

# Building Momentum for Prenatal-to-Three

Lessons Learned from Message Research





This guide offers messaging and communications tips, based on insights from recent research, to help PN-3 advocates build support and spark action among policy leaders.

We know the prenatal-to-three (PN-3) period is critical for children's current and future health and development, and we know families need extra support during this formative, yet often stressful, time. There is growing momentum for federal, state and local efforts to build policies and programs that support our youngest children and their families. From high-quality child care and early learning to maternal and infant health, paid leave, home visiting, and financial supports—many types of programs are needed to give all children a strong start.

To understand how to make the best and most urgent case for investments in programs that support families with young children, the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT) partnered with bipartisan research team Hart Research Associates and Echelon Insights to conduct qualitative and quantitative messaging research with policy influencers across the country and on both sides of the aisle.

What did the research find? Many policy influencers understand the importance of PN-3. But with so many competing demands, they need to be convinced to make it a priority.

PN-3 messages tested well across the board with all types of policy influencers. The work that advocates have been doing for decades to raise awareness about the importance of supporting infants, toddlers, and their families is paying off, and the policy and program solutions proposed have high support.

Now, amidst many competing priorities, PN-3 advocates must make a strong case for why investing in young children and their families must be top of the agenda, and why it's critical to act now. Across all PN-3 messaging, it's time to dial up the urgency.



### Resources to Make the Case

Visit [www.theNCIT.org/make-the-case](http://www.theNCIT.org/make-the-case) to find messaging materials, infographics and research to help you make the case for investments in PN-3 policies and programs.



### Full Research Findings

To view the complete research and an appendix of all the messages tested please visit <https://www.thencit.org/resources/promoting-a-pn-3-agenda>.



### Definition: Policy Influencer

A policy influencer is a highly engaged citizen who regularly consumes news, has an interest in current events, and is politically involved in some way. This group is a reliable proxy to understand policy leaders' opinions.



The messages outlined in this guide are rooted in research and designed to be used when engaging with federal, state and local policy leaders and decision makers. As you weave the messaging into your new and existing communications, tailor the language, as needed, to best represent your work, your specific location, and your audiences.

While it does not encompass all aspects of PN-3 work, the language tested in this research resonated strongly across all policy influencer demographics and can be used to make the broad case for prioritizing PN-3 programs and policies.

This guide builds on the ideas that gained the most support and provides the building blocks for message development and communications tips to help PN-3 advocates make convincing arguments and spark action among policy leaders, including:

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# MAKING THE CASE: CORE NARRATIVE

The core narrative is an overarching, introductory message to convey why investing in PN-3 programs and policies is so important and to build a sense of urgency for investing now. It includes the language that performed the strongest among all policy influencers. Use this narrative and supporting points as a starting place to find common ground with your audiences before pivoting into more specific language around your federal, state, local policy priorities.

### General Message:

Every child deserves a strong start in life. The foundation we provide for them shapes their future and the future of our communities. We have to get it right.

During the first three years of life, the brains and bodies of infants and toddlers make huge gains in development. Babies' brains develop fastest from birth to age three, and their early experiences—both positive and negative—build the foundation for brain and body architecture that will support their ability to learn, their behavior, and their overall health.

We must act now to ensure that children grow into socially, emotionally, and physically healthy kids who are confident, empathetic, and ready for school and life.

### Supporting Points:

- Our country is at its best when we recognize that children, particularly our youngest, are our greatest resource. We cannot expect a healthier, more resilient, more prosperous country in the future if we don't invest in our children now.
- By making sure all infants and toddlers and their families have access to supports—including mental and physical health services, high-quality child care, paid leave, financial security and support networks, regardless of their skin color, gender, or life experiences—we can strengthen our communities and live up to our promise as a nation.

### Calls to Action:

- Infants and toddlers must be our highest priority; they need our investment now because they only get one chance at a strong start.
- This is our chance to make a powerful commitment to our youngest generation.



**49% of policy influencers** chose a message about infant brain development as among the most compelling reasons to support PN-3 programs and policies—making it the best-scoring message overall.



## MESSAGING SPECIFIC PN-3 TOPICS

When talking about PN-3 policies and programs, there are opportunities to tie in many themes to strengthen and deepen conversations. This research tested 10 message frames representing topics currently pervasive in media cycles and national narratives to see which were the most convincing to policy influencers for supporting PN-3 investments. While all the frames were persuasive, the following topics—brain and body science, equity and maternal health—rose to the top. The following are suggestions from the tested language on how to weave these narratives into your messaging.

