

# National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative

## Keys to High-Quality Child Care for Infants and Toddlers

### Core Knowledge and Competencies for Infants and Toddlers



Core knowledge and competencies (CKCs) define the content (*knowledge*) and skills (*competencies*) that adults working with young children need to support individualized learning experiences and development. CKCs are components of a broader professional development system in most States and territories.

Early care and education professionals (ECE professionals)<sup>1</sup> need to understand the rapid physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional development that infants and toddlers experience. To practice responsive child care, they need a keen awareness of the critical importance of emotional development and its connection with language, culture, and social growth during infancy. When adults understand what to expect from young children and how to support them during their first 3 years, they can better nurture the skills needed for success later in life. CKCs designed specifically for infant and toddler ECE professionals, supported by high quality training and educational opportunities, will ensure that caregivers have the knowledge foundation as well as the relationship-based skills needed to provide quality care.

This fact sheet describes common elements found in the CKCs of 36 States,<sup>2</sup> including age ranges, core knowledge categories, competency levels, and special considerations for children with special needs and cultural diversity.

## AGE RANGES

All State CKCs include knowledge requirements that support infants and toddlers. Over half of States have CKCs covering birth through 8 years or birth through 5 years (see Figure 1). A few States have CKCs covering the prenatal period while others extend into adolescence. A number of State CKCs do not explicitly identify an age range, though most contain references to infants and toddlers.

## INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Research on brain development underscores the importance of learning experiences in the first three years of life. Infants and toddlers require good health and nutrition, developmentally appropriate activities, and responsive caregivers for optimal brain growth and development. Competent and well-trained infant and toddler ECE professionals provide high-quality care that supports rich early learning experiences and builds a solid foundation for later learning.

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<sup>1</sup> The term early care and education professional refers to adult caregivers, including center-based care providers, family child care providers, and family, friend, and neighbor caregivers.

<sup>2</sup> The generalizations in this paper are based on CKC documents available on the internet. This paper focuses on States because CKCs for territories were not available online; territories may encounter similar issues when they develop CKCs.

