

Increased compensation for early educators: It's not just 'nice to have' it's a must-have ^[1]

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Imagine your niece or nephew is headed off to college next year. They tell you that they want to work with young children because they want to have an impact on the learning process that sets kids up for success in life. They want to get a degree in early education and are particularly interested in working with infants and toddlers because they know that those are the formative years of development.

How would you react? Would you tell them that a bachelor's degree in early care and education (ECE) is the lowest-paying college major? That the majority of early educators and their families have to rely on public assistance in order to get by? That even though they have an early care and education degree, they will often be called "babysitters"?

That's the current reality for early educators in America. In 2017, national median wages for early educators ranged from \$10.72 per hour (or \$22,290 full-time per year) to \$13.94 per hour (or \$28,990 full-time per year). These are quite literally poverty-level wages: the federal poverty threshold for a family of four in 2017 was \$24,600. Wages on average are even worse for early educators of color, who make up about 40 percent of the national ECE workforce, and for early educators who work with infants and toddlers.

Making early education and care an attractive field now and in the future means fundamentally reshaping early childhood jobs to provide fair compensation and reasonable working conditions. Not only will this change make a meaningful difference to the lives of current and future early educators — and therefore the children in their care — but it will be a major step forward in the valuing of historically feminine work and toward a more gender and racially just society.

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