



Support a Diverse and Culturally Competent Workforce

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About this Project

CLASP's *Charting Progress for Babies in Child Care* project highlights state policies that support the healthy growth and development of infants and toddlers in child care settings, and provides online resources to help states implement these policies. The foundation of the project is a policy framework comprised of four key principles describing what babies and toddlers in child care need and 15 recommendations for states to move forward. The project seeks to provide information that links research and policy to help states make the best decisions for infants and toddlers.

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By Hannah Matthews¹

Child care providers and caregivers need a set of skills to work effectively and respectfully across cultures. All babies and toddlers in child care need nurturing, responsive providers and caregivers they can trust to care for them as they grow and learn. To support this goal, CLASP recommends that states ensure the diversity and cultural competence of infant and toddler providers and caregivers in order to meet the needs of the state's children under three and their families.

This document presents research supporting the recommendation to support a diverse and culturally competent workforce. Visit www.clasp.org/babiesinchildcare for materials related to this recommendation, including ideas for how state child care licensing, subsidy, and quality enhancement policies can move toward this recommendation; state examples; and online resources for state policymakers.

What does the research say about babies and toddlers, diversity, and cultural competency?

Children under three are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. There are more than 12 million babies and toddlers in the United States. Nationwide, 12 percent of households have a child under age 3.² These households are racially and culturally diverse. Approximately 18 percent of Hispanic families, 13 percent of Asian families, 13 percent of black families, and 11 percent of white non-Hispanic families include a child under age 3.³ In recent years, immigration has accelerated diversity among the infant/toddler

population.⁴ One in four children under age 3 live in an immigrant family (i.e., one comprised of one or more foreign-born parents).⁵ Approximately 62 percent of immigrant families with children under 3 have origins in Latin America and the Caribbean, representing many countries and many distinct languages.⁶ Approximately one of seven babies and toddlers in the U.S. have a parent who speaks limited English,⁷ indicating that a language other than English is likely to be spoken in the home. The extent to which infants and toddlers in these households are exposed also to English—for example, through sibling interactions or in child care or other settings—varies considerably.

Children’s cultural identities are shaped during the infant and toddler years.

Culture influences all aspects of child development; it is transformative and encompasses everything in a person’s environment—including language, communication, beliefs, customs, practices, interactions, relationships, and behaviors.⁸ The growth and development of babies and toddlers is rooted within a cultural context, as are the early care practices of parents and caregivers.⁹ The early care experiences of babies and toddlers help to shape their cultural identities, which form the basis of their personalities and sense of self as they grow older.¹⁰ As babies and toddlers are developing their core identity as members of cultural groups, it is critical that providers and caregivers understand the subtle and overt ways they may convey their own ideas about diverse cultural groups to children in their care.¹¹

The foundations of children’s language skills are developing during the infant and toddler years.

The earliest experiences of young children shape their growth and development, including language and communication skills. All young children need support for the development of their home or primary language. In addition, young children whose primary language is not English will ultimately need support in acquiring English language skills in order to succeed in school and beyond.¹² Research confirms that young children have the ability to learn two languages from birth and that learning two languages does not delay development of either language. Moreover, some research suggests that dual language learning—as early as the infant/toddler years—

has long-term cognitive, academic, and social benefits.¹³ Bilingual child care environments, therefore, may offer the best opportunity for supporting babies’ and toddlers’ development of home and English language skills.¹⁴

Many infants and toddlers are in nonparental child care with providers and caregivers who may or may not reflect their cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

The use of child care varies by race, ethnicity, and country of origin. In 2001, 50 percent of black non-Hispanic infants under age 1 were in a regular nonparental care arrangement, compared to 39 percent of white non-Hispanic infants and 33 percent of Hispanic infants.¹⁵ Similarly, 72 percent of black non-Hispanic toddlers (ages 1 and 2) were in a regular nonparental care arrangement, compared to 56 percent of white non-Hispanic toddlers and 41 percent of Hispanic toddlers.¹⁶ Forty percent of babies and toddlers in immigrant families of all races and ethnicities were in a regular nonparental care arrangement in 2002.¹⁷

