

Advancing Infant and Toddler Care and Education as a Public Policy Priority: A Case Study

Over the past several decades, states, municipalities, researchers, and advocates have paid increasing attention to preschool for children 3- and 4- year-olds. In contrast, until recently, public policy and programming for very young children ages 0 to 3 received scant consideration. Like many other states, New Jersey's support for infant and toddler care has lagged far behind that for preschool.

This case study describes how The Nicholson Foundation's investments have helped to make the infant and toddler years a public policy priority in New Jersey. The Foundation has helped to build greater public recognition of the critical importance of the first three years to a person's long-term health and well-being. The Foundation's investments also have strengthened the systems that care for and educate children during these critical early years.

High-Quality, Affordable Care and Education is an Urgent Economic Issue

- ❖ 69% of New Jersey mothers with children younger than age 6 are working.¹
- ❖ The average annual cost of infant care in New Jersey is \$12,988.²

The Problem

An expanding body of research is demonstrating the long-term impact of experiences in the early years. As a result, the importance of positive interactions between infants and toddlers and their parents and other adult caregivers is increasingly recognized.

However, too many infants and toddlers still do not get the benefits that high-quality care and education can provide. Many lower-income working parents in particular must deal with the stress of not being able to find or afford even the most basic care.

Federal and state funding to help low-income parents pay for child care is inadequate, reaching less than 15%³ of low-income children ages 0 to 3 years. The quality of care for infants and toddlers also varies widely. Regulation of child care centers and home-based care addresses basic health and safety, but does not ensure quality care and education. Ultimately, it is parents and the decisions they make in navigating the complex world of early care and education that will dictate the experiences their children will have, and these decisions will have enormous impact on their children's lifelong well-being.

The Solution: More Attention and Commitment to Infants and Toddlers

The solution to this problem is relatively simple to articulate but complex to execute: (1) Bring attention to the infant and toddler life stage as an important public policy priority, (2) improve awareness and uptake of existing care and education programs and policies, and (3) increase public investment from a variety of sources to improve the quality and care and education for this age group. Specifically, this means more:

- ❖ Public and private partnerships to bring attention to this issue, galvanize support, and fund programs that increase access, improve quality, and expand the ability and capacity of providers to provide high-quality care and education.
- ❖ Public funding for child care subsidies to address affordability for low- and middle-income families;
- ❖ Public funding to increase the quality of early childhood care and education, including increasing training and compensation for infant and toddler teachers; and



Learn More about the Importance of the Early Years

- ❖ Harvard Center on the Developing Child. [Brain Architecture](#)

Why Are the Early Years So Important?

A robust, and growing, body of research is showing the critical importance of the first few years of life:

- ❖ The brain's architecture begins building even before birth. In the first few years of life more than 1 million new neuronal connections form every second.
- ❖ The brain grows and develops faster between birth and age 3 than at any other time of life. During this time, the capacity for thinking, emotion, language, and self-regulation are formed.
- ❖ Healthy physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development happens when young children are cared for in safe, nurturing families and communities that have access to a strong and affordable early care and education system.
- ❖ Ensuring healthy development of these critical functions during the early years is an important contributor to future success in school, in work, and in life.

The Nicholson Foundation's Support for Infants and Toddlers

The Four Elements of The Foundation's Grantmaking

- 1 Examine and highlight the problem
- 2 Support work on the front lines
- 3 Turn up the volume of public advocacy support
- 4 Lay a strong foundation for the future

Learn More About...

- ❖ [NIEER](#)
- ❖ [Advocates for Children of New Jersey](#)
- ❖ [New Jersey Policy Perspective \(NJPP\)](#)
- ❖ [All Our Kin](#)



The Nicholson Foundation has pursued a multi-pronged effort to increase the focus on the early childhood years, improve access to affordable, high-quality infant and toddler care and education, and encourage a supportive policy agenda. This work has evolved over time, with four elements and a carefully considered progression of projects supporting multiple grantees. In keeping with the Foundation's overall grantmaking principles, this work aims to create long-lasting and durable systems change.

