

# Policy Brief

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## Raising the Bar: Creating a Skilled Child Care Workforce for Our Youngest Children

by Cynthia Rice and Valerie C. Shore

Young children's experiences and relationships during their first years of life can dramatically affect who they will be and what they will become. From birth to age three, children's experiences shape their brain development and impact their future growth and learning.

During these critical years, many young children spend a large portion of their days with adults other than their parents. With fifty-five percent of New Jersey working mothers having children under the age of 3, and 38 percent of these young children spending 35 hours or more in some form of care each week,<sup>1</sup> high-quality child care is a must for creating a strong base for children's futures.



For a learning environment to be "high quality," it must have highly-qualified caregivers or teachers who possess knowledge of how young children develop and skills to nurture that unique development. For infants and toddlers, this can only happen when their caregivers have access to training, education and on-going supports.

Achieving this end is no easy feat for caretakers and teachers directly responsible for our youngest children. Three barriers stand in the way of achieving a qualified infant/toddler workforce:

1. The weak requirements for becoming an infant/toddler caregiver
2. The cost of education and professional development
3. The lack of incentives once the professional development has been completed

While several avenues exist for child care providers to access professional development, no comprehensive data exist on how many New Jersey child care workers actually have earned these credentials.

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### Lax Requirements for Caregivers

New Jersey's child care centers are required to be staffed by a small number of individuals with some background in early childhood education. These employees include a director, as well as a head and/or group teacher.

However, to meet required staff/child ratios, centers must hire "additional staff members,"<sup>2</sup> for which there is no educational requirement upon hiring. In fact, staff members can be under 18, as long as they are directly supervised by someone older than 18 years old.<sup>3</sup>

Once a new staff member is hired, they are required to participate in a center "orientation," and must attend a total of 10 hours of staff development each year, in the areas of child growth and development, positive guidance and discipline and health and safety procedures.<sup>4</sup>

There are no other requirements.

There are even fewer requirements for staff in registered child care homes. Family child care providers registered with the state must be at least 18 years old, reside in the family child care home, and be of "good character," with sufficient maturity to maintain a family child care home for children.<sup>5</sup>

They and additional staff must also participate in eight hours of pre-service training in such areas as growth and development, discipline, safety and nutrition, prior to being issued a Certificate of Registration.<sup>6</sup>

### The Cost of Professional Development

According to the most recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual salary for all workers in 2012 was \$34,750<sup>7</sup>, while the median salary for child care workers was just \$19,510, or \$9.38 per hour<sup>8</sup>. At an average of just under \$1,626 per month<sup>10</sup>, the low wage earned by most child care workers means they are often unable to personally afford any meaningful professional development.

This is a widespread and growing problem. Until recently, many New Jersey center staff attended non-credit bearing Child Development Associate trainings at their local Resource and Referral Agencies -- at a discounted rate. State funding supplemented the total cost. These county-based agencies that manage child care can still offer the non-credit CDA, but scholarships are no longer available. The cost of this non-credit credential may now cost between \$1,500 and \$2,100-- a prohibitive cost for many low-income workers.

A statewide child-care quality improvement pilot, known as Grow NJ Kids, is now the primary source of funding for child care workers to advance their education to earn a credit-bearing Child Development Associate, which can cost more than \$2000 when taken at a community college.

If a child care center is enrolled in Grow NJ Kids, their teachers could receive support for:

- Scholarships (for teachers, classroom assistants and directors)
- Classroom enhancement grants, such as curriculum materials
- Free professional development training in curricula and/or assessment.<sup>11</sup>

Although scholarships to support these costs are beneficial, those staff members in centers not participating in Grow NJ Kids will have no access to those scholarships.

The cost of obtaining the NJ Infant/Toddler Credential (see *The Options for Professional Development* sidebar) varies widely depending on how a person satisfies the prerequisites, but all avenues require six college credits<sup>12</sup> at a minimum cost of \$105 per credit<sup>13</sup>, or \$630. This does not include the cost of any campus fees and required materials, nor does it cover the cost of the other requirements associated with this credential.

On the higher end, a Bachelor's degree in an early childhood-related field in New Jersey can cost anywhere from \$40,000 to more than \$120,000 for four full-time years<sup>14</sup>, while an Associate's degree can range from \$8,000 to \$19,000<sup>15</sup>.

### **Staff Incentives: Rewarding Quality and Building Stability**

Professional development incentives help support a stable and better-educated child care workforce by encouraging teachers to pursue a higher level of education. For example, by providing them with additional compensation, the rate of staff turnover is frequently reduced. This results in a higher quality learning experience for young children, improving their chances of arriving at kindergarten ready to learn.

