

Think Babies™ NC 2021-2025 Prenatal to Age 3 Policy Priorities for Infants, Toddlers, and their Families



When we support our youngest children in having the opportunity to fulfill their potential, we create the best outcomes in health, education, and economic well-being for everyone in North Carolina.

The COVID-19 crisis has had a devastating impact on many of the support systems for our youngest children and families – from child care, to home visiting, to health care – and has exacerbated the existing challenges and disparities faced by babies and families across North Carolina. Each and every day, the pandemic is shaping the early experiences of the 363,000 infants and toddlers in our state. Their potential must be the top priority in our recovery, and beyond, to ensure that all babies have a strong foundation for success and not a future that is undermined by the effects of this crisis.

The science is clear: early experiences matter. Our brains grow faster during the first three years than at any other time in life, developing one million neural connections every second. From birth, babies' early experiences and relationships with responsive and caring adults shape their brain development. The quality of the foundation built in early childhood, whether it is strong or fragile, affects all future development, health, learning, and lifelong success.

Parents play the lead role in their child's healthy development, but all parents are stretched in the earliest months and years of their child's life, and most rely on an extended network of family and community supports for help in navigating their child's development. But families of color or with low income face additional barriers to accessing these supports, and as a result, they are often overburdened and under-resourced. These inequities can impact their children even before birth. Our communities and our state all have a role to play in providing every parent with the extra support that is needed during this especially critical time in order to help prepare the children who will be our future workers, innovators, and leaders.

When families have what they need to thrive, our economy works. When policies embody equity, all children have opportunities to reach their full potential, and our society is strengthened.

Every child, regardless of their race, family income, or zip code, deserves an equal opportunity to thrive and succeed in life.

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance believes that policies, programs, and funding should ensure healthy beginnings prenatally and at birth, support families with young children, and make high-quality early care and learning environments more accessible and affordable to all parents who want and need them. Babies can't wait, and neither can we. Ensuring strong development for North Carolina's infants and toddlers must be our top priority. When we support them in their earliest years, we prepare our babies to grow, learn and succeed – and our communities, workforce and economy become stronger.



All Children Need Healthy Beginnings

For babies, good physical and mental health provides the foundation to develop physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. When children have good health in utero, good birth outcomes, and access to needed health services, they are more likely to have good physical health and on-track development during childhood and throughout life. Early adversities and disparities, often beginning prenatally, can affect brains and bodies for a lifetime.

Parental health impacts babies' health, both in the perinatal period and beyond. Supporting pregnant women at work reduces infant mortality, improves maternal and infant health outcomes, and reduces doctor and hospital visits. Women with health insurance are more likely to get timely and adequate prenatal care, and parents with health insurance are healthier themselves and can provide their children with health care coverage to support their healthy development. Well-child health check-ups and developmental screenings can improve the early identification of physical and behavioral concerns that can be addressed before they become long-term health problems. All early childhood service providers need to be skilled in supporting infant and young child mental health and social-emotional development.

Healthy Beginnings Policy Priorities

- Ensure families have access to health care by closing the coverage gap.
- Adopt reasonable workplace accommodations for pregnant employees.
- Extend postpartum maternal Medicaid coverage from 6 weeks to 1 year.
- Expand eligibility for early intervention services to include infants and toddlers at risk for developmental delays.
- Adopt early childhood mental health competencies for early childhood service providers.



All Children Need Supported Families and Supportive Communities

Supported Families Policy Priorities

- Increase opportunities for home visiting and parenting education programs.
- Adopt paid family and medical leave for employees.
- Adopt sick leave for working families.
- Reestablish the NC Earned Income Tax Credit to increase family economic security.

Young children develop in the context of their families and the connections they have with their communities. A stable, secure relationship with a caring adult is a key factor in young children's development. Family stability can be supported by adequate income, time to nurture family bonds and provide caregiving to ill family members, safe neighborhoods to grow and play, stable housing, and adequate food and nutrition. But many infants and toddlers live in families that don't always have the resources or opportunities to meet these needs, particularly

families of color or with low income. When families face these challenges and risk factors, their babies can be exposed to stress and trauma that negatively impacts their healthy development.

Access to home visiting and parenting education programs in all communities can help to strengthen families and support parents during the critical first months and years of a child's life. Family-oriented workplace policies such as paid family and medical leave and paid sick days support all families in having the time needed to bond with their children and to care for themselves and their families. Helping families meet their basic needs leads to a more equitable and resilient future in which all families with young children have the solid economic foundation they need to thrive.



All Children Need Access to Quality Early Care and Learning Experiences

Babies' early learning experiences have a lifelong impact. Children who attend high-quality early education programs are better prepared for school and life – academically, socially and emotionally. Positive early learning experiences can help to reduce disparities by providing young children of color and from families with low income with a strong foundation for future success. But for far too long, our child care system has been built upon unaffordable costs for families, inequitable access to high-quality early learning programs, an untenable business model for child care providers, and unlivable wages and benefits for the early childhood workforce caring for children. This is unsustainable for children, parents, early educators, and our economy.

Early Learning Policy Priorities

- Increase child care subsidy funding and change waitlist policy to expand access to high-quality, affordable child care for infants and toddlers.
- Establish better child care subsidy rates to ensure equal access to quality child care for infants and toddlers in all counties.
- Expand the supply of infant-toddler care to ensure families living in child care deserts have access to high-quality care.
- Ensure infants and toddlers have well-educated and well-compensated teachers with the skills needed to support healthy development.

Families with low income need child care subsidy assistance to be able to work and provide their young children with quality early learning experiences, beginning in infancy. Adequate and equitable reimbursement rates for child care programs would allow more infants and toddlers to access quality early learning programs in all 100 counties. Babies need well-educated teachers to help them grow, learn, and succeed, and teachers must be well-compensated for the important work they do in order to attract and retain a high-quality early childhood workforce to support young children's healthy development.



Think Babies™ NC Alliance

The Think Babies™ NC Alliance seeks to ensure that North Carolina's youngest children, prenatal to age 3, benefit from effective and equitable public policies, programs, and funding so that all children have what they need to thrive: healthy beginnings, supported families, and quality early care and learning experiences. The NC Early Education Coalition serves as the backbone organization for the Think Babies™ NC Alliance, which is led by a cross-sector Leadership Team of state and local organizations focused on advancing public awareness and policy solutions for infants, toddlers, and their families.

For more information:

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