



OVERVIEW

Policymakers face a fundamental tension between the fact that essential workers must have child care in order to continue to provide the services our communities rely on and the reality that any group care setting increases the risk of COVID-19 transmission. As states across the nation settle into this unprecedented time, leaders are facing difficult decisions about how to address the child care needs of essential workers while ensuring that the health and safety of children, families, and providers is prioritized. ZERO TO THREE recognizes that policymakers and state agencies are working hard to effectively respond to this crisis while navigating resource constraints, technical difficulties, and rapidly changing information. If a state makes the decision to implement emergency child care for essential workers, it is critical to consider the unique needs of infants and toddlers during this crisis.

Below are a set of recommended considerations as policymakers and advocates design systems to deliver care for infants and toddlers of essential workers. In designing these crisis systems, states must navigate the complex balance of ensuring that all possible measures are taken to ensure the health and safety of children, families, and providers, that available care is of the highest quality possible, and that there is an adequate supply of affordable infant-toddler care available to families who need it. The considerations below have been divided into three categories: those directly relating to babies, parents and families, and early childhood educators/caregivers.

BABIES

✓ **Address the Specific Developmental Needs of Infants and Toddlers in Times of Crisis**

The first three years of a baby's life are the time of fastest brain development and their early experiences lay the foundation of development for all that follows. This critical period means that babies are particularly vulnerable to the negative impacts of trauma associated with the current pandemic crisis. It is vital that caregivers understand, and are able to meet, the unique needs of children ages 0-3 to support their development and build resilience.

- *Consider solutions that will allow infants and toddlers to receive the most developmentally appropriate care during this crisis. Very young children can experience traumatic stress during this pandemic which may look like clinginess, difficulty in being consoled, aggressiveness or impulsivity, difficulty in sleeping and showing regression in behavior. Disseminating resources such as [Shelter from the Storm: Resources for Early Care and Education Professionals](#) and connecting programs to Infant Toddler Specialists and/or Early Childhood Mental Health Consultants in your state can help to support staff in minimizing the impacts of trauma.*

✓ **Maintain or Decrease Ratios and Group Size**

Social distancing is the only tool currently available to prevent transmission of COVID-19 and therefore any group care setting increases the risk. Keeping group sizes as small as possible reduces, though cannot eliminate, that risk. We also know that the quality of child care ultimately boils down to the relationship between the child care provider and the child, and low adult-child ratios and small group sizes support children's healthy development during the most rapid period of brain development.

- *Consider how you can ensure ratios and group sizes support public health and children's healthy development. Under normal circumstances ZERO TO THREE recommends adult child ratios of no more than 1:4 and group sizes of no more than eight children under the age of three.¹ During this crisis, consider lowering ratios and groups to the smallest size possible to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.*

✓ **Engage High Quality Programs**

During this time of child and family stress, it is especially important that infants and toddlers are receiving high quality care in appropriate environments that support healthy growth and development. This includes caregivers and teachers with specialized knowledge and skill in early childhood development, with a focus on infants and toddlers² as well as learning environments designed with babies' safety and comfort in mind.

- *Consider strategies such as partnerships with providers in all program types who have demonstrated high quality through systems such as QRIS to deliver emergency child care for essential workers.*

✓ **Promote Continuity of Care**

Caring, consistent relationships experienced by young children help establish a child's ability to learn, to form positive relationships, to exercise self-control, and to mitigate stress³. A transition in caregivers can in and of itself be a source of stress for infants and toddlers. Continuity of care during this time of crisis increases the ability of providers to recognize and respond to manifestations of stress and trauma in the children in their care.

- *As states establish emergency care for essential workers, to the extent possible, consider engaging current infant-toddler child care providers in all program settings to maintain relationships with families served before the crisis to support children's healthy development and resilience.*

¹ ZERO TO THREE, *Infant Toddler Child Care Talking Points*, 2013, Available online at:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2013-infant-toddler-child-care-talking-points>

² National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative at ZERO TO THREE, *Professional Development for the Infant/Toddler Early Care and Education Workforce* (2010). Retrieved from <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/467-professional-development-for-the-infant-toddler-early-care-and-education-workforce>

³ Ibid.

