Counties Getting Started: A Prenatal-to-Three Guidebook



The National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers







COUNTIES GETTING STARTED: A PRENATAL-TO-THREE GUIDEBOOK

Counties Matter to the Well-Being of Young Children

Counties play a pivotal role in promoting economic opportunity and prosperity at the local level, through programs and initiatives in key areas like health and human services, education and workforce training. Counties are also critical players in ensuring healthy beginnings for our youngest residents, working daily to shape early childhood systems, influence policy and provide core services to an estimated 16 million infants and toddlers across the United States.

County investments and initiatives related to early childhood development are vital to community-wide health because neuroscience research shows that the most rapid period of brain development occurs within the first three years of life – more than at any other point – laying the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health. Nonetheless, many children arrive to their first classroom unprepared for kindergarten, creating an essential need for states and communities to work together to provide young children with a strong and healthy start.

By supporting the health and wellness of babies today and providing access to high-quality learning environments that stimulate their growth and development, counties can help to ensure a prosperous tomorrow for young children and better outcomes across communities.

What Your County Can Do to Help Young Children Thrive

In 2017, the National Association of Counties' Research Foundation (NACORF) partnered with The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT), funded through the Pritzker Children's Initiative (PCI), which brings together national partners, early childhood leaders, policymakers and practitioners, from inside and outside state and local government, to create and strengthen promising policies and programs (and share what works) so that more states and communities can support the healthy development of our youngest children.

Together, PCI and NACoRF recognize that counties help to shape early childhood systems and are instrumental in investing in core services for infants and toddlers that help to support a thriving community and positively impact outcomes into adulthood. To promote broader appreciation of the role of counties in supporting the nation's youngest residents, NACoRF calls on all 3,069 counties to unite in a national movement to ensure more children have a healthy start in life by identifying and undertaking a local initiative to make a positive impact on the lives of infants and toddlers.

How to Use This Guidebook to Take Action for Infants and Toddlers

To support this call-to-action, NACORF has developed a series of tools to support counties in their prenatal-to-three (PN-3) initiatives. One of these tools is this guidebook, which outlines a foundational process and links to resources that county officials, agency leaders and non-profit directors can use to strategically pursue initiatives to strengthen their local early childhood systems. Whether your county is just starting out or already has a cradle to career, birth to five or even prenatal to age eight initiative in place, this resource is designed to include key components relevant to all counties and can help to provide guidance on expanding or enhancing a comprehensive system of supports that start as early as possible. This guide shares methods and useful strategies from counties that have implemented early childhood initiatives across the country and also offers a list of considerations and approaches for improving local supports for infants and toddlers. We recognize that each county is unique and encourage all communities to follow a process that is most responsive to their county's needs. Highlighted within this guide are methods that any county can use at any point in time and in no particular order. No matter where you are in your process, we encourage you to use these strategies to get started on this critical work.

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CONVENING YOUR PN-3 STAKEHOLDER TEAM

Assembling a leadership team for children from prenatal to age three (PN-3) is an essential step in strengthening your early childhood system. Whether you are building from a team already in existence or just starting out, cross-sector stakeholders bring connections to existing networks, historical knowledge, experience in practice and subject matter expertise to the table.

Assess the current collaborative environment

Consider the following:

- Does our community already have an existing partnership, coalition, taskforce or advisory group focused on early childhood that we can build from?
- What partners should we bring to the table to help drive our early childhood efforts? What nontraditional partners can we engage?
- How diverse is our stakeholder team? Inclusion
 of a range of perspectives and experiences will
 not only help you define the problem, but also
 strategize equitable solutions.
- Establish a team of optimal size and with sufficient authority to plan and implement ideas and strategies most effectively and efficiently.
- Does the team include leaders with the authority to make decisions and drive implementation of new strategies? Does the team <u>represent the</u> <u>knowledge and experience of parents</u>,² front-line staff and middle managers?

Name your key stakeholders

A successful cross-sector stakeholder group may include, but is not limited to:

- Public Sector (health, education, social services, etc.)
- Faith-Based Organizations
- Non-Profit Organizations
- School Systems
- Child Care Programs (centers, homes, schools)
- Local Businesses³
- Local Philanthropic Organizations
- Higher Education Systems
- Parent and Community Representatives

Plan for success

Once you've identified who should be at the table, plan for the launch of your stakeholder group meetings. In preparation, consider:

- What is the shared vision for the youngest children in our county?
- What can the team do more effectively together than individually as program and system actors?
- Teams can get stagnant. To encourage
 consistent engagement over time, it's important
 to define the goal and outcome you are all
 working towards together. Strive for continuous
 improvement by taking stock of how it's going at
 every meeting and milestone.