Limited demographic information exists on the licensed early childhood workforce,¹⁸ particularly on the birth to three workforce. According to U.S. Department of Labor data, 64 percent of the U.S. child care workforce is white non-Hispanic, a group that includes providers caring for children of all ages.¹⁹ No national data exists on either the language diversity or linguistic abilities of the child care workforce or the birth to three workforce. Some research suggests that in certain communities, one-fourth or more of the child care workforce may speak a language other than English; yet, in other communities the child care workforce has limited multilingual capacity.²⁰ Some evidence suggests that the birth to three workforce may be

From Carol Brunson Day, “Every Child is a Cultural Being,” in *Concepts of Care: 20 Essays on Infant/Toddler Development and Learning*

“All children are cultural beings. Their beliefs, values, and behavior stem from rich cultural perspectives that are rooted in early experiences with their families and communities.”²¹

more diverse than the preschool workforce and that the overall child care workforce is growing more diverse with time.²²

Babies and toddlers are more likely than older children to be in informal child care settings. Many babies and toddlers are in the care of a family, friend, or neighbor caregiver;²³ and they may have caregivers who are ethnically or linguistically similar. Some anecdotal evidence suggests that family, friend, and neighbor care may be more likely to reflect the culture and languages of children cared for, because parents are connected to caregivers of the same backgrounds through common social networks.²⁴ The reasons families choose different child care arrangements are complex. One reason some families select informal care arrangements is a preference for a provider who shares similar cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds.²⁵ In a Washington State study, nearly one-fifth (18 percent) of parents with children under age 6 said that a racial, cultural, or linguistic match with a caregiver was “very important” to them as an indicator of the quality of a child care environment.²⁶

It is unclear from research whether babies and toddlers form attachments more easily when receiving nonparental care from a person of a similar ethnic background. One study found greater attachment between toddlers and preschoolers entering child care and providers when they shared an ethnic background.²⁷ Another found that an ethnic match between a young child and a caregiver is not related to social and cognitive outcomes for children; rather, high-quality care—care that is sensitive and responsive to the individual child—benefits all young children, regardless of the ethnic background of the person providing that care.²⁸ Yet, standard measures of quality care may not include assessments of the cultural sensitivity of providers or consider the cultural context of the practices of providers and caregivers in child care.²⁹

Providers and caregivers who reflect the home cultures and speak the home languages of babies and toddlers can support continuity between the home and child care settings and support healthy development. Young children’s social and emotional development is supported when there is cultural and linguistic continuity between their experiences at home

and in child care.³⁰ Having providers and caregivers who reflect the home cultures and speak the home languages of babies and toddlers provides a secure environment for babies and toddlers and contributes to effective communication with parents.³¹ Infants and toddlers may feel more emotionally secure when they hear their home language in a child care setting.³² It also reinforces the importance and value of their cultural background.³³ For babies and toddlers still developing the ability to communicate in any language, it is particularly important that their caregivers and parents are able to communicate about their care and development. Providers and caregivers who share the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of families may best be able to explain and communicate potentially sensitive issues, such as those around special needs including physical, emotional, and learning disabilities or delays.³⁴ Providers who share the cultural background of the children in a child care setting may also share their knowledge of cultural practices with other providers in the setting and translate nuances of culture.³⁵

Cultural and linguistic continuity and healthy development of diverse infants and toddlers can also be supported by culturally sensitive providers and caregivers. Continuity between home and child care can be cultivated by providers and caregivers who understand and respect families’ diverse cultural practices in the child care setting, and who have the skills to build upon them—even if they do not themselves share the families’ cultural or linguistic background.³⁶ At a minimum, all babies and toddlers need caregivers who respect their home cultures and languages, are willing to learn about and adapt to diverse cultural practices, and have access to appropriate resources to support that learning. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, developmentally appropriate practices for young children should be informed by knowledge of young children’s social and cultural contexts.³⁷ Incorporating the home cultures and languages of babies and toddlers in child care settings—including the use of familiar music, materials, practices, and customs—can create positive early learning experiences; and this should be part of a planned curriculum or approach to working with babies and toddlers in child care settings.³⁸ Providers who do not

speak the same language as the babies they care for can still support home language and English language development by engaging in nurturing and responsive conversations and communication with a child in any language, as well as through non-verbal communication.³⁹ When child care providers demonstrate their sensitivity and understanding of issues related to culture, they provide a supportive environment for babies and toddlers and their families. Babies' and toddlers' social, emotional, and cognitive development is enhanced through good partnerships between parents and those who care for their children. Policies and practices, including building strong relationships with families, can demonstrate respect and support for the backgrounds of diverse infants and toddlers.

