

# Strengthening the Infant-Toddler Child Care Workforce

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A Messaging Tip Sheet



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## Introduction

As part of their efforts to advance policy agendas that positively impact infants, toddlers and their families, several states are working to strengthen the workforce to provide more families with high-quality child care options. The messaging materials in this tip sheet are sourced largely from messaging already being used by state advocates in an effort to help other states communicate effectively about this positive policy change.

The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT), a program of the Pritzker Children's Initiative, and ZERO TO THREE's *Think Babies*™ campaign have collaborated to distribute this messaging resource. Advocacy groups will want to adapt this messaging to reflect specific policy and fiscal priorities and local dynamics in their state. This document covers:

- How to make the case for an enhanced workforce;
- The elements of high-quality child care for infants and toddlers;
- How to address specific messaging challenges around increasing education requirements and compensation for well-trained child care staff; and
- Additional guidance to address tough questions.

## Making the Case for High-Quality, Affordable Child Care for Infants and Toddlers

- **The Reality for Families:** Today, 62% of women with infants and toddlers are in the workforce. Of the 12 million infants and toddlers in the U.S., more than half spend some or all of their day in child care.
- **What Infants and Toddlers Need to Thrive:** Science shows our brains develop faster in the first three years than any later point in life. Families need access to high-quality, reliable, affordable child care that surrounds infants and toddlers with a safe environment, nurturing relationships with early childhood teachers and caregivers and strong early learning experiences that support healthy development.
- **How Child Care Supports Brain Development:** High-quality child care supports infants' and toddlers' growing brains by providing a stimulating learning environment that builds a strong foundation for the development of cognitive and communication skills, an expanded vocabulary, social and emotional skills and boosted academic achievement.
- **Most Families Don't Have Access:** Quality care varies widely. Research shows that 75% of toddlers in center-based care and 93% in home-based care are in low or mediocre-quality care settings that can be detrimental to their development. This inequity largely affects children living in families with low-incomes and children of color. Families need equal access to help their children be successful.
- **How to Achieve High-Quality Child Care:** Increased public investments in child care – along with other subsidy and scholarship strategies – are needed to provide more infants and toddlers with quality early care and education opportunities without passing these costs to parents, many of whom can't afford the high cost of quality child care. The average annual cost of center-based child care for infants is more than the average cost of public college tuition and fees in 28 states.<sup>i</sup>
- **The Return on Investment:** High-quality child care provides children with a strong start to prepare the workforce of the future, and fuels our country's economic engine by helping today's parents work.<sup>ii</sup>

## Elements of “High-Quality” Child Care | A ZERO TO THREE Resource

The quality of child care relies on the relationship between the child’s teacher and the child. Elements of high-quality care for infants and toddlers include:

1. To help children make connections with adults that support their development, there should be **no more than a 1:4 teacher/caregiver-to-child ratio** and no more than eight children per group.<sup>iii, iv</sup>
2. Children should have **one primary, but not exclusive, teacher or caregiver for at least one year**, and ideally until age three. This is critical for an infant’s emotional development.<sup>v</sup>
3. Caregivers and teachers should have **specialized knowledge and skills in early childhood development**, with a focus on infant and toddlers.
4. Average child care teacher/caregiver wages are at the bottom of the occupational ladder at less than \$11 an hour, which qualifies them for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) food assistance benefits in every state. Extensive research shows that **better paid staff provide better quality early care and education**.<sup>vi</sup>



## Messaging the Challenges

What follows are the common challenges and significant opportunities that could arise as you highlight new educational requirements and higher compensation for early childhood teachers and caregivers. Each challenge includes message guidance to help you pivot to your program and policy goals and help make the case for infants and toddlers.

### Addressing New Educational Requirements

Emphasize	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What all parents want (safe, reliable and high-quality programs with skilled teachers or caregivers who can support young children’s healthy development and early learning)</li> <li>• Infant and toddler care is expensive to provide and underfunded; child care programs need more resources and support to provide quality early care and education</li> <li>• Skilled early childhood teachers and caregivers are necessary to support young children’s healthy development and learning</li> <li>• Your state’s education standards should reflect the latest science in child development</li> <li>• Policy specifics that demonstrate support for early childhood teachers and caregivers, such as: professional development supports, program enhancements, and more financial resources to serve more families with quality care</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Criticizing existing child care providers for their current credentials and training</li> <li>• Making it sound like more college education is the only way to achieve this status if early childhood teachers and caregivers can verify their knowledge and skills/competencies another way</li> </ul>

**Acknowledge the need:** For today’s families to remain in the workforce, they want and need reliable and high-quality child care that surrounds their infants and toddlers with a safe environment, nurturing relationships with skilled and caring adults and strong early learning experiences.

