[Introduction]

Hi, my name is Eva. In this course we will focus on appropriate learning environments for infants and toddlers. This course will help you recognize and develop the tools needed to create a learning environment that meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers.

[Learning Objectives]

Before we begin, let’s take a moment to review the learning objectives for this course. Once you have completed this course, you will be able to:

- Identify characteristics of an appropriate physical environment for infants and toddlers,
- Describe the importance of indoor and outdoor play,
- Identify ways to support literacy and language development in the child care environment,
- Describe the importance of relationships in the learning environment, and
- Create individualized, age appropriate schedules and lesson plans.

[Elements of a Developmentally Appropriate Environment]

There are many different elements that need to be considered when creating developmentally appropriate environments. As an infant or toddler caregiver, it is important to be reflective and responsive to young children’s needs throughout the day. In this course, we will focus on the many aspects of a developmentally appropriate environment. These areas include:

- Health and safety,
- The physical environment,
- Language and literacy,
- The social emotional environment,
- Schedules and lesson plans, and
- Parental involvement.

Implementing appropriate practice in all these areas is not only beneficial to the growth and development of the child, but makes the life of the caregiver significantly easier and less stressful.
Throughout this course, it is very important for you to remember that children learn through their experiences. As adults, we are in control of the setting, and therefore, have a great impact on each and every child’s learning process. The child and the process are not separable: the child’s experience is the learning process (Bos, 1987).

[Health and Safety]

Health and safety is the most basic part of child care. Without a safe environment, children are not free to explore and learn. When looking at your environment, it is extremely important to pay close attention to the safety of the indoor and outdoor spaces. Think about possible safety issues from the perspective of an infant or toddler. Your state licensing standards will help you identify and correct potential hazards in your environment.

Supervision is the primary means of ensuring the safety of children. Check your child care facility and outside areas for blind spots. You should be able to see all of your children at all times, no matter where you are located. Suggestions for increasing visibility include moving furniture, making blind spots inaccessible, or strategically placing a mirror to make blind spots visible from any location in the room.

It is also extremely important that staff anticipate and act to prevent safety hazards. Check your child care facility and playground every day to ensure that the environment is safe. For infant and toddler environments, this includes getting down on the floor to view potential hazards from the child’s level. Staff need to be sure that children follow safety rules, and it is important for the children to be told the reasons behind safety rules. This gives them an opportunity to learn to self-regulate their behavior to incorporate safety as part of their everyday living.

Hand washing is vital in infant and toddler environments. Caregivers and children need to follow all hand washing rules to reduce the spread of germs. Adults and children need to wash their hands:

- When entering the child care environment, including arrival in the morning and after playing in sand and outside,
- Following diapering and toileting,
- Prior to and following any meal, including before giving a baby a bottle,
- Before playing in the water table or other water activities,
- After feeding or touching animals, and
- If there is any contact with bodily fluids, such as mucus or blood, or other potentially harmful substances.

Adults should also wash their hands after all breaks.

Other suggestions for preventing the spread of germs include:

- Removing children with contagious illnesses,
- Providing extra clothes in case of accidents,
- Administering medications properly,
• Covering sandboxes between uses, and
• Following appropriate sanitizing procedures

[Space and Furnishings]

A properly set up and maintained physical environment is essential for infant and toddler learning. The physical environment can either be your greatest friend or work against you throughout your workday. Let’s begin by looking at the larger picture of space and furnishings, and work our way to a focus on appropriate learning areas.

When considering the space and furnishings in an infant or toddler environment, it is important to ensure that the space is not too crowded or too open. There should be adequate space for large motor activities, such as building with blocks, jumping and dancing. Infants need ample floor space to build their movements from rolling over to crawling and walking. Without this space and floor time, their physical development can be impeded. Remember that younger infants need protected areas, and cannot safely be in a large space with mobile or walking children.