### Most Convincing Arguments for Programs/Policies to Provide Resources to PN-3 Families and Children

All Policy Influencers	White Policy Influencers	Black Policy Influencers	Latinx Policy Influencers	AAPI Policy Influencers	Republicans
<b>Brain Development</b> 49%	<b>Brain Development</b> 51%	<b>Equity – Historic Perspective</b> 54%	<b>Maternal Support</b> 50%	<b>Brain Development</b> 54%	<b>Full Body Health Specific</b> 54%
<b>Equity – Forward Facing</b> 45%	<b>Equity – Forward Facing</b> 45%	<b>Child Poverty</b> 51%	<b>Equity – Forward Facing</b> 48%	<b>Child Poverty</b> 52%	<b>Brain Development</b> 52%
<b>Maternal Support</b> 44%	<b>Full Body Health Specific</b> 44%	<b>Maternal Support</b> 49%	<b>Equity – Historic Perspective</b> 48%	<b>Equity – Forward Facing</b> 50%	<b>Maternal Support</b> 44%

See the full messages tested in the appendix on Page 16.





## Brain and Body Development

The message research consistently demonstrated that brain and body science is the strongest frame across all policy influencer demographics to build support for PN-3 programs and policies. Research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University highlights that the earliest years in a child's life are not only critical for brain development but for the development of all biological systems in the body. And when it comes to discussing the science around full-body health, our message testing showed that audiences reacted very positively to specific examples of long-term health outcomes.

The following messages around the science of brain and body development tested well with policy influencers across all demographics:

- Babies' brains develop fastest from birth to age three. So, their relationships with caregivers and early experiences—both positive and negative—build the foundations of brain architecture, which supports their ability to learn, their behavior, and their overall health.
- That's why it's critical to support parents and babies early, so caregivers can prevent infants and toddlers from experiencing prolonged stress that can disrupt healthy development.
- Positive experiences early in children's lives promote healthy physical development throughout the body, including the brain, the heart and lungs, the systems that turn food into energy, and the immune system.
- Negative experiences early in life can lead to long-term health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and mental health challenges.
- By investing in programs that support families with infants and toddlers, we can give more children a healthy foundation for life.





### Snapshot: PN-3 Is Critical for Lifelong Health and Development

A child's early experiences during the prenatal period and first three years after birth shape brain development and the healthy development of all other systems in the body. What happens during this early period can have substantial effects on both short- and long-term outcomes in learning, behavior, and physical and mental health.

Research from the *Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University* shows that supportive relationships, consistent routines, and positive experiences early in life are just as important for healthy brain and body development as good nutrition and protection from environmental toxins. These experiences build sturdy brain architecture, which becomes the foundation for core social-emotional skills, early executive functioning and self-regulatory skills, literacy skills, and the body's ability to cope with stress, battle illness, and overcome hardship.

Supportive relationships and positive learning experiences begin at home and can also be supported and provided through a range of effective programs and policies that help children succeed and prevent the need for more costly interventions later on.

Learn more about the scientific case for investing in the first three years of life at <https://www.thencit.org/resources/early-health-development-infographic>

### Equity

Successful conversations about PN-3 and equity start with finding common ground. While the research did not do a deep dive into how to talk about equity, it did evaluate how convincing equity arguments were to make the case to policy influencers to prioritize PN-3 policies and programs. The research shows that when discussing equity, it will be important to consider your audience's background, perspective, and familiarity with the topic. For example, research found that Black policy influencers are more likely to start from a place of higher support for PN-3 programs and policies and are more likely to be convinced by strong equity messaging, as compared to other demographics such as White, Latinx, AAPI or Republican influencers.

The research also showed that equity messaging is not a convincing frame for Republican audiences and does not rank in the top three—as it does for most other demographics and with policy influencers overall. To maximize effectiveness in making a case to support PN-3 programs and policies, more conservative audiences will more likely be persuaded with the language of brain development, physical health, and maternal health support.

Start your conversations with what we know works best and then look for ways to educate on equity once you have established common ground.