ASSESSING YOUR SYSTEM

A child's experiences within the first three years of life are the bricks and mortar of brain development. Supportive relationships and positive learning experiences early in life build a sturdy brain architecture that becomes the foundation for core social-emotional skills, early executive functioning, self-regulatory skills and literacy skills that are important for later success in school, the workplace and the larger community.

Counties play a key role because they often are responsible for the service delivery of community resources critical to the well-being and economic security of children, families and communities. To ensure that all children are healthy and developmentally on track by age three, counties may assess if families with young children in their community have access to high-quality services in the following three priority areas:

- Healthy Beginnings: A healthy beginning starts before birth. To improve chances for a strong start in life, access to comprehensive, early prenatal care that includes immunizations, screenings and referrals to any necessary services can ensure healthy births and support optimal development in a child's earliest days, months and years.
- Supported Families: From birth to age three, stimulating and nurturing, responsive relationships fundamentally shape how a baby's brain develops. Building an infrastructure that provides every family access to an early and timely support system is a recognized, effective method to help parents navigate services designed to support young children and nurture healthy development. Whether it's encouraging regular reading, coaching on parenting skills through home visiting or providing more intensive supports for children who have experienced trauma – community-based prevention services that provide wrap-around and economic supports (for instance federally mandated programs like Women, Infants and Children (WIC), Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid) support families and help to ensure babies get what they need for their development during this critical time.

• Quality Care and Learning: High-quality child care must be accessible and affordable to every family who needs it. Whether it is in a child care center or with friends, family or neighbors, stimulating learning opportunities and nurturing, responsive relationships with caregivers are crucial to support healthy brain development in infants and toddlers and help to build a more productive workforce. Programs like Early Head Start, child care subsidies and professional development and training for caregivers remain crucial to expanding access to affordable, high-quality early learning all while bolstering the local economy at the same time.

By strengthening these three core areas, counties can build and sustain locally responsive programs, policies and systems that meet the needs of all families and create better education, health, social and economic outcomes that increase revenue and reduce the need for costly, less effective interventions later in life.

Gather and review data

Early childhood data can be used to help identify the needs of infants and toddlers in your county. Once you've brought your stakeholder team together, engage the group in gathering your county's available prenatal-to-three data and collectively reviewing findings - closely examining access to services and honing in on any trends, existing disparities and determining future needs. Is there any data you are not currently collecting, but should be to better understand your county?

A community profile or assessment tool can help to provide a summary of data about young children and families focusing on the assets and resources within your community and can be helpful in starting conversations with your local stakeholder group in identifying service gaps and possible opportunities to address them. Your community may already have an existing profile that you can update, or alternatively, you may use this template⁴ developed by NCIT and its partners. Remember, when you are recording local data for your community profile, be as specific as possible. Providing detailed quantitative data is helpful if you want to update the profile later and helps to maintain institutional knowledge if staffing changes over time.

Explore financing opportunities

Once your county collectively reviews your early childhood data, consider all of your resource needs and analyze existing funding opportunities. Explore a mixture of traditional and innovative funding strategies for expansion and long-term sustainment of the work, which may include:

- Redistributing existing funds;
- Institutional or foundational support (like from a local community foundation);
- Federal and state grants;
- Tax credits;
- Excise tax:
- Municipal or non-profit bonds; or
- · Social impact financing.

Remember to engage county budget staff in any of your strategic discussions. Investments do not necessarily have to be monetary and counties must give careful thought to increasing funding. Explore no or low-cost options. It's possible that existing resources could be more effectively aligned across programs and funding streams to maximize impact. For example, counties may employ blending and braining techniques or share services with a partner to advance mutual interests. This resource⁵ is helpful in outlining the role of policymakers in leveraging local funding sources and generating new revenues.

Apply an equity lens

Even before birth, infants and toddlers are affected by social factors associated with race, age, gender and sense of place. To create opportunity for all children from the start, county governments can play a key role by committing to the application of an equity lens across policies, practices and funding that level the playing field for all children and close opportunity gaps.

