

# START STRONG PA



Half a century ago, one might have referred to them as babysitters, day care workers, or in some cases she might simply be called “Grandma”.

The evolution of the American family and our understanding of brain and social and emotional development requires the evolution of our early childhood education system. Today, infants and toddlers are cared for outside the home by well-qualified, professional educators armed with theory and practice specifically designed to assist in the development of young brains.

It is time to view the standards and access to child care through a new lens, starting with the highly impactful developmental time spent between birth to three years old in infant and toddler education.

**“Babies are born wired for relationships. They naturally seek interactions with others through their coos, babbles, cries and facial expressions toward an adult, and generally parents are the first recipients of these bids for interactions.”<sup>1</sup>**



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## BABIES ARE BORN LEARNING

A gentle and familiar touch that bridges that moment of insecurity when a child is dropped off for the day or the vocalization of the color of an orange as morning breakfast is administered, are teachable moments—part of a curriculum that ebbs with the needs a small child requires throughout a day filled with wonder and learning. Infant/toddler teachers are trained as experts in relationship-based care practice and guide young minds through these moments. With the birth of a child comes the birth of a lifetime of relationships, some of the most impactful and important in the first years of life at an infant/toddler school.

This is achieved by focusing on three defined areas:

- Social-emotional development
- Cognitive development through language and literacy
- Physical development

**“At the core of relationship-based care practices are policies, procedures and practices (or specific components) that support families, teachers, and children as they build relationships with and among each other. Through these interactions, families, teachers and children begin to understand each other’s specific needs, such as how to communicate with each other so that the child’s needs are met.”<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Center for the Developing Child, n.d.; Lally, 2011

<sup>2</sup>Network of infant/toddler Researchers: “Including Relationship-Based Care Practices in Infant-Toddler Care: Implications for Practice and Policy”, May 2016

<sup>3</sup>(Ahnert, Pinquart, & Lamb, 2006; Howes & Spieker, 2008; Raikes, 1993) and (Ahnert et al., 2006; Van IJzendoorn, Vereijken, Bakersmans-Kranenburg, & Riksen-Walraven, 2004).” From [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nitr\\_inquire\\_may\\_2016\\_070616\\_b508compliant.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nitr_inquire_may_2016_070616_b508compliant.pdf)



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## **INVESTING TODAY ALLOWS ALL CHILDREN TO THRIVE**

The heart of infant/toddler education is based on evidence-based practices focused on the optimal development of each child. As states across the country invest in high-quality early childhood education, much of the investment is being made during the pre-k years, but each child's development and education begins at birth, and both are necessary investments.

## **INFANT/TODDLER PROGRAMS MUST BE FUNDED AT ADEQUATE LEVELS FOR CHILDREN**

Research shows that 85% of brain development occurs from birth to age three, resilience is built and a lifelong pathway for education is set. Each year that a child misses the opportunity to develop on par with the children whose families are able to access the best infant/toddler care, a disparity is created among them. Investing now is imperative so that no young mind is left underdeveloped and all Pennsylvania children have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

## **PROFESSIONAL INFANT/TODDLER TEACHERS CAN CHANGE OUTCOMES**

As our core family function evolves, so must our society. Policymakers, in general, understand the value of early childhood education, but have yet to recognize the urgent need to stabilize the infant/toddler workforce through affordable access to professional development and adequate pay.

# LOVE OF A BABY, LIFE OF A TEACHER

Behind the doors of this quiet stand-alone building are 11 babies. You're welcomed by clean white walls adorned with pictures and a large block formation with playful messages to parents and children as they arrive each day. The classroom sits behind a glass wall; rocking chairs are near cribs lined neatly in a row across from an eating area with low to the ground booster chairs. You might mistake it for an over-furnished living space, except for the fact that each item is labeled in English and Spanish, photos of each child are placed strategically around the room, along with certifications, licenses, and safety information.

Teacher Maria has been with this center for 15 years now, while her colleagues are just three and one-year veterans of the infant/toddler profession. Part of the owner's job is to ensure each of her employees earns her Child Development Associate Credentials. One teacher in the program is currently working on her associates degree at night and shares her challenges of balancing school, work and family. This requires a process most small business owners are not required to manage. Raising and maintaining staff qualifications in a Pennsylvania-based STAR 4 center is a job in itself.

The first step is always finding the right person: disposition, patience, energy, attitude and affection for children are all job requirements. Then come the certifications and degrees. STAR 4 is the highest rating in the Keystone STARS System. A Keystone STARS System designation provides a tool so parents can gauge the quality of a program.

This STAR 4 center is required to maintain annual professional development plans, up-to-date certifications and a continuous quality improvement plan. Each teacher must raise their qualifications in line with the STAR 4 rating requirements. Elaine, the owner of this center, supports her teachers through earning a Child Development Associate Credential, and then counsels them to move onto higher degrees, like a BA in Early Childhood Education. Her business model includes time for teachers to work on their studies and mentors them through their continued education.

# A WELCOMING DROP-OFF

“Here comes James!” Maria sings as the first child arrives. On this morning, drop-off begins with a father sharing how James had trouble sleeping the night before and wasn’t interested in his morning bottle. Smiling as this valuable chat occurs, teacher and parent both totally comfortable with this routine.

Another dad arrives and quickly departs after saying hello and offering a quick goodbye kiss to his child. There’s no need for updates from this dad since the mom texts every morning with a night before recap and morning assessment in preparation for the drop off.

Jade, a teacher who has been working at this center for three years, is sitting on the floor as one of the older babies crawls over. She carefully helps the child stand up on her own and begins to sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” As she sings the baby leans close to her and smiles. They put their palms together as the little one sways to the tune giggling and smiling.

Another teacher sits on the floor and plays with toys with two infants and cuddles a baby in her lap rocking her back and forth. “Good work,” she says as one of the infants tries to raise her head. “Keep that head up!” Jessica knows that as babies grow emotionally and physically, attention to progress and milestones is key to healthy development.

This Keystone STAR 4 center is an ideal setting and runs how high-quality child care centers should across the Commonwealth. Here there are specific key learning areas on which teachers must focus. This team of professionals integrates these activities and interactions as they work with 11 children.



At one point in the day, Maria is sitting with two older infants and playing with blocks. She stacks the blocks slowly showing the two children how she is doing it. “Come build with me,” she says. She slowly stacks the blocks and then shows each baby how to do it. She takes time to let them try then shows each baby how to poke the tower until it tumbles down. They all giggle when it falls. Professional development aids these teachers to engage babies in a healthy developmental way. An early childhood educator’s tools are as valuable as a dentist—each serves a purpose and helps the child develop.

Infant/toddler rooms are full of mostly forgettable moments that wouldn’t make an Instagram feed, but could make a developmental difference to a child. One child is fussy, so time for a walk with some soothing assurances; another child needs tummy time to help build muscle control and motor skills.

The developmental milestones from birth to three-years-old are some of the most rewarding for parents, and most important for young children. Across the country, early childhood educators in centers like this are further defining the infant/toddler education system with the science and experience to ensure each child will develop in line with his/her peers.

**“Previous research on both parental and non-parental caregiver attachment shows that infants who experience stable, consistent, sensitive, and responsive care from their primary caregivers develop more secure attachment relationships.”<sup>2</sup>**

