



**STATEMENT
OF
ZERO TO THREE POLICY CENTER**

SUBMITTED TO THE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

**SUBMITTED BY:
MATTHEW E. MELMED, J.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
ZERO TO THREE**

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Chairman Rangel and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to submit the following written testimony on behalf of ZERO TO THREE. My name is Matthew Melmed. For the last 12 years I have been the Executive Director of ZERO TO THREE, a national non-profit organization that has worked to advance the healthy development of America's babies and toddlers for close to 30 years. I would like to start by thanking the Committee for its interest in examining the economic and societal costs of poverty and for providing me the opportunity to discuss the interaction between poverty and the healthy development of our nation's infants and toddlers and how federal policy can help address the issues raised.

Some may wonder why babies matter in public policy. Surely they are the province of their parents or caregivers. Yet, public policies often affect very young children, policies that are sometimes created with little thought as to their consequences for this age group. In addition, many policies focus on the effects of *ignoring* the needs of infants and toddlers, for example, by having to address the cognitive gaps between low-income preschoolers and their more affluent peers or providing intensive special education services for problems that may have begun as much milder developmental delays left untreated in a young baby. Mr. Chairman, my message to you is that babies can't wait—we know that early intervention and prevention works best and we know what works to promote healthy development in young children.

The early years create an important foundation for later school and life success. We know from the science of early childhood development that infancy and toddlerhood are times of intense intellectual engagement.ⁱ During this time – a remarkable 36 months – the brain undergoes its most dramatic development, and children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. All babies and toddlers need positive early learning experiences to foster their intellectual, social, and emotional development and to lay the foundation for later school success. These years may be even more critical for young children living in poverty.

One of the most consistent associations in developmental science is between economic hardship and compromised child development.ⁱⁱ The malleability of young children's development and the overwhelming importance of the family (rather than school or peer) context suggest that economic conditions in early childhood may be far more important for shaping children's ability, behavior, and achievement than conditions later in childhood.ⁱⁱⁱ Lower-income infants and toddlers are at greater risk than middle to high-income infants and toddlers for a variety of poorer outcomes and vulnerabilities such as later school failure, learning disabilities, behavior problems, mental retardation, developmental delay, and health impairments.^{iv} Babies and toddlers living in high-risk environments need additional supports to promote their healthy growth and development.

Congress must consider the unique needs of very young children and their families who are living in poverty. Policies should help attack the intergenerational cycle of poverty by laying the foundations for early learning and improving prospects of later school success on the part of the children. We know that intervening early in the life of a child at-risk for poor development can help minimize the impacts of these risks. We must

ensure that infants, especially those living in poverty, have time at home with their parents in the first months of life. We must also ensure that infants and toddlers living in poverty have access to quality, developmentally appropriate early learning programs such as Early Head Start or quality child care to help ensure that they are ready for school.

Portrait of Infants and Toddlers Living in Poverty

There are more than 12 million infants and toddlers living in the United States. Twenty-one percent – 2.6 million – live in poor families.^v After a decade of decline, the percentage of children under the age of 3 living in low-income families is on the rise again.^{vi} Between 2000 and 2005, the number of children of all ages who were poor increased by 11 percent.^{vii} During the same period, the number of infants and toddlers who were poor increased by 15 percent.^{viii} It is important to note that young children are disproportionately impacted by economic stress. Forty-three percent of children under the age of 3 – 5.2 million – live in low-income families (defined as below 200 percent of poverty).^{ix}

The environmental stresses to which these children are more likely to be exposed, such as inadequate nutrition, substance abuse, maternal depression, exposure to environmental toxins, and trauma/abuse can all negatively influence their development.^x For example, the existence of maternal depression and other adult mental health disorders can negatively affect children if parents are not capable of providing consistent sensitive care, emotional nurturance, protection and the stimulation that young children need.^{xi} Maternal depression, anxiety disorders, and other forms of chronic depression affect approximately 10 percent of mothers with young children^{xii} -- this number is even higher for families in poverty. In fact, findings at enrollment from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project indicate that nearly half (48 percent) of mothers reported enough depressive symptoms to be considered clinically depressed.^{xiii} Early and sustained exposure to the aforementioned risks can influence the physical architecture of the developing brain, preventing babies and toddlers from fully developing the neural pathways and connections that facilitate later learning.

