



## **Infants Have Their Own Curriculum: A Responsive Approach to Curriculum and Lesson Planning for Infants and Toddlers**

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Infant-toddler childcare programs often look like either a watered-down version of preschool or a glorified version of baby-sitting. Unfortunately, most of the curriculum approaches and lesson plans that program managers call for, and early childhood educators carry out don't make things better. In general infant care practice what is usually seen is the implementation of curriculum extremes. One curriculum approach often used believes that very young children only need safe environments and tender loving care and that specific attention to learning is inappropriate. Another common approach believes that in order for infants to grow and develop cognitively they must be stimulated intellectually by adult developed and directed lessons and activities, carefully planned ahead of time, and programmed into the infants day. Both of these positions are incorrect.

In other nations, where the profession of infant-toddler caregiving has been developing for many more years than in the USA, things are done differently. Infant-toddler curricula are broadly defined. Adult generated lessons are seen as misguided. It is the interest of the infant and the belief that infants have their own curriculum that drive practice. It is understood that very young children need to play a significant role in selecting their learning experiences, materials, and content. Curriculum plans do not focus on games, tasks, and activities, but on:

- ◆ how to best create a social, emotional, and intellectual climate that supports child-initiated learning and
- ◆ the building and sustaining of positive relationships among adults and children.

What results is a curriculum and planning approach that combines:

- ◆ tender loving relationship based care, as the essential prerequisite of intellectual development,
- ◆ attention to the child's interests, curiosity, and motivation as the beginning point for curriculum planning, and
- ◆ adults who play the role of facilitator of the child's learning, rather than teacher.

## **Planning A Responsive Curriculum**

Responsive curriculum planning focuses on finding strategies to help caregivers search for, support, and keep alive children's internal motivation to learn, and spontaneous explorations of people and things naturally of interest and important to them. Planning to work responsively with infants should begin with the study of the specific children in care. Detailed records of each child's interests and skills should be kept so as to give guidance to the adults as to the role they will take in each child's learning. It should also be realized from the start that plans should not be static. The child's unique thoughts, feelings, needs, and interests must be seen as part of the equation for implementing plans. Adaptation and change are a critical part of the learning process and should be expected. Once an interaction with a child or small group of children begins, a caregiver has to be ready to adapt his or her plans and actions to meet the momentary needs and interests of each child. Good plans always include a number of alternative strategies and approaches.

Lesson plans, appropriately developed, should include strategies to broaden the caregiver's understanding of, and deepen their relationship with, each child served, in addition to specifying particular content and materials. Good plans should: 1) reflect activities that orient the caregiver to the role of *facilitator of learning* rather than the role of "teacher;" and 2) assist the caregiver in reading the cues of each infant served. A most essential part of curriculum and daily planning is the context for learning. Infants don't need specific lessons so much as a well-trained and knowledgeable adult who can create a rich setting for learning. The planning of learning environments--and the local policies that help create a climate for learning--are more important to infant development than specific lessons or specific activities. The environment must be seen as part of the curriculum, provoking interest and encouraging and supporting exploration. Research has shown that much of how infants learn best comes not from specific adult-directed lessons, but from teachers knowing how to maximize on each child's natural learning.

## **The Search for a Responsive Curriculum**

Many programs have sought help in developing or selecting an infant-toddler curriculum and in designing appropriate lesson plans for infants. Curricula and lesson plans for work with infants and toddlers must center on activities, environments, and interaction styles that are responsive to the needs and interests of infants and toddlers. They must also respect the competencies that infants and toddlers bring to each interaction, and reflect their need for relationship-based experiences.

One general warning: Do not select a curriculum or lesson planning format that is simply a prescribed sequence of adult-directed activities that leaves the infant out of the process of selecting the topic of the lesson. Both the infant and the caregiver should play a role in the selection process, with the child initiating the activity at times, and the caregiver at other times.

