

Introduction

The years from birth to three are generally regarded by families, researchers and practitioners as critical years for the development of the foundational skills and competencies that support continuous lifelong learning (National Governor's Association, 2005). The early and rapid development of the brain and related neurological functioning during this period have been well documented in research reports (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) and the popular press. Along with the increased public attention given to the importance of this age period, national and state efforts are under way to support development of early learning guidelines that identify essential learning outcomes for infants and toddlers (National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative, 2006).

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* recognizes the importance of shared responsibility and accountability to achieve positive outcomes for all children. This document, like its companion, *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Standards for 3 to 5*, stresses the importance of collective efforts among families, early childhood care and education practitioners, communities and policymakers in supporting the learning and development of young children.

Minnesota's infants and toddlers are cared for, nurtured and educated in a variety of settings, including their own homes; family, friend and neighbor homes; family child care homes; child care centers; and specific education programs. Parents, caregivers, health providers, social service providers, parent and family educators, early childhood educators, community members and policymakers share responsibility for the healthy development of Minnesota's infants and toddlers.

Purpose and goals

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3 provides a framework for understanding and communicating a common set of developmentally appropriate expectations for infants and toddlers, presented within a context of shared responsibility and accountability for helping very young children meet these expectations.

The document was developed with three goals in mind:

1. To help parents and other caregivers understand developmentally appropriate expectations for infants and toddlers.
2. To promote healthy child growth and development, high quality child care and early childhood education.
3. To develop comprehensive and coordinated services to benefit families with infants and toddlers based on the Early Learning Guidelines framework.

These guidelines express shared expectations for young children's learning and provide a common language for measuring progress toward achieving those goals.

The National Infant and Toddler Child Care Initiative, of which the Minnesota project is a part, defines early learning guidelines as research-based, measurable expectations of what children should know (understand) and do (competencies and skills) in different domains of learning. Early learning guidelines should be applicable to care provided by parents and families and to various early care and education settings. Sometimes early learning guidelines are developed as one component of program standards; however, these terms have different meanings and intended uses. Program standards are expectations about the characteristics or quality of early care and education settings. Minnesota currently has program standards for infant and toddler care and education in the form of licensing regulations specifically for children under three¹ (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2003). Federal programs, such as Early Head Start, also have program standards (Administration for Children and Families, 2003).

Minnesota is using the term "Early Learning Guidelines" for ages birth to 3 to emphasize flexibility in the application and uses of the guidelines and to avoid having them confused with program standards. "Early Learning Guidelines" also reflects a more informal and less structured approach in the care and education of very young children than is the case with academic learning standards. The *Minnesota Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* are intended to be a resource to support the learning and development of Minnesota's infants and toddlers and to promote high quality early childhood care and education.

¹ Rule 2 for Family Child Care facilities includes regulations for children 6 weeks to 12 months and 12 months to 30 months.

Rule 3 for Child Care Centers includes regulations for children 6 weeks to 16 months and 16 months to 33 months.

The infant and toddler developmental period

The infant and toddler period of growth and development spans the years from birth to 3. Development and learning in this age period takes place within the context of trusting relationships and interactions with others. The social and emotional competence that develops during this period is the basis for, and influences, all later learning (Ounce of Prevention, 2004; Zero to Three, 2004).

The *Early Learning Guidelines* are intended as a framework for supporting the growth and development of very young children in the age period of birth to 3 years. The indicators, examples and strategies are based on **widely held developmental expectations** observed in infants and toddlers from birth to 3. Three broad age groups are commonly used to describe major changes during the infant and toddler period (Lally, et al, 2003; WestEd, 2004). **Young infants** between the ages of birth to 8 months are in a stage of very rapid development that includes the integration of sensory, motor, social/emotional, language and cognitive systems. Babies at this age need the emotional security that comes from close relationships with primary caregivers. **Older infants** are between the ages of 8 months to 18 months. Their increased ability to explore and move greatly affects their interactions with their social and physical environments. Infants at this age eagerly explore their surroundings but need familiar and trusted adults as a secure base of support. **Toddlers** between 18 months and 36 months have increased ability to influence their environments in many ways, including verbal language and physical actions to obtain more of the things they need or want, which in turn enhances their development in other areas. Toddlers are seeking new ways to increase their assertiveness and independence while also receiving reassurance and support from others who share in their adventures.

While the indicators in this document are the same across the age period from birth to 3, the examples and suggested strategies are different and specific for the three age groups. **Key indicators** for each age group highlight the most significant developments or emerging abilities. These are summarized on pages 46-47.

The term, “Indicators of Progress,” is used to emphasize that individual children vary considerably in their rate of progress in achieving developmental milestones or benchmarks. Chronological age alone is not a good measure of child development because the many influences on development result in a wide range of individual variations.