The Importance of Unhurried Time

Welfare to work policy is an area where the importance of infant and toddler development may not be so obvious, but is a factor that should be given great weight. The need for infants, especially, to spend time with their parents should be balanced against society's goal of moving adults quickly into the workforce. Often, when this need is considered, it is only in the context of the expense of providing child care for this group.

According to a groundbreaking report released by the National Academies of Science, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, parents structure the experience and shape the environment within which a young child's early development unfolds.^{xiv} Infants and toddlers need unhurried time with their parents to form the critical relationships with them that will serve as the foundation for social, emotional, and cognitive development. The better parents know their children, the more readily they will recognize even the most subtle cues that indicate what the children need

to promote their healthy growth and development. For example, early on infants are learning to regulate their eating and sleeping patterns and their emotions. If parents can recognize and respond to their baby's cues, they will be able to soothe the baby, respond to his cues, and make the baby feel safe and secure in his new world. Trust and emotional security enable a baby to explore with confidence and communicate with others -- critical characteristics that impact early learning and later school readiness.

At-risk infants and toddlers in particular need time with their parents because their early attachments can help serve as a buffer against the impact of the multiple risk factors they may face. Early attachments are critical for infants and toddlers because a positive early relationship, especially with a parent, reduces a young child's fear in novel or challenging situations thereby enabling her to explore with confidence and to manage stress and also strengthens a young child's sense of competence and efficacy.^{xv} In addition, early attachments set the stage for other relationships, foster the exploratory behavior that is so critical to early learning, and play an important role in shaping a young child's ability to react to stressful situations.^{xvi}

The need for time with infants has direct relevance to welfare to work policies, and Congress should consider the developmental needs of infants and toddlers in shaping these policies. Excessive mandatory work requirements for low-income parents who are receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) make unhurried time difficult. While states have the option of exempting parents with infants from work requirements, many do not take advantage or exempt these parents for only a few months.

There is evidence to suggest that long hours of maternal employment in the child's first year, can be a negative factor for infant development.^{xvii} It is particularly difficult for mothers with young children living in poverty because of the kinds of jobs they tend to have (i.e. service jobs), the nontraditional hours they are often required to work, and the poor quality child care that is available. Young children living in poverty are much more likely to have a mother who works nontraditional hours compared with young children living above the poverty line.^{xviii} Service jobs, which often entail very low wages, few benefits and nontraditional work hours, are disproportionately filled by less-educated women who now comprise a large group of mothers who are entering the labor force as a result of welfare reform and federal work requirements.^{xix}

Finally, we know almost nothing about how the TANF program with its work requirements has affected infants and toddlers, for good or ill. Some studies have looked at the impact of TANF on older children, but ignore the impacts on the youngest. I urge Congress to require research into the impacts this program has on the well-being of infants and toddlers.

Early Head Start: A Beacon of Hope for Babies Living in Poverty

Comprehensive high quality early learning programs for infants and toddlers, such as Early Head Start, can help to protect against the multiple adverse influences that may hinder their development across all domains. Very young children living in poverty are

more at-risk for a variety of poor outcomes than low-income families. Programs like Early Head Start not only set the stage for later school readiness and success, but also for the parent's road to self-sufficiency.

Research from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, and its companion follow-up results, concluded that the program is making a positive difference in areas associated with children's success in school, family self-sufficiency, and parental support of child development. For example, Early Head Start produced statistically significant, positive impacts on standardized measures of children's cognitive and language development. A smaller percentage of Early Head Start children scored in the "at-risk" range of developmental functioning. Early Head Start children had more positive interactions with their parents than control group children. In addition, Early Head Start significantly facilitated parents' progress toward self-sufficiency. Although there were not significant increases in income, there was increased parental participation in education and job-training activities. The study also found that Early Head Start parents were more involved and provided more support for learning. Early Head Start parents were observed to be more emotionally supportive and less detached than control-group parents. They also provided significantly more support for language and learning than control-group parents.^{xx}

The experience of Early Head Start suggests that exempting parents of young children from work requirements need not mean an unproductive period. They can be engaged in activities that are good for their own development as well as that of their children—if resources are available. In fact, a few states have channeled TANF funds into expanding Early Head Start services.

