

## **FAMILY SUCCESS INSTITUTE**

### **Position Paper on Early Childhood Success**

#### **About the Family Success Institute**

The Family Success Institute (FSI) is a NJ-based non-profit organization with the vision of transforming policy, funding and practice to assure that all families in all communities have the resources, opportunities and supports they want and need to successfully raise their children from conception to young adulthood. Given the indisputable importance of the very early years, both from vast research and experiential common sense, an FSI Work Group on Early Childhood Success has drafted this paper on the topic. The prenatal to age 3 (PN-3) period is the most rapid and sensitive period of development and it sets the foundation for long-term health and wellbeing. All children deserve the opportunity to be born healthy and raised in nurturing, stimulating, viable and secure environments with limited exposure to adversity. Unfortunately, many children lack the opportunities they deserve and these disparities are often influenced by state policy choices. (1) The focus of this first FSI paper starts with the 0-3 population and their families.

#### **The Critical Importance of Every Child's Early Years**

Children's early experiences set the foundation for their subsequent learning and development, establishing the probabilities for their success or failure into adulthood. The prenatal period is a critical time because children's healthy development, including vigorous brain growth, begins before birth. During this time it is imperative that all expectant mothers receive timely, high quality prenatal care to support healthy pregnancies, promote healthy prenatal development, and to inform and empower women and their families toward positive perinatal experiences for themselves and their new babies. To thrive, children need consistent supportive caregiving and positive life experiences from birth and throughout childhood. While the family is responsible for raising children, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that social and economic disparities can impede even the most dedicated families' abilities to provide the optimal environments their children need.

From birth and throughout the first few years of life, babies are building a sense of themselves, and the trustworthiness of others based on their experience of their main caregiving relationship. For infants, the earliest needs and capacities to feel safe, calm, alert and attentive are all dependent on responsive, attuned, contingent, loving care. Beginning in early infancy with successful attachment of the infant and their main caregiver, typically their mother, a continuing warm and responsive relationship is the foundation of mental health, cognitive development, and the basis upon which we develop our relationship with the world.

When the quality of children's experiences are less than optimal, their chances for success in life diminish. And when families struggle to bring in a living wage, put food on the table, or stay in their homes, or when they struggle with difficult health, safety and environmental concerns or emotional issues, they are less likely to be able to provide the positive experiences their children need. When communities lack the positive conditions, programs and services that families need to successfully raise their children, children's life chances suffer. Children can be resilient to stress, especially when family relationships are supportive and strong, but research shows that a higher number of risk factors makes resilience less likely.

## **New Jersey's Commitments to Positive Early Childhood Development**

New Jersey is well recognized for focusing attention on positive early childhood development with numerous initiatives: Universal Home Visiting; additional evidence-based home visiting programs including Nurse Family Partnership (NFP), Healthy Families (HF) , Parents As Teachers (PAT) and HIPPIY (Home Based Intervention for Parents of Preschool Youth ); publicly funded preschool; publicly funded preschool beginning at age 3 specifically for children with developmental disabilities; a quality rating system for preschool programs (center based and home based providers); provision of child care subsidies for eligible families; NJ Family Care, which now welcomes enrollment of undocumented children; Nurture New Jersey; expanding mental health awareness and services for infants and toddlers and their families as well as launching infant mental health consultation for child care centers and professionals; early intervention screening; family success centers; county councils for young children; Healthy Steps which concentrates on 0-3 year olds and their families in pediatric health care settings; CSOC Zero to Five Helping Families Thrive, which focuses on ensuring that children under the age of five are serviced through the CSOC system and receive age appropriate treatment; connecting NJ County Hubs; numerous helplines and websites which serve as resources for parents and caregivers of young children: NJ211, Parents Inc., Perform Care and Child Abuse Hotline.

## **National Recognition of New Jersey's Commitment to Infants and Toddlers**

The Pre-Natal-to-3 State Policy Impact Center at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education and Human Development produces a Roadmap to provide guidance to state leaders on the most effective investments states can make to ensure all children have the opportunity to thrive from the start. Grounded in the science of the developing child and based on comprehensive reviews of the most rigorous evidence available, the Roadmap provides detailed information on five effective policies and six effective strategies that foster the nurturing environments infants and toddlers need and that reduce longstanding disparities in opportunities and outcomes among racial and ethnic groups.

