

# Closing the Opportunity Gap for Babies and Families:

## ZERO TO THREE'S ROAD MAP TO REACH AMERICA'S POTENTIAL

Every year, 8 million adults take on the vital, but daunting, job of preparing a prospective worker and citizen who will help shape the country's future—that is, they become parents. All of society has a stake in whether babies get off to a good start. Today's infants and toddlers will be the core of the mid-century workforce, one that will need to be highly skilled to compete globally and secure our economic future. When babies and their families have the supports they need, we create future innovators, thinkers, and stronger communities. But when we don't provide those supports, we all feel the consequences.

**In America today, too many babies fall behind even before their second birthday, placing both them and the nation at risk for never reaching their full potential.** Babies' early experiences shape their brain development, creating either a strong or fragile foundation for all later learning. Many families lack social and economic resources to provide sufficient opportunities for positive, nurturing early learning experiences. By age 2, infants and toddlers in families with lower incomes, less education, and fewer social supports are more likely to show gaps across all domains of development. A disproportionate number of these babies are racial or ethnic minorities, underscoring a lack of equity in resources and pathways. Without the early experiences that build a strong foundation, they enter PreK already playing catch up. Major investments should start where learning starts—at birth.

As a nation, we cannot simply stand on the sidelines and wish parents the best in supporting their children's earliest development. Our shared vision of a prosperous future will be realized only if it includes a robust quality of life for babies *today*.

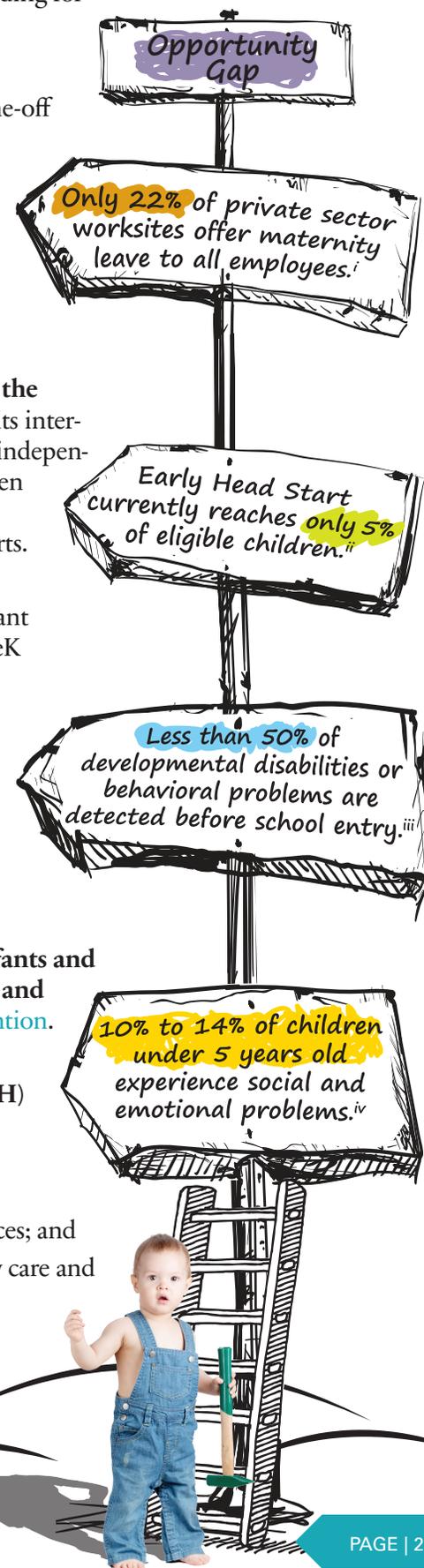
The first 3 years of life are a window both of opportunity and vulnerability. We must seize the opportunity with a comprehensive policy roadmap that supports families in giving all babies the same chance to thrive and succeed. Because when babies succeed, we create stronger families, productive communities, and a robust workforce and economy.



*About ZERO TO THREE:* Founded in 1977, ZERO TO THREE is the leading organization that promotes the health and development of infants and toddlers. We translate research on early development into information for parents, early childhood practitioners, and policymakers. Our approach is multidisciplinary and holistic, emphasizing the need to support infants and toddlers across all domains of development: social, emotional, intellectual, language, and physical.