Individual differences

Child development progresses differently for every individual. The values and practices of family, culture and community influence individual child outcomes. Especially for very young children, the family provides the primary context for interaction with others, for early learning experiences and for entrance into the broader world. The experiences of infants and toddlers in learning the language and behaviors of their family must be supported by other early care and education settings where young children spend time. Although young children develop in generally similar stages, their individual life experiences are reflected in greatly diverse patterns of behavior and learning. Such individual differences are normal and must be respected for infants and toddlers to develop positive concepts of self and self-worth. Meaningful caregiver strategies acknowledge and incorporate cultural practices and individual developmental differences.

The *Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* are written to include children developing at different rates and with different patterns of behavior. Infants and toddlers with disabilities will make progress on the skills, behaviors and concepts that are described by the indicators, with expected variations for each child. Many infants and toddlers with special needs require and receive early intervention services to increase and enhance their ability to achieve these developmental expectations.

Guiding principles

The development of the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* was informed by the following guiding principles:

- 1. Infants and toddlers develop in the context of their families, cultures and communities.** Children are unique with their own temperaments and rates of development. Development is the result of many different factors, including physical and emotional health and well-being, nutrition, sensitive and responsive caregiving and the quality of the environment.
- 2. Nurturing and responsive caregiving helps infants and toddlers develop secure and trusting relationships.** Infants and toddlers with secure and trusting relationships are better able to learn, play and grow. Infants and toddlers are active learners who learn through play, interaction with others and active exploration of their environment.
- 3. The years from birth to 3 represent a period of rapid growth and development and are critical for the healthy development of young children.** Development begins prenatally and learning during infancy provides the foundation for school readiness and success in school and life. Early intervention can help reduce developmental delays and foster optimal growth and development.
- 4. Multiple abilities and skills are developing simultaneously in a child's first three years of life. As these abilities and skills emerge, each affects the development of the others.** For example, changes in infants' ability to remember affects how they respond to new people. Development of the whole child requires maximizing potential across multiple domains.

Early learning guidelines: What they are and are not

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* are a resource to support the learning and development of infants and toddlers and enhance the quality of early care and education for infants and toddlers. The *Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* provide a common conceptual framework for communicating across different settings, programs and systems that influence the early growth and development of young children. The guidelines include indicators, examples and suggested strategies that parents and family members can use to better understand and support their children's development during these early formative years. The framework also provides guidance for other caregivers and teachers in planning and implementing appropriate curriculum and assessment including some caregiver strategies to support growth and development. The *Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* are not intended to be a curriculum or an assessment tool. Instead, the guidelines and framework identify the desired learning outcomes that quality instruction and assessment need to address.

Early childhood indicators of progress as a new approach

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* and *Minnesota's Early Learning Standards for 3 to 5* are part of a new approach in the movement toward shared responsibility and increased accountability. Especially during the infant and toddler age period, young children's development must be considered within the context of the family, early care and education settings and the community. These systems, along with policymakers, share a role in being accountable for the optimal development of very young children. By emphasizing the necessity for collaboration among families, early care and education settings, communities and policymakers, these documents suggest that everyone must work together to provide optimal opportunities for learning and development. Since the foundation for healthy development, relationships with others and learning begins during the first three years of life, increased attention and emphasis on accountability and shared responsibility must include improving outcomes for the very youngest children.

Potential uses of early learning guidelines

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* are to be used as a resource for family members, caregivers and teachers, community members and policymakers in ways that are supportive of young children's development. Some potential uses of the guidelines are described below.

For parents and family members

To build awareness of infant and toddler development

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can help parents and other family members develop a better understanding of infant and toddler development and provide some strategies they can use to enhance children's development. Some will use the document and related materials on their own as a resource for learning about and supporting their child's development. Others will increase their awareness of the importance of the indicators and strategies through participation in discussions with home visitors, public health nurses or other educators directly involved with the family.

To increase communication between parents and other caregivers

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can be used to provide common language and goals for parents and other caregivers as they discuss infant and toddler growth and development. Ongoing communication and mutual support are essential for providing continuity and consistency in meeting the needs of very young children.

To increase awareness of quality infant and toddler care and education

Parents are the first and most important teachers of their young children. They are also the best advocates for their children. The *Early Learning Guidelines* can help parents and family members better understand essential learning outcomes and the importance of quality early care and education that supports infant and toddler development.

For caregivers and teachers

To guide planning for learning experiences and the role of caregivers and teachers

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* provide a common framework for developmentally appropriate expectations for infants and toddlers from birth to 3. Parents, family members and other caregivers play an important role in supporting the learning and development of infants and toddlers. The examples and strategies given for each of the age groups: birth to 8 months, 8 months to 18 months and 18 to 36 months, provide some ideas and guidance for supporting infants' and toddlers' progress in achieving these widely held expectations. Other resources provide additional support for planning developmentally appropriate curriculum for infants and toddlers (Dombro, et al, 1999; Lally & Mangione, 2006; WestEd, 2004).