PARENTS AND FAMILIES

✓ Support Parents of Infants and Toddlers

Parents of infants and toddlers are facing myriad stressors and challenges as they navigate the COVID-19 crisis. From meeting basic needs, to managing their own stress, to responding appropriately to manifestations of child stress, parents are under unprecedented pressure. Child care providers are well positioned to see and respond to the variety of needs that families may have during this time.

- *Consider sharing [ZERO TO THREE Coronavirus Resources for Early Childhood Professionals](#) to help child care programs support families in weathering this storm as well as providing information about local community resources such as [diaper banks](#), nutrition supports and mental health services.*

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS/CAREGIVERS

✓ Protect and Compensate Providers for Their Service

Infant-toddler educators who continue to operate during the COVID-19 crisis are providing a vital service that allows essential workers such as health care workers, first responders, and grocery store employees to continue to perform jobs that communities rely on. By continuing to operate, these educators face increased risk to themselves and their own families.

- *Consider how you can support infant-toddler educators who continue to operate by offering extreme duty pay that reflects their service, prioritizing their access to personal protective equipment, and ensuring access to health care in the event that they or their family members contract COVID-19.*

✓ Apply COVID-19 Safety Measures

There is no way to eliminate the risk of COVID-19 transmission in group care settings, however there are measures in addition to regular health and safety practices that child care providers can take to reduce the risk to both the children and adults in programs. The CDC has released new guidance for child care providers operating during the COVID-19 crisis. Preliminary data suggests that very young children may be more vulnerable to the disease than older children⁴, making attention to safety protocols especially important for providers serving infants and toddlers.

- *Consider what methods you will utilize to distribute and adopt the [CDC guidance](#) with particular attention to the *Caring for Infants and Toddlers* section during the *Coronavirus crisis*.*

✓ Ensure Access to Essential Supplies

In order to provide healthy and safe environments for all children, pandemic child care centers will need support in obtaining nutritious foods and cleaning supplies, as well as infant and toddler-specific supplies such as diapers and wipes. Across the country, providers are reporting significant challenges obtaining essential items.

⁴ Dong Y, Mo X, Hu Y, et al. Epidemiological characteristics of 2143 pediatric patients with 2019 coronavirus disease in China. *Pediatrics*. 2020; doi: 10.1542/peds.2020-0702. Retrieved from <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/pediatrics/early/2020/03/16/peds.2020-0702.full.pdf>.

- *Consider innovative methods to ensure access to these necessities, including building funding for supplies into child care program payment models, pursuing grant dollars through FEMA, state-initiated contracts with grocery stores, modified store hours and/or free delivery and shipping options.*

✓ **Require Staff Clearances and Training**

In times of calm, as well as crisis, it is essential that safety measures remain in place for keeping babies safe from harm. Eliminating and delaying essential clearance checks may lead to irreparable harm. Of equal concern is the placement of caregivers in programs without the appropriate orientation and knowledge required to safely care for infants and toddlers.

- *Consider how programs can utilize staff who have already been appropriately vetted and trained in how to work with babies as well as how to efficiently bring on new staff without compromising the safety of the children.*

Some states are utilizing existing online platforms that match families to caregivers for in-home care. If your state plans to promote this service as a solution to infant and toddler care during this time, it is vital that you maintain the same standards of safety related to staff clearances and training. For states with existing registries, these databases may be particularly useful in identifying qualified staff from programs that have closed.

- *Consider a method by which families can find previously trained and vetted staff from existing child care programs. As an incentive, allow qualifying families to use subsidy dollars when highly qualified staff are chosen for in-home care.*

✓ **Maintain Monitoring and Compliance**

Licensing specialists play a critical role in protecting young children and maintaining health and safety standards, especially in the midst of a crisis.

- *Consider innovative ways that this service can continue and that programs can be continuously reminded of the importance of following prior and new standards during this crisis.*