



BUILDING STRONG FOUNDATIONS: Advancing Comprehensive Policies for Infants, Toddlers, and Families



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Policy Framework for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

Imagine a world where the policies that affect babies, toddlers, and families successfully ensured that those very families could thrive: Where parents and their infants and toddlers have access to preventive health care and insurance to rely on if they become ill. Where parents make a living wage and can access social services and supports when necessary. Where infants and toddlers have access to high-quality child care and early education programs that support their development and help their parents go to work. Where parents have paid time off for the birth or adoption of a child or when they or their children are ill. Where public policies address the comprehensive and interrelated needs of all infants, toddlers, and families.

This world is currently out of reach, but it doesn't have to be. With the right policies and sufficient funding to implement those policies, families with infants and toddlers could thrive.

The framework below outlines the universal needs of infants, toddlers, and families. It also highlights examples of policies that meet those needs. Any vision for infants and toddlers must include a focus on racial equity given the diverse and changing composition of this population. Far too many poor and low-income children and adults are marginalized because of their race, ethnicity, immigration status, or nationality. People of color are disproportionately affected when public programs are inadequately or inequitably funded. For purposes of this framework, policy is not restricted to laws and regulations but includes a broader set of considerations such as implementation, guidance, and funding. Since all of these components are so critical and interconnected, we will be looking across the range of possibilities in this framework and project. We envision these policies to be cross-cutting with the policies overlapping and working together to meet the needs of families.

Babies Need...

...healthy bodies, healthy minds, and healthy parents. Infants and toddlers need to be healthy, and so do their parents. Families need access to health insurance, a medical home, and nutritious food to eat. Children and their parents also need comprehensive mental and physical health care services, including prenatal and preventive care.

Children learn best when they are healthy physically, socially, and emotionally. We can promote the good health of infants, toddlers, and their families by enacting policies that ensure families receive mental and physical health services, have health insurance, and get nutritious food prenatally and in the early years of life. For example, when states expand Medicaid, more parents are able to get health insurance, which promotes access to needed preventive care to ensure they are healthy and able to care for their children. Health coverage also ensures that any problems with children's health or development are caught early.

Some examples of programs and funding streams include:

- Medicaid
- Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP)
- Maternal and Child Health Block Grant
- The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)

...economically stable families. Infants' and toddlers' parents need good jobs in responsive workplaces with paid sick days and family and medical leave. These workplace policies help reduce poverty, support families, reward effort, and expand opportunity. Families with young children need access to economic supports and benefits programs to help meet their basic needs.

Quality jobs—positions that offer paid time off, regular hours, and adequate, stable pay—play a significant role in parents' ability to support their children's development. For example, parents' job quality plays a significant role in whether they are able to arrange stable child care, take time off after a child is born or adopted, care for themselves or their children when they are sick, and bring home enough money to meet the needs of their families.

Income and work support programs offer a tremendous opportunity to significantly improve the stability of low-income families. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provides some income support to help low-income pregnant women and parents of infants and toddlers meet their basic needs and stabilize their lives, but reaches a small proportion of families in poverty. Tax policies can also help ensure the economic stability of families with infants and toddlers.

Housing assistance programs improve the lives of low-income families by reducing the likelihood that families live in overcrowded housing, experience homelessness, and move frequently, conditions that undermine early development.

Some examples of programs, policies, and funding streams that support economically stable families include:

- Paid sick leave
- Paid family and medical leave
- Pell Grants
- Homelessness programs
- Housing Choice Vouchers
- Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)
- Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC)
- Child Tax Credit (CTC)

...strong parents. Infants and toddlers need strong parents who are adequately supported and have effective parenting skills.

Parents play the most active and significant role in their baby's healthy development. Young children learn and grow in strong families where parents are able to successfully face the challenge of nurturing their children. During the first three years of life, experiences are shaping a child's brain and providing the foundation for later development. Negative experiences, such as maltreatment (abuse or neglect), can interfere with healthy development. Good child welfare policies can ensure that infants and toddlers have stable, nurturing relationships by providing preventive services to help avoid maltreatment or to ensure proper intervention and supports after maltreatment has occurred.

Parenting support is a method of encouraging and reinforcing families, particularly as part of a comprehensive and coordinated system of services. These voluntary services are most effective when tailored to meet the needs of individual families and offer information, guidance, and support. For example, ongoing home visiting services provided directly in the home help improve parenting and support children's development.

Some examples of programs, policies, and funding streams that support strong parents include:

- Home visiting
- Parenting education
- Child welfare

...high-quality child care and early education opportunities. Infants and toddlers need high-quality, affordable early care and education programs so that their parents can work and they can develop on target and be able to succeed. This includes child care, Early Head Start, and early intervention.

Infants and toddlers need consistent relationships with caring adults and adequate health and developmental supports to properly shape their brains and build a strong foundation. High-quality early childhood education programs and policies can help ensure that families have access to care that allows parents to go to work while ensuring their children are in settings that will help them learn and grow. Providing substantial federal and state investments in these programs could have a significant impact on their reach, since only a small percentage of eligible infants and toddlers are currently served.

Policies that recognize the special needs of infants and toddlers with developmental delays and disabilities are incredibly important to support children's development, improve families' abilities to meet their children's needs, and increase the capacity of states to provide quality early intervention services.

Some examples of programs, policies, and funding streams that support high-quality child care and early education opportunities include:

- Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG)
- Early Head Start (EHS)
- Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)



Moving Toward a Blueprint for Building Strong Foundations

Defending, supporting, and improving the existing programs that are foundational to children’s and families’ wellbeing is of utmost importance. The United States has an existing set of policies, programs, and services that support healthy development, economic stability, strong parents, and high-quality early care and education, but they are largely working under severely limited budgets and restricted reach. What’s more, many policies and programs are not designed to be responsive to families’ complex needs or with consideration for how they might further disadvantage already marginalized communities. Sometimes policymakers do not even make the connection or recognize their contribution to young children’s healthy development. Investing in these programs and improving them in order to meet the unique needs of families with infants and toddlers is critical for our nation’s future. Importantly, policies, programs, and initiatives that intentionally address the interconnected needs of young children and their families are likely to achieve the greatest outcomes. Working toward investment and support for connected and impactful policies will truly improve the lives of infants, toddlers, and families.



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