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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 GOOD MORNING, GROWING & GUIDING

As children arrive on this morning, year-old Gabriella is carried into the classroom clinging tightly to her mom. You can almost feel the trepidation as the anticipation of separation sets in. Teachers in this center are always prepared for any morning; excitement, anxiety, sleepiness or just a little under the weather. Appropriately trained to sense that feeling and ensure a secure hand-off, teacher Cameron quickly stands and offers a warm embrace of comfort and welcome. As she rubs Gabriella's back and talks to her quietly about all the fun things they will do that day, a colleague talks with the mother about Gabriella's night and records any important information. They talk a little more as the child calms down and waves good-bye to her mother, marking the morning's first successful child/teacher interaction.

Scenes like this will play out throughout the day at this child care center. Moments between parents, children and their infant/toddler teachers are meaningful and present endless opportunities to expand minds, develop social skills and learn.

The morning routine continues as children arrive, eat breakfast and then find their way into other chosen activities. One child is discovering how to push a chair around the room with the help of a few others. The teacher watches the children problem solve what to do as they approach the carpet. She allows them to try this for a few minutes, and then begins guiding, narrating and talking the children through it.

These milestones spotlight an infant/toddler teacher's focus on her training and the child's needs. Important day-to-day learnings and experiences help a child develop and help the teacher to guide the students through secure social, emotional and developmental interactions. It's no accident that when a child comes through the door they are spoken to in a certain tone, language and cadence. The intentionality of approach is a consistent, guiding presence based in theory and practice.

As four children pull out a climber and begin to climb up and down, Cameron moves strategically over to that area to keep a watchful eye while allowing the children to explore. She helps scaffold (support) the children when needed. On a construction site, scaffolding is erected to help support the new structure as it is being built. The scaffolding is removed once the building is complete, and it is able to stand independent of supports. In early childhood education, the scaffolding method of teaching works the same way: new lessons and concepts are learned with the support of a guiding teacher, while a child builds toward independence.

This particular scene is upended when one child stops playing with the climber and runs across the room, grabs a block and throws it. Without hesitation, the well-trained teacher stops, redirects and suggests, “I am wondering if you can build a house with those blocks?” She moves to the child and helps him focus on that task for as long as he is interested. Once again, there is an unwavering commitment to every touchpoint throughout the day.

Dylan, who was drawing at the table, begins to get upset, which triggers an almost instinctive move by the teacher who rubs his back and helps him name and manage his emotions. A well-trained and experienced teacher knows just what to do in these moments and exactly what works for each child in her care. She later explains to a new teacher the child’s background and specialized care he requires; it is a healthy nod to her respect and understanding of his needs and developmental progress.

Cameron gathers the children on a rug for Dr. Seuss story time. The conclusion of the book transitions to the singing of a song that includes all of the children’s names. All of the children clap along, some sing and others laugh when their names are called. The morning rounds out as smocks and paints are set up and children giggle with anticipation: time to explore texture, color and creativity.

The teachers talk about what the brush and the paint feel like on their hands, the colors, and how sometimes it is hard to take turns. They encourage children to try this sensory experience.



WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS

Down the hall in the infant room, where a maximum of four children are cared for by one teacher and on this day a visiting occupational therapist, a teacher and dad discuss the infant's sleep last night, last feeding and the day ahead. After dad's farewell, she feeds the baby while another child attempts to climb on the table—a teachable moment presents itself: “We climb in the climbing area,” she vocalizes and then moves to help the child safely climb and explore in the climbing area.

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. You could miss the “One step, two step, there you go!” as another child's hands are being held while scooting along building up the steps toward walking and yet another is hearing about the rain from his teacher while watching through the window.

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 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.”²



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