A completely open environment can send the wrong message to children. For example, if all furniture is pushed up against the walls and the space is left entirely open, then various types of play get intermingled, and there is no distinction between quiet play and loud play. A completely open floor plan also encourages running and rough play. When the space is broken up into centers, the expectation of each area becomes clear. If there is a space that is conducive to running, children will find it. Be sure to examine the placement of your furniture in an environment with mobile children, to ensure that you have not created an indoor space that encourages running.

When looking at the furniture in your room, it is also important that you have everything necessary to take care of the basic needs of the children. Please look at your environment to ensure that the following are in place:

a. A proper area for diapering and toileting with wipes, diapers, and a trashcan,
b. Appropriate furniture for snacks and mealtimes, including high chairs for infants and toddler-sized tables and chairs,
c. Individual cribs or mats for each child, used by the same child each time to avoid contamination. Remember that children who are not walking need to be in cribs, and children who are walking need to use mats,
d. Proper ventilation and, depending on your regional location, air conditioning and heat,
e. Natural lighting whenever possible,
f. Furniture that promotes self-help skills, including low sinks or sinks with step-stools and child-sized toilets,
g. Toys, organized and easily accessible to children, and
h. Storage that can be used for supplies and extra toys.

Your space and furnishings come together to create an environment that is tailored to meet the needs of very young children. Some caregivers make the mistake of expecting an infant or toddler to fit into an adult-sized space that has undergone only a few modifications. Infants and
toddlers are naturally curious, and are motivated to use all of their senses to explore their environments, whether these environments are child-friendly or not. While the initial set-up of an adult-sized facility may be easier on the caregiver, the actual day-to-day interactions between the caregiver, the child, and the environment will be filled with chaos. Adult-sized chairs around the room become instant climbing units for toddlers, and books not specifically created for infants become teething rings and possible choking hazards. By child-sizing your infant or toddler room, you will not only create a safe, welcoming environment for the children in your care, but you will spend far less time lifting and redirecting children, bending over and picking up knocked over items, and reaching for toys and books on high shelves.

Three distinct age groups exist during the first three years of life. For the purposes of our discussion today, it will be helpful to think about every aspect of the learning environment from the perspective of these three groups:

- **Young infants**, approximately birth to 9 months, are reacting to the new world around them and are most concerned with security. To strengthen development for young infants, provide experiences that encourage feelings of trust. Create comfortable, quiet spaces away from older children where caregivers can nurture and soothe young infants. Assign the same caregiver to the same infant each day to help build trust and familiarity.

- **Mobile infants**, approximately 9 to 18 months, are consumed with wanting to move and explore. Mobile infants will crawl, scoot, climb, and take steps towards anything and everything that is in front of them. Caregivers must provide mobile infants with environments that are at all times safe, clean and stimulating.

- **Toddlers**, approximately 18 to 36 months, are forming identities and learning to focus their attentions on desired activities. Caregivers are able to use a wide array of materials and sensory experiences to gain a toddler’s attention. Redirection and behavior guidance will help toddlers appropriately communicate their emotions.

As we discuss different learning areas, imagine the set-up for each age group. How would a mobile infant’s art area look different from a toddler’s? And why? What modifications can be made for young infants?

**[Wall Displays]**

When examining your physical space, it is important to ensure that wall displays are meaningful to the children – not just a cute decoration that looks good to adults. Walls displays are important teaching tools. Items need to be hung at the children’s eye level. Displays should include art created by the children, photos of the children and their families, realistic representations of nature, and pictures of people of various races and cultures, ages, genders, and differing abilities. It is not necessary to hang all of these items on your wall at one time. Just as walking into an overly bright, crowded department store can cause you to feel overwhelmed and stressed, a child care environment with excessively decorated walls can make children feel the same way.

**[Learning Areas]**
Learning areas are also an important part of the physical environment. When creating learning areas, ensure that quiet play is separated from active play. For example, your library should not be next to the block play area. Now, let’s take a closer look at some specific learning areas you should include in your child care setting.

