

New Jersey Pediatrics

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New Jersey Chapter

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One of the most stressful decisions new parents have to make is determining who will care for their baby when they return to work. As a parent's most trusted source for medical and developmental advice on babies, pediatricians are well-positioned to inform families about why quality matters in a child care setting and what to look for in their search. During this time of incredible growth and discovery, it is critical that babies have a healthy start to grow and learn. For the more than 200,000 New Jersey babies with working parents, the ability to find quality care is vital.

Tips to share with parents for choosing a child care program*

- Look for a facility that is licensed and which other parents can recommend.
- Find out if the center has been rated by Grow NJ Kids, NJ's child care rating system
- Learn about their availability and hours of operation. Are they flexible with your work schedule?
- Ask about their policies for discipline, feeding and toilet training.
- Find out what background and training staff members have.
- Visit during the day when children are present and ask these questions when observing:
 - Do children seem happy and engaged?
 - Is there a structure of planned activities?
 - Do staff members seem to enjoy children?
 - Are conflicts handled patiently and respectfully?
 - Do adults speak and interact directly with babies and toddlers?
 - Is the facility kept clean and safe?
 - Would your child enjoy coming here and would you feel good leaving your child here for the day?

*Source: Right From The Start NJ, rightfromthestartnj.org

But many parents will tell you that quality child care is not only expensive, but also difficult to find. Understanding the landscape of New Jersey's child care system and the resources available can be invaluable in anticipating the challenges that families face and helping them be their best advocate. At a time when positive early learning environments matter most, every New Jersey family deserves access to quality child care to support a baby's language, physical health, and social and emotional development. Advocates for Children of New Jersey (ACNJ), together with NJAAP through NJ's Think Babies Coalition, is calling

for pediatricians across the state to join in our campaign to urge state leaders to help make high-quality child care within reach for every working family that needs it.

NJ Babies At a Glance

102,000

Number of babies born in New Jersey every year

23%

Percent of expectant mothers who receive late or no prenatal care

66%

Percent of babies with all parents in the workforce

27%

Availability of licensed child care for NJ infants and toddlers with working parents

\$250

Median weekly cost for center-based child care for an infant

Sources: ACNJ's two publications: *Babies Count 2018* and *No Room for Babies: Center-Based Infant-Toddler Child Care in Short Supply*, as well as NJ Dept. of Human Services, Div. of Family Development *2017 NJ Child Care Market Price Study*

The science is clear—children develop more than one million new neural connections per second during the first three years of life. Positive interactions with nurturing caregivers strengthen these neural connections and help to build a strong foundation for development and learning. With an increasing number of children cared for by someone other than their parent, a stable, nurturing environment established early on in life is imperative for a child's overall well-being.

For many babies, child care is their first educational experience. Access to high-quality child care helps improve physical and cognitive outcomes, paving the path for school readiness. When the care provided is consistent, emotionally supportive and developmentally appropriate for the child, children can achieve:

- Enhanced brain growth and child development
- Greater success in school (such as better math and language skills)
- Better cognition, social skills, interpersonal relationships and self-regulation
- Decreased need for special education and related services later in life
- Higher graduation rates and lower juvenile crime

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PARENTS' VOICES

The Race to Find Child Care for Infants

"You have to get a spot before you conceive!"

"I didn't realize how much in advance you needed to secure a spot. I went to a few day cares and they said we have one spot left and there were all these other families touring. You have to make this huge decision and you have 24 hours to make it!"

Helping parents determine quality child care

The quality of infant-toddler child care programs varies greatly across the state. Pediatricians can point parents to [New Jersey's county Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies](#) (CCR&Rs).

New Jersey's CCR&Rs have

trained staff to provide information to families, the public, and providers about:

- The different types of child care providers
- Financial assistance to obtain child care services
- Local child care programs that accept state financial assistance (subsidy) and other services for which families may be eligible

In an effort to provide families with a consistent and reliable way to assess their options, the state of New Jersey also launched its own child care quality rating and improvement system, known as [Grow NJ Kids](#), in 2013.

Grow NJ Kids is organized as a progression of levels of program quality. "One-star" programs meet basic licensing standards, while "five-star" programs demonstrate higher quality practices in classrooms. These outcomes are determined by research-based assessment tools. To achieve a high rating, programs must meet quality standards in five categories—early learning, family and community engagement, health and safety, workforce qualifications and program management.

The state rating system is still in its early stages of implementation and the majority of programs have not yet been rated. While enrollment is still growing, parents are left with little information to consider when making one of the most important decisions of their children's lives—where their kids will spend their days during their most formative years. That is why pediatricians can be a great resource in explaining to families what to look for in their search. Grow NJ Kids' website, [grownjkids.gov](#), provides a printable checklist, in both English and Spanish, which parents can use when looking for a child care or early learning program.

Meeting the child care challenge for babies

Although a nurturing and stimulating environment is one of the most important factors to consider, many families are quickly confronted with the challenges of cost or simply finding available space in a child care center. The median weekly cost for center-based child care for an infant is \$250, making it unaffordable for many low- to moderate-income households.

