



IT³ Strategic Plan December 2012

Introduction

Oklahoma is one of four states recognized for “pioneering efforts in the blending of funding streams to support the implementation of high quality infant toddler services” (Cohen, Gebhard, Kirwan, & Lawrence, 2009). Acknowledging Oklahoma’s leadership in early childhood education, the community-oriented and collaborative nature of OU-Tulsa, and the national need for interdisciplinary infant/toddler knowledge, the OU Vice President for Research designated the Early Childhood Education Institute (ECEI) a University Strategic Organization (USO) in the summer of 2011. The ECEI has been conducting research involving infants and toddlers as part of its larger research agenda since its inception in 2006. The USO designation and support served as a catalyst to launch a research group within the ECEI—the IT³ Center—that aspires to play a leading role in the generation, application, and dissemination of knowledge about early care and education with a specific focus on the under-studied age groups of infants, toddlers, twos, and threes.

Over the next five years, the following vision, mission, and goals will guide the development of the IT³ Center into a premier, nationally recognized research center focused on the development and learning of infants, toddlers, twos, and threes in early care and education settings.

Vision

The IT³ Center strives to understand and inform the distinct development and learning of infants, toddlers, twos, and threes within early care and education settings through research, dissemination, and application.

Mission

As a university-based research center, the IT³ Center uses an interdisciplinary approach to:

- expand knowledge of the understudied group care context for infants, toddlers, twos, and threes;
- examine experiences, processes, and outcomes for children, families, and staff at the intersection of practice, policy, and programs;
- enact a partnership approach to inform research questions and translate knowledge into action through active engagement with community partners;

- promote dissemination of research-based knowledge to professional, policy, practitioner, and public audiences; and
- prepare the next generation of scholars and practitioners with IT³ knowledge and research skills.

Goals

The IT³ Center will be a:

- *Catalyst to launch and utilize interdisciplinary approaches and strategies to address questions regarding infants, toddlers, twos, and threes, especially within the realm of group care.*
- *Incubator for and contributor to cutting-edge research on the experiences of children, families, and staff at the intersection of practice, policy, and programs.*
- *Conduit to promote the dissemination of research-based knowledge to professional, policy, practitioner, and public audiences.*
- *Forum to engage partners in a bi-directional, dynamic exchange of research questions, findings, interpretations and meanings in applied settings.*
- *Partner to OU-Tulsa academic programs in the preparation of the next generation of scholars with IT³ knowledge and research skills.*
- *Successful steward of fiscal and human capital necessary to achieve the vision, mission, and goals of the IT³ Center.*

Each goal is discussed in more detail below:

- *Catalyst to launch and utilize interdisciplinary approaches and strategies to address questions regarding infants, toddlers, twos, and threes, especially within the realm of group care.*

To effectively accomplish the mission of the IT³ Center and address the complex issues of group care with infants, toddlers, twos, and threes, a broad, interdisciplinary approach is needed. Early care and education settings operate within political, economic, social, and cultural realities that impact outcomes for children, families, staff, and programs. Drawing on experts from a variety of disciplines, including mental and physical health, human development and education, nutrition, nursing, and medicine, as well as family science and social work, the IT³ Center will employ a “question first” approach to generate new knowledge and understanding. These interdisciplinary teams will work together using concepts and measures that extend beyond any one discipline. The IT³ Center will cultivate ongoing discussion and collaboration so that together we can weave the theory, knowledge, and research strategies of multiple disciplines to develop new ways to address significant questions.

- *Incubator for and contributor to cutting-edge research on the experiences of children, families, and staff at the intersection of practice, policy, and programs.*

The impact of early care and education on children's and families' developmental trajectories has been well-established (e.g., *Neurons to Neighborhoods*, 2012), but understanding which specific aspects of quality care matter most—especially for infants, toddlers, twos, and threes—is lacking. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and diverse research methodologies, IT³ will contribute substantially to the knowledge base by examining predictors and outcomes as they relate to children, families, staff, programs, and policy.

- ***Conduit to promote the dissemination of research-based knowledge to professional, policy, practitioner, and public audiences.***

IT³ will strengthen and expand its methods for sharing research-based knowledge on infants, toddlers, twos, and threes in early care and education settings. IT³ will contribute to the knowledge base of Early Childhood Education by producing scholarly publications and presentations that will inform conceptual and theoretical understanding in the field. Additionally, IT³ will cultivate strategic partnerships with existing organizations such as Zero to Three, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and Research Connections to reach a wide variety of audiences.

- ***Forum to engage partners in a bi-directional, dynamic exchange of research questions, findings, interpretations and meanings in applied settings.***

IT³ will foster reciprocal relationships built on mutual trust, respect, and understanding with program, policy, and family partners as the cornerstone of IT³'s community engagement. Questions of interest will emerge from the synergistic dialogue among partners to generate new directions for research and evaluation at IT³. Working together researchers, practitioners, policy makers and families will examine the data sharing and utilization processes to improve outcomes for children, parents, staff, and programs.

