



CONNECTING WITH INFANT-TODDLER PROFESSIONALS TO ADVOCATE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Infant-toddler professionals bring a lot to the table when we get involved in advocacy for very young children and their families. We bring expertise on child development, stories about the children and families we serve, and deep knowledge about what young children need to grow up healthy and ready to learn. But infant-toddler professionals are an incredibly diverse group, with many different skill sets, knowledge-bases, and backgrounds. Just as the needs of a young child are comprehensive – *good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences* – so are the professionals working to help families meet these needs. We come from a variety of disciplines – physical health, mental health, early intervention, and early care and education, to name a few – and we all have a unique and valuable perspective to bring to the policymaking process. Reaching out to other professionals working with infants and toddlers is a powerful way to bring these diverse perspectives together to create better policy for young children and their families.

This article explores why engaging other infant-toddler professionals in advocacy can be an effective strategy for policy change and provides practical tools and examples to aid ZERO TO THREE Policy Network members in their efforts to connect with other Big Voices for Little Kids.

Why Not Go It Alone?

Simply put, there is strength in numbers. How many times have you doubted whether your email or your phone call to a policymaker would make a difference in their decision about an issue that impacts young children? But what if that policymaker received calls or emails from 100 constituents about the issue, all with the same message? Odds are that the policymaker is going to take notice and look at the issue more closely, creating an opportunity for advocates to educate them on the unique needs of infants and toddlers and better inform their decision. Showing that a diverse group of professionals committed to the needs of infants and toddlers agree on a specific issue can heighten the visibility and importance of the issue. The diversity of voices advocating together will help the infant-toddler policy agenda rise above competing interests and ultimately advance.

But the strength of engaging other professionals in advocacy lies not solely in the numbers, but also in the broad array of expertise it brings to bear on policymaking. These diverse perspectives reinforce the importance of focusing on the needs of the whole child in policymaking. For example, when providing input on a policy decision, a pediatrician may more closely focus on how the decision will impact the physical health of young children, while an infant mental health specialist may be more in tune with how the decision will impact a child's social-emotional development. When you reach out to engage infant-toddler professionals from multiple

disciplines in advocacy, you are helping to ensure that policies truly reflect the comprehensive and interconnected needs of young children.

INFANT-TODDLER PROFESSIONAL GROUPS

Depending on where you live, there may be associations for the different groups of professionals who work with young children. Use the list of ideas below to identify groups to connect with in your state and community. But remember, even if your state does not have these formal associations, you may already know many people in these fields through your own work. Be sure to reach out to your existing networks!

- *Infant Mental Health Specialists* – Many states, such as [Michigan](#) and [Maine](#), have state associations for infant mental health or infant and toddler mental health. If your state does not have a mental health association dedicated specifically to very young children, check the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services listing of [state mental health organizations](#) to find your state mental health advocacy organizations. They may have a subcommittee or group of members focused on infants and toddlers.
- *Pediatricians* – The American Academy of Pediatrics has a chapter in every state. To find your state contact, check out their [chapter contact listing](#).
- *Head Start and Early Head Start providers* – Connect with Early Head Start providers in your state through your state Head Start Association. You can also contact your [Head Start State Collaboration Director](#) to explore ways to engage Head Start and Early Head Start providers in your community and state.
- *Child Care Providers* – The National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) has a [search function](#) to help you find your local association of child care providers. Some states, such as [Tennessee](#), also have associations of family child care providers.
- *Early Interventionists* – The National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center has a [listing of state IDEA Part C coordinators](#), as well as state websites. They may be able to help you reach the network of early interventionists throughout the state.
- *Infant-toddler Specialists* – Many states, such as [Indiana](#), have networks of infant-toddler specialists who provide support to early care and education professionals working with very young children.

IDEAS FOR CONNECTING WITH OTHER INFANT-TODDLER PROFESSIONALS

There are many different tools and tactics you can use to connect with other infant-toddler professionals in your state and community. Try some of the strategies below and [let us know how it goes!](#)

- The ZERO TO THREE Policy Network created a [Facebook page](#) where members can connect with one another about their infant-toddler advocacy activities in states across the

country. On the “Discussion Board,” advocates in Kentucky, Virginia, Wyoming, New York, New Mexico, and Oregon have created discussions specific to their states. If you live in one of these states, post on the discussion board to introduce yourself. If you live in another state, create your own discussion thread to meet other Big Voices for Little Kids near you.

- Establish an email or phone “advocacy tree” consisting of your colleagues interested in advocating for young children. When you become aware of an opportunity for advocacy, such as an upcoming vote on legislation related to young children or a town hall meeting hosted by a legislator or candidate for elected office, put the tree into motion by emailing or calling the person at the top of the list to encourage them to take action. That person then calls the person below them on the advocacy tree and asks them to take action, and so on.
- Share monthly editions of ZERO TO THREE’s [Advocacy Developmental Milestone Calendar](#) or our periodic action alerts with other professionals in your state. Urge them to take action!
- Encourage a gathering of infant-toddler professionals at an upcoming event in your state or community, such as a conference, advocacy day at the state house, legislative or administrative hearing. Showing power in numbers at an event where policy is being discussed can send a very strong message!
- Use ZERO TO THREE’s [Early Experiences Matters Policy Guide](#) to make presentations to small groups of professionals interested in getting involved in advocacy for young children. You can also meet more informally with colleagues over coffee to talk about different pieces of the *Policy Guide* and how you might use it to impact policy in your state.

