

Learning At Home and Homelike Environments

Infants and toddlers are usually most comfortable in their homes -- and why not? That is the place where they are loved most of all! In addition to their homes, many infants and toddlers spend time in family child care, center-based care, or other group care settings. When the spaces where infants and toddlers spend their time bring in elements of their homes it sends the message that "This is a place where you, your family, and your culture will be respected and valued."

A family's home is already a rich environment full of learning opportunities! Whether a family is enrolled in a home visiting option or they participate in child care, their child will still spend much of their time at home. Both teachers and home visitors have the important job of helping families see all the opportunities for learning that already exist in their own home.

Have you ever noticed that no two homes are exactly alike? Even in apartments where the floor plan is the same for every unit, the way people decorate and the furniture they choose provide a sense of individuality. People tend to create spaces that are reflective of their personalities and family culture. Think for a moment about your own home and what makes it special. Are there elements of your home that are unmistakably you and/or your family? Maybe it's the pictures you have out, or something given to you by a grandparent -- most of us have something special that makes our living space personal.

When we create spaces for infants and toddlers, one goal is to provide continuity, because very young children are more comfortable when people and things around them are familiar. One important aspect of continuity is having the same caregiver (or home visitor), or a very small group of caregivers who interact with a child and their family. Another aspect of continuity is caring for babies in out-of-home care settings in ways that are as similar as possible to how their families care for them at home. In home visiting, it is important that the ideas and activities provided by the home visitor for the family are in sync with the family's values and goals for their child.

There's No Place Like Home!

Stephanie is doing a home visit with Nathan and his eighteen-month-old daughter Linda. Nathan shared with Stephanie that he really wants to provide a home where Linda can learn. He doesn't know what to buy nor does he have a lot of money to spend on toys. Stephanie assures Nathan that everything he needs is already in his home!

Helping families create home environments where their children can thrive is an exciting way home visitors can support parent and child relationships in the home. Nathan, like most parents, wants to provide the best for his daughter. Stephanie can help Nathan come up with ideas for how to use their home and daily routines to support Linda's development.

Everyday materials that support learning:



- Empty food containers (egg cartons, cereal boxes, spice tins, cracker boxes)
- Boxes to serve as blocks (shoe boxes, tissue boxes, etc.)
- Clean, empty laundry detergent tops or yogurt containers make excellent toys for stacking and nesting
- Empty egg cartons or muffin tins provide opportunities to explore one-to-one correspondence and pretend play (shopping or cooking)
- Fabric of various textures like scarves, bandanas or scraps of old clothes can be fun to touch, snuggle, or use as a baby blanket in pretend play
- Empty containers and a bowl of water over a cake pan for dump and fill water play with minimal mess
- Empty coffee can and spoon makes a drum
- Safe-to-throw items such as soft balls, shower scrubbers and balled up socks
- Cushions or pillows on the floor to crawl over or jump on top of
- A "cozy" area (blanket or scarf laid over a table, or large cardboard box) that children can crawl into and use as an indoor tent

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!"

Supporting Development in All Domains

Twelve-month-old Isabella scoots herself over to the coffee table as her parents, Armando and Mariana sit near her. Cecilia, their home visitor, watches as Armando and Mariana encourage

Isabella as she reaches for the coffee table and attempts to stand up. "She's so close to standing up!" Mariana shares with Cecelia, "she's been reaching at this table all week." Cecelia picks up one of Isabella's favorite toys and puts it on the table. In her effort to reach for the toy she forgets how hard it is to stand and pulls right up to reach for the toy! Everyone claps as Isabella grins with pride.

To create a home environment that supports gross motor skills:



- Help a child learn to safely climb on and off the couch
- Use a step stool (to wash hands, brush teeth, see the kitchen counter)
- Take a walk
- Create a child-friendly obstacle course with cushions to climb over, a cardboard box tunnel to crawl through, hopping over a handkerchief on the floor, etc.
- Practice walking (or crawling!) up and down stairs with your child.

To create a home environment that supports fine motor skills:

- Provide supervised experiences with paper and pens/pencils/markers/crayons – children as young as twelve-months-old will want to try writing like adults do
- Offer babies junk mail or old newspapers to crumple, crinkle and tear
- Make a "treasure basket." Fill a basket (or muffin tin) with safe, ordinary household and natural items and allow babies to discover the treasures inside. Remember that one of the ways babies explore is with their mouths so make sure everything is safe to mouth or suck on and always provide close supervision. Some items for a treasure basket might be: a measuring cup, fabric, a coaster, a spoon, balls, and whatever (safe objects) you find!

To create a home environment that supports social skills:

- Provide the knowledge and skills to help families recognize that the most important part of their children's environment is the relationships they grow together
- Encourage parents to respond to babies' sounds, smiles, and gestures as though they are having conversations.
- Play turn-taking games—for example, the child may hand the parent a ball, and the parent hands it back.
- For toddlers, use a paper plate to make a 'stop' sign one side and a 'go' sign on the other. Play stop-and-go games in a hallway; this helps children learn self-control and listening skills.
- Play games with toddlers using stuffed animals, dolls, or action figures. The dolls can practice negotiating difficult issues like taking turns, needing space, and being polite. They can also sing songs and do silly dances!

