

Supporting Strong Families and Communities for North Carolina Babies and Toddlers

Supportive and supported families and communities play a critical role in building strong foundations for learning. Stable, secure, nurturing relationships with competent, supported, caring adults is a key factor in ensuring the healthy development of babies and toddlers.

Young children who experience toxic stress from early experiences in their homes or communities can suffer from changes in the neural circuitry and chemical composition in their brains, making them less resilient over time, more likely to suffer from physical and mental illness, and less likely to meet early literacy goals. On the other hand, positive experiences, including parent and child interactions like talking, playing, eating meals, and reading together helps children grow stronger emotionally, develop larger vocabularies, and learn to read more easily.



Families need to be supported to ensure babies' and toddlers' optimal development. Both formal family support services and informal support networks can help buffer the negative effects of living conditions like poverty and family stress, which can compromise the quality of parent and child interactions. Family economic supports, mental health and substance abuse services, and resources that build parents' skills and knowledge about child development can improve caregivers' capacity to effectively parent and improve babies' and toddlers' outcomes.

Research demonstrates the role supported and supportive families and communities play in preparing babies and toddlers to meet a critical developmental benchmark—reading on grade-level by the end of third grade. The Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Measures of Success Framework outlines research-based measures that impact early literacy. Family and community measures from the Pathways Framework that are relevant for babies and toddlers include formal and informal family supports, positive interactions between caregivers and children, children being safe from abuse and neglect, parents having sufficient knowledge of child development and parenting skills, and reading with children. Policy factors that impact these critical family and community measures include:

- Parental education and educational supports
- Paid leave
- Family substance use and access to treatment
- Parental depression and access to screening and treatment
- Parental Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)
- Poverty screening
- Families eating meals together
- Books in the home

Pathways also outlines a set of children's living conditions that matter for early literacy. When these conditions are positive, babies and toddlers and their families are more likely to thrive; when they are negative, they are more likely to struggle. The Pathways children's living conditions include:

- Family economic security
- Safe and economically viable neighborhoods
- Environmental health
- Housing stability
- Trauma-informed communities
- Equity

*This report is based on **Zero To Three's Infants and Toddlers in the Policy Picture: A Self-Assessment Toolkit for States**. The NC Department of Health and Human Services and organizations on the Think Babies Leadership Team provided information in 2018 on North Carolina's family support policies, which are shared here. The self-assessment also includes questions about children's health, early intervention and early education. NCECF produced two additional briefs sharing those policies, and they are available at www.buildthefoundation.org*

Specific state-level policies can support families with young children. National experts have found that when states have the following policies in place, babies and toddlers are more likely to thrive.

BASIC NEEDS

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
Exempt single parents from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) work requirement until youngest child is a least one year old.	YES	25 states	
Reduce the TANF work requirement to 20 hours or less for single parents with children under six years old.	YES	30 states	
Offer exemptions and/or extensions of the TANF benefit time limit for women who are pregnant or caring for a child under six years old.	NO	16 states	
State has a state minimum wage that exceeds the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.	NO	29 states	North Carolina's minimum wage matches the federal minimum wage at \$7.25. It was last increased in 2009.
State exempts single-parent families of three below the poverty level from personal income tax.	NO	42 states	
State offers a refundable state earned income tax credit (EITC).	NO	23 states	NC had a refundable state EITC from 2007-2013. It was eliminated for tax year 2014.
State offers a refundable state dependent care tax credit.	NO	11 states	NC had a child and dependent care tax credit. It was eliminated for tax year 2014.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- North Carolina's TANF work requirement policies allow exemptions for single parents with very young children, recognizing that young children's well-being is dependent on being safe and nurtured. How could extending the time limits on TANF eligibility for pregnant women and those with very young children also support children's healthy development?
- Research demonstrates that tax credits for working families, when generous and refundable, both lift families out of poverty and prevent some families from slipping into poverty. How could reinstating refundable tax credits for low-income families improve North Carolina's economy?