# The Agenda: Building Supports That Help All Babies Thrive

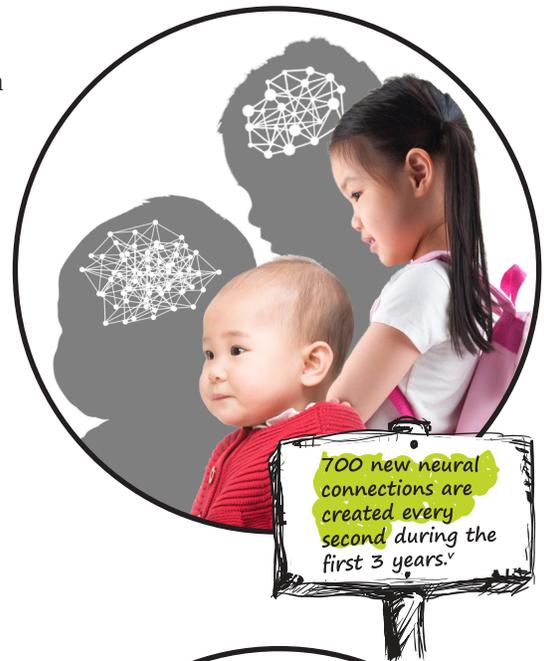
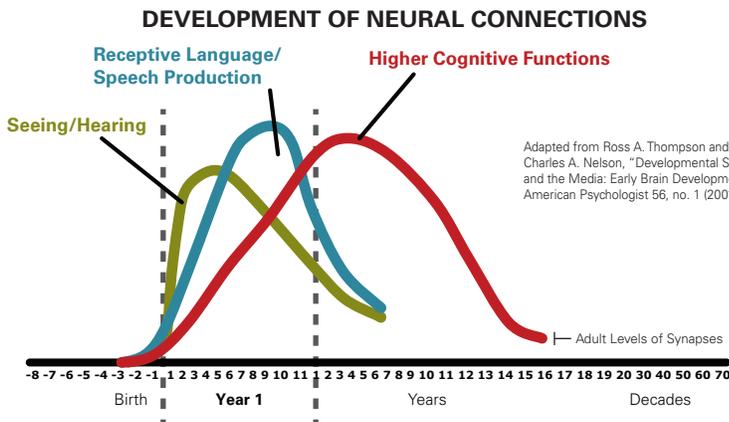
- **Stop the erosion of funding that supports early development by removing the sequester and raising limits on domestic spending in the future.** In real dollars, federal funding for early learning is the same as it was 10 years ago.
- **Help parents and families support their children's early development:**
  - ✔ **Create a federal Paid Family Leave program** to give hardworking parents time-off to spend time with their newborns or newly adopted children. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/paidleave](http://www.zerotothree.org/paidleave).
  - ✔ **Extend the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program authorization** to give pregnant women and families critical and tailored tools designed to help them succeed as new parents. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/homevisiting](http://www.zerotothree.org/homevisiting).
- **Expand comprehensive early development and learning opportunities:**
  - ✔ **Reauthorize and expand Early Head Start as the centerpiece of promoting the development of the most disadvantaged infants and toddlers**, maintaining its inter-generational nature, inclusion of pregnant women, and availability to children independent of parents' employment status. Promote innovations that build on its proven approach, including incorporating Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships as a bridge between the model federal program and state child care quality efforts. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/EHS](http://www.zerotothree.org/EHS).
  - ✔ **Increase funding for high-quality infant-toddler child care** through significant increases in mandatory child care funds and the designation of funds in any PreK funding stream to ensure families have access to care that supports their babies' development and incentivize states to raise quality. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/childcarepolicy](http://www.zerotothree.org/childcarepolicy).
- **Identify and address developmental needs from the start:**
  - ✔ **Provide incentives and technical assistance to states and communities to implement integrated developmental screening efforts** for young children across settings and ensure referral and follow-up for services. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/devscreening](http://www.zerotothree.org/devscreening).
  - ✔ **Reauthorize Part C of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, "Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities," to increase access to early intervention services and provide additional funding.** Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/earlyintervention](http://www.zerotothree.org/earlyintervention).
- **Emphasize positive social and emotional development in young children by increasing access and quality of Infant-Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) services by:**
  - ✔ increasing the supply of IECMH professionals;
  - ✔ preventing, identifying, and treating maternal depression;
  - ✔ expanding Medicaid reimbursement for relationship-based mental health services; and
  - ✔ increasing the capacity for mental health training and consultation within early care and learning programs. Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/infantmentalhealth](http://www.zerotothree.org/infantmentalhealth).
- **Ensure the well-being of infants and toddlers in child welfare through developmental approaches, such as including the Safe Babies Act in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, to promote community systems change through court-based teams that support the healthy, positive development of infants and toddlers.** Learn more at [www.zerotothree.org/cwpolicy](http://www.zerotothree.org/cwpolicy).



