RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

Supporting the Professional Development of Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers

Key Highlights

- Defining the competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills, and attributes) that are essential for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers may help improve hiring, professional development, and workforce support practices, all which promote high-quality care for children.
- Research has shown that online professional development systems can support competency development in infant/toddler teachers and caregivers.

Overview

Infancy and toddlerhood are periods of childhood marked by rapid development that set the stage for life-long learning and well-being. High-quality child care and early education (CCEE)[a] during this time can facilitate positive developmental outcomes.[1,2,3] Creating high-quality early care environments for infants and toddlers requires a workforce that is well prepared and supported to teach and care for them in these specific developmental stages.

Competency: A piece of knowledge, a skill, or an attribute essential to the practice of teaching and caring for infants and toddlers.

- Knowledge is information that may be applied to practice.
- Skills are strategies or abilities that may be applied to practice.
- Attributes are attitudes, beliefs, or other characteristics that may influence the application of knowledge and skills to practice.[4]

[a] Child care and early education (CCEE) refers to caregiving and educational services for children from birth to age 13. CCEE includes center- and home-based settings for infants, toddlers, preschool- and school-aged children. CCEE refers to services for a larger age group than early care and education (ECE), which consists of services provided only for young children (birth to age 5 who are not yet in kindergarten). ECE programs are included within the definition of CCEE.



The information in this publication was drawn from two OPRE-funded reports completed by Mathematica:

Competencies of Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers: A Review of the Literature

This report provides a comprehensive review of the literature identifying infant/toddler competency frameworks and outcomes related to competencies.

An Exploration of Online Professional Development Systems Supporting the Competencies of Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers: Key Findings and Next Steps for Learning

This report describes findings from an exploration of online competency-based professional development frameworks that include infant/toddler teachers and caregivers.

Research Highlights

Child Care and Early Education Policy and Research Analysis

In other words, as with any workforce, infant/toddler teachers and caregivers need the relevant **competencies** to do their jobs well. The challenge is in 1) defining these competencies and 2) creating pathways for the workforce to obtain them.

In many professions, competency standards are indirectly set by requiring a certain degree to qualify for the role. However, there is currently no universal qualification needed to be an infant/toddler teacher or caregiver within and across states for center-based or home-based settings. The majority (59.8%) of center-based infant/toddler teachers and caregivers have less than an associate degree, and half (50.4%) of them do not have a Child Development Associate credential (CDA) or a state early childhood certification.[5] Among listed[b] home-based child care providers (88.3% of whom care for at least one child under the age of three), 58.6 percent have less than an associate degree and 40.8 percent[c] do not have a CDA or a state early childhood certification.[6] But, since postsecondary education is not accessible for much of the infant/toddler workforce, educational attainment is not necessarily the best way to gauge their competencies to support young children.

Competencies Needed in Infant/Toddler Teachers and Caregivers

The field needs a better way to understand how to hire and support teachers and caregivers who are ready to promote development and learning of infants and toddlers. In other words, we need clear frameworks for the competencies needed in this workforce. When we know what knowledge, skills, and attributes are essential to providing high-quality infant/toddler care, we can better tailor professional development (PD) opportunities for this workforce. Teachers and caregivers can learn and improve specific competencies over time, so a **competency framework** that leads to more effective PD is likely to improve caregiving for infants and toddlers over time.

Competency Framework:
A compilation of competencies intended to convey the range of knowledge, skills, and attributes essential to a particular area of practice, job, or profession.[7]

A range of competency frameworks for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers are already being used in practice, and they have important similarities and differences. The two recent research studies summarized in this highlight (linked above) describe 1) existing competency frameworks for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers in center-based and family child care settings and 2) how they relate to child, family, teacher/caregiver, classroom, and program outcomes. Using an internet search, researchers identified 58 competency frameworks, 51 of which were developed for teachers and caregivers in specific states and seven of which focused on teachers and caregivers nationally.

[b] The 2012 and 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) survey provides the following definition: "Listed individuals appeared on state or national lists of early care and education services, such as licensed, regulated, license-exempt, or registered home-based providers. States use these terms with varying definitions and attach varying levels of program and professional standards, oversight and monitoring" (Home-based Early Care and Education Providers in 2012 and 2019: Counts and Characteristics, p.3).

[c] This value reflects CDA and state certification for listed, home-based providers who care for at least one child with whom they did not have a prior personal relationship. The 2019 National Survey of Early Care and Education from which this value was drawn did not collect this information consistently from home-based providers who only cared for children with whom they had a prior personal relationship.

The following domains appeared across many frameworks:

- Instructional planning, child assessment, and progress monitoring
- Arts and creativity
- Health, safety, and nutrition
- Social and emotional development support
- Cognitive development support
- Language and literacy support
- Motor development support
- Cultural identity and responsiveness
- Family communication and engagement
- Community partnership
- Professionalism

Twenty-nine of the identified frameworks were based on or aligned with existing standards established by national organizations, such as:

- The National Association for the Education of Young Children Standards for Initial and Advanced Early Childhood Professional Preparation Programs[8]
- The Child Development Associate Competency Standards[9]
- The Division for Early Childhood Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education[10]

In addition to analyzing all of the competency frameworks together, the researchers also conducted in-depth case studies of five states that created their own frameworks. Profiles of each state—California, Illinois, Maine, Texas, and Oregon—describe how their competency framework was developed and implemented. These profiles give CCEE leaders recent examples of how states use competency frameworks:

- California: California Early Childhood Educator Competencies[11]
- Illinois: Gateways Infant Toddler Credential[12]
- Maine: Maine Infant Toddler Credential[13]
- Texas: CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies[14]
- Oregon: State-developed Core Knowledge Categories and Standards and the ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators[15]

These frameworks are intended to, in the long term, lead to better teaching and caregiving and, in turn, better child outcomes. While there has been little research to date on the link between specific competencies and child outcomes, there is compelling evidence that teachers/caregivers can improve their competencies and increase their knowledge and skills over time.

