The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of families with infants and toddlers and disrupted the services and systems they rely on. Educating policymakers about what babies need to thrive has never been more important. While traditional in-person *Think Babies* events may not be feasible in the near future, virtual events are emerging as an effective and timely way to advance *Think Babies* priorities. The resources in this guide support you holding virtual *Think Babies* events and complement the other tools, resources, and templates included in the [*Think Babies* Events Toolkit](https://www.thinkbabies.org/think-babies-events/).

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For resources related to the COVID-19 Pandemic, please visit the [Policy Response to COVID-19](https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/3278-policy-response-to-covid-19) page on the ZERO TO THREE website.

Think Babies Virtual Events Overview

*Think Babies* events place babies front and center in the policy process by elevating family stories and connecting the families of infants and toddlers directly with their policymakers to let them know what babies need to thrive. The COVID-19 pandemic means that in many cases in person events are not currently viable and may not be for some time. As families struggle to navigate the current crisis, centering the needs of infants and toddlers has never been more urgent. Virtual *Think Babies* events are a creative and timely way to highlight the current and long-term needs of infants, toddlers and their families. Options include hosting a virtual *Strolling Thunder* event, *Think Babies* Policy Forum, Listening Session, or Advocacy Training. These virtual events focus on the *Think Babies* priorities of:

* Quality, affordable child care;
* Paid time off for parents to bond with and care for their babies;
* Healthy emotional development; and
* Strong physical health and nutrition.

Key Elements

* Elevate the lived experience of families

Family stories are the heart and soul of *Think Babies* events. This is particularly relevant now, at a time when the experience of families is changing incredibly rapidly and many more families are struggling to meet their children’s basic needs and nurture their health and wellbeing. Whatever format your virtual *Think Babies* event takes, the goal is to get the stories of families with children 0-3 in front of policymakers in order to advance the *Think Babies* policy priorities.

* Engage policymakers

Educating policymakers about the needs of babies through personal connections is a key component of successful *Think Babies* events. This is especially important during the current crisis. Policymakers are inundated with competing demands and priorities associated with both the short and long-term policy and fiscal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. ZERO TO THREE’s experience with *Think Babies* in the recent weeks and months has consistently demonstrated that personal stories and connections are one of the most impactful strategies we have available right now to lift the needs of babies up above the noise of the moment.

* Make the link to policy

As with in-person events, effective *Think Babies* virtual events draw the line that connects the individual experiences of families to the policies that shape those experiences. The newly released [*State of Babies Yearbook: 2020*](https://stateofbabies.org/national/) provides data that can be used to demonstrate that even before COVID-19 crisis, our threadbare systems for children and families meant that too many faced persistent hardship. Recovery from the pandemic presents an opportunity to rebuild with stronger policies.

Ways to Structure *Think Babies* Virtual Events

*Think Babies* virtual events can be structured in many different ways. Keep in mind that it is especially important that virtual events be succinct and relevant. Have a clear idea in mind what you want to achieve with your event and what type of event will best advance that goal.

* Hold individual meetings with key policymakers and families via phone or video conference. As with in-person meetings, you can facilitate the meeting to support the family and provide additional information.
* Convene a group video meeting with a panel of families and a group of policymakers. This can be a good way to reach a larger number of policymakers.
* Host a livestream event featuring parents and policymakers that is open to the public.
* Dedicate a day on social media to focus on the stories of families with young children. Collect family stories and photos that you can share on social media and invite others to share as well. Make sure that policymakers know about your event.

While the primary focus is on family stories, integrating the voices of providers in *Think Babies* virtual events can also provide helpful context for the experiences of families with infants and toddlers.

Maximize Impact

Get the most out of your virtual event through strong lead-up, amplification, and follow-up. Examples include:

* Promote your event in advance using your email lists, social media, coordination with partners, and any other opportunities available.
* Tag policymakers on Twitter.
* Pitch earned media.
* Send follow-up materials to policymakers electronically.
* Take screen shots and record events so that you can post them on social media after the event and amplify your message.
* Encourage your partners and supporters to share your content on social media.
* Create a custom frame for people to use on social media on the day of your virtual event.
* Record videos of family stories that can be edited together and shared.

