

PROMOTING CONTINUITY OF CARE IN INFANT/TODDLER SETTINGS:

Recommendations for Arizona

A position statement of the Arizona Head Start Association to build an effective, responsible, and appropriate approach to serving very young children in group care.

Introduction

Very young children develop in the context of their relationships with adults, including their infant/toddler care providers. Neuroscientists have documented the influence of early experiences on development well into childhood and beyond. In fact, these experiences help determine the architecture of the brain, the ability to regulate one's emotions, and how a child's genetic makeup is expressed.¹ Babies form stronger and more secure attachments to adult caregivers who are consistently available to them and are able to read their preverbal cues and respond sensitively to their needs.² Research has shown that babies who experience multiple disruptions in their early care are more likely to show aggression and be less outgoing in the preschool years.³ Access to sensitive, responsive caregiving may be particularly protective for infants and toddlers growing up in families struggling with poverty and life stress; one in five children under age 3 who live in extreme poverty are estimated to face three or more risks to their development.⁴ Children's relationships with adult caregivers are vital for shaping the brain, early childhood development, and the foundations of school readiness;⁵ this is the scientific basis for promoting continuity of care in infant and toddler settings.

¹ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2007). The science of early childhood development: Closing the gap between what we know and what we do. Retrieved from http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/reports_and_working_papers/science_of_early_childhood_development/

² Raikes, H. (1996). A secure base for babies: Applying attachment theory concepts to the infant care setting. *Young Children*, 51(5), 59–67

³ Howes, C., & Hamilton, C. E. (1992). Children's relationships with caregivers: Mothers and child care teachers. *Child Development*, 63(4), 859–866.

⁴ National Center for Children in Poverty. (n.d.). Young child risk calculator [Data tool]. Retrieved from [http://www.nccp.org/tools/risk/?state=US&age-level=3&income-level=Extreme&ids\[\]=72&submit=Calculate](http://www.nccp.org/tools/risk/?state=US&age-level=3&income-level=Extreme&ids[]=72&submit=Calculate)

⁵ Early Head Start National Resource Center. (2012). School readiness goals for infants and toddlers in Head Start and Early Head Start programs: Examples from the Early Head Start National Resource Center. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/early-learning/curriculum/school-readiness-goals-infants-toddlers.pdf>

The Position

The Arizona Head Start Association takes the position that policy maker and other stakeholders in young children' lives have a shared responsibility to ensure that young children keep the same caregiver for the first three years of age by:

1. **Maintain a mixed age group with the same teacher(s).** When children are in safe, nurturing, and high-quality settings, maintaining the primary caregiving relationship until the child is at least 3 years old is an important effort to support continuity for the child and family.⁶ The longer a young child spends in the care of the same sensitive and skilled caregiver, the more likely he or she is to form a secure attachment to that person.⁷ This continuity is also important for the caregiver. The extended time may help the caregiver better understand the needs of the growing child and form trusting relationships with his/her family that also add continuity in caregiving practices across the program setting and home environments.
2. **Reduce turnover of caregivers of very young children.** Among the research examining the quality of early childhood programs, rate of job turnover for child care staff seems to be a strong indicator of program quality.⁸ Frequent turnover among early childhood teachers prevented children from developing a secure attachment with teachers. In addition, teachers' high turnover negatively affected children's social, emotional, and language development. Not only the relationship between teachers and children, but the relationship between teachers and parents also suffered from high turnover. Studies seem to agree that insufficient compensation was the most common reason for high turnover.
3. **Simplify DES Child Care Subsidies enrollment.** Babies and toddlers benefit from stable care, which is difficult for low-income parents to obtain when they rely on subsidies. Low-income parents may have low literacy levels in English and frequent changes in their work status that make it hard to navigate subsidy rules and maintain eligibility.

Recommendations

1. **Develop and Implement Child Care regulations that allows for mixed age groups of infants and toddlers.** Different structures for continuity of care include mixed age groups of infants and toddlers together, nurtured by primary caregivers throughout their first three years, similar to the design of family child care. When children are

⁶ Lally, R., & Tsao, C. (2004). Continuity of care. Retrieved from the Program for Infant/Toddler Care website: http://www.pitc.org/cs/pitc/lib/download/pitc_res/710/Continuity%20of%20Care.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d

⁷ Raikes, H. (1993). Relationship duration in infant care: Time with a high-ability teacher and infant-teacher attachment. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 8(3), 309–325.

⁸ Cassidy, D. J., Lower, J. K., Kintner-Duffy, V. L., Hegde, A. V., & Shim, J. (2011). The day-to-day reality of teacher turnover in preschool classrooms: An analysis of classroom context and teacher, director, and parent perspectives. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 25(1), 1-23. doi:10.1080/02568543.2011.533118

grouped in mixed age levels, the age of the youngest child in the group determines the staff to child ratio and maximum group size. Infants and toddlers may be included in mixed age groups only when 8 or fewer children are present in the group. Children who leave may be replaced by a child of any age, as long as the staff-to-child ratio and group size are determined by the youngest child in care.

2. **Offer Contracts directly to Child Care providers to offer high-quality child care subsidy slots/enrollment opportunities.** How subsidy payments are made has an impact on the ability of child care providers to plan and keep to their budgets and commitments to caregiver salaries, and subsequently whether providers are willing to take subsidies for low-income babies and toddlers and able to remain a stable resource in low-income communities
3. **Link enrollment processes of other public low-income programs with eligibility for Child Care Subsidies.** Matching eligibility periods to those of the federal Early Head Start program, especially when providers are layering child care subsidy dollars and Early Head Start. Disruptions in subsidy receipt can lead to changes in caregivers and unstable care arrangements.

Conclusion

Continuity of care is critical to enhancing relationships in infant and toddler settings. Caregivers have more time to build relationships with children and their families, resulting in enhanced early care experiences and better supports for the bond between parents and children. These early connections fuel important neurological processes that help infants and toddlers explore and learn to regulate their emotions, forming the roots of school readiness.

A system of continuity of care helps to nurture the important relationships between primary caregiver and the child.

It is within the context of these relationships that children grow and develop.
