



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



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Parent Support Services and Resources: Critical Supports for Infants, Toddlers, and Families

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Families of infants and toddlers should have access to a continuum of parent support services and resources to support their child's development. Parents and other primary caregivers seek support and information about their children's development from a range of sources such as friends, family, child care providers, health care providers, and parenting websites. These support systems are critical for parents who want to give their children the best start in life. Unfortunately, many parents lack the capacity to fully nurture their children's early development, due to factors including stress in their own lives, economic insecurity, substance abuse, domestic violence, limited support, or lack of knowledge about effective parenting strategies. Parenting support services, which range from written informational resources to more intensive interpersonal interventions, can help fill these gaps. For example, voluntary home visiting programs provide support, coaching, and resources for low-income, at-risk mothers from a trained professional during pregnancy and in children's first year or beyond. Other parent support models are offered through health care, child care, or other community settings and may feature group training, individualized parent coaching, peer-to-peer support, and assistance with navigating other community services. In addition, families with identified problems may benefit from more intensive therapeutic strategies to strengthen the parent-child relationship.

In the earliest years of life, children's relationships with their primary caregivers are the foundation for healthy development.¹ Sensitive, responsive caregivers are attuned to their children's distress and let them know that they are safe and protected, which helps infants and toddlers regulate stress, encourages them to explore their environments, and supports early learning.² When responsive caregiving

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is not present during this period of rapid brain development, the child misses out on stimulating interactions and on a close relationship to buffer the resulting stress – both of which put the child’s development at risk.³

Research suggests that parenting resources and support services can help address barriers to effective parenting, support parent-child relationships, and promote children’s learning and development. For example, services that provide coaching or training on parenting skills have been shown to improve parenting behaviors; reduce harsh disciplinary practices, such as spanking; promote parents’ knowledge about children’s development; and increase parental participation in activities that support learning.⁴ These services also benefit parents directly by reducing stress and mental health problems and improving economic self-sufficiency.⁵ Consequently, children show improvements in health and development, as well as school readiness and achievement.⁶ Investments in high-quality parent supports can also reduce the need for future public spending on child welfare, mental health, special education, and juvenile corrections. For example, one study found a return on investment between \$1.26 and \$5.70 per dollar invested in the Nurse Family Partnership home visitation model, with the largest return when serving higher-risk families.⁷

The federal government currently funds parent support programs through several funding streams, typically targeting low-income or otherwise at-risk families. Most notably, Congress established the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program in 2010, providing federal funds to states, territories, and tribes to support voluntary, evidence-based, home visiting services.⁸ This program served over 160,000 parents and children in fiscal year 2016.⁹ In addition, the federal Community Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) grant program is a flexible source of state funding for various initiatives and programs, including home visiting and other parent supports, which provide early, comprehensive support for families and promote parenting skills, with the goal of preventing child abuse and neglect. Parenting support is also an integral part of the federal Early Head Start program, which provides low-income pregnant women and parents with children under age 3 with family-centered services to nurture healthy parent-child relationships.

States and localities may also fund parent support services from other federal sources such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and grant programs from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, including Project LAUNCH grants. Depending on state policies, Medicaid reimbursement may be available for some parent supports, such as home visiting, parent education, and maternal depression screening.¹⁰ A number of states, communities, and private funders have also invested in parent support programs. Some jurisdictions sponsor broad-based parenting resources including written informational materials, interactive online resources and apps, or text reminders about developmental milestones and the importance of talking and playing with a young child. Parent support programs may also refer families as needed to mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, or other services to address underlying causes of parenting challenges.

Existing parenting services and resources are not widely available to those who need them.

Despite the range of potential funding sources, overall funding for parent supports is insufficient to meet families’ needs and is fragmented across multiple agencies, making it challenging to provide specific services to families who would benefit the most. Even the larger federal programs that support parenting services are still relatively small and serve few eligible families.¹¹ Even when parenting programs are available, some families continue to face barriers to accessing support, including time and transportation constraints, cultural preferences or linguistic barriers, and the stigma associated with needing help.

Although many of these programs have existed for decades, parenting support has more recently emerged as a state and federal policy issue that is ripe for public investment. All parents want to do the best for their children, but many parents report needing additional help and guidance. In one survey of parents, nearly half reported that they don’t receive the support they need when they are stressed.¹² Over 80 percent of parents agreed that good parenting can be learned, with nearly 70 percent agreeing they would use more positive parenting strategies if they knew about them.¹³

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To better support parents of infants and toddlers, federal policymakers should sustain and expand funding for evidence-based parenting programs and supports through MIECHV, CBCAP, and other funding sources. In addition, state and local policymakers can expand from funding individual program models to building coordinated systems that promote access to a continuum of high-quality parenting services. Several states and communities have launched innovative approaches, such as centralized intake to screen and refer families to the most appropriate programs, systems to monitor the quality of parent support programs, and professional development to build a more robust parenting support workforce.

In doing so, policymakers can move the field from a patchwork of evidence-based programs to a stronger system of parent supports that are well matched to families' needs. Responsive caregiving in the earliest years of life is essential to children getting a good start in life. Investment in a system of parent supports can ensure that all parents have access to the help they need to nurture their child's learning and development.

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