Online Professional Development Supporting Competency Development

Providing targeted PD can support the growth of specific competencies and may be an effective way to make CCEE environments more supportive of infants and toddlers**.** Delivering competency-based PD online may be an accessible format that allows teachers and caregivers to participate more readily. However, there are relatively few existing online PD systems that include content specific to infant/toddler teacher and caregiver competencies. A recent scan of existing online PD systems identified five systems that include such content, three of which have at least

one study of their outcomes.[16] CCEE leaders who are interested in supporting competency development among their infant/toddler teachers and caregivers might consider using or embedding aspects of these PD approaches in their own supports.

Online PD Systems that Support Infant/Toddler Teacher and Caregiver Competencies			
	Contents	Format	Features
Children's Learning Institute (CLI) Engage	Originally developed for Text School Ready Project (TSR) to support early childhood professionals serving children from birth to age six.	• Several competency-aligned trainings for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers. • Self-paced training modules. • Many narrated videos. • Pre-test & post-test questions. • Open-ended reflection questions.	Standalone courses are free and publicly available. Positive outcome demonstrated in at least one study.
Virtual Lab School (VLS)	Originally developed for early childhood professionals working in child and youth programs run by the U.S. Military.	• Self-paced tracks. • Separate track for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers. • Aligned with Child Development Associate (CDA) Competency Standards and other topics. • Follows LEAD format: Learn (reading and watching videos), Explore (self-refection), Apply (strategies to implement), and Demonstrate (quiz).	Online content is free and publicly available. Positive outcome demonstrated in at least one study.

Online PD Systems that Support Infant/Toddler Teacher and Caregiver Competencies			
	Contents	Format	Features
We Grow Together (WGT) [17]	Developed by Mathematica to help teachers and caregivers of infants and toddlers understand how their interactions with young children support child development.	• Self-paced modules. • Includes videos, handouts, presentations with voiceover. • Users can download and print content. • Competency self-assessment with checklists and self-reflection activity questions. • Aligned with a research-based observational tool (Quality of Caregiver-Child Interactions for Infants and Toddlers; Q-CCIIT). • Designed for use in the context of relationship with a PD coach.	Online content is free and publicly available. Positive outcome demonstrated in at least one study.
CDA with CLASS®	Developed by Teachstone for infant, toddler, and preschool teachers and caregivers earning a CDA.	• Aligned with the CDA and with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool. • Option for self-guided or fully facilitated course. • Competencies assessed with multiple-choice assessments. • Part of larger CLASS system that includes online resources and virtual coaching. • Separate course available for CDA renewal.	Available for a fee.

Online PD Systems that Support Infant/Toddler Teacher and Caregiver Competencies			
	Contents	Format	Features
Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN)	Developed by the state of Maine Office of Child and Family Services, Department of Health and Human Services as an in-service training for a wide array of early childhood professionals.	• Embedded in larger Maine PD network that includes in-person trainings, communities of practice, and consultation. • Aligned with CDA and Maine Infant Toddler Credential. • Includes instructor-facilitated course, narrated videos, and on-demand courses. • Some courses are specifically for those earning an infant and toddler credential or those working with infants and toddlers. • Competencies assessed through a multiple-choice test after each module and knowledge checks before and after the course. • Includes self-reflection activity questions.	Available to users in any state. Some content is free and other content requires a fee.

Note: ACF does not endorse the online professional development systems linked above, and cannot guarantee the quality or accuracy of information contained on externally linked websites.

Summary

Together, the two studies described above outline what we know about the competencies needed to be an infant/toddler teacher or caregiver, and what supports are available to help them attain these competencies. There are no universal competencies for infant/toddler teachers and caregivers, yet the summary of existing competency frameworks resulted in a list of eleven domains that are commonly accepted as critical for this workforce. Better understanding of the needed competencies informs efforts to create and refine PD opportunities for this workforce. Researchers identified five online PD systems, each of which is tailored for an audience and/or assessment tool. Researchers identified five online PD systems, each of which is tailored for an audience and/or assessment tool. More attention is needed to 1) develop a universal competency framework and 2) provide PD for those competencies at scale. Additional work is also needed to address larger systemic issues for this workforce such as poor compensation and limited career advancement opportunities.

Equity Considerations for Supporting Infant/Toddler Teachers & Caregivers

The early childhood workforce—predominantly composed of women, over 40 percent of which are women of color—receives lower compensation and experiences more barriers to career advancement than most other professionals.[18] Moreover, teachers and caregivers who work with infants and toddlers make an average of $2 less per hour than those who work with 3–5-year-old children.[19] It is critical to acknowledge and account for the structural and systemic barriers that infant/toddler teachers and caregivers face when planning and implementing efforts to support their competency development. Focusing on competencies alone, without addressing these larger issues, may not be enough to produce meaningful change.

For additional context about the characteristics of the early childhood workforce, it may be helpful to review the Early Childhood Workforce Index,[20] which includes state profiles. For a historical exploration of the barriers and inequities that exist for the early child workforce, CCEE leaders may want to read the Mary Pauper paper.[21]

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