



**START
STRONG
PA**

The Case for High- Quality Infant and Toddler Child Care

Why does high-quality infant and toddler child care matter?

Pennsylvania has made great strides in increasing access to and investments in high-quality early childhood education. The most significant increases have focused on pre-kindergarten programs for three- and four-year olds. In fact, in the past five years, Pennsylvania has increased the share of eligible children in publicly-funded, high-quality pre-k from 32% in 2014 to 44% in 2019.

However, research shows that the most critical phase of human brain development begins even before prekindergarten. The majority (85%) of that development occurs during the first three years of life. With 69% of families having both parents working and with 70% of all mothers in the labor force, the Commonwealth can further strengthen high-quality child care leading to a lasting impact on brain growth for thousands of Pennsylvania children under age three.

“Learning begins at birth which makes it essential that all children have the opportunity to receive care that is not only safe but encourages developmental, behavioral, and cognitive growth.”

—Dr. Pia Fenimore, Lancaster Pediatric Associates

Children that participate in high-quality early learning programs beginning as infants, such as those in the Abecedarian and Perry Preschool Projects, have positive long-term and multigenerational effects in education, employment, and health. Along with their educational attainment and employment success, participants in the Abecedarian Project showed improved adult physical health and increased healthy behaviors.² Researchers found Perry Preschool Project participants (especially males), who are now in their fifties, provide more stable home lives for their children - demonstrating the potential of multigenerational positive benefits from high-quality early care and education experiences.³

High-quality child care programs:

- 1) offer safe, nurturing, and responsive environments where children grow, learn, and succeed;
- 2) allow families to work knowing children are with qualified and caring professionals; and
- 3) foster the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of young children.

Infant and toddler care gives children a strong foundation while offering a support system for hardworking families and developing a strong community and economy. The Early Learning Investment Commission (ELIC) and Ready Nation released a study in 2019 which examined the economic impact of gaps in Pennsylvania child care. These gaps resulted in an economic cost of \$2.5 billion in lost earnings, productivity, and revenue. The report highlighted that 1/3 of families rely on formal child care and another 1/3 of families must make multiple arrangements and piece together informal child care in order to work.⁴ Parents, employers, and taxpayers benefit from an affordable and accessible child care system. Equally important, every family and child deserves access to high-quality early learning opportunities.

“Through our wide-ranging workforce development initiative, we have found that a big barrier to work for a large population of individuals is access to affordable child care. Addressing this issue is a key component to fixing the Commonwealth’s jobs skills gap; helping individuals enter and stay in the workforce; breaking the cycle of poverty; and better preparing and educating the next generation.”

— Gene Barr, PA Chamber President and CEO and a member of the Pennsylvania Early Learning Investment Commission



What is the current landscape in Pennsylvania?

Families

Pennsylvania is home to 1,270,433 families with children and 418,455 of those children are under three years old.⁵ As one of the largest expenses for many families, child care often exceeds the amount of the monthly rent or mortgage and may account for one quarter of a household’s budget. On average, Pennsylvania families pay \$7,680 annually (ranges from \$5,004–11,628) for family child care and \$9,504 annually (ranges from \$6,372–15,564) for center-based care.⁶

Child care providers

Although child care expenses for families are high, the full cost of high-quality child care is even greater for those who provide it. In 2018, Pennsylvania piloted an Infant Toddler Contracted Slots Program in which it attempted to pay programs closer to the cost of quality by setting rates at \$15,000 per child per year. Furthermore, other cost studies have shown that when teachers are compensated based on their degrees and credentials the cost should be as high as \$25,000 per infant.⁷ Paying infant and toddler teachers on par with kindergarten teachers would retain quality professionals in child care centers and yield the best results for children’s development.