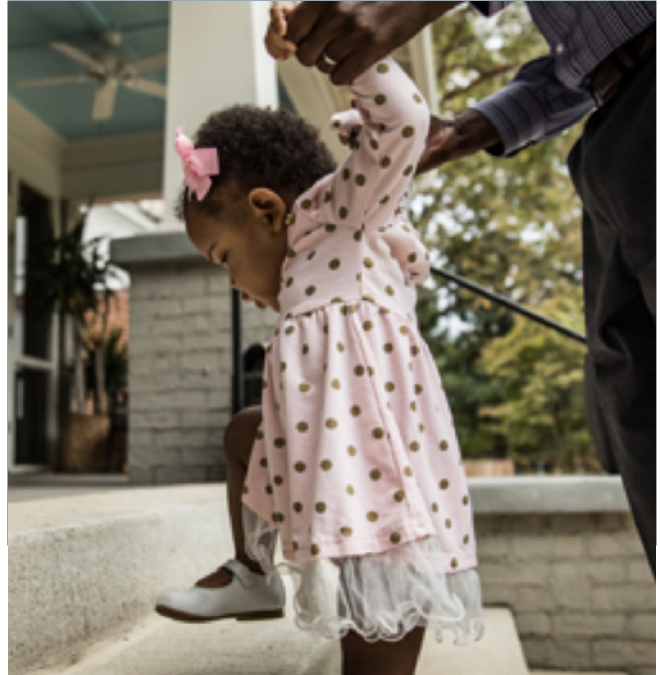


The following messaging that framed equity in the context of access for all children performed well in the aggregate across most demographics, and was the second highest ranked PN-3 message frame overall:

- Every child deserves a strong start in life. We can strengthen our communities and live up to our promise as a nation by ensuring that all babies and toddlers have access to resources and services they need regardless of where they live, their family's income or education, their gender, or the color of their skin.
- We must make investments to support families most in-need so that all children can succeed in school and life.

Messaging that directly calls out our history of systemic racism and deep inequities resonated best among Black policy influencers and was not ranked as a top three frame for any other demographics such as Latinx, AAPA, Republicans or White influencers.

- Every child deserves a strong start in life, but not every child starts from same place.
- A history of systemic racism has resulted in deep inequities simply because of where a child lives or the color of her skin. It can mean they begin life with fewer advantages than their peers and keep losing ground over time.
- We must demand that our systems work for all kids and families with programs that support parents and caregivers and give every baby the same strong start.



## **Maternal Health**

Maternal health disparities in the U.S. are a serious equity issue that must be addressed. Research shows that the severity of this problem is alarming across demographics and referencing it is an effective way to build support for programs and policies that benefit those giving birth. The following language performed well across most demographics, especially Black and Latinx policy influencers, Republicans and small town/rural respondents.

- A healthy baby starts with a healthy mom. But our country is failing when it comes to maternal health.
- More women in the United States die in childbirth than in any other developed country, and Black women are more than twice as likely to die than white women.
- We must do better. All mothers need access to care during and after pregnancy, and they need access to the regular well-child visits, screenings, and mental health care that give their babies the best start in life.





### Discussing COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted all aspects of life, and the economic fallout is continuing to hurt families across the country. Young children have been affected by their parents' stress and by a lack of resources.

When used alone, messages focused on COVID-19 was not a top convincing argument with policy influencers. However, when used specifically to drive urgency for PN-3 investments, the pandemic was a particularly helpful motivator. The following is suggested messaging to leverage the pandemic to instill a sense of urgency:

- During the first three years of life, the brains and bodies of infants and toddlers make huge gains in development. Their needs are not put on pause when the world goes into quarantine.
- Because of COVID-19, countless infants and toddlers have fallen behind as a result of isolation, economic hardships and family stress, but it's not too late to help.
- We must act now to ensure that families have the support they need in their children's earliest years to recover and build a strong foundation for a healthy future.





## CONSIDERATIONS BY AUDIENCE

Overall, policy influencers' endorsement of a PN-3 agenda is appreciable across both sides of the aisle. This is a very rare issue where the ideological poles are largely in agreement. While support is solid across the board, there are some differences in the importance of specific policy agendas as well as the message frames that are more convincing.

The following guidance highlights differences between partisan audiences and addresses how to counter potential opposition arguments.

### Reaching Conservative Audiences

Research shows that across the political spectrum, there is broad support for infants, toddlers, and their families. And while there are partisan gaps, especially on financial supports, overall Republicans are generally quite supportive. While 62% of policy influencers believe it is very important to enact PN-3 policies and programs, 52% of Republicans share this view.

