



Environment as Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers

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Introduction

One important way infants and toddlers learn is through exploring their environment. Children will naturally be drawn to explore an environment that is inviting. Whether the environment is a home, socialization space, or a child care center; creating a safe, playful, and welcoming learning environment for infants and toddlers requires a thoughtful process. Thinking about play spaces, areas for caregiving routines (like diaper changes), and ways to integrate home cultures into the environment are important aspects of planning. Programs should also consider the flexibility of space, which supports the changing ages, interests, and characteristics of a group of children over time. In this News You Can Use we will explore ideas about building nurturing environments to support the learning of very young children.



Create an Environment of YES!

The toddlers in Annika's family child care created a new game. The game involves taking trucks up the short loft and rolling them down the slide. Annika watches the children delight in the added momentum that the slide gives to their trucks, but she is uneasy about allowing this activity. Before she says "no" out loud, Annika asks herself if anyone could get seriously injured from this activity. She doesn't think so. She asks herself, "What are they learning from this?" She realizes that by joyfully rolling trucks down the slide children are learning important concepts about physics, gravity, and momentum. The children are also taking turns and working together without any adult support! After she weighs the risks she decides to stay nearby, but to let the activity continue. She also decides to come up with some plans about what to put out in her space that will allow for similar experiments in the days to come.

An environment of "yes" means that everything infants and toddlers can get their hands on is safe and acceptable for them to use. One way to ensure this is to for adults to do ongoing safety checks in group care spaces and provide families with information about doing safety checks of their own. The teacher, home visitor, and the child's family play a vital role in making sure everything is safe, then stepping back to allow exploration.

Sometimes infants and toddlers will use materials in creative ways that surprise us! When you feel uncomfortable about an activity, stop and ask yourself two questions:

- Is it dangerous?
- What are the children learning from this experience? ⁱ

If you decide the activity is safe with supervision, stay nearby. Be thoughtful and open to what the children might be learning. If the activity is not safe, can you find something that addresses their curiosity in the same way? For example, if young toddlers are delighted to discover that by shaking their sippy cups, liquid comes out; you may be worried that this water on the floor will lead to a slippery accident. Instead, you might provide squeeze bottles outside or at the water table. Remember, the adult is responsible for keeping children safe *and* encouraging learning through curiosity.

Elia prepares the space for socialization. She thinks about what the children have been interested in the past few weeks and remembers a few struggles from the last socialization. Elia wants the socialization time to provide opportunities for children to play together but the older toddlers seem to need so much support around sharing and being safe. Last time the group came together it seemed like the older toddlers were constantly fighting over one toy or another.



For today, Elia plans to have experiences set up for the children that include multiples of items – a water table filled with pom-poms and many containers, a basket with lots of balls, and play clay with cookie cutters. She will also create a cozy book area just the right size for one child and one adult for children who want a break.

Saying “no” to infants and toddlers or asking them to “share” is a strategy that rarely works. One way to prevent conflict is to reflect on, and then set up, the space where children play in ways that promote “yes!”

- What areas generate the most “no’s” or require the most adult guidance?
- What do the children need and enjoy the most when it comes to playtime?
- Do you have multiples of favorite toys?
- Do you have enough places where toddlers can play alone or with few friends?
- Do you have adequate space for active play?
- Is the room appropriately child-proofed?

Try drawing a rough sketch of the space you are using with infants and toddlers to help you think through the questions above. The process might generate some ideas about what to change or try in order to make the space work better and reduce the “no’s.” For example, perhaps the toddlers in your classroom often argue over who gets to play at the water table—which is placed against the wall in your classroom. You might try pulling it out so that it can be accessed by all four sides and create room for more children, reducing the conflicts.

The area that your group is most interested in will change over time. Continue to make changes that follow their interests like making the block area bigger, or creating a large gross motor space. Remember that we all learn through trial and error! Feel free to try something new, assess how it works, and then adapt until it is successful.