Think Babies Virtual Events Logistics Tips

Thoughtful logistical planning of your *Think Babies* virtual event will help everything go smoothly and ensure your audience focuses on the content.

As you begin to plan your event, consider the following key questions:

1. What is your goal?
2. Who are you trying to reach?
3. What do you want them to know or do?
4. What will they need to act efficiently and effectively?
5. What is the current capacity of your organization and your partners to plan and implement a virtual event?

After exploring these questions, use the tips below to pull together your logistics.

* Determine the best platform for your event based on your goals, audience and expected number of attendees, desired interaction, and available tools. Social platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and LinkedIn allow your organization to broadcast to larger, public audiences. Google Hangouts, Zoom, WebEx or other multi-user platforms are best used to connect and meet with large groups of people for more interactive conversations.
* For longer events, consider including interactive features such as videos, photos, and polls.
* To the extent possible, be sure that all presenters/meeting participants have strong Wi-Fi bandwidth, and have updated their browsers or required apps/software before joining the conversation. Ask participants to keep their devices plugged in throughout the event or have them fully charged at the start.
* Plan to practice with participants before your meeting or larger event, ideally a day in advance to resolve any technical issues and do a run through with all presenters/meeting participants. Picking up on cues is challenging in a virtual environment, so think ahead about transitions and how best to moderate. Have a plan in place for navigating any technical difficulties that may arise during a virtual event (i.e. a speaker is disconnected or if slow connections cause a delay).
* Consider whether to film content horizontally or vertically – horizontal video can be easier for users to view on a laptop or Connected TV, while vertical is more conducive to viewing from a smartphone. Therefore, horizontal is best for more formal live streams or events such as panel discussions or press conferences, and vertical is best for sharing more casual news or updates.
* Consider housing archived presentations, slide decks, and supplemental content online for attendees to access after the event, ideally within 24 hours.
* If you are posting video on social media channels, consider adding captions so that the video is accessible and users who keep their phones muted are still able to engage with your content.

Think Babies Virtual Events Tips for Engaging Families

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of families with infants and toddlers. Families are navigating a complex web of economic and health concerns while also attempting to support their children’s healthy development, in many cases in isolation from both the formal and informal systems of support on which they normally rely. While it is a time of unparalleled stress for families with young children, it is also a time when families are demonstrating incredible resiliency and creativity to meet the challenges of the moment. Even though stretched beyond normal limits, many families are eager for opportunities to let policymakers know what they need for their babies to thrive. The tips below are intended to complement the existing recommendations for engaging families found throughout the [*Think Babies* Events Toolkit.](https://www.thinkbabies.org/think-babies-events/)

Tips for engaging families in virtual events

* Lead time is important. Begin your outreach for virtual events far enough in advance to give ample time for recruitment and preparation.
* As always, relationships are key. This can be a particularly challenging time to build new connections with families. Think through who you or your partners have existing relationships with and build on for engagement in your event.
* Every family has a different story. Do your best to engage more than one family to paint the broadest picture possible.
* Ask questions to get a sense of what families are experiencing during this crisis and the story they have to tell, related to your event goals. For example, if you are focusing on child care, ask families about their child care situation before the pandemic and their fears for when they need to return to work. If you are asking about paid leave, inquire how paid leave was or would have been helpful to them during this time.
* Take the time to prepare families before your event so that they know exactly how things will go logistically, what the goals of your event are, and what their role is.
* Expect to play the part of tech support to families participating in your event. If you are planning a live event or meeting, schedule practice time to ensure that all technology is working, and families feel comfortable with it.
* If families will be on video, help them prepare ahead of time. While families are invited to these events because of the stories they bring, and not the state of their home, many of us would feel self-conscious about visitors in our homes right now. Help them think about a place where the lighting is good, and they feel comfortable about the background. Consider sharing with families the option to use a Zoom background if they feel uncomfortable having their home visible.
* Be flexible and family friendly. Ask families what they will need to be able to participate and do your best to meet those needs. There is no need for families to find a quiet place to speak with you. Welcome interruptions and acknowledge that it is okay if they occur during events. Families are juggling a lot right now and policymakers seeing that firsthand is authentic and powerful. Circumstances may change for families and they need to know that while their commitment to the event is important, you understand that the needs of their family take priority.
* Recognize that this is a stressful time and that not all families will have the capacity to engage in every type of activity right now. Consider offering multiple ways that require varying degrees of effort. For example, if a family doesn’t feel they have the capacity engage in an event directly as a speaker or meeting participant, perhaps they could engage with your event on social media or share a quote that you use in support of your event.
* Plan to follow up with families personally after your event to debrief and thank them. At in person events, this can happen naturally at the end of event, but the end of virtual events can feel abrupt. Share any metrics from the event and how it helped you make progress toward your goals, so they know the impact of their participation.

