

Messaging Briefs

# Early Head Start



## Introduction

*ZERO TO THREE and the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers have created the following message brief to help advocates communicate with policymakers about the need and opportunities for enacting policies that increase access to Early Head Start. This brief is meant to serve as a source of research-tested messaging and broad policy guidance to help you craft messages and materials as you speak with policymakers and other stakeholders.*

## Making the Case for Prenatal to Three Policies

The following language can serve as a way to introduce Early Head Start within the frame of prenatal-to-three policies.

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 faster from birth to age three than at any later point, and their early experiences—both positive and negative—build the foundation for brain and body architecture that will support their ability to learn and their overall social, emotional, and physical health.

Early Head Start comprehensively promotes healthy child and family development for pregnant people, infants, and toddlers during the critical prenatal-to-three window. This evidence-based program creates opportunities for both parents and children, helping parents with incomes below the poverty line improve their economic security while ensuring their young children are on a solid path toward healthy development.

By investing in programs that support families with infants and toddlers, we can give children a healthy foundation in life and drive economic growth for communities and the families who live in those communities. We must act now to ensure that all babies and toddlers have the foundation to grow into socially, emotionally, and physically healthy children who are confident, empathetic, and ready for school and life.



## The Need for Early Head Start

Use these suggested message points and proof points to demonstrate why families need access to Early Head Start.

Every child deserves a strong start in life, but not every child starts from the same place. Nearly 19% of babies in the U.S. live in families with incomes below the poverty line.<sup>1</sup> Systemic barriers create circumstances where families cannot always provide the essential resources babies need to thrive.

Early Head Start leverages both federal investments and community resources to best meet the needs of families they serve.

The Early Head Start approach includes:

- **Prenatal and postpartum services** for expectant families including health care and education on healthy fetal development, labor and delivery, postpartum recovery, parental depression, infant care, safe sleep practices, and the benefits of breast feeding.
- **Early childhood education** through a variety of learning experiences including high-quality center-based programs, family child care, and home visits.
- **Family supports** that connect families with available community resources including employment, transportation, housing support, and more.
- **Health services** in the community to ensure children have access to immunizations, dental, medical, mental health, and nutritional services, as well as early identification of health problems.
- **Family engagement** that focuses on preparing parents as primary teachers and nurturers in the planning and implementation of services for their child's well-being and development.

These supports, focused on early development and learning, help parents become better equipped with the skills to build a strong foundation for their young child's future.

## The Benefits of and Opportunity to Expand Access to Early Head Start

These message points provide recommendations to improve investment in and access to Early Head Start in your communities.

For 25 years, Early Head Start has been a proven model to positively affect the development, health, and well-being of young children and their families.

Early Head Start research shows success for children and parents:

- Children in Early Head Start showed positive impacts at ages 2 and 3, including enhanced cognitive and language skills, decreased aggressive behaviors, increased engagement with parents during play, and increased rates of immunization.<sup>ii</sup>
- Early Head Start provides parents with the resources they want and need to support their children’s development and their families’ economic well-being. Research has shown that parents in Early Head Start were more emotionally supportive, provided more support for children’s language development and learning, and were less likely to use harsh discipline strategies such as spanking. Enrollment in Early Head Start also promoted parents’ participation in education and training as well as their employment.<sup>iii</sup>
- Positive impacts on children’s development were still evident two years later upon entry into kindergarten. In particular, children who followed Early Head Start with formal pre-K programs between the ages of 3 and 5 fared the best.<sup>iv</sup>

Despite the proven benefits, only 11% of infants and toddlers who are eligible for Early Head Start are currently being served by it, and the proportion served varies from 3% to 23% across states.<sup>v</sup>

More state and federal investments are crucial to increase access to Early Head Start for more young children and their families, so they are able to benefit from the proven results of the program.

## Starting a Conversation on Equity

Successful conversations about equity and prenatal-to-three policies start with finding common ground. Research that evaluated how convincing equity arguments were to policy influencers when making the case to prioritize prenatal-to-three policies showed that it’s important to consider your audience’s background, perspective, and familiarity when discussing equity.

Strong equity messaging that directly calls out our country’s history of systemic racism is more likely to resonate with audiences who recognize these inequities are embedded into our society’s structures and systems. For audiences less familiar with equity concepts, consider messages on brain development, physical health, and maternal health support, which were found to be most persuasive in making the case for prenatal-to-three policies and can help establish common ground. Start your conversations with what we know works best and then look for ways to educate on equity once you have established common ground.

Find more message guidance in [Building Momentum for Prenatal-to-Three Policies](#).

## Calls to Action

Consider using these message-tested calls to action to drive policy change for Early Head Start.

- Early Head Start is our chance to make a powerful commitment to our youngest generation. Infants and toddlers must be our highest priority. They need our investment in evidence-based Early Head Start programs now because they only get one chance at a strong start.
- We need to ensure infants and toddlers grow into socially and emotionally healthy children who are confident and empathetic. State and federal policymakers can support infants, toddlers, and their families during this critical time of brain and body development by increasing investments in Early Head Start (and programs modeled on Early Head Start) to expand equitable access to all eligible infants, toddlers, and pregnant people.



## About Think Babies™

ZERO TO THREE created Think Babies, a call to action for federal and state policymakers to prioritize the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families and invest in our future. We advocate for policies that ensure all babies and their families have good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences. Sign up to join the team that's fighting for our future at [www.thinkbabies.org](http://www.thinkbabies.org).

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

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

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- Children's Alliance (Washington)
- Maryland Family Network
- Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children
- Start Early (Illinois)
- Texans Care for Children
- Children at Risk (Texas)
- North Carolina Early Education Coalition
- Groundwork Ohio
- Michigan League for Public Policy
- Michigan's Children
- Early Childhood Investment Corporation (Michigan)
- South Carolina Infant Mental Health Association
- Institute for Child Success (South Carolina)
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- Kids Win Missouri
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- Children's Action Alliance (Arizona)
- Southwest Human Development (Arizona)
- Alabama Partnership for Children
- Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students

## Endnotes

- i. ZERO TO THREE. State of Babies Yearbook 2021. <https://stateofbabies.org/national/2021/>
- ii. 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 Impact of Early Head Start Volume I: Final Technical Report. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/making-a-difference-in-the-lives-of-infants-and-toddlers-and-their-families-0>
- iii. 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 Impact of Early Head Start Volume I: Final Technical Report. <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/making-a-difference-in-the-lives-of-infants-and-toddlers-and-their-families-0>
- iv. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2006). Research to practice: Preliminary findings from the Early Head Start prekindergarten follow up. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/report/research-practice-preliminary-findings-early-head-start-prekindergarten-followup>
- v. ZERO TO THREE. State of Babies Yearbook 2021. <https://stateofbabies.org/impact-area/learning/>