In recent years, we have learned a great deal about development during the first three years of life. Magazine articles describe the amazing things infants and toddlers can do. New research explains how their brains develop. When infants and toddlers experience caring relationships and positive environments every day, they are on their way to a bright future. Negative experiences and environments can create barriers to development and learning. With help, many children are able to overcome these barriers, but harmful experiences can have long-lasting effects. Clearly, a child’s future depends on the strength of the foundation set during the first three years of life.

We have also learned about the vital role that caring adults play in children’s lives. Infants and toddlers need adults who are warm and sensitive to their needs. Loving relationships are necessary for young children’s emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. To nurture development in all these domains, adults must know how children typically grow and develop. They must recognize that each child has individual strengths and may have special challenges. This allows families, caregivers and teachers to offer learning activities at the right level for each child. These experiences support and challenge young children to reach their potential.

There are many different cultures in North Carolina. A child’s culture and background affects how he or she develops. Adults who work with young children must learn about and respect each child’s culture and background. Gaining cultural knowledge and respect helps caregivers and teachers work with families as a team. These partnerships help families reach goals they set for their children.

Some infants and toddlers face significant challenges in their everyday lives. These challenges include disabilities, special health care needs, poverty, violence, abuse or neglect, and other family stresses. Adults who care for these young children must be prepared to meet their special needs. They must begin by building trust and a sense of safety for children who are living in poverty or other stressful circumstances. This sense of security supports all learning and development.

This publication will assist people who work with infants, toddlers, and their families as they carry out these major responsibilities. The guidelines provide a common vision for the development and learning of all infants and toddlers in North Carolina. This common vision can help teachers, caregivers, and families work together for children’s futures. Caring adults will be better able to nurture children consistently and create high quality learning environments. Infant–Toddler Foundations provides the guidance that caregivers and teachers need to realize their shared hopes and dreams for North Carolina’s youngest citizens. By following these guidelines, adults can build positive relationships with children and nurture their desire to learn.
History and Background

There have been many national and state-level efforts to improve the quality of infant and toddler care. Two recent publications, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000) and *Eager to Learn* (National Research Council, 2001), have contributed to these efforts. In these reports, the National Research Council reviewed research and made policy recommendations about early childhood development and learning in the United States. The publication *Hardwired to Connect: The Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (YMCA of the USA, 2003) speaks of the importance of nurturing communities to help children grow into healthy, happy adults.

Early Head Start and the National Child Care and Development Fund are federal programs aimed at improving the quality of infant-toddler care. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates appropriate services for infants and toddlers with disabilities. These programs help provide high quality experiences for some of the infants and toddlers who need them most. Recent efforts focus on creating a system that ensures high quality programs for this age group. For example, the National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative @ Zero to Three, mentioned earlier, works with states to build a high quality infant and toddler child care system. It is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Such coordinated efforts are critical, because the average quality of infant and toddler child care continues to be low.

Within our own state, there have been numerous efforts to improve the quality of programs for infants and toddlers. North Carolina’s Smart Start program is an early childhood initiative that is recognized across the nation. Smart Start formed public-private partnerships in every county that work together to help children be ready to succeed in school. Many other states have started similar programs. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Scholarship Project focuses on increasing early childhood teacher education levels. The Child Care W.A.G.E.$® Project supports education and increases compensation for early childhood teachers. Both of these programs started in North Carolina and both have expanded to several other states. These programs reward teachers and caregivers for staying at the same child care facility. They also support consistent relationships between adults and children that are so important to early learning.

The list of groundbreaking programs in our state does not end there. The North Carolina Division of Child Development (DCD) has funded many programs to improve the care infants and toddlers receive. DCD developed a star-rated licensing system for child care centers and family child care homes. This system helps parents locate programs that choose to meet higher standards of quality. DCD also funds a network of infant-toddler specialists. These professionals help child care facilities improve their infant and toddler programs and increase the number of spaces devoted to infant and toddler care. DCD collaborates with other programs that improve the health and safety of infants and toddlers in child care. Examples of these programs include Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) training, emergency preparedness training for child care providers, and the services provided by child care health consultants. In 2005, regional Children’s Developmental Services Agencies (CDSAs) were created to coordinate all assessment
and intervention services for children birth to three with disabilities and their families. In 2006, the state legislature significantly increased funding to serve infants and toddlers with disabilities through these agencies. North Carolina also offers high-quality preparation for the infant-toddler workforce. Birth through Kindergarten licensure is available through four-year colleges and universities. The Infant-Toddler Care Certificate Program is available through the community college system.

