

HIGH-QUALITY INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATORS NEED GOOD TRAINING.

Increased Public Investment Also Promotes Child Development and Makes Early Education Accessible

WHITE PAPER

One of the most important periods in a person's life cycle to stimulate learning occurs between birth and age 3.¹ However, there are considerable gaps in the United States between what infants and toddlers need for successful development and what is available from well-trained, qualified educators and what is accessible to parents of very young children.

This white paper examines the learning and social-emotional needs of infants and toddlers and the training requirements and needs of the early childhood professionals who educate and care for them. It highlights the known gaps between their needs and the current state of early childhood education in the United States and what can be done to bridge those gaps. The nature of educational preparation and skill development for the infant/toddler educator workforce has evolved in response to new research on the brain development of children from 0 to 3 that reinforces how crucial these years are for cognitive, social and emotional, language, and physical development.

The paper moves from making the case for high-quality learning for infants and toddlers to evaluating the availability and accessibility of such early childhood education for American families from different socioeconomic, racial and ethnic, and geographical backgrounds. High costs and the dearth of public support and community resources are one set of factors responsible for these gaps. The low status and uneven preparation of infant/toddler educators are also contributing factors. The paper makes the argument for better training and professional development and for the important role that the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential™, awarded by the Council for Professional Recognition (the Council), plays in ensuring high-quality educators for children between 0 and 3. It illustrates how early childhood educators who have earned an infant/toddler CDA are trained in the competencies for professional practice that nourish brain development and apply the developmentally appropriate teaching strategies for infant-toddler or other age-appropriate settings. Examples of promising infant/toddler education initiatives around the country also are discussed.

WHY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS SO IMPORTANT

During children’s first three years of life, their brains are rapidly wired with most of the neurons they will have as an adult. These neurons process information flowing from one neuron to another across a synapse. Synapses are the basis for learning and memory. Neuroscience has shown that a 3-year-old typically has twice as many synapses as an adult. In addition to rapid brain development, a multitude of factors in a child’s environment influences early cognitive, physical, and psychosocial development, according to psychologists like Urie Bronfenbrenner, who emphasized the “ecology of human development.” These are key years for an infant or toddler to learn how to interact with others, and develop self-awareness, empathy, trust, and other psychosocial aspects of human development. Recognition of the developmental importance of these years has pushed “the frontier of school readiness” from preschool to the infant/toddler period, as the Network of Infant/Toddler Researchers reported.²

Research clearly indicates that interactions with parents, educators, and others matter profoundly from birth to age 3, and the caliber of infants’ or toddlers’ daily interactions with an early childhood educator has the potential to impact their brain structure throughout their lifetime. Because the infant and toddler years are so critical to child development, it is essential that all very young children have access to high-quality care and education and that their educators have the knowledge, competencies, and sensitivities to best meet infants’ and toddlers’ needs. Unfortunately, these are areas in which the United States is particularly deficient.



ACCESS AND BARRIERS TO INFANT/TODDLER CARE AND EDUCATION

Approximately 12 million Americans were between the ages of 0 and 3 in 2016. Of these, about 6.1 million were white, 3.1 million are Hispanic, about 1.6 million were black, more than half a million were Asian, and about 120,000 were American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Infants and toddlers are more likely to be poor than the general population, with 24 percent living in poverty and 47 percent in “near poverty” households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold in 2014.³

Although countries like Denmark and the Netherlands enroll 50-65 percent of their 0-to-2-year-olds in formal care, estimates of infant-toddler enrollment in center- or home-based settings in the United States range from one-third to one-half. In France, early childhood education is essentially free for parents, whereas the average annual cost of center-based care in the United States for an infant was higher than in-state tuition at a four-year public college in 28 states and the District of Columbia, according to Child Care Aware.⁴

Given the high costs and the lack of sufficient government support for early childhood education for American families, access is heavily, and sadly, dependent on household income and geography. Fewer than one in five low-income infants, toddlers, as well as children of preschool age, are enrolled in high-quality early childhood education, and nearly half as many young children in rural areas are enrolled, compared to those in urban and suburban areas. Head Start (including Early Head Start), the Child Care Development Block Grant, and other federal programs serve or fund only a small fraction of young children who are eligible, and the quality of programs tends to be poorer for those from low-income backgrounds. For example, at Washington, DC’s Barbara Chambers Children’s Center, only children of parents with incomes below the poverty level are eligible, yet there were 122 on the waiting list for 28 slots in early 2018, according to director Sonia Di-majo. At another publicly funded center, at Bell Multicultural High School in Washington, five of the 40 young children have high-school-age parents, two have incarcerated fathers, two live in homeless shelters, and many of the rest come from single-parent households, according to director Anna Ayala. As a result, poor children and children of color are generally at a significant disadvantage before they even enter kindergarten.⁵

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THE WORK OF INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATORS

The work of an infant/toddler educator is clearly of vital importance to children in their first three years of life and can be enormously rewarding, yet it is also hard work, at low pay, and generally accorded little social respect. Every day, in homes and centers across the country, two million or more adults are paid to care for and educate children between birth and age five, with half or more working with infants and toddlers.⁶

At the Barbara Chambers center, 12 infants between zero and 16 months sit at low tables finger-painting, as middle-aged women guide their hands, talk to them, and watch out for their safety. The walls are adorned with painted trees with multi-colored leaves, and cribs stand in the corner for naptime. The room is also filled with toys and cabinets and simple phrases on the walls in Spanish and English.

