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Investing in California's Babies: The Case for High-Quality Early Childhood Education (Prenatal to Age 3, PN-3)

Why the PN-3 years build the foundation for healthy, thriving California families

Early childhood education is a crucial foundation for lifelong success, yet many Latino infants and toddlers face significant barriers to accessing high-quality and affordable programs. By 2050, Latino children will comprise 50% of the K-12 public school population. To ensure equitable access to early learning opportunities, it's essential to provide high-quality services for Latino infants prenatally through age three (PN-3).

Why the PN-3 Years Matter

- A baby's brain reached 80% of its adult size by age 3 and 90% by age 5.¹
- More than 1 million new neural connections form every second in the first years of life.²
- Early relationships, interaction and high-quality caregiving shape lifelong health, learning and economic mobility.³

High-quality PN-3 care is not a luxury; it is a critical infrastructure for California's future workforce, economy and racial equity goals.

California's Child Care Landscape: Progress and Strengths

- California now has 35,836 licensed child care facilities,⁴ including 10,552 centers and 25,284 family child care homes, providing nearly 1 million licensed spaces.⁵
- The number of child care spaces now exceeds pre-pandemic levels by 6%, showing recovery and growth.⁶
- California Head Start served 83,000 children across 1,835 centers in 2024.⁷
 - California Head Start participants are 12% less likely to live in poverty as adults and families participating have higher employment/education outcomes.⁸

California has expanded its child care capacity by creating new slots; however, the benefits are not evenly reaching families with infants and toddlers.

¹<https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/>

²<https://www.zerotothree.org/why-0-3/>

³<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9345511/>

^{4 5}[Licensed Child Care Facilities, by Type](#)

⁶<https://www.ppic.org/publication/policy-brief-californias-changing-child-care-landscape/>

⁷<https://calmatters.org/education/2025/10/california-head-start/>

⁸<https://nhsa.org/resource/state-national-fact-sheets/>

Who California's Babies Are: Demographic Realities

- California is home to 1.7 million children ages 0-3 (4.3% of the population).⁹
- One in two California children ages 0-3 are Latino.¹⁰
- Nationally, 95% of Latino children are U.S.-born; 53% have an immigrant parent.¹¹
- In California, 33% of children ages 0-3 live in low-income families.¹²
- In California, more than half (59%) of children ages 0-5 — approximately 1,689,000 young children — are dual language learners.¹³

Persistent Gaps and Inequities for Families with Infants and Toddlers in California

A. Access and Availability

- 17% of California parents could not find care when they needed it for a week or more in a national survey.¹⁴
- 67% of families applying for assistance were placed on a waitlist; 32% waited more than three months.¹⁵
- Only 1 in 9 children eligible for child care subsidies is.
- In half of California counties, families live in child care deserts.¹⁶

B. Affordability

- Using the average price of child care in California in 2024, center-based infant care costs 16% of the median married-couple income and 50% of the median single-parent income.¹⁷
- The Administration for Children and Families defines affordable child care to mean no more than 7% of a family's income.¹⁸
- County-level costs range from 8% to 21% of household income.¹⁹
- The median cost of infant care in California ranged from \$11,000 to \$29,000 per year in 2024.²⁰

^{9 10} https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ACIAC_Children_Ages_0-3_FINAL.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.hispanicresearchcenter.org/hisp-family-facts/over-90-percent-of-all-u-s-latino-children-were-born-in-the-united-states/>

¹² https://childrenspartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/ACIAC_Children_Ages_0-3_FINAL.pdf

¹³ https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-nciip_dll-fact-sheet2022_ca-final.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.ccfc.ca.gov/pdf/ResearchAndPublications/Child_Care_0_5_Policy_Brief_2025.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.crrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Statewide-Parent-Child-Care-Financial-Assistance-User-Experience-Report_Public.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁶ <https://centerforhealthjournalism.org/our-work/insights/what-does-it-mean-kids-live-one-californias-child-care-deserts>

¹⁷ <https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/Pricing%20and%20Landscape%20Infograms/Pricing%20Sheets%20PDF/2024-2025-price-fact-sheet-child-care-affordability-California.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://acf.gov/occ/news/new-rule-improve-child-care-access-affordability-and-stability-ccdf>

^{19 20} <https://www.ppic.org/blog/how-expensive-is-child-care-in-california/>

C. Workforce Instability

- Nationally, 81% of child care providers cite low wages as the main reason educators leave; 78% say wages are the barrier to hiring.²¹
- In California, 43% of early educator families rely on safety-net programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.²²
- California early educators have poverty rates that are 4.9 times higher than K-8 teachers.²³
- California early educators earn \$15.66/hour, which is below a living wage.²⁴
- California Latina child care center directors earn 87 cents on the dollar compared to white/Asian peers.²⁵

D. Dual Language Learners and Equity Gaps

- In California, there are approximately 1.5 million children ages 0-5 who are dual language learners, representing about 59% of children in that age range.²⁶
- In a national survey by UnidosUS and Abriendo Puertas that asked 1,300 Latino parents with children ages 0-5 whether they want their child to be bilingual in both Spanish and English, 93% of Californians said yes.
- From 2011 to 2015, 57% of California DLL children lived in low-income families.²⁷
- Children from low-income households are already on slower language growth trajectories by age 2, and socioeconomic-linked developmental disparities persist into school age.²⁸

Economic and Workforce Returns

- Every \$1 invested in high-quality early childhood programs yields \$13 in return.²⁹
- Lack of child care could cost the U.S. economy \$329 billion over 10 years.³⁰
- Public early childhood education increases parental income and work hours, with long-term gains.³¹
- Child care access is directly linked to California's workforce participation, productivity and gender equity.³²
- Learn more about our [Latino Infant Initiative](#) and how we're improving education outcomes for infants and young children.

²¹ <https://www.naeyc.org/about-us/news/press-releases/survey-childcare-centers-understaffed>

^{22 23} <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2024/states/california/>

²⁴ <https://www.kqed.org/news/12008467/uc-berkeley-study-reveals-early-educators-still-among-lowest-paid-workers>

²⁵ https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-nciip_dll-fact-sheet2022_ca-final.pdf

²⁶ https://www.cfc.ca.gov/pdf/ResearchAndPublications/Child_Care_0_5_Policy_Brief_2025.pdf

²⁷ https://www.crrca.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Statewide-Parent-Child-Care-Financial-Assistance-User-Experience-Report_Public.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁸ <https://centerforhealthjournalism.org/our-work/insights/what-does-it-mean-kids-live-one-californias-child-care-deserts>

²⁹ <https://info.childcareaware.org/hubfs/Pricing%20and%20Landscape%20Infographics/Pricing%20Sheets%20PDF/2024-2025-price-fact-sheet-child-care-affordability-California.pdf>

³⁰ <https://acf.gov/occ/news/new-rule-improve-child-care-access-affordability-and-stability-ccdf>

³¹ <https://www.ppic.org/blog/how-expensive-is-child-care-in-california/>