

Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (ELC) Program Laying the Foundation of Learning for Infants and Toddlers



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ZERO TO THREE
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Early Learning Challenge



The ELC offers states an opportunity to increase the number of disadvantaged children, birth to five, in high-quality early childhood settings and to create and enhance state integrated early learning systems.

- At ZERO TO THREE, an organization dedicated to promoting the health and development of infants and toddlers, we urge that as you develop your state's application, you work toward a system that not only supports but intentionally includes infants and toddlers in early learning strategies.
- We know from science that brains are built from the bottom up. During the first three years of life, the brain undergoes its most dramatic development and children acquire the ability to think, speak, learn, and reason. The early experiences of young children will shape the architecture of their brains in enduring ways and build the foundation – whether strong or weak – for their future development.
- For that reason, we strongly urge you to emphasize the importance of supporting early learning beginning from birth as you plan and implement a comprehensive state early learning system.

The following information on how infants' and toddlers' unique needs can be met by a comprehensive early learning system is organized by the five ELC selection criteria:

- (A) Successful State Systems
- (B) High-Quality, Accountable Programs
- (C) Promoting Early Learning & Development Outcomes for Children
- (D) A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce
- (E) Measuring Outcomes and Progress

(A) Successful State Systems

Why is a coordinated state system for early learning and development important for infants, toddlers, and their families?

- All infants and toddlers need good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences.
 - Programs and services that address these areas are essential, yet they are only as strong as the infrastructure that supports them.
 - To be effective, programs must be organized within cohesive systems that coordinate and align a broad array of services.
- A substantial number of infants and toddlers live in families facing financial and social stresses that place them at risk developmentally.
 - No one intervention can provide the wide range of services needed to ensure all infants and toddlers develop to their full potential.
- Child care, health care, and other family supports and services are more efficient and effective when they are integrated and coordinated.
 - Programs serving infants, toddlers, and their families have historically been developed in a patchwork fashion in response to specific needs. They frequently have separate funding sources, standards and regulations, and governance structures. This labyrinth of discrete programs has resulted in conflicting policies, inconsistent quality and accountability, and less efficiency.

(A) Successful State Systems

What does a coordinated state system for early care and development look like, and how can it support infants, toddlers, and their families?

- Embraces a comprehensive approach to recognizing that infants' and toddlers' optimal development is multifaceted and crosses several domains including health, mental health, education, and social services.
- Takes steps to ensure success by:
 - Creating a shared systemic vision for supporting young children and their families.
 - Promoting coordination among the multiple services and supports for young children and their families by establishing collaborative planning and decision-making structures.
 - Aligning policies and resources.
 - Building broad public awareness and support.
 - Establishing desired outcomes for infants and toddlers, and monitoring key indicators associated with these outcomes.
 - Developing a coordinated early childhood data system that: enables policymakers and practitioners to analyze data for infants and toddlers separately from older children, generates information that is useful in continuous quality improvement efforts for programs and professionals, and is aligned with other state data systems.

(A) Successful State Systems

What does a coordinated state system for early care and development look like, and how can it support infants, toddlers, and their families? (contd.)

- Adopts a governance structure that will be most effective in meeting the needs of infants and toddlers, where:
 - State-level coordinating and governance bodies include members with specific infant-toddler expertise.
 - Local coordinating and planning bodies involve all programs serving infants and toddlers, including: child care, Part C, home visiting, Early Head Start, etc.
 - Partnerships are developed at the state and local levels with private entities interested in promoting positive early childhood outcomes.
- Coordinates public and private financing sources to leverage resources, reduce duplication, and create efficiencies to best meet the needs of young children and families.

(B) High-Quality, Accountable Programs

Why is it important for early care and education programs that serve infants and toddlers to be high-quality and accountable?

- Every day six million children under age three spend some or all of their day being cared for by someone other than their parents.
 - Unfortunately, more than 40% of them are in child care classrooms of poor quality.
- Studies show that higher quality early care and education is a predictor of improvement in children's ability to understand spoken language, communication skills, verbal IQ skills, cognitive skills, behavioral skills, and attainment of higher math and language scores.
- Quality early care and education programs provide infants and toddlers with nurturance, support for early learning, preparation for school, and opportunities to reach their full potential through:
 - Sensitive, responsive, and attentive primary caregivers.
 - Verbal and cognitive stimulation.
 - An area that is clean and safe so babies can explore their surroundings.
- Research demonstrates that the strongest effects of quality out-of-home settings are found with at-risk children.

(B) High-Quality, Accountable Programs

How can program standards and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) promote quality in early care and education programs serving infants and toddlers?

- Recognizing the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers by including program standards specific to their care and education, such as:
 - Infant-toddler specific training or education for caregivers.
 - Approved curricula or learning approaches specific to infants and toddlers.
 - Lower ratios for infants and toddlers.
 - Communication with parents regarding routines such as feeding and sleeping.
 - Assignment of a primary caregiver and continuity of care.
 - Program policies that specifically address infant-toddler issues.
 - Partnerships with state Part C system.

(B) High-Quality, Accountable Programs

How can program standards and Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) promote quality in early care and education programs serving infants and toddlers? (contd.)

- Using quality improvement measures that include a specific focus on infants and toddlers, such as:
 - Infant-toddler specific program assessment tools like the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised Edition (ITERS-R) and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) for toddlers.
 - Program evaluations that include a close look at caregiver/child interactions.
- Offering incentives for participating in QRIS that address the higher cost of providing care for infants and toddlers so that efforts to raise quality do not result in fewer slots for young children.
- Integrating infant-toddler ELG, core knowledge and competencies, and credentials into QRIS.
- Educating parents on key indicators of quality for infants and toddlers and publicizing programs' QRIS ratings so parents can make informed decisions about early care and education settings for their children.

(C) Promoting Early Learning & Development Outcomes



Why is it important to promote the learning and development of infants and toddlers?

- The learning and development of infants and toddlers unfolds in many different settings, including:
 - The home, child care centers, family child care homes, family friend and neighbor care, Early Head Start, and more.
- Development is cumulative, and the earliest experiences lay the foundation for all the learning that follows.
 - The emergence of basic skills and competencies is directly linked to the later development of more complicated skills and competencies.
 - How we think, learn, communicate, concentrate, problem solve and relate to others when we get to school and later in our lives depends in large part on the experiences we have and the skills we develop during the earliest days, months, and years.
- Social and emotional development is important throughout early childhood, but its primacy in infancy and toddlerhood calls for a clear emphasis on relationships.
- High-quality care that promotes positive early learning and development can have lasting effects into adulthood, particularly for low-income children who often start behind their peers when they enter school.

(C) Promoting Early Learning & Development Outcomes



How can the learning and development of infants and toddlers best be promoted?

- Through a continuum of services across the programs serving infants and toddlers - including child care, Early Head Start, home visiting programs, Part C, and more - wherever they are.
- By ensuring this continuum:
 - Promotes collaboration with and access to comprehensive services that support all developmental domains.
 - Emphasizes communication between early childhood professionals so that services delivered through different programs are coordinated.
 - Offers two-generation approaches that help parents support their children's development and address their own needs.
 - Expands access of high-need infants and toddlers (including: low-income children, children with disabilities and developmental delays, English language learners, children in the child welfare system, children who reside on Indian lands, and children who are migrant or homeless) to high-quality early care and learning services.
 - Provides training for the early childhood workforce on the special needs of high-need infants and toddlers.
 - Integrates services for children with developmental delays or disabilities into early care and learning settings.

(C) Promoting Early Learning & Development Outcomes



What do early learning and development standards look like for infants and toddlers?

- They contain standards for what children should know (understand) and be able to do (competencies and skills) across multiple domains of learning, tailored for different age groups.
 - A state can best define these expectations through the use of Early Learning Guidelines (ELG) for infants and toddlers that:
 - Reflect the understanding that infant-toddler learning is multidimensional and developed in all domains of child development as appropriate for each age group.
 - Describe strategies adults can use to build relationships with infants and toddlers.
 - Include research- and evidenced-based learning expectations for each age group.
 - Reflect the family's values and culture.
 - Align both vertically, with guidelines for older children, and horizontally, within the infant-toddler system.
- A state can use age-appropriate assessments to collect information about an infant's or toddler's developmental progress within a normed and standardized assessment tool.
 - Use this to guide caregiver practice in best supporting the child's development.

(D) A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce

Why should strengthening the early childhood education workforce include a focus on specialized development of early childhood professionals working with infants and toddlers?

- Competent and well-trained infant and toddler early care and education professionals provide high-quality care that supports rich early learning experiences and builds a solid foundation for later learning.
- Working with infants and toddlers requires a specialized level of knowledge and skill that is unique to the developmental needs of the earliest years, which set the foundation for future learning.
 - To best support development, infant-toddler professionals need in-depth knowledge of all the domains of development, including: social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical.
- Infant-toddler professionals span a variety of program and service settings and professional disciplines, including: early care and education, early intervention, mental health, physical health, and child welfare.

(D) A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce



How can an early childhood professional development system support infants and toddlers?

- Through workforce preparation and ongoing professional development on family and community relationships, cultural competence, infant and toddler development, and methods for inclusion of children with special needs.
- Coordinating and aligning a cross-sector model, that:
 - Promotes infant-toddler coursework at all levels of higher education.
 - Facilitates collaboration of practitioners across programs.
 - Supports practitioners in addressing diversity of families and communities that are served.
 - Establishes core knowledge and competencies (CKCs) that:
 - Articulate the full range of infants' and toddlers' needs and the required content and skills of practitioners.
 - Align with Early Learning Guidelines.

(D) A Great Early Childhood Education Workforce



How can an early childhood professional development system support infants and toddlers? (contd.)

- Establishing infant-toddler credentials (ITC).
 - The goal of ITC is to improve quality of caregiver/child interactions.
 - ITC set a standard of care for infant-toddler practitioners.
 - They assert that the holder has specialized knowledge, skills, and professional achievement that serve as a foundation for high-quality care of infants and toddlers.
- Creating Infant Toddler Specialist Networks (ITSN).
 - The goal of ITSN is to strengthen the capacity of early care and education programs to deliver high-quality services.
 - ITSN coordinate the work of Infant Toddler Specialists (ITS).
 - They support the workforce by providing services such as: professional development, technical assistance, resource identification, education, and support.

(E) Measuring Outcomes and Progress

Why is it important to identify outcomes and measure progress toward meeting them for infants and toddlers?

- Identifying outcomes that the early childhood system as a whole is meant to achieve will provide direction and foster collaboration across services and agencies.
- Regular review and use of data on early learning and development programs, early childhood services, early childhood professionals, and child outcomes can guide continuous quality improvement efforts at the program, community, and state levels.
 - Collecting and analyzing data specific to infants and toddlers can help identify improvements to practice and policy that will better meet the needs of very young children and their families.
- A state-level early childhood data system that provides a central place, or links databases from different agencies together, allows policymakers to better understand how the early childhood system is working as a whole to meet the needs of young children and families.

(E) Measuring Outcomes and Progress

What does an effective early childhood data system look like and how can it support infants, toddlers, and their families?

- Assigns children, early learning and development programs, and early childhood professionals unique identifiers.
- Includes (or links to) data from all of the services supporting infants, toddlers, and their families, including child care, Early Head Start, home visiting, Part C Early Intervention, and health and mental health services.
- Is governed by a state body responsible for managing data and ensuring privacy protection and security
- Is used to measure progress toward outcomes for infants and toddlers such as:
 - Percentage of babies born at a healthy birth-weight
 - Percentage of young children receiving well-child visits and immunizations
 - Percentage of young children with developmental delays and the services they are receiving
 - Percentage of infants and toddlers in high-quality early learning and development programs
- Is part of, or connects to, a state longitudinal data system that follows children from cradle to career.

EARLY EXPERIENCES MATTER



www.zerotothree.org

ZERO TO THREE is a national, nonprofit organization that informs, trains and supports professionals, policymakers, and parents in their efforts to improve the lives of infants and toddlers.

- We train professionals and build networks of leaders.
- We influence policies and practices.
- We raise public understanding of early childhood issues.

All our work is:

- Grounded in research and experience.
- Multi-disciplinary.
- Culturally responsive.