

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™



ZERO TO THREE
Early connections last a lifetime

Young children can thrive in high-quality early childhood programs. And the benefits don't stop there. High-quality early learning experiences set a foundation for success in school and in life. Effective educators are the key to creating experiences that optimize infants' and toddlers' development. *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™* (Dean, LeMoine, & Mayoral, 2016) detail the essential knowledge and skills they need to be effective.

The Critical Competencies:

- Support educators who work in group settings (center-based and family child care homes) with infants, toddlers, or both
- Focus on pedagogy—the method and practice of teaching
- Detail essential and observable skill sets that effective early educators use to optimize babies' and toddlers' (1) social-emotional, (2) cognitive, and (3) language and literacy development
- Feature considerations for supporting high-needs populations and multi-language learners

Critical Competencies' Focus

The *Critical Competencies* focus on a subset of teacher-child interaction skills because:

- Strong teacher-child interactions within these areas of learning and development are most closely associated with children's success in school and life, particularly for children at risk (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Curby et al., 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008).
- Early educators need to acquire culturally and linguistically competent knowledge and skills to intentionally support infants and toddlers raised in multilingual and multicultural environments.
- Infant and toddler educators need access to information on how to apply foundational knowledge in a group setting, what infant-toddler teaching and learning looks like in practice, and what specific skills educators need to optimize children's learning opportunities.

This brief provides an overview of the *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant–Toddler Educators™* in five sections:

1. Critical Competencies' Focus
2. Critical Competencies' Foundation
3. Relationship to Other Relevant Criteria
4. Organization and Content Excerpts
5. Using the Critical Competencies

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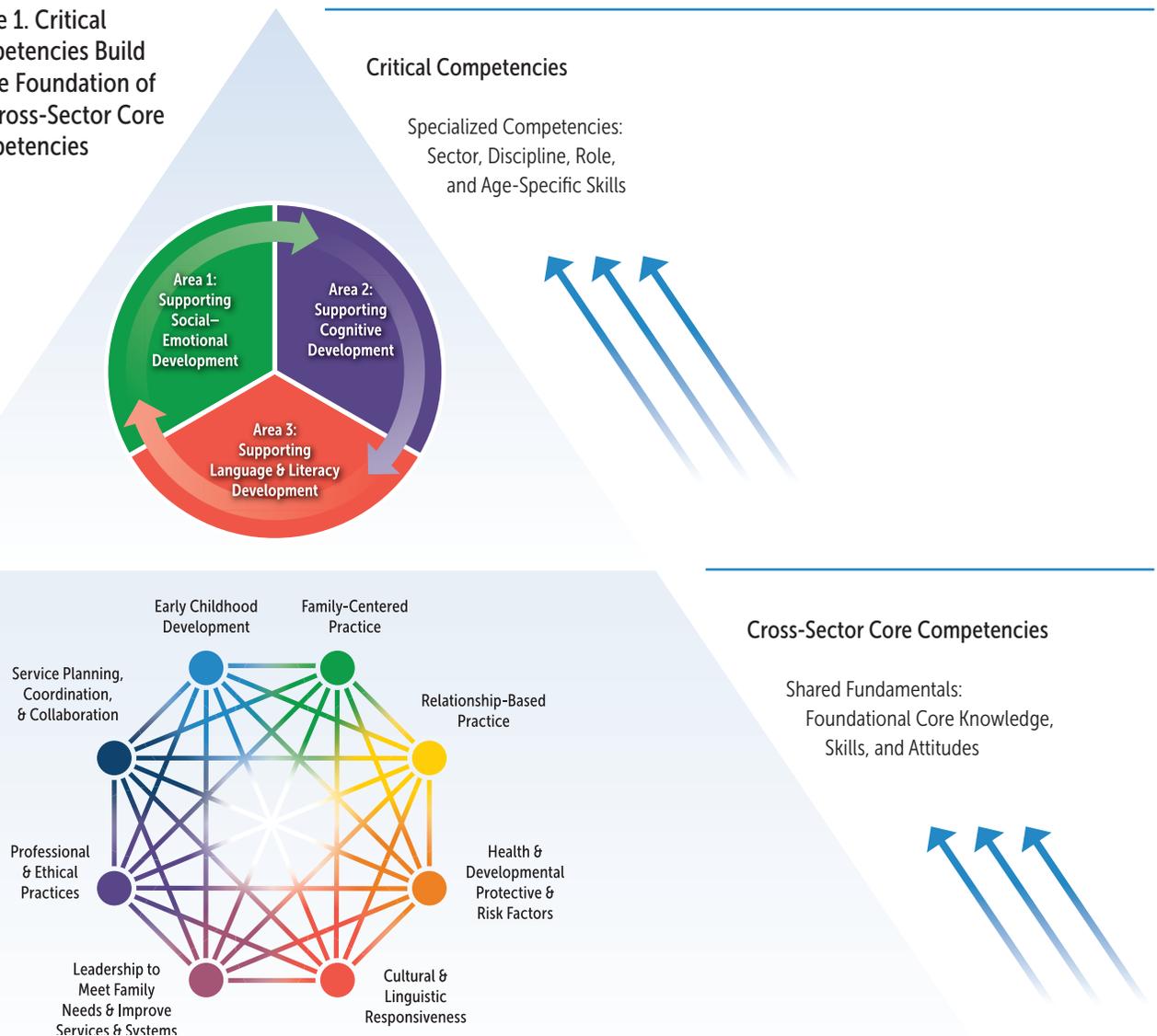
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The *Critical Competencies* advance the call from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council's (NRC) committee report *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation* (2015) to increase supports for the infant-toddler workforce, to develop specialized competencies for this population building on core competencies for the early care and education workforce, and to ensure that these competencies address the cross-cultural skills needed to work with diverse populations.