Although the benefits of Early Head Start are clear, the program is only reaching a small proportion of at-risk children and families. Currently, only 10 percent of the overall Head Start budget is used to serve 61,243 low-income families with infants and toddlers in the Early Head Start program – less than three percent of those eligible. In order to ensure that the program can serve more eligible babies, Congress must increase the Early Head Start set-aside to at least 25 percent over five years and expand funding for Head Start to make those increases a reality. We can't wait until these at-risk children are ready behind at age four to intervene.

Quality Child Care for At-Risk Infants and Toddlers

Second only to the immediate family, child care is the context in which early childhood development most frequently unfolds, starting in infancy.^{xxi} According to 2005 data, 42 percent of one-year-olds and 53 percent of one-to-two-year-olds have at least one regular non-parental care arrangement.^{xxii} The increase in the number of working parents with babies and toddlers comes at a time when science has demonstrated the critical importance of supporting the development and learning of children ages birth to three, and makes the need for quality child care even more significant.

The evidence associating the quality of infant and toddler care with early cognitive and language outcomes “is striking in consistency.”^{xxiii} High quality child care is associated with outcomes that all parents want to see in their children, ranging from cooperation with adults to the ability to initiate and sustain positive exchanges with peers, to early competence in math and reading – all of which are key ingredients to later school success. However, more than 40 percent of infants and toddlers are in child care rooms of poor quality.^{xxiv}

Research indicates that the strongest effects of quality child care are found with at-risk children – children from families with the fewest resources and under the greatest stress.^{xxv} Yet, at-risk infants and toddlers who may benefit the most from high-quality child care are unlikely to receive it – they receive some of the poorest quality care that exists in communities across the United States.^{xxvi} Poor quality child care for at-risk children may diminish inborn potential and lead to poorer developmental outcomes.^{xxvii} Congress should ensure that all babies and toddlers, particularly those living in poverty, have access to quality child care. An increase in federal funding for child care would lead to increased investments in quality and would help to ensure that more low-income infants and toddlers have access to quality child care settings. More funding needs to be directed specifically at improving the quality of care for infants and toddlers, and providing professional development opportunities with infant-toddler content for early childhood staff who work with this age group.

Conclusion

During the first three years of life, children rapidly develop foundational capabilities – cognitive, social and emotional – on which subsequent development builds. These years are even more important for infants and toddlers living in poverty. All young children should be given the opportunity to succeed in school and in life. We know that all babies, especially those at-risk, need unhurried time in the first months of life with their parents. We also know that access to comprehensive, high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs and services – whether Early Head Start or child care – can serve as a protective factor for at-risk infants and toddlers.

Too often, the effect of our overall policy emphasis is to wait until at-risk children are already behind developmentally before significant investments are made to address their needs. I urge the Committee to change this pattern and invest in at-risk infants and toddlers early on, when that investment can have the biggest payoff -- preventing problems or delays that become more costly to address as the children grow older. We do not need to accept that vulnerable children will inevitably have already fallen behind at age four and then provide special education and intensive prekindergarten services to help them play catch up. We know what at-risk babies need to help them grow up healthy and ready to learn. I urge the Committee to consider the very unique needs of babies living in poverty as you address the economic and societal costs of poverty.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to our nation’s at-risk infants, toddlers and families.

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- ⁱ Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Ibid.
- ^v Douglas-Hall, Ayona., Chau, Michelle., and Koball, Heather. 2006. *Basic facts about low-income children: Birth to age 3*. September 2006. http://www.nccp.org/media/ecp06b_text.pdf (accessed February 5, 2007).
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} Ibid.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Ibid.
- ^x National Center for Children in Poverty. 1999. *Poverty and Brain Development in Early Childhood*. <http://www.nccp.org/media/pbd99-text.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2007).
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- ^{xii} M. O'Hara, *Postpartum Depression: Causes and Consequences* (New York, NY: Springer-Verlag Inc., 1994).
- ^{xiii} Early Head Start Evaluation and Research Project, *Research to Practice: Depression in the Lives of Early Head Start Families* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, January 2003).
- ^{xiv} Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ^{xv} Ibid.
- ^{xvi} Ibid.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Ibid.
- ^{xix} Ibid.
- ^{xx} U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. 2002. *Making a difference in the lives of infants and toddlers and their families. The impacts of Early Head Start*.
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- ^{xxii} 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.
- ^{xxiii} Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ^{xxiv} Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes Study Team. *Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes in Child Care Centers*, Public Report, 2nd edition. (Denver Economics Department, University of Colorado at Denver, 1995).
- ^{xxv} Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah. 2000. *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid.