



Fight for Our Families

An Infant-Toddler Agenda for the President
and the 118th Congress



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What Families Need Policymakers to Know

Every day across the United States, parents take on the toughest yet most joyous job—raising the more than 11 million infants and toddlers who, in the second half of this century, will be the workers, caregivers, problem-solvers, and leaders of our country. The actions of the 118th Congress and the President will help determine whether families who have carried on through the pandemic and tough economic times have the tools for this vital work and whether critical early foundations for their children and the nation will be strong or fragile.

This federal agenda for our policymakers was formed in partnership with families themselves, who gave input on key policies and sent a clear message: they want policymakers to make young children a top priority by advancing policies that equitably distribute resources, remove barriers, and create opportunities. Families are urging national leaders not to sideline policies that bolster their important work, but to embrace the well-being of their children as the key to our future. They are fighting for their children's futures, and they are imploring the President and Congress to join with them...

“My biggest thing is to fight for our families.

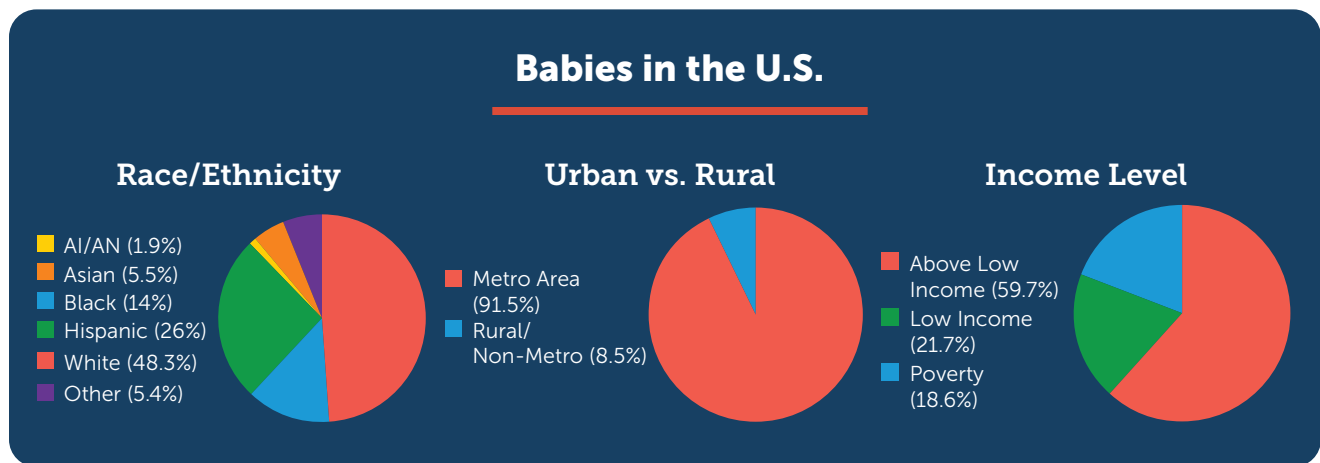
-Tiffany, LA

Families are the best experts on what they and their children need. To develop this national policy agenda, we consulted with our *Strolling Thunder*™ Family Advocacy Network, part of the *Think Babies*™ movement.

We asked these experts what Congress should know about the policies that would help their young children thrive. This agenda reflects their very strong voices, hopes, and deep concern for how young children and families are supported in our country.



The Landscape for Families



ZERO TO THREE's [State of Babies Yearbook](#) shows that infants and toddlers are a diverse group. More than half are Black, Indigenous, Latine, or other people of color. They live in families with widely varying incomes and in states with different levels of available resources. But every infant and toddler today has grown up in a pandemic. They already have experienced isolation and, for many, greater economic hardship and emotional distress.

“ I think the pandemic, like so many other things, just exposed the gaps and the cracks that were [there] already, and it just all crumbled for so many people during those years.

-Abi, KS

The family advocates with whom we spoke frankly discussed the challenges of raising their children in this difficult economic time. One father talked about the parental struggles associated with babies who were born early during the pandemic, which has exposed gaps in the health care system.

Families with children with special needs shared a common thread of difficulties, including long waiting times for services, seemingly endless paperwork, and the frustration and mental stress associated with advocating for their children and meeting their needs. Families in general expressed the hope that a network of caring adults will surround their children to promote healthy development.

Families shared how they would bridge these gaps and fill in the cracks to ensure that all babies and families have what they need to thrive. Families described such specific needs as more supportive economic and workplace policies, as well as cross-cutting themes related to equitable access to resources and the knowledge and cultural attunement needed by professionals who care for their children and support families in all types of settings.

“ Whether it’s child care or health care or really any kind of support that parents need, I... continually feel like it’s really hard as a parent to try to, you know, have a job.

-Todd, HI

Economic Security

Economic hardships and the resulting trade-offs are foremost in many families’ minds, especially as inflation has increased the cost of food, housing, and medical care. Families shared that their priorities are shifting to focus on affording their most basic needs, with housing and food insecurity increasingly mentioned as key challenges. As families with young children manage jobs and family responsibilities, they cite the need for higher wages, as well as help with the basics of food and shelter.

Many families cited the enhanced Child Tax Credit (CTC) as a key economic support that helped improve their children’s lives. Sometimes the extra income helped them buy healthier food or simply a sufficient amount of food for their family. The financial stability afforded by the CTC helped relieve parents’ stress and allowed them to spend extra time with and provide quality care to their babies. The CTC’s absence has been sorely felt, with one rural mother explaining how the cascading effects of lacking cash for a car repair prevented her from accessing therapy and enrichment activities for her child with special needs.

“ I’m lucky to be able to send my kids to a great daycare, but it means I have to keep the heat low in the house and buy less healthy foods for them to eat and only take them to the doctor if it’s unavoidable, so the lack of affordability impacts my family significantly.

-Masha, MD



Mental Health

Stress and mental health issues often go hand in hand with economic hardship and isolation. Families pointed out that caregivers' mental health and well-being is linked to that of their children and reported that caregivers have been under added levels of stress throughout the pandemic. They worry that many parents feeling increased strain on their own mental health may not realize that their state of mental well-being can affect their children as well.

Parents reported having difficulty finding mental health care for themselves and their young children, especially care that is culturally responsive. Families also noted the need for more screening for maternal depression and early childhood trauma, as well as more mental health resources for caregivers and babies, including in primary care settings where they are most easily accessed. A related issue cited by several families was the need for treatment for substance use disorders that enables parents and their babies to remain together.

“ A good mental health care system [is] very important, because I [suffer] from anxiety and depression, and I don't want to pass it on to my child. ..[S]he might be aware when I have my good days and my bad days. So a good mental healthcare system would be wonderful for our children's future as well.

-Karina, AZ



Family and Community Connections

Families are never coping with just one thing—they are juggling many needs in an environment where help is often hard to come by. Their frustration stems from multiple challenges. Even finding out about available services in the community and then making connections can be hard without a place or person to help support their children’s development and connect them with services. They want all families to have access to comprehensive support, so that when they knock on a door for services, that door leads to all the things they need.

Many parents supported the approach of having an early development specialist in their pediatrician’s office to focus on their child’s development, make connections to other services, and allow for more time to interact with their family. Others described the benefits of working with home visitors, Early Head Start programs, and community resource centers. The key is to ensure that all families have a door to knock on. Families with experience in the child welfare system—once as parents and now as partners to parents in the system—cited the comprehensive support of the Infant-Toddler Court Program.

“ Parents are exhausted. [The] pandemic, work, economy, raising a kid—you name it. We are exhausted. Loving our children and providing good health to them is exactly what we want, but it can be challenging with all the demands as parents. Think accessible. Think easy. Think of ways to reach parents in ways that we have not before.

-Liz, NH



The Professionals Who Care for Our Children

Family advocates return repeatedly to the theme of professionals who care for their children, whether in primary care, early intervention, mental health, or child care. They want and expect these professionals to be appropriately educated in early development, how to interact with young children to support development, and recognizing signs that development may not be typical. Based on their experiences, parents felt primary care providers may not always be well informed about autism or other special needs, and often do not have the time to observe and listen, which is one reason why the approach of embedding child development specialists in primary care resonated with them.

Parents particularly recognize the value of early childhood educators and the fact that they are severely underpaid for their critical and difficult work. Families see early educators as partners and recognize that low wages affect the turnover that often disrupts these important relationships with their children. They worry that providers are overstressed without being cared for themselves. They also emphasized that the early educators whose relationships with their children help shape early development should be well-qualified. They advocated for better access to training and higher compensation that will help make early childhood education a more attractive field. Families had similar thoughts about the need for improved pay for the early interventionists who were so important in supporting their children's development, hoping to attract more people into the field and address shortages in services.

“ We should be paying [child care specialists] more because we value the work that they're doing more. And the higher value we put into them, even financially, [will] increase the value of the care that we're going to end up getting [for] the future for our children. And [we're] going to have more qualified individuals wanting to be a part of that system, because they can actually make a living doing it.

-Abi, KS



Cultural Reflection and Respect

Families expressed concern that services across the board should be inclusive, particularly in service systems where providers often do not look like their family. Practitioners may not be listening and honoring families' cultures and hopes for their children. One parent described how draining it was to have to explain to a mental health provider the cultural lens through which to interpret the concerns being shared.

Families advocated for intentional efforts to recruit practitioners of diverse races, ethnicities, and language backgrounds in fields ranging from infant and early childhood mental health to early intervention to early childhood education. Programs designed from within the community help ensure they are culturally responsive and meet community members' actual needs. To reflect the diversity of families in the United States today, parents cited the need for materials in multiple languages.

“ You still wonder about equity of opportunity and cultural confidence—will they (all children) see images of themselves, will it be an identify affirming environment, how do we deal with those implicit and explicit biases and expectations that may differ for your child.

-Cindy, CT

Equitable Distribution of Resources

Families emphasized that the level of resources varies not just by family, but also by community. They want to do the best for their children, but the lack of resources in their communities is a barrier. Many live in “deserts”—areas lacking services such as early childhood education, nutritious food, or medical care. One mother noted that enrolling her child in Medicaid was easy; finding a doctor was the hard part. Another parent worried about ensuring that families who really need child care, but may not be able to navigate the system due to language or transportation barriers, do not lose spots to more knowledgeable or affluent families.

Several families pointed out transportation barriers to accessing services, calling for vouchers to help facilitate getting to providers or developing creative solutions to reaching rural families. Strict eligibility limits for services also undermine access to resources, keeping many struggling families from obtaining services such as nutrition assistance and medical services for children with special needs. Families cited the need for benefits to reach a much wider group of people, with many calling for universality in areas such as mental health and infant and early childhood mental health, child care and early learning, and food assistance. In addition to broad eligibility, families also recognized that key programs should promote equitable access to resources via intentional placement of services—filling the deserts.

“ Based on zip codes, you can tell what resources are available. There are a lot of under-resourced communities... If someone were to throw a zip code to me, I could say ‘No, they don’t have this, they don’t have that,’ whether it be early childhood programming, whether it be housing...I believe in my whole heart that everybody wants the absolute best for their children. Unfortunately, the community isn’t set up for everyone to have equitable access to those things. And so I think a priority has to be equitable distribution of resources so that everybody—regardless of their zip code, regardless of their community, regardless of whether [they went to] school—everyone has exactly what they need in [gaining] access to it.

-Wendy, MO

Early Intervention

Having a child with developmental delays or disabilities creates its own journey where each step can be a challenge. Families described the frustration of missed signs for developmental issues, as well as the long waits to see specialists, receive diagnoses, and access services. Medicaid coverage looms large in families’ ability to access services and care for children with special needs. Without it, the cost of services becomes a major barrier to receiving early intervention that can make a big difference in young children’s development.

Families cited the need for more early intervention providers, quicker turnaround times for diagnoses and services, and increased support for paying for services. They also emphasized the need to ensure that health and early childhood providers are educated in recognizing the signs of developmental delays, as well as the need for more widespread developmental screening.

“ I could have benefited greatly from early intervention. I knew something was going on with my child but there was limited support.

-Jordan, OR

Paid Family and Medical Leave

Families are keenly aware of the importance of time off for supporting early development. One family advocate cited having time off when babies are born or adopted as the greatest hope for young children, noting that many parents cannot afford such freedom. Parents often feel they are forced to choose between work and their families because they do not have paid leave.

Parents and other caregivers need paid leave not just when babies are born or adopted. Very young children can and do have serious medical conditions that strain family economic and emotional resources. Paid family and medical leave, as well as paid sick days, give families the ability to be present for their children not only at birth or adoption but during times of illness when a very young child most needs the comfort and security of familiar caregivers. Job protection and continued wages at these times helps bring peace of mind and reduce the potential transference of stress to one's child.

“ If we could all have [paid family and medical leave], I think it'll be a win for everyone, not only our children, but also the parents. And I think that will definitely give our kids a strong start...right from the beginning.

-Ivonne, VA



Child Care and Early Learning

Not surprisingly, families frequently cited all major aspects of child care as an issue for infants and toddlers, including scarcity, high cost, and quality concerns, especially in small towns and rural areas. Families value quality and are wrenched by having to choose affordability over care that better supports their children's comprehensive developmental needs.

Families also recognize that early educators are the key to quality, repeatedly emphasizing the need for caregivers and teachers who are educated on how to support all children, as well as a level of compensation on par with the important work they do. Ideally, a quality early care and learning system for infants and toddlers would be open to all, with access to comprehensive, high-quality services such as those available through Early Head Start.

“ Affordable child care does not equal quality child care! We need better options for our kids. ...We need peace of mind that we are sending our kids to a safe and enriching program. They deserve clean facilities with trained teachers. We are in a child care crisis. Families are forced to choose whatever is available when a spot opens. Mothers are walking away from the workforce because they simply can't afford it. People are paying second mortgages and are being forced to choose between putting food on the table [and] putting their child in daycare to afford the food. We can't keep going like this.

-Jessica, MA



What Do Families Need From the President and Congress?

Families want policymakers to make young children a priority as the wellspring of our nation's future. But they don't see this happening. The family leaders we turned to expressed a need for urgent action and prioritization of the supports and services they rely on.

“As much as we struggled, I know there are people out there 50 to 100 times worse that are struggling.

-Tiffany, LA

Programs serving families are often small and don't go far enough to reach all who can benefit, yet are still vulnerable to cuts. The patchwork of programs families look to, such as Medicaid, nutrition assistance, child care assistance, and mental health supports, would be targeted for cuts in the proposed House budget approach, while taxes could be lowered for businesses and wealthier people. Families want to get across the importance of ensuring children have what they need to thrive.

“What do we need to do on a federal level, then down to the state level, to put a spotlight on infant and early childhood wellness—child care, mental health resources, family support, education, all of that?

-Jenna, NV

Families want the President and Congress to understand the realities of balancing two vital roles—contributing to economic productivity and raising their children, with few of the supports that are the norm in other countries.

“In today's world, families need support. Parenting is the hardest job in the world. Having access to financial support, child developmental knowledge, and community activities makes it a little bit easier.

-Heather, OH

Families do not expect anything to be handed to them, but need national policymakers to see them as partners, to be on their side and that of their children. They want their leaders to go beyond funding children and family programs as an afterthought to recognizing the critical role families play in making our country strong.

“Invest[ing] in our children and community early makes for a better community and life for our next generation.

-Isabel, DE

A Policy Agenda to Support Families and Young Children

Families strive every day to do the best for their children. The recommendations below for national policies reflect the hopes and challenges families expressed for giving their infants and toddlers what they need most to thrive: Good Health, Strong Families, and Positive Early Learning Experiences. To partner with families and move forward together, the President and Congress must invest to ensure all young children receive the foundation they need to meet our nation's challenges in adulthood. The President and Congress must recognize that proposals to cut funding for the myriad programs that support families will harm children and by undermining their foundation, undermine our nation's future.



Good Health

“ Aside from the more obvious markers of physical health (access to care, compliance with well checks, immunization schedules), early screening, and then early intervention, we need to also acknowledge mental health and how this affects children.

-Cate, VA

- **Transform pediatric care to support early development.** The most common touch point for babies, toddlers, and their families in this country is primary care. Pediatricians and family medicine doctors are the frontline for many of the health and developmental issues facing children. We can leverage this universal setting to focus on whole-family care and the support of healthy development and caregiving well-being—an approach pioneered by ZERO TO THREE's [HealthySteps](#) program. By expanding federal funding streams such as those in the Bureau of Primary Health Care's Health Center Program and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau to build early childhood systems that are inclusive of the health care setting, and embedding early childhood development experts in primary care, we can transform primary care to drive better developmental trajectories and outcomes for young children and caregivers.
- **Increase the capacity to support strong infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH).** How young children feel about themselves and relate to others is at the core of all learning and development. Our nation must build the infrastructure and means to promote and address the foundational mental health needs of young children.
 - To promote understanding and use of IECMH supports and services, IECMH should be infused into all early childhood settings, such as pediatric care, child care, child welfare, and home visiting, through training and mental health consultation.

- Promoting equitable accessibility to address behavioral health concerns starts with developing a well-trained, diverse IECMH workforce, especially to address trauma and adverse experiences and provide healing-centered care. This work should start with establishing IECMH Centers of Excellence and clinical leadership programs.
- Policies should promote applying the science of IECMH through widespread use of developmentally appropriate practices and tools such as the [*DC:0-5™ Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood*](#) to assess and diagnose mental health disorders in young children.
- Current funding streams should be leveraged to better integrate IECMH into states' overall mental health policy by working with them to dedicate at least 10 percent of Community Mental Health Block Grant funds for IECMH for children from birth to age 5 who are experiencing or at risk of developing mental health disorders.
- **Expand trauma-informed care, treatment opportunities, and supportive services for families dealing with substance use disorder.** There should be an increased focus on and expansion of family-centered treatment, particularly for parents and their babies together. Comprehensive approaches should connect families to services such as child care and housing, and address caregivers' own early trauma that often underlies substance use. Such treatment can promote family stability and prevent unnecessary child welfare involvement and foster care placement.
- **Extend Medicaid coverage for mothers and babies.** We continue to support expanded access to health coverage for all parents and caregivers, particularly Medicaid expansion, but other Medicaid enhancements could directly improve maternal and infant health, as well as the role of primary care in supporting development and preventing adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Mandating coverage provisions, including coverage for doulas, continuous coverage for all children until the age of 3, and coverage for all women and birthing people through 12 months postpartum, drives better outcomes for mothers and babies and advances health equity. Expanding reimbursement opportunities for IECMH supports and services, including multigenerational therapies for babies and caregivers, will help provide services to many families struggling to access the care they need.





Strong Families

“ Families need to be able to meet their basic needs before they can flourish. Worrying about the cost of groceries, housing, transportation, child care, etc.... makes it hard for families to think about more than surviving. Once basic needs are met, parents could use a chance to connect.

-Erika, ME

- **Enact comprehensive national paid leave policies.** Comprehensive paid family and medical leave promotes bonding between parents and babies and enables workers to care for their own and family members' extended health needs. To meet the needs of families and their young children, a national paid family and medical leave plan should be accessible to all working people; offer a meaningful length of leave; be affordable and cost-effective for workers, employers, and the government; be inclusive in its definition of "family;" and offer protections against employer retaliation when workers use their right to take leave. Paid sick days allow all workers to earn time to address short-term care needs for themselves or their ill child or family member, and to obtain preventive care.
- **Build an equitable economic base.** Economic security is critical when children are young and their brains are developing at the most rapid rate of their lives. To help close income gaps as well as the racial wealth gap, families need a minimum wage of at least \$15 per hour, fair work schedules, and new approaches such as "baby bonds." Families from across the political spectrum also are calling out the urgent need to reinstate and make permanent the enhanced [Child Tax Credit](#) with full refundability.
- **Support families in their ability to meet basic needs.** When families have the resources to meet their basic needs, hardship diminishes and the emotional well-being of caregivers and children improves. As the first line of defense against food insecurity, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) must be strengthened and protected with boosted benefit levels to reflect today's food prices. In addition, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) should be expanded and modernized as a critical program for pregnant people and for families with very young children. Simultaneously, access to affordable housing must be increased, as only one in four eligible households receive a housing voucher.
- **Create communities that reinforce family strengths.** Create a robust new funding stream to help communities design an array of approaches to ensure that every family has access to comprehensive support for parenting, positive child development, and family services. The availability of readily accessible support, through approaches such as early childhood specialists in primary care, home visiting, and family resource centers, can help address the social determinants of health and form protective factors that buffer young children from stresses that can derail their development. While

we spend billions on child protective services and placing children in foster care, perpetuating institutionalized racism and inequities, we invest almost nothing in prevention. It is time to give families an entry point to services that build on their strengths.

“ Everyone should have advocates who understand the experience in foster care...They made me want to keep fighting. Everything they did made me feel like it was sincere from the heart, and I really appreciate no one gave up on me. The (Infant-Toddler Court) Program taught me and it made me stronger and the woman who I am today, with full custody of my son.

-Felisha, FL

- **Transform child welfare into a family focused, trauma-informed “child well-being system.”**

Transforming the child welfare system by applying the science of early childhood development and adopting trauma-responsive and healing-centered policies and practices can help courts and communities keep families intact and thriving. The Strengthening America’s Families Act (SAFA) builds on promising work by states and community teams across the country, centering equity in family support and outcomes, building capacity to address early adversity, and preventing the removal of infants and toddlers from their homes and potential subsequent involvement in child welfare. SAFA also creates a framework for effectively implementing preventive services under the Family First Prevention Services Act.





Positive Early Learning Experiences

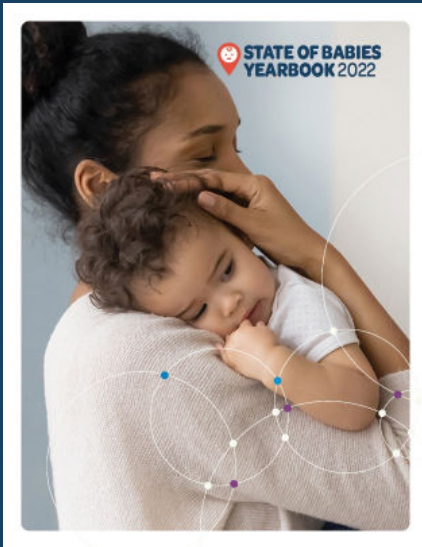
“ Early Head Start being the standard... is a great starting point. I would love to see it expanded across all children, so that they have access.

-Shawnnita, TX

- **Sustain child care and build the world-class system families deserve.** As a key foundation for a strong economy and healthy early childhood development, quality child care is a public good and must be treated as such. Second only to a child's home, child care is the place where foundational early development unfolds. Access to high-quality care can set children up with a strong foundation for their future development and learning. However, such care remains inaccessible and unaffordable for far too many families, especially those with infants and toddlers. We must continue investing in existing supports for families such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant, while building towards a comprehensive child care system that ensures all families have access to affordable, high-quality care that meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers and supports a well-compensated and well-supported workforce of early educators.
- **Fully fund Early Head Start as a beacon of hope.** As families continue to face steep economic challenges and stressors, this effective early development and family support program should be empowered to reach all eligible infants and toddlers, as well as serve significantly more pregnant people. It is essential to invest in the recruitment and retention of highly qualified Early Head Start staff, including through enhanced compensation, to reverse staffing shortages that limit the program's existing capacity and to support Early Head Start as a model for infant and toddler early care and learning.
- **Expand Early intervention (EI) as an essential part of the early care and learning system.** The federal funding structure for EI services through Part C of IDEA should enable states to fully meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers, including developmental screening and follow-up, helping families navigate the system; expanding the EI workforce and ensuring adequate reimbursement; ensuring coverage for more children who are at risk or could benefit from services; and incorporating more infant and early childhood mental health expertise and services.

“ The harsh reality is that families do not have the supports they need. As a Nurse Practitioner, I can care for the very sickest members of our community, but I cannot afford to care for myself or my children. We can, and we must, do better.

-Cate, VA



Find more detailed information about babies in the nation and in your state:

stateofbabies.org

Acknowledgements

The Federal Policy team would like to thank the families who opened their lives to us and allowed us to anchor this agenda in the reality of their experiences. While we could not quote every family who supported this effort and whose ideas and experiences are reflected here, members of the Strolling Thunder Family Advocacy Network as well as Infant-Toddler Court Team Parent Leaders provided thoughtful contributions throughout the year to this agenda for the President and the 118th Congress. We are extremely grateful. It would not have been possible without you.

ABOUT ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all infants 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.

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