



Prenatal through Pre-K: Building Bright Futures

Babies are born “wired” to learn.¹ From the time of conception to the first day of kindergarten, children’s development rapidly progresses at a pace exceeding that of any subsequent stage of life.² High quality early learning experiences during the infant and toddler years are associated with early competence in language and cognitive development, cooperation with adults, and the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, thereby laying the foundation for later school success.³ At this most critical of developmental stages, many infants and toddlers live in vulnerable circumstances. Forty-three percent live in low-income families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty level and a fifth live below the poverty line, with 61 percent of infants and toddlers in immigrant families living in low-income households.⁴

While the expansion of pre-kindergarten programs is a critical step to helping all children enter school ready to succeed, for low-income children, the achievement gap often emerges long before they reach the preschool door. During these early years, children exhibit striking disparities with regard to what they know and what they can do, and these differences are predictive of later school achievement.⁵ Children who come to kindergarten with a strong base of knowledge and abilities are more likely to succeed in school than those who are not as well prepared. But those abilities and that knowledge are based on a strong foundation for learning created in the earliest years – not just in the traditional preschool ages of three and four. According to the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), when compared to the majority of American preschoolers, the average child *entering* Head Start was found to be at approximately the 16th percentile in vocabulary and early writing skills, the 31st percentile in letter recognition, and only at about the 21st percentile in early math.⁶ While the highest quarter of Head Start children were at or above the national average in early language and number skills, the lowest quarter ranked on average in the lowest two percent of all American preschoolers.⁷

Parents and caregivers have the greatest impact on a baby’s development, but they may need support in learning how to nurture early learning. In fact, a baby’s development before birth can have a significant impact on subsequent learning, so good prenatal care is a critical component of early learning policy. In addition, with more than half of mothers of infants and toddlers participating in the workforce,⁸ many young children are in child care and need caregivers who understand the unique needs of infants and toddlers. Yet, child care for infants and toddlers is frequently of poor quality.

Without effective policies that make quality early learning experiences available and accessible to our nation’s youngest children, many infants and toddlers will be at the threshold of learning, but will be left behind and forced to play educational “catch-up” as they enter preschool. In addition, preschool teachers will find it more difficult to prepare children for school.

While there is a growing interest nationwide in early childhood education in the years immediately preceding kindergarten, the unique needs of infants and toddlers have been a public policy afterthought. Waiting to support children until they reach age three or four is simply too late to overcome the developmental disadvantages that may have begun even prenatally. Supporting the optimal development of the most vulnerable babies and toddlers must begin even before birth.⁹ By creating a comprehensive prenatal through pre-kindergarten continuum, policymakers can include the critical needs of infants and toddlers as an integral part of their planning.¹⁰ There are several specific ways that policymakers can include infant and toddler policies in pre-kindergarten initiatives:

1. **Ensure integration of infant and toddler needs by using funding strategies that create a prenatal through pre-kindergarten continuum.** Directing substantial funding toward improving programs to help prevent babies from falling behind long before they enter preschool helps promote a continuum of planning and services for all of the preschool years. Strategies could include funding the components of a birth-to-five system, ensuring that the needs of infants and toddlers are taken into account in funding programs also available to serve older preschoolers, or providing significant funding within any pre-kindergarten programs through infant-toddler set-asides

Congress should:

Ensure that any early childhood policy includes an infant-toddler component with significant funding to help ensure quality programs for infants and toddlers as well as older preschool children.

Following this innovative model - prenatal through pre-kindergarten funding streams are emerging in some states:

- *Smart Start:* North Carolina pioneered this initiative which consists of a network of local non-profit agencies and a state level public-private partnership. *Smart Start* funds various birth-to-five systems components, including efforts to enhance program accessibility, provide quality health screenings to young children as well as family supports, and increase professional development initiatives.¹¹

Another funding strategy is the allocation of set-asides in funding streams to ensure a particular percentage of resources will go to a specific population or program, including infants and toddlers. Examples of infant and toddler set-asides include:

- *Early Head Start.* Based on research about the value of programs that serve young children and their families, the 1994 Head Start Reauthorization Act created Early Head Start and mandated that a specific portion of all Head Start funding be available for programs serving infants and toddlers.¹² This set-aside has increased over the years to its current level of ten percent of all Head Start funds.¹³ Unfortunately, Early Head Start is reaching only a small proportion of at-risk children and families – less than three percent of all eligible children and families are served.¹⁴
- *Child Care Development Block Grant Infant-Toddler Set-Aside.* An infant and toddler set-aside, approximately \$100 million, has been included through the annual appropriations process in the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) over the last several years. This set-aside has helped states improve the quality of infant and toddler child care.¹⁵

- *Illinois Infant-Toddler Set-Aside.* Reacting to a need articulated by preschool teachers for better prepared four-year-olds, the Illinois legislature created a set-aside in their state Early Childhood Block Grant for programs serving infants, toddlers, and their parents.¹⁶ This set-aside, which is based upon the precedent established by the federal government with Early Head Start, is currently at 11 percent of the Illinois Early Childhood Block Grant.¹⁷

2. **Improve the quality of infant-toddler programs as an integral part of building a solid infrastructure for pre-kindergarten.** If policymakers only strengthen early learning opportunities for children who are close to kindergarten age, many of those children will still have to play educational “catch up.”

Congress should:

Include strengthening the quality of infant-toddler programs as an integral part of efforts to build a solid infrastructure for pre-kindergarten. Early learning guidelines can strengthen infant and toddler programs by increasing caregivers’ knowledge and understanding about how to support very young children’s learning and development.

For example, Arkansas’ program standards and early learning guidelines include benchmarks of development and strategies that all caregivers can use with infants and toddlers, which are linked to early learning guidelines for preschoolers as well as content standards for the state’s kindergarten through twelfth grade system.¹⁸

3. **Cultivate a quality infant-toddler workforce by ensuring that the professional development and compensation system provides infant-toddler caregivers and teachers with opportunities to acquire and use the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the developmental needs of children.** There is widespread recognition that the professional development of early childhood professionals plays a critical role in the quality of services for very young children, just as it does for older children. Recruiting and training infant-toddler caregivers and teachers is difficult because they often choose to move into pre-kindergarten, where there are opportunities for advancement and higher salaries. Often there are shortages of educational opportunities specific to working with infants and toddlers.

Congress should:

Implement a professional development system that meets the full range of age groups served (birth to pre-kindergarten) and across program auspices (child care, pre-kindergarten, Head Start/Early Head Start). Professional development opportunities should include an emphasis on infant and toddler development and care.

For example, Wisconsin developed an Infant/Toddler Teacher Credential that sets standards for infant and toddler caregivers and provides recognition for those who demonstrate a specialized knowledge of infant and toddler development.¹⁹ Furthermore, to retain qualified personnel in the early childhood field, salaries must be comparable across prenatal through pre-kindergarten programs.

4. **Encourage the development of governance structures in states to coordinate services and policies for children prenatally through pre-kindergarten.** A coordinated governance structure can improve outcomes for children by ensuring that all parts of a system work together to provide quality, comprehensive early care and education.

Congress should:

Support state efforts to coordinate services and policies from a prenatal to pre-kindergarten continuum. There are many models of coordinating governance structures in states. The merging of a state's programs for young children into a single state agency may help to ensure the collaboration and coordination of all its early childhood programs.

For example, Georgia created a new agency called *Bright from the Start* that manages its state pre-kindergarten program, federal child nutrition program, *Even Start Literacy* program, all child care licensing and registration, and CCDBG quality set-aside, as well as its infant and toddler earmark.²⁰ Alternately, advisory groups may be developed to counsel decision-makers on how to mobilize resources, facilitate holistic approaches, and/or strengthen partnerships between programs serving young children. These may be executive branch entities, such as Children's Cabinets, or they may be public-private partnerships.²¹

- 5. Involve individuals who work with infants and toddlers in the pre-kindergarten planning process.** The lives of infants and toddlers are touched by many individuals involved in early childhood development, from parents and teachers to mental health professionals and child welfare agents.

