

## STATES' USE OF EARLY LEARNING GUIDELINES FOR INFANTS AND TODDLERS

### What Are Early Learning Guidelines and Why Are They Important?

**E**arly Learning Guidelines (ELG) for infants and toddlers may be called early learning standards, frameworks, foundations, benchmarks, indicators of progress, or other similar names. No matter the name, they are a set of expectations about what infants and toddlers should know and be able to do during specified age ranges.<sup>1</sup> ELG are usually issued by the state agency responsible for child care or education and are primarily intended for use by early care and education providers.

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center and the National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative have jointly conducted a project focused on the implementation and alignment of ELG for infants and toddlers. As part of this project, Policy Center staff conducted interviews with representatives of eight states (Arkansas, California, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia) on their implementation processes. This paper is a summary of the information gathered from interviews of key professionals in these states and from other sources.

ELG have the potential to advance the early childhood field by increasing awareness of what infants and toddlers are capable of learning and doing from birth to 3 years. This information helps caregivers and parents understand the processes behind children's development and how they can promote quality early experiences that improve child outcomes.<sup>2</sup> ELG for infants and toddlers are also a tool to inform the public, professionals in related fields, and policymakers about the importance of guidelines for the youngest children and about the relationship between optimum development in the early years and school readiness.

### ELG for infants and toddlers serve a number of purposes at both policy and practice levels:

- **Focus policy attention on infants and toddlers.**
- **Serve as resources for policymakers to foster high-quality programs.**
- **Improve the quality of care and learning through more intentional and appropriate practices to support infant-toddler development.**
- **Develop a more qualified workforce.**
- **Educate parents and the public about child learning and development.**
- **Align the state's infant-toddler policies and practices with those for older children and across system components.<sup>3</sup>**





## State of the States' Early Learning Guidelines

The movement to create standards or guidelines for K–12th grades originally grew out of the No Child Left Behind initiative to make teachers in public schools accountable for what they were teaching. The Bush administration's Good Start, Grow Smart initiative required all states to develop voluntary ELG for preschoolers. Over the past few years, many states have voluntarily created ELG either specifically for infants and toddlers or for the broader birth-to-5 age range.

Arkansas was the first state to develop ELG for infants and toddlers in 2002.<sup>4</sup> By 2007, the number had increased to 21 states.<sup>5</sup> Currently, 31 states and 3 territories have published ELG for infants and toddlers, and several states and territories are now developing them.<sup>6</sup>

State and territory agencies must determine how they will incorporate the ELG for infants and toddlers into the early care and education system and whether implementation will be voluntary or mandatory within their regulations and quality improvement systems. Some states, such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Maine, and Arkansas, require use of the ELG at some or all levels of their quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), offering an incentive for early care and education programs to use the guidelines in program planning or daily lesson planning. Embedding ELG for infants and toddlers into child care licensing regulations, such as requiring that staff has training on the guidelines, would be another way to incorporate them into the state's early care and education system. If states require programs to use ELG, they will need to establish a monitoring system. This would likely be part of the regular monitoring conducted for licensing or QRIS. The monitoring system might include review of the extent to which the ELG for infants and toddlers are available to staff and are used in professional development, lesson plans, classroom quality assessments, and individualized plans for children.

Some states, such as Louisiana and Michigan, include both ELG and program standards in the same document, which can help outline the role of the environment in supporting children's development. Most states incorporate strategies or activities for caregivers under each domain area or with their indicators or benchmarks. These strategies can give caregivers a starting point for supporting children's emerging skills.

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Some states develop companion documents to their ELG for infants and toddlers with learning strategies aligned to the guidelines, which may be geared to providers or parents. Kentucky's *Parent Guide for Children Birth to Three*, Pennsylvania's *Learning is Everywhere* activity guide, and Maine's *Watch Me Grow* series are examples of companion documents that are shorter and more visually appealing to help parents understand and use the ELG. South Carolina adopted Ohio's ELG for infants and toddlers, and together they have developed the *Infant-*



*Toddler Guidelines Field Guide*, which both states will use to help providers understand and implement best practices. Pennsylvania has developed a wheel for family, friend, and neighbor care providers with key guidelines by age group in each of the domains. California has produced a set of DVDs to illustrate the skills and development documented in its ELG for infants and toddlers, as well as two sets of DVDs and a workbook related to its program standards. Arkansas has developed several companion pieces: *Picture This* scenarios illustrating particular strategies for parents and providers, *Infant-Toddler Family Connections* materials for parents, and a poster summarizing the ELG for providers to post.