Critical Competencies' Foundation

The *Critical Competencies* build on the foundation provided by ZERO TO THREE's *Cross-Sector Core Competencies for the Prenatal to Age 5 Field* (ZERO TO THREE, 2015) which were generously funded by First 5 Los Angeles and present a universal set of core competencies necessary for all prenatal-5 service providers. The *Cross-Sector Core Competencies* describe essential knowledge, skills, and attitudes that any professional working with young children needs, in eight domains as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Critical Competencies Build on the Foundation of the Cross-Sector Core Competencies



Relationship to Other Relevant Criteria

ZERO TO THREE's *Critical Competencies* also embrace and integrate the principles set forth in the Irving Harris Foundation's Diversity-Informed Infant Mental Health Tenets (n.d.; reproduced with permission of the Irving Harris Foundation). These 10 Tenets provide a diversity, inclusion, and fairness lens that can and should be applied to all practices and services aimed at supporting infants, toddlers, and their families. Some Tenets' details are explicitly called out throughout the *Critical Competencies* to highlight examples of how inclusive teaching methods and practices can apply a diversity, inclusion, and fairness lens.

The *Critical Competencies* also build on professional criteria for the early childhood field, giving consolidated and easily understood guidance. In partnership with the organizations below, the *Critical Competencies* are crosswalked with:

- National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) *Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation* (NAEYC, 2009)
- Council for Professional Recognition's *Child Development Associate (CDA) Credential™ Competency Standards* (n.d.)
- Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health's (MI-AIMH) *Competency Guidelines®* (2014)
- Division for Early Childhood's (DEC) *Recommended Practices in Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education* (2014)
- WestEd's Program for Infant/Toddler Care's (PITC) topics and objectives (n.d.)
- Collaborative for Understanding the Pedagogy of Infant/Toddler Development's (CUPID) *Draft Competencies for the Infant/Toddler Workforce* (2015)
- Center for the Study of Social Policy's *Strengthening Families™ Protective Factors* (n.d.)