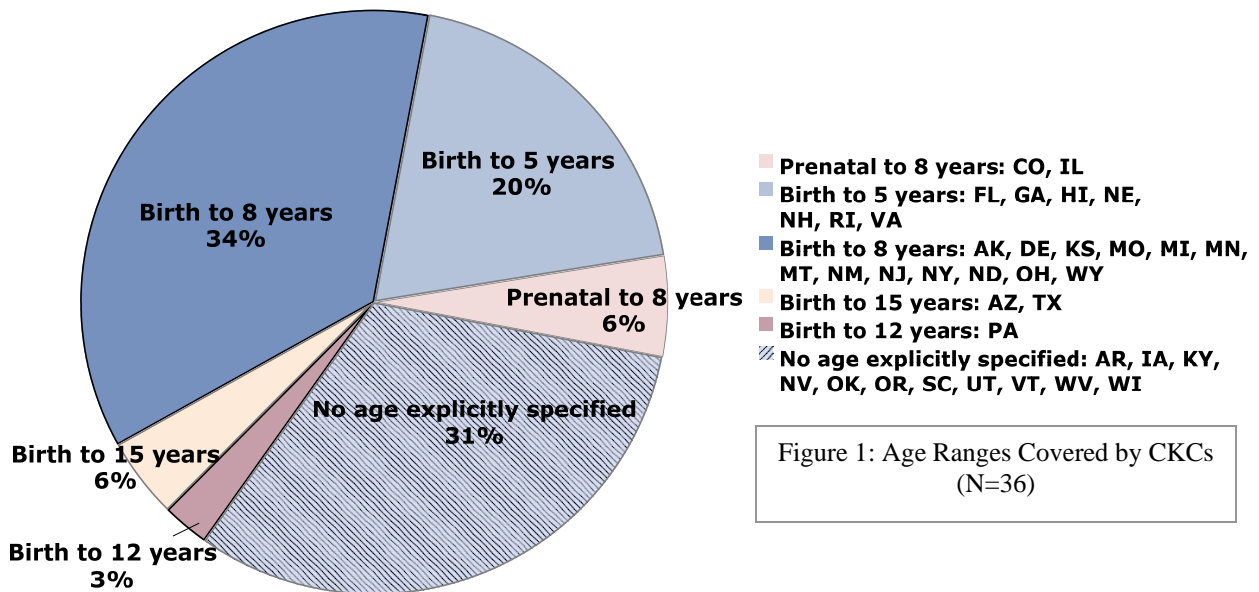


Figure 1: Age Ranges Covered by CKCs (N=36)

All State CKCs require ECE professionals to have general knowledge and competencies in infant/toddler development. Some States embed competencies for the infant/toddler workforce throughout the entire CKC document; a few include infant/toddler competencies in selected core knowledge areas (e.g., child growth and development).

Several States have credential programs for the infant/toddler child care workforce<sup>3</sup> that formally recognizes the professional achievement of those who have trained for and worked with infants and toddlers in child care programs. The Infant/Toddler Credential (ITC) is a qualification indicating that the holder has specialized core knowledge and competencies that serve as a foundation for high-quality interactions with and care for infants and toddlers. In States that offer the Infant/Toddler Credential, CKCs are often aligned with the ITC pathway to ensure that professionals serving infants and toddlers attain specialized knowledge and competencies. States that do not have a separate CKC document require infant/toddler knowledge and competencies within their ITC programs.

Examples of infant/toddler CKCs include:

- **Colorado** has CKCs for prenatal through 8 years of age. Within the broad core knowledge and competencies, specific requirements for infant care—leading to knowledge of the prenatal period, the birthing process, and the neonate and newborn—are embedded where appropriate.
- **Illinois** requires mastery of CKCs, providing benchmarks and outcomes for prenatal through age 8 years. These are linked to the State credential for ECE professionals serving infants and toddlers. The Illinois Infant Toddler Credential ensures that professionals have a broad early care and education perspective with a foundation in infant/toddler development.

<sup>3</sup> National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative. (2007). *Credentials for the infant/toddler child care workforce: A technical assistance tool for child care and development fund administrators*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance, Child Care Bureau.

- **Maine's** Infant Toddler Caregiver Competencies require core knowledge training and formal education specific to infants and toddlers.
- **New Mexico** has CKCs for birth through 8 years and offers formal education opportunities leading to the Specialization in Family, Infant, and Toddler Studies for typically and atypically developing infants and toddlers.
- **New York** requires CKCs for ECE professionals serving young children birth through 8 years. In addition, it requires specialized infant/toddler competencies for individuals who receive the Infant Toddler Care & Education Credential. New York uses these competencies as the basis for recruitment, education, and assessment of infant/toddler caregivers and teachers.

## Core Knowledge Categories

Core knowledge is the crucial information that ECE professionals need to work effectively with young children. Although the specific content areas and level of required detail varies, all States have developed core knowledge domains that are consistent with the ECE professional common knowledge and developmentally appropriate practices recommended by the NAEYC.<sup>4</sup> Core knowledge domains include:

- **Child Growth and Development:** Understanding the theoretical constructs that define and describe child development.
- **Child Observation and Assessment:** Acquiring skill in observation and assessment to support individualized planning and learning.
- **Health, Nutrition, and Safety:** Being aware of safety regulations, nutritional standards, and general child health to maintain a safe environment.
- **Learning Environment and Curriculum:** Knowing learning theory and curriculum to establish developmentally appropriate and supportive learning environments.
- **Child Guidance:** Appreciating the engagement of families within family-centered relationships and sharing developmentally appropriate techniques to guide and manage the behaviors of young children.
- **Family and Community Relationships:** Knowing techniques to establish family partnerships to support the idea that children are best understood within the context of family, culture, and community.
- **Professionalism:** Understanding the theories of ethical conduct and delivering services with the skill, competence, and character consistent with a trained professional.
- **Professional Development:** Participating in the ongoing process of adult learning and continuing education.
- **Administration/Management:** Applying theories of program operations, fiscal and personnel management, staff relations, leadership, human resource management, regulations, and program evaluation to implement administrative systems.

