



New York's Infant-Toddler Resource Center: *Better Care for Babies*

Multi-Ethnic, Multi-Lingual Model Proves Potent Tool for Lifting Quality of Care for Children Under the Age of 3

Research on brain development has created new urgency about infant and toddler development. The first three years are fundamentally different from all others. By the age of three, 85 percent of the brain's capacity is in place, creating the ability to speak, learn and reason.

Early experiences greatly influence the way those skills develop, setting the stage for lifelong emotional, physical social and intellectual growth. With child care now a critical source of early experiences for a growing number of children, the New York City Infant-Toddler Resource Center arms practitioners and programs with the knowledge and skills they need to get babies and toddlers off to a good start.

The New York City Infant-Toddler Resource Center is a joint initiative of the New York City Child Care Resource and Referral Consortium's five member agencies, Child Care, Inc., Child Development Support Corporation, Chinese-American Planning Council, the Committee for Hispanic Children and Families, Inc. and The Day Care Council of New York City, Inc., funded by N.Y. State Office of Children and Family Services.

For more information about New York's Infant-Toddler Resource Center, please contact Julia Travers, Infant-Toddler Coordinator at 212.929.7604 ext 3011.

www.babystepsnyc.org



Infant care should be based on relationship-planning, not lesson-planning—and should emphasize child-directed learning.¹

—WestEd's Program for Infant and Toddler Care, 2007.

Infant-Toddler Resource Center

- ✓ Increases knowledge for practitioners, parents and policy makers
- ✓ Builds skills of infant-toddler workforce and parents
- ✓ Changes practice across spectrum of settings caring for babies and toddlers
- ✓ Promotes improvement in public policies
- ✓ Promotes better outcomes for babies and toddlers, especially those most at-risk



Advancing the Needs of Babies and Toddlers:

Healthy Children, Strong Families, Early Learning

In 2003, the New York City Child Care Resource and Referral Consortium launched the city's first broad-based, coordinated and coherent effort to improve care for children under the age of 3, in the form of a new Infant Toddler Resource Center. The new center, a joint initiative staffed and supported by the Consortium's five member agencies, provides training, professional development and technical assistance to early learning and care programs across the city, using a multi-ethnic and multilingual approach to introduce research-based practice.

The idea for the center sprang from emerging research which revealed the human brain grows at breakneck speed in the first three years of life. By the age of three, 85 percent of the brain's capacity is in place, creating the ability to speak, learn and reason. Scientists also showed that early experiences greatly influence the trajectory of that growth, creating the foundations for lifelong learning and growth.³

Those findings galvanized early childhood experts and practitioners to take a closer look at infant-toddler care, now a critical source of early experiences for a growing number of children. More than half of all one and two-year-olds now have at least one regular child care arrangement;

and nearly 40 percent spend more than 35 weeks in non-parental care. Yet surveys found much of that care to be so poor that it could compromise early development, jeopardize language development and social skills.

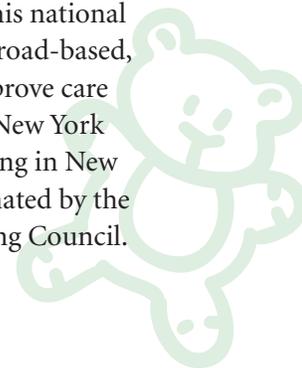
Children grow and thrive in the context of close and dependable relationships that provide love and nurturance, security, responsive interaction and encouragement for exploration.²

—From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, National Research Council.

Other studies revealed the power of high-quality care to promote healthy development and learning. Adults with proper training could boost a child's vocabulary and literacy, along with other physical, social and emotional skills. The National Research Council marshaled the new evidence and issued a clarion call for dramatic changes in policy and practice in early care settings. Advocates, experts and practitioners secured new Federal funding to spur innovation and improvements in care for children under the age of 3. By 2001, a veritable movement emerged to introduce research-based practice into early learning centers, led by a National Better Baby Campaign, state and Federal policy makers and leading professional organizations.⁴

The creation of the New York Infant-Toddler Resource Center grew directly out of this national energy and agenda, and represents a broad-based, coordinated and coherent effort to improve care for children under the age of three in New York City. The center is one of seven operating in New York State as part of a network coordinated by the New York State Child Care Coordinating Council.

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The Center's Team of Infant-Toddler Specialists Provides Crucial Expertise to Improve Practice and Programs

Each of the five agencies contributes an infant-toddler specialist to a team that drives the initiative forward, by providing the core expertise on research-based practice and by creating the appropriate materials, training and technical assistance. The multi-agency, multi-ethnic team underwent intensive joint training, in consultation with national experts and researchers.

