

# BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE:

Strong Policies for Babies and Families After COVID-19



**ZERO TO THREE**  
Early connections last a lifetime



## Executive Summary

The experience of the pandemic has laid bare what families already knew: Our systems for supporting the health and well-being of young children and families are threadbare to practically nonexistent. ZERO TO THREE's *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* revealed that, even before the earthquake of COVID-19 shook the world, families with young children faced challenges that put many babies' strong development at risk, especially young children of color and those in families with low income. Now, as the crisis continues, the inadequate response to supporting young children and families in a time of immense social and economic stress creates the risk that the experience of the pandemic will be indelibly imprinted on the lives of our youngest children.

As the nation worked to respond to the pandemic's impacts, another earthquake hit our country. The unconscionable death of George Floyd, a Black Minneapolis resident, at the hands of the police was one in a long line of murders of Black men, women and children in a manifestation of deep-seated racism. Yet, Floyd's death has riveted the nation's attention on the need for change, raising hope that it created a moment for justice to take root. The resulting pain, anger and anguish led to a resurgent protest movement that swept the nation, demanding policing reforms and

investments in communities of color to bring about racial, social and economic reforms. As we know from the *Yearbook*, babies are not immune to these injustices, experiencing inequities even before birth.

What families have experienced with the pandemic is indeed akin to an earthquake: a sudden, unexpected upheaval that is destructive and shakes to the core. But what sometimes follows an earthquake is a tsunami that spreads across the ocean and disproportionately impacts those who cannot make it to higher ground. As the pandemic

wears on, we see the devastating toll: more than 200,000 dead; millions unemployed (with workers at the lowest rungs of the wage ladder hit disproportionately hard); child care programs, often on precarious footing in the best of times, closing and despairing of ever reopening; and millions of families isolated at home, struggling financially as their stress increased from the pandemic's beginning and has remained at a high level. As we look more closely, we see the disproportionate effects on children and families of color, not just in the disturbing infection and death rates, but in the fallout from the economic implosion.

Getting the response right matters because the babies who are experiencing the pandemic are at risk of carrying its imprint on their development throughout their lives. The first three years are a period of rapid brain development, when the brain develops 1 million neural connections every second. Babies' relationships with trusted caregivers, usually their parents, are critical to shaping this development. Young children are extraordinarily sensitive to their caregivers' mental well-being as well as the stability and security of their surroundings. The prolonged stress adults are feeling — economic deprivation and increasing insecurity in meeting basic needs such as food and shelter — means young children's development is being shaped by conditions that if unaddressed could undermine this crucial foundation for all later learning and relationships.

As we look toward containing the virus and economic recovery, the policy direction is clear. We must not simply try to get back to the old normal. As the *State of Babies Yearbook* shows, particularly for babies and their families, the status quo before COVID was unacceptable.

**We must build for the future, establishing strong systems that support all children, families, and individuals; examine how policies benefit some, marginalize others and seek corrections; and, consider who has the power to shape the futures of babies, families and communities and relocate that power so it is proximate to those it affects.**

By doing so, we will arrive at policies that promote racial equity and seek to eliminate barriers to



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success as we prepare our future workers, innovators and leaders for the challenges they will meet as they grow to adulthood. In the process, we will make response and resilience, even in a crisis such as COVID-19, less chaotic and more oriented to the needs of society.

This policy report brings together the landscape for babies and families before the pandemic as revealed in the *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* as well as observations on how they have been faring during the pandemic and economic upheaval, and the policy gaps that left families of color and with low income particularly vulnerable. We then outline a set of policies needed to bridge the ongoing and unaddressed effects of the pandemic, then provide a strong future for babies, families and our nation.

Detailed discussions of COVID-19 Relief policies can be found in briefs outlining [Five Critical Needs For Babies in COVID-19](#).



## Good Health



For babies, good physical and mental health provides the foundation to develop physically, cognitively, emotionally and socially. Parental health affects babies' health, both in the perinatal period and beyond. Yet, the *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* and accompanying brief on maternal and infant health disparities clearly signal significant barriers to appropriate health coverage and care, and subsequent support for women and babies of color.

