

Messaging Briefs

# High-Quality, Affordable Child Care



## 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 needs and opportunities to invest in high-quality, affordable child care for infants and toddlers. 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 high-quality, affordable child care 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 in life, 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.

High-quality child care feeds a baby's growing brain, building the foundation necessary for them to develop and thrive as adults.<sup>1</sup> By making sure all infants and toddlers and their families have access to high-quality, affordable child care options that meet their needs, we can strengthen our communities and live up to our promise as a nation.

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



## The Need for High-Quality, Affordable Child Care

Use these suggested message points and proof points to demonstrate why families need equitable access to high-quality, affordable child care in all settings.

Parents and primary caregivers play the most immediate role in shaping their children’s early foundation. When parents go to work, they want and need access to high-quality, affordable child care that supports their infants’ and toddlers’ healthy development.

- 62% of mothers with children under age three nationwide were in the workforce prior to the pandemic.<sup>ii</sup>
- Every year, U.S. families lose out on \$8.3 billion in wages due to lack of child care.<sup>iii</sup>
- U.S. businesses lose \$3 billion annually due to employee absenteeism resulting from child care issues.<sup>iv</sup>

However, high-quality, affordable, and accessible child care is out of reach for most families.

- Child care is often one of the largest expenses in a family’s budget.<sup>v</sup> Infant care exceeds the cost of college tuition in 30 states and the District of Columbia. Costs range from 29.3% of a family’s income to 93.8% depending on where the family lives.<sup>vi;vii</sup>
- Approximately half of families who want to access child care live in child care deserts, making it extremely difficult or impossible to find a licensed child care provider.<sup>viii</sup> This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, given the number of early childhood educators who said they are considering leaving the industry or closing their business.<sup>ix</sup> Moreover, families struggle to find child care options that meet their cultural and linguistic needs.
- Access to high-quality infant-toddler child care is out of reach for the 40% of babies born to households with low-incomes,<sup>x</sup> a disproportionate number of whom are babies of color.<sup>xi</sup>
- The economic impacts of our nation’s child care crisis on infants and toddlers, working parents, employers, and taxpayers shows an annual cost of \$57 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue.<sup>xii</sup>

Young children spend many hours in child care settings, and during that time, it is early childhood educators who help shape the early brain development of infants and toddlers.

### A Note on Language

*As you communicate about this policy area, we encourage you to consider the language that will best resonate with your policymakers and other stakeholders. For example, in some communities, “child care/child care provider” is preferred, while “early childhood education/educator” resonates better in other communities.*

- Average wages for infant and toddler care are at the bottom of the occupational ladder at less than \$11 an hour,<sup>xiii</sup> with more than half relying on public assistance even before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>xiv</sup> Moreover, these early childhood educators are paid less than individuals caring for and educating older children.
  - Low wages disproportionately impact women of color. 45% of early childhood educators are Black, Asian, or Latinx, and half of child care businesses are minority owned.<sup>xv</sup>

A lack of public funding has set our child care system up for failure. Our nation will continue to harm working families, their children, and the early educators who care for them until we begin to fund child care as the public good it is.

- Only 16 states allow child care subsidies for families with incomes over 200% of the federal poverty level, and only 4% of families with low incomes receive a child care subsidy.<sup>xvi;xvii</sup> And in many states, children who are eligible do not receive subsidies due to funding challenges.
- Research shows disparities in child outcomes as early as 9 months and growing by 24 months, with significant gaps in development by the time children enter preschool.<sup>xviii</sup>
- 48% of children in families with low incomes arrive in kindergarten unprepared to succeed.<sup>xix</sup>



## The Opportunity to Expand Access to High-Quality, Affordable Child Care

These message points provide recommendations to improve child care policies in your communities.

Strong communities start with strong families. Investing in young children’s healthy development pays off for all of us. Babies grow up healthier, parents have more opportunities to work, communities are more connected, and our economy gets stronger.

Families should have access to high-quality, affordable child care services that best suit their needs, whether a child care facility, family child care, or family, friend, and neighbor care. High-quality care and education for infants and toddlers includes nurturing relationships with responsive caregivers, continuity of care, and an environment that is safe for young children to explore and learn. Infants and toddlers in high-quality settings have opportunities for cognitive, social-emotional, and language and literacy development. With a skilled educator and nurturing environment, healthy brain development can occur in any setting a family chooses.

Child care is a public good, both essential to economic recovery today and to the workforce of tomorrow. However, funding for high-quality child care is not reaching those who are in greatest need or who lack access. Increased public funding is imperative for a mixed-delivery system of high-quality care and providers to meet the needs of families, communities, and economy. Any policy solution must be built on principles that will ensure it serves the needs of the current and future workforce:

- **Quality:** All children receive high-quality child care.
- **Access:** Families can access the high-quality child care setting that best meets their needs.
- **Affordability:** Families receive the financial support they need to afford high-quality child care.
- **Workforce:** Early childhood professionals in all settings can receive the support, resources, and compensation and benefits they need to provide high-quality care and support their own families.

These proof points show the possibilities and return on investment:

- 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.<sup>xx</sup>
- Investments in high-quality early childhood programs starting at birth provide taxpayers with a return of \$6.30 for every dollar invested.<sup>xxi</sup> This return has compounding benefits, driving a 13% per year return on investment through better education, health, social and economic outcomes later in life.<sup>xxii</sup>

## 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 high-quality, affordable child care.

- Infants and toddlers must be our highest priority; they need our investment in high-quality, affordable child care now, because they only get one chance at a strong start.
- We need to increase funding, affordability, and access for high-quality child care to reach families who are in greatest need or who lack access.
- Investing in high-quality, affordable child care now is our chance to make a powerful commitment to our youngest generation and our future workforce.

## 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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- Washington State Parent Ambassadors
- 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)
- Children's Advocacy Alliance (Nevada)
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- Bloom Consulting (Montana)
- Kids Win Missouri
- Idaho Voices for Children
- Children's Action Alliance (Arizona)
- Southwest Human Development (Arizona)
- Alabama Partnership for Children
- Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students

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