



CHILDREN AND WELFARE REFORM—Issue Brief 7

Better Strategies for Babies: Strengthening the Caregivers and Families of Infants and Toddlers (FEBRUARY 2000)

OVERVIEW

There is universal agreement that babies need safe and stimulating environments and nurturing relationships with parents and other caregivers. For low-income families with young children, these universal needs are overlaid with stresses and complexities brought on by poverty. Policies and programs can either add to these burdens or provide families with needed supports to enhance babies' healthy growth and development.

These policies and programs usually fall into one of three areas: welfare reform, child care, and family support. In each of these areas, families with babies have unique needs and should have special consideration. In addition, for families who receive services in more than one of these areas, opportunities to strengthen families will be missed unless services are coordinated and consistent in each.

THE CHALLENGES

- **Welfare reform and low-wage work.** Families who have low-incomes, are receiving cash assistance, or transitioning from cash-assistance programs seek work out of economic necessity. Their employment tends to include few benefits, and their work schedules frequently involve nontraditional and unpredictable hours. Their work schedules and transportation difficulties, as well as lack of resources, limit their child care options.
- **Child care.** Research shows that infants and toddlers are at particular risk from low-quality child care settings and reap benefits from high-quality child care. Yet infant and toddler care, regardless of the type of setting, is likely to be lower in quality than other age groups and is by far the most costly. Further, much of it is likely to be found in home-based settings, where babies are cared for by other relatives, friends, and neighbors (kith and kin care) about which there is little information and for which there are few efforts to provide strength and support to caregivers.
- **Family support programs.** The 1990s were marked by a growing interest in promoting the healthy development of infants and toddlers through efforts to encourage nurturing parenting and to link families with needed services and supports. Many families with infants and toddlers who are or will be affected by welfare reform are involved in these programs, and many such families have trusting relationships with program staff. This means that comprehensive child development programs are often in a unique position to help parents and their young children address the challenges associated with welfare-related changes in their lives.

PROMISING STRATEGIES

Few efforts exist to address the multiple needs of low-income families with infants and toddlers, especially those affected by welfare reform. There are some early examples, however. One cluster of efforts addresses the child care needs of families with babies whose parents are working or participating in work-related training. These programs attempt to address the fact that infants and toddlers are cared for in a wide spectrum of settings, and many of these include care by family, friends, and neighbors. Promising strategies include:

- supporting kith and kin caregivers through partnerships between child care, family support, and community-serving agencies;
- engaging kith and kin providers within a larger framework of community-based approaches for all child care; and
- working to develop community linkages among infant and toddler care improvement projects.

A second set of strategies is based in family support and child development programs and includes but moves beyond addressing child care needs to additional work and family issues for these families. These strategies include:

- reaching out to all caregivers of children and supporting parents' work;
- exploring how child development and family support programs can help families affected by welfare reform;
- using funds from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant to states for home-visiting programs for first-time mothers of newborns;
- using state networks of family support centers to help families facing welfare challenges; and
- enhancing cross-system training and leadership for professionals working with infants, toddlers, and their families.

CONCLUSION

The strategies described above highlight some important ways to begin to address the needs of low-income families with infants and toddlers. They enhance the basic quality of child care for babies throughout the community, paying attention to nonprofessionals as well as professionals caring for infants. They build multidisciplinary, community-wide systems of care for infants and toddlers and their families, based on communities' existing resources. They develop programs to address the multiple needs of families beyond enhancing parenting skills. Finally, they use TANF funding to support services for infants and toddlers in families receiving, transitioning from, or trying to avoid the need for cash assistance.

As states and communities strive to meet the critical needs of infants and toddlers and their families, it is clear that linking initiatives are essential. By framing broad strategies that engage all relevant parties—families, caregivers, health professionals, employers, program administrators, legislators, and educators—states and communities will be able to implement programs that meet the immediate and future needs and ensure the healthy growth and development of infants and toddlers.

For more information about programs pursuing these strategies and contact information, as well as research citations, please refer to Children and Welfare Reform Issue Brief 7: *Better Strategies for Babies: Strengthening the Caregivers and Families of Infants and Toddlers*. Copies of the full publication are available through the NCCP Web site at: www.nccp.org.

This issue brief is supported by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the A. L. Mailman Foundation. NCCP takes responsibility for the facts and opinions presented therein.