PUTTING THE ADVOCACY TREE INTO ACTION

During the 2009 legislative session, family child care providers in Tennessee took action into their own hands to stall a bill that would negatively impact their ability to provide high-quality services for young children. Leading up to a hearing on the bill, leaders of the Tennessee Family Child Care Alliance mobilized their network of providers across the state by using phone and email advocacy trees. They began by sending information about the bill to their providers, along with clearly outlined steps to help them take action. In turn, the providers continued the advocacy tree and reached out in their communities to spur parents, business owners, military families, and family members to get involved. Within just a few days, nearly every member of the legislature was contacted and more than 3,000 constituents had signed a petition in opposition to the bill. Their hard work paid off on the day of the hearing when consideration of the bill was postponed to later in the session, allowing time for the legislators to better understand the full implications of the legislation before making a decision.

- Host a table or an exhibit at a conference or meeting you are attending to share information about advocacy for infants and toddlers. Encourage visitors to sign up for the [ZERO TO THREE Policy Network](#), so that they can put their commitment to young children into action. If possible, share local information about infant-toddler issues in your state and, when timely, have them take direct action on an issue while visiting the table or exhibit.

EXAMPLES FROM THE CREATING CONNECTIONS FOR BABIES PROJECT

As part of ZERO TO THREE's *Creating Connections for Babies* project, Birth to Three State Advocacy Leaders in Kentucky, New York, New Mexico, Oregon, Virginia, and Wyoming are working to engage infant-toddler professionals in their state in advocacy for young children and their families. Read about some of their strategies for engaging professionals, and use them as a jumping off point for your own efforts to connect with other infant-toddler professionals in advocacy!

Wearing Red for Young Children in Virginia

As part of "Step Up for Kids Day" in September 2008, Laura Allen, one of two Birth to Three State Advocacy Leaders in Virginia, made sure that infant-toddler advocates got some extra attention. Leading up to a rally at the state house, Laura reached out to professionals working specifically with infants and toddlers and encouraged them to wear red so that they would stand out in the crowd of children's advocates. This not only helped advocates find others who focused on the very youngest children, but ensured that the needs of infants and toddlers did not get lost in the broad array of important children's issues discussed that day. The strategy worked! When the local media covered the event for the nightly news, a mass of red Big Voices for Little Kids were prominently in the background getting their message across.

New York Advocates Launch Infancy Policy Leadership Circle

In June 2008, Jackie Jones and Carole Oshinsky, New York's Birth to Three State Advocacy Leaders, helped launch the state's first Infancy Policy Leadership Circle as a statewide advocacy voice specifically focused on babies and their families. Building on the work of the New York Zero-to-Three Network, based in New York City, and the Winning Beginning NY early care and education coalition, the Leadership Circle brings together early childhood professionals, leaders, and advocates from across the state, drawing on diverse fields such as health, early education, and early intervention to create a more powerful voice for young children and their families. The Leadership Circle is working to create a comprehensive agenda to improve public policy and expand state investment for infants and toddlers. To begin to articulate this agenda, Jackie and Carole convened small, multi-disciplinary groups, both in-person and virtually, throughout the state to identify important priorities for young children and families. This helped to ensure that the agenda would reflect the complex nature of a child's early developmental needs. At the same time, the Leadership Circle is working with other major coalitions in the state, Winning Beginning NY and NY Children's Action Network, to help set yearly policy goals and promote infant/toddler issues on their agendas.

Bringing Professionals Together to Debate the Issues in Kentucky

Leading up to the November 2009 presidential election, Judi Steilberg, one of two Birth to Three Advocacy Leaders in Kentucky, wanted to encourage her colleagues to watch the domestic

issues presidential debate and take action during the election season. To get them motivated, she hosted a small gathering during the televised debate and shared resources and tools to help them take action. She invited her colleagues working in the early care and education field, but also reached out to other professionals working with young children in her community. The debate watchers came from a variety of backgrounds – some worked in social services, other worked in the medical field, and others came from the business community. But all left the debate gathering armed with tools to Be Big Voices for Little Kids during election season.

CONCLUSION

Advocating for young children and their families is challenging work and can be daunting to tackle by yourself. Connecting with other professionals who work with young children is an effective strategy to raise the profile of infant-toddler issues and bring broader expertise to bear on policymaking. We encourage you to use the tools and ideas presented in this article to reach out to other infant-toddler professionals in your state and community and engage them in your advocacy efforts.

Author:

Elizabeth DiLauro, Advocacy Specialist, ZERO TO THREE Policy Network

Published: June 15, 2009