New Jersey is one of three states that has adopted and fully implemented all five effective policies in the Roadmap, creating optimal health and development for children by increasing access to needed services and adequate household resources; supporting parents' ability to work; improving the physical, social and emotional health of children and parents and fostering nurturing and responsive environments (1)

The five Roadmap strategies include

- expanded income eligibility for health insurance
- reduced administrative burden for SNAP
- paid family leave for at least 6 weeks
- a state minimum wage of at least \$10 and
- a refundable state EITC.

A summary of New Jersey's progress in implementing both the policies and strategies is attached.

## **New Jersey's Pre-School Landscape**

In addition, the Governor's commitment to universal publicly funded pre-school further improves young children's academic, college and career success, and enables parents to maintain employment. New Jersey is one of three states that prioritize starting at age three and meets all critical components of effective pre-school, attached (2).

153 school districts are currently implementing publicly funded pre-k with a capacity of nearly 69,540 children or 33% of the state's 210,000 three and four year olds. School districts with more than 10% of children qualifying for free or reduced price lunch are now eligible to apply for preschool funding.

The number of 3-4 year old children living in poverty enrolled in Head Start is 7,268, representing 3.4% of the total population of 210,000 three and four year olds within the state. Combining three and four year old enrollment in both publicly funded preschool models results in 76,808 children enrolled or 36.5% of all three and four year olds.

Child Care Aware reports 57,464 children enrolled in full day pre-school, which likely includes children over the age of three. It has not yet been determined what percentage of the 57,464 are children ages 0-3.

Enrollment in Early Head Start which enrolls children 0-3 living in poverty in New Jersey in 2020- 2021 is at 3,417, which represents 1.1% of the total 0-3 population within the state, which is 300,284. (3)

The question remains: how are the majority of New Jersey's infants and toddlers, particularly those living in low income households, being cared for? The Center for American Progress' December 2022 report states that inequities in access to high quality child care perpetuates many of the opportunity gaps that k-12 schools spend years attempting to counteract. Interventions that occur after kindergarten have had some positive impacts on children's later achievements, but the results are much weaker than those of early intervention. Several key studies have shown that providing families that have low socioeconomic status access to high quality, affordable child care before children reach age five can buffer early learning gaps and improve long term academic, social, economic and health outcomes.

New Jersey has implemented a Quality Rating System for center and family based child care providers: *Grow NJ Kids*. Research shows that children in quality care and early learning programs when they are young are better prepared for kindergarten with better reading skills, more math skills and larger vocabularies.

### **New Jersey's Evidence-Based Initiatives Targeting Infants and Toddlers**

Child Care Aware's New Jersey *Quick Facts: Children, Families & Child Care* (October 2022) indicates there are 300,284 children under age 3 in New Jersey. 4,205 children within this age group are participating in one of the state's four DCF funded evidence-based home visitation programs (4), representing 1.4% of the total 0-3 child population. Effective the spring of 2022, Family Connects, a fifth evidence-based home visiting program is piloted in Mercer County and offered to newborn birth and adoptive parents living in Mercer County and giving birth at Capital Health Medical center in Hopewell/Pennington. When fully operational, a home visit will be offered to 1,600 Mercer County residents delivering at the designated Medical Center (5). It is noted that the Family Connects model is offered to the universe of births at Capital Health, and does not specifically target under resourced new parents. It is conceivable then that the total number of children 0-3 receiving home visiting service would increase to 5,805 or 1.9% of the 0-3 age group of 300,284.

