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Competency Frameworks for Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers in Texas

In Texas, [the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies](#) were developed for infant and toddler teachers and caregivers in any type of child care and early education setting. The competency framework is intended to advance early childhood education by outlining the practices and behaviors that best promote child development. The competency framework has five competency domains: (1) language and communication, (2) early literacy, (3) cognitive skills, (4) social and emotional development, and (5) physical development. The infant-toddler competency framework has been integrated into trainings, professional development, and coaching support. Resources are disseminated throughout Texas and are free to programs, teachers, and caregivers. However, infant and toddler teachers and caregivers in the state are not required to participate in these activities.

The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies are an extension of the previously established CIRCLE Pre-K Competency Framework and a complement to the [Texas Core Competencies for Early Childhood Practitioners and Administrators \(Texas Core Competencies\)](#). The Texas Core Competencies are a set of skills and concepts that early child care and education professionals should know and demonstrate when working with children from birth to age 8. The Texas Core Competencies are intended to help practitioners and administrators advance their skills and professional development. Many of the competencies in the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competency Framework align closely with the Texas Core Competencies. However, the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies are specific to the infant-toddler age group, and applicable only to practitioners.

What is the ITTCC study?

The [Infant and Toddler Teacher and Caregiver Competencies \(ITTCC\) Study](#) included in-depth case studies of five states that have developed and implemented competency frameworks focused on infant and toddler teachers and caregivers. This profile draws from data that the study team gathered and analyzed in fall 2021 through winter 2022, based on documents and telephone interviews with staff from state agencies, organizations, and institutions of higher education, to learn about their experiences designing and implementing the competency frameworks.¹ The five states included in the ITTCC Study each use different terms to refer to teachers and/or caregivers working across early care and education settings in their state (e.g., early educator, early learning professional, practitioners, etc.). Throughout this profile, we generally use Texas' preferred terminology. The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the Administration for Children and Families funded Mathematica to conduct the ITTCC study.

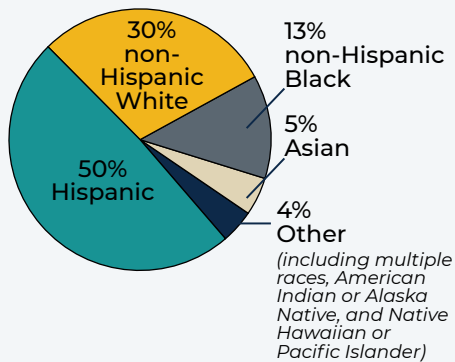


Key organizations and their roles

The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies were developed by the [Children's Learning Institute \(CLI\)](#) at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. CLI administers and oversees several other components of Texas' early learning systems and programs, such as Texas School Ready

About Texas

Infant and toddler population²



About 46 percent of the infant and toddler population live in households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line.

Number of infant and toddler lead teachers and caregivers³

There are an estimated 34,318 lead infant and toddler teachers and caregivers in Texas across the following settings:



873
in Early Head Start programs



178
in school-sponsored programs



24,060
in other center-based programs



1,081
in family child care homes serving only infants and toddlers



8,126
in family child care homes serving mixed ages

Qualifications of infant and toddler teachers and caregivers

Infant and toddler teachers and caregivers in Texas must meet requirements for qualifications as laid out in state licensing regulations and/or Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Texas State Licensing Qualification Requirements

State licensing regulations require that teachers and caregivers in a child care or early education center have a high school diploma, high school equivalent, or high school certificate of coursework completion as defined in Texas Education Code §28.025(d).⁴ There are no specific requirements for infant and toddler teachers and caregivers or for lead teachers.

State licensing regulations require that primary family child care providers have a high school diploma or high school equivalent. A primary family child care provider in a licensed family child care home must also have additional

education and experience; licensing regulations identify combinations of education and experience that would qualify depending on the type or extent of education (for example, whether a degree or certificate, and extent of coursework in child development).⁵

Office of Head Start Qualification Requirements

In accordance with §1302.91 of the [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#), Early Head Start teachers must have at least a Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential, or the state equivalent, and training or coursework in early childhood development with a focus on infant and toddler development. Early Head Start family child care providers must have previous early care and education experience and at least be enrolled in a Family Child Care credential or degree program before they are hired, and they must acquire the credential within 18 months of beginning to provide services.⁶

(TSR), a quality improvement initiative that offers a range of professional development supports for teachers and caregivers of children from birth to age 5. Other programs include the Texas Infant-Toddler Specialist Network (ITSN) and the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System, a data system and platform through which early childhood professionals receive professional development guidance and support. CLI also disseminates the competency framework through the state's institutions of higher education and the state Head Start Collaboration Office.