Think Babies Virtual Events Sample Social Media Content

The content below can be modified to reflect the details and priorities of your event.

**Posts to announce your event**

* ATTN [LOCAL AREA] parents & guardians of children ages 0-3! We want to hear from you! Join us for [YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT] to share your stories about the joys and challenges of raising infants & toddlers in our new “normal.” Register here: [LINK]
* We know that parents & caregivers are the true experts on what #babies and families in [COMMUNITY] need to thrive in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond. Join us on [DATE] to share your story and encourage our leaders to #ThinkBabies: [LINK]
* We’re excited to announce [YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT] to tell our policymakers it's time to #ThinkBabies. Join us: [LINK]

**Posts to preview your event**

* **Two Weeks Before:** We’re just two weeks out from our #ThinkBabies [YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT]! Will you share your story and urge policymakers to #ThinkBabies? Register now: [LINK]
* **One Week Before:** What do [COMMUNITY]’s #babies and families need to thrive? Join us next week to #ThinkBabies and share how we can make sure all infants and toddlers have a strong start in life. [LINK]
* **One Day Before:** Babies can’t wait! The need to make the potential of every baby our national priority has never been more urgent. Take some time to #ThinkBabies with us tomorrow: [LINK]

**Day-of event posts**

* Today’s the day! We can’t wait to hear directly from parents on what #babies and families in [COMMUNITY] need to thrive. How are you taking time to #ThinkBabies today? Tune in: [LINK]
* How can we ensure babies in [COMMUNITY] get the best possible start in life? Today, we’re excited to have [POLICYMAKERS] join us to hear directly from families about the joys & challenges of raising infants & toddlers. Join us today! [LINK] #ThinkBabies
* *We recommend that you post thank-you messages and screenshots of policymakers who attended; photos/quotes from any stories, and retweet posts from families.*

**Posts following event**

* **Thank You to Families:** We loved hearing directly from families at our #ThinkBabies [YOUR VIRTUAL EVENT]! Stay in touch by joining the team that’s fighting for our future: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>
* **General Ongoing Campaign:** We have heard parent stories but we’re not done yet! Investing in baby brain development is one of the most important things we can do to ensure [COMMUNITY] is able to recover & rebuild following #COVID19. #ThinkBabies with us: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>
* **General Ongoing Campaign:** Telling the story of America’s babies is more important than ever. It’s time for [HIGHLIGHT RELEVANT POLICYMAKERS] to #ThinkBabies. Join the team that’s fighting for our future: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>
* **General Ongoing Campaign:** The first 3 years of a child’s life shape every year that follows. Just one more reason [HIGHLIGHT RELEVANT POLICYMAKERS] need to #ThinkBabies. The #COVID19 pandemic will have lasting effects on children, their families, & our community. Join us: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>

* **General Ongoing Campaign:** Investing in #baby #braindevelopment is one of the most important things we can do to raise healthy, well-rounded adults. #ThinkBabies with us: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>
* **General Ongoing Campaign:** When we #ThinkBabies and help parents support their healthy development we can ensure that our country doesn’t return to the previous status quo for babies and families after #COVID19. Join the team that’s fighting for our future: <http://bit.ly/2M9eJpH>
* **General Ongoing Campaign:** Even before COVID-19, #StateofBabies showed us that the littlest among us faced big challenges. What happens next is up to us. Share the data and take action: <https://bit.ly/3e6MKUF> [TAG ZERO TO THREE]