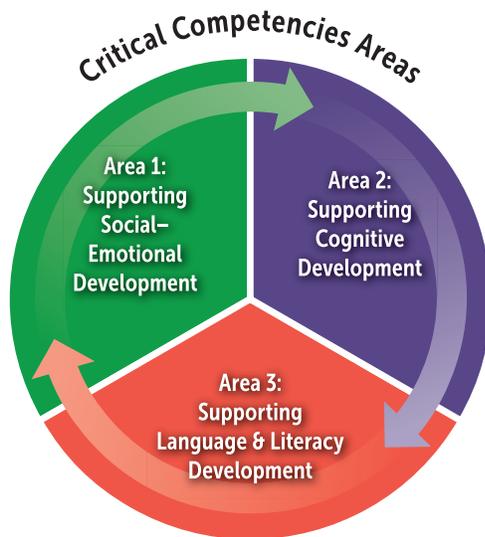
It is important to note that the *Critical Competencies* also include links to the child development outcomes described in the new Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015), and suggested alignment with infant and toddler teacher observation tools including:

- Quality of Caregiver-Child Interaction for Infants and Toddlers (Q-CCIIT) draft indicators (Atkins-Burnett et al., 2015)
- Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) tool for infants (Hamre, La Paro, Pianta, & LoCasale-Crouch, 2014)
- Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) tool for toddlers (La Paro, Hamre, & Pianta, 2012)
- Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale–Revised Edition (ITERS-R; Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2006)

Organization and Content Excerpts

The *Critical Competencies* are organized in three learning and development areas and 13 sub-areas as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Critical Competencies Areas and Sub-Areas



Critical Competencies Sub-Areas

Supporting Social–Emotional Development

1. Building Warm, Positive, and Nurturing Relationships
2. Providing Consistent and Responsive Caregiving
3. Supporting Emotional Expression and Regulation
4. Promoting Socialization
5. Guiding Behavior
6. Promoting Children’s Sense of Identity and Belonging

Supporting Cognitive Development

7. Facilitating Exploration and Concept Development
8. Building Meaningful Curriculum
9. Promoting Imitation, Symbolic Representation, and Play
10. Supporting Reasoning and Problem Solving

Supporting Language & Literacy Development

11. Promoting Communication Exchange
12. Expanding Expressive and Receptive Language and Vocabulary
13. Promoting Early Literacy

Each of the three learning and development areas include:

- an overview of the developmental area for infants and toddlers and
- a summary of infant-toddler educators’ role in supporting development in the area.

Sample Excerpts

Area 2: Supporting Cognitive Development

Supporting infant and toddler cognitive development requires educators to have a solid understanding of the infant–toddler developmental continuum, individual children’s interests and temperament, and the way in which cognitive learning is scaffolded—coached or supported by a more experienced peer or a caregiver—through responsive facilitation of play and exploration. “When adults understand how the mind develops, what progress children make in their cognitive abilities, and how active inquiry and learning are children’s natural inclination, they can foster cognitive growth by supporting children’s active engagement with new experiences” (IOM & NRC, 2015, p. 101). When this knowledge is coupled with responsive and nurturing facilitation by a trusted teacher, infants and toddlers



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Specifics for Infant–Toddler Educators

Infant–toddler educators are central to young children’s cognitive development because they provide the consistent and supportive relationships in which exploration and understanding of concepts are nurtured. Within consistent relationships infants and toddlers seek out experiences and interactions that spark their curiosity and wonder about the world. Supportive educators build on the natural inquisitiveness of infants and toddlers to purposefully plan for and support extended engagement with and increased understanding of basic foundational concepts. Cognitive growth is stimulated by infant–toddler educators’ ability to observe and follow children’s natural inclinations to learn about their world and to build on such teachable moments.

Each of these 13 sub-areas include:

- specific and detailed, pedagogy-focused skill statements that help educators understand what the competency looks like in their day-to-day interactions;
- content that directly supports those who work with high-needs populations;
- suggestions for working with dual-/multi-language learners; and
- examples in practice with young infants, mobile infants, and toddlers.