When communicating with conservative audiences:

- **Start from common ground.** The core messages around brain science and full-body health and development performed well with everyone—including Republicans.
- **Connect with what they know.** Most understand the importance that the prenatal period through the first three years of life have for a child's healthy development and future success. And through their lived experience, they often know that all parents are stretched during these formative years.
- **Lean into the science of early childhood development.** Research shows messages with specific information about the brain and full body health implications for the PN-3 period performed best with conservatives:
  - Positive experiences early in a child's life promote healthy physical development throughout the body, including the brain, the heart and lungs, the systems that turn food into energy, and the immune system. Negative experiences early in life can lead to long-term health problems, including high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and mental health challenges.

### Reaching Liberal Audiences

While there is broad support for infants, toddlers, and their families across all policy influencers, Democrats are most supportive of a PN-3 agenda overall. While 62% of policy influencers believe it is very important to enact PN-3 policies and programs, 75% of Democrats share this view.

When communicating with more liberal audiences:

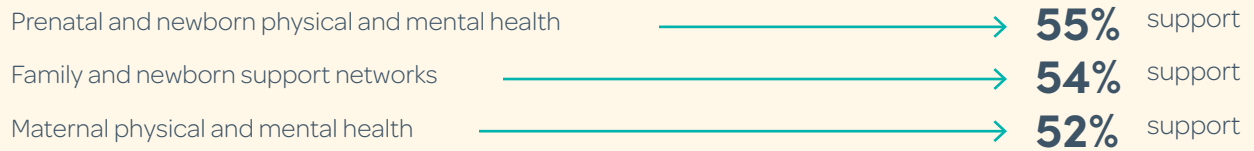
- **Emphasize urgency.** Use the primary core message and supporting points and continue emphasizing the urgency to act now.
- **Focus on policies with high support.** While PN-3 programs and policies have high support across the board from Democrats, they are most supportive of programs that support maternal and newborn physical and mental health as well as child care programs. They are least supportive of home visiting programs (though a majority of Democrats still support these).



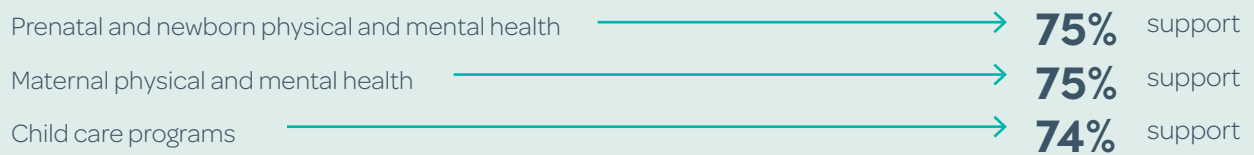
**Consider which policies and programs garner the highest levels of support from different audiences.**

The percentages reflect the percentage of each demographic that rated the policy as very important (rating of 9-10 on a 0-10 scale)

**When it comes to specific programs, Republicans are most supportive of programs that support:**



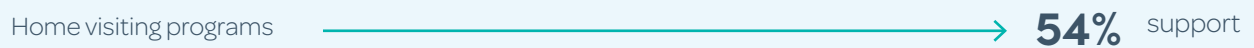
**Democrats are most supportive of programs that support:**



**Republicans are least supportive of:**



**Democrats are least supportive of:**



*\* In the research, home visiting programs were defined as where parents who want more intensive support can have a nurse or other professional visit them at home when they need or want it, during the first several years of their child's life, to answer questions, help them learn about parenting and healthy development of babies and make needed referrals. While a majority still supports home visiting, support ranks as the weakest in the list of policies and programs tested.*



## Ways to Counter Opposition

The research exposed respondents to opposition messages to see if any eroded support for PN-3 priorities. Results showed that policy influencers continue to strongly support the PN-3 core messages even after hearing counter arguments. The most significant drops in support were from conservative-leaning Republicans.



**Opposition messages** about the supposed imperative for parents to stay at home and against policies that encourage a culture of both parents working and leaving the raising of their children to others did have a persuasive impact on Black women, Latinx women, White men, Republicans, rural populations, and non-liberal Democrats.



**Counteract those messages** by discussing programs and policies as a means to provide parents who want or need to work the additional supports they need for their young children.

For example: “Parents with young children need to get back to work to support their families and want to do what is best for their children’s development. They can do both if we enact policies that provide parents with the support they need to remain contributing members of the workforce while caring for their children and giving them a solid foundation from which to grow and thrive.”



**Opposition messages** about cost resonated with Republican audiences. They were persuaded by the sentiment that the cost of PN-3 programs and policies could be a burden to taxpayers and that there are more important priorities.