THINK BABIES™ NC

Think Babies™ NC, funded by the Pritzker Children’s Initiative and Zero To Three, aims to improve outcomes for North Carolina’s babies and toddlers by advancing policies that support their healthy development. Think Babies™ NC is aligned with the NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative and the NC Early Childhood Action Plan. The initiative is led by the NC Early Education Coalition with support from the NC Early Childhood Foundation and a Leadership Team of state and local organizations focused on advancing public awareness and policy solutions for infants, toddlers, and their families. The Think Babies™ NC policy agenda includes two policies focused on supporting families.

- Increase opportunities for home visiting and parenting education programs.
- Adopt paid family and medical leave for employees.

HOME VISITING AND PARENTING EDUCATION

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
State has statewide centralized or coordinated intake system(s) to help connect families to appropriate home visiting or parenting education programs.	NO	Four states have centralized statewide intake. Seven states have a statewide system of regional/local intake systems	<p>The Statewide Home Visiting and Parenting Education System Planning Team is being launched in May. The North Carolina Partnership for Children is serving as the “backbone” agency to support the planning, in partnership with the NC Division of Public Health and UNC-Chapel Hill. Some of these policies will be considered by the Team. A few local coordinated intake systems exist, but no regional or statewide system is in place.</p> <p>A workgroup of the Home Visiting Consortium, led by the Division of Public Health, has formed to begin exploring core competencies for parenting education and home visiting professionals.</p>
State has core competencies for parenting education and home visiting professionals.	NO	24 states	
State provides early childhood mental health consultation to support home visiting programs.	NO	<i>Data not available</i>	
State tracks common outcomes across home visiting programs.	NO	<i>Data not available</i>	

CRITICAL QUESTION

- North Carolina does not have any of the recommended policies in place around home visiting and parenting education. How can the state coordinate and streamline these policies, programs and services to create a comprehensive home visiting and parenting education system for the state?

PAID LEAVE

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
State has paid family leave policy providing full or partial replacement of wages after birth or adoption.	NO	3 states	
One or more local jurisdictions in the state have a paid family leave policy providing full or partial replacement of wages after birth or adoption.	YES	<i>Data not available</i>	In NC, 16 cities or counties have passed paid parental leave policies for local government employees for the birth or adoption of a new child or to care for an ill family member.
State has a policy requiring employers to provide paid sick leave that allows parents to take paid time off when a child is sick.	NO	4 states	

CRITICAL QUESTION

- How can North Carolina build on local successes in adopting paid family leave policies to extend those supports to children and families across the state?

GOOD FOR FAMILIES IS GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Nearly 70 percent of young children in North Carolina have all available parents in the workforce. Parents are struggling to balance work and family obligations, and employers are losing out:

- 50 percent of fathers in the US say they have passed up work opportunities, switched jobs, or quit to care for their children. 75 percent of mothers say the same.
- Nearly 40 percent of US parents say they have left a job because it lacked flexibility.
- Employers in North Carolina and across the country report growing challenges in hiring qualified workers. Within the next two years, an estimated 5 million jobs will go unfilled.

Providing family-friendly benefits like paid leave, pregnancy accommodations, and flexible scheduling provide a competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent, increasing productivity and employee satisfaction, and reducing absenteeism. Employees who work in family-friendly organizations are more satisfied with their jobs, more engaged with their work and less likely to leave the workforce. Family-friendly benefits also have a direct, positive impact on children’s and parents’ health and well-being, building a strong foundation for future learning at a critical time in childhood development. When we support young children in their earliest years, they grow into healthy kids who are ready for school and for life—and our communities, workforce and economy become stronger and more productive.



