

Leading for Impact with Infants and Toddlers: High-Impact Levers for Leadership, Teaching, and Advocacy

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With more than [half of children](#) under age three in the United States enrolled in non-parental care on a weekly basis, there is [increasing demand](#) for high-quality early education and care programming for infants and toddlers. Despite the need, more than 51 percent of families live in [child care deserts](#), defined as geographical areas where there are three or more children for each available licensed child care slot. Nationally, [some states](#) have more than five infants and toddlers for every licensed child care slot, with low-income counties offering the fewest options.

The [Center for American Progress](#) explains that infants and toddlers living in low-income families are impacted by a range of persistent stressors that undermine child development, including disparities in housing, health, nutrition, and economic security. Optimal child development is dependent on high-quality care, yet the [2021 Fact Sheet](#) from Zero to Three shows that 75 percent of toddlers enrolled in center care and 93 percent enrolled in home-based care are in programs of low to mediocre quality. This means children are not experiencing the kind of relational, language, and cognitive stimulation that can positively impact development and learning. “Poorer quality child care does not provide this boost and can even be detrimental to development where children lack other resources” (4).

Because of the rapid growth of the brain during the first three years of life, low-quality child care experiences are particularly concerning. In [Illinois](#), data reflects national trends, with less than 20 percent of infants and toddlers having access to licensed child care and only 5 percent having access to high-quality care. Across the United States, the [quality of care](#) for infants and toddlers remains [low and variable](#). Expanding access to high-quality, affordable child care is a key priority for leadership training, policy, and practice.

[The State of Child Care for Babies: The Need to Do Better for Our Youngest Children](#) (2021) points out that barriers to high-quality programming are connected to systemic weaknesses. Critical anchors for high-quality child care for infants and toddlers include the following:

- State licensing requirements for adult-child ratios to ensure researched-based standards;
- Sustained public funding to increase available slots for infants and toddlers;
- Implementation of key quality indicators, standards, and aligned curriculum that explicitly strengthen all areas of development and learning for infants and toddlers;
- Focused professional development for early childhood educators, including equitable career pathways and scholarships to overcome educational barriers;
- Access to targeted training that builds on principles of child development in diverse contexts, the essential role of the family in decision-making and curriculum planning, and alignment of

competencies for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging articulated by the NAEYC Statement on [Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#) (2020) and the book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, [Fourth Edition](#) (2022); and

- Focused attention on the health and well-being of infant and toddler teachers, including equitable pathways to higher education and increased compensation linked to opportunities for career advancement.

Infant and toddler teachers have a higher turnover rate than other early childhood professionals. Up to 49 percent of [infant and toddler teachers](#) leave their centers or the field each year. According to the most recent [OPRE report](#) (March 2023), centers that serve children ages birth through three only or birth through five years old have higher turnover rates than centers that serve children ages three through five years old only. This level of turnover is particularly detrimental for infants and toddlers due to their rapidly developing brains and their essential need for predictable relationships, high-quality cognitive and language stimulation, and individualized care. In addition, the high turnover rate has enormous implications for the training and preparation of the workforce and for the role of early childhood leaders facing immense challenges in staffing, training, building learning communities, and promoting quality improvement.

WHAT STEPS CAN PROGRAM LEADERS TAKE?

Teaching infants and toddlers is incredibly complex and demanding. There are several high-impact practices that can strengthen early childhood programs that serve infants and toddlers. Leaders need to ensure teachers experience a sense of belonging, have access to personal and professional resources, and feel included in decisions that impact them. The following strategies can help achieve those goals:

Incorporate a trauma-informed approach to leadership. Infant and toddler teachers face particularly demanding [work-related stressors](#) such as long work hours, insufficient professional support, and limited control over their working conditions. Important [research](#) shows that for infant and toddler teachers, professional stress is magnified by economic hardship, mental health struggles, and personal stressors. Make compassionate support the norm for your program:

- Introduce ongoing discussions and resources that promote [trauma-informed care](#) with staff.
- Explore how the program can become a healing space for children and families by implementing [trauma-informed teaching](#) and intentionally promoting resilience.
- Connect staff and families with information about [trauma-informed child care](#) to jumpstart conversations and action plans.
- Share information about community mental health and counseling resources, community programs, and public benefits, such as food programs, federal assistance, and local sources for food, clothing, health and wellness, and housing.

