

# Candidate Guide to *Think Babies*



**Want to build a better future? It begins with infants and toddlers.**

The science is clear. Babies' brains develop faster from birth to age three than at any other time of life. Their early experiences – both positive and negative – build the foundation for brain architecture and physical and mental health that will support their ability to learn, grow, and thrive. When babies and toddlers have resources and opportunities that support good health, strong families, and positive early learning experiences, it will lead to communities that are stronger, smarter, healthier, and fairer.

Every child deserves a strong start life but opportunities to grow and flourish are not shared equally by all infants, toddlers, and families, reflecting past and present systemic racism and barriers to critical resources. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, just over 40% of babies lived in families without enough income to make ends meet. For our country to thrive, we must ensure that every baby has what they need to reach their full potential.

[ZERO TO THREE](#) created [Think Babies™](#) to bring attention to what babies and their families need to thrive. It is a call to action for federal and state policymakers to prioritize policies that support infants and toddlers that reflect the needs and priorities identified by families.

In this candidate guide you will find the research, statistics, and policy solutions you need to *Think Babies* – and most importantly, stories of how these issues impact families across the country.

Three key areas that are critical to families with infants and toddlers are:

- Affordable, quality child care;
- Paid family and medical leave; and
- Economic security supports like the Child Tax Credit.

The greatest opportunity to influence a child's life outcomes – academic, social and emotional, and physical – is during their first three years. Invest in giving all babies the best chance to succeed in life and build a better future for all of us.

Meet some of our *Think Babies* advocates and read their stories below.



## Infants and Toddlers Need Comprehensive Paid Family and Medical Leave

**The time after the birth or adoption of a baby is an essential time of development for babies and families.**

Because early relationships nurture brain connections that form the foundation for learning and relationships, parents and caregivers play the most important role in supporting their children's healthy development. When families have the supports and resources that they need and want, outcomes for babies improve.

Eighty five percent of working people in the United States do not have access to paid leave through their employers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics). That means many parents must make the impossible choice between taking the time they need to bond with and care for their babies and losing their jobs or economic security.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought our country's caregiving crisis to the forefront of national discourse. Paid family and medical leave is essential for supporting family's economic stability in the face of unforeseen circumstances. Families' experiences of the public health crisis demonstrated that our lack of a national paid family and medical leave program is dangerous.

Families need more than the emergency paid leave provisions passed by Congress in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act which has since expired. As of summer 2022, only 10 states and the District of Columbia have passed paid leave laws or ballot initiatives. Babies and their families need a permanent, comprehensive national paid family and medical leave program that gives them time to bond with their babies, foster nurturing relationships that build early brain connections, and care for themselves or family members with serious illnesses.

Policy makers must invest in comprehensive paid family and medical leave insurance programs that embodies the following core principles:

- Accessibility for all working people;
- At least 12 weeks of leave;
- Coverage for the full range of medical and family caregiving needs established in the Family and Medical Leave Act;
- Affordability and cost-effectiveness for workers, employers and the government;
- Inclusivity in its definition of "family"; and
- Protections against employer retaliation when workers utilize their right to take leave.

**For more information, visit [thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-paid-leave](https://thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-paid-leave).**

### Anna A. (Bastrop, LA)

Anna's son, Gareth, had severe allergies and asthma that led to multiple hospitalizations in his first year of life. Without comprehensive paid family and medical leave, Anna had to walk away from a job she loved to care for her sick baby: *"I had to return to work after 6 weeks due to the exhausting of my entire leave [due to a difficult pregnancy.] None of the leave was paid, but my job was on the line if I didn't return to work. If there were more time for me to bond with my baby, I would have had more knowledge of what was going on with [his severe allergies and asthma]. I would not have had to resign from my job if there was more time allowed to be home with him."*

### Cate W. (Norfolk, VA)

Cate W. is an essential worker and was placed on bed rest with her third baby. Because she has an hourly position, Cate doesn't have benefits, including paid leave: *"In late summer 2019, I was placed on bed rest for the remainder of my pregnancy. I was grateful when my Navy husband's command allowed him augmented working hours so that he could assume the majority of household work as we waited for their baby's birth. But I work as an inpatient pulmonary/critical care nurse practitioner at one of the region's largest hospitals. Because of challenges in finding the child care that our middle child needed, I have an hourly position without benefits, including paid leave. Every day I was in bed, hoping to make sure my daughter had the best chance at a healthy life, was another day I was not getting paid."*