How was the competency framework developed?

The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies were based on the CIRCLE Pre-K Competency Framework used in TSR. TSR is a statewide professional development program that provides supports and coaching to early childhood teachers and caregivers on setting goals, monitoring child development, and developing curricula. TSR began in 2003 and has been linked to positive outcomes for teachers.⁷ However, programs participating in TSR Pre-K sought similar intensive supports for their

infant and toddler classrooms. CLI began developing the infant-toddler competency framework in 2015 with input from experts in infant and toddler development and education, including clinical child psychologists and infant-toddler teachers, caregivers, and coaches. To guide development, CLI also used the [Texas Infant, Toddler, and Three-Year-Old Early Learning Guidelines](#); the Texas Core Competencies; the CIRCLE Pre-K Competency Framework; and published literature on infant and toddler learning. Since the development of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies, TSR has been expanded to serve teachers and caregivers of infants and toddlers. The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies have not been revised since the initial version was finalized in 2018.

Funding for the development of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies came from the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), through the state's Child Care and Development Block Grant, and multiple foundations recruited through CLI's fundraising and philanthropic efforts. TSR (supported by the TWC and the Texas Education Agency) and the ITSN (also supported by TWC) provide ongoing funding to support this work.⁸

Key definitions

The ITTCC study defines competency, competency framework, competency domain, and proficiency levels in the following way:

Competency: A piece of knowledge (K), a skill (S), or an attribute (A) essential to the practice of teaching and caring for infants and toddlers

/ **Knowledge** is information that may be applied to practice.

/ **Skills** are strategies or abilities that may be applied to practice.

/ **Attributes** are attitudes, beliefs, or other characteristics that may influence the application of knowledge and skills to practice.

Competency framework: A compilation of competencies intended to convey the range of knowledge, skills, and attributes essential to a particular area of practice, job, or profession.

Competency domain: Competency frameworks often group competencies (that is, KSAs) by domain. That is, individual KSAs focused on a similar topic may be clustered within a framework by competency domain. Examples of a competency domains include “support for language and literacy,” “support for social-emotional development,” “health and safety,” “working with families,” or “arts and creativity.”

Proficiency levels: Some competency frameworks identify competencies (that is, KSAs) that are essential for practice at various career stages (for example, entry, mid-career, advanced).



What education and training on the competencies is available?

Training and technical assistance

[CLI Engage](#), the CLI's free, state-funded web-based professional development system and assessment platform for early childhood programs, houses the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and related resources. CLI Engage offers a range of content for early childhood teachers and caregivers. It also offers specific resources grounded in the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies, including the following:

- / [The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Training: Play with Me Series](#), a set of instructional videos from real classrooms that demonstrate how the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies can be used in interactions with children. The videos also discuss developmental milestones and important child development theories. The ITSN uses these courses to guide discussions during interactive Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and TSR teachers and caregivers complete the courses as part of their individualized coaching plans.
- / [The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Activity Collection](#), a set of videos demonstrating activities and lessons, based on the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies, that teachers and caregivers can replicate in their own classrooms to support the language, social emotional, health, and cognitive development of infants and toddlers.

The ITSN uses PLCs to convene groups of teachers and caregivers virtually to discuss and reflect on their practice. Teachers and caregivers first attend a series of self-paced courses where they learn about the competencies through the CIRCLE Play with Me Series and the Activity Collection, and then they participate in live, online PLCs to dive deeper into topics and reflect on how they are using the competencies in their own classrooms. During these PLCs, teachers and caregivers can also set goals and create an action plan to prioritize the types of professional development and competency-based practice they need.

Teachers and caregivers participating in TSR complete the courses and apply the competencies during an observational assessment using the Competency Observation Tool (COT; described further below). TSR coaches use the observational results to develop individual action plans for the teachers and caregivers that include opportunities for competency-based practice. Teachers and caregivers work to strengthen their knowledge in the infant-toddler competency framework by submitting videos of their work and receiving individualized feedback from their coach.