Even with these programs in place, North Carolina still faces the same challenges as the rest of the nation. Recent data show that the average quality of infant-toddler classrooms in this state continues to be lower than the level needed to promote optimum development and learning. With an increasing number of infants and toddlers in out-of-home child care for many hours each week, poor quality care is a grave concern. The fact that much of this care is unlicensed further increases concerns about quality.

High program quality is one essential element of an early childhood system that ensures positive outcomes for all children. It is also necessary to define more clearly the outcomes or end results that are desired for children so that child care providers can work toward goals they understand. Such guidelines specify desired results for infants and toddlers that all teachers and caregivers can share and strive to achieve.

As of 2005, all states had developed or were completing early learning guidelines for preschool children ages three through five. Almost half of the states had published guidelines for infants and toddlers or were in the process of writing them (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). North Carolina now joins this group of states. This set of guidelines strengthens continuing efforts to meet the challenges related to infant-toddler program quality. When teachers and caregivers use the strategies in this document to help infants and toddlers develop as these guidelines describe, program quality will improve.

**Hopes for these Guidelines**

Individuals who care for and educate infants and toddlers are on the forefront of providing what children need to thrive and learn. Communities and policymakers play a vital role by providing vision, support, and funding. We hope this publication will raise awareness about how important the first three years of life really are. We hope policymakers and communities will increase funding and support for infant and toddler programs. For children and for society as a whole, there is no more important work than caring for infants and toddlers.

The guidelines and strategies in this publication reflect up-to-date knowledge about infant and toddler development and learning. We hope they will help families, caregivers and teachers focus on experiences that will make a difference in children's lives. We hope that all adults who work with infants and toddlers will use these guidelines to set up environments, plan activities, and decide what is important to observe and assess in children's development. We hope they will use this document to talk with families about age-appropriate goals for their children.

When the words infants, toddlers, and children are used in this document, they refer to ALL children ages birth to three. This includes children who have or are at risk for disabilities and delays and children with special health care needs. It includes children who live in all neighborhoods, children of migrant workers, and children who are culturally and
linguistically diverse. The following section explains how to use these guidelines to help ALL infants and toddlers develop and learn.

**How to Use These Guidelines**

We recommend that you begin by reading *Infant–Toddler Foundations* cover to cover. You will learn about:

- Principles that guided the writing Task Force and should guide your work with young children and families.
- Practical tips for using these guidelines appropriately.
- “What to Look For” – the guidelines for the development and learning of infants, young toddlers, and older toddlers.
- “What to Do” -- the strategies for supporting development and learning of infants, young toddlers, and older toddlers.
- “Real World Stories” show positive strategies at work in different settings.
- “Important Milestones” to help you determine whether infants and toddlers are developing like other children their age or might need to have their development evaluated.
- Other resources and references that can help you in your work with infants, toddlers, and families.

Once you have reviewed *Infant–Toddler Foundations* as a whole, it is time to focus on the children and families in your care. Check the age levels at the end of this section to see which guidelines might apply to the children you work with. Study the guidelines for your age group(s) under “What to Look For” in each domain area. You will find guidelines divided into five domains: Emotional and Social Development, Health and Physical Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development and Communication, and Cognitive Development. Each domain is further divided into three to five areas. It may be helpful to start by focusing on one domain at a time.

These guidelines help to tell the story of what children at different stages of development may begin to do. You will probably notice that infants and toddlers in your group regularly do some of the things listed for their age group. They may just be starting to show some abilities, and they may not yet do some of the things described. This is normal. Use the guidelines to think about “next steps” for each child in your group.

Then consider the natural moments during the day that might offer chances for children to take these next steps. What activities might you plan? What materials might you add to the environment? For children with disabilities or special needs who may not be at the same level as other children their age, use the same process described above: Think about “next steps” for these children by considering their current level of development and how they might develop next.

After the guidelines in each area, you will find strategies to support development and learning listed under “What to Do.” The strategies will help you think about how to turn a guideline into a natural moment for development and learning. Many of these strategies can be carried out with no special equipment needed. Choose strategies that seem most likely to help the children you care for take their “next steps.”

Sometimes the guidelines for a child’s age group do not seem to describe how a particular child is developing right now. This may happen whether or not a child has a disability. When this happens, look at guidelines for younger or older age groups as appropriate. Use the *Foundations* document for preschool children if needed. Your goal is always to learn what developmental steps the child is taking now. Then you can choose strategies to support those next steps. Many strategies for children with disabilities are suggested. Be creative and find ways to adapt other strategies. Families and other professionals can suggest additional ideas.

Finally, it is important to understand some of the terms used frequently in this document. These and other important terms can be found in Appendix C.

- **Teachers and Caregivers.** Adults who work with infants and toddlers include teachers and caregivers in centers; family child care home providers; kith and kin or family, friend and neighbor care; early intervention professionals, and many