Planning Play Spaces

Twenty-two-month old Alex is creating a tower with his blocks. He looks away for a moment to find another block and as he turns back he sees fifteen-month-old Vivienne knock his tower over accidentally as she crawls by. Alex screams and reaches to hit her but their caregiver Elena stops him in time. After some reflection, Elena realizes that the block area is in a “high traffic area” or a space where children frequently walk or crawl through. That afternoon Elena uses furniture to create a protected area for block play.

Elena’s observation about where the block area was located helped her form a plan about how to design her classroom. Keeping some play areas protected can have the added benefit of keeping the materials contained. You may also think about your classroom in terms of areas that are quiet, like a rest area or book area, and areas that are louder, like the sensory table and block areas. Keeping these areas apart from each other will naturally reduce disturbances in the quieter spaces.

Another idea is to create spaces that are only big enough for one, two, or three children at a time. For example, a table in a corner with two chairs on the remaining sides is the perfect area for two toddlers to work on puzzles. The space is only big enough to accommodate two so the adult spends less time “reminding” children that only two can do puzzles at a time. If a small area gets crowded, rather than ordering children to move in order of “who got there last” the adult can say, “This looks really crowded. I don’t think anyone can have fun with so many of us here. Who wants to come play dress up with me?”



Environment as Curriculum

Monica and Jen are sitting together at planning time thinking about their group. Monica feels like lately all they are saying is, "Keep your feet on the ground please," or "It's not safe to climb on the table." The other day they noticed 17-month-old Kailey climbing the bookshelf. When they pulled her off she turned around and hit Jen. Monica and Jen realize that the room must not be meeting the gross motor interests of the children. Since they share the playground with other rooms, they cannot extend outside time. They make a plan to rearrange their room to create more space for safe jumping, climbing, throwing, tumbling, and running.

Monica and Jen are teachers who understand how the environment is a part of their curriculum. During their planning they realized that the room set-up is no longer a good fit for their children -and they found a creative way to make some changes. Taking time to evaluate your environment from the perspective of curriculum, with a focus on what children are showing you they want to learn about, can lead to new insights and ideas about how to create space for learning.



Play Materials within the Environment

During a socialization, seven-month-old Wesley has found a wooden spoon. The first thing he does to explore this spoon is to put it up to his mouth and touch it with his tongue. He makes a face and his mother, Kara, laughs and says, "That doesn't taste very good, does it?" He looks at her and tries it in his mouth again. Wesley decides instead to bang the spoon on a table and delights in the sound he is making.

When choosing play materials for infants and toddlers you rarely have to spend a lot of money to find something that will fascinate. Think of all that Wesley was able to do with his spoon. Wesley was able to hold it because it was light enough. He also tried tasting it and found he did not want to eat it. He had the opportunity to hold onto it long enough that he was able to explore different ways to play with from touching to tasting to making noises. The whole experience for Wesley was full of sensory opportunities.



Play Materials within the Environment (Cont'd.)

When you are providing materials for young children the best toys lend themselves to many different play experiences. Toys that can be used in many different ways are called **open-ended materials**. Blocks are a good example of open-ended materials. Blocks can be used for building towers, houses, zoos, beds, and anything a child can imagine. They can also be step stools, roads, and ramps. When they are combined with sand in a sand and water table they are platforms for animals or a surface for rolling balls along. Most teachers and home visitors have many, many ways they use blocks, and children always come up with surprising new ways to use materials.

Some play materials are not open-ended because they can only be played with in one way. Often these toys are more expensive, plastic, and marketed as “educational.” Think about a toy that sings the ABC song when you press a button. Infants are likely to bore quickly of such a toy.ⁱⁱ It only does one thing, over and over. This type of toy is more likely to be mouthed or thrown by babies trying to figure out a new way to use it.

Some open-ended materials to consider using in your classroom might be:

- Blocks – wooden, plush, foam and cardboard (Can be made from tissue boxes covered in paper)
- Clean, empty containers from yogurt, coffee, formula
- Muffin tins, ice cube trays, empty egg cartons
- Measuring cups (for pouring and nesting)
- Clean liquid laundry detergent caps
- Pom Poms (from craft stores)

•“Sand” tables don’t always have to have sand in them. They can also be filled with cedar shavings, soapy water and sponges, rocks, snow, soil, leaves, wrapping paper scraps, shredded paper, straws, hay or other creative things.