Over time, each member also gained certification in use of nationally-recognized assessment tools and training techniques and continues to take advantage of professional development opportunities offered by national experts, such as Zero to Three and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.⁵

The core approach reflects the latest research which emphasizes the crucial importance of “relationship-based” practice, individualized attention and child-led learning. The approach is based on research which shows babies thrive in the care of adults who are responsive and respectful of babies, “in tune” with their cues. Such skills can be learned,

with training and on-going coaching, and adults with such training are more likely to create a safe environment that supports a child’s natural curiosity and thus promotes learning, as well as social, emotional and physical skills.⁶

The team prepares curricula, training and assessment materials in three languages, and has developed culturally-sensitive approaches to outreach. The center also makes strategic use of demographic data collected by the five agencies to target neighborhoods and programs serving the most at-risk babies and toddlers.

Strategic Services and Outreach = Impact on Infant-Toddler Practice and Policy

The Consortium leverages its staff and resources to promote systemic improvement in care for children under 3. To that end, the agencies used theory of change models to identify strategic partners and adopted a year-by-year strategy to impact individual practice, as well as program policies, by:

Increasing Knowledge about Infant-Toddler

Development. Each member of the Consortium created an on-site resource library, with core training materials and resources, videos, professional journals and information for parents. Bilingual staff translated materials into Spanish and Mandarin to meet the linguistic and cultural needs of child care providers and families. The center’s website, www.babystepsnyc.org, provides links to local and national resources and organizations focused on infant-toddler development.

Path to Literacy Starts in the First Three Years

Research shows that caregivers can promote language and literacy starting in the earliest months—using simple practices, such as:

- singing songs,
- asking questions,
- reading books,
- repeating back baby’s sounds.

The center’s infant-toddler specialists promote such practices, by encouraging the use of simple words and keeping a balance of listening and talking. Early literacy is just one of the key components of high-quality infant care, promoted by the center. To learn more, visit www.nyscccc.org and click on “Best Practices for Infants and Toddlers.”

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The Center's Team of Infant-Toddler Specialists

Provides Crucial Expertise to Improve Practice and Programs



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Building bridges across disciplines focused on Infant-Toddler Development. The center created an Advisory Committee aimed at creating new linkages between early intervention specialists, health and mental health professionals, and colleges and universities, based on studies which showed the value of early intervention services and family support in promoting healthy development in the first three years of life. The center has also partnered with the Administration for Children's Services in that agency's strategic goal to expand and improve care and learning for children under 3, working with dozens of programs as they add infant and toddlers services.

Offering on-site technical assistance and training. The center's team developed a model of intensive support, working with individual programs, which links assessment, mentoring, coaching and on-site training, engaging teachers and directors in the process to improve classroom practice. The team developed a separate model for home-based providers, including family child care and group family child care settings. The model includes benchmarks for progress over the course of a year, with pre- and post-tests to evaluate the results, and develop the next set of benchmarks for continuous improvement. Data and reports from directors indicate the model led to improvements in both practice and classroom environments, with directors and staff better able to promote child-led learning and healthy development.

Promoting relationship-based, child-led approach to curricula. The center's team developed two training modules to guide practitioners and programs seeking a deeper understanding of the new research and implications for practice. The first module,

"Infant-Toddler Development and Learning," provides information on the key developmental milestones and introduces practitioners to use of assessment tools. The second module, "Supporting Infant-Toddler Development Through Responsive Care," focuses on infants and toddlers' emerging social awareness and emotional development, and the value of responsive care-giving in encouraging learning and literacy. The training and materials have been translated into three languages and adapted for providers in diverse settings.

Neuroscientists have documented that our earliest days, weeks and months of life are a period of unparalleled growth. Simply put, early experiences matter.⁷

—Unequal from the Start: A Check Up on New York City's Infants and Toddlers, New York City Zero to Three Network.

Increasing knowledge about components of quality infant-toddler care. The center offers a range of training and professional development opportunities, filling a critical gap in knowledge and skills for the city's early childhood workforce, educating them about the ten key components of quality infant-toddler care.⁸ The center's training and workshops address the most urgent needs, identified both in new research and in observations by the center's team of infant-toddler specialists in settings serving children under the age of 3. That includes best practices for reducing the spread of infectious disease, as well as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and Shaken Baby Syndrome.