Although states have been actively disseminating and training on their ELG for infants and toddlers, few states have completed evaluations of how the guidelines are actually being used. In 2009, Washington State conducted an online survey to gather information and inform a revision of its birth-to-5 ELG. The survey was offered in English and Spanish and was available for 2 months. Over 600 respondents answered questions about the importance of the guidelines, their use of the guidelines, and how drastically the guidelines should be modified. In Maine, an implementation evaluation of the state's QRIS, currently underway, includes case studies of how programs at the highest level of the rating system are implementing child assessments linked to the ELG for infants and toddlers.

## Implementation

Once states have developed ELG for infants and toddlers, they will need to consider several issues when preparing to implement these guidelines statewide. How should the state disseminate the ELG? How can early care and education providers be trained in using the ELG? How can the ELG be embedded into existing professional development and quality improvement systems?

## Dissemination

States and territories typically distribute their ELG for infants and toddlers and any companion documents widely in both electronic and hard copies. Printed copies may be distributed through state agencies, child care resource and referral agencies, other partner organizations, and centers that warehouse and mail publications on behalf of an organization. In some states, such as California, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, there is a nominal charge for printed copies, but copies can be downloaded without cost. Materials for parents are usually distributed through early childhood programs. Virginia held a statewide summit to release their ELG for birth to 5 and core competencies for early care and education professionals.



### Training

Many states develop and implement inservice training on their ELG for early care and education providers. Content may be presented in a variety of venues, including conferences, training-of-trainers models, and training directly to staff in programs. Length of the training varies widely, from 2-hour orientations to multiple-day sessions. Ohio offers about 20 hours of basic training and a more advanced series on best practice. Maine offers a 30-hour, eight-session training course on the ELG for infants and toddlers as part of its 180-hour core knowledge training program. Arkansas' *Adventures for*



*Toddlers* is a curriculum for providers serving children ages 18 to 36 months on how to plan daily activities using suggestions from the ELG; it is available online or on CD at no cost to providers. Pennsylvania has developed a DVD series on its early learning standards for various age groups, consisting of nine 3-hour sessions for program administrators to use in training their staff. California incorporates its ELG into a variety of training mechanisms: Program for Infant-Toddler Care (PITC) Institutes, Learning and Development Academy training-for-trainers, Partners for Quality regional seminars and technical assistance through infant-toddler specialists, and PITC in Practice intensive training and coaching for child care providers.

Support for the trainers themselves is another area to consider. Washington State developed a companion training booklet suggesting ways to integrate the guidelines into provider training.<sup>7</sup> Minnesota plans to develop a network of mentors and coaches for its trainers that will help them embed the ELG and program standards into the training they provide for early childhood programs.

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Some states offer training to audiences beyond traditional early care and education programs, such as family, friend, and neighbor care providers; home visitors; and parents. Ohio trained public broadcasting Ready to Learn Early staff to offer training to family child care providers. In Virginia, the State Library used information from the state's ELG for birth to 5 in early literacy and child development training for librarians.



### Early Learning Guidelines and the Professional Development System

ELG for infants and toddlers should be embedded into the state's professional development system, including both preservice and inservice training.

- Community colleges and 4-year institutions can incorporate ELG into coursework. This facilitates the transfer of credits across institutions. In North Carolina, state agency staff met with representatives from state universities and community colleges to encourage incorporation of the ELG for infants and toddlers into their courses. Trainings and seminars for higher education faculty in California have supported use of the ELG and program standards in college courses. In Maine, a waiver process for infant-toddler professionals is used as an incentive for students. If a college can show that the content of the ELG training is covered in its courses, graduates who have taken these courses can receive a waiver of required training on the ELG for infants and toddlers. In Virginia's community colleges, the ELG for birth to 5 are introduced to students in courses and used as a way to align classroom objectives to the guidelines (for example, students planning activities with children must cite the corresponding standard in their lesson plans).
- Inservice training on the guidelines can lead to college credits. In Maine, infant-toddler professionals who complete a 180-hour core knowledge training program, including 30 hours on ELG for infants and toddlers, can receive 9 to 12 college credits.
- Career lattices can require training in ELG for infants and toddlers at some or all levels. In particular, trainers and infant-toddler specialists should be proficient in understanding and applying the guidelines.
- Training registries and calendars of training opportunities can identify the particular section of the ELG as well as the core competencies addressed by each training session.
- Infant-toddler credentials, which formally recognize an individual's qualifications for working with children under 3 years old, should include content related to the ELG for infants and toddlers. Arkansas' 30-hour training, which leads to a certificate for infant-toddler care,

includes required training on the ELG for infants and toddlers. Maine's ELG training is about one-third of the training needed for an infant-toddler credential. This credential is equivalent to a Child Development Associate on the career pathway.