Appreciating the Natural Environment

Eighteen-month-old Zach points to the plants on the window sill. It is clear to his caregiver Anna that he wants a closer look. She takes down the small container and tells him, “This is rosemary; you can touch it if you are gentle.” She demonstrates a gentle touch. Zach imitates her gentle touch. She shows him how she smells the herb and he takes a big sniff.

Young children have such a strong desire to experience nature in a real way. Have you ever seen a baby fascinated by a leaf? Have you noticed how toddlers will react in different ways when they notice a bug? Young children who have experiences with grass, bugs, trees, rocks and sticks will be more likely to care for the natural environment.ⁱⁱⁱ

Some wonderful ways to share nature with young children is to grow organic, non-toxic plants in your classroom and outside play area. Even if you only have a small space you can have a container garden^{iv}(a great use for that broken water table in the shed). Find out what grows easily in your climate and start with a few seeds. When you have herbs, try floating them in your water table or mixing them into sand. Talk about the smells and encourage children to touch and rub the herbs to help the scent come out.



Appreciating the Natural Environment (Cont'd.)

Family child care provider Jason has created an outdoor “classroom” with a small sink, places to change diapers, tables for eating and activities, and shelves for storage. On warm days he leaves the back door open for free play and children can choose where they want to be. Today, fifteen-month-old Elliot has a bag of animal figures he is bringing to the sand box. He carefully takes each animal out of the bag and when they are all out, he goes back inside. Jason says, “Would you like this box to use as a barn for those animals?” and Elliot says, “Ya.” Jason hands him the box and Elliot toddles back outside.

If you are lucky enough to have direct access to an outside play area, consider bringing some of your “inside” items outside. For some reason, blocks in a sandbox have a completely different allure than when they are in your classroom. Paper taped to a fence for painting can be inviting and allow many toddlers to create together. Spray bottles filled with water can be used to magically turn cement to dark gray.

Chalk artwork done outside on a deck or cement area can be photographed and remembered long after it is rained away. Infants often enjoy time outside on a soft blanket with just a few simple toys.

Sometimes we have to let go of “grown-up” ideas about activities that only belong “inside” or “outside.” Almost every activity that happens indoors can happen in some fashion outdoors as well.^Y When adults are creative and open like Jason, children have the freedom to experiment with items in new spaces. Remember that most things, including children, are pretty easy to clean (especially when you are outside!).

Conclusion

The environment plays such a large role in the lives of young children. Wherever children spend their days should be a place where they feel welcome. Think of all the homes you have ever been in; no two homes are exactly the same. Classrooms and family child care programs should have the same individual feel and even change over time. It is important to make the environment safe, nurturing, culturally respectful, and reflective of families. Look for the next News You Can Use to learn more about creating homelike environments that are reflective of families. Infant and toddler teachers and home visitors can create and support environments that inspire loving and learning together.



Words You Can Use:

Open ended materials: Toys that can be used in many different ways. For some ideas about how to choose toys use this link:

http://main.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_play_choose toys&AddInterst=1503



Footnotes:

- i Bev Bos and Jenny Chapman, *Tumbling Over the Edge* (California: Turn the Page Press, 2005), 59.
- ii Diane E. Levin and Barbara Rosenquest, "The Increasing Role of Electronic Toys in the Lives of Infants and Toddlers: Should we be Concerned?" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 2(2) 2001: 242-6.
- iii Bos and Chapman, *Tumbling Over the Edge*, 110.
- iv Deb Curtis and Margie Carter, *Designs for Living and Learning* (Minnesota: Red Leaf Press, 2003), 101.
- v Louis Torrelli, "Enhancing Development Through Classroom Design in Early Head Start: Meeting the Program Performance Standards and Best Practices," *Children and Families, Spring, 2002 (44-51)*, retrieved from <http://www.spacesforchildren.com/articles/EarlyHeadStart.pdf>