# Research Supports Significance of the Earliest Years

## Early Brain Development Lays the Foundation

A baby's brain architecture forms as connections for important functions such as hearing, language, and cognition peak during the first 3 years. Later, higher level brain functions will be built on top of these foundational connections, like a scaffold. Early experiences influence which connections are reinforced and which fall away unused, and thus whether this important foundation will be strong or fragile.



## Relationships Are the Key to Baby Learning

Relationships with trusted adults, primarily their parents, are central to providing and helping babies navigate these early experiences. Within these relationships, young children learn how they are valued and how the world works. With about 6 million infants and toddlers spending time in the care of someone other than their parents, other caregivers also play a key role. These trusting relationships foster the social and emotional skills—confidence, persistence, self-regulation, attentiveness, and ability to form relationships—that set infants and toddlers on the path to being confident learners, productive workers, and emotionally competent human beings.<sup>vi</sup>

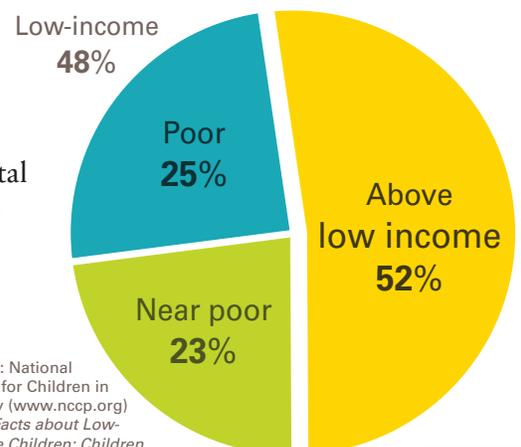


## Not All Babies Have the Opportunity to Thrive

When families lack access to key ingredients for healthy, positive development, a child's early years can become a time of vulnerability rather than promise. Chronic, unrelenting stress—sometimes called “toxic”—is a prime mechanism through which early experiences can undermine brain development. Children may experience such stress from environmental factors such as unstable housing, deprivation, and parental stress or mental health issues. Early chronic stress literally gets under the skin, becoming embedded in rapidly developing neurological and physical systems.<sup>vii</sup>

- ✓ Children with risk factors, such as living in low-income households, abuse or neglect, prenatal exposure to alcohol or other substances, and low parental education, have a higher incidence of developmental delays and disabilities than the general population. Disparities emerge as early as 9 months and widen by 24 months old.<sup>viii</sup>

Infants and toddlers by family income, 2012



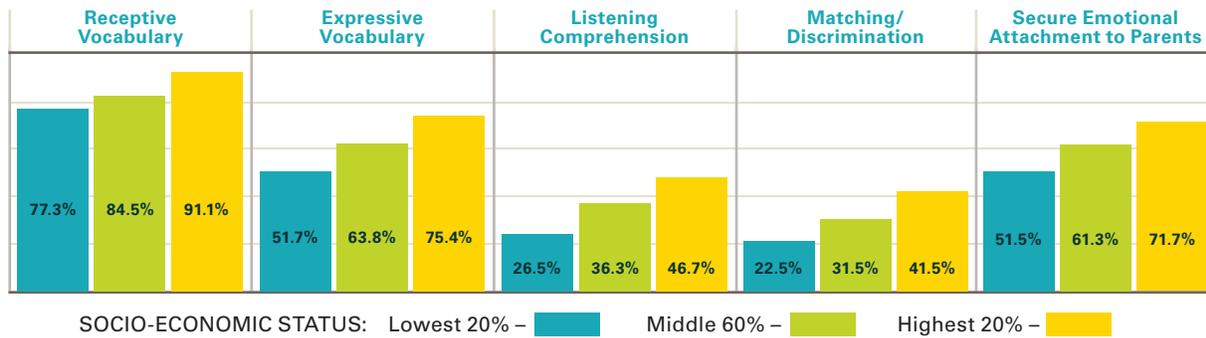
More than 1/2 of infants and toddler in poverty have had at least 1 adverse experience that could undermine their development.<sup>ix</sup>