[Relaxation and Comfort Area]

Infant and toddler rooms need space for relaxation and comfort. This is usually combined with the book area. Infants need this quiet space as much as toddlers. Infant relaxation areas should be protected from children involved in active play. They should include books, pillows or cozy furniture, and soft toys. Be careful when placing materials in a relaxation area for infants to ensure that no materials could cause a suffocation hazard. Many infant relaxation areas include mats, carpets, stuffed animals, and soft toys. Remember, it is just as important for infants to have books in a quiet space as it is for toddlers and older children.

[Fine Motor Area]

All infant and toddler child care programs need fine motor materials. These are materials that encourage small movements, such as grasping and pincher grip. Some suggested materials for an infant fine motor area include soft blocks, puzzles, grasping toys, toys with slides or buttons to push, nesting cups, rattles, small containers that can be used to fill and dump, and toys with different textures.

Some examples of fine motor materials in a toddler room are shape sorters, simple puzzles, stringing beads, pegs and peg boards, stacking rings, nesting toys, interlocking blocks, and developmentally appropriate writing and art materials. Toys need to be rotated to maintain the children’s interest. Young children have difficulty sharing. Supplying multiples of the same toy often prevents conflict among the children.

[Infant Art Area]

Art activities promote fine and large motor development, provide sensory experiences, offer a creative outlet for children, and give children a sense of pride in something they have created.

Many infant caregivers are hesitant to do art activities with babies. However, infants are very capable of doing art when provided with developmentally appropriate supplies. A caregiver needs to ensure that all materials are non-toxic prior to use, because the infants will place the items in their mouths.

Infants are capable of finger painting, and enjoy the texture and feeling of the paint as it slides through their fingers. Finger painting on different surfaces can provide different sensory experiences. Infants also enjoy tearing and crumpling paper. Appropriate papers include waxed paper, butcher paper, parchment paper, or rice paper. Mobile infants can draw with crayons or mold with dough. Many caregivers are extremely creative when doing infant art, so pay attention to co-workers and classmates for new ideas. One of the most important ways to get ideas for
infant art is to watch how your infants play. Reflect on how infants move and what they are interested in, and think of ways to incorporate the children’s interests into an art activity.

[Toddler Art Area]

Toddlers are capable of using a wider variety of art materials. Again, it is extremely important to ensure that all art materials are non-toxic. They can use crayons, water colors, markers, finger paints, paint brushes, clay or dough, and collage materials. Using various types of papers can enhance art experiences, as can unique materials for collages such as feathers or leaves. Different painting utensils, such as toothbrushes, sponges, texture rollers, play cars, or blocks, can extend art experiences.

Ideally, art should be made available daily using a variety of materials. You can vary the materials offered throughout the week. Art activities can be conducted indoors or outdoors. Some caregivers prefer that particularly messy art activities be kept outside to reduce clean-up.

It is possible to have art materials openly accessible for toddlers to use at will. Before making this decision, however, consider the abilities of your students. Remember that children need to be taught the proper way to use art materials.

[Music and Movement Area]

Music and movement activities provide opportunities for large and small motor development and can be a wonderful sensory experience. Rhythm and patterns in music can be a precursor to mathematical development.

Infant and toddler child care programs need musical toys and instruments. Caregivers will often incorporate the music area into the dramatic play area. A variety of musical toys should be introduced on a rotating basis to keep the children’s interest. Examples of toys that can be used with infants or toddlers include tambourines, bells, shakers, xylophones, or homemade musical toys.

Infants and toddlers also need formal and informal music and movement experiences. Formal music experiences are planned by caregivers to fit into the daily routine and curriculum. Informal music experiences are unplanned. Children enjoy incorporating movement into songs. Children who do not yet talk may mimic a caregiver’s hand gestures or body movements in order to participate in the music experience.

The use of music should always be purposeful. Recorded music should be used for activities or for soothing sounds at naptime. However, playing music for more than twenty minutes as background noise teaches children to tune out music and devalues the importance of music experiences.