**Counteract those messages** with strong return-on-investment proof points and real stories of long-term positive economic results. For example: “Research based on high-quality early childhood programs have found that for every \$1 invested in early care and education, there is a \$4 to \$9 return to society over the course of a child’s life.”





## USING DATA AND PROOF POINTS

Providing evidence through research and data points is always important when educating audiences. When considering the use of proof points, many existing data points are persuasive, but facts about brain science lead the way. This research indicates that leaning into the brain and body science, prenatal and maternal health, and specifics on return-on-investment are some of the most compelling proof points.

This is not a comprehensive list of data points. The following offers a few samples of the top performing data points from the list provided to policy influencers that were rated as “very convincing” arguments for PN-3 programs and policies.



### Brain and Body Science:

- The early years are the most active period for establishing the neural connections that make up brain architecture, when more than one million new neural connections form every second.
- Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and depression, three of the most common and costly conditions that account for more than \$600 billion in healthcare expenditures in the United States annually, can be linked to adverse early childhood experiences.



### Prenatal and Maternal Health:

- More women in the United States die in childbirth than in any other developed country, and Black women are more than twice as likely to die as White women.
- Nearly 25% of all U.S. women start prenatal care late in pregnancy or do not receive the recommended number of prenatal visits. This number rises to 34% among Black women and to 41% among Indigenous or Alaska Native women.



### Return-on-Investment:

- Research based on high quality early childhood programs have found that for every \$1 invested in early care and education, there is a \$4 to \$9 return to society over the course of a child’s life.
- One in six children in the United States has a disability. Identifying those needs early and addressing them immediately reduces the likelihood of disabilities worsening, decreases the need for later services, and saves money.
- Investing in home visiting programs can save in ER visits, child abuse and neglect, special education and grade repetition, and future juvenile delinquency and crime.
- A major investment in child care and early learning would create an estimated 2.3 million new jobs, as well as provide opportunities for parents with low incomes to return to the workforce.



## APPLYING THESE MESSAGES TO YOUR WORK

This message guide includes language that can be used in different situations and with different policy influencer audiences. To ensure your message hits home with your target audiences, be sure to:

- **Add data and stories that represent your state or community.** Policy leaders are most concerned with their own constituents; how they can support children and families in their area. Pair national data with state or local data when possible, and elevate stories that will bring the messaging to life with real, tangible experiences of young children and their families. Incorporate data, infographics and stories from diverse perspectives and experiences. Visit [www.thencit.org/make-the-case](http://www.thencit.org/make-the-case) for infographics on the science of early childhood as well as on the return on investment for early childhood education.
- **Always have a strong call to action.** End your message with a clear and inspiring opportunity for your audiences to act. The more tangible your call to action, and the more tailored it is for your specific audience, the more likely it will be realized. Having one strong, realistic call to action will be more impactful than multiple options or lofty goals that don't feel achievable for your audience.
- **Look for opportunities to elevate PN-3 messaging in all aspects of your work, including on** social media, your website, email marketing, letters to the editor, op-eds, interviews, conferences and events, meetings, and informational materials. An audience will need to hear something multiple times from multiple trusted sources before they accept it as true.





## ABOUT THIS GUIDE

**Messaging Research Methodology** To understand how to best make the case for investments in programs that support children prenatal to age three, the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers partnered with bipartisan research team Hart Research and Echelon Insights, to conduct qualitative and quantitative research with policy influencers across the country and on both sides of the aisle. Discussions focused on participants' perceptions of the prenatal period and the first three years of a child's life, beliefs about what is needed to support healthy development, the role state and local governments play in supporting families, and why urgent action is needed.



The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase, conducted from January 19 to 28, 2021, included two three-day online discussions. The discussions were segmented by political leaning: one among right-leaning and one among left-leaning policy influencers. The second phase of research, conducted from April 5 to 16, 2021, consisted of an online survey among 1,625 policy influencers representing all regions of the U.S. and from both sides of the aisle.

### **The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT)**

NCIT brings together national partners, early childhood leaders, philanthropy, policy makers and practitioners inside and outside state and local government to create and strengthen promising policies and programs, and share what works, to encourage greater attention to, and investment in, the healthy development of our youngest children. Learn more at [www.theNCIT.org](http://www.theNCIT.org).

### **Think Babies**

ZERO TO THREE created *Think Babies* to make the potential of every baby our national priority. Early experiences shape how a baby's brain develops, laying the foundation for future learning, behavior and health. *Think Babies* brings nationwide attention to what babies and families need to thrive. Learn more at [www.thinkbabies.org](http://www.thinkbabies.org).