The work is a far cry from “babysitting.” “First, I observe the children to know them,” Mara Hernandez, a teacher with a CDA credential who has spent more than six years working with in infant/toddler centers and preschools and 10 years with older children, said. “It’s important to make a connection with them. We talk to their parents to learn more about them and ask them to bring in pictures or a scarf or something to make a connection with home. We see what skills they need to develop and we make individualized lessons plans for each child.”⁷

Ms. Ayala agrees that teaching must be “intentional,” geared to the individual child and parents need to be engaged with her dozen multilingual teachers and staff. As a saying on the wall proclaims: “We are like a box of crayons. Each one of us is unique.”

Interactions and relationships between educators and very young children are extremely important since these are the adults who often spend as much or more time with infants and toddlers than their parents do on the days that children are at centers.

Working with toddlers at the Bright Horizons Child Development Center in New Brunswick, N.J., Emily Urbanski, who earned a CDA credential, said: “I read with children, ask questions during the story that are open-ended to encourage conversations, and I also let them tell a story based on the illustrations in the book.”

A center assistant director at Bright Horizons in Rochester, Minn., Teresa Larson, who also has a CDA, works hard to learn about each child and her needs. “It’s important to establish positive and productive relationships with families by sharing details about the child at drop-off and pickup times,” she said. Gauging a child’s specific emotional or physical needs is important so that she can “develop special routines and rituals and provide consistent and dependable support for developing a sense of competence and confidence.”

Teaching and caring for infants and toddlers is “much more demanding” than working with older children, Ms. Hernandez said. “You have to be there all the time, and be emotionally attached to your children, yet you also need to know child development theory and good practice.”

However, the pay is poor, hovering around the city’s \$12.50 minimum wage. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, that’s higher than the national median of about \$11 per hour. At these poverty-level wages, about half of educators nationally rely on Medicaid, food stamps, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and other public benefits. In addition to teaching and caring for infants and toddlers, teachers have to clean and sanitize the classroom and playroom, working eight-hour shifts at various times between 7 am and 6 pm. Ms. Hernandez, who is working on her associate degree, often goes to bed at 1 or 2 am and has to wake up a few hours later.⁸

Not only are infant/toddler and preschool educators paid less than half the median pay for kindergarten teachers, often without benefits, but they are also accorded little respect. “We really need to get past the perception that we play with young children all day,” Lori Kelly, an early educator from Ohio with a CDA, said. “It’s perceived as easy work. . . Our work—it isn’t valued or understood.”⁹

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TRAINING INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATORS

High-quality learning and care for infants and toddlers necessarily requires a well-trained professional workforce. Unfortunately, not all infant-toddler educators receive the specialized knowledge and practical experience they need to optimize child-development outcomes. Moreover, “the sophistication of the professional roles of those who work with children from infancy through the early elementary years is not consistently recognized and reflected,” according to a 2015 Institute of Medicine report, *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age Eight: A Unifying Foundation*.¹⁰

There is considerable debate over the appropriate nature and extent of training and education that an infant/toddler educator (or a preschool teacher, for that matter) should receive, even though there is widespread agreement that specialized training is associated with better child outcomes. As many cities and states have begun to require an associate or bachelor’s degree to teach preschool and, in some cases, infants and toddlers, we need to define what is essential basic training and what is the value of additional training—whether in colleges or ongoing professional development.¹¹

To address these questions, a 15-organization task force called Power to the Profession, which includes the Council, was established in 2016 to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge, and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation.¹²

An infant/toddler CDA requires that a candidate be able to attain six competency goals, which include 13 functional areas describing the major tasks or functions that an early educator must achieve. These are:

Goal I. To establish and maintain a safe, healthy learning environment

1. Safe
2. Healthy
3. Learning Environment

Goal II. To advance physical and intellectual competence

4. Physical
5. Cognitive
6. Communicative
7. Creative

Goal III. To support social and emotional development and to provide positive guidance

8. Self
9. Social
10. Guidance

Goal IV. To establish positive and productive relationships with families

11. Families

Goal V. To ensure a well-run, purposeful program responsive to participant needs

12. Program Management

Goal VI. To maintain a commitment to professionalism

13. Professionalism

THE CDA IS NECESSARY FOR INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATORS

The CDA credential defines and assesses basic competencies for early childhood educators working in preschools, with infants and toddlers, as home

visitors, and for family childcare, which provides a consistent standard instead of the widely varying training that is found throughout the nation. Attaining a CDA credential requires 480 hours of supervised classroom experience, 120 hours of training, a portfolio, feedback from parents, and direct observation of the competencies and demonstration of effective practice with young children in a specific setting. It provides the foundation for what early childhood educators must know and be able to do, making every interaction with a young child a teachable opportunity to foster successful child development.¹³

With 420,000 CDA's earned since 1975, including 106,000 for infant/toddler educators, the credential is the most widely recognized certification that early childhood educators have gained the initial knowledge, skills, and experience to effectively engage with young children. The CDA is a requirement

for Early Head Start teachers who work with infants and toddlers, and is being required in a number of states for home-based providers and assistant teachers in childcare centers.¹⁴

The Council refers to the CDA as a best first step in embarking on a career in early childhood education, as it articulates to credit toward associate degrees in a growing number of community colleges and many four-year colleges. It is also affordable for lower-income staff, since “financing is largely absent for system-level improvements to ensure that higher-education program prepares students with the knowledge and competencies necessary to work with young children,” according to a February 2018 National Academies report.

“The CDA gave me so much knowledge of children and how to do the job,” Elba Menjivar, a teacher at Washington’s Bell child development center, said. Studying for her bachelor’s degree, she added: “Without the CDA, it would have been more difficult in college—and the university gave me six credits.”

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SOME SUCCESSFUL INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT INFANT/TODDLER EDUCATION AND EDUCATORS

As noted, infant/toddler training and requirements to be an educator and caregiver vary throughout the country, and there is simply not enough funding to help support the training of what is largely a low-income female workforce. Nonetheless, many states and communities recognize these problems and the importance of providing early learning to children between birth and 3. Initiatives differ in their scope and primary goals, yet all are intended to improve access to quality early childhood education and enhance the training and professional development of educators. Promising initiatives include:

- California’s Program for Infant/Toddler Care (PITC) is a comprehensive, multimedia training program for trainers of infant/toddler caregivers, infant/toddler teachers, home visitors, and program directors. PITC is organized in four modules that cover social-emotional development, quality in group care, cognitive and language development, and cultural and family issues.¹⁵
- Montana provides Infant/Toddler and Preschool Professional Development Incentive Awards that fund educators seeking to increase their knowledge of early childhood development. The state offers that enables new infant/toddler educators to complete their training requirements for a CDA.¹⁶
- Ohio established Standards of Care and Teaching for infant/toddler educators that present research-base information on child development.¹⁷
- Colorado consolidated disparate early childhood programs in 2012 to increase information sharing and offer a professional development information system that can help individuals seek training to meet their goals and competency levels.¹⁸

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- Maryland’s Healthy Beginnings program provides resources for educators on developmentally appropriate activities for young children.¹⁹
 - Seattle’s Family and Education Levy provides funding to train early childhood educators, among other efforts to improve infant/toddler education.²⁰
 - Illinois has created an Early Childhood Block Grant that allocates 25 percent of its funding to infant/toddler programs.²¹

CONCLUSION

Infants and toddlers—and their families—need access to free or affordable early childhood education and care provided by professionals armed with the knowledge and competencies to be top-notch educators. Despite promising initiatives, increased funding and outreach in some localities, the United States fails to provide early childhood education, not only for babies and toddlers but also for those of preschool age. The children and families who most lack access are poor, come from troubled home situations, and be children of color. This creates a number of vicious cycles: Children are not school ready and behind more affluent children, perpetuating opportunity gaps and class divisions. With parents unable to afford care and, thus, often unable to work, this traps these parents and their families in poverty or “near poverty,” denies them dignity, and wastes human talent and effort that could contribute to the U.S. economy and to communities.

At the same time, with infant/toddler educators being in one of the nation’s lowest-paid occupations, and training, educational, and certification requirements differing from city to city and state to state, it is hard to get and retain high-quality infant/toddler educators. The lack of professional respect only makes matters worse.

“I think we value our children less than other nations do,” Arne Duncan, the former U.S. secretary of education, has said. “I don’t have an easier or softer or kinder way to say that.”²²

In order to value our youngest children and ensure that their educators have high-quality training and are economically and socially valued, we need to make the kind of investments that virtually every other rich nation has made. These need to be investments in infant/toddler and other early childhood education centers, investments in young children by making these centers economically accessible and the same kind of public good that K-12 education is, and investments in the training, education, professional development, and compensation for educators who provide one of the greatest services to the future of our nation.

Fundamental training requirements for infant/toddler educators must include a CDA, which can become a stepping-stone to further education. In order to have national standards to professionalize this vital workforce, government leaders, early childhood education coalitions and advocates, and parents must pay special attention to the infant/toddler workforce.

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