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Too Young to Vote, Too Important to Ignore: 5 Things Legislators Need to Know About Infants and Toddlers

By Jennifer Palmer | Jan. 19, 2021 | [➔ State Legislatures Magazine](#)

As a state legislator, you are serving in the policymaking arena at an extraordinary time. Your constituents selected you to help carve a path forward for your state and find solutions to the immense challenges they are facing—from coping with unemployment and the struggles of running a small business to balancing the demands of work and child care or caregiving.

You likely won't have heard, however, from your youngest constituents, the ones who may feel the aftereffects of the pandemic the longest.

For infants and toddlers, whose brains and biological systems are rapidly developing, issues exacerbated by COVID-19—food insecurity and unstable housing, among others—could have lasting consequences.

As you head into this most unusual of sessions, here are five things to consider about the infants, toddlers and families in your states.

1. The First Three Years of Life Are Critical for Healthy Brain Development

At a million new neural connections a second, children's brains grow more in the first three years than at any later point. This uniquely sensitive period of development means the quality of a child's environment, interactions with caregivers and experiences can lay either a strong or a weak foundation for all the growing and learning that follow.

Warm and responsive relationships with caregivers support healthy development in infants and toddlers. Surveys of parents with young children conducted since March confirm that, due to the public health crisis, many are experiencing increased stress, conflict with partners, anxiety and depression, all of which can compromise their ability to provide nurturing caregiving.

Absent a protective factor like another trusted adult, children may experience extended periods of stress that can "get under the skin" and affect lifelong health, learning and well-being.

2. Roughly 40% of Infants and Toddlers, or 2 in 5, Live in Low-Income Households

Infants and toddlers are overrepresented among those living in poverty, which can slow brain development and learning. Research shows children in low-income households can fall significantly behind in language development.

Often in the early stages of their careers, parents of young children face the highest costs for care during a time in which they typically earn lower wages and have less access to financial resources. Public funding for programs and services for children age 3 and younger lags significantly behind investments in older children, forcing parents to bear the brunt of their young children's care and education during the particularly critical window of development in the first few years of life. Without access to high-quality early learning opportunities, children from low-income households are at greater risk of falling behind their peers beginning before they enter kindergarten.

3. Disparities for Children of Color Start Before Birth

Black mothers have a pregnancy-related death rate that is three to four times higher than that of white mothers, and they are more likely to have one or more chronic health conditions. Black infants are more likely to be born preterm and with low birth weight and have twice the mortality rate of white and Hispanic infants.

Researchers attribute racial disparities in birth outcomes to inequitable access to high-quality health and prenatal care, disproportionate risks affiliated with poverty and economic hardship, discriminatory policies, bias from health care providers, and the stress and physical toll of racism.

Furthermore, people of color are overrepresented in low-wage occupations, which impacts their ability to access caregiving supports like paid family leave and high-quality child care. Parents of color are also two to three times more likely than their white counterparts to report lacking someone to turn to if they need help, potentially jeopardizing their emotional well-being and ability to provide nurturing care.

4. Care for Infants and Toddlers Is Unaffordable for Parents and Providers Alike

Young children who attend high-quality care benefit from being developmentally supported and put on a path to school readiness, yet millions of children do not have this opportunity. Child care is often more expensive than housing or in-state college tuition, putting it financially out of reach for many families. And while there is a general shortage of child care across the country (made much worse by COVID-19), infant and toddler care is by far the least available and most expensive. Only 4% of low-income families with infants and toddlers receive financial assistance through federal funding to help them pay for care.

On the supply side of the equation, early childhood educators earn an average of \$11 an hour and must stretch parents' payments to cover payroll and other business costs. Caregivers for infants and toddlers earn the lowest wages and have the highest turnover. Though research shows educating groups of young children, including infants and toddlers, requires specific knowledge and skills, early childhood educators earn about half what kindergarten teachers make and have poverty rates four to 14 times that of K-12 teachers. This financial strain can negatively affect early educators' mental health as well as their interactions with children—the linchpin of early learning.

5. Targeted Policies and Programs Can Make a Lasting Difference

Many policies and programs strengthen outcomes for infants, toddlers and their families. Paid family leave policies and earned income tax credits are linked to improved health outcomes for moms and infants and to greater family economic security. Voluntary home visiting programs support pregnant mothers and new parents and are shown to lower incidences of child abuse, neglect, preterm births and low birthweights, as well as improve school readiness for children and increase high school graduation rates for teen mothers.

Moreover, investments in early childhood programs can produce high rates of return—some studies show up to 13%—and can prepare children for success later in life in almost every way: better long-term health, lower incarceration rates, improved high school graduation rates and greater workforce productivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified preexisting issues for young children and those who care for them. These issues could have long-term effects that can be more easily, more successfully and more cost effectively addressed by fostering healthy development early in life rather than relying on remedial programs to address later-life problems. This legislative session will undoubtedly include many urgent and competing priorities. It may also be an opportunity to make cost-effective policy changes and investments to help create brighter futures for your state's youngest constituents.

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Additional Resources

- Time Off to Care: State Actions on Paid Family Leave, NCSL Brief
- Promoting Healthy Infant-Toddler Development by Supporting Teen and Young Adult Parents, NCSL Brief
- Early Childhood Home Visiting: What Legislators Need to Know, NCSL brief
- Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, University of Texas at Austin LBJ School of Public Affairs
- National Collaborative for Infants & Toddlers