

# CLASP

Center for Law and Social Policy

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## *Starting Off Right.*

Promoting Child Development from Birth  
in State Early Care and  
Education Initiatives

Rachel Schumacher and Katie Hamm  
Center for Law and Social Policy

Anne Goldstein  
Zero To Three

Joan Lombardi  
The Children's Project

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# *Executive Summary*

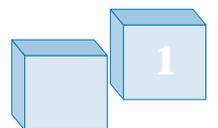
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**I**n the period from birth to age 3, early experiences shape the architecture of the brain—including cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional capacities—at a phenomenal rate. Unfortunately, during this critical developmental period, children are most at-risk for poverty and most vulnerable to its effects, which include low birth weight, obesity, lead poisoning, and stunted growth. Most young children also spend some time in non-parental care, and the quality of child care settings for infants and toddlers is often much lower than those for older children. Infants and toddlers with employed mothers spend an average of 25 hours per week in child care, and 39 percent are in child care for 35 hours or more each week. Despite compelling evidence of the importance of child development from birth, a clear state early care and education policy agenda that addresses infants and toddlers is still emerging.

State early care and education policies that start at birth and address the full range of children’s development can potentially identify health and developmental issues, link families to necessary supports, and assure that those who care for infants and toddlers have the tools to stimulate early learning and development and ease transitions into the preschool and elementary years.

## *Examples of State Strategies*

Interviews with state policymakers and advocates suggest that there are two key components of state action that can better support policies from birth to 3: first, state leaders should focus specifically on policies that promote child development from birth to 3; and second, they should structure governance and finance systems that can assure ongoing support and attention to early care and education issues for very young children and their families.



## State Initiatives to Promote Child Development Birth to 3

*High standards to ensure healthy child development by promoting program standards and guidelines for early learning*

Program standards and learning guidelines are important and interrelated tools for state policymakers to help improve the quality of early care and education for very young children. In most states, child care licensing is not being used to establish high standards and guidelines that promote the healthy development of children, but instead to provide a basic foundation of health and safety for all children in regulated care settings.

State strategies to promote high standards and early learning guidelines include:

- implementing Early Head Start Program Performance Standards in child care settings;
- focusing on infants and toddlers within a quality rating system;
- requiring program standards of subsidized child care providers through direct contracts; and,
- using early learning guidelines to promote development for children from birth to 3.

*Qualified and well-compensated teachers and supported caregivers*

A sensitive and responsive caregiver is critical to the healthy development of children, particularly for infants and toddlers whose social and emotional development requires more one-on-one attention and continuity of care than older children. Well-trained caregivers are a key component of a quality early care and learning environment. Adequate compensation for these providers is also important, as research shows that highly-trained center-based teachers are more likely to leave their program or the early childhood field if they earn low wages.

State strategies to promote a qualified and well-compensated early childhood workforce include:

- using scholarship and wage enhancement strategies that include infant-toddler teachers;
- establishing a state infant-toddler credential and supports for participating teachers;
- creating a statewide network of infant-toddler specialists; and,
- reaching out to home-based, family, friend, and neighbor caregivers.

*Linkages to comprehensive services to support families and promote healthy child development*

Linkages to comprehensive services such as health, nutrition, family support, and any necessary social services are crucial to the success of early care and education policies, particularly for those children living in poverty. Poor children are at a great risk for a number of conditions that could impede healthy growth and development.

State strategies for providing comprehensive services to young children include:

- expanding access to comprehensive services using Early Head Start Program Standards; and,
- building a network of trained child mental health consultants available to providers and parents.

## State Governance and Funding Strategies to Support Birth to 3 Policies

### *Coordinated governance for birth to 5*

In order to deliver quality, comprehensive early care and education services, states need sound governance structures that assure that all the parts of a system are working in a coordinated way. Governance must account for both *horizontal* connections across systems serving the same age children—for example, child care, Head Start, state pre-kindergarten programs, and early intervention services—as well as *vertical* connections of services from birth to 5 to provide continuity and coordination for children as they grow. How governance is structured can help assure that infants and toddlers are considered whenever crucial early care and education policy decisions are made.

State strategies for coordinating governance include:

- combining agencies; and,
- governing jointly.

### *Funding across birth to 5*

Funding decisions drive policy, making it crucial that new and existing funding streams target and include services for infants and toddlers along with those for preschool-aged children.

### ■ KEY STEPS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR STATE LEADERS ■

While each state might choose to address the needs of children under age 3 in a different way, the following steps might be useful in the planning process:

- Assemble all stakeholders, including state health, family support, and early intervention program representatives.
- Review state demographic data.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of state policy.
- Assess policy challenges.
- Develop a state blueprint for a birth to 3 agenda that builds on the existing birth to 5 system strategically.
- Develop state-based funding strategies.

Depending on current policies in a state, different approaches may work best to help assure support across the birth to 5 age span. For example, a state could create a set-aside in their preschool program, following the example of the federal Head Start program. Or, a state may create a funding stream available for local use for birth to 5 initiatives that can be tied to public-private community partnerships.

State strategies for funding across the birth to 5 spectrum include:

- setting aside infant-toddler funds within a preschool funding stream; and,
- creating a birth to 5 funding stream.

## *Emerging Themes*

- **Birth to 3 Needs More Policy Attention.** As governors and state legislatures focus on school readiness, new opportunities for creative ideas on how to support parents and ensure quality child care for the youngest children will emerge. Still, more resources are necessary to address the needs of infants and toddlers.
- **State Leadership is Crucial to Move Forward for Infants and Toddlers.** As federal funding for children's programs shrinks, states will have to take the lead on issues affecting young children.
- **All State Planning Needs to Address Building Capacity and Specific Knowledge of Child Development Birth to 3.** Building the supply of trainers, educators, technical assistance providers, and specialists with knowledge in infant and toddler development and programming is a necessary first step to improving services.
- **Some States are Developing Promising Initiatives, Following Different Paths to Strengthening Birth to 3 Policies.** States can improve early care and education for infants and toddlers no matter what structures and systems for early care and education they already have in place.
- **In Addition to Birth to 3 Policies, States Should Examine Their Governance and Financing Structures to Assure Ongoing Integrated Policy Development.** Intentional governance and financing policies help reinforce birth to 3 early care and education policies.
- **As Birth to 3 Initiatives Emerge, Ongoing Improvement and Evaluation are Critical.** States should assure that funding is available for ongoing data collection and monitoring and that such information is used to improve programs.