Given the situation before the pandemic, it is not surprising that the health crisis of COVID-19 has disproportionately affected people of color, with higher rates of infection and death. Increasing data on adverse impacts of COVID-19 on pregnant women, particularly Latinas, adds another layer of concern to a maternal care system that already is failing women of color. Soaring unemployment decimated access to health care, underscoring the untenable nature of linking health insurance primarily to employment. In states that have not adopted Medicaid expansion, unemployed workers had little to fall back on.

Babies also have been affected. Meeting their health needs became more complicated even as their environments became more stressful. Missed

well-child visits and vaccinations, already lagging for babies in families with low income before COVID-19, has become a great concern during the pandemic. The mental health of parents and young children has been the silent tsunami, as surveys have documented rising levels of stress, anxiety and depression in caregivers and children. In pediatric care settings that have transformed to become more family- and child-development centered (such as through [HealthySteps](#)), connections to isolated families in need of support were maintained.

**We now have an opportunity to build a more resilient, equitable health care system that can also be a gateway to more holistic support for young children and families.**



### Policies to bridge the pandemic:

- Extend Medicaid coverage to immigrant women and to 12 months postpartum.
- Channel funds to support the mental health needs of young children and their families.

### Policies to build good health for the future:

- **Health insurance coverage for all.** A health care system available to all adults and children is vital to moving beyond this crisis and toward a nation that prioritizes the health of its people.
- **Improved maternal health care.** As we tackle broad systemic and institutional changes, a few simple policy solutions can begin to address disparities and improve maternal health, such as extending Medicaid coverage to 12 months postpartum and covering innovations such as doulas.
- **Transforming pediatric care to become the gateway to comprehensive family-centered care and developmental support.** Create a structure and payment mechanism that incorporates evidence-based interventions, supports multi-generational care and addresses social determinants of health.
- **Strengthened mental health services essential for babies and families.** Promote expanded specialized infant and early childhood mental health workforce and access to infant and early childhood mental health and perinatal mental health services.





## Strong Families



Young children develop in the context of their family's environment, where stability and supportive relationships best nurture their growth. Family stability is secured through adequate income, time to nurture family bonds and provide caregiving to ill family members, safe neighborhoods to grow and play, and the ability to meet basic needs such as stable housing, food and nutrition, and even diaper supplies. The *State of Babies Yearbook: 2020* revealed that many babies and toddlers lived in families, particularly families of color or with low income, which were unable to meet all these needs even before COVID-19 reshaped their environments. The lack of policies to assure economic security, paid time off or support in meeting families' psycho-social and material needs has left many American families without resources to cope with extreme crises such as the current emergency.

It was not surprising that the seismic shift of the pandemic and the aftershocks to the economy hit many families particularly hard. It was not surprising that the percentage of households with young children who became food insecure would more than double the high "normal" rate, with thousands of cars lining up at food pantries. Given their pre-COVID economic situation, it was tragically predictable that families of color would be particularly hard pressed to weather the crisis — in paying monthly housing costs, dealing with job loss or being on the front lines of exposure to the novel coronavirus as essential workers. And given that as

a nation we place little emphasis on building family strengths, it is not surprising that many families with young children are struggling with the anxiety of isolation and economic deprivation, and have found few hands outstretched to support them.

**Because the continuing pandemic means a slower economic recovery, additional aid to unemployed workers and their families is needed now. But then we need the more durable economic and family-oriented policies that will create stronger supports for families.**



### Policies to bridge the pandemic:

- Renew enhanced federal pandemic unemployment coverage of \$600 per week and more direct payments to families.
- Invest \$1 billion to support community agencies in outreach to families experiencing great economic and social stress to promote family strengths and prevent abuse and neglect.
- Provide \$100 billion in rental assistance to cover back rent and ward off eviction.
- Expand food and nutrition benefits as food insecurity mounts in households with children.