Focus on building an inclusive, caring learning community. Program leaders need to focus on building a cohesive community within programs, strengthening professional relationships, and spending time with

individual staff. One-on-one relationships with program staff can make all the difference to the program's stability and to the staff's well-being. Teachers who report [high levels of connectedness](#) with other staff, experience better supervisor support, and feel more control over their work report lower stress, provide higher quality care, and are [less likely to leave their jobs](#). Positive relationships with supervisors and overall organizational well-being are essential to achieving staff stability. Importantly, [teacher well-being](#) is a consistent predictor of teachers' intentions to keep working at their current programs and to continue in the early education and care profession. The following action steps can help you facilitate these priorities:

- Meet with teachers at a regularly scheduled time. Use [reflective supervision](#). Ask staff what is working and not working. How do they need your support or additional resources? What are they learning about themselves, children, and families?
- Reserve time to be in classrooms. Set aside thirty minutes daily, rotating to spend time with each teacher. Become a helping hand and bring words of affirmation and encouragement. Take notes about issues you may observe and follow up during reflective supervision. In this way, reflective practice will become a program norm rather than an infrequent part of more formal evaluation.
- Hold monthly program meetings to focus on continuous quality improvement. Ask teachers and families for feedback to set goals. Discuss data from program and classroom assessments that can be used to guide action steps for change.
- Ask teachers to contribute to staff meetings. Ask what is working well. What are successes and joys? What are important insights and lessons learned? With this information, you can create a culture of shared learning that strengthens ownership and self-agency.
- Invite staff to participate in regular formal feedback, including surveys. Seek staff ideas about program needs, directions, and decisions. Use data from staff surveys to plan staff meeting topics and guide how you connect with community resources.

Make family engagement a priority. Build on and expand the ways families are included in the daily life of the program:

- Hold at least two formal conferences with families annually. Even when there are other kinds of communication and meetings, establish set times where teachers seek family feedback and share progress.
- Learn about the values and goals of families. Teachers should ask families to demonstrate how children are fed, diapered, and put down for a nap. Ensure teachers incorporate family priorities during teaching, routines, and transitions.
- Invite families to participate on your advisory board.
- Seek frequent family feedback, including formal surveys that can be used to adapt communication and programming.
- Connect families to resources, activities, information, and services. Create connections among families and with the community.
- Invite families to participate regularly in the classroom, reading, playing, and singing with the children.

- Learn about and anchor teaching in the social, cultural, and linguistic contexts of families, teachers, and the community. For example, books, stories, songs, activities, materials, and conversations should reflect the experiences children know and enjoy.

Build a vision for high-quality teaching. In a review of 161 peer-reviewed papers between 2009 and 2020, infant and toddler teachers received [fewer professional development supports](#) than other early education teachers, with the fewest supports available for teachers in under-resourced communities. Existing training, coaching, and technical assistance should be focused on the specific work of teaching infants and toddlers. Consider new strategies to add to your practices:

- Distribute materials and resources that explain the importance of high-quality, culturally responsive teaching on infants' and toddlers' development and learning. See the list of resources at the end of this article for more information.
- Offer training and coaching focusing on procedures and processes for screening every child annually, providing results to families, and distributing information to connect families with related resources and information.
- Include a priority on observation, documentation, and assessment for infants and toddlers, and provide strategies that explain how to use assessment results to guide curriculum planning.
- Prioritize rich language and literacy interactions, including language acquisition, communication, and multi-lingual learning for infants and toddlers. This priority area of quality significantly impacts whether or not children experience adequately challenging learning throughout each day.

Step up into advocacy. Information and resources linked in this article can be used to communicate with community and state leaders about the importance of providing high-quality programming for infants and toddlers. Share your personal story with community leaders. Invite your local newspaper to highlight outstanding child care programs in your community – beginning with your own. Share the ways your program is having an impact on the lives of children and families. Join with national and state organizations to leverage collective impact on behalf of infants, toddlers, families, and teachers. Spread the message that infants and toddlers are worthy of great investment and boldly ask for support.

While tremendous progress has been made in updating professional competencies and standards related to infant and toddler teaching, many challenges remain. Together, we can celebrate, encourage, and celebrate the work of family child care and early education and care programs serving our most vulnerable children. Collectively, we can increase our impact by offering important facts, recommendations for practice, and action steps for advocacy that can empower and strengthen the field.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Look for the upcoming NAEYC book release: *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable & Joyful Learning with Infants and Toddlers*, edited by Marie Masterson and Ron Grady.
- Explore [Head Start resources](#) for infant/toddler settings.
- Share [Zero to Three](#) teaching and advocacy information.

- Learn about child development in context through the [Center on the Developing Child](#) at Harvard University.
- Check out the [NAEYC workforce supports](#) for infant and toddler teachers.
- Provide teachers and families with the NAEYC [Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice](#) to jumpstart conversation and connection.
- Explore the revised [Whole Leadership Framework](#) to inspire and guide pedagogical leadership with program staff.

For support or more information about this article, please contact Marie Masterson at: mmasterson1@nl.edu

To check out the many resources and professional development offerings at McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership, please see: <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/>

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