Here are a few approaches that your county can consider for creating a more inclusive community:

- Start and sustain community dialogues about equity and bias.
- Engage a stakeholder group with a diverse spectrum of backgrounds and perspectives.
- Include parents in the process to add a grounded voice to the discussion. In order to make realistic and sustainable progress, community members must be included.
- Build alliances across groups and allow for opportunities for feedback and reflection.
- Use local data disaggregated by population characteristics like race, ethnicity, immigration status, language and household levels of income to identify disparities in outcomes and inform policies and practice.

Identify priorities

Work with your stakeholder team to conduct a **S**trengths, **O**pportunities, **W**eaknesses, **T**hreats (SWOT) analysis to identify your priority area(s).

Ask yourselves:

- What are some of the greatest strengths and assets in our community?
- What are some of the challenges or obstacles that we face? Do we face any threats?
- What has our county done previously to address these community challenges? What worked well?
 What might not have worked as well?
- How do families perceive quality of life in our community? Do we need to hold focus groups or develop surveys to understand this perception better?
- Are neighborhoods, populations or zip codes underserved? How does the data break down by race, ethnicity, language, gender, or other relevant lenses?
- Are there any opportunities to expand, connect, align or overhaul programs, policies or systems?
- Does the identified priority area address the underlying root causes (not only surface level problems) in your community?

DEVELOPING YOUR GOAL(S)

Setting a clearly defined PN-3 goal (or goals) can lay the foundation for a desired result and help communities organize their time and resources. Counties should first consider their long-term, big picture vision for young children and then narrow the scope. For example, what do you want to achieve and where do you want to be in the short-term (6-18 months), mid-term (2-3 years) and long-term (3-5 years) from now?

Then, in collaboration with your stakeholder group, set PN-3 goal(s) that reflect the hoped-for outcome in the area prioritized for action. Your PN-3 goal is your main objective and should be:

- Specific;
- Measurable:
- Attainable:
- Relevant; and
- Time bound.

When developing your S.M.A.R.T. goal, your stakeholder group should reflect on the following:

- If achieved, does your PN-3 goal contribute to better outcomes for children and families? Is your PN-3 goal framed around (at least one of) the three core focus areas: a healthy start at birth, stronger support of families with infants and toddlers and the need for high-quality care and learning environments? Can you measure those outcomes and progress towards them?
- Who are the population(s) you are trying to target?
- Are there any expected barriers to implementing your goal? What steps you will need to take to mitigate them?
- Are there any existing or developing state or other local level initiatives aligned with your PN-3 goal?
- Is your goal data-informed and /or address some of the key findings in your community profile?
- Does your S.M.A.R.T. goal build towards your short-term, mid-term and long-term vision?



DEVELOPING YOUR ACTION PLAN

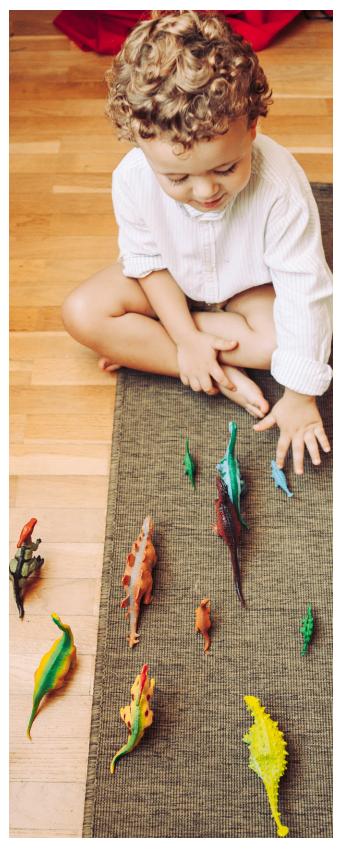
Developing an action plan is a key step in the process and requires community input and transparency early on in order to obtain buy-in and support through the implementation phase.

Each community has its own unique style. To get started, review any previous action plans that have been successfully implemented within your community. Consider the reasons for its past success (i.e. format, simplicity, informs the future, etc.) and utilize the best qualities in your own plan.