**Build common ground:** Research shows that a child’s brain develops most rapidly from birth to three than at any later point in their lives and high-quality early experiences — like what children receive in high-quality child care settings — lay the foundation for healthy development and learning.

**Bridge and pivot to your message:** 48% of children living in families with low-incomes do not receive adequate early learning opportunities and arrive in kindergarten unprepared to succeed.<sup>vii</sup> Child care teachers and caregivers who meet basic education standards in early childhood development, with a focus on infant and toddlers, are in the best position to provide the experiences that build the foundation for future learning and success. High-quality programs also provide parents of young children with the support they need to work and be economically self-sufficient.

**Share your call-to-action:** Increased investments that support child care teachers and caregivers will ensure more infants and toddlers receive high-quality early learning experiences to better prepare them for school and life, allowing their parents the peace of mind to return to work and contribute to their own family's and community's economic success.

### Addressing Issues of Compensation

Emphasize	Avoid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The brain science research and why qualified early educators support young children's development</li> <li>• Average child care wages are at the bottom of the occupational ladder and extensive research shows that better paid teachers and caregivers are associated with better quality care</li> <li>• Emphasize the early childhood workforce crisis; teachers and caregivers are not entering the field or are leaving the field because compensation is so low; increasing compensation for early childhood teachers and caregivers will help recruit and retain a qualified workforce</li> <li>• Low wages for child care teachers and caregivers mean that most don't earn sufficient income to meet their own basic needs and worry about food insecurity, housing and medical treatment; child care teachers and caregivers rely on public income support programs, like food assistance, at twice the rates of workers in other occupations<sup>viii</sup></li> <li>• Policy specifics to explain how qualified early childhood teachers and caregivers will be paid, and that parents and child care centers won't pay more</li> <li>• Return on investment research to illustrate the short and long-term benefits and emphasize the high rates of economic return on high-quality care<sup>ix, x</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pitting policy costs against one another</li> <li>• Using the word "babysitting" or only "caregiving" since that's not what these child care providers do</li> </ul>

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**Acknowledge the need:** Today's working parents want and need safe, reliable and high-quality child care for their infants and toddlers. We need a highly-trained and well supported child care workforce to provide strong early learning experiences for infants and toddlers during this most critical window for brain development.

**Build common ground:** Average child care wages are at the bottom of the occupational ladder at less than \$11 an hour. Extensive research shows that better paid staff are associated with better quality care.<sup>xi</sup> Child care teachers and caregivers are leaving the field for better paying jobs in public education, retail and other occupations.

**Bridge and pivot to your message:** Research shows programs and policies that support healthy brain development from prenatal to three more than pay for themselves through better social, economic and health outcomes, and build a more productive workforce that strengthens our economy now and in the future. Investments in high-quality early childhood education starting at birth provide taxpayers with a return of \$6.30 for every dollar invested.<sup>xii</sup> This return has compounding benefits, driving a 13% per year return on investment through better education, health, social and economic outcomes later in life.<sup>xiii</sup>

**Share your call-to-action:** Providing increased compensation to qualified early childhood teachers and caregivers will help retain a workforce that can provide high-quality early childhood experiences for infants and toddlers, which will build the foundation for them to succeed in school and thrive as adults and give their parents a chance to contribute to the economy and support their families. When states and communities invest in high-quality early care and education starting in the early years of a child's life, the returns for the community are the highest, and we can reduce the need for more expensive interventions in K-12, college and through adulthood.

