
A CHAMPION FOR BABIES

An Interview with Joan Lombardi

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On March 14, 2001 Erica Lurie-Hurvitz of ZERO TO THREE had the opportunity to speak with Joan Lombardi about the Better Baby Care Campaign, a national initiative Joan is launching that encourages community and state leaders, policy makers, parents and professionals who work with young children to take concrete steps to improve the early care of infants and toddlers.

You have been involved in getting specific policies and funding in place for young children for most of your career. Now, you have this broader vision for Better Baby Care. What is that about?

As you know, the status of infants and toddlers in the United States needs serious attention. Many people might not realize that some 40 percent of children under age three live in or near poverty. The United States lags far behind other western nations in our support for policies that promote healthy child well being in the early years. Simply put, we have to redouble our efforts to move the policy agenda forward. With the publication of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, the report of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, it has become increasingly clear that policies have not kept up with what we know about the importance of the early years. While there has been promising interest in after-school and preschool services, there has been less policy attention to services in support of infants and their families,

JOAN LOMBARDI is one of the nation's leading experts on early childhood and school age policy issues. In addition to her work as an advisor to a variety of national organizations and foundations working to improve services for children and expand supports for families, she recently launched a campaign to improve the quality of infant and toddler care.

Joan served in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) from 1993 to 1998. Before becoming Deputy Assistant Secretary for Children and Families, she served as the first Director of the Child Care Bureau. During her years at HHS, she was instrumental in planning the White House Conference on Child Care and developing policies for the Administration's Child Care Initiative. In addition, she served as Staff Director for the Secretary's Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion and was primary author of *Creating a 21st Century Head Start*. Prior to joining the Administration, Joan worked with several early childhood organizations and was the Project Director of the National Head Start Association's Silver Ribbon Panel and primary author of the landmark report, *Head Start: The Nation's Pride, the Nation's Challenge*.

Joan's more recent work has focused on improving services for infants, toddlers and their families. Currently she is co-editing a book on Early Head Start and completing a book on redesigning child care as an opportunity to promote education, support families and build communities. She is the mother of two. In 1998, *Working Mother* magazine recognized her work on behalf of the nation's children and families and named her one of the most influential working mothers in America.



PHOTO: MARILYN NOLT

despite the recent interest in brain development. By launching the Better Baby Care Campaign, I hope to shine a spotlight on the needs of babies and their families.

What is the focus of the campaign?

We all agree that every infant should grow up in a strong and nurturing family. Children and families should have access to good health and family support services. Parents, particularly parents of very young children, need more time to spend with their babies. So, the campaign is framed within the broad needs of children and families. We know that more and more infants are spending time in out-of-home care. Sixty-one percent of parents with children under age 4 report that their children are in regularly scheduled child care. According to

recent figures from the Urban Institute, more than 6 million children under age three spend time in care on a regular basis. These are important opportunities to promote the healthy growth and development of the child and to help parents succeed. Given the concerns about the quality of care, the campaign was kicked off with a focus on improving the care of infants while in non-parental care arrangements. However, I think we can also support parents by reaching families who are using care.

To whom are you targeting the campaign?

The campaign is targeted at anyone who is concerned about infants and their families. I am focusing my own efforts primarily on national and state policymakers and advocates by asking a range of organizations to make a commitment to help improve the situation of infants and toddlers over the next two years. Although ZERO TO THREE is completely focused on infants and toddlers, the concerns of very young children can easily be lost by other organizations that have the

whole age range of children and families in front of them. My goal is to have national organizations work with their state and local affiliates, urging them to step

at a glance

- Infant and toddler policy is an emerging area within early childhood policy.
- The Better Baby Care Campaign is a nationwide effort focused on improving the early care of infants and toddlers.
- Community coalitions of infant/toddler practitioners should reach out and involve parents — we need a consumer voice.

up their efforts around infant and family issues. For example, during the Better Baby Care Forum at the National Association of Resource and Referral Agencies (NACCRRRA) held in March 2001, I asked participants to have similar forums in their states and to think about the whole array of services that infants and toddlers need including health, family support and child care services. A few state groups have already stepped forward. Convening a group at the state or community level can be difficult because stakeholders don't all work in one agency — we need people from health, education, family support and a range of community stakeholders at the table to advocate for better infant/family policies.

What do you hope will happen in states and communities as a result of these efforts?

I hope states and communities will take a look at the whole range of the developmental services that young children need. Is there enough prenatal care? Is there a “medical home” for infants and toddlers? Are there family supports in place from the time the baby is born? Are there programs that reach out specifically to new fathers? Is adequate child care available? Are there special services for those kids and families who need them? Are there ongoing services for kids with special needs? Are child welfare services responding appropriately to the needs of infants and toddlers? States and communities need to consider all of these issues. We can provide a range of out-reach services that address several of these needs through

child care. I find that the people who advocate for one part of infants' and toddlers' lives aren't necessarily connected with people who are doing other things for infants and toddlers. So, for example, you may be concerned with infants and toddlers in the child welfare system but may not be linking to child care and family support policies. All of these issues are cross-cutting.