Supporting Safe Home Environments

Aisha recently moved into a shelter with her 4-month-old son Dion. She enrolled Dion in Shawna's classroom and has noticed that Shawna puts Dion on the floor a lot. When Aisha asks about that,

Shawna explains that "tummy time" is good for a baby's muscles. A few days later Aisha tells Shawna that she wants to let Dion have tummy time at home, but in the shelter the floor is hard and dirty.

Sometimes families are in situations where their home environment is not very safe. EHS teachers and home visitors can partner with families in protecting their children and continuing to nurture their development. Shawna was prepared to help Aisha come up with some ideas about how to let Dion have some time on the floor at "home." Some ideas for caregivers and home visitors in this situation might be to provide a low-sided cardboard box for tummy time or to bring butcher block paper to define a clean space for the baby. Shawna could also provide Aisha with a vinyl tablecloth or clear shower curtain liner that could serve as the "rug." The tablecloth makes a clean spot for a baby blanket where babies can practice tummy time, rolling, or reaching for toys.

To support safe home environments:

- Help families of mobile infants find resources to solve safety issues. Are electrical outlets covered? Is furniture stable enough to be pulled up on? Use a "home safety check list" with families.
- Work with community partners to provide families with safety items like outlet covers and cabinet locks.
- Refer families to health care providers who can test infants and toddlers for exposure to lead (often transmitted by swallowing peeling paint in older homes and apartment buildings). Talk to parents about what they can look for in their homes to avoid possibly exposing their child to lead.
- Identify safe local parks for outdoor play time.
- Even in small homes or apartments, try to help families create one area that is safe for children to play in and one place (such as a cardboard box decorated with stickers) where children can keep their "treasures."
- Help families feel good about where they are, even if it isn't where they want to be long term. This can be done by pointing out what obstacles the family may have overcome and accomplished to find housing, keep their family together, or seeking EHS services.

Creating Homelike Environments

Sasha, a child care provider in a center-based program, is setting up her new classroom. She recently visited a friend who provides child care in her home and loved the calm, cozy environment. Sasha wants her mixed-age classroom to feel like a home. She has a couch, some rocking chairs, and a table in the room where children can play with toys and caregivers and visiting family members can sit nearby. On initial home visits, Sasha noticed family decorations, and found some similar things to decorate her classroom. She also took photos of each family and placed them around the room where children can see them.

Making a child care center classroom feel like a "home away from home" is a great way to create a warm, welcoming, nurturing environment. Homelike environments are possible in most spaces with a little bit of creativity and imagination. Imagine how wonderful it would feel for a nervous new parent coming into a child care center to see a comfortable room where caregivers, families, and children gather and spend their time.

Think of your environment as one way you can begin to build close, supportive relationships with children and families. Look around and see what you can do to promote relationships in all the areas of your space. A couch is not only a place to sit but also provides comfortable space for teachers and parents to



relax and catch up at pick-up time, hold and feed babies, or cuddle with toddlers to read a book. A changing table is more than a place to change diapers! It is a space where caregivers and babies can enjoy some one-on-one time together.

Bringing in Home Cultures

Jim and Carol's families have lived in the same small town for generations. Their parents worked in the local factory and now Jim does too. Their son, Adam, is enrolled in the local Early Head Start center and his teacher, Meghan, is visiting the parents for a home visit. Meghan explains that she likes her classroom to reflect the lives and cultures of the families in the program. While Jim and Carol like this idea, they don't think they have a "culture" to offer. Meghan explains how every family is different, and that makes up the culture of their family! She points out the pictures on a shelf of family gatherings and asks if she can take a similar picture of Jim, Carol, and Adam to put in the classroom.

An excellent place to get ideas for your room is on home visits to your families. Look around their homes and ask yourself, "How can I bring this into our space?" Notice what is on the walls and how families decorate. Do the families have mirrors, artwork, and photos of themselves? If you have



parents like Jim and Carol, who work in a job and wear uniforms, see if you can get an extra hat or vest for the children's dramatic play area. Here are some things to consider when creating a home away from home:

- Find ways to be reflective and respectful of the cultures your families come from. Rather than purchasing toys that represent world cultures, use textiles and fabrics common to the cultures of the families your program serves. This is more meaningful to both children and their parents. Ask families to provide you with the empty food containers (cereal boxes, etc) they use; cover these with contact paper and place them in the "housekeeping area" so that the children's playthings are the items they see at home.
- Use pictures (with the permission of families) to create a

sense of home:

- Laminate photos, slip them into wall mounted clear displays, or use inexpensive, safe frames to display pictures of the children and families in your program.
- Display photos of caregivers, home visitors, and their families.
- Include photos of families in socialization spaces to make these rooms feel more homelike
- Display pictures of neighborhood landmarks such as a community center, school or park
- Use baskets or cloth containers instead of brightly colored plastic buckets to store toys.
- Look for ways to make families' home cultures part of the caregiving space – for example, use woven baskets or textiles (curtains, blankets, tablecloths) in the style of families' countries of origin.

Conclusion

The place where very young children spend their time is full of messages to the child. When caregivers and family members are intentional about the environments they create they can send messages such as:

- Your family life and relationships are valued here
- This is a place where you can explore and learn

- This place is kind and loving—just like home
- I want to keep you safe and secure
- Our relationship is important

Working hard to create a space that is welcoming and homelike, or helping families see the rich experiences their own home has to offer, are wonderful parts of the job that home visitors and caregivers do every day!

References

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