Congress should:

Encourage the involvement of a broad spectrum of early childhood professionals, organizations, and advocacy groups at the federal, state, and local levels when legislating and implementing pre-kindergarten programs. This diverse group should include individuals who work with infants and toddlers across a variety of disciplines such as health, family support, and early learning, and should also involve less traditional participants such as family and juvenile court judges, mental health providers, and community business leaders.

For example, in New York, a broad spectrum of early childhood professionals, advocates, researchers, educators and public agency staff came together to develop a blueprint for a comprehensive, high-quality birth-to-five early care and education system.²²

 RESEARCH

With growing interest nationwide in early childhood education, especially pre-kindergarten programs, and the lack of public policy efforts focused on the needs of infants and toddlers, ZERO TO THREE and the Trust for Early Education (TEE) partnered in the summer of 2003 to conduct an exploratory study to identify how states are incorporating infants and toddlers into systems planning around pre-kindergarten programs. This study, *Building Bridges from Pre-kindergarten to Infants and Toddlers: A Preliminary Look at Issues in Four States*, focused on four states that had engaged in systems-building efforts around early childhood services: Georgia, New York, New Jersey, and Illinois. The study analyzed whether policymakers can successfully build off pre-kindergarten to address the needs of infants and toddlers. The researchers found that this important goal can be accomplished if the needs of infants and toddlers are considered *while* pre-kindergarten policy strategies are being developed and implemented.²³

Key findings from *Building Bridges from Pre-kindergarten to Infants and Toddlers: A Preliminary Look at Issues in Four States* include:²⁴

- Emerging pre-kindergarten programs raised awareness about the importance of early education across the birth to five age span in Georgia, Illinois, New Jersey, and New York.
- Promising policies to address the needs of infants and toddlers have emerged, and these policies can be instructive to other states beginning the planning process.
- Collaboration with child care providers increases the impact that pre-kindergarten has on the child care community.
- Pre-kindergarten presents staffing and professional development opportunities and challenges for infant and toddler providers.
- Early education system-building across program types and age groups has the potential to bring pre-kindergarten and infant-toddler initiatives together, but states need a clearer road map for how to achieve their vision for infants and toddlers.
- Leadership that is committed to birth-to-five coordination and planning across program types makes a difference.

★ FAST FACTS

- In the U.S., there are approximately 12 million children under the age of three.²⁵
- Fifty-seven percent of women in the U.S. with children under the age of three are in the workforce.²⁶
- In 2002, 38 percent of infants and toddlers with working mothers spent 35 hours or more in nonparental care.²⁷
- 2.7 million infants and toddlers in low-income families have at least one parent employed full-time, year-round. 1.6 million infants and toddlers in low-income families have at least one parent employed part-time or full-time, part-year. 1.0 million infants and toddlers in low-income families do not have an employed parent.²⁸
- A national study of 100 child care centers found that 92 of them provided inadequate care for babies.²⁹
- Forty-three percent of infants and toddlers live in low-income families with incomes below 200 percent of poverty and a fifth live below the poverty line. Sixty-two percent of these low-income infants and toddlers have parents who have only a high school education or less. Sixty-one percent of infants and toddlers in immigrant families live in low-income households.³⁰

About Us

ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a non-partisan, research-based, nonprofit organization committed to promoting the healthy development of our nation's infants and toddlers. To learn more about this topic, or about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please contact us at 202-638-1144 or on the Web at <http://www.zerotothree.org/policy>.

¹ Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

² Ibid.