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### **Early Learning Guidelines Within Quality Rating and Improvement Systems**

As states develop QRIS, there are a number of ways to embed use of the ELG for infants and toddlers. In Minnesota's QRIS pilot, programs receive points for activities aligned with the state's ELG. Higher points are given to programs using an approved curriculum, which must be aligned with the ELG in order to be approved.

Both Ohio and Pennsylvania require use of the ELG at all levels of their statewide QRIS, with more in-depth use required at higher levels. For example, programs in Ohio's QRIS must develop a plan for implementing the ELG for infants and toddlers, and infant-toddler staff must be trained on the guidelines as a prerequisite for other training. At the upper two levels of the QRIS, every classroom is assessed annually, and its curriculum must be aligned with the ELG for infants and toddlers.

In Maine and Arkansas, requirements related to the ELG for infants and toddlers are part of only the higher QRIS levels. In Levels 2 through 4 of the Maine QRIS, providers must conduct an "authentic assessment," which involves observation and child assessments linked to the ELG for infants and toddlers. Arkansas' QRIS requires training in the guidelines, specific to the ages served by the program, at the upper two levels.

### **Alignment With Other System Components**

The concept of alignment is becoming more prevalent as states develop early childhood systems. Alignment means the links or connections between two parts of the system, such as ELG for infants and toddlers and those for pre-K, or ELG and assessment tools. Alignment does not mean that the two parts have to match exactly. Also, alignment does not address the quality of each part but rather addresses their compatibility.

Alignment can be either vertical or horizontal. Vertical alignment is the links between different ages or grades of children, such as ELG for infants and toddlers aligning with pre-K guidelines. Horizontal alignment is the links between ELG, program standards, core competencies for professionals, assessment, curriculum, and other parts of the system for children in the same age group.

### **Vertical Alignment With Pre-K and K–12 Standards**

Most states developed K–12 and pre-K early learning standards before ELG for infants and toddlers. In an effort to be consistent, some states used previously developed standards to construct the domains of ELG for infants and toddlers. However, K–12 standards focused on holding teachers accountable for students acquiring information in academic content areas. In ELG for infants and toddlers, the emphasis is on supporting teachers and caregivers in nurturing the development of children so they will become competent learners. ELG for infants and toddlers can describe the foundations of learning, while pre-K and K–12 standards describe how the content of learning becomes increasingly differentiated and skill-oriented.<sup>8</sup> For example, Maine decided to focus the infant-toddler guidelines on a continuum of development rather than on an end product and to emphasize ways to support development rather than to assess it.



Several states, including Kentucky, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina, illustrate the connections between their sets of standards for children of different ages. Georgia, Michigan, and Kansas provide information about how their ELG for infants and toddlers align with the *Head Start Child Outcomes Framework* as well as with pre-K and K–12 standards. States have sometimes had to revise their standards for other age groups after developing infant-toddler guidelines. Pennsylvania developed pre-K standards, then revised kindergarten standards, then developed ELG for infants and toddlers so that all were aligned. A recent revision strengthened alignment of infant-toddler guidelines with those for older ages and made stronger connections with learning, while focusing supportive practices and examples on those appropriate for very young children. When various types of programs are using the same or aligned sets of child outcomes, transitions between programs are facilitated and the continuum of development is supported.

## **Horizontal Alignment With Core Competencies for Professionals**

ELG for infants and toddlers should be aligned with professional standards for teachers and caregivers who work with very young children. This process happens differently within states, depending on which set of standards was developed first. In Ohio and Maine, core competencies were developed after ELG for infants and toddlers and built on the guidelines. In Pennsylvania, core competencies for professionals were reexamined after the ELG for infants and toddlers were revised. Through Virginia's Alignment Project for 0–K, a number of products were developed at the same time: ELG, professional competencies with levels of mastery, a career lattice, and program standards to be used as the basis of a QRIS.

## **Horizontal Alignment With Child Assessment**

It is important to align ELG for infants and toddlers with assessment systems used by early care and education programs. ELG are not an assessment tool or development checklist and should not result in excluding children from a program or in staff “teaching to the test.” ELG provide a framework for the development and learning of infants and toddlers, which caregivers can use as a guide for observing and planning activities. North Carolina describes how to use the guidelines to facilitate observations of young children’s development and learning. Their guidance clarifies that the ELG for infants and toddlers should not serve as an assessment checklist nor be used to take the place of formal developmental screening or evaluation of children.<sup>9</sup>

Child assessments, on the other hand, collect information about an individual child’s performance and use that information to evaluate a child’s progress within a normed and standardized assessment tool. States and programs need to carefully analyze the assessments they use in relation to the ELG to ensure that the assessment is measuring the same skills and the breadth of development emphasized in the guidelines. Minnesota has aligned its ELG for infants and toddlers with the Ounce Scale. California has a child assessment observation tool that must be used by all programs funded by the California Department of Education. The content of this instrument is being reviewed for alignment with the ELG.

