

**Celebrating Very Young Children:  
Bringing Our Voices Together to Create Change**  
An interview with Joan Lombardi

To launch the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network's new e-newsletter, ZERO TO THREE spoke with Joan Lombardi about the important role early childhood professionals and researchers can play in advocating for infants, toddlers and their families. Joan was the founder of the Better Baby Care Campaign, which was the forerunner to the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network. We know her thoughts and insights will inspire you to create change for our nation's very young children.

*You have devoted your career to improving the lives of very young children in this country, what do you hope can be accomplished through the Policy Network?*

I hope that together, we can help assure that all children – from birth through age three – have a good start in life. In particular, this means ensuring that they have strong families, access to health care, and positive early learning experiences. It's always been our goal to raise awareness about the importance of the earliest years of life. But now, we must make sure that we speak up and work with policymakers to create policies that are supportive of families in their efforts to care for their very young children.

Today across the United States, too many children don't have access to good health care. At the same time, there are significant numbers of babies and toddlers in child care environments that may not be optimal for their development. And infants are the fastest growing category of children entering foster care in the United States. There's so much more that we can do, and the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network gives us a way to do it.

*What roles can infant/toddler researchers and practitioners play in the policy process?*

Their role is essential to our success and can contribute so much to the policy process. All of the people who are working with, or on behalf of, infants and toddlers are the eyes and ears that help give voice to the issues that families with young children are facing. Whether they are delivering services, training those who care for young children or conducting research, infant/toddler professionals have something to share with policymakers that is unique and insightful.

*Do you have any advice for people who know about the developmental needs of babies and toddlers but haven't yet become involved in advocacy?*

Yes -- share your stories and be optimistic about change. Tell others what you're seeing, and be sure to share with them both the concerns of families and the positive programs that address these needs. Everyone likes to hear good news, and we have some to share with policymakers. For example, we don't talk enough about programs with good results, such as Early Head Start (EHS). Early Head Start has proven that it can have a positive impact on the developing child and support parents in their efforts to care for their young children. The program is flexible and fits the needs of communities and families – whether it's a home visiting program, a center-based child care program or a series of supports to parents. Early Head Start is a program that really

delivers on its promises and represents the hope and potential of the country, yet it only reaches a fraction of eligible children. We need to turn this around to help prevent the achievement gap for poor children.

New advocates joining this movement should be optimistic about the potential to effect policy. Even though we've recently had some serious budget setbacks, we have to keep moving forward and believe we can make a difference. It's going to take more voices coming together -- like a chorus -- but we can do it.

*What do you think are the most critical issues impacting very young children at the state and local level?*

Parents need time and support to be good parents, and our public policies must reflect that. Too many families still don't have access to family leave when their babies are born, which makes it difficult during this critically important developmental period in the life of a young child. At the same time, the quality of child care for infants and toddlers needs serious attention. We have to continue to work toward developing state plans that focus on improving the quality and accessibility of infant/toddler child care. And we must remind policymakers that quality child care is not only an important work support for families, it is an educational environment for children.

Advocates for very young children must continue to stress the importance of creating strong bonds between parent and child, and caregiver and child. For infants and toddlers in particular, the relationship with a caring adult is the essential ingredient to getting off to a strong start. Very young children need regular and sustained attention from parents and child care providers. Parents need to laugh and have fun with their children. Babies and toddlers need routines, continuity of care, adequate sleep and good nutrition. This may not sound much like public policy, but it is. Our policies should create the environment that encourages families to flourish, that helps them avoid stress and tells them they are important and valued.

*If you could wave a magic wand, what would you like to see happen at the federal level over the next five years to improve the lives of infants and toddlers?*

I would like to see every infant and toddler that is eligible for Early Head Start have access to the program and for all infants and toddlers to have the best health care possible. I would like to see an improved child care system that puts more focus on infants and toddlers. For the thousands of infants and toddlers in foster care, I would like to see child welfare policies that assure placements in stable and developmentally appropriate environments.

*Any last thoughts for ZERO TO THREE Policy Network members?*

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Network is a big step and important piece in the overall child advocacy movement. It's a chance for people who work with, and on behalf of, infants and toddlers to step forward and celebrate our nation's youngest children. It's an enormous opportunity, and I hope more and more people across the country take it. You know, it's my hope that in a few years, there will be tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of people

involved in the ZERO TO THREE Policy Network advocating for babies, toddlers and their families.

**Joan Lombardi** is one of the nation's leading experts on early childhood development and child and family policy. She is the director of The Children's Project LLC, through which she serves as an advisor to a number of foundations and policy initiatives. Joan served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for External Affairs in the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and was the first Director of the Child Care Bureau. She is the author of *Time to Care: Redesigning Child Care to Promote Education, Support Families and Build Communities* (Temple University Press, 2003) and co-editor of *A Beacon of Hope: The Promise of Early Head Start for America's Youngest Children* (ZERO TO THREE Press, 2004).

In 2004, Joan launched the Global Leaders for Young Children program in partnership with The World Forum Foundation, which provides leadership support to 19 early education leaders from 8 countries. In addition, she has served as a Senior Fellow with The Global Fund for Children in Washington D.C. and on the Education Leadership Council of Save the Children.