Higher education

Institutions of higher education use the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies, but implementation has not been tracked formally. In Texas, all institutions of higher education have full access to the competency framework and associated resources, and CLI created user guides to help these institutions implement CLI Engage tools and resources. Study participants indicated that institutions of higher education have shared that they use the competency framework to bring more practice-based content into their courses or their practicum supervision routines.



How is the competency framework integrated into the state early childhood system?

Licensing decisions and requirements

There are currently no formal licensing requirements to use the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies. Some courses on CLI Engage align with both the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and the Texas Core Competencies and can count toward annual professional development training hours required for licensing. In some cases, courses can also provide continuing education units that can be substituted for the required credit hours in child development and management required for licensing.

Workforce development initiatives

The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies will be incorporated in a micro-credentialing process that uses a framework for coaches. Through this process, coaches earn

a “badge” for each competency demonstrated. Coaches who earn all badges in a certain area receive a micro-credential. Receiving every micro-credential leads to an early childhood certification.

The micro-credentialing process for coaches is part of CLI’s broader effort to recognize early childhood specialists, teachers, and caregivers who are engaging in continuous quality improvement and advancing their skills. Although the process is currently being used only with coaches, CLI is developing micro-credentialing pathways for teachers and caregivers. CLI is also working to integrate the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and the micro-credentialing system into the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System to enable statewide recognition for demonstrating the competencies.

QRIS standards and ratings

CLI is partnering with the TWC, which administers the state’s quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), [Texas Rising Star](#), to integrate the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies into the Digital Resource Collection. The Digital Resource Collection is an online compilation of local, state, and national professional development resources that Texas Rising Star mentors use to help early child care and education providers improve their ratings. It is intended to directly support the use of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies in quality improvement efforts.



How do programs use the competency framework?

Because the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies are relatively new, it is not clear how many programs use the competency framework independently of CLI or how they use the competency framework. Because CLI is well connected to child care and early education professionals in Texas through its many programs and partnerships, it can encourage center directors to engage their staff in the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies through the CIRCLE Infant-Toddler Teacher Training: Play with Me Series and

the CIRCLE Activity Collection on CLI Engage. The training series explains the competencies using video examples. Teachers and caregivers can use activities from the Activity Collection in their classroom and share them with parents to support family engagement and learning at home. Each activity is accompanied by a lesson plan, a demonstration video of the activity being conducted, and guidance for implementation.

Head Start grant recipients in Texas are not required to use the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies or participate in any CLI programs. However, local Early Head Start programs are encouraged to participate in the Infant-Toddler Specialist Network and TSR, which use the competencies. The competencies are not tied to any national credentials or certifications.



How are teachers’ and caregivers’ competencies, as articulated in the framework, assessed?

The COT enables infant and toddler specialists and coaches to observe teachers’ and caregivers’ CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies in a child care or early education setting and then work with them to set goals and create an action plan to prioritize the types of professional development and competency-based practice needed. After an observation, a specialist or coach determines whether a teacher or caregiver has demonstrated each competency and, if not, works with them on next steps and goal setting. The COT aims to give teachers and caregivers a common language to identify skills they’re already demonstrating and to help them recognize vital steps in child development and the importance of foundational skills. Coaches use the COT to observe teachers and caregivers in TSR programs at the beginning and middle of the school year. CLI has a birth-to-5 coaching team that looks across communities and at the number of COTs completed to ensure that the classroom observations are being conducted. Coaches document when goals are set and met using the online version of the COT and update it bimonthly.



How is use of the competency framework monitored?

Data related to the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies—in particular, progress on professional development goals—are collected and stored electronically for programs participating in TSR as a form of program monitoring that CLI uses to analyze patterns of goal setting. These data are primarily used by specialists and coaches to guide their work with teachers and caregivers, but the CLI team also uses it to monitor implementation.

CLI funded a small pilot feasibility study of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies in the 2018–2019 school year.⁹ In this study, 38 center-based toddler teachers were randomly assigned to treatment or control groups. The treatment group received a six-month course of support in the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and a training program that included a workshop to familiarize teachers with the program’s resources, online professional development courses, four hours of coaching per month, and classroom kits of books and toys. Teachers who participated in the intervention demonstrated improved interactions with toddlers, with effect sizes of 0.55 to 0.85. The intervention did not have effects on toddlers’ language and social-emotional or behavioral skills. A larger, multiyear study of TSR and an implementation study of the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies in the Infant-Toddler Specialist Network are in progress.



