

A photograph of a baby being held up by an adult. The baby is wearing a pink and white striped long-sleeved shirt and blue denim jeans. The adult is wearing blue denim jeans and brown shoes. They are standing in a grassy field with trees in the background. The text 'NEXT STEPS' is overlaid in large white letters, and 'FOR INFANTS, TODDLERS, & THEIR FAMILIES' is overlaid in smaller white letters below it.

NEXT STEPS

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The first 1,000 days in a child's life are a time of great opportunity and tremendous vulnerability. The foundation of long-term social and emotional health is established during these earliest years while physical, cognitive, and language growth proceeds rapidly. Yet, infants and toddlers across the U.S. and in Rhode Island are more likely to live in poverty than people in any other age group. Infants and toddlers are also more likely to experience abuse or neglect than other age groups. Rhode Island has a history as a leader in supporting children and families. Our state's next steps should ensure prevention, protection, progress, and possibility for all our infants and toddlers.

The **recommended Rhode Island infant and toddler policy priorities** were developed by a public-private steering committee and leadership team based on input from more than 200 early childhood experts from across the state. The process was coordinated by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT with technical assistance from Zero to Three through the Alliance for Early Success. Many of the recommendations come from Zero to Three's Self-Assessment Checklist for States and build on the work of the Rhode Island Early Learning Council, Successful Start, and other state planning teams.

This document highlights **policy areas that require increased attention and resources**, and it identifies **policy areas of strength** that the state should maintain and improve over time. A key area of strength is Rhode Island's policies promoting children's health, including access to health insurance, prenatal care, and well-child care. Recognized as a national leader, Rhode Island needs to maintain and continue to strengthen our child and family health systems.

ECONOMIC SECURITY

Infants and toddlers are more likely to live in poverty than any other age group. Living in poverty during early childhood has a profound negative impact on the development of skills and knowledge necessary for success in school and in life. Families with infants and toddlers face many challenges in achieving economic security. Housing and child care are the biggest expenses for families with young children.

JOBS: Expand job opportunities and work supports to ensure all parents of infants and toddlers are on a pathway to economic security. Help employers understand the needs of pregnant women and families with very young children and connect families with resources.



HOUSING:

- Develop strategies to meet the immediate needs of families experiencing a housing crisis, including rapid referral to a safe and appropriate shelter or a hotel voucher if no shelter is available and the family has no safe place to stay.
- Reduce the length of time families with young children stay in shelters and turn focus to homelessness prevention and rapid re-housing.
- Prioritize the most vulnerable families, including families with pregnant women, infants and toddlers, for available housing options.

- Invest state funds to create and preserve existing affordable housing, prevent and reduce evictions and foreclosures, and expand access to subsidized, long-term, safe affordable rental housing for families with young children.
- Improve the health and safety of neighborhoods, particularly in high-poverty communities.

CHILD CARE: Strengthen the state's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) by:

- Restoring CCAP eligibility for all working families with incomes between 180% and 225% of the federal poverty level. Families with incomes at this level cannot afford licensed child care without a subsidy.
- Providing at least 12 weeks of child care during periods of unemployment to support job search and provide continuity of care for children.
- Allowing low-income families to use CCAP when parents are engaged in education and job training programs.

EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT: Expand Rhode Island's Earned Income Tax Credit for low-wage working families with children, while keeping it fully refundable.

PARENT EDUCATION LEVELS: Help new mothers and new fathers complete their education (high school, professional training, and/or higher education) so they are not trapped in low-wage jobs and they can move up the economic ladder.

Maintain Current Focus: Ensure pregnant women and families with young children have stable access to **affordable health insurance** through Rlte Care. Promote the availability of Temporary Caregiver Insurance, Rhode Island's new **paid family leave** program. Enroll more eligible pregnant women, infants, and young children in the **WIC and SNAP programs** to reduce food insecurity and promote healthy growth and development.

MENTAL HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Babies develop the capacity to form close and secure relationships from the moment they are born. They depend on committed and nurturing parents and caregivers to help them express and regulate emotions and learn from the world around them. An infant and early childhood mental health approach promotes wellness, prevents adverse outcomes in the context of stress or risk, and treats mental health symptoms and disorders as necessary. All professionals who work with infants and toddlers have a role to play in fostering healthy relationships as a critical foundation for early development.

ROUTINE SCREENING: Establish policies and supports to implement routine depression and psychosocial screening and referral through obstetric and pediatric health care practices and WIC offices, for all pregnant women and parents of young children.

MENTAL HEALTH TREATMENT: Ensure access to infant/toddler and family mental health consultation and treatment by qualified mental health professionals. Provide professionals in pediatric health care practices and in early care and education programs with rapid access to qualified infant and early childhood mental health consultants to assess, evaluate, and facilitate referrals for follow-up and treatment as necessary.



FAMILY SUPPORT & PARENTING

Babies don't arrive with instruction manuals. In order to develop to their full potential, children need loving, prepared parents who are "crazy about them" and who can provide a stable environment with opportunities to learn about the world. Every parent needs time and family and community support to develop relationships and care for their children. Evidence shows we can help the most vulnerable parents and families avoid problems that result from "toxic stress" (early exposure to adverse experiences) and build stronger families with evidence-based programs.

