



# MAPPING THE GAP™

## INFANT & TODDLER CHILD CARE IN AMERICA

Child Care Aware® of America's (CCAoA) vision is that every family in the United States has access to a high quality, affordable child care system that supports children's growth, development and educational advancement and creates positive economic impact for families and communities. For working families, finding and paying for high-quality care for their very young children (birth to age three) can be especially challenging. The following paper describes key aspects of quality early childhood education for children under three, cost drivers and affordability of child care and the overall lack of access to care that families face when seeking care for an infant or toddler. In addition, we provide a snapshot of solutions states and communities are utilizing to close the gap for families, as well as a series of policy recommendations.

### Quality of Care

Birth to three is an incredibly important period of growth and development for children: brain development will never again occur as quickly as it does during this time and children are learning rapidly. Because of this, child care is more than just a workforce support for young children – it is pivotal to their development.

Caring for children ages zero to three requires awareness of how children develop, as well as individualized attention given to each child while in child care. Highly-credentialed early childhood educators in well-regulated settings are imperative to the quality of infant care. However, finding or training enough workers who meet these guidelines can present a problem all on its own, as infant and toddler care is labor intensive and requires low adult to child ratios. The [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\)](#) recommends a staff-to-student ratio of 1:4 (and no higher than 1:6) for infants and toddlers. To ensure early childhood educators are properly trained to work with the youngest learners, many states have or are developing [credentials for infant/toddler educators](#). These credentials ensure child care staff are specialized in the care of infants and toddlers. In many states, Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&Rs) agencies provide access to training, coaching and other resources to support care providers in obtaining credentialing and ensuring they are able to provide high-quality child care across settings.

In Illinois, representatives with various perspectives collaborated to design an [Infant Toddler Credential](#) specific for early childhood educators working with children zero to three. Administered through Illinois Network of Child Care Resources and Referral Agencies (INCCRRA)—the state-wide CCR&R— the system covers seven content areas including human growth and development; health, safety and well-being; observation and assessment; curriculum design; interactions, relationships and environments; family and community relationships; and personal and professional development. Focusing the content in each of these topic areas on birth to three allows for targeted learning about this critical time of development to help inform and improve the quality of care infants and toddlers receive.

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In addition to an experienced staff, child care settings need to be well-regulated to protect their young charges. The U.S. Office of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) offers a set of minimum health and safety guidelines that set a baseline for early care, known as [Caring For Our Children Basics](#) (CFOC Basics). While these are not federal requirements, they provide a federal standard for child care providers to follow and can give parents more information about the safety of the care they choose for their children. Components such as these ensure children are getting the developmental support they need at the most formative years of their life.

Even with the thorough guidelines and best practices outlined by the federal government and subject matter experts, child care regulations and guidelines are largely left up to the states. While state licensing regulations must align with the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), state child care licensing regulations can differ dramatically from state to state and by type of child care. Child Care Aware® of America has recently analyzed how each state's requirements (including those relevant to infant/toddler care) align with CFOC Basics standards in its [Child Care State Licensing Database](#). This alignment is a first step to providing a roadmap for states to improve and refine their regulations to ensure that all licensed child care provides a safe and healthy environment for children.

## Cost of Infant & Toddler Care

According to the [Department of Health and Human Services](#) (HHS), child care should cost no more than 7 percent of a family's income. *Child Care Aware® of America's [Parents and the High Cost of Care Report: 2017](#)* found that zero state averages met this requirement – child care is unaffordable for families across the country. The least affordable state for center-based infant care is Massachusetts, where the average annual cost is more than \$20,000. This comes in at approximately 17 percent of the median income for a married couple, while single parents are paying approximately 71 percent of the median income. In some states, including Massachusetts, families living at the poverty level would have to pay their entire income towards center-based child care.

High-quality care in all settings, from child care centers to family child care homes, is difficult for many parents to pay for, and even more so for younger or single parents who need infant care. Parents in the millennial generation, some of who are nearly 40, pay a significant amount of their income towards child care. Systemic challenges, such as static wages and high student debt, mean child care is inherently less affordable than it was for their preceding generations.



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Child Care Aware® of America's [Millennials and the High Cost of Child Care](#) research brief found that millennial parents pay more than 30 percent of their income for infant center-based care in all but seven states. In these seven states, millennial parents still pay more than 20 percent of their income to child care. The high cost of child care is not only a burden on the parents who have to cover these costs, but also on the workforce. Lack of availability of affordable child care takes parents and guardians, both single and married, out of the workforce.

Many working families have to decide between staying in the workforce and paying a high percentage of their income to child care or leaving the workforce and facing financial losses they may never make up. In 2016, the Center for American Progress released a report, [The Hidden Cost of a Failing Child Care System](#), with an interactive calculator demonstrating the cumulative costs that leaving the workforce for even a few years can have on an individual's lifetime earning potential. These costs can easily reach hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost wages, lost wage growth and retirement benefits. For example, a 30-year-old woman making \$60,000 a year could expect to see a lifetime loss of more than \$340,000 from only two years out of the labor force.

