



## A Good Start

New initiative aims to raise awareness of the physical and emotional needs of toddlers.

**WHILE THERE HAS BEEN** a big (and worthy) push recently to support initiatives for preschoolers, there is also a growing awareness that the stage of life from birth to three years old is just as crucial. During that time, an infant and toddler's cognitive, emotional, mental and physical development lays the foundation for lifelong health and well-being.

"Children who aren't given the right opportunities to learn at the start of their lives are less likely to be prepared to enter and succeed in school, increasing the likelihood of lifelong struggles," says Dr. Arturo Brito, a pediatrician and former deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Health. He adds,

"Even physical conditions such as obesity, heart disease and

diabetes have been linked to inadequate support in the first three years."

Education and awareness are essential to helping parents, caregivers, educators, health-care professionals and policy makers understand the roles they play in ensuring a brighter future for the vulnerable birth-to-three age group. To that end, a new statewide public-awareness campaign, Right from the Start NJ, is bringing together experts, physicians and nonprofits to share resources and information for the benefit of the adults who touch the lives of infants and toddlers. (I will be anchoring a public-broadcasting series by the same name on this topic.)

The Nicholson Foundation, a Newark-based nonprofit dedicated to improving the health and well-being of vulnerable

populations in New Jersey, is among the initiative's supporters. "Focusing on infants and toddlers makes economic sense down the road, as it will translate into huge savings for the health-care system and social safety net," says Brito, executive director of the foundation.

Simply put, these early years are an opportunity to make a positive impact on lifelong development. And society needs to help, especially considering today's changing lifestyles.

"For a long time, caring for young children under the age of three was considered to be purely a family responsibility," says Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of Advocates for Children of New Jersey. "However, with so many parents in the workforce, childcare is the educational opportunity that can support their early growth and development."

Zalkind says the state needs to raise the childcare reimbursement rate to more accurately reflect the true cost of providing care for babies and infants.

Indeed, several leading Jersey legislators, including Teresa Ruiz (D-Newark), chair of the Senate Education Committee, and Joseph Vitale (D-Woodbridge), chair of the Senate Health Committee, have expressed interest in introducing legislation to improve public policy on early childhood.

Other nonprofits rallying behind Right from the Start NJ include the Montclair-based Turrell Fund, which supports initiatives nationwide that focus on children from birth to age three. "There are studies that have proven that the return on investment is \$8 to every \$1 spent," says Turrell Fund president and CEO Curtland Fields. "Yet when it comes to public policy, the challenge is that the investments made today don't see the total dollar return until many years down the road."

But our youngest citizens need our help now. It starts with caregivers.

Advises Brito: "Talk to your pediatrician about what you can do to stimulate your infant or toddler so you are giving him or her the opportunity to grow to his or her fullest potential right from the start." 🌱



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