What are the key lessons learned related to the implementation of competency frameworks?

According to study participants, the following factors have motivated teachers’ and caregivers’ use of the framework:

- / **Alignment with other policies and standards.** The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies are aligned with national frameworks, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children competencies, and integrated into state systems of teacher training and education, including QRIS and the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System.
- / **Relevance to the field.** The skills linked to the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies are highly observable and build off one another. This makes them relevant for teachers and caregivers as they can be replicated in practice.
- / **Funding.** At the state level, CLI has a line of funding written into state legislation and has secured consistent federal research funding to support the implementation of the broader competency framework activities.
- / **Leadership.** Leaders in state agencies have worked to ensure buy-in at various levels: within state agencies, to ensure the framework meets the needs of the workforce, and at the center level, to ensure directors and administrators can help disseminate the infant-toddler competency framework throughout their centers.
- / **Accessibility.** The CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and supporting materials are free for teachers and caregivers. CLI designed the competencies to be applicable to different child care and early education settings, developed an implementation guide, and frequently offers sessions to help teachers and caregivers learn how to align the competency framework with their own program content or training. The online availability of the competency framework through CLI Engage makes it particularly accessible for teachers and caregivers.
- / **Dissemination.** CLI conducts extensive outreach through the Texas Education Agency, TWC, and the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System to help raise awareness of the framework.



What are the state's plans for the competency framework?

CLI is currently working to expand micro-credentialing to teachers and caregivers. Teachers and caregivers will have opportunities to submit work samples to demonstrate their competencies and earn micro-credentials. When all micro-credentials have been earned, the teacher or caregiver will receive certification, which Texas does not currently require for infant and toddler teachers and caregivers. CLI hopes that providing steps to

certification will enable teachers and caregivers to readily advertise their competency levels for higher pay, and that higher pay will in turn incentivize further engagement with the competencies. CLI envisions that the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies and micro-credentialing system will all be housed within Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System. CLI also hopes to make the CIRCLE Infant & Toddler Teacher Competencies available in various languages.

Endnotes

¹ In Texas, the study team spoke with a co-director at CLI, an associate director at Texas State Initiatives at CLI, an assistant professor at CLI, a senior program manager at CLI, a program manager at CLI, and the director of the Texas Head Start State Collaboration Office.

² These data came from ZERO TO THREE's State of Babies Yearbook: 2022 (<https://stateofbabies.org/states/>). Data were collected from the Census Bureau's American Community Survey and the National Survey of Children's Health.

³ Authors' calculations. Data come from Child Trends' Early Childhood Workforce Qualifications Calculator (<https://www.childtrends.org/publications/early-childhood-workforce-qualifications-calculator>). Data were collected from (1) the number of teachers serving infants and toddlers in 2012 National Survey of Early Care and Education, and (2) state proportional data for numbers of "childcare workers," "teacher assistants," and "preschool teachers" in data from the U.S. Department of Labor. These estimates are only for lead teachers. Early Head Start programs may include Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. School-sponsored centers are those that are funded by a public school district and/or is under administrative oversight and is subject to reporting requirements for a public school district.

⁴ <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/doing-business-with-hhs/provider-portal/protective-services/ccl/min-standards/chapter-746-centers.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/doing-business-with-hhs/provider-portal/protective-services/ccl/min-standards/chapter-747-homes.pdf>

⁶ <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-91-staff-qualifications-competency-requirements>

⁷ Crawford, A., C. Varghese, and P. Monsegue-Bailey. "The Implementation and Scaling of an Early Education Program." *Journal of Applied Research on Children*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2020.

⁸ <https://texasschoolready.org/about-us/how-tsr-works/>

⁹ Crawford, A., C. Varghese, Y. Oh, C. Guttentag, T. Zucker, S. Landry, and R.A. Cummins. "An Initial Investigation of the CIRCLE Infant-Toddler Teacher Training for Toddler Teachers." *Early Education and Development*, August 2021, pp. 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.1961427>

Submitted to:

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Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Contract Number:

HHSP2332015000351/HHSP23337021T

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Suggested citation: Gemignani, J., C. Jones, and P. Caronongan. (2022). Competency Frameworks for Infant and Toddler Teachers and Caregivers in Texas. OPRE Report #2022-319, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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