Opportunities for teachers to increase their education level or participate in professional development trainings are constructive and will help improve overall classroom quality. The problem is that there are currently no financial incentives, such as a pay increase, once a teacher has taken advantage of the offered learning opportunities. Few professions, if any, ask staff to improve their education and skills without offering additional compensation. Without these incentives, the most motivated and talented child care providers will seek out careers that will reward their skill levels, perpetuating an unstable child care workforce for young children most in need of stability.



### **Conclusion**

The connection is clear: quality child care requires qualified caregivers, making professional development essential. This cannot be attained without financial supports and incentives. As crucial as the infant/toddler years are for social and cognitive development, and considering the large proportion of children who attend some form of child care during these formative years, strengthening the quality of the early childcare workforce must be a priority.

With studies suggesting a return to society of \$8 to \$17 for every dollar spent on early education<sup>16</sup>, increasing educational and financial supports for child care workers are common-sense investments. Strengthening the requirements for those caring for young children, linked with increased scholarship opportunities, grant programs and compensation incentives, means more child care workers will have the skills critical to giving children the care they need to thrive.

As the impact of early education becomes more apparent, the question must no longer be whether we can afford to invest in our early childhood workforce. The question is: For the sake of our future – our children, our communities and our state – can we afford not to?

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## THE OPTIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

There are three primary professional development options when infant/toddler caregivers want to increase their knowledge and improve their skills with young children:

- Child Development Associate (CDA)
- New Jersey Infant/Toddler Credential (I/T), and
- Bachelor or Associate degrees in Early Childhood Education.

**The Child Development Associate.** The CDA is a nationally-recognized credential that can be obtained within six to 12 months. Training is available in classrooms and online and requires students to complete a portfolio that demonstrates mastery of specific skills. That portfolio must document the student's hands-on experience with young children, passage of a written exam, completion of formal training in key subject areas, and completion of a professional evaluation by an appointee of the organization issuing the credential.

Generally, an applicant must be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or equivalent, although applicants enrolled in a vocational/technical high school program in Early Childhood Education may be eligible as well. While these credentials are generally non-credit bearing, Child Development Associates may have a head-start on an Associate's degree in early childhood education if they attend a college that provides credits for the credential's coursework. Those credits can then be transferred toward a higher degree. Non-credit bearing CDAs are offered by most county-based Resource and Referral Agencies, which manage various aspects of child care in each county.

**The New Jersey I/T Credential.** This credential is administered by Professional Impact NJ (PINJ), a statewide initiative created to enhance the preparation and education of early childhood and afterschool providers.



This credential, recognized only in New Jersey, requires successful completion of one of four possible training prerequisites:

- A valid Child Development Associate, which is either an infant/toddler CDA or another CDA that includes 30 hours of training specific to infants and toddlers
- 120 approved non-credit training hours related to key indicators, including social/emotional well-being, child development, curriculum and nutrition
- Nine college credits from an accredited institution that are related to these key indicators
- Associate's or Bachelor's Degree in early childhood education, child development or a related field.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, all applicants must assemble a professional portfolio similar to that required of Child Development Associate applicants, and must complete two 3-credit college courses specifically created for the Infant/Toddler Credential.<sup>18</sup>

The two mandatory courses are currently offered at only three community colleges and two universities in New Jersey, in contrast with CDA training, which can be obtained from a variety of sources and agencies.<sup>19</sup>



**Bachelor and Associate Degrees.** College degrees in Early Childhood Education and related fields are available at 24 New Jersey colleges and universities in either 2- or 4-year degrees.<sup>20</sup>

There are two types of Associate Degrees:

An Associate of Arts or Associate of Science degree, which consists of a 2-year course load, all or a portion of which may be transferable to a 4-year Bachelor's degree program. The second type is an Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.) degree, which is designed as a stand-alone program providing a thorough knowledge base in a particular discipline, but its credits are rarely transferrable to a 4-year institution.

Students who obtain a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education must also satisfy requirements of a liberal arts major in order to qualify for teacher certification in New Jersey.<sup>21</sup> Despite the unique needs of our youngest children, only eight of the 24 colleges and universities offering degrees in early education also offer a concentration, certificate or credential specific to infants and toddlers.<sup>22</sup>

Recently, the University of Cincinnati released an online Associate Degree program in infant/toddler education, consisting of a modular series available at no cost to faculty members at higher education institutions.<sup>23</sup> The model's goal is to provide a coursework for universities to replicate or modify in order to provide additional infant/toddler classes. New Jersey is in the process of developing a course using the University of Cincinnati's program as a model.



## (Endnotes)

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