[Block Area]
The block area is a space that promotes a child’s creativity and imagination. Children’s ideas can be seen in a concrete fashion while they are working with blocks. Block play is also important for the development of spatial relations and early math skills. Children use blocks to examine weight, balance and shapes.

Block areas need to be placed in such a way that children are able to build on a stable, flat surface. The floor is a perfect place for children to build. The block area should be a large space that allows children’s play to grow either outwards or upwards.

There are many different types of blocks, including wooden blocks, soft blocks, cardboard blocks, or plastic blocks. Blocks can be various sizes, shapes, colors, and weights. Keep in mind, however, that small blocks can pose a choking hazard to very young children. Soft blocks are the most appropriate choice for infants. Wooden blocks can be successfully used in a toddler program, and add a natural element to the materials. Accessories, such as toy cars, trucks, animals, and dolls can extend children’s imaginative play.

[Dramatic Play Area]

Infants and toddlers naturally mimic familiar situations and places in their everyday lives. When we think of young children in child care, we often picture dramatic play. Infants and toddlers benefit greatly from a well-designed and diverse dramatic play area. You may be aware of the benefits of dramatic play to a child’s imagination and social skills – that is easy to observe. Children become mothers, dentists, astronauts, and firefighters through play. Other learning domains are also present in dramatic play, however. Language and communication development, physical development and motor skills, emotional development, and cognitive development are all greatly enhanced through play.

Infants are able to engage in dramatic play in several ways. The foundations of learning begin when we are infants, and dramatic play is an important building block. Infants enjoy close, face-to-face interactions with caregivers. They depend on interactions like these to affirm the security of their environment. Introduce dramatic play by using puppets, dolls, toy telephones, and other age-appropriate materials into games like “Peek-a-Boo” and “Pat-a-Cake.” Use toy pigs to act out “This Little Piggy Went to Market.” Hide and reintroduce these materials as you sing the finger plays with infants, and frequently change the pitch and volume of your voice. An infant engaged in dramatic play activity is not only smiling, cooing, and squealing with delight, but she is also strengthening her eye and neck muscles as she follows your face and the props.

For toddlers, a dramatic play area is usually its own constant part of the environment. A play area set up as a home can include child-sized home and kitchen furniture, pretend foods, doll clothes and furnishings, and dishes. It is not necessary for the dramatic play area to be kept as a kitchen or home; it can be changed to a grocery store, restaurant, picnic spot, doctor’s office, veterinary clinic, etc.

Dress-up clothes are appropriate for any dramatic play area. Use your creativity to imagine real life situations that children want represented in dramatic play. Wigs, ballerina slippers, large gloves, men’s jackets, skirts, construction hats, and many other items enrich a dramatic play
area. It is not necessary to spend a large amount of money–discount stores, garage sales, secondhand stores, etc. offer dress-up items at low costs. Be sure to include a tall, unbreakable mirror so children can see themselves.

It is important to represent diversity in the dramatic play area and throughout the room. Dolls of different ethnic backgrounds should be included, as well as dress-up or doll clothes from different cultures. Provide different food props to represent foods from around the world, along with foods that are familiar in your children’s lives. Also include props for dolls to represent people of differing abilities, such as crutches, walkers, glasses, or wheelchairs. By providing materials that represent familiar situations and places, children are given a chance to engage in play that is meaningful to their life experiences.

[Sensory Area]

Infants and toddlers learn through their senses. Since they are constantly exploring through touching and mouthing, every aspect of their environment needs to be designed for their safety (Gonzalez-Mena, Eyer, 2007). Tactile experiences give children information about the world around them. Sensory experiences with elements such as sand, water, shaving cream, dough, feathers, etc. provide numerous ways for children to learn about the world around them.