All providers and caregivers need a set of skills for working effectively across cultures.

In order to develop the skills necessary to work with an increasingly diverse young child population, it is important that providers of all backgrounds receive meaningful training in cultural competency and in knowledge of dual or second language acquisition.⁴⁰ Cultural competency requires a set of skills including (but not limited to) knowledge and understanding of cultures, diverse parenting practices, family values and customs, and dual language acquisition processes. It requires individual providers and caregivers to be aware of their own cultural background and practices, to view behaviors in a cultural context, and to have cross-cultural communication skills to engage in meaningful ways with diverse families and communities.⁴¹ Child care providers need to understand the cultural backgrounds of the young children they care for, in particular the strengths and assets of those communities and the unique ways in which their families care for them and support their healthy development.⁴² When babies and toddlers are in child care, conflicts may arise over differences between child care practices of the dominant culture and practices rooted in the traditions of minority cultural groups. Providers and caregivers can be taught strategies for mitigating these conflicts and for using reflective practices to better understand families' backgrounds and cultural preferences, as well as how their own cultural background shapes their practices and beliefs.⁴³ Child care settings can implement strategies that

create opportunities for cross-cultural learning among staff and families.⁴⁴

In order to understand how to best support young children from linguistically diverse backgrounds, child care providers must have knowledge of dual language acquisition.⁴⁵ Training should be made available to assist all providers and caregivers in acquiring this understanding. Child care settings may be some infants' and toddlers' primary exposure to English, and child care providers need to understand the critical importance of their role in providing this linguistic exposure for young children and how they can support language development in any language. Parents who themselves have limited English proficiency may seek out monolingual English child care environments in order for their children to learn English, often seeing English acquisition as the key to future academic and economic success. They may not have knowledge of research in this area to understand the importance of maintaining and supporting home language.⁴⁶ Child care providers with training in dual language learning can talk to parents about the importance of supporting home language along with English language development.

How can state child care licensing, subsidy, and quality enhancement policies recruit, maintain, and support the diversity and cultural competence of infant/toddler providers and caregivers?

Current research, coupled with the growing diversity of the infant/toddler population, suggests a need to increase the multilingual and multicultural capacity of the birth to three workforce. In addition, the diversity that does exist among infant and toddler providers must be maintained. It is equally important to ensure that providers of diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds are recruited and supported and that providers of all backgrounds are skilled to work with diverse babies and toddlers in their care. Given the large share of infants and toddlers with family, friend, and neighbor caregivers, it is critical to support diverse family, friend, and neighbor caregivers in

providing culturally competent, safe, and stimulating environments for babies and toddlers in their care.

States can address diversity in core competencies and provide training and technical assistance to infant/toddler providers and caregivers to increase cultural competence.

All providers—as well as trainers and technical assistance providers—can benefit from training in cultural and linguistic competence, which can be embedded in professional development standards. At a minimum, providers need help understanding how to support the home language development of babies and toddlers and incorporate their home cultures in daily activities, particularly when child care providers are caring for children of different backgrounds from themselves or for children from several different cultural backgrounds. States can examine whether their core competencies for infant/toddler caregivers explicitly address cultural and linguistic diversity and ensure meaningful training opportunities for infant/toddler caregivers to achieve these competencies. A recent analysis of infant and toddler early learning guidelines in 21 states found a lack of attention to the developmental and learning needs of English Language Learners (ELLs).⁴⁷ A literature review of existing state early childhood educator competencies found a general weakness in the areas of competencies in cultural diversity and dual or second language learning.⁴⁸ States can also support Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC) certification for infant/toddler specialists in their state. Understanding cultural continuity and developing cultural competencies are central tenets of PITC, a nationally recognized training model for child care providers.⁴⁹ The North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral Council has 25 infant/toddler specialists that provide training to licensed child care providers serving children from birth to age 3 based on PITC, the Environment Rating Scales, and current infant/toddler literature on best practices. They currently have one bilingual infant/toddler specialist, and some trainings and technical assistance are available in Spanish to meet the needs of the state's growing Latino population.