1 Examine and highlight the problem

A key step in solving any problem is understanding it. The Foundation addressed this issue by funding a series of groundbreaking studies and reports:

- ❖ A 2013 study by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) examined the quality of early childhood care and education centers, Early Head Start centers, and family child care services.⁴
- ❖ Between 2013 and 2018, Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ) conducted several studies that identified and analyzed barriers to quality and accessible early childhood services.⁵
- ❖ In 2017, New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP) conducted a study on the subsidy rates that help low-income families pay for care.⁶
- ❖ In 2018, the Foundation and four other foundation partners funded All Our Kin to produce the *New Jersey Family Child Care Landscape Report*, a comprehensive review of family child care and the policy and programmatic changes that could improve these services.⁷

2 Support work on the front lines

A second component of the Foundation’s work has been to support efforts to improve the capacity of organizations that are directly involved in providing care and education to young children. These projects have provided opportunities to explore various approaches to help ensure that infants and toddlers have access to high-quality care and education.

One of these approaches was to work with state and local government to improve quality and capacity. In 2013, the Foundation funded ACNJ to conduct pilots of a child care quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for infants and toddlers. This helped jump start a statewide QRIS, and helped inform the State’s development of *Grow NJ Kids*, the New Jersey QRIS.

In 2014, New Jersey began to test drive *Grow NJ Kids* in three counties. The Foundation supported this effort by funding Programs for Parents to try out *Grow NJ Kids* in 16 early childhood centers in Newark’s lowest income neighborhoods.

From 2014 to 2018, the Foundation also supported a parallel quality improvement project for family child care providers called Steps to Quality. More than 40 providers in Mercer, Essex, and Middlesex Counties ultimately participated. The effort was led by Child Care Connection, Inc., Mercer County’s Child Care Resource and Referral agency, in collaboration with two other agencies—Essex County’s Programs for Parents and Middlesex County’s Community Child Care Solutions. This project became the

foundation for incorporating family child care into *Grow NJ Kids*.

Another approach to this “front lines” work was supporting child care providers directly through funding that allowed for the expansion of Early Head Start capacity.

The Foundation helped two Head Start organizations—Greater Bergen Community Action Programs and Gateway Community

How Does Grow NJ Kids Work?

- ❖ Grow NJ Kids is an objective rating system that gives parents and others a standardized way to assess the quality of early care and education programs and centers.
- ❖ Programs first do a self-assessment and then work with trained professionals to address areas needing improvement.
- ❖ Then, trained raters formally assess the program. Programs can earn up to five stars.
- ❖ To learn more, visit the [Grow NJ Kids](#) website.

Learn More About...

- ❖ [Programs for Parents](#)
- ❖ [Child Care Connection, Inc.](#)
- ❖ [Community Child Care Solutions](#)
- ❖ [Greater Bergen Community Action](#)
- ❖ [Gateway Community Action Partnership](#)



A Greater Bergen CAP Early Head Start classroom.

- ❖ Action Partnership—convert Head Start spaces to Early Head Start, adding 12 Early Head Start classrooms, and expanding and improving 18 Early Head Start classrooms in low-income areas throughout the state.

3 *Turn up the volume of public advocacy support for early childhood policy change*

In 2013, the Foundation met with other early childhood funders and ACNJ to discuss the highest priority needs of very young children and how those needs could be addressed. The group agreed that the quality, availability, and affordability of infant and toddler early care and education were priorities. They also agreed that a strong focus on promoting an early childhood policy and advocacy agenda was needed.



Strolling Thunder: On May 21, 2018, advocates, parents, and nearly 150 babies gathered in front of the State House Annex to tell lawmakers to make infants and toddlers an important state priority.

Learn More About Right From the Start NJ

- ❖ Visit the RFTSNJ [website](#)
- ❖ Get to know [The Turrell Fund](#) and [Caucus Educational Corporation](#)

As a result, the Foundation and the Turrell Fund supported an ACNJ initiative, Right From the Start NJ. This initiative was designed to educate the public,

policymakers, and other stakeholders about the importance of the infant and toddler age range and about needed improvements to New Jersey's early education systems.

