



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime

# America's Babies: Making Their Potential Our Priority

An Agenda for the 116th Congress  
and the Administration



**This year, 4 million babies will be born in the United States.** Forming more than 1 million new neural connections every second, these babies represent infinite potential.

Someday, these babies will be the workers who build a strong economy, scientists who make breakthroughs in curing disease, and leaders who provide a vision for the future. As our birth rate stagnates and the rest of the world races to catch up to America's prosperity, we cannot afford to squander the innate potential of a single child.

But, the story of babies in the first half of this century is one of potential limited. Young children, and particularly babies, are the age group most likely to be poor in America.<sup>I</sup> More than two in five infants and toddlers live in families without enough income to meet basic needs. Food insecurity, unstable housing, or environmental chaos and violence pervade many babies' lives, creating chronic and unrelenting stress that undermines development. These problems tend to be perceived as urban, when babies and families in rural areas often lack access to jobs and vital services.

Babies of color, who make up more than half of all births, disproportionately lack the resources that allow children and their families to thrive. Discriminatory policies have led to an unequal share of adverse experiences; children of color are more likely to be poor, be born too soon or too

small, and live in unsafe environments.<sup>III</sup> Their families face inequities in accessing support that could boost them to a level playing field, such as comprehensive prenatal care and quality early learning experiences.

The science of early development tells us what babies need to thrive: **Good Health** to ensure strong minds and bodies, **Strong Families** to provide the nurturing relationships that ensure sturdy neural foundations and resilience, and **Positive Early Learning Experiences** to shape the burgeoning brain architecture on which all later learning will rest. Research shows that investments that enhance families' ability to provide these supports will pay dividends.<sup>IV</sup> Some of these proven policies are already in place, but at modest funding levels that often only target children deemed "at greatest risk," reaching only a sliver of those in need.

ZERO TO THREE's policy agenda challenges the 116th Congress and the Administration to reframe how policies approach our smallest, yet greatest resource. Instead of labeling some babies as being "At Risk," we should stamp on each tiny forehead the words "Unlimited Potential." That change in perspective leads to policies that have a broader reach, while boosting opportunities for babies and families who have lacked access. Our country will only be strong in 2050 and beyond if we nurture the young children who will shape its future and make their potential our priority.

## POLICIES THAT MAKE BABIES' POTENTIAL OUR PRIORITY

### Good Health:

**The foundation of a strong society is healthy people, starting before birth. Ensuring a healthy nation requires widely accessible comprehensive health coverage, as well as approaches that seek to address the root causes of poor health. Most importantly, our future success relies on the support of early social-emotional development that is the bedrock of babies' growth. Congress and the Administration can build on what sciences tells us to:**

- Protect and expand Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program, and the Affordable Care Act for young children and their parents, as well as ensuring coverage of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) services that include multigenerational therapies for babies and caregivers.
- Transform primary care and insurance policy to address the social determinants of health by using Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (EPSDT) to monitor and address developmental needs, and funding child development specialists and services embedded in primary care.
- Expand the capacity to address IECMH through increased funding for existing IECMH grants, guidance clarifying IECMH services covered by Medicaid, and dedicated funding to build a highly qualified IECMH workforce.



## Strong Families:

All families need support in tackling the tough, rewarding job of raising and nurturing children. Strong family policies support both the caregiving and economic functions of the family. Congress and the Administration should:

- Enact national policies for both comprehensive paid family and medical leave to promote bonding between parents and babies, and paid sick days so all workers earn time to care for themselves or their ill child or family member, and to obtain preventive care.
- Provide broad community support for parents to nurture their young children's development and prevent abuse and neglect by funding models such as HealthySteps to embed child development and IECMH specialists in primary care and other child-serving settings and using the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to enable communities to create a continuum of parent and family support services.
- Increase the economic security of families with infants and toddlers through policies that put more disposable income in families' pockets, such as universal young child allowances, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and access to higher paying jobs through education and job training.
- Build community approaches to support families with infants and toddlers in the child welfare system through judicially-led teams of professionals by authorizing and funding state efforts to establish infant-toddler courts and community teams to transform practice for infants, toddlers, and families, and ensuring the Safe Babies Court Team™ approach can be used to successfully implement preventive services under the Family First Prevention Services Act.



## Positive Early Learning Experiences:

A well-funded early care and learning system helps ensure all families who need child care can access the quality services their children need. We must both strengthen the overall services for infants and toddlers, while ensuring that quality is not the privilege of a few. Congress and the Administration should:

- Double federal child care discretionary funding and enact a comprehensive child care program for low- and moderate- income families, such as the Child Care for Working Families Act, which would ensure working families have the quality care that they need, their children receive care that helps them learn and thrive, and the early childhood workforce has the training and compensation its mission requires.
- Expand Early Head Start's (EHS) comprehensive services for infants and toddlers in poverty.
- Instigate an "infant-toddler teacher surge" for both EHS and child care with scholarships and stipends to ensure a qualified, adequately compensated workforce for the youngest children.
- Increase funding for and the scope of Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers) to ensure developmental support for babies prenatally exposed to alcohol and other substances, including opioids.



<sup>i</sup> Koball, H. & Jiang, Y. (2018). *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children: Children under 18 Years, 2016*. National Center for Children in Poverty. On the web at [http://nccp.org/publications/pub\\_1194.html](http://nccp.org/publications/pub_1194.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Cosse, R., Schmit, S., & Ullrich, R. (2018). *Building Strong Foundations: Racial Inequity in Policies that Impact Infants, Toddlers, and Families*. Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy and ZERO TO THREE. On the web at <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2561-building-strong-foundations-racial-inequity-in-policies-that-impact-infants-toddlers-and-families>

<sup>iii</sup> Lu, M. (2017). *Racial-Ethnic Disparities in Birth Outcomes: A Life-Course Perspective*. Presentation to the National Association of Certified Professional Midwives. On the web at <http://nacpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/DrLuSlides.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> Heckman, J. (2018). *Return on Investment in Birth-to-Three Early Childhood Development Programs*. The Heckman Equation. On the web at <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/research-presentation-for-birth-to-three-advocates/>





## ZERO TO THREE

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ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals and policymakers. For more information, and to learn how to become a ZERO TO THREE member, please visit [zerotothree.org](https://zerotothree.org), [facebook.com/zerotothree](https://facebook.com/zerotothree), or follow [@zerotothree](https://twitter.com/zerotothree) on Twitter.