<sup>4</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1993). *A Conceptual framework for early childhood professional development*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.  
National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Some States have core knowledge domains specific to infants and toddlers. For example, Maine, New Mexico, New York, and South Carolina require specialized knowledge consistent with the NAEYC's early childhood professional common knowledge and developmentally appropriate practices, including:

- **Infant/Toddler Growth, Development, and Well-Being:** Having the theoretical knowledge necessary to work with children ages birth to 2 years.
- **Health, Safety, and Nutrition:** Having the ability to promote good health for infants and toddlers.
- **Infant/Toddler Learning Environment and Curriculum:** Knowing infant/toddler learning theory and curriculum to establish developmentally appropriate and supportive learning environments.
- **Working with Infants, Toddlers, and their Families:** Understanding the importance of family engagement in the development of their infant or toddler.
- **Infant/Toddler Assessment and Observation:** Understanding observation, screening, evaluation and assessment activities for all infants and toddlers.

## Levels of Core Competencies

Core competencies are the observable skills that allow ECE professionals to apply their core knowledge to practical settings. Most States have developed multilevel competencies that are consistent with the continuum of professional development recommended by the NAEYC.<sup>5</sup> Many States further integrated CKCs within State-based career lattices or pathways that lead to certificates, credentials, higher education, and other forms of training or education. Like career lattices, each competency level is typically defined by level of experience, stage of career, position title, and education. The levels of professional competency represent a tiered framework demonstrating proficiency from entry level to an advanced level of academic preparation and experience. Participants in career lattices are able to advance from one level to the next through formal study and reflective practice and experience, often becoming more specialized as they achieve higher levels of formal education or training. Advanced ECE professionals are expected to demonstrate a general set of competencies often within a specific specialization, such as infant/toddler certification.

The professional development framework and number of competency levels varies by State. Most States designed CKCs with three or more levels, but some used fewer levels. States that used fewer competency levels often combined and integrated the multiple requirements of CKCs in other States. Figure 2 illustrates a tiered framework of competency requirements.

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<sup>5</sup> National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1993). *A conceptual framework for early childhood professional development*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