## **Horizontal Alignment With Curriculum**

Similarly, ELG should be aligned with the curriculum used with infants and toddlers. The guidelines are not a curriculum. They provide a guide for choosing and evaluating curricula and planning daily activities. Some curricula have a particular content focus, such as literacy or social-emotional development, that may not fully reflect the breadth of the guidelines. Again, alignment analyses can be helpful.



Some states require programs to choose among a list of approved developmentally appropriate curricula. This is an opportunity to ensure that approved curricula are consistent with the ELG for infants and toddlers. Pennsylvania developed guidance documents on aligning the curriculum with ELG and on linking the guidelines to classroom planning.

## Resources for Explaining Alignment

Some states develop resource materials designed to help early care and education programs understand alignment. Arkansas' *Association of Measurements* document crosswalks the infant-toddler and pre-K guidelines, work sampling, the Ounce Scale, Head Start performance standards, Creative Curriculum, and the kindergarten readiness assessment. The *Pennsylvania Crosswalk* aligns its ELG with National Association for the Education of Young Children accreditation, Head Start performance standards, the state's QRIS, and core competencies for professionals working with young children. The *Continuum: Pennsylvania Learning Standards for Early Childhood* document includes every standard from birth through kindergarten. The Pennsylvania Department of Education is developing the framework for its Standards Aligned System, which was originally for grades 3 through 12 but is being extended down to birth.

## Conclusion

It is important to note that ELG for infants and toddlers are the “new kid on the block” in states’ development of standards. States are just beginning to research and evaluate how these ELG fit into existing systems and how they can be better aligned both horizontally and vertically with other system components. Intentionally including the birth-to-3 population in ELG creates the first rung in the ladder to improved quality of care and education for all children.

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November 2010*

## About Us

The ZERO TO THREE Policy Center is a nonpartisan, research-based resource for federal and state policymakers and advocates on the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers. To learn more about this topic or about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please visit our website at [www.zerotothree.org/policy](http://www.zerotothree.org/policy).

1 Sandra Petersen, Lynn Jones, and Karen Alexander McGinley, *Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers: Recommendations for States*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE, 2008, [http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/building-early-childhood-systems/early\\_learning\\_guide\\_for-infants.pdf](http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/building-early-childhood-systems/early_learning_guide_for-infants.pdf)

2 Ibid.

3 Petersen, Jones, and McGinley, *Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers*; Catherine Scott-Little, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Victoria Stebbins Frelow, and Jeanne Reid, “Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines: The Content that States Have Addressed and Implications for Programs Serving Children with Disabilities.” *Infants & Young Children* 22, no. 2 (April–June 2009): 87–99.

4 Catherine Scott-Little, Sharon Lynn Kagan, Victoria Stebbins Frelow, and Jeanne Reid, *Inside the Content of Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines: Results from Analyses, Issues to Consider, and Recommendations*. University of North Carolina-Greensboro and Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008, <http://www.uncg.edu/hdf/facultystaff/ScottLittle/FINAL%20FULL%20REPORT%20-%202.28.08.pdf>

5 Scott-Little, Kagan, Frelow, and Reid, “Infant-Toddler Early Learning Guidelines.”

6 National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative, *Infant/Toddler Early Learning Guidelines Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC: National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative, July 2010. States (19) and territories (3) with ELG specific to infants and toddlers are AR, CA, CNMI, CT, DC, DE, FL, GA, GU, KY, LA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MS, NC, ND, NE, OH, PA, and PR. States (12) with ELG for birth through age 5 are AK, AL, IA, ID, IN, KS, NH, OR, TN, VA, WA, and WI.

7 Washington State Child Care Resource & Referral Network, *Healthy, Happy and Learning! Children from Birth to Kindergarten: An Introduction to the Washington State Early Learning and Development Benchmarks for Trainers of Early Care and Education Professionals*. Washington State Department of Health and Social Services, n.d., [http://www.k12.wa.us/EarlyLearning/pubdocs/BenchmarksTrainingdoc\[S\].pdf](http://www.k12.wa.us/EarlyLearning/pubdocs/BenchmarksTrainingdoc[S].pdf)

8 Petersen, Jones, and McGinley, *Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers*.

9 North Carolina Division of Child Development, *Early Foundations: Guidelines for Development and Learning for North Carolina's Infants and Toddlers (Birth to 36 Months)*. Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Division of Child Development, 2007.

Design: Metze Publication Design

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