A local comprehensive action plan might include:

- Community strengths and assets;
- Potential barriers or obstacles:
- A description of the planning you've done up until this point;
- Your S.M.A.R.T PN-3 goal(s);
- A list of current resources available;
- A list of resources needed:
- Well-developed, prioritized objectives and detailed action steps;
- · Accountability for each of the action steps;
- · An outline of best practices;
- Policy and system changes that could augment your effort;
- An implementation timeline and identified responsible parties; and
- Adopted measures for success.

Once you've begun implementation, at the midway point, review your action plan with your stakeholder group to see how far you've come in developing your PN-3 system. Are you headed in the right direction? Are you making the progress you intended? Create a feedback loop to better meet community needs and goals.



IMPLEMENTING AND SUSTAINING SOLUTIONS

It is easy to get stuck in the planning process. Work to move from theory to practice – from problem solving to solving problems. During this stage the project lead can help to:

- Monitor the implementation of key action steps;
- Consider using a project management tool to track activities;
- Brainstorm opportunities to address challenges as they arise and shift strategies (if necessary);
- Provide technical assistance (if applicable);
- Help to build capacity;
- Document lessons learned;
- Identify new funding opportunities to sustain efforts long-term;
- Use data to inform policy and practice; and
- Maintain momentum through community engagement and advocacy.

Develop a communications strategy

A comprehensive and effective communications strategy helps to:

- Identify the effective strategies necessary to reach targeted audiences;
- Build awareness about early childhood needs, starting prenatally, within your community;
- Help the general public understand the brain science and why it's important to invest early;
- Make the connection to other priorities and initiatives in the county;
- Provide an opportunity to establish new relationships;
- Sustain community momentum; and
- Build a case for increased investments.



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When developing a plan to communicate your efforts, determine what local messages are needed and strategize opportunities and tactics for sharing your message with the general public, key stakeholders and policymakers over time. If your community already has a strategic communications plan in place, engage your local Public Information Officer (PIO) or communications team in this process. By using resources to plan a strategy⁶ and make a pitch,⁷ engage your stakeholder team to help employ various tools and strategies, like storytelling, to elevate and sustain your initiatives.

Build public will

Building public will is an important component of any prenatal-to-three agenda. Counties can employ a variety of strategies to generate community buyin, foster leadership and increase commitment to bolstering services, programs, policies and systems vital to the success of all infants and toddlers. These may include:

- Using your cross-sector stakeholder group to bolster county-wide support for PN-3. Your stakeholder group can lay a strong foundation for identifying early childhood champions to lead the coordinating body and message the needs of young children and their families. By leveraging their expertise, they can help to identify community assets and deficits, set priorities, build the case for early investments and push towards the intended results.
- Making a Public Declaration. Your community
 could identify ceremonial ways to recognize
 and honor its commitment to PN-3 policies and
 programs. Non-binding resolutions, pledges of
 support, and public declarations of commitment
 are effective tools for building awareness around
 a particular PN-3 issue, educating decisionmakers, creating county board champions and
 serving as a catalyst for kicking off or enhancing
 prenatal-to-three efforts in your county.
- Creating a Communications Strategy.
 Engage your Public Information Officer (PIO)
 (if your county has one) and leverage local
 communications channels to share your
 message. Types of communications channels to

- pursue could include social media, local press, or even existing listservs and newsletters through key partners like neighborhood parenting groups, child care programs, recreation centers, afterschool programs, school districts or health and education departments at local colleges and universities.
- Building Strategic Partnerships. Creating alliances and forging partnerships among individuals and organizations is a critical component of successful community engagement. Effective partnerships present opportunities for sharing ideas, collaborating and achieving broader outcomes. Consider pursuing partnerships based upon an organization's ability to reach stakeholders and advance efforts throughout the community. Some partnerships may include philanthropic organizations, teachers' unions, parent-teacher associations, sports teams and associations, faith-based youth groups, pediatric and other medical groups and local employers, chambers of commerce and businesses. To offer a show of support, a partner could:
 - » Share social media content on the benefits of focusing on the early years;
 - » Present at county council or board meetings to share how infant and toddler programs and policies benefit their organization's mission and the broader community;
 - » Host a community event or town hall to provide residents and stakeholders with more information on what expanding PN-3 supports means for the county;
 - » Organize visits to hospitals, pediatric offices, home-based child care programs and child care centers to show county leaders how quality PN-3 supports impact children and families;
 - » Leverage their networks and invite researchers, pediatricians, nurses or leaders from neighboring counties who are pursuing similar PN-3 policies to share their successes; and
 - » Sign an open letter.