Family Forward NC is an innovative initiative to improve children’s health and well-being and keep North Carolina’s businesses competitive. It is business-led change to increase access to research-based, family-friendly practices — big and small — that improve workplace productivity, recruitment and retention; grow a strong economy; and support children’s healthy development. The Guide to Family Forward Workplaces offers evidence-based guidance on benefits and their impact on children, families and businesses; sample policies and case studies from North Carolina employers who have successfully implemented family-friendly policies; and steps for how to get started implementing new policies or enhancing existing ones. Access the Guide online at: www.familyforwardnc.com

Family Forward NC is fostering a community of employers who are inspired to support the health and well-being of our state’s current and future workforce. It is led by the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation and supported by Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina.

CHILD WELFARE

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
State requires frequent visitation with birth parents for infants and toddlers in out-of-home care (foster/kinship care) when safe and appropriate.	NO	15 states require visitation at least once a week	The NC Division of Social Services plans to bring ZERO TO THREE’s Safe Babies Court Team model to NC. This model offers concrete strategies that allow the professionals engaged in the system to improve babies’ and toddlers’ and their families’ experiences of the child welfare system. The model lays out a developmentally-appropriate way to respond to maltreatment of babies and toddlers and has the potential to impact these child welfare policies in NC. Learn more about the Safe Babies Court Team model at https://www.zerotothree.org/our-work/safe-babies-court-team
State policy requires more frequent case reviews for infants and toddlers in out-of-home placements than for older children.	NO	4 states	
State policy requires more frequent permanency hearings for infants and toddlers in out-of-home placements than for older children.	NO	6 states	

POLICY	NC HAS POLICY IN PLACE?	# OF STATES WITH POLICY IN PLACE	POLICY AND PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS
For infants and toddlers in out-of-home placements, state policy specifically promotes keeping young children in their first placement.	YES	39 states	
State initiates concurrent planning as soon as possible (or within 24 hours of removal) to ensure that infants and toddlers in out-of-home placements are moved quickly into permanent placements.	NO	14 states	

CRITICAL QUESTION

- North Carolina does not have child welfare policies in place specific to babies and toddlers. How could the science behind the importance of the earliest years for building a strong foundation for future health and learning support a differentiated response for the youngest children? How could the state's investment in the Safe Babies Court Team model be leveraged to impact these policies?

SOURCES

NC Early Childhood Foundation, *NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading Action Framework*, February 2019. Available online at: https://files.buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FINAL_NCECF_report-pathways-actionframework_digital-spreads-020519.pdf

NC Early Childhood Foundation, *Shared Measures of Success to Put North Carolina's Children on a Pathway to Grade-Level Reading*, 2017. Available online at: https://files.buildthefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Measures-of-Success-Framework_FINAL.pdf

NC Early Childhood Foundation, *Guide to Family Forward Workplaces*, 2019. Available online at: <https://familyforwardnc.com/guide/>



PATHWAYS

to grade-level reading

Pathways to Grade-Level Reading (Pathways), an initiative of the NC Early Childhood Foundation in collaboration with NC Child, The North Carolina Partnership for Children, Inc., and BEST NC, aims to improve third-grade reading outcomes in North Carolina by taking a coordinated birth-through-age-eight approach with aligned policies and practices that focus on:

- Children's Health and Development, Beginning at Birth
- Supported and Supportive Families and Communities
- High-Quality Birth-through-Age-Eight Learning Environments, with Regular Attendance

The Pathways Measures of Success Framework and Action Framework were co-created by hundreds of cross-sector early childhood leaders and stakeholders.

Some of the Actions recommended to support babies' and toddlers' families include:

- Screen children and families for social determinants of health and parental depression and connect them to appropriate services, including two-generation interventions
- Create family-friendly employment policies
- Increase access to affordable housing
- Ensure accessible transportation to early care programs, schools and health services
- Expand child care subsidies and provide wrap-around services for high-quality early care and education
- Support families in advocating for their children
- Support systems to engage deeply with families, and require linked strategies across programs to engage and learn from families
- Be inclusive in planning and designing services, and ensure that systems are culturally and linguistically relevant and competent
- Use data to track community needs and service provision