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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.”¹



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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.”³

¹Center for the Developing Child, n.d.; Lally, 2011

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

³(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



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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.

COUNTRY CLASSROOMS

Tucked back on a long, winding country road in rural Pennsylvania, this child care center is the central focus of a 100-acre farm. Driving up to the pebbled parking lot and greeted by the horses in their corral, while kids are playing outside, it is abundantly evident that this is a special place.

The center's owner, Laura, who has an Associate Degree, a BA in Psychology and a Master's Degree in Early Childhood, as well as her director's credential sits in a roomy vestibule greeting toddlers, just a stairway below the first-floor entrance, which is mainly devoted to pre-k students. Plenty of windows light the room and a French door leads outside to a covered patio, grassy area, picnic shelter, barns, gated in-ground pool, swings and gated toddler play area. This ground level room is divided into separate classrooms in an open-aired style of learning with infants, younger toddlers and older toddlers organized accordingly.

“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.”²

INFANT CARE

Morning drop off plays out like a well-choreographed dance between babies, parents and teachers. “How are you today, sweetheart?”, is sung while teachers are learning, “How did she sleep last night? Has she eaten anything this morning?” Becca is a certified Child Development Associate, who has worked at this center for almost five years.

The kitchenette feels like an uber-organized home: feeding schedules, a class roster with children’s names and birthdates, posters for proper diapering and handwashing, lesson plans for the week, authorizations for sunscreen and bug spray usage. The monthly calendar with milestones for each infant that is carefully updated. A mirrored gate adorned with photos of the children separate the kitchen from the play area. Around the room there are books to read, look at, and developmental toys to play with others. The walls are covered with children’s art work, educational posters, and teacher-made summertime bulletin boards.

A late arriving parent signs the medication protocol book and describes her child’s required dosage and frequency, while the other teacher is on the floor with four infants reading a book aloud, talking to the children, engaging with all of them at the same time, it seems. The chorus of narration is playing as teachers deliberately speak to the children: “What’s happening sweet guy?”, “What’s the matter, baby?”, “Who is getting sleepy?” It reaches a crescendo as Alexa joyfully sings, “Hi, Sweet Girl!”

On this day, some children transition better than others. One teacher is consoling a crying infant that has just arrived, while the others are redirected to hear a story. “What do you think this book is about?” Alexa asks.



TEAMWORK WITH TODDLERS

The attention to organization and teamwork is on display in the older toddler room on this day. One teacher is handling diaper changes while another is reading a book. The children are transitioned smoothly between changing and listening to the story. The combined 15 years-experience of the teachers in this toddler room shows as they maintain seamless order, while allowing the children to explore this country space.

“Who wants to read a book?” is a rallying cry in most toddler rooms. Sitting on the floor, students gather on Becca’s lap, some stand, while others kneel close by. A book is the great organizer, as children love the entertainment, interaction and stimulation. Understanding positive relationships and supportive interactions, building as the foundation of their work with children, infant/toddler teachers reach for the tools they have been taught and focus on every day.

As she is reading, the teacher’s questions echo. She asks, “Where are your eyes?” and says “Here is your cheek.” “Now, where is your cheek?” “Here is your hand for throwing,” “Where is your hand?” Language and cognitive development are always front of mind.

Tagging in and out, one teacher finishes changing a diaper and sends an over-the-shoulder reminder “Don’t forget to wash your hands” as the other carries the child to the sink. Hand over hand Alexa sings the ABC song as she and the toddler wash their hands together. Boom, a toddler has fallen and without hesitation, Laura and other children are there to comfort her. Everyone is quickly redirected with a call to action, “We can all go outside when we finish cleaning up and enjoy this beautiful day!” Cooperation is the order of the day and cleanup is quickly under way.

One teacher swiftly collects a walkie-talkie and index cards with pictures of each toddler that is clipped to her belt loop. Hand-in-hand the children excitedly and orderly head into the country scene equipped with play equipment and farm animals. Mother Nature tags in as the teachers continue working in tandem. “What do you see?” “Doesn’t that feel soft?” “Why do you think that works this way?” Every moment is teachable, each teacher is in tune with their students.