MEASURING PERFORMANCE

Using indicators to measure child well-being helps to identify if a positive impact is being made and supports policymakers in their decision-making. The <u>Outcomes Framework</u>⁸ can help to identify and establish baseline data for tracking progress of your goal(s) over time. It was developed by NCIT partners as a national system of metrics to hold us accountable in measuring impact and to help connect collective community efforts.

Each outcome area is associated with a set of indicators that communities can select to track and measure progress. The core metrics for this framework have been selected because they are research-based, valid data points that are measurable, comparable and reliable across communities and diverse families, and sensitive to interventions. Foundational system indicators are also contained in the framework.

Track your data

Using the <u>Outcomes Framework</u>, counties may opt to select a mix of indicators to measure and track progress on your goal(s). Once you select an indicator to measure progress on connected to your PN-3 goal, consider the following:

- What data do you need to measure this indicator?
- Who has access to that data? Do you have a relationship with that entity? What resources do you need to leverage or connections do you need to build? Do you need a data sharing agreement?
- · How often is this data measured?
- Do you have a system in place for collecting, merging or tracking this data?
- Do you need to collect new data?
- What does success look like? How will we recognize it?

Because each community has access to varying types of data, use your community profile to help support local data conversations and inform your selection. The Data Guidebook9 also serves as an added resource for identifying potential data sources for each of the indicators.

Having a mechanism established to effectively track data helps to lay the foundation for effective reporting. Determine how often parties should report back and monitor data in alignment with your goal(s).

Measure your progress

Measure the results of your work by:

- Gauging your success against a baseline.
- Analyzing the story behind the data. What other factors contribute to the history and forecast of your community?
- Comparing local data with regional, state and national data (when available).
- Thinking beyond the outputs. Is anyone better off?
- Reassessing your strategies for improvement (if needed).

Report your impact

Reporting on outcomes is an opportunity for counties to share the successes of their early childhood initiatives and demonstrate the return on the investments that have been made to taxpayers and leadership. Short-term measures can be predictive of long-term success, so don't wait to report on your impact.

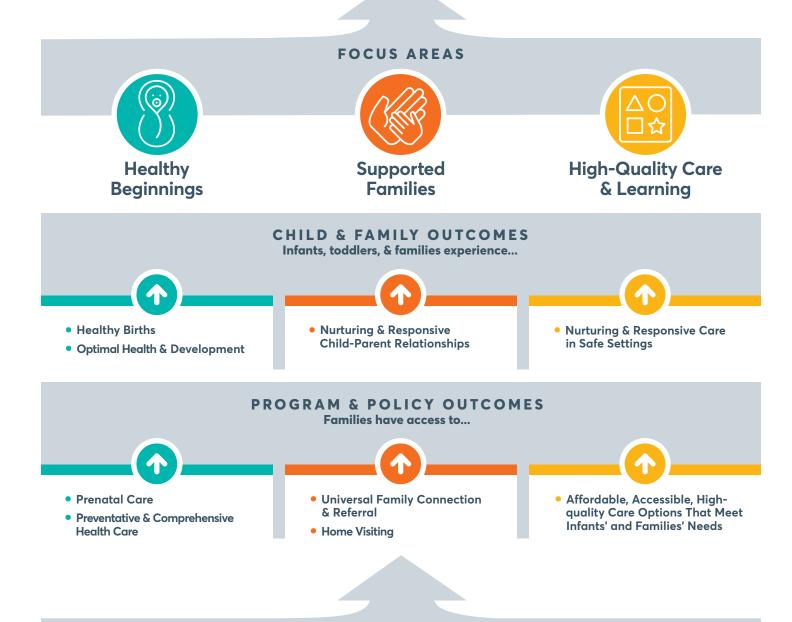
To make the data work for you:

- Hold regular meetings between leadership and agencies focused on discussing performance data.
- Communicate your impact with policymakers and the general public by using common language and avoiding industry jargon.
- Remain transparent about any negative or unintended results.
- Use the data to inform local policy and develop budget recommendations.