Sensory play can be offered indoors or outdoors and should be offered frequently, preferably every day. There are many different accessories, such as dishes, buckets, shovels, toy vehicles, dolls, tubes, and balls, which can be used to enhance sensory play. Use your imagination to create new and different experiences with sensory elements. For example, you can hide things in the sand for the children to find, or use water as a doll bathtub or car wash.

[Nature and Science Area]

Infants and toddlers are natural scientists. Children are constantly experimenting, examining, and developing ideas about their environment. Nature and science experiences should be offered indoors and outdoors daily. Infants and toddlers need hands-on experiences with nature, such as opportunities to touch plants, smell flowers, or listen to the wind (Cryer, et al., 2004). Infants and toddlers should be encouraged to examine natural processes like changes in temperature, season, or weather. Take every opportunity to call attention to insects, birds, or other creatures that are seen outdoors. Pets and indoor plants are way to bring nature indoors. Consult licensing standards in your area before purchasing a pet or indoor plant. Also consider how your children will treat a pet. Many young children will want to poke and yell at a pet, and some children may be allergic to animal hair. In such cases, a soothing aquarium can be a good option for young children.

Materials in child care should represent nature realistically. This can be accomplished by having books with real pictures of animals in the library, and with pictures on the wall representing realistic animal or nature scenes. A book displaying pictures of all the children’s pets is another way to bring nature to the child care program while maintaining the importance of the home-child care connection.
A child care program should have science materials for young children. This generally includes magnets, magnifying glasses, color paddles, stones, or shells. For infants and toddlers, make sure materials are large enough not to pose a choking hazard, and always supervise children closely. Offering creative collections throughout the year can enhance your children’s knowledge of science. These include, but are not limited to, collections of seed pods, leaves, herbs, or pine cones. Natural items offer numerous sensory experiences for young children. Remember to consider scents, touch, size and safety when choosing your collections.

[Outdoor Experiences]

Caregivers are often cautious when taking children, especially infants, outdoors. Sometimes the only outdoor experience infants will have is riding in a stroller during a quick walk around child care center. While this experience does provide fresh air, it provides few of the other sensory experiences that a child needs to grow and learn.

Outdoor experiences provide many opportunities for learning that an indoor environment cannot. The outdoors offers experiences with different types of weather, including wind, temperatures, and various precipitations. Children are able to experience different terrains as they walk from concrete to grassy surfaces. Different landscapes, like hills and uneven walking surfaces, help develop balance and dexterity. Various textures like rock, bark, wood, or grass provide interesting sensory experiences. Trees offer lessons about growth, and classifying leaves by shape, size and color encourages mathematical thinking.

Nature experiences can be great opportunities to develop language and new vocabulary. Talk to children about their observations during and after outdoor walks and playground time, and discuss the things that excited them. Our role as caregivers is to facilitate children’s thinking and learning as they discover meaningful experiences (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 1999).

[Outdoor Play Areas]

Outdoor play areas for infants should have spaces that encourage basic motor skills along with sensory experiences. Bucket swings and cradles are appropriate for infants when they meet your state’s safety guidelines. Wind chimes, flags, and bubble machines create wonderful outdoor sensory experiences for very young children. Shade is an important element of any playground, so consider canopies or large umbrellas to provide protection from the sun.

Toddler outdoor environments have a multitude of options. Toddlers can explore half-buried tires, sandboxes, tunnels, playhouses, and sensory tables. Swings, with proper supervision and a good fall zone, are always popular. Children enjoy watching fabrics or mobiles blow in the wind. All learning centers that are offered inside can be offered outside. A quiet place to read books is valued by many toddlers. Sand, pebbles and plants, when children are appropriately supervised to prevent choking and other safety hazards, can serve as great cooking materials in a home center. An outdoor area is perfect for messy art, because the clean-up is much easier. Toddlers also enjoy using various materials to build, such as blocks or cardboard boxes. Do not forget the importance of physical activity. Balls, riding toys, and cars and trucks provide great outdoor gross motor activities.
Openness creates a sense of freedom (Greenman & Stonehouse, 1996). Though many playgrounds only offer an open view of the sky due to fences or other structures, this still invites a feeling of being a part of something much bigger in the world of an infant or toddler. Remember, children deserve beauty in their environment and throughout their lives. Indoor and outdoor environments reflect what is valued in our lives and programs.