Child care teachers

While quality expects and demands the appropriate knowledge and credentials of any professional, the median wage for a professional working with infants and toddlers in Pennsylvania is \$9.71.¹¹ Nationally, the annual turnover rate for early childhood educators is 30%, with low compensation cited as the top reason for leaving the field.¹²

Child care subsidies

Currently, there are 122,770 infants and toddlers eligible for the Child Care Works Subsidized Child Care Program, a mix of federal and state dollars designed to support financially eligible families working a minimum of 20 hours per week or 10 hours of education and 10 hours of work. A national study showed that parents who received subsidies are more likely to work and stay employed.⁸

Enrolled families pay a weekly copayment which varies according to family size and income, which are revised annually based on the Federal Poverty Guidelines. Subsidies provide critical support to struggling families for their child care expenses—yet 77% of eligible infants and toddlers remain unserved in Pennsylvania. As of September 2019, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) reports that there are 3,079 eligible infants and toddlers on the waitlist with an average waiting period of 99 days.⁹

“As a parent of an infant, I rely on my child care provider to have a high-quality and stimulating environment for my baby to develop and thrive.”

—Nikki Esposti, parent of an infant at Playhouse Children's Center in Punxsutawney

How does the Pennsylvania system rate quality?

Pennsylvania serves as a model for other states in the development of a quality rating and improvement system (QRIS). Developed in 2003, the Pennsylvania QRIS - Keystone STARS - is a tool used to assess and improve the quality of early learning programs. Levels include STAR 1 through STAR 4, with STAR 3 and 4 programs considered “high-quality.”

As of 2017, all certified (meet state minimum requirements for health and safety) child care programs receive a STAR 1 rating with the option to move up in quality rating by meeting additional standards.

The QRIS uses research-based standards focused on:

- Staff qualifications and professional development
- Programming (curriculum, classroom environment)
- Partnerships with family and community
- Leadership and management (business practices)

Unfortunately, only 43% of child care capacity in the state currently meets high-quality standards as determined by Keystone STARS.¹⁰ In addition to the STARS designation, teacher-child relationships play a critical role in quality environments.

Quality is rooted in relationships

The teacher-child relationship is the center of quality. Early childhood teachers are responsible for creating a safe, nurturing, and responsive environment for children. High-quality teachers recognize the importance of supporting the growth of a child's social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills, with the best results occurring when quality practices are consistent and continue throughout a child's time in the program. A teacher's knowledge comes through experience and credentials. Experience working with young children deepens their ability to establish and maintain relationships that support children's growth. As these early childhood teachers advance in their careers, professional development and education strengthens the quality of their



relationships and teaching. Early childhood teachers hold a variety of credentials and degrees ranging from a Child Development Associate (CDA), that requires nine hours of ECE credits and 120 hours of training, through advanced graduate degrees.

“Highly qualified staff, equipped with the necessary educational tools to appropriately develop and teach every child, is essential to providing high quality early education and child care for families.”

—Charles Dinofrio, President & CEO of Lehigh Valley Children's Centers, Inc.

High-quality also means connecting families with external community resources- including early intervention, home visiting, and other social services. For instance, early learning programs offer an opportunity for developmental assessments of young children so that children receive additional services as early as possible, reducing the need for special education in the later academic years. Early childhood educators can make more informed decisions and recommendations for the family and child when they remain consistent for a classroom and program.

What does this mean for Pennsylvania?

Start Strong PA calls on Pennsylvania policymakers to increase state funding so more children can access high-quality child care. State funding should eliminate the waitlist for children and ensure all eligible families can access a subsidy in order to work or attend school.

Start Strong PA also calls on federal policymakers to continue increasing investments in the Child Care and Development Block Grant. Pennsylvania should utilize additional federal funds to address rates, educator compensation, and training opportunities for professionals in the field.

High-quality infant and toddler care must be a priority: Pennsylvania's children, families, and workforce depend on it. Children deserve early learning experiences where they grow, learn, and succeed while families productively work and our economy booms.

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Start Strong PA aims to support healthy child development, working families, and the economy by increasing access to and affordability of high-quality child care programs for young children.