### Wendy D. (Ballwin, MO)

When Wendy and her husband adopted Bryce, she was able to take 12 weeks off work due to a combination of personal time off and FMLA, but much of her leave was unpaid. While she values the time she took off, having no income for several weeks was a financial strain. With paid leave, Wendy could have taken that valuable bonding time without the stress of not having reliable income to help meet household expenses. In Wendy's words: *"Bonding is the foundation of our relationship with Bryce. From the time we met him in the hospital when he was a day old, we immediately began skin-to-skin contact with him. We were able to take time off from work to be with him for the first three months of life, and that was extremely important to us. Bonding as he is older means reading together, playing on the floor with one another, and simply being together as a family. I wish we could have taken more time, but it was not financially feasible."*

# Infants and Toddlers Need Quality, Affordable Child Care

Quality child care prepares babies for future learning and success.

Parents and primary caregivers play the most immediate role in shaping their children's early foundation. When parents go to work, school, or job training however, they need access to high-quality, affordable child care that supports their infants' and toddlers' healthy development. Access to quality child care not only supports families' employment and education, it also lays the groundwork for babies' future success, including strong cognitive skills, higher scores on math and language measures, and the social and emotional skills critical to all learning. Unfortunately, high-quality child care can be hard to access, especially for families with low incomes.

Infant-toddler care, especially high-quality care, is prohibitively expensive with costs ranging from 29.3% of a family's income to 93.8% depending on where the family lives. Infant-toddler care costs more than in-state college tuition in 35 states and the District of Columbia and surpasses the cost of housing in 3 out of 4 regions. Despite the high cost of care, few families receive financial assistance for it. Only 4.6% of infants and toddlers in families with low-or moderate-incomes are served by the Child Care and Development Fund. Individual states set eligibility levels for child care subsidies. Only 16 states allow child care subsidies for families with incomes above 200 percent of the federal poverty level which was \$46,060 a year for a family of three in 2022.

This country's child care system was broken before COVID-19. The pandemic has further strained the system. Inadequate public investment has produced a system where the families who can find infant-toddler child care pay more than they can afford. Many are forced to leave the workforce altogether to become full-time caregivers. Child care providers, many of them women of color, earn too little, threatening the ability of child care programs to operate and the ability of individual staff to provide for their own needs and those of their families. In this environment, far too many young children do not receive the stable, nurturing care that they need to thrive.

Families have faced an increased lack of access to reliable child care throughout the pandemic, from early widespread closures to ongoing intermittent closures following outbreaks and exposures. This lack of access and unpredictability has directly impacted parents', particularly mothers', workforce participation, threatening family economic security and our country's economy.

Our child care system is failing babies, families, and providers. Robust public funding is imperative for a system of high-quality programs that is accessible to all families. Any policy solution must be built on principles that ensure:

- All children receive quality child care with responsive, consistent caregivers and a safe environment in which to explore and learn;
- Families can access the high-quality child care setting that best meets their needs;
- Families get the financial support they need to afford high-quality child care; and
- Early childhood professionals in all settings and age groups receive support, resources, and compensation to provide high-quality care and support their own families.

## Paula P. (Idaho Falls, ID)

Even with two full-time incomes, Paula's family struggles to get by, particularly due to the high cost of child care: *"Many of the local child care programs have waiting lists that are months long. Currently the cost of child care per month is nearly twice the amount of our monthly mortgage. Between rising fuel costs, child care and the overall cost of living, we have no money in savings for an emergency and we struggle to make ends meet. I feel as if the American dream doesn't apply to the working middle class. My husband fought for our country, yet it doesn't feel as though anyone wants to fight for us."*

## Brooke C. (Albuquerque, NM)

Brooke quit her job after having her baby because she and her first-responder husband could not afford the care their son needed: *"I worked for years in a child care center - an amazing, beautiful, clean, exceptional child care center where I could never afford to take my child now. With the high cost of quality care, I was forced to settle for other programs, which was unimaginably painful because of the impact it had on my innocent child. I currently take odd jobs, cleaning homes and babysitting, so I can stay home with my child."*

## Nikki G. (Apple Valley, MN)

Finding the affordable, high-quality child care Nikki's family needs has been difficult. After adopting their third child, Nikki was struck by the number of times programs told her they had space for their son, but not the staff to care for him: *"Our son and oldest daughter now attend the same school, but our youngest is still at home because she's on a waitlist. For our family, child care feels like a three-legged stool that has one wobbly leg: one leg being affordability; one leg being available near you at the time you need it; and the last leg being a high-quality place you trust for your children. You can only pick two of the strongest legs and hope that you won't topple over. If I had an ask as a parent, it's to just fix the dang stool. We need all three legs. If we did, I could unclench my grip, stand on top of it, and grab for things that me and my children want and need from shelves we currently can't reach."*

For more information, visit [thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-child-care](https://thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-child-care).