Source: National Center for Children in Poverty ([www.nccp.org](http://www.nccp.org)) *Basic Facts about Low-income Children: Children under 3 Years, 2012*

## Research Supports Significance of the Earliest Years (Continued)

- ✓ Children who are in the lowest socio-economic group, who live in poverty, whose parents have less education, or whose mothers are not employed tend to lag behind their peers who have more resources in developing language, early math, and social-emotional indicators by about 2 years old.<sup>x</sup> Because children from racial or ethnic minorities are overrepresented in these categories, on average they are behind white children, underscoring a need for equity of opportunity.

PERCENTAGE OF 2-YEAR OLDS DEMONSTRATING SPECIFIC COGNITIVE SKILLS AND SECURE EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT BY SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS<sup>xi</sup>



### Supporting Early Development Is a Wise Investment

Program evaluation research highlights effective strategies to create the conditions in which children and their families thrive, even in the face of adverse circumstances. Such strategies promote strong relationships that can help buffer children from the toxic stress that can undermine healthy brain development and provide positive early learning experiences. Starting in the important prenatal period, proven approaches can help diminish the gaps and promote stronger social-emotional foundations. They include home visiting, high-quality child care, and the comprehensive approach of Early Head Start.

Demographic changes should inform the expansion, content, and further research on promising approaches. The majority of infants in the U.S. are now minorities, and they are more likely to lag in attaining developmental skills. Consideration of cultural context is key as we seek to support their families and provide equity of opportunity for positive early learning experiences.

*“Higher skill base at [age] 3 enhances the productivity of later investment... When the initial base is substantially compromised, so are the returns to later investment.”<sup>xi</sup>*

- James Heckman, Nobel laureate

<sup>i</sup> Jacob Klerman, Kelly Daley, and Alyssa Pozniak, Family and Medical Leave in 2012: Technical Report. U.S. Department of Labor, 2012. Retrieved March 4, 2013, from [www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/survey](http://www.dol.gov/whd/fmla/survey).

<sup>ii</sup> 2013 Program Information Report (PIR): The Office of Head Start PIR data are publicly available on the PIR Reports web site at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/pir>.

<sup>iii</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Developmental Screening Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/parents\\_pdfs/DevelopmentalScreening.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/pdf/parents_pdfs/DevelopmentalScreening.pdf).

<sup>iv</sup> C. B. Brauner and B. C. Stephens, “Estimating the Prevalence of Early Childhood Serious Emotional/Behavioral Disorder: Challenges and Recommendations.” *Public Health Reports* 121 (2006): 303–310.

<sup>v</sup> Center on the Developing Child, “Child Development Fact Sheet.” Harvard University, n.d. <http://developingchild.harvard.edu>.

<sup>vi</sup> National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, *The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2000. [www.developingchild.net](http://www.developingchild.net).

<sup>vii</sup> Ross A. Thompson, “Stress and Child Development.” *The Future of Children*, 24(1), 41–59, 2014. Retrieved March 9, 2015, from [www.futureofchildren.org](http://www.futureofchildren.org).

<sup>viii</sup> T. Halle, N. Forry, E. Hair, et al., *Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons From the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)*. Washington, DC: Child Trends, 2009.

<sup>ix</sup> David W. Willis, “Early Childhood Systems and the Home Visiting Program: A Vision for the Future.” PowerPoint presentation, Parents as Teachers, 2014. Retrieved February 10, 2015, from [www.parentsasteachers.org](http://www.parentsasteachers.org).

<sup>x</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 2012, Table 133. Accessed at [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_133.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_133.asp).

<sup>xi</sup> James Heckman, Rob Grunewald, and Arthur Reynolds, “The Dollars and Cents of Investing Early: Cost-Benefit Analysis in Early Care and Education.” *Zero to Three*, 26(6), 10–17 (2006).



For more information about the policy recommendations in this agenda, please contact **Patty Cole** at [PCole@zerotothree.org](mailto:PCole@zerotothree.org) or at **202-638-1144**.

To learn more about the ZERO TO THREE Policy Center, please visit our website at: [www.zerotothree.org/public-policy](http://www.zerotothree.org/public-policy)