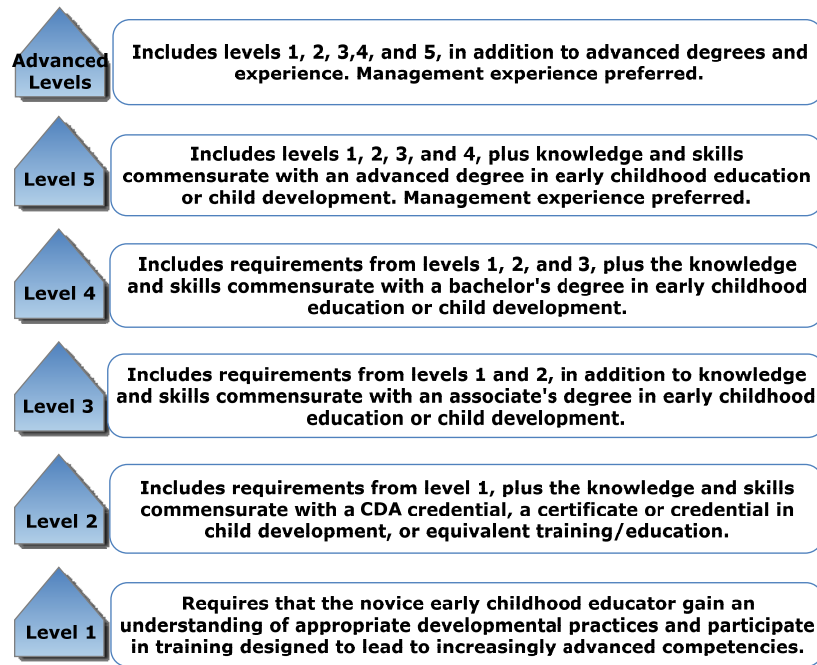


Figure 2: CKC Levels of Competency

## Core Knowledge and Competencies: Special Considerations

### INFANTS AND TODDLERS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

Over the last 30 years, legislative mandates<sup>6</sup> have shaped policies and practices that support inclusive participation in early care and education.<sup>7</sup> Including competencies that address infants and toddlers with special needs is an important step toward ensuring that the infant/toddler workforce can provide supportive and enriching care environments for families seeking inclusive child care.

Most State CKCs do not explicitly include dedicated and detailed competency areas for young children with special needs, with the exception of New Hampshire and Oregon. Most States (e.g., Illinois, Michigan and New Mexico) embedded competencies for special needs across all age and developmental domains appropriate for ECE professionals serving infants, toddlers, and young children.

<sup>6</sup> H.R. 1350--108th Congress: Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (2003). Retrieved Nov 9, 2009 from [www.copyright.gov/legislation/pl108-446.pdf](http://www.copyright.gov/legislation/pl108-446.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Division for Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Early childhood inclusion*. Washington, DC: Council for Exceptional Children, Division of Early Childhood and the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND DUAL-LANGUAGE LEARNERS

From birth, young children are exposed to different languages, cultural values, beliefs and assumptions within the family and in the context of their community. Children absorb powerful messages from people, the environment, and the community that shape their identity and social and cultural values. How infants, toddlers, and young children interact within their environment and respond to experiences is heavily influenced by the values and beliefs of the family and others who care for them. Because culture has a powerful impact on early learning, ECE professionals need competencies in learning about the families, cultures, and languages of children in their care to challenge their own assumptions about differences. ECE professionals knowledgeable about their own cultural values and how their experiences can influence learning and development are better equipped to deliver services in a culturally sensitive manner to all young children across the age spectrum, including infants and toddlers.

Though most States have embedded diversity and communication across the developmental domains, these States included specific core knowledge areas with competencies on diversity: Colorado, Hawaii, New Hampshire, Oregon, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. No States explicitly addressed dual-language learning for infants, toddlers, and young children.

### Conclusion

CKCs are similar across States for ages covered, core knowledge areas, competencies, and special considerations such as special needs and diversity. Most CKCs require broad knowledge of elements that lead to high-quality care, supported by more specialized multilevel credential pathways such as the Infant/Toddler Credential. States also have recognized the importance of ensuring that ECE professionals are able to provide high-quality care to diverse populations and young children with special needs by requiring mastery of knowledge in these areas. The following are examples of State CKCs that address infants and toddlers, special needs, and diversity.



## State Examples of Core Knowledge and Competencies

Below are selected examples of State core knowledge and competencies for illustration and information purposes only.

**Colorado Core Knowledge and Standards** span prenatal to 8 years and require knowledge of the birthing process as well as the neonate, newborn, and infant. Colorado also included a specific CKC area on culture and individual diversity. The diversity competency contains requirements to gain knowledge on the inclusion of young children with special needs. Colorado requires advancement through two levels of competencies—level 1 requires an understanding of the theoretical and historical constructs underlying early education, and level 2 requires application of theory to practice. The two levels of advancement are related to the first two levels of the six-level Colorado Early Childhood and School Age/Youth Credentials. Both credit bearing courses at Colorado colleges and noncredit trainings are based on the same core knowledge standards and are approved by the Colorado Department of Human Services. The document also includes detailed developmental focus areas and suggested supporting activities to enhance learning. For more information, see:

<http://www.smartstartcolorado.org/professionals/documents/CKSBook.pdf>

**Hawai'i Careers with Young Children: Attitudes, Skills, and Knowledge (ASK)** is designed for center-based ECE professionals working with young children ages birth to 5 years and includes diversity knowledge requirements. The ASK core areas are linked to Hawaii's six-level professional development system. ECE professionals must demonstrate knowledge and competencies in ASK core areas at progressive levels of mastery that correspond to the six levels of the ECE professional development framework: awareness, demonstrates with supervision, understands, demonstrates independently, articulates milestones clearly and teaches them to others. For more information, see:

<http://www.patchhawaii.org/files/content/providers/center/careers/ASK%20Booklet.pdf>

**The Illinois Gateways Early Childhood Education Credential Content Areas** require knowledge of child development and learning for ages birth through 8 years to support a developmentally, culturally, and individually appropriate teaching/learning environment. Competencies for working with children with special needs, culture, and diversity are embedded throughout the core competency areas. Illinois requires knowledge in seven content areas, with three levels of benchmarks that align with the ECE career lattice, early learning standards, and State credentials. Illinois complemented the broad ECE content areas with the specialized

**Infant Toddler Credential Content Areas**, a voluntary credential for practitioners who work with children under age 3 years. For more information, see:

<http://www.ilgateways.com/credentials.aspx>

**New Hampshire Guide to Early Childhood Careers** for ECE professionals serving children age birth to 5 years includes 12 core knowledge areas that provide the foundation for training and curriculum development. Each core area is multifaceted and recognizes four progressive levels of competency: awareness, acquisition, application, and proficiency. New Hampshire included specific core knowledge areas in cultural diversity and children with special needs. For more information, see:

<http://www.dhhs.State.nh.us/DHHS/CDB/LIBRARY/Training+Material/ece-guide.htm>

## **The New York State Early Care and Education Core Body of Knowledge**

**Framework** for young children ages birth through 8 years includes six knowledge areas. Within each knowledge area, there are three ascending levels of competency, designed as a continuum. New York competencies align with State-level credentials and facilitate access to higher education programs. New York complemented its broad knowledge framework with the **New York State Infant Toddler Care and Education Competencies**. The infant/toddler competencies focus on the unique knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to provide quality care for infants and toddlers. The New York State Association for the Education of Young Children uses these competencies as the criteria for the New York Infant Toddler Care and Education Credential. Competency areas for infant and toddler care include: infant and toddler development, family and culture, environment and curriculum, and assessment and evaluation. Competencies to support early intervention knowledge-building are embedded in the document. For more information, see:

[http://www.nysaeyc.org/credentials/pdf/IT\\_Competencies.pdf](http://www.nysaeyc.org/credentials/pdf/IT_Competencies.pdf)

<http://www.earlychildhood.org/>

## **Core Body of Knowledge for Oregon's Childhood Care and Education Profession**

is designed for a broad range of individuals in the early childhood profession and requires mastery of diversity competencies. Oregon requires competency in 10 specific core knowledge categories that include special needs and cultural diversity. Mastery of three levels of knowledge (introductory, intermediate, and advanced) indicates advancement within each core area. The competency requirements are linked to and provide the foundation for the Oregon Registry and the Oregon Registry Trainer Program. Oregon also includes a comprehensive glossary of core competency definitions. For more information, see:

<http://www.centerline.pdx.edu/forms/1%20OPDS/OPDS-CoreBodyKnowledge.pdf>

**Texas Core Knowledge and Skills in Early Care and Education** requires competency in eight areas, including cultural diversity. The Texas core knowledge and competencies are the foundation for trainings and are linked to the trainer registry. For more information, see:

[http://www.uth.tmc.edu/tecccds/practitioners\\_spry.html](http://www.uth.tmc.edu/tecccds/practitioners_spry.html)



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