[The Use of TV, Video or Computers]

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) recommends no television viewing for children under the age of two and only one to two hours for children over two. Children learn about their world through interactive experiences. They learn language through reciprocal conversations. The TV and computer do not provide rich sensory experiences that engage a child’s mind and encourage learning. Additionally, watching television or using computers encourages children to be sedentary rather than active.

Now let’s watch a video that shows a well-designed learning environment. Listen as the caregiver describes the amount of thought that went into arranging the physical environment. Creating well-designed learning environments requires a great deal of forethought and consideration.

[Creating a Language Rich Environment]

Developing language is a principal developmental task of infants and toddlers. Caregivers and parents play a crucial role in a child’s language development. Infants learn quickly that language is used to communicate needs and feelings. An infant’s cry can represent hunger, pain, or loneliness. Infants also develop an early understanding of other communication cues like facial expressions, eye contact, touch and gestures. Infants understand language long before they can speak. Remember, just because a child cannot respond does not mean that she is not absorbing the meaning of your words. You can support a child’s understanding of language through using simple and exact words or phrases, like “soft touch” or “you are smiling – you are happy!” It is important to use descriptive words, and words that reflect a child’s feelings and emotions.

When working with infants and toddlers, it is helpful to think of yourself as narrating the day with each child. Tell him what you are doing as you are doing it. Describe what is happening during routine care and during play. Ensure that you personalize your interactions with each child. Make eye contact and use each child’s name frequently during the interactions.

Infants and toddlers can pick up sign language very early. It is incredibly useful to teach infants signs for common needs such as milk, sleep, more, eat, or all done. Sign language relieves many frustrations for non-verbal children, because they are able to effectively communicate their needs. Sign language also gives the caregiver an understanding of how much a child can communicate before he is able to use words.
When you describe what a child is saying or feeling, you are teaching her that language carries meaning. If a child points to an object because he wants it, you can say, “I see you want that rattle.” Reciprocal or “turn-taking” conversations encourage children to communicate more frequently with you. With young infants, this can include mimicking sounds like cooing to the child, or repeating the words they are using. Interpreting what very young children are saying can be difficult at first, but as you become familiar with a child’s speech patterns, understanding her words will become easier. This process requires getting to know each child well and paying close attention to his language usage and abilities.

Children’s use of language is supported by adding words to their ideas. If a child says “milk,” then you could reply, “I see you want your milk. It is in your cup.” Children’s language is also encouraged by asking simple questions. This can include saying: “What book do you want?” or “What do you see in that picture?” Remember, even if a child cannot answer you, the value lies in asking open-ended questions and describing the world around him.

Be sure to give children a chance to answer you when having conversations with them. Maintain a balance between listening and speaking, and remember that the social rules of conversation often vary with children. Children usually need more time to respond than adults do. By giving children this opportunity, you reinforce that their communication is important.

[Reading Books]

Books are an incredibly important means of building a child’s literacy skills, and children should be read to from birth. Books expand a child’s vocabulary and introduce the concept of a story. Reading with children demonstrates that print has meaning. Children learn the direction of text, how to turn pages, where the story begins, and how to recognize specific letters. These concepts are considered important pre-literacy building blocks, which help children become successful readers.

Books offer many opportunities for participation and interactive conversations. During book time, children can discuss characters, objects, colors, feelings and other parts of the story. After each page, ask questions about what the children are observing; explore new ideas and concepts with them. Children learn through repetition, so when they ask to hear the same book again and again, continue to have conversations about what they are seeing and hearing. These conversations not only strengthen children’s language and literacy skills, but by listening and responding to the children’s interests and enthusiasm, you are also building important relationships.

