



CLASP

Policy solutions that work for low-income people



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

State and Federal Policy Opportunities to Improve the Lives of Infants and Toddlers and their Families

As a nation, we are failing our youngest children. Too many infants and toddlers in the United States lack the resources they need to thrive during this formative period, putting them at risk of poor health, material hardship, and chronic stress. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and ZERO TO THREE call on federal and state policymakers to embrace a bold policy agenda—one that invests in and optimizes proven programs and seizes new opportunities to make policies work better for families with young children. For such policies to be successful, increased state and federal resources are vital. Current investments are insufficient to meet the needs of families with young children, hampering the effectiveness and accessibility of public policies and programs.

In every policy decision, legislators and program administrators must consider:

- **The potential effects on families and communities of color and immigrant families and communities.** Policymakers should understand how policy decisions have contributed to existing inequities. They should also work to ensure that additional resources and new or reformed policies address—rather than create or exacerbate—disparities.
- **How different policies and programs interact with one another.** Children’s and families’ needs are multifaceted, often cutting across multiple policy and program areas. Policymakers must consider how decisions in one area may have implications for families’ ability to use programs or services in another. They should also strengthen cross-system coordination so that policies and programs work together to support families.

Building Strong Foundations Key Policy Opportunities

The following policy recommendations are not comprehensive. Instead, they represent a few key policy opportunities within our framework that are timely, ripe for action, and already have groundwork laid at the local, state, or federal level. ZERO TO THREE and CLASP selected these policies because they would help a large portion of infants and toddlers or target the needs of the most vulnerable families with very young children.

Federal and state policymakers should:

- Ensure all children and parents have **health insurance coverage**. States should expand Medicaid to cover low-income adults, including parents of infants and toddlers.
- Extend **paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave** to all workers. Congress should pass comprehensive legislation that provides paid sick days and paid family and medical leave that covers the full range of personal medical and family caregiving needs. In the interim, states and localities should implement paid family and medical leave and paid sick leave laws to cover their geographic area.
- Promote access to **high-quality jobs** for parents of infants and toddlers. Federal and state policymakers should support subsidized and transitional employment programs that promote access to jobs with adequate wages, predictable hours, paid sick days, and career ladders.
- Ensure all families can access **high-quality early care and education**. Federal and state policymakers should expand child care assistance to low- and middle-income families who work or go to school and prioritize infants and toddlers in access and quality improvement initiatives. Policymakers should target programs offering comprehensive early childhood services to infants and toddlers and pregnant women living in or near poverty.
- Make sure the **child welfare system** promotes the healthy development of infants and toddlers experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, maltreatment. State and federal policymakers should expand access to comprehensive family support and child maltreatment prevention services and revise child welfare policies to better support the unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers.
- Ensure the **mental health system** adequately addresses the unique needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. Policymakers at all levels should ensure infants, toddlers, and their parents have access to quality mental health services spanning from promotion to prevention, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment.

These recommendations represent a sample of many policy actions policymakers can take to improve the health and wellbeing of infants and toddlers and their families. For more information about the complete array of specific policy options state and federal policymakers should consider, visit CLASP at www.clasp.org and ZERO TO THREE at www.zerotothree.org.



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Resources

For more information about these policy opportunities, consult the following resources from ZERO TO THREE and CLASP.

Health Insurance Coverage

- [*Health Insurance: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*Children Need Health Insurance—So Do Their Parents*](#)
- [*America’s Babies Need Affordable Health Care: The Impact of Medicaid Restructuring on Young Children*](#)

Paid Family and Medical Leave and Paid Sick Leave

- [*Paid Leave: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*The Child Development Case for a National Paid Family and Medical Leave Program*](#)
- [*FAMILY Act Supports Low-Wage Workers and Their Families*](#)

High-Quality Jobs

- [*Education and Training Programs: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*Subsidized Employment Programs: Goals and Design*](#)
- [*The Struggles of Low-Wage Work*](#)

Quality Early Care and Education

- [*Child Care Assistance: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*Early Head Start: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*Implementing the Child Care and Development Block Grant Reauthorization: A Guide for States*](#)
- [*Supporting Babies through QRIS*](#)

Child Welfare System

- [*The Child Welfare System: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*A Call to Action on Behalf of Maltreated Infants and Toddlers*](#)
- [*Safe Babies Court Team Approach*](#)

Mental Health System

- [*Mental Health Services: A Critical Support for Infants, Toddlers, and Families*](#)
- [*Planting Seeds in Fertile Ground: Actions Every Policymaker Should Take to Advance Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health*](#)
- [*Seizing New Policy Opportunities to Help Low-Income Mothers with Depression*](#)

About the Building Strong Foundations Project

CLASP and ZERO TO THREE’s *Building Strong Foundations: Advancing Comprehensive Policies for Infants, Toddlers, and Families* project promotes state and federal policy actions that comprehensively address the wellbeing of infants, toddlers, and families. To access additional project resources, including a policy framework, briefs making the case for investing in 13 specific core policy areas, and examples of states’ actions and opportunities, please visit www.clasp.org/buildingstrongfoundations or www.zerotothree.org/strongfoundations.

CLASP and ZERO TO THREE thank the W.K. Kellogg Foundation for their generous support of this project.

December 2018