New Jersey is home to more than 310,000 infants and toddlers, representing 3.4 percent of the state's population. As many as 35 percent live in households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty level. In 2017, that equated to about \$50,000 a year for a family of four.

The lack of child care for babies is due in great part to how much more it costs for centers to provide care for babies. State regulations require class size to be small—one staff person for every four infants—because babies need greater care. Today, 66 percent of New Jersey babies have all available parents in the workforce, yet there is only enough availability in licensed child care centers for 27 percent of these babies.

Centers in low-income communities, in particular, are hardest hit. Many of these centers accept child care subsidies, state financial assistance, that allow parents access to child care while they work or attend school. However, subsidy reimbursement rates to child care providers are often too low to meet even their basic expenses—staff, rent and utilities, let alone make and sustain improve quality infant-toddler care.

Resources:

- **ACNJ.org**
 - Get involved in advocating for better public policies and increased investments to support New Jersey's youngest children and their families
- **RightFromTheStartNJ.org**
 - Access educational resources including videos and informative blogs covering child development, early learning, parenting tips and early childhood policies.
- **GrowNJKids.org**
 - Find out which centers are rated through New Jersey's child care quality rating and improvement system.
- **ChildCareNJ.gov**
 - Access state resources and information regarding child care in New Jersey, including your county Child Care Resource and Referral Agency. Find out what child care programs are available in your community, information about financial assistance and which programs participate in the NJ Child Care Subsidy.
- **Data.NJ.gov/childcare_explorer**
 - Access a list of all licensed child care centers and their inspection reports in New Jersey

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As a lead partner in Right From The Start NJ and as a state grantee of the national ZERO TO THREE Think Babies campaign, ACNJ is advocating for better public policies and increased investments to support New Jersey's youngest children and their families.

In October 2018, Governor Phil Murphy directed \$38 million in federal funding to improve the state's child care system, with infant care as a priority. This was a

great step forward in building a strong, high-quality child care system in our state. However, even with additional dollars, at a rate of \$208.78 per week or \$5.22 per hour for a 40 hour work week, many center-based programs still cannot afford to care for infants. Currently, about 40 percent of New Jersey municipalities, particularly urban and rural communities, are considered child care "deserts" with limited or no center-based child care for infants. In addition, the number of registered family child care homes has been steadily declining, further reducing options.

Families depending on subsidies will continue to struggle to find quality center-based child care for their babies. The current infant subsidy rate—even with the additional dollars—is still not at parity with the current toddler rate, with subsidy funds for infant classrooms at nearly \$1000 less per month than those classrooms that care for toddlers.

The New Jersey's Think Babies Coalition is bringing attention to state leaders and decision-makers the need to ensure every baby has access to affordable, quality child care. Positive early learning environments help our youngest children to thrive, while giving employers a stable workforce and strengthening the economic health of our families, our neighborhoods and the state as a whole. To get involved, visit acnj.org.

What Can NJAAP Members Do?

As a trusted provider, you have the relationships necessary to help guide families to the proper resources. As a healthcare professional, you can lend your voice to a wider platform, informing lawmakers and state leaders that success begins at birth and access to quality child care is key.

Inform Patients. Whether infants are cared for in a center-based child care setting, a family child care provider or by a relative, what happens during the first few months and years of life has an enormous impact on how a child learns and grows throughout his or her lifetime. Inform families about the importance of this critical time in brain development for babies.

Get the Data. Learn about the state of infant and toddler well-being from ACNJ's 2018 Babies Count data report. At acnj.org, visitors can also access reports on the challenges in child care in New Jersey and how to get involved in helping our youngest children thrive from birth to 3.

Reach out to your community. Pediatricians and specialists can make connections with child care providers in their area and offer to do a presentation to parents or to staff, or have a Q&A session with parents. Provide child care centers with relevant health-related pamphlets on topics such as nutrition, exercise, overall health care and the importance of immunizations, so that babies are healthy enough to attend child care.

Lend your voice. Pediatricians have a strong platform to advocate on behalf of their littlest patients. Whether it's writing a Letter to the Editor in your local newspaper or providing testimony at the State House, your voice matters. Contact acnj.org to learn how to get involved.

Attend Strolling Thunder New Jersey. Join us for ACNJ's rally for babies on May 30th. RSVP at acnj.org



Conclusion:

For working families who need child care, quality is a key component to helping babies thrive and grow up healthy to be successful adults. Unfortunately, many families struggle to find affordable, quality child care. Physicians are in a unique position to enact change by educating families on what quality child care looks like, and helping to advocate for their patients' well-being. If all members of the NJAAP lend their voices to the cause, we can ensure that New Jersey children have what they need to thrive: strong families, healthy starts and positive early learning environments.

The New Jersey Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics is a member of the state's Think Babies Coalition, which ACNJ leads, consisting of more than 60 early childhood stakeholders in both private and public sectors, including representing the collective voices of children and parents in New Jersey, and state officials who provide guidance and data. Coalition members support the campaign's efforts to make babies a state priority with recommendations, outreach and communications.