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## Tough Questions and Answers

### What if child care directors/owners and even teachers oppose increasing education standards or compensation?

- Explain which teachers need to meet new standards — such as lead teachers only — to demonstrate that not all staff are required to participate.
- Document what percentage of child care teachers and caregivers already meet these education standards to demonstrate that this is not a massive change.
- Be sure the higher educational infrastructure is in place to support teachers acquiring new education, including online courses, mentoring and professional development, and scholarship programs.
- Couple increased education requirements with a clear compensation strategy that will be added to the system to compensate early childhood teachers and caregivers who meet the new qualifications; otherwise directors and owners will say they will be forced to pay teachers more and pass cost on to their parents who already can't afford the high cost.
- Where possible, include child care directors, owners and teachers in the development of the policy.

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### **Will child care providers be responsible for paying tuition to complete these new educational requirements?**

- Highlight any early childhood scholarships or other professional development support your state may offer to help with the costs for child care teachers and caregivers who want to go back to school.
- Reinforce any testing child care teachers and caregivers can take to demonstrate their existing qualifications meet the new educational requirements without going back to school as an alternative.

### **When child care programs are mandated to pay staff more, won't parents be left to foot the bill?**

- Emphasize that additional state public investments are required to attract and retain qualified child care teachers and caregivers, so that these policy changes won't drive up the cost of child care for parents, early childhood providers or child care programs.
- Highlight how the policy builds upon policies and programs that are already in place to support early childhood providers and child care programs with teacher wages.
- Reinforce that research shows programs and policies that support healthy brain development from prenatal-to-age-three (including high-quality programs that pay teachers and caregivers a commensurate wage) more than pay for themselves through better social, economic and health outcomes and build a more productive workforce that strengthens our economy now and in the future.

### **Won't these new policies worsen the child care teacher/caregiver shortage and make it harder to meet staff-child ratios?**

- Highlight how these policies are designed to attract and retain well-qualified and well-compensated early childhood teachers and caregivers by raising entry level lead teacher qualifications and providing improved compensation for qualified providers.
- Document the existing child care teacher shortage, which is due to low education standards and compensation that discourage people from entering the early childhood education field.

### **Many center- and home-based child care centers are closing due to the operating costs and lack of resources, including qualified teachers, to maintain their programs. Others opt not to accept subsidies, because they do not cover the necessary costs. Will these new policies further hurt child care centers?**

- Explain that if the state makes an increased investment in a quality child care workforce, child care centers will be strengthened, not hurt.
- Highlight other state policy examples that support and stabilize child care programs, such as better child care market rates, grants and contracts or other incentives.

## Statistics to Help You Make the Case

- Today, 61% of women with infants and toddlers are in the workforce.<sup>xiv</sup> Of the 12 million infants and toddlers in the U.S., more than half spend some or all of their day in child care.<sup>xvi</sup>
- Investments in high-quality early childhood education starting at birth provides taxpayers with a return of \$6.30 for every dollar invested.<sup>xvii</sup>
- This return has compounding benefits, driving a 13% per year return on investment through better education, health, social and economic outcomes later in life.<sup>xviii</sup>
- 48% of children living in families with low-incomes do not receive adequate early learning opportunities and arrive in kindergarten unprepared to succeed.<sup>xix</sup>
- The average annual cost of center-based child care for infants is more than the average cost of public college tuition and fees in 28 states.<sup>xx</sup>
- The growing American skills gap will lead to 6 million unfilled jobs by 2020.<sup>xxi</sup>
- U.S. businesses lose \$3 billion annually due to employee absenteeism resulting from child care issues.<sup>xxii</sup>
- Every year, U.S. families lose out on \$8.3 billion in wages due to lack of child care.<sup>xxiii</sup>
- 78% of survey respondents (including 70% of conservatives and 89% of liberals) supported assistance programs that ensure child care workers receive a living wage.<sup>xxiv</sup>



**Pritzker Children’s Initiative (PCI)**, a project of the J.B. and M. K. Pritzker Family Foundation, is committed to building a promising future for our country by investing in and supporting solutions in early childhood development for children prenatal to age three, with the goal of every child reaching kindergarten ready to learn.

**National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT)**, funded through the Pritzker Children’s Initiative, brings together national partners, early childhood leaders, philanthropy, policymakers and practitioners inside and outside state and local government to create and strengthen promising policies and programs, and share what works, so that more states and communities can support the healthy development of our youngest children.

**ZERO TO THREE** works to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals and policymakers. ZERO TO THREE created the *Think Babies*™ campaign to make the potential of every baby our national priority. When we *Think Babies*™, we create stronger families, vibrant communities, and a prosperous country.

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