Advancing the Needs of Babies and Toddlers: *Healthy Children, Strong Families, Early Learning*

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Meeting an Urgent Need to Improve Practice and Policy Across New York City

From the start, the new center met an urgent and overwhelming need for improvement and expansion of quality care for children under the age of 3. Surveys revealed that few practitioners, out of a workforce of thousands, have specific education in infant-toddler development. The city's regulatory framework failed to require specialized training or knowledge of infant-toddler development. Lead teachers in center-based infant-toddler programs needed only a high school diploma or G.E.D.⁸

The Consortium saw an opportunity to create an approach that would reach both widely and deeply, building on the deep relationships and community ties the member agencies had already established with early childhood practitioners and programs across diverse neighborhoods and settings. Targeted mailings and public awareness and education campaigns helped build awareness of the new scientific findings; carefully planned curricula, training and technical assistance could lift the quality of both individual practice and programs.

The center also created and continues to sustain strategic alliances with early intervention and family support services, given the research which shows

Many children under the age of three now spend up to ten hours a day in child care settings. During this time, their brains grow rapidly.

—Clarke-Stewart, Gruber, & Fitzgerald⁹

that infant and toddler development depends on strong families, health and mental health supports. Close working relationships with the New York City Zero to Three Network, for example, promote better practice by linking health, mental health and early care professionals. Finally, the center has linked with city agencies and policymakers to promote positive changes in public policy, including new regulatory frameworks that support research-based approaches to infant and toddler care.

Now in its sixth year, the Resource Center provides a new model for innovation, one that is especially suited to New York City's diverse communities and high proportion of babies living in poverty. The new framework has successfully introduced research-based practice in a manner that is both measurable, as well as culturally-competent enough to reach diverse audiences and settings serving the largest numbers of children under the age of 3.

Center Boosts Knowledge, Changes Practice

Surveys revealed much positive change among participants who took advantage of the center's on-site technical assistance. Directors reported staff had gained a better knowledge of:

- Practices to make programs more responsive to children's individual needs.
- Health and safety issues that arise with children under age of three.
- How emotional, social and intellectual skills emerge.
- Strategies to foster language development.



The Infant-Toddler Center = Effective Strategy for Quality Improvement



✓ Individual Practice Improves:

Directors, teachers and staff in centers, as well as family child care providers report better skills in handling behavioral problems, health and safety issues and how to encourage learning and literacy.

✓ Individual Programs Improve:

On-site, on-going technical assistance, especially when combined with training using the center's own training modules, increased center's scores on assessment tools, showing improvement in both the learning environment and the interactions between staff and children. Teachers reported better understanding of how to set up the classroom to encourage learning. Staff demonstrated better knowledge of practices to prevent spread of infectious disease.¹⁰

✓ Public Policies Improve:

The center played a key role in several successful efforts to improve particular public policies and regulatory frameworks for infant-toddler care:

- The Center's research-based report on the inadequacy of staff qualification requirements, based on an examination of current city and state regulations and a survey of operating programs in New York City led to a re-consideration of those requirements,
- Training requirements for staff in infant-toddler programs in center-based programs were subsequently strengthened.

✓ More Awareness of Early Intervention Services:

The center has created new linkages between child care providers and early intervention specialists, promoting a better understanding of the importance of developmental milestones and resources available to keep development on track.

✓ Parents' Knowledge Improves:

The center's infant-toddler specialists have worked with parent counselors at the five member agencies to provide knowledge and materials for families seeking quality care for children under the age of 3.



- 1 The Program for Infant and Toddler Care, a collaborative effort between WestEd and the California Department of Education, offers nationally-recognized materials and curricula for adults working with children under the age of 3, which can be found at www.pitc.org.
- 2 Shonkoff, Jack and Phillips, Deborah, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council, 2000.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Better Baby Campaign white paper, 2001. Published by Child Care, Inc. and available at www.childcareinc.org.
- 5 See WestEd's Program for Infant and Toddler Care at www.pitc.org. Also Frank Porter Graham Center at University of North Carolina, www.fpg-unc.edu/~abc/ and National Institute for Early Education Research, www.nieer.org.
- 6 "Infant-Toddler Programs: The Workforce, Better Trained Teachers = Healthy Development." Child Care, Inc., 2006.
- 7 "Unequal from the Start: A Check-Up on New York City's Infants and Toddlers." New York City Zero to Three Network, 2008. Available at www.nyzerotothree.org.
- 8 "What is high-quality child care for infants and toddlers," New York State Infant and Toddler Resource Network, available at www.nyscccc.org.
- 9 Clarke-Stewart, Gruber, & Fitzgerald (1994). *Children at home and in day care*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- 10 In addition to national studies cited above, a report on in-depth training and assessment of 22 programs in New York City, conducted by the Infant-Toddler Resource Center, documented such effects locally.