ACNJ focused on informing state government stakeholders and policy makers about the importance of infants and toddlers and building a network of champions among early childhood organizations. In 2017, Right From the Start NJ expanded to include a strategic communications campaign and website, which partnered with the Caucus Educational Corporation to produce campaign-related content for public television.

In another aspect of its early childhood policy work, the Foundation funded the New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children (NJAEYC) in 2018 to work with ACNJ to promote within its membership a strong public policy agenda focused on educators, families, and children ages 0 to 8.

Learn More About...

- ❖ [New Jersey Association for the Education of Young Children \(NJAEYC\)](#)
- ❖ [Princeton University's Future of Children Journal](#)

4 *Lay a strong foundation for the future*

To achieve sustainable systems change for infants, toddlers, and their families, the Foundation also is supporting additional efforts that build on past successes and lessons learned to lay a strong foundation for the future:

- ❖ To further increase knowledge about the critical infant and toddler age range, the Foundation funded a special issue of Princeton University's *Future of Children* journal. The journal, which will be published in late fall of 2020, presents evidence about which early child development programs are most effective, examines how program effects vary among different groups of children and families, and discusses how the next generation of programs can be improved.



- ❖ To influence a new generation of pediatricians, in 2018, the Foundation funded an American Academy of Pediatrics

Learn More About...

- ❖ [AAP Community Pediatrics Training Initiative](#)

Learn More About Current EYFC Partners

- ❖ [The Burke Foundation](#)
- ❖ The Maher Charitable Foundation
- ❖ [The Schumann Fund for New Jersey](#)
- ❖ [The Henry & Marilyn Taub Foundation](#)
- ❖ [Turrell Fund](#)

Community Pediatrics Training Initiative, which fosters partnerships between all of New Jersey’s pediatric residency programs and community-based service providers and professionals based in Family Success Centers around the state. The program aims to improve the system of care for young children and train pediatricians and community leaders to collaboratively engage in systems change work.

- ❖ To add a critical research focus to public policy work, in 2019, the Foundation began supporting development of the Center for Infant and Toddler Policy Research at NIEER. Partnering with state government agencies, ACNJ, NAEYC, and other policy leaders and stakeholders, the Center will bring data and policy analysis to policy discussions within New Jersey and inform decision makers about key issues relating to care and education for New Jersey’s youngest children.
- ❖ To ensure continued alignment of funding for early childhood initiatives, the Foundation provides leadership to the Early Years Funding Collaborative, a coalition of New Jersey foundations focused on children ages 0 to 8 and their families.



A graduating class of “Steps to Quality” family child care providers display their certificates.

The Impact of The Nicholson Foundation’s Investment

In 2019, the environment for infant and toddler care and education is quite different than it was just a few years ago. Thanks to investments by The Nicholson Foundation and other foundations, the commitment of State leadership and agencies, federal investments, and efforts by other stakeholders:

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- ❖ In the past two years, the State increased the infant child care subsidy rate by 40%, the first increase in 10 years.⁸ This increase acknowledges that providers serving infants require more resources, especially staff, than do providers serving other age groups.
- ❖ The State created a tiered reimbursement system in *Grow NJ Kids* to award high subsidy rates to early childhood programs providing higher quality services.
- ❖ New Jersey included \$24 million in its FY2020 budget for child care.
- ❖ Families earning \$60,000 or less annually are now, for the first time, eligible to apply for a Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit on their 2018 tax return.
- ❖ New Jersey has gained national attention for its infant and toddler work. In 2019, the Pritzker Foundation awarded ACNJ a \$100,000 [Pritzker Children's Initiative](#) planning grant to create a statewide plan to strengthen New Jersey's Prenatal to 3 policy agenda. [ZERO to THREE](#), a national organization that promotes healthy early childhood development, also named New Jersey one of six [Think Babies](#) sites across the nation.

The Nicholson Foundation

The Nicholson Foundation is dedicated to improving health and early childhood outcomes of vulnerable populations in New Jersey. Our approach is to transform service delivery systems by informing policy and developing sustainable models in the following five strategic focus areas:

- ❖ Primary Care
- ❖ Population Health
- ❖ Early Childhood
- ❖ Professional Development
- ❖ State Government

To learn more, visit us at www.thenicholsonfoundation.org.