The following six articles, called “Reports from the Field,” focus on action and innovation as they describe new efforts to strengthen the care given to the nation’s youngest children. These are not reviews of research but stories written from the point of view of participants, promoters, and leaders. Innovations are, almost by nature, controversial, and opponents exist who would no doubt describe these changes in different terms. That is the give-and-take that drives American policy debates, as knowledge enters the rough-and-tumble world of politics, service delivery, and program implementation.

The first three reports address the dilemmas parents face as they juggle work demands with the daily care needs of their babies and toddlers. The first, by Asher and Lenhoff, explains how the Family and Medical Leave Act came about, tells of the broad coalition of advocates that promoted it, and outlines today’s advocacy agenda for improving family leave policies. The second, by Zinsser, offers a thoughtful consideration of child care by relatives. Because this traditional form of care is more like parent care than professional care, the newest efforts to improve its quality use concepts of family support rather than professional training. The third report, by Lucas, describes the comprehensive child care system put in place by the military over the last dozen years. Because one-half of the children served in the military’s centers and family child care homes are under age three, the military’s oversight and investment in program quality are especially important to anxious parents. In differing ways, these three reports present approaches that improve the options open to parents as they make decisions about infant and toddler care.

Broadening the lens from family choices regarding caregiving and work, the last three reports document ambitious efforts that use new funds to integrate and enrich the array of services that specific communities offer families with very young children. These initiatives reach beyond child care to include family support, health, early learning, and
intervention to reduce risks to children. They seek to do business in new ways by starting with inclusive planning efforts, capitalizing on public/private partnerships, and supporting local innovations that respond to community needs.

The fourth report, by Fenichel and Mann, explains the origins and structure of Early Head Start, begun in 1994 to extend Head Start’s comprehensive services to children under age three. This report highlights the program’s efforts to balance federal oversight with local flexibility while building the strengths of children, families, and communities. The fifth report, by Levine and Smith, reviews the Carnegie Corporation’s release of the high-profile Starting Points report and subsequent grants to public/private partnerships in selected cities and states to create services, improve programs, and reshape policies to benefit infants, toddlers, and their families. The final report, by Bodenhorn and Kelch, tells the story of the implementation of Proposition 10, a 1998 California referendum that imposed a new tobacco tax and devotes the revenues to young children and their parents. Here, newly formed multidisciplinary commissions at the state and county levels have been given the power and responsibility to use significant new resources to achieve child development goals. In all three reports, new funding for programs has come wrapped in the promise and challenge of new approaches to governance.

These descriptive accounts, stories that ring with the conviction that motivates both advocates and leaders, are included to illustrate the excitement and the struggles facing those who set out to create new supports and options for families as they care for the youngest members of our society.