## APPENDIX

The following are the list of 10 pro-PN-3 agenda messages tested in the survey and how they ranked in terms of most convincing arguments for supporting PN-3 policies and programs. For the full research, including demographic breakdowns, please visit here: <https://www.thencit.org/resources/promoting-a-pn-3-agenda>

### **Brain Development: 49%**

Babies' brains develop fastest from before birth to age three. So, their relationships with caregivers and early experiences—both positive and negative—build the foundations of brain architecture, which supports their ability to learn, their behavior, and their overall health. That's why it's critical to support parents and babies early, so caregivers can prevent infants and toddlers from experiencing prolonged stress that can disrupt healthy development. Access to mental health resources, quality child care, and networks of community support are critical to set families on a path for success.

### **Equity – Forward Facing: 45%**

Every child deserves a strong start in life. By ensuring that all babies and toddlers have access to resources and services they need—regardless of where they live, their family's income or education, their gender, or the color of their skin—we can strengthen our communities and live up to our promise as a nation. We must make investments to support families most in need so that all children can succeed in school and life. *(asked of half sample)*

### **Maternal Support: 44%**

A healthy baby starts with a healthy mom. But our country is failing when it comes to maternal health. More women in the United States die in childbirth than in any other developed country, and Black women are more than twice as likely to die as White women. We must do better. All mothers need access to care during and after pregnancy, and they need access to the regular well-child visits, screenings, and mental healthcare that give their babies the best start in life.





### **Full Body Health – Specific: 43%**

Positive experiences early in children’s lives promote healthy physical development throughout the body, including the brain, the heart and lungs, the systems that turn food into energy, and the immune system. Negative experiences early in life can lead to long-term health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and mental health challenges. By investing in programs that support families with infants and toddlers, we can give more children a healthy foundation for life. *(asked of half sample)*

### **Child Poverty: 42%**

Kids only get one chance at a strong start. For too many, poverty stands in the way of healthy development. Housing instability, food insecurity, and overall stress can lead to long-term physical and mental health problems for the more than 40% of infants and toddlers in the United States who live below poverty or with low incomes. By investing in programs that support mothers during and after pregnancy, connect families to a community of care, and build economic security, we can lay the foundation for a healthy childhood and future success for these families. *(asked of half sample)*

### **ROI and Community Cohesiveness: 41%**

Strong communities start with strong families. Investing in young children’s health and care pays off for all of us. Babies grow up healthier. Parents have more opportunity to work. Communities are more connected, and our economy gets stronger. In fact, for every dollar we spend on high-quality programs that support young children from birth, we see a 13% annual return in economic benefits, in areas such as reduced healthcare costs and less crime. Investing in families is an investment in our communities and our future.

### **Equity – Historic Perspective: 40%**

Every child deserves a strong start in life, but not every child starts from same place. A history of systemic racism has resulted in deep inequities simply because of where a child lives or the color of her skin. It can mean they begin life with fewer advantages than their peers and keep losing ground over time. That is not how our country is supposed to work. We must demand that our systems work for all kids and families with programs that support every mother and give every baby the same strong start. *(asked of half sample)*



### **Full Body Health – General: 35%**

Positive experiences early in children’s lives promote healthy physical development throughout the body. Negative experiences early in life can lead to long-term health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, obesity, and mental health challenges. By investing in programs that support families with infants and toddlers, we can give more children a healthy foundation for life. *(asked of half sample)*

### **National Values: 33%**

It is time to ask ourselves what kind of country we want to be. Are we satisfied with so many infants and toddlers being raised in poverty? Are we okay with new parents not having the basic necessities—healthcare, child care, mental health services, paid family leave—to raise the next generation of Americans? Studies have shown time and again that we can make a truly positive difference in the lives of young children and that doing so will make our country stronger over the long term.

### **Economic Development/COVID: 31%**

The COVID-19 pandemic has hit families with infants and toddlers particularly hard. All the pressures that come with being a parent—healthcare, finding quality child care, getting time off of work, emotional stress—have been made even worse and shown just how important supports for parents and newborns are. Now we have the chance to help families recover from the pandemic stronger than before by putting families at the center of our efforts. Policies that give parents access to care and support early in a child’s life pay lifelong dividends because healthy growth and development up to age three is so crucial for future success. *(asked of half sample)*