### **Additional Research Supporting Assistance for Parents of Young Children**

A recent Pritzker Foundation funded study; the National Latino Family Report 2023 surveyed 1,300 Latino families with children ages 0-5 during the September 6 – October 4, 2022 timeframe. The survey results are important as the Latino population in New Jersey evidenced by the 2020 Census is 18.7% or 1,991,635. High level results include: 40% are extremely concerned that they will not be able to provide

a good future for their children; nearly one third are extremely concerned that they will not have enough food to eat every day and over one third are extremely concerned that they will not be able to afford child care. Solutions for Latino upward mobility included goal setting tools for education and job development, career counseling and coaching, guaranteed basic income and government savings accounts for children (at 86% and 81% response respectively).

This survey information leads into our final issue: poverty and its effects on infants and toddlers. The Center for American Progress Report (December 2022) examines in detail how disparities in housing, health care, child care and economic security affect babies for life. A Roadmap for Reducing Child Poverty 2019 (6) focuses on evidence-based programs and policies for reducing the number of children living in poverty in the US by half within 10 years (or 2025) particularly policies that could affect poor parents' resources in the near term. The study concludes that income poverty itself causes negative child outcomes, especially when poverty occurs in early childhood. (6) While the study recognizes that a myriad of available public benefits influence a poor family's financial stability, and recommends that a \$3,000 per child per year child allowance policy would produce the largest poverty reduction. (conclusion charts attached).

### **Recommendations**

Based upon this information, the Family Success Institute and its community members acknowledge New Jersey's commitment to children ages 0-3 and their families and encourage:

1. Accelerated expansion of universal publicly funded pre-school to qualified districts on a prioritization of need basis, with an ultimate goal of access for all New Jersey 3 and 4 year old children.
2. Increase the hours of operation for publicly funded preschool from the current school day to include before and after care to enable working parents to continue their employment with a priority on partnership with community-based child care organizations to fully maximize the benefits of a "mixed delivery approach".
3. Substantially increase the availability of infant and toddler care, including operating hours reflective of the needs of working parents, in all New Jersey communities; provide guidance and technical assistance to help these small businesses thrive.
4. Invest in assisting center and home based childcare providers to complete the *Grow NJ Kids* accreditation process to improve the quality of care for children. Develop an initiative to organize networks of family-based child care providers that is supported by relationships with high-quality center-based providers (hub and spoke)
5. Substantially increase the availability of income-based evidence-based home visiting programs.
6. Invest in the creation of County specific and parent and community-driven prevention-oriented early childhood success systems of care (services and infrastructure) addressing the unique circumstances of each community
7. Implement a guaranteed income initiative targeted to 500 low income and otherwise under resourced families with young children ( not neighborhood based), based on lessons learned

from existing pilot programs including cities such as Newark and Paterson, NJ. Research on guaranteed income is attached.

8. Pilot creation of Child Savings Accounts (CSA) for 1,000 young children living in low income and under resourced households (not members of the 500 households targeted in item 7). Research on CSAs is attached.
9. Create a transparent state-level forum for Early Childhood Success to integrate and guide state policy and funding across state government and through county and local government, philanthropy, advocacy, education, practitioners and other stakeholders with a strong emphasis on the active participation and decision-making by parents. This entity would ideally be a component of the Council for Family Success as envisioned in the FSI legislation.
10. Create a Learning Community of diverse public, private and parent reps to keep current on the most cutting edge research, policies, practices and funding strategies to promote and grow early childhood success and by infusing gained knowledge into state policies, funding and service delivery methods.

### **Data Sources**

- (1) PreNatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap, October 13, 2022
- (2) New Jersey's Strategic Plan for Preschool Expansion Phase 1: The Foundation, October 2022, created in partnership with the Office of Governor Philip D. Murphy, the New Jersey Department of Education, Rutgers Graduate School of Education, NIEER (National Institute for Early Education Research)
- (3) The State of Head Start and Early Head Start: Looking at Equity, NIEER, Rutgers University, pages 177-180.
- (4) ACNJ Report on Enrollment in New Jersey's Evidence Based home Visitation Programs
- (5) The RFP released by DCF for Family Connects indicated that 80% of the Capital Health Medical Center's 2,000 annual births are residents of Mercer County.
- (6) National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine (2019). A Roadmap to Reducing Child Poverty. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi:<https://doi.org/10.17226/25246>.