What issues do you think most states and communities will decide they should tackle first?

I think the first step is for every state and community to conduct a scan of where they are in supporting families with very young children. This should include significant input from families themselves. What needs to be done first will vary across the country from state to state and community to community. We really have to focus on improving the care of children at home and in child care. We have a long way to go. Let's take Family and Medical Leave. While we won 12 weeks of job-protected, unpaid Family and Medical Leave in 1993, it is still not accessible to many families, since people working in small companies are often not covered. Moreover most families can't take unpaid leave; they need income support during those important first months at home with their baby. While the ZERO TO THREE/ Civitas survey clearly showed public support for parental leave, our policies don't reflect this support. We have to join with The National Partnership for Women and Families, an organization that is working to improve family leave. There are a growing number of states that are now

STEPS TO BETTER BABY CARE

The *Better Baby Care Campaign* is a nationwide effort to ensure the very best care for our youngest children. The campaign is focused on improving the early care of infants and toddlers while their parents are working, in school, or in need of out-of home services. You can promote *healthy care*, *family-centered care* and *developmental care* by encouraging your state and community to invest in the following steps to Better Baby Care:

Healthy Care

1. Ensure that all child care meets state and local licensing requirements and that standards follow the recommendations in the National Health and Safety Standards for Out-of-Home Care.
2. Provide every infant/toddler program with access to health and mental health consultation and support.
3. Promote the inclusion of children with special needs and provide ongoing support to parents and providers.

Family-Centered Care

4. Help parents understand how to select and monitor the quality of care for their infants and toddlers.
5. Promote parent involvement, parent education, and

family support through child care and services that reflect the cultures and languages of the families served.

6. Create networks of support for family child care and kith and kin providers.

Developmentally appropriate care

7. Ensure that infant/toddler providers have specialized training in child development and family support, and receive adequate compensation.
8. Develop the capacity of all higher education institutions in the community to offer courses in infant/ toddler care and supervision.
9. Provide an infant/toddler specialist to work with providers and parents in every Child Care Resource and Referral Agency.

Critical Investments

10. Expand the supply of quality infant care through direct investments and higher reimbursement rates for accredited care.
11. Ensure that all eligible children have access to Early Head Start.
12. Provide families with paid parental leave for the first year of a baby's life.

considering legislation on this issue. This is a hopeful sign. But, we can't rest until we have these laws on the books and families have the time and resources to help them during that critical first year.

Once a parent does return to work, we all know it is very difficult to balance work and family without good, stable care. Despite the growth in public funding for child care during the past few years, the system still does not provide good options for families, particularly for very young children. We see shortages of good infant care across the country. I hear from many resource and referral agencies in various states that almost half of their calls are for infant care. The lack of training and investments in staff are taking a toll on our ability to recruit and retain qualified staff. We have to invest more public resources in compensation initiatives, expanding Early Head Start, ensuring health and mental health consultation, and providing networks of support for family child care and kith and kin providers.

Are there promising initiatives going on across the country?

Yes there are some promising efforts, but they are

still relatively small and often pieced together. We need to bring these efforts to scale. For example, about a half a dozen states now invest in Early Head Start; we need to promote this in every state. Similarly, a few states have funded an infant toddler specialist in the resource and referral agency who works with the child care providers and families. This should be taking place in every community. This person in turn becomes a "champion for babies and their families," helping stimulate change across the community.

There are two other important steps we need to take. First, we need to weave services together so they fit the realities of working families. So, for example, home visiting and other parenting programs could be promoted through linkages with child care. Second, one of the big missing pieces is an adequate career preparation system. Many higher education institutions are not focused on helping us prepare the infant/family workforce we need, at all levels, from people who work directly on the floor with babies and toddlers, to specialists and other important support providers. We need a national initiative to improve the capacity of the higher education system to help prepare the infant/family workforce.

How much of the responses to your campaign have to do with who you are, your reputation and the relationships you have formed over the last several decades?

I think the response is driven by people's passion for young children and by what they see families need. Families need time. They need information and support. They need better child care environments and access to health care. Families, particularly low-income families, are not getting these needs met. You read about a tragedy in the paper and you say to yourself, "What could we have done? What service could have been in place for that moment for those kids not to have ended up in the position they were in?" We need to figure out what went wrong. It's also the simple things. For example, we take for granted that everybody knows to put babies to sleep on their backs, not to shake babies, and to make sure that they are well secured in their infant car seats. Yet we know there are too many people that still don't know how important these everyday safeguards are to children. We need to step up public awareness around these safety issues.