EVIDENCE-BASED FAMILY HOME VISITING: Broaden eligibility for the existing evidence-based family home visiting programs in Rhode Island by accepting enrollment of vulnerable families from every community in the state and by allowing families with children over 6 months of age to participate.

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS: Expand the availability of effective community-based resources and parenting programs to help families with young children strengthen social networks and build confidence in supporting their children's development. Strengthen and sustain initiatives to help families provide enriched language environments for infants and toddlers.

INFANT/TODDLER WORKFORCE: Support cross-sector professionals to develop infant-toddler expertise by establishing an endorsement system in Rhode Island (based on the Michigan system adopted by 20 states) that provides a pathway integrating infant/toddler mental health principles into practice across service sectors.

CHILD WELFARE: Expand child welfare and family court alternatives to removing young babies from parental care. If a child needs to be removed from her/his home, ensure placements are stable. Whenever reunification is under consideration, provide comprehensive support to families to maintain and re-build parent-child relationships, including daily in-person interaction through supportive visitation.

Maintain Current Focus: Ensure children and families have access to **health insurance** through Rte Care. Continue to move forward with universal developmental and behavioral screenings for all young children following the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines, and include **screening for child and family mental health**.

CHILD WELFARE: Prioritize child welfare resources to meet the needs of young children who have experienced maltreatment. Ensure families with young children who are involved in the child welfare system have adequate resources and high-priority access to effective interventions (e.g., drug treatment, mental health treatment, domestic violence programs, and intensive family support) so they can establish and maintain a stable, nurturing, and responsive home environment.

Maintain Current Focus: Promote use of Rhode Island's **paid family leave program** for both mothers and fathers. Sustain investments to provide access to **evidence-based family home visiting programs** for vulnerable families.

HIGH-QUALITY EARLY LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Emotionally-secure relationships developed with parents and caregivers during infancy are the foundation for early learning. Infants and toddlers learn how the world works and how to regulate their own emotions by interacting with adults. Secure relationships allow infants and toddlers to explore and learn from their surroundings and develop foundational language and literacy, executive function, math/spatial, and other critical knowledge and skills across all developmental domains.

CHILD CARE: Improve the quality of infant/toddler child care by:

- Adopting best practices for child care license monitoring, including conducting at least two inspections per year for all licensed facilities, posting licensing inspection reports on the internet for public review, and maintaining recommended caseload levels for licensors.
- Implementing a system of tiered reimbursement rates for the Child Care Assistance Program so child care programs have resources to meet higher quality standards required by BrightStars, the state's Quality Rating and Improvement System.
- Using state contracts to ensure the availability of high-quality infant care (at BrightStars level 5) in communities with large concentrations of low-income families.

EARLY INTERVENTION: Ensure all children with developmental delays and disabilities have access to Early Intervention by expanding outreach and screening in low-income and at-risk communities to find and enroll eligible children in Early Intervention.

EARLY HEAD START: Expand access to Early Head Start and expand collaboration between Early Head Start and community-based child care programs to better meet the needs of low-income children in child care.

INFANT/TODDLER WORKFORCE: Strengthen the infant/toddler workforce across the early care and education system by:

- Providing professional development opportunities, resources, and supports to improve infant/toddler relationship-based practices, including initiatives designed to enrich language environments, establish culturally and linguistically responsive practices, and promote infant mental health.
- Ensuring all infant and toddler educators and program administrators are able to participate in professional development on the Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards.
- Developing and implementing strategies to improve the wages of professionals who work with infants and toddlers and their families.



- Exploring the development of a state infant/toddler credential that crosses service sectors (child care, home visiting, and Early Intervention) and recognizes an individual's qualifications for working with children under age 3 and their families. Link the credential to higher education systems at entry level, AA, and BA levels.

CHILD WELFARE: Ensure infants and toddlers who have experienced maltreatment have access to high-quality early learning and development programs (Early Head Start, Early Intervention, and/or high-quality child care).

Maintain Current Focus: Continue efforts to provide **universal newborn screening**. Ensure all families with infants and toddlers are connected with a high-quality, responsive, pediatric **medical home**. Move forward with efforts to implement **universal developmental and autism screenings** at recommended ages with referral to appropriate follow-up evaluation and intervention when indicated. Promote **car seat safety, early oral health, safe sleep, and lead poisoning prevention**.

Use the **BrightStars Quality Rating and Improvement System** to improve the quality of infant/toddler child care programs. Promote the use of the **Rhode Island Early Learning and Development Standards**.

ORGANIZATIONS ENDORSING RHODE ISLAND'S INFANT & TODDLER POLICY PRIORITIES

Rhode Island Early Learning Council
Successful Start Steering Committee
Early Intervention Interagency Coordinating Council
RI Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition
RI Alliance to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and Empower Young Families
RI Association for Infant Mental Health
Washington County Coalition for Children



INFANT & TODDLER POLICY PRIORITIES STEERING COMMITTEE

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