Sample Excerpts

Infant–toddler educators who *facilitate children’s exploration and concept development* demonstrate the following observable skills:

- C-1a** Ensure that different types of culturally appropriate toys or other objects are present and accessible in the group care setting so that infants and toddlers can explore objects and their functionality
- C-1b** Position infants to promote independent exploration of objects, their own hands and feet, or a caregiver’s face
- C-1c** Promote infants’ exploration using their senses—hearing, touching and feeling different textures, seeing, smelling, or tasting
- C-1d** Extend infants’ exploration of objects by repositioning infants or objects, imitating actions, and modeling varied ways to use objects

- C-1h** Facilitate children’s exploration of concepts like means–end and cause and effect by prompting through processes and offering specific verbal and nonverbal information or guidance when children need additional cues to understand concepts, for example:
 - *Helping toddlers investigate how mud is formed when it rains or which things sink or float by asking, “I wonder whether the feather (or rock, or container) will sink or float?”*
 - *Exploring cause and effect with infants by commenting, “When you move your hand this way, the toy makes a chica, chica sound”*
 - *Exploring object permanence with an older infant, who drops a spoon by asking, “Where did the spoon go?”*



Considerations for Supporting Vulnerable Populations

Facilitating exploration and concept development is important for all children but especially critical for children who may not have opportunities to safely explore small manipulatives, cause and effect toys, or other learning materials in their homes. Sometimes key things that promote children's learning are missing from the environment. For instance, an environment may not have play materials, the space may not be safe for child exploration, or family members may not be available or know how to facilitate children's play and exploration. When children have limited access to these resources, educators can

play with various toys and materials within the group care setting. Making the most of learning opportunities by sitting close by and commenting on what children are doing, extending language, and asking questions to prompt exploration are all important strategies in the early learning setting. Connecting families to home visiting programs, local libraries, or conducting home visits as part of your program can also be a good way to give families additional resources, help them use their everyday materials in new or expanded ways, and extend facilitated play.



Considerations for Supporting Dual-/Multi-Language Learners

Infant-toddler educators support concept development by setting up environments to encourage young children's exploration while using conversations during that play to build on children's understanding. The use of language to reinforce concepts is important for all children and requires a thoughtful and linguistically responsive approach when working with children learning multiple languages. Some concepts introduced and learned may be unique to the school or home setting. However, more often infants and toddlers have similar experiences across both settings that early educators can help link and extend for

that foster concept and additional development. Connecting with children in a familiar language is ideal as infant-toddler educators strive to help children master concepts and develop proficiency in a second language. For example, teachers can build on the words a child already knows. A child may hold up a round-shaped piece of play-dough during play and say, "Tortilla." Teachers can expand on this statement by saying, "Tortilla! A corn tortilla. Yummy! May I eat it?" (Hirschler, 2005). Careful scaffolding and bridging between two languages will help children transfer from one language to another

What does *facilitating children's exploration and concept development* look like In practice?