States can recruit and support a diverse birth to three workforce by creating professional development ladders that include community-

based training in multiple languages—along with financial supports for training and education—and by improving language access to licensing and professional development systems. Recruiting and retaining linguistically and culturally diverse infant/toddler providers requires a range of supports, including scholarships and other forms of financial assistance, incentives, and partnerships between community-based organizations—particularly those focused on serving ethnic minorities and immigrant and refugee groups—and state higher education systems. A professional development ladder should consist of multiple pathways and strategies to improve the knowledge of the workforce and should include community-based training, resource and referral agencies, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities. Racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to be enrolled in two-year institutions than four-year institutions and are often discouraged from articulating to four-year institutions because of restrictions on transferring credits.⁵⁰ State policies can improve articulation agreements among institutions of higher education and help to recognize degrees from institutions outside the U.S. Providers whose first language is not English may need additional supports—including student cohorts and mentoring, academic supports, and training in native languages—to make the most of professional development opportunities.⁵¹ Additionally, limited English proficient (LEP) early childhood educators may be prohibited from beginning early childhood coursework because of difficulties meeting English-language requirements, along with a lack of minority-language coursework.⁵² State higher education systems also need to improve their own cultural competency and capacity to prepare early childhood teachers to work with an increasingly diverse child population. The majority of early childhood education faculty members in four-year institutions are white and non-Hispanic,⁵³ a fact that highlights the need for more diversity among those preparing future child care providers. The supply of linguistically appropriate care can also be expanded by ensuring that providers and caregivers who speak languages other than English can access the licensing process. A review of state Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) biennial state plans found that three states report that they have policies

in place to make their child care licensing regulations more accessible to providers from language minority or immigrant communities.⁵⁴ Finally, states can support providers who care for children who are linguistically diverse by offering financial incentives. California, for example, pays providers who care for children with limited English proficiency at an adjusted child care subsidy payment rate that is 10 percent higher than the state standard reimbursement for contracted providers.⁵⁵

States can support quality initiatives for family, friend, and neighbor caregivers caring for diverse babies and toddlers. There is a wide range of education levels, experience, and training among family, friend, and neighbor caregivers. Because of the informal nature of this kind of care, these providers are often disconnected from formal child care agencies and isolated from other child care providers in their communities.⁵⁶ Caregivers in new immigrant communities may be even more isolated, due to language barriers or immigration status.⁵⁷ In Minnesota, focus groups of immigrant and refugee family, friend, and neighbor caregivers indicated that they would like information and training to be conveniently located in informal settings, such as community-based organizations, apartment complexes, and individual homes. They also stressed the importance of having bilingual trainers who can provide information in their home languages.⁵⁸ Outreach and support initiatives can increase the child development knowledge and skills of family, friend, and neighbor caregivers, who may not have had access to culturally and linguistically appropriate information and resources prior to providing care.⁵⁹ Trusted messengers and training through peer networks can help build relationships and connect informal caregivers to training and supports.

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for dynamically updated information related to this recommendation, including:

- **Policy Ideas** that states can use to move toward this recommendation
- **State Examples** profiling initiatives of policies under this recommendation
- **Online Resources** for state policymakers

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⁵⁶ Nina Sazer-O'Donnell, Moncieff Cochran, Kristi Lekies, et al., *Sparking Connections, Phase II: A Multi-Site Evaluation of Community-Based Strategies to Support Family, Friend and Neighbor Caregivers of Children, Part 1: Lessons Learned and Recommendations*, Families and Work Institute, 2006,

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⁵⁷ See Matthews and Jang, *The Challenges of Change*.

⁵⁸ Chia Youyee Vang, *Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care Providers in Recent Immigrant and Refugee Communities*, prepared for the Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2006,

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