- ***Partner to OU-Tulsa academic programs in the preparation of the next generation of scholars with IT³ knowledge and research skills.***

One of the current barriers to knowledge generation and dissemination is the lack of researchers, across fields, focused on infant/toddler development, care, and education in group settings. The IT³ Center seeks out academic partners to share existing knowledge, identify gaps, and launch interdisciplinary research to answer pressing questions. The IT³ Center will serve as a laboratory to foster the development of comprehensive, robust research skills tailored to the unique developmental period of infants, toddlers, twos, and threes. We aim to increase knowledge with a range of scholars including graduate students, postdocs, IT³ research fellows, and early- and mid-career researchers.

- ***Successful steward of fiscal and human capital necessary to achieve the vision, mission, and goals of the IT³ Center.***

The success of the IT³ Center in achieving its vision, mission, and goals depends on both fiscal and human resources. To ensure the solvency and future development of the IT³ Center, it is important to maintain current funding, develop new funding sources, and diversify funding streams.

Human capital—the talents and skills of the IT³ Center’s researchers, staff, and community partners—is also vital to the success of the IT³ Center. Thus, in addition to funding, the IT³ Center must attract and fully engage a diverse, creative, energetic, and talented group of key staff members and collaborators representing researchers from multiple disciplines, program partners, and families.

Conclusion

This Strategic Plan is designed to guide our work for the next 5 years—until 2017. Our next step is to develop an Implementation Plan that will outline both short- and longer-term steps to ensure success in achieving the above six goals.

APPENDIX

Background and Rationale for IT³ Center

Significant numbers of infants, toddlers, twos, and threes spend time in settings outside their immediate family (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011). Although infant/toddler care is the fastest-growing and most sought-after form of childcare in the US (NACCRRA, 2008), and a growing body of research documents the lasting value of high quality early environments to later school achievement and life success, little is known about the specific features or processes that optimize group settings for young children (Camilli, Vargus, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010), especially infants and toddlers. Moreover, little is known about the professional development content and strategies most effective in preparing infant/toddler teachers (Zaslow et al., 2010).

The primary aim of the IT³ Center is to fill these gaps by generating basic and applied research to delineate the complexities of high quality group care for children under the age of 4. A related aim is to integrate information from allied disciplines (e.g., nutrition, health, social work) to better understand and support infant/toddler development in context and as a unique developmental period.

These are important national priorities because recent research has found that the quality of available infant/toddler care is inadequate (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995; NICHD Early Childhood Research Network, 2000; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011) at the same time that policy makers are increasingly turning their attention to infant/toddler programs to reduce the achievement gap and enhance school readiness. The doubling of Early Head Start in 2009 is evidence of the growing federal interest in infants and toddlers.

States have also recently begun to fund initiatives related to the care and education of infants and toddlers in group care settings. As mentioned above, Oklahoma is one of four states recognized for “pioneering efforts in the blending of funding streams to support the implementation of high quality infant toddler services” (Cohen, Gebhard, Kirwan, & Lawrence, 2009).

To take advantage of these and other emerging opportunities, the ECEI and IT³ Center engaged in strategic planning during the summer and fall of 2012 to clarify and refine identities, visions, missions, and goals.

History of the Development of IT³ Strategic Plan to Date (December 2012)

- During the 2011-12 academic year, IT³ began to take shape as a separate entity within the ECEI. Prompted by USO critiques and IT³ Advisory Board feedback, the need to develop a clear, strong strategic plan that crystallizes IT³ identity, sharpens our focus, and guides future aspirations became apparent.
- During the late summer and early fall of 2012, ECEI worked with OU-Tulsa's strategic planner to refine ECEI's vision, mission, and short- and long-term goals. We made the decision to separate strategic planning for the two groups—one process for the larger and broader ECEI; a separate set of meetings for the more focused IT³ Center.
- As a unique and separate process, the IT³ Center devoted several sessions in late summer and early fall of 2012 to IT³ strategic planning.
- The goal of the IT³ Center's strategic planning is to devise a blueprint that supports IT³'s transition from an idea, to a group, to a USO, to a Center. We recognize the need for a strong vision, mission, and goals with concrete actions, to guide IT³ Center growth and success.
- On October 29 and 30, 2012, the IT³ Advisory Board reviewed a draft strategic plan and offered many helpful suggestions. Their insights and suggestions have been incorporated into this current document.
- The product to date, this document, is a statement of our vision, mission, and goals for the next 5 years (2012-2017).
- An implementation plan will be developed during the winter of 2013 and presented to the IT³ Advisory Board for their review and comment at the scheduled May 20 and 21, 2013 meeting.

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