Young Infants	Mobile Infants	Toddlers
<p>Maribel, a 5-month-old in Emma's child care program, is enjoying time on the floor and has begun to reach for various toys. Emma notices her attempts to reach a squeaking toy that is just out of her arm's range. Emma moves closer to Maribel and says, "I see you reaching for that rubber duck, let me help you. I am going to move that toy a little closer so you can pick it up." After moving the toy, Maribel wiggles her body to grab the toy, Emma says, "Wow, Maribel, you got the duck!" As Maribel brings the toy to her mouth and bites on it, the duck makes a squeaking sound. Maribel startles at the noise and takes it out of her mouth. Emma smiles, making eye contact, and says, "Oh, you made it squeak with your mouth." Emma presses on the duck to make it squeak again.</p>	<p>One-year-old Jamie has been working on placing shapes into their correct cut outs on the shape sorter off and on for the last week. Manuela has noticed that sometimes he gets upset and frustrated when the shapes don't slide in. When that happens, Jamie has been dropping the toy and moving on to another activity. Today Manuela has made sure that she can be on the floor while Jamie explores the toy. When Jamie starts to struggle and drops the toy, Manuela says, "That star is a hard shape to fit, Jamie, but you are doing a great job turning it until it fits." Jamie picks the toy back up and tries again, looking back and forth between the toy and Manuela. Manuela says, "That's it, Jamie, you are getting really close." As he continues to</p>	<p>Tommy, a 30-month-old, is sitting on Laura's lap reading a book about fruits and vegetables. When they turn to a page containing cherries, Tommy points to the cherry and says, "Apple!" Laura smiles and looks at the book saying, "It does look like an apple, Tommy, doesn't it? It is red like an apple, and it is round like an apple, but this is actually a fruit called a cherry." Laura points to the stem of the cherry and says, "See how the cherry has a long stem on the top? Cherries have long stems, and apples have very short stems." She pauses while Tommy looks at the picture then adds, "Also cherries are much smaller than apples." Laura continues, "Let's find the page with apples on it and we can look for them to see." Laura turns to the page</p>

Using the Critical Competencies

The evidence-based *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™* can be used by all stakeholders to build a shared understanding of what effective and specific teaching skills that support infants' and toddlers' social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy development look like. The *Critical Competencies* provide concrete skill statements and practice examples to help these professionals and those that support them successfully bridge the knowledge to practice process. Table 1 summarizes additional potential uses of the *Critical Competencies* by stakeholder roles.

Table 1: Potential Uses of ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

Stakeholders	Additional Potential Uses
Individual educators	Reflect on current practice, assess current competencies, identify areas for growth, and plan for professional development
Program administrators	Specify competencies for roles and job descriptions; reflect on and evaluate staff performance; frame and record professional development needs, plans, goals, and achievements
Professional preparation and development (training, technical assistance, and higher education) providers	Inform and frame professional development goals, objectives, expected outcomes, and other elements of content and design; categorize and publicize opportunities
Organizations/institutions/ agencies that design or deliver professional development	Set or align professional development content; ensure aligned requirements; coordinate, categorize, and align offerings; facilitate modularized, stackable, transferable offerings and articulation agreements
Professional development systems	Assess current offerings and identify overlaps and gaps; plan for priority needs; categorize, promote, and track opportunities; frame expectations of competency and career progression

A central tenet of the early care and education field is the individual context at the heart of each child's development. Similarly, the individual context of early childhood educators, programs, communities, and systems influence the potential uses of *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™*. To be meaningful, these competencies (and truly any standards) must be used appropriately in the unique context of the individual educator, program, agency, organization, institution, community, or system.

ZERO TO THREE's Early Childhood Workforce Innovations department can help your organization use this competency framework to analyze your existing workforce supports and target professional development priorities that are strategic and aligned with your workforce goals. Our team of Workforce Innovations experts use their diverse and extensive experience to take an innovative approach that:

- centers on the range of early childhood workforce characteristics and their specific professional needs;
- uses implementation and improvement science to enhance system efficiency, accountability, and fidelity; and
- offers a global perspective while honoring your unique context.

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Work with ZERO TO THREE to plan your professional development offerings for 2017 and beyond. With a suite of products and services based on the *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™*, we will create a flexible and cost-effective program that will support your workforce needs and goals for years to come. Visit www.zerotothree.org/CriticalCompetencies or contact workforce@zerotothree.org to learn more about how the *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™* suite of products and services can be part of your long- and short-term professional development plans and offerings.

About ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE works to ensure all babies and toddlers benefit from the family and community connections critical to their well-being and development. Since 1977, we have advanced the proven power of nurturing relationships by transforming the science of early childhood into helpful resources, practical tools, and responsive policies for millions of parents, professionals, and policymakers.