## Infants and Toddlers Need Economic Stability

**For the almost 4 million babies born each year in the United States, economic security can mean the difference between a strong beginning and a fragile start.**

Young children grow in the context of their families and communities. Ensuring economic security for families and communities is fundamental to creating the environment in which young children thrive, laying the groundwork for our next generation. Poverty gets under the skin, undermining strong brain development and other physiological systems. More than 80% of children in families with low incomes live in a household where at least one person is employed but work alone is often not enough to lift a family out of poverty or help them reach economic security. A parent or caregiver working full-time at the federal minimum wage will have only \$15,080 in annual income. That is not enough to lift even a 2-person family out of poverty. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 1 in 5 babies lived in poverty. Poverty among American Indian/Alaska Native and Black infants and toddlers is nearly twice the national average, affecting more than 1 in 3 babies. Hispanic infants and toddlers are more likely to live in poverty than the national average, with 1 in 4 babies in poverty. These disparities are rooted in structural racism and discriminatory policies that have historically blocked opportunity for these communities. The chronic, unrelenting stress and instability associated with poverty is compounded by difficulty accessing services such as preventative health care, quality housing, treatment for physical and mental health challenges, and quality child care or finding employment that provides paid family and medical leave.

We can ensure families can provide safe housing, nutritious foods, adequate clothing and diapers, and regular access to medical care so young children have stability during this time of rapid growth and development. The enhanced, monthly federal Child Tax Credit supported families with young children in meeting basic needs (e.g., food, housing, utilities, and telecommunications). Seventy three percent of families with low income reported using the Child Tax Credit for these purposes. Families who received Child Tax Credit payments were less likely during that time to report experiencing material hardship than households that had not received the payments. Unfortunately, Congress allowed this vital support for families to lapse, increasing the risks for families of living in economic insecurity.

Every parent wants to give their child a strong start in life. Policymakers can help build an economy that would ensure families have enough income to make ends meet and provide for their children's healthy development by:

- Making permanent the enhanced, fully refundable federal Child Tax Credit for young children which expired at the end of 2021;
- Ensuring a federal and state minimum wage of \$15/hour;
- Increasing the federal and state Earned Income Tax Credit; and
- Helping close the wealth gap with "Baby Bonds".

### Brandy S. (Big Flat, AR)

When Brandy S.'s husband's pizza business shut down during the pandemic, they moved to a rural community in Arkansas with their elementary school student and 2-year-old son. She is grateful for the flexible family-friendly job that allows her to work from home as she homeschools her older son, who has Autism, and cares for her toddler. But the family struggles to make ends meet every month.

*"My family earns a modest income and receives no government support. Without the Child Tax Credit, my family had to reassess our budget. My husband had to take on an extra job. He's been working six sometimes seven days a week to help provide for our family. Even with him doing so, we're still struggling. We have to make the decisions of when and how often to drive into town as gas prices have risen substantially. Our grocery budget is also super tight every month."*

### Monique V. (Grand Rapids, MI)

Monique is a chef and a mom with significant health concerns. Her daughter, Estrella, is "strong, super sassy, and so smart." Estrella was born with mild cerebral palsy and is in the process of autism testing: *"I want to be clear that my family's struggle to find economic security is not a result of laziness. Between us, my daughter and I have 25 doctor appointments every month, making it impossible for me to work. I also care for my parents, both with chronic conditions. It is challenging for my partner to work because there are days that I can't physically care for our daughter, and we need his help. We try to utilize resources, but we are sometimes denied due to complications."*

### Stephanie C. (Roxbury, MA)

Stephanie is a public school kindergarten teacher and community advocate who is working hard to care for her baby while she does essential work in her community: *"I do not qualify for programs that can be helpful, so during the time that I was teaching and going to school, I paid to meet all of my family's needs on my own, which has been a struggle on a teacher's salary. It is too high to qualify for any discounts or benefits like vouchers, but too low to really make ends meet. The cost of child care takes up about 35% of my income."*

For more information, visit <https://www.thinkbabies.org/policy-priorities-economic-security>.