Although many parents are paying too much of their household budget toward child care, even these high costs are not enough to cover the financial burden borne by child care providers just to keep their doors open. The true cost of child care includes rent, utilities, and maintenance; classroom materials; food; office and administration cost; and, most importantly, labor. As explained earlier, infant and toddler child care is very labor intensive and requires low adult-to-child ratios. Unfortunately, the infant-toddler teachers, who play a critical role in a child's early development, are widely under-paid, often making hourly wages on the same level as fast food cooks. The average wage in 2017 was just \$10.72 an hour. [According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), child care workers made a median annual salary of \$22,290, approximately \$7,000 less than preschool teachers and less than half what kindergarten teachers made. This has resulted in a deficiency of experienced and well-educated staff in early education settings. All too frequently, providers struggle to make ends meet for their own families.



Many early childhood educators supplement their employment with a second job just to support themselves and continue to do the work they are most passionate about – caring for and educating young children.

### Access to Infant & Toddler Care

Across the country, new parents struggle to find safe child care settings for their infants and toddlers while they are at work. In 2016, Child Care Aware® of America held focus groups with parents of young children to gain a better understanding of how they find and access child care. Despite varying circumstances, many families face similar difficulties:

- **Availability is an issue.** Families everywhere face a lack of licensed child care in their communities – this is especially true for families with an infant or toddler. Parents frequently describe a cobbled together child care scheme, relying heavily on family and friends to fill in child care gaps when care is otherwise unavailable.
- **Affordability means compromise.** Even when parents can find child care in their community that meets their needs, they frequently make compromises based on what they are able to afford. Licensed child care for infants can be incredibly unaffordable, particularly in areas with a high cost of living and for millennial parents making near poverty level wages. For parents across the country, high-quality child care for infants and toddlers is financially out of reach.

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- **Building trust is key.** Parents noted the greatest hurdle in selecting a child care provider is their need to have a trusting relationship with the person caring for their child while at they are at work. Although they reiterated that no one can take care of their child like they do, open and frequent communication about their child's health, routines and social and educational development help to foster a trusting relationship.
- **Quality child care is multi-faceted.** When asked to describe a quality child care program, parents emphasized a clean, safe and monitored environment with a clear schedule or routine where providers are enthusiastic about young children and provide them with love and attention.
- **The search for child care can be difficult and frustrating.** Families may spend anywhere from a few weeks to several months to find or determine their child care situation. Even so, parents in this focus group seemed unaware of county-based or city-based listings, government offices, or their state or local CCR&R as a resource for information about and referrals to quality programs with vacancies in their community.

For many families across the country, child care is not much of a choice; rather it is a myriad of accommodations based on factors that affect everyday life: job demands, household budget, social network and support, and shortage of child care slots. The difficulty of finding child care can often drive parents to take unwanted risks with their children's safety. A lack of available or affordable regulated and licensed care can push families to other options in the so-called "gray market" of unlicensed and unregulated care.

A report from the [National Center for Children in Poverty](#) (NCCP) found that nearly half of all children spend at least some time in unregulated friend, family and neighbor care because it is often the best, or only, option parents can find. CCR&Rs are an invaluable resource for families seeking child care.

Each year, CCR&Rs across the country provide hundreds of thousands of referrals to programs near them, by child care setting, vacancies by age group, and by hours needed. CCR&Rs also help eligible families to apply for and access subsidies, or vouchers, to help pay for child care. Unfortunately, many states' subsidy programs are woefully underfunded, leaving many families to make difficult decisions.

While several states and Washington DC are beginning to offer publicly-funded preschool for 4-year-olds, very few offer public funding for infants and toddlers beyond Early Head Start and Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies. According to the [Administration for Children and Families](#) (ACF), universal prekindergarten programs can even lead to the closing of early childhood centers, which is often done in order to balance budgets.

CCAoA has partnered with child care leaders to map supply and demand issues in child care. See CCAoA's Infant Toddler edition of [Mapping the Gap™](#) to see how four states have identified gaps in care for infants and toddlers.

*Child Care Aware® of America has partnered with state child care leaders across the country to examine child care supply and demand. We have found that many states have severe shortages of infant/toddler child care relative to demand. Recent maps highlighting infant toddler supply and demand gaps show:*

- In [Alaska](#), only 18 percent of children under 3 years old have access to licensed child care. Compounding this issue even further, many of these child care slots are located in the larger population centers – like Juneau, Anchorage and Fairbanks – leaving families in rural locations with almost no options for licensed child care.
- In [Hawaii](#), only 11 percent of licensed child care slots across the state are reserved for children under 2 years old.
- In [Mohave County, AZ](#), only 7 percent of the child care slots are available to children under 3 years old.
- In the [Wilmington, DE suburbs](#), only 50 percent of children under 3 years old have access to licensed child care.