From all we know about "how infants learn best," we know that they must have a hand in selecting what they learn. Therefore, the infant should be an active partner in the process of selecting curriculum content, and the curriculum should be dynamic enough to move and flow on

a daily basis with the infant's changing interests and needs. In this way, the curriculum is responsive and respectful of what the infants bring to and want from these early experiences.

Curriculum planning, implementation, and supportive materials should anticipate developmental stages but also allow for individual variations in learning styles and temperaments. These elements must be broad enough in scope to respond to all developmental domains simultaneously.

In a responsive curriculum, a good portion of subsequent lesson planning has to do with caregivers preparing themselves and the environment so that infants can learn -- not in figuring out what to teach infants. Lesson planning then involves exploring ways to help caregivers get "in tune" with each infant they serve, and learn from the individual infant what he or she needs, thinks, and feels. Yet even "in tune" caregivers need to plan and re-plan how to form a relationship with each individual child, and best meet that child's needs and relate to her or his unique thoughts and feelings. Very little positive learning will take place, regardless of what daily plans look like, if the curriculum and any lesson planning does not include:

- 1) attention to the development of a safe and interesting place for learning;
- 2) the selection of appropriate materials for the individual needs and interests of the children served;
- 3) the organization of learning and care in small groups;
- 4) management policies that maximize the child's sense of security in care and continuity of connection with the caregivers;
- 5) ways to optimize program connections with the child's family; and
- 6) the grounding of caregivers in the cognitive, social, and emotional experiences in which infants and toddlers are naturally interested.

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### **Curriculum Factors to Consider**

When developing or selecting a curriculum it will serve you well to examine them for how successfully they address the following factors in infant development.

- 1) **Infants learn holistically.** Infants do not experience social, emotional, intellectual, language, and physical learning separately. Adults are most helpful to the young child when they interact in ways that reflect an understanding of the fact that the child is learning from the whole experience, not just the part of the experience that the adult gives attention.
- 2) **Infancy has three stages.** Between birth and age three, a child goes through three distinct developmental stages: young infant, mobile infant, and toddler. The type of care and

experiences given should change when the child's stage changes and should also take into consideration transitions between stages.

- 3) **Relationships are primary for development.** The infant is dependent on close, caring, ongoing relationships for positive, physical, social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Infants develop best when they are sure of having trusted caregivers who can read their cues and respond to their needs. Infant-toddler care policies must ensure that these relationships exist and thrive, because they are the essence of quality care.
- 4) **Infants are developing their first sense of self through contact with others.** An infant or toddler learns most of how he or she thinks and feels by imitating and incorporating the behaviors of those who care for her or him -- how they first see themselves, how they think they should function, how they expect others to function in relation to them.
- 5) **Home culture is an important part of a child's developing identity.** Because an infant's sense of self is such a crucial part of a child's make-up, early care must, in addition to carefully selecting and training caregivers, ensure that links with family, home culture, and home language are a central part of program policy.
- 6) **Infants are active, self-motivated learners.** Each infant is born curious and motivated to learn, and actively participates in learning each day. Environments and activities that keep motivation, experimentation, and curiosity alive must be constructed to facilitate the infant learning process.
- 7) **Infants are not all alike – they are individuals with unique temperaments.** Because of these differences, staff need to individualize and adapt to each child.
- 8) **Language skills and habits develop early.** The development of language is particularly crucial during the infant/toddler period. Quality care provides many opportunities for infants to engage in meaningful, experienced-based communication with their caregivers, and have their communications acknowledged and encouraged.
- 9) **Environments are powerful.** Infants and toddlers are strongly influenced by the environments and routines they experience each day. This is particularly true for very young infants who cannot move themselves from one environment to another. The physical environment, group size, daily schedules, lesson plans, and caregiving routines must foster the establishment of small intimate groups in which relationships with trusted caregivers can develop.
- 10) **Adults exhibit strong emotions when charged with the care of infants.** Parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers often experience heightened emotions when they care for infants and toddlers. Developing strategies for dealing with conflicts that can emerge between parents and caregivers must be considered part of the caregiver's role.