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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.

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

Greeted through the doors of this row house by neatly aligned cubbies and a large fish tank, you know when you arrive at this urban care center that you are welcome, and that this space is carefully arranged for the four small children who call it home during their time away from their parents. You also understand that this is a professional environment, as the front hallways are adorned with certifications, safety information and announcements. Bright labels and a neat floor space with age-appropriate toys accessible to the little ones make evident to the intentionally designed environment for infant/toddler care.

This welcome and warm environment is what you might expect from Sasha, who owns this home-based family child care center. She is proud of her more than 20-years experience: teaching kindergarten in the Pennsylvania Public School system and teaching Family Child Care (FCC) Providers. With a master's degree, she set out to provide reliable child care for single moms who are working and in school—a niche that has long struggled with access to high-quality care for their babies.

This FCC is open during non-traditional hours providing a uniquely fitting schedule for a unique set of parents. She understands the challenges that working, single parents experience and Sasha works to ensure their children have a quality place to be when mom is working.

Programs work best when owners create reliable organizations with the highest quality staff. Continued education and a commitment to core principles of relationship-based care are necessary to provide the type of care each child deserves. Growing technology allows for up-to-the-minute communication with parents when a child's needs call for mom or dad's attention. Record keeping, observations and individual planning for each child allow for continuity when a child progresses into pre-k or elementary school experiences.

“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

DOUBLE THE DEDICATION TO RELATIONSHIPS

On this day, three children arrive with mom: eight-month-old twins and a two-year old. As Sasha is greeting mom and listening closely to a rundown of the kids' night and morning, she is greeted with two-year-old exuberance and hugs. Navigating the conversation, she seamlessly allows the toddler to settle in on her comfy and welcoming lap. Mom wraps up her report and Sasha's aide, Jayda, offers a puzzle to help transition little DeAndre.

As DeAndre takes on the day, and the puzzle, Sasha enters and sets up the twins in a soft area with sensory toys ready to engage.

"How are you today?" Without hesitation, the child climbs into her lap and settles in; it's a comfortable and loving welcome. As they set their sights on a puzzle, Sasha makes the most of a soft area with a few sensory toys ready to help the babies transition away from mom who is off to work.

Sasha takes a seat on the rug and sings along to music playing in the background. The babies are smiling as she intentionally engages the twins: "What are you playing with?" "What do you have?" "I see a few fun things!" When one of the babies reaches for an orange ball the caregiver says "Oh! You have something that is orange."

Across the room DeAndre is dancing as the music plays. After the songs, Jayda optimizes the child's interest in her performance and begins to read a book. With story time underway, he climbs onto her lap, listening closely. With attentive minds developing in the moment, she stops and repeats words of the book, and supports DeAndre as he tries to say the words back to her.

These teachers are supporting emotional development, while guiding the child's cognitive development. Infant/toddler pedagogy defines teachers' focus in three Critical Competencies: Social & Emotional, Cognitive and Language & Physical development.



GIVE THEM WORDS, GIVE THEM TIME

A fourth toddler arrives just in time for a morning stroll. As Sasha prepares two toddlers for a morning walk she talks the children through this process: “Time for a walk, let’s get our jackets, zippers up! what will we see outside?” Snack time once again offers a roadmap for speech, with teachers talking the children through what they’re eating, the texture, taste and smell. The sheer volume of language spoken to children is fundamental to learning and later success.

Even the change of a diaper offers daily moments of narration and communication between teacher and child. Carrying the child to the changing table is time to talk and as Jayda works her way through the rote task of opening the diaper, checking inside, wiping a bottom clean, preparing a new diaper, sliding it gently beneath the little one’s bottom and fastening it neatly around his tiny belly, she continues to talk to him sharing what they will be doing next.

These developmental moments are playing out alongside the carefully guided development of fine motor skills, crawling, standing up and walking. With one of the infants on the floor playing with Sasha, one being talked through a feeding, while Jayda is on the floor holding a baby’s hands to help stabilize her toddling legs. Excitement erupts, as her tiny hands are released, “You’ve got this! Look at you standing.” Boom to the floor. Baby and teacher are smiling as Jayda engages once again, “You were standing and now you are sitting.”

The moment has passed, as Jayda begins an ever so brief game of peek-a-boo and offers two small toys for baby’s tiny fingers to navigate. She asks her to put one toy on top of the other. This moment becomes a precursor to a place on Jayda’s lap. She asks, “Are you tired, honey? Do you want to sleep?”, as she warmly welcomes her to her lap and begins to rock her to sleep. The strong relationship formed with this child is evident in this small moment.

Child care centers 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 homes 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.



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