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## Solutions

While quality child care for infants and toddlers may be both expensive and hard to access, there are solutions to solving this problem. The child care system works when child care providers, CCR&Rs, state agencies and other partners collaborate to ensure children and families are receiving the support, education and assistance they need. When states direct money to training, infant-toddler specialists and enhanced referral through CCR&Rs, more families with infants and toddlers can access the child care that best meets their needs.

The National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance (NECQA) has published a [series of briefs](#) for en-gaging FCC and FFN providers in improving quality and safety at the state and local levels. Directly interacting with FCC and FFN providers to make them more accountable to child safety regulations may be a partial solution, and can help make safe child care an option for families that otherwise would be unable to afford it. ZERO TO THREE and QRIS Network have also released a [report](#) on improving the quality of FCC networks, concluding that staffed networks would help improve and strengthen a poorly-regulated system. Investing in CCR&Rs to staff these networks while also providing training and technical assistance, can help FCC and FFN providers improve the quality of their care. States and cities across the country have introduced initiatives to help develop quality control and improvement for FCC homes. One such notable program is [Arizona's "Kith & Kin Project"](#). This project, which has existed since 1999, involves a 14-week training program for FFN caregivers that teaches them about topics such as nutrition, schedule planning and brain development. Programs like the "Kith & Kin Project" are a positive first step in ensuring all children have high-quality care, no matter in what setting.

CCR&Rs are a major driver to the continuous improvement of quality of child care at the local and state level. CCR&Rs work with providers to administer training and technical assistance on topics such as health, safety and infant-toddler development. They conduct research on the supply and demand needs that help the agencies inform recruitment to increase the supply of child care. CCR&Rs also work with families through enhanced referrals, which are in-depth interviews with families to help find the child care program that will best fit their needs. Through training, recruitment and enhanced referral services, CCR&Rs are on the ground improving both the supply and quality of child care, while helping families find the care they need.

State administrators can allocate money received from CCDBG to programs and systems that support infants and toddlers through their CCDF State Plan. In New York, infant-toddler specialists at CCR&Rs in each region of the state, provide technical assistance to child care providers with the goal of improving the quality of care for infants and toddlers.

Several states and cities utilize financial incentives for child care providers to improve the quality of their system. In Philadelphia, a tax on sugary drinks was used to fund its universal pre-kindergarten program, while [Nebraska's school readiness tax credit](#) offers refunds to early childhood educators based on level of qualifications. Other states offer financial incentives, such as [Montana's Professional Development Incentive Awards](#), which provides monetary rewards ranging from \$500 to \$1600 for increasing their knowledge of early childhood development.

*In Indiana, CCR&Rs employ infant-toddler specialists through Better Baby Care™ Indiana (BBCI), which is part of a national movement to improve child care environments and support systems for parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers. Infant-toddler specialists are available to offer consultation services and resources to both child care providers and families on a variety of issues that impact healthy care and development for infants and toddlers.*

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## Recommendations

All families in the United States should have access to high-quality, affordable child care. This care is especially needed for infants and toddlers during the brain's most crucial time of development. Child Care Aware® of America has several recommendations to ensure that as many families as possible are able to access the best child care to fit their needs:

**Invest in Family Child Care and Family, Friend and Neighbor Care.** Around 1 in 4 families with infants and toddlers choose licensed FCC homes for care. Investing in training and support networks for FCC and FFN providers, facilitated by CCR&Rs, can help them improve quality and become more widely regulated.

**Utilize Federal Dollars for Enhanced Referrals and Infant-toddler Specialists.** Investing in enhanced referral services and infant-toddler specialists within the CCR&R state system can help improve access to care that will best meet their needs for families with infants and toddlers.

**Invest in Child Care Resource and Referral.** Child care resource and referral is a crucial driver towards quality child care. Working with both families and child care providers, CCR&Rs have knowledge that few others possess. Investing CCDF funds in the CCR&R system will better support children, families, providers and communities.

### **Invest in Infant-toddler Child Care Research.**

Researchers need funding to study the issues shared in this report. Better data is needed to understand the issues related to the impact of lack of access to care, the high cost of care and inconsistent quality of care for infants and toddlers.

### **Utilize Tax Dollars to Promote Quality Infant and Toddler Child Care.**

Using tax credits at a local or state level has proven a viable option for making early child care more affordable.

### **Pass the Child Care for Working Families Act.**

Child Care Aware® of America [advocates for the passage of legislation](#) that provides families access to high-quality and affordable child care. The 2017 Child Care for Working Families Act would mandate higher matching rates for infants and toddlers, enable preschool programs for 3- and 4-year-olds and provide the child care workforce with a living wage and access to increased training. We also encourage Congress to appropriate higher levels of funding to CCDBG to implement quality support to make sure child care settings are safe, well-regulated and affordable.

**Make Your Voice Heard.** All children deserve access to high-quality, affordable child care options, and that will take investment. Join in the movement for quality learning environments for infants and toddlers with [Child Care Works](#) by signing the pledge.



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