Remember that infants and young toddlers experience books, like everything else, using multiple senses. When using cardboard books with infants, ensure that small pieces of cardboard do not break off and cause a choking hazard. Soft, durable books are recommended for very young children.

[Social Emotional Environment]
Social emotional development includes the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships, and express and regulate emotions. Infants and toddlers are wired to learn through the primary responsive relationships in their lives, including parents and other regular caregivers. An infant uses a familiar, supportive adult as a “safe place” to return to after exploring the world and building independence.

Considering the amount of time you spend with the children in your care, you play a significant role in helping children develop their social skills and sense of self. Every moment of the day can be a teaching opportunity to build the child’s value of self, and social and emotional knowledge. Think about some of the topics we’ve covered today: art, music and movement, dramatic play, outdoor experiences, language and literacy. How would you incorporate social emotional learning in these areas? Recognize a child’s competency by positively commenting on her efforts at the art center. Help a child express the frustration she feels after she shares her favorite musical instrument. Encourage empathy during book time by discussing a character’s sadness. Social emotional development can and should be incorporated into all parts of the child’s day.

[Guidance and Redirection]

Guidance and redirection foster socialization and strengthen security by providing children with boundaries and choices. As children interact with their peers and learning environments, they look to their caregivers to set limits and guide behavior. When children are consistently led toward safe boundaries, they build trust. Redirecting behavior teaches children what to do, rather than what not to do. As children make more positive choices, they develop their self-esteem.

Caregivers guide children’s behavior by establishing and communicating simple, consistent limits. When possible, use the same words with every child to state the class rules that help guide behavior: “Hitting hurts – hands are for touching,” “No biting! We keep our friends safe.” When working with a team of adults, it is helpful for everyone to use the same guiding language and the same limits throughout all parts of the day.

Infants and toddlers need constant redirection. When redirecting a child, it is important to discuss what you are doing with the child during the redirection. If a baby is climbing on another infant, redirect the climbing baby by saying: “I am moving you because it hurts your friend when you climb on her.” This simple statement describes the effect of the baby’s actions, teaches him language for his actions, and establishes boundaries for behavior. Now picture the same scenario and the only word spoken to the infant is “no”. This gives the infant very little exposure to language, and very little information about what the boundary is. Notice how only saying “no” limits the learning opportunity.

When working with very young children, it is important to remember developmental stages. Often, caregivers will attribute adult intentions or motivations to an infant or toddler, without knowledge of that child’s developmental abilities. For example, some caregivers will describe an infant as “manipulative” as he cries when wanting to be held. When caregivers understand that infants are not cognitively capable of being manipulative, they are able to understand the motivation behind behavior and help children meet their needs.
Speak to children and other adults in child care in a relaxed and pleasant voice. Listen to the words and tone you use, and reflect on how you sound to individual children. As the caregiver, you are modeling respect, impulse control, conflict resolution, and other meaningful social emotional attributes. It can often be enlightening to record yourself teaching, and reflect on your interactions.

Remember, infants and toddlers are learning to manage their behaviors just as they are learning to walk, talk, and identify shapes and colors. You would not get angry at a child if she fell down while trying to walk; use this same thinking when guiding and redirecting behavior. Never punish a child. Withholding food, isolation or removal from the group, and yelling or laughing at a child are never acceptable practices.

The following video shows a caregiver effectively redirecting a very young child. Notice how the caregiver uses the redirection as an opportunity to teach language, self-regulation, and limits.

**[Program Structure]**

Many infant and toddler programs routinely use schedules and lesson plans. In fact, many state licensing standards require a posted activity plan. Schedules and lesson plans help map daily activities, and provide consistency and routines that children need to feel safe. However, it is imperative that caregivers use the cues of the children to adapt the daily schedule to best fit the children’s needs.

