

Gaston County: Infant Toddler Child Care Profile

Children's development and learning in the first few years lay the foundation for all of the years that follow. Children who attend high-quality early education programs are better prepared for success in school—academically, socially and emotionally. However, in North Carolina there is an extreme shortage of quality, affordable child care that supports families and helps infants and toddlers grow, learn and succeed.

North Carolina needs to increase access to child care assistance for working families with infants and toddlers.

- **Infants and toddlers are missing out on opportunities for healthy development and early learning.** A child's brain grows more quickly during their first three years of life than at any other point. Ensuring that infants and toddlers have access to quality early care and learning programs lays the foundation for lifelong learning.¹
- **Quality care and learning is out of reach for low-income working families, and all North Carolina counties face child care subsidy shortages.** The average annual cost of infant child care in North Carolina is \$9,255.² A single parent with one infant earning \$32,920, which could qualify for child care assistance at 200% of the federal poverty level, would need to spend almost one third of their income on infant child care. In **Gaston County**, 2,099 infants and toddlers could qualify for child care assistance under current eligibility standards. However, only 367 infants and toddlers received subsidy in 2018, 17% of all those who could qualify.³
- **Infants and toddlers wait longer for child care assistance, missing crucial developmental opportunities.** The waitlist for child care assistance does not measure all unmet need, but is one indicator of need at a specific point in time. Across the state, infants and toddlers make up more than half of children under six on the waitlist, but receive child care assistance less frequently than preschool children. In **Gaston County**, 396 infants and toddlers were on the subsidy waitlist in September 2018, comprising 49% of the 0-5 waitlist population.⁴

North Carolina needs to address the acute shortage of infant toddler child care programs.

- **Working parents with babies want access to quality infant toddler child care.** In North Carolina, 67% of children under six live in households with all parents working.⁵ It's important for parents to know that they have a safe, nurturing and stimulating environment in which to leave their children while they continue to increase the financial security of their families.
- **North Carolina qualifies as a "child care desert" when it comes to infant toddler child care.** Almost all, 99 of 100, North Carolina counties qualify as child care deserts with more than three infants and toddlers competing for every available slot.⁶ In **Gaston County**, there are 6.25 infants and toddlers per available child care slot.⁷
- **Even in counties with programs serving infants and toddlers, quality child care is scarce.** In **Gaston County**, 45 programs serving infants and toddlers have four or five stars, 66% of all infant-toddler programs. 821 infants and toddlers (67% of all infants and toddlers enrolled in licensed child care) are served in these high-quality programs.⁸

¹ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2016). 8 Things to Remember about Child Development.

² Economic Policy Institute. (2016). "The Cost of Child Care in North Carolina."

³ Data retrieved from U.S. Census, (2000); DCDEE, (2017); and NC FAST, (November 2018).

⁴ Data from DCDEE, September 2018.

⁵ NC KidsCount. (2017). Children Under Age 6 with All Available Parents in the Labor Force.

⁶ Jessen-Howard, S., Malik, R., Workman, S., & Hamm, K. (2018). Understanding Infant and Toddler Child Care Deserts. Center for American Progress.

⁷ Data from Jessen-Howard et al, 2018.

⁸ Data from DCDEE, August 2018.