Let me also say one more thing about the Better Baby Care Campaign. I think it is important that we reach out to more young people interested in infants and toddlers, and policy issues around infants and toddlers, as a field. We have early childhood policy, but I think that infant and toddler policy is an emerging area within early childhood policy. I think it's been a difficult issue to talk about because people have trouble seeing that we can have a public response for infants and toddlers and it doesn't mean that we are talking about something "outside" of

TOWARDS BETTER BABY CARE: A NATIONAL COMMITMENT

Statement of Principles

Every infant and toddler should grow up in a strong and nurturing family.

Every infant and toddler should have a clearly identified medical home with up-to-date primary care.

Every infant, toddler and their family should have health insurance and access to information on health resources, including services for children with special needs.

All families should have access to paid family and medical leave for the first year of a baby's life.

All pregnant women, expectant fathers, and parents of infants and toddlers should have access to parenting education and family support.

All working families with infants and toddlers should have access to quality, affordable care.

All children with special needs should have access to early intervention services.

All infants and toddlers should have a stable and permanent home and access to specialized services when needed.

their families — we are talking about *supporting* families. We need to train new leaders to get them involved, to understand what the issues are and to pay attention to the conditions of infants and toddlers in their communities. When you think that there are thousands of people in this country without access to prenatal care, it's just amazing. This should not happen here or anywhere in the world.

Do you have any advice for people in communities who are not currently advocates but who are interested in becoming advocates?

If there are people in a community who work for infants and toddlers, then there should be a coalition that comes together across agencies and groups to look at and document the resources and needs of families. Again, we must reach out and involve parents. They should be the heart of our efforts. We need a consumer voice. The coalition should ask: What are the services that are currently provided? What are the issues facing infants, toddlers and their families and what do they need? It is difficult to move an agenda until you know, very concretely, where the shortfalls are, because I think most people assume that everything is fine or that it's not their responsibility. But

it is our responsibility and if we don't do something about it now, we will face tougher issues in the future. I think this is very connected to the whole debate we are having on education and literacy now at the third and fourth grade levels. I recently saw a study in a city that showed that the neighborhoods that had few services for infants and toddlers were the same neighborhoods where there were low literacy levels among children in the third and fourth grades. We need to start by investing in early childhood services that support strong social and emotional development as a cornerstone to learning. We need to look toward new voices — reaching out to parents, pediatricians, police, religious leaders, the business community — we all need to be involved.

Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

I hope people see themselves as champions for babies. Watch people in an airport: When they see a baby, they often coo and whisper something sweet. Many people care; they just have to put that caring into action and speak up on a personal, professional and political level about the well-being of our youngest children. We are in the year 2001. I would like to see a lot of focus on 0, 1, 2 and 3 year olds in 2001, 2 and 3. Let's see where we can get. Maybe we can actually change national policy. We have to remember it all starts with baby steps! ♪

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO BE INVOLVED

There are a variety of ways that you can help advocate for Better Baby Care. You can:

- Hold a Better Baby Care Forum in your community or state. Bring all the infant and toddler providers together for a special day of networking and sharing. Highlight research and promising ideas.
- Lead a discussion of the needs of infants and their families in your community. Share the *statement of principles and steps to improve quality care* with others during conferences or meetings.
- Ask a health-related group, civic group, local foundation or business to join you in an effort to take at least one step to improve infant and toddler care. Start with improving health and safety.
- Help establish a scholarship fund that will help pay for training of infant/toddler providers in the community. Ask local businesses to sponsor a provider in their neighborhood.
- Collect stories and other information on the needs of families in your community. Share this information with policymakers.
- Encourage parents of very young children to speak out on the need to improve the quality of care and to provide paid family leave.
- Share new initiatives with others across the country by letting us know your successes. Celebrate every step.

Send comments and ideas to www.BetterBabyCare.org

WWW.BETTERBABYCARE.ORG

Divided into three sections, this web site provides resources related to the Better Baby Care Campaign, a wealth of facts and information on infant and toddler care in general, and hyperlinks to other organizations and agencies that can serve as resources to community and state efforts to improve the quality of infant/toddler care. The first section of the site, "The Campaign," includes background information on the Campaign including a special note from the Campaign's creator, Joan Lombardi, a statement of principles, concrete steps that communities and states can take to improve the quality of infant care and talking points individuals can use with their legislators and other decision makers. In a section dedicated to "The Facts," there is a one-page fact sheet on infant/toddler care, summaries of relevant research findings and hyperlinks to more information on these research findings and on information on indicators of quality care. In the section of the site dedicated to "The Resources," there is information and hyperlinks to additional resources on ensuring safe and healthy care, promoting family-centered care, developmentally appropriate care and critical state investments in infant/toddler care.