-
- ³ Goldberg, Jason, Bruner, Charles, and Kot, Veronika. 1999. *The ABC's of early childhood: Trends, information and evidence for use in developing an early childhood system of care and education*. Des Moines, IA: Iowa Kids Count and the Iowa Forum for Children and Families.
- ⁴ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2006. *Basic facts about low-income children: Birth to age three*. http://www.nccp.org/pub_eep06.html (accessed July 12, 2006).
- ⁵ Goldberg, Jason, Bruner, Charles, and Kot, Veronika. 1999. *The ABC's of early childhood: Trends, information and evidence for use in developing an early childhood system of care and education*.
- ⁶ Head Start Bureau. 2003. *Executive summary, Head Start FACES 2000: A whole-child perspective on program performance*. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/faces/reports/executive_summary/exec_summary.pdf (accessed July 12, 2006).
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2004. *Current population survey: Employment status by sex, presence and age of children, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2004*. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table5-2005.pdf> (accessed June 29, 2006).
- ⁹ Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*.
- ¹⁰ Lombardi, Joan, Cohen, Julie, Stebbins, Helene, Lurie-Hurvitz, Erica et al. 2004. *Building bridges from pre-kindergarten to infants and toddlers: A preliminary look at issues in four states*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- ¹¹ Schumacher, Rachel, Hamm, Katie, Goldstein, Anne, and Lombardi, Joan. 2006. *Starting off right: Promoting child development from birth in state early care and education initiatives*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy and ZERO TO THREE.
- ¹² Wilen, Julie. 2003. *Ready for school: The case for including babies and toddlers as we expand preschool opportunities*. Chicago, IL: The Ounce of Prevention Fund.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Note: 61,243 is the exact number of children under three served by Early Head Start in Fiscal Year 2005. Head Start Program Information Report for the 2004-2005 Program Year, Early Head Start Programs Only. Retrieved October 23, 2006. Note: 2,552,000 children under three in the U.S. live below the federal poverty level. U.S. Census Bureau. 2005. *Current population survey, 2006 annual social and economic supplement. POV34: Single year of age—Poverty status: 2005*. http://pubdb3.census.gov/macro/032006/pov/new34_100_01.htm (accessed October 23, 2006).
- ¹⁵ ZERO TO THREE Policy Center. 2003. *The infant-toddler set-aside of the Child Care and Development Block Grant: Improving quality child care for infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE. <http://www.zerotothree.org/policy/> (accessed November 6, 2006).
- ¹⁶ Wilen, Julie. 2003. *Ready for school: The case for including babies and toddlers as we expand preschool opportunities*.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Schumacher, Rachel, Hamm, Katie, Goldstein, Anne, and Lombardi, Joan. 2006. *Starting off right: Promoting child development from birth in state early care and education initiatives*.
- ¹⁹ Ounce of Prevention Fund, Birth to Three Project: Training and Workforce Development Committee. 2001. *Credentials and training programs for staff who work with infants, toddlers, and their families: A summary of programs in other states*. Chicago, IL: The Ounce of Prevention Fund.
- ²⁰ Schumacher, Rachel, Hamm, Katie, Goldstein, Anne, and Lombardi, Joan. 2006. *Starting off right: Promoting child development from birth in state early care and education initiatives*.
- ²¹ Segal, Ann, Grossman, Lisa, and Lovejoy, Anna. 2004. *A Governor's Guide to Children's Cabinets*. Washington, DC: National Governors Association Center for Best Practices.
- ²² New York State Child Care Coordinating Council. *Infant toddler blue print advisory committee: History and background*. http://www.nysccccc.org/infant_blue.htm (accessed July 12, 2006).
- ²³ Lombardi, Joan, Cohen, Julie, Stebbins, Helene, Lurie-Hurvitz, Erica et al. 2004. *Building bridges from pre-kindergarten to infants and toddlers: A preliminary look at issues in four states*.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2006. *Basic facts about low-income children: Birth to age three*. http://www.nccp.org/pub_eep06.html (accessed July 12, 2006).
- ²⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2004. *Current population survey: Employment status by sex, presence and age of children, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2004*. <http://www.bls.gov/cps/wlf-table5-2005.pdf> (accessed June 29, 2006).

²⁷ Kreader, J. Lee, Ferguson, Daniel, and Lawrence, Sharmila. 2005. *Infant and toddler child care arrangements*. Washington, DC: National Center for Children in Poverty. <http://www.nccp.org/media/RTPC1.pdf> (accessed October 31, 2006).

²⁸ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2006. *Basic facts about low-income children: Birth to age three*. http://www.nccp.org/pub_eep06.html (accessed July 12, 2006).

²⁹ Oser, Cindy and Cohen, Julie. 2003. *America's babies: The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center's data book*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.

³⁰ National Center for Children in Poverty. 2006. *Basic facts about low-income children: Birth to age three*. http://www.nccp.org/pub_eep06.html (accessed July 12, 2006).