Counties can review <u>this resource</u>¹⁰ to learn more about how to effectively evaluate early childhood systems.

Measuring Success: Healthy Child Development By Age 3

With a focus on equity, states and communities can build and sustain locally responsive programs, policies, and systems that meet the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. Policy outcomes support child and family outcomes, and prenatal-to-three systems create a sustainable infrastructure to ensure families get the right services at the right times.







Data Systems



Coordinated Planning & Financing



Political Will & Engagement



Continuous Quality Improvement



Coordinated Intake & Referral of Family Services



Workforce Development



RESOURCES

- 1. The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT) Solutions Center, www.thencit.org
- Parent Engagement and Leadership Assessment Guide and Toolkit: Full Report, https://cssp.org/ resource/parent-engagement-and-leadershipassessment-guide-and-toolkit/
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, www.uschamberfoundation.org/topics/early-childhood-education
- ^{4.} Assessing Infants and Toddlers In Your Area: Use Data to Create a Community Profile, www.thencit.org/sites/default/ files/2019-03/101741-003_NCIT_ CommunityProfileTool_r3.pdf
- 5. The Children's Funding Project: Fact Sheet for Policymakers, www.thencit.org/sites/default/files/2018-12/childrens_funding_project_fact_sheet_for_policymakers_september_1_2017.pdf

- 6. NCIT Strategy Planning Worksheet, www.thencit. org/sites/default/files/2019-02/101741-003_NCIT_StrategyChart_V2.pdf
- 7. NCIT Pitching Tools: Make the Case, www.thencit. org/make-the-case
- 8. NCIT Outcomes Framework, www.thencit. org/sites/default/files/2019-01/Prenatal-to-Three Outcomes Framework.pdf
- 9. Prenatal-to-Three Outcomes Framework: Data Guidebook, www.thencit.org/sites/default/ files/2018-12/Prenatal-to-Three%20Data%20 Guidebook_0.pdf
- A Framework For Evaluating Systems Initiatives, www.thencit.org/sites/default/files/2019-03/ Framework%20for%20Evaluating%20Systems%20 Initiatives.pdf

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

In addition to this guidebook, there are many other resources available to support your local efforts. The NCIT Solutions Center serves as an action-oriented platform of information and guidance to support states and communities who are working on policies related to infants and toddlers. Additionally, NACoRF leads quarterly, virtual convenings for small/rural, mid-size/suburban and large/urban counties called Peer Learning Networks. These networks provide an opportunity for counties to engage with their peers across the country and to explore local early childhood innovations and best practice models. To join a Peer Learning Network to share what's working in your county, or for access to supplemental countyspecific resources like webinars, workshops and publications, please visit www.countiesforkids.org. NACoRF staff are here to assist you as needed.

For questions or to share your local early childhood story, please send an email to info@countiesforkids.org. We know that improved outcomes for children translate into thriving communities, and on behalf of NACORF and all counties, we thank you for taking actionable steps to ensure the well-being of all children, families and communities.



ABOUT US

About the National Association of Counties Research Foundation

The National Association of Counties Research Foundation (NACoRF) is a non-profit organization recognized by the U.S. Department of the Treasury Internal Revenue Service as a 501c3 public charity providing education, technical assistance and research to counties. NACoRF's mission is to ascertain, develop and distribute knowledge about county governments and training of public officials, prospective public officials, and other interested parties.

National Association of Counties Research Foundation 660 North Capitol St, NW Suite 400 Washington, DC 20001

About the Pritzker Children's Initiative (PCI)

The Pritzker Children's Initiative (PCI), a project of the J.B. and M. K. Pritzker Family Foundation, is committed to building a promising future for our country by investing in and supporting solutions in early childhood development for children prenatal to age three, with the goal of every child reaching kindergarten ready to learn. More information about PCI can be found at http://pritzkerchildrensinitiative.org/.

About The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT)

The National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT) is committed to advancing policies and programs that ensure families have the support they need to give their infants and toddlers the foundation for a strong start in life. Funded by the Pritzker Children's Initiative, a program of the J.B. and M.K. Pritzker Family Foundation, this effort brings together national partners, early childhood leaders, policymakers and practitioners inside and outside state and local government to create and strengthen promising policies and programs and share what works so that more states and communities can support the healthy development of our youngest children. More information about NCIT can be found at www.thencit.org.





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