### Policies to build strong families for the future:

- **Economic security policies foundational to strengthening families with young children.** Create long-term solutions such as a \$15 federal minimum wage, enhanced and increased “take-up” of federal and state Earned Income Tax Credits, a child allowance through a Young Child Tax Credit and “Baby Bonds” to help close the wealth gap, starting at birth.
- **Family-oriented workplace policies.** Enact permanent national paid family and medical leave, paid sick days and fair work schedules policies as equitable ways to support all families.
- **Enhanced support for basic needs.** Provide greater ongoing investments to food programs, housing assistance and essentials such as diapers to help families create stable environments for their young children.
- **Community systems to strengthen families and support parents.** Create a substantial new funding stream to enable communities to build broad systems using strategies — such as home visiting, family resource centers and pediatric-based parenting and development support — to give parents and caregivers a clear path of support for nurturing children and meeting their families’ needs.
- **Equitable child welfare policies for infants and toddlers and their families.** Promote state policies and local approaches, such as Safe Babies Court Team™, to promote better outcomes for babies and families, including enhancing court oversight and collaborative problem-solving, ensuring health equity, strengthening and supporting families and embedding early childhood development principles in child welfare systems and practices.



## Positive Early Learning Experiences



The quality of babies' early learning experiences has a lasting effect on their preparedness for lifelong learning and success. **Overall, as a nation we are not emphasizing the ways early development is supported — through strong relationships and interactions with trusted adults — or the importance of providing services to ensure their foundational development is on track.** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, child care and other early learning opportunities for infants and toddlers fell far short of what children and families need.

- Despite indications that many infants and toddlers have environmental conditions that can undermine development, less than a third of infants and toddlers receive developmental screening.
- Only five states provide early intervention services to children in circumstances that place them at high risk for developmental delays.
- Only 4.2% of infants and toddlers in families with low to moderate income receive direct financial assistance for child care, when infant care is more costly than public college in many states.
- The vast majority of states set minimum quality requirements for infant-toddler child care too low to ensure babies have the opportunities for the interactions with skilled caregivers they need to grow socially, emotionally and cognitively.
- While Early Head Start has strong standards and proven benefits, funding constraints mean only a handful of babies and toddlers as well as pregnant women benefit from its comprehensive support for parenting and early development.

COVID-19 buffeted the fragile, underfunded early care and learning system, challenging even its more stable parts and bringing much of it to the brink of collapse. Head Start and Early Head Start, while challenged to adapt, used the program's stable funding structure to continue supporting families using remote services. Child care programs and providers, on the other hand, are small businesses with a precarious financial structure based mostly on parent payments and their own low wages. With little federal financial support forthcoming, many providers teeter on the brink of closing permanently. As an essential service,

## Positive Learning Experiences

their health and safety have not always been considered in pandemic policies. As the economy opens up public awareness of the essential nature of child care has grown, yet the child care system may not be able to respond without significant support. Another service critical to children with special needs is early intervention, where providers scrambled to use telehealth to

remain connected to the infants and toddlers whose development they support. Yet, the drop in well-child care visits raised concerns that the already low developmental screening rate, especially for low-income children, would drop farther with many children missing this key window on developmental needs.



### Policies to bridge the pandemic:

- Provide \$57 billion to stabilize the child care system.
- Provide \$20 billion through FY 2022 for Head Start and Early Head Start to meet sanitation, personnel costs, and infrastructure needs.
- Provide \$500 million to support Early Intervention services.

### Policies to build positive early learning experiences for the future:

- **Expansion of Early Head Start as a beacon of hope.** Expand Early Head Start to reach all eligible infants and toddlers while prioritizing enrolling significantly more pregnant women.
- **A comprehensive high-quality child care system for all working families.** Recognition that child care is a public good and a key foundation on which a strong economy that works for all rests requires a system of publicly-funded, high-quality child care, accessible to all and built on principles that will ensure it serves the needs of both the current and future workforce.
- **Expansion of Early Intervention (EI) as an essential part of the early care and learning system.** The federal funding structure for EI services should enable states to fully meet the developmental needs of infants and toddlers, including developmental screening and follow-up; helping families navigate the system; expanding the EI workforce and ensuring adequate reimbursement; ensuring coverage for more children who are at risk or could benefit from services; and incorporating more infant and early childhood mental health expertise and services.

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### ABOUT ZERO TO THREE:

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all infants and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, the organization has advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals, and policymakers.