

Considerations for Developmental Needs of Infants and Toddlers in Child Care Programs During the COVID-19 Pandemic



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

OVERVIEW

Child Care programs across the country have begun to re-open and re-connect with families as states make decisions about stay-at-home and social distancing orders. In cases where child care programs have remained open, they are navigating changing local conditions and guidance. State leaders are helping child care providers to access and understand the [CDC child care guidelines](#) as a baseline for health and safety procedures. Many states are also providing a set of state-specific rules and guidelines to protect children and families. ZERO TO THREE has compiled the following additional recommendations related to mental health and relationships to layer on top of the essential physical health and safety guidelines provided by the CDC to ensure that the developmental needs of babies and families are a part of state re-opening plans.

As outlined in [Considerations for Infants and Toddlers in Emergency Child Care for Essential Workers](#), it is imperative that child care programs address the specific developmental needs of infants and toddlers in times of crisis. See that document for more information on offering developmentally appropriate care for babies during this time.

Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Children and Adults

Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 5 years old to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the stressors facing families and threatened the mental health of both children and adults, making it imperative to have a strong system of supports in place.

✓ **Ensure that the state has an adequate supply of mental health experts prepared to support programs and families upon re-opening/continuing to adapt to the COVID-19 context**

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of using [infant and early childhood mental health \(IECMH\) consultation](#) for preventing and reducing the impact of mental health problems in young children. The social-emotional health of young children suffers when they have a parent who is struggling with depression or when the home life is complicated by poverty, domestic violence, or substance abuse – all of which may have been exacerbated by impacts of the recent coronavirus pandemic. Unaddressed, these challenges can continue to interfere with development and manifest over time. Well positioned mental health specialists can support programs, staff and families in implementing supports to alleviate the trauma of recent events.

¹ZERO TO THREE recognizes that economic support for families is critical to ensuring health and safety in child care settings, however that is beyond the scope of this document. For more information on economic policies that support young children, visit <https://stateofbabies.org>.

✓ **Provide support to program directors in recognizing staff concerns and meeting needs as these adults adapt to a very different workplace environment**

Early childhood educators may be returning to programs, classrooms and children after a long and potentially stressful spring. For those who remained open, they may have spent the past months navigating a very challenging context. It is important that leadership in these programs recognize the emotional and financial burden that has been placed on educators and have strategies in place to support the adults that are caring for our youngest children. Policymakers should utilize tools, training and ongoing support for these leaders as they take on the task of operating programs and supporting staff in the new environment.

✓ **Create program level resources and systems to ensure that staff at all levels understand how to access help when they are unable to meet the needs of a child or a family and require additional support**

In addition to the substantial professional development that will be required to adequately equip educators to meet the mental health needs of children and families, they will need to understand and be able to access additional supports for when they are unable to fully support children and families on their own. While this has been an ongoing need prior to the pandemic, it is more imperative than ever that educators understand processes for accessing IECMH consultants as well as a deep understanding of other community resources available to families during the pandemic and after.

Maintaining Relationships with Families of Young Children

The parent-provider relationship is an essential partnership in ensuring a child's healthy development and engagement in a high-quality early care and education program. New practices that are intended to minimize the risk of virus exposure may disrupt traditional connection points between providers and families, requiring innovative solutions to ensure that these relationships are maintained and strengthened.

✓ **Promote policies to connect staff with families when drop off/pick up excludes in-person contact**

New drop off policies may keep caregivers of young children from daily contact with families. In order to ensure that these relationships are maintained and nurtured, programs should develop other methods for daily check-ins and ongoing communication.

✓ **Design policies to continue to promote breastfeeding**

While restricting the number of people entering child care facilities is important for reducing the risk of virus transmission, policies making exceptions for breastfeeding parents should be put in place and clearly communicated to families.