The indicators provide a common language for use across different settings, programs and services. A common language and framework facilitates discussion and collaboration among parents, home visitors, public health nurses, home-based caregivers, center-based staff, school programs and others. The use of the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can also help early care and education programs align curriculum, instruction and assessment with other state and national outcome standards and guidelines.

Many factors, including the culture and language background, developmental level, learning style and temperament of each infant and toddler, must be taken into account as learning experiences are planned and implemented. Infants and toddlers learn through interaction with others in a supportive environment. The preparation of the environment, including staffing and the materials and toys that are available, provide opportunities for observing and supporting learning and development (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2003).

To provide direction for planning appropriate assessment of infants and toddlers

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* can help parents, caregivers and teachers define the kinds of things infants and toddlers need to know and be able to do at each stage of development. Once those are understood, parents, caregivers and teachers can start to collect evidence of infant and toddler learning through observation and authentic assessment (Dichtelmiller, 2004).

Authentic assessment practices are those that are based on everyday learning experiences and provide opportunities for caregivers and teachers, including parents and other family members, to observe and document what infants and toddlers show they know and can do through their actions and behavior.

Examples of authentic assessments for infants and toddlers that are widely used in Minnesota include the Ounce Scale, the Creative Curriculum Infant and Toddler Assessment System and the High/Scope Child Observation Record for Infants and Toddlers.

The Ounce Scale provides standards and materials for observing growth and development of infants and toddlers from birth to 42 months in three ways (Meisels, et al., 2003): The Observation Record, the Family Album and the Developmental Profiles and Standards. The Ounce Scale depends on careful observation and documentation by caregivers and teachers, including parents and family members, in their everyday activities with infants and toddlers. When used appropriately, the Ounce Scale can increase parent and caregiver knowledge by focusing attention on the skills and achievements of individual children as well as increasing awareness of areas needing further development.

The Creative Curriculum approach uses assessment with infants and toddlers that includes caregiver or teacher observations and a checklist based on the themes or developmental strands of the Creative Curriculum (Dombro, et al., 1999). This approach emphasizes the integration of curriculum and assessment through caregiver or teacher planning and implementation. Both the curriculum strategies and the observation checklist focus on the same emerging skills, knowledge and behaviors. Parents and family members are involved through ongoing sharing of observations and reports.

The Child Observation Record for Infants and Toddlers looks at the whole child from the ages of 6 weeks to 3 years. It focuses on children's strengths (High/Scope Foundation, 2003). Caregivers and parents record observations as they care for, play with and attend to the child. This assessment system includes several parts, including observation booklets, parent guides and posters of key experiences for infants and toddlers.

To provide content for staff training and development

Caregiver and teacher qualifications and training directly affect the expected outcomes for infant and toddler development. A related document defines core competencies for caregivers and teachers who work with young children (Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004). *Minnesota Core Competencies* describe expectations for what the adults who work with young children need to know and be able to do, similar to the way that early learning guidelines describe expectations for what young children need to know and be able to do. *Core Competencies* identify several important areas within the learning environment and curriculum, for increasing the skills and competencies of those who work with infants, toddlers and young children.

Training aligned with the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* and the *Core Competencies* is provided by many organizations including Minnesota's Child Care Resource and Referral Network.

Caregivers and teachers enrolled in early childhood education and related courses through Minnesota post-secondary colleges and universities should find reasonably close alignment of many course objectives with *Minnesota Core Competencies* and the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress*.



For community members

To provide a framework for needs assessment within the community

The *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3* can serve as a guide for identifying the sources of support within the community that encourage the healthy growth and development of very young children.

Related resources, such as Environmental Rating Scales (Harms, Cryer, & Clifford, 2003), can help community members learn more about the quality of the infant and toddler care and education available in their community. Some of the components of quality infant and toddler care and education that have been identified include health and safety, group size, staff-child ratios, staff qualifications, continuity of care and responsive caregiving (Lally, et al., 2003).

To help organize advocacy efforts within the community

Many communities are focusing on the importance of early childhood care and education for the future economic development of the community (Rolnick & Grunewald, 2003). Because of the emphasis on school readiness in several state and national initiatives, the importance of quality infant and toddler care and education in providing the foundation for later learning is also receiving more attention (Ounce of Prevention, 2004; Zero to Three, 2004).

For policymakers

To assess the impact of public policies on infants and toddlers and their families

Policymakers can use the *Early Childhood Indicators of Progress* as a reference for assessing the impact of policy decisions on infants and toddlers and their families.

Prevention and early intervention efforts to make sure that very young children get a strong and healthy start help reduce the likelihood that children will need more intensive and costly help at a later age (Sandall, McLean, & Smith, 2000).

To improve public understanding of appropriate expectations, accountability and responsibility

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota's Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3 enhance understanding of appropriate developmental expectations for infants and toddlers. Parents, family members, other caregivers and teachers, community members and policymakers all share in the collective responsibility for successful outcomes for the youngest children. This document provides a comprehensive framework for shared accountability and responsibility for young children's development.