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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 teacher is absent on this day. Two full-time teachers and a substitute “floater” are managing morning drop off. Child care centers are required to maintain a strict balance of teachers to children, so on this day children will be meeting a new face. The center is meticulously kept and sectioned off into separate areas for eating, changing, playing and sleeping. Everything is perfectly placed and carefully checked to ensure safety and sanitation.

As the morning routine plays out like a well-rehearsed symphony, the “floater” teacher is rocking a baby in the rocking chair. Little ones notice this new face as they are playing with blocks, which offers an opportunity for introductions.

A child starts to get nervous when the “floater” walks by. The teacher anticipated earlier that this child would take a bit to warm up to new people. A warm gentle rub of the back and some calming words of encouragement are offered, “Don’t worry, I am here, you can see me right here. That is our new friend, she will be your friend, too.” It takes some additional comfort, but the child eventually calms.

A team approach helps to ensure that individualized care is happening for each child, despite teachers looking after several children with many needs at once. Language and literacy are building throughout the narration of simple tasks, while social and emotional development are front of mind with each child’s response to experiences. The calm demeanor in a busy infant room helps children to feel safe, secure and parents know that their child’s needs are met.

“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

FIRST TASTE

All around this bright white kitchen children are sitting for breakfast. On this morning, Maia is tasting yogurt for the first time. As the teacher leans in and begins to feed the child, she sings “Yummmmy, I think you will like this.” Alas, it is not a match. After a brief taste, the yogurt is ejected onto the high chair. Her sour face tells the story, but the teacher continues to engage. “This is new, do you like this? Let’s try again, it may feel a bit different in your mouth and taste new.” After several tries, followed by a spit out, she smiles and acquiesces, “Don’t worry we will try again another day”.

Emilia moves to the counter, records on Maia’s chart that she didn’t like the new food. When mom comes for pickup, she will know to pack something different for the next day’s breakfast. Returning to the now trepidatious child with a fresh plate of food, she exclaims: “I know you like this!” Nutrition victory is recorded as the teacher’s attention briefly turns to see a special guest has arrived with one of the children.



A GRAND GUEST

During drop off time parents in child care centers are always encouraged to stay and help settle little ones in before they depart for the day. Understanding the unique needs of each child is part of the job. Important nuances can make a child's day flow smoothly and help teachers anticipate individual needs.

On this day, Isabella's grandmother is along for drop off as mom and teachers catch up. This grandmother is visiting from another country and she does not speak English. Emilia, who speaks fluent Spanish, encourages mom and grandma to sit and chat a minute, as she can see the grandmother's anxiety. While speaking with the mother and grandmother in Spanish, a Isabela's diaper bag is being unloaded and Emilia sets the baby up at a small table to start her breakfast. It's a seamless transition.

Understanding a child's needs goes beyond just understanding how to babysit. Early educators must acquire culturally and linguistically competent knowledge and skills to intentionally support infants and toddlers raised in multilingual and multicultural environments.

As mom signals she is ready to head out for the day, the grandmother approaches Emilia and gives her a big hug. They silently smile at each other and the mother and grandmother connect the generations. It would seem that Emilia has worked with this grandmother before, but this day was the first time she has met the grandmother, as a special request from mom who asked that her mother meet the person who was taking care of their grandchild.



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