# Infant/Toddler Resource Guide



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# Primary Caregiving

Download the article, *Primary Caregiving*.

Article - Primary Caregiving (/resource/program-infanttoddler-care-pitc-six-essential-program-practices-relationship-based-care)

Use this resource to help communicate the importance of primary caregiving. It will help promote essential program practices to ensure quality in family child care and center-based programs that serve infants and toddlers.

## Rationale

High-quality relationship-based care is central to children's early brain development, emotional regulation, and learning (Center on the Developing Child, 2012). The Program for Infant/Toddler Care recommends six essential program practices as a framework for relationship-based care. One of these practices is **primary caregiving—**the practice in which the care of each infant or toddler is assigned to one specific caregiver who is principally responsible for caring for that child in the care setting and communicating with the child's family (Lally & Mangione, n.d.). Consistent, responsive, and meaningful interactions with a primary caregiver build a child's attachment with a familiar adult (Raikes & Edwards, 2009). Primary caregiving also strengthens relationships with families, which, in turn, supports the development of trust and security between the infant or toddler and the primary caregiver (Lally et al., 2010).

The primary caregiver's responsibilities include

- fostering a relationship with the child and his or her family;
- observing, documenting, and anticipating and planning for each child's development process and learning;
- supporting the child through transitions;
- carrying out the majority of the child's personal care routines; and
- providing emotional support.

Primary caregiving does not mean exclusive care. It means, however, that program leaders, caregivers, and families know who has primary responsibility for each child. Primary caregiving often happens naturally in family child care homes (Lally & Mangione, n.d.).

## Why Is Primary Caregiving Important for Infants and Toddlers?

- Primary caregiving relationships provide a strong foundation for responsive interactions and communication between an infant or toddler and his or her caregiver (Ruprecht et al., 2016).
- Primary caregiving provides opportunities for caregivers to deepen their knowledge of a child's development, abilities, and interests, which allows for more accurate developmental assessments and individualized curriculum implementation (Theilheimer, 2006).
- Primary caregiving provides an opportunity for partnerships between families, primary caregivers, and specialists (for example, mental health, medical, occupational therapists) that support individualized care for infants and toddlers

(McMullen et al., 2016).

## How Does Primary Caregiving Promote Positive Child Outcomes?

- Infants and toddlers develop trust when primary caregivers respond to their unique temperament, needs, and interests (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).
- Primary caregiving supports infants' and toddlers' identity and cultural connection to their families (Lally, 1995; Virmani & Mangione, 2013).
- Responsive primary caregivers buffer stress and help the infant or toddler regulate (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).
- Young children who do not have a primary caregiver and instead experience multiple caregivers (or multiple childcare settings in a day) are more likely to engage in challenging behavior (Clasien de Schipper et al., 2004; Morrissey, 2009).

## Planning to Implement Primary Caregiving in Diverse Child Care Settings

**Goal:** High-quality infant and toddler programs implement primary caregiving for each infant and toddler.

- Implement written guidance to support primary caregiving throughout the program. This includes creating staff and family handbooks that share the importance of, as well as practices for, supporting primary caregiving strategies for infants and toddlers and their families.
- Create job descriptions for infant and toddler caregivers that include expectations for primary caregiving practices. This includes forming relationships with families, learning about families' home cultures and caregiving routines, and weaving the home care experiences into daily practice.
- Attend, create, or advocate for professional development that promotes primary caregiving.
  - Strengthen professional development of caregivers and administrators on the concepts and implementation of primary caregiving. This should start at orientation when hiring new staff and then continue throughout the years of employment.
- Use an intentional review process to continually strengthen primary caregiving across the center or family child care program.

## References

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