

From Science to Public Policy: New Jersey's Collaboration to Improve Child Care

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“From Science to Public Policy” is a new occasional article in The Baby Monitor: ZERO TO THREE Policy and Advocacy News. Each article will illustrate how scientific research about infant-toddler development informs policy decision making through an example from either the state or federal level.

New Jersey can claim a long, proud history of collaboration between state government and the child care community. Since New Jersey first implemented child care regulations for center-based child care for infants and toddlers in 1984, a group of infant-toddler child care providers, college faculty and advocates has collaborated on an on-going basis to enhance the state's child care licensing regulations. This group effort led to the creation of a grassroots organization, the Coalition of Infant/Toddler Educators ([CITE](#)), which works closely with the state's child care licensing office to improve the quality of the state's child care services.

From the outset, there have been two primary objectives of the collaboration between CITE and the state. First, to provide professional development opportunities for child care practitioners in the field and second, to utilize cutting edge science about infant-toddler development to inform policy decisions. Through presentations by nationally-known scholars at CITE conferences and monthly meetings focusing on best practices, current research about infant-toddler development has informed program development and helped guide the state's regulatory actions.

For example, in the 1980's, one focus of infant development research highlighted the importance of primary caregiving relationships. The work of Drs. T. Berry Brazelton, Michael Lewis and others on mother-infant interactions was highlighted in CITE presentations. Their studies of the role of micro-interactions between parents and infants in the development of attention and self-regulation emphasized the importance of early relationships. As a result, when the New Jersey child care center regulations were revised in the early 1990's, they contained a provision that children under the age of 2-1/2 years old be assigned to a specific primary caregiver. New Jersey was among the first states to include primary caregiving requirements for child care providers. These requirements stipulated the caregiver role in daily routines and in building relationships with parents.

In another example of utilizing research to inform policy, CITE has advocated for optimal adult:child ratios in infant-toddler child care centers and registered family child care homes for more than 20 years. In their advocacy efforts, they have cited research which highlights the importance of one-to-one interaction, attachment and responsive relationships. A true breakthrough occurred after the publication of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* in 2000. Following the release of this seminal publication, the annual CITE conference and other statewide events presented information on brain development research. Staff of the Child Care Licensing Office returned from these events with an expanded understanding of the significance of the prenatal to age 3 period of life. In

particular, they were inspired by the information on the rapid growth of synaptic connections during the first three years and the role of adult-infant interaction in stimulating brain growth. The scientific reports gave licensing staff a justification for reducing staff:child ratios in child care in order to promote more frequent one-on-one interactions between children and staff.

New Jersey already requires a 1:4 ratio for infants, and when the regulations were recently revised, the Licensing Office came prepared to improve the toddler ratios. However, the regulators were concerned whether existing child care programs could economically support the proposed change in regulation. The Licensing Office conducted a survey of programs and found that a reduction to one teacher for each six toddlers could be supported in the child care community without imposing a significant impact on the cost of care. (The regulations had previously required a 1:7 ratio.) This change and more specific requirements for training primary caregivers were enacted in the 2005 revision, a direct result of science informing public policy.

Members of CITE learned a great deal in their experiences using scientific research to inform public policy. These lessons include:

- **Long-term relationship building is critical.** Establishing ongoing relationships with state regulators was a necessary component that led to policy change.
- **Sharing current research is a motivating factor for policymakers.** Ensuring that decision makers hear about the most current scientific research about infant-toddler development was vital to the process of making policy changes.
- **Consider the various impacts of policy changes, and work to build consensus among affected groups.** Policymakers may also consider whether new policies will have significant impact on the providers under regulation, the families they serve and the economic factors that result from policy change.

While many factors influenced the ultimate changes in regulation, new scientific evidence prompted state regulators to examine current requirements and continually upgrade regulations that improve the quality of experience for infants and toddlers in child care settings.

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