**[Infant Program Structure]**

Most programs follow an infant’s individual daily schedule for routine care. Routine care includes sleeping, eating, and diaper changing. However, the needs of an infant are far beyond routine care. Infants come into the world as learners and scientists. They are built to explore the world around them. Caregivers are facilitators of an infant’s experimentation and learning. If caregivers follow an infant’s curriculum and cues, then they are making the most of the learning experiences that the infant needs. This is accomplished through observations of the infant’s play and exploration.

When caregivers follow adult-set schedules, however, the learning activities an infant needs are not followed, and the infant’s developmental needs may not be met. The best way to support an infant-guided curriculum is to not interrupt an infant during play, when possible, and to repeat children’s actions and words. Remember, with repetition comes mastery, which then builds the foundation for future learning (Lally, 2010).

**[Toddler Program Structure]**

Toddler programs generally have a more structured schedule than infant programs. Just because most toddlers are ready for and need a predictable schedule, does not mean the activities within that schedule should be rigid. The toddler schedule can include set times for routine care, such as feeding or nap, but should also include child-led activities based on the observations of daily play. The infant and toddler caregiver is truly a *facilitator* of the child’s learning, rather than the *director* of the child’s learning.
When offering group activities for toddlers, it is important to make the activity optional. Free play options should be available during group activities. For example, many toddlers love stories and can sit for extended periods of time listening and interacting while books are read. However, toddlers who are uninterested in the story should be allowed to play in another supervised area. Caregivers should always invite children to participate in a group activity, but be respectful of and responsive to their choice.

Program structures that respect child-directed curriculum serve infants and toddlers in the most developmentally appropriate ways. This can be a tricky curriculum to document on a lesson plan. Most programs require written and posted lesson plans and schedules. However, many programs are open to deviating a bit from that lesson plan when they are aware of what is most beneficial to the children.

[Parents as Partners]

Family involvement is an important part of caring for young children, and should be considered a part of the learning environment. A few of the benefits to the children, curriculum, and yourself when families are actively engaged in your program are:

- **Meaningful Experiences** – Family is what is most meaningful to a child. Healthy relationships with families assist caregivers in building strong relationships with children.
- **Individualization** – Families are experts on their own children and provide crucial information, ranging from learning styles to sleeping patterns.
- **Culturally Appropriate Curriculum** – A child’s home language and culture can play a significant role in the child’s cognitive and linguistic development. When parents share aspects of their child’s background, caregivers can incorporate family traditions into the child’s daily routine to help support the home-child care connection.
- **Language and Literacy Foundation** - By educating parents and involving them in language-rich activities in the child care program, caregivers can have a lifelong impact on a child’s value of literacy.

Young children need consistency between home and child care. When the expectations of the child at home are dramatically different than the expectations in child care, it can cause confusion or acting out. Many caregivers notice the adjustment process children go through on Monday mornings after spending the weekend at home. This can be worse for children who have dramatically different expectations at home. When caregivers work with families to create this consistency, it not only helps the child acclimate to the child care environment, but it also supports the parent-child relationship.

[Bringing It All Together]

During this module, we have talked about ways to create a learning environment that meets the developmental needs of infants and toddlers. By integrating the different elements of a developmentally appropriate environment, caregivers are able to provide children with a safe, stimulating, and enjoyable learning experience.
Here are the major messages we would like you to “take home”:

- Appropriate physical environments for infants and toddlers include safe spaces, a variety of learning materials and sensory items, and spaces for quiet and loud play,
- Indoor and outdoor play allows children to explore the world around them, and is crucial for their development,
- Caregivers support literacy and language development in child care by using words to narrate a child’s day, communicating with sign language, mimicking sounds, and reading books,
- Infants and toddlers strengthen social emotional skills like trust, empathy, security, and self-control through responsive, consistent relationships in the learning environment, and
- Individualized schedules and lesson plans should be child-led and facilitated by the caregiver.

Thank you for your participation in this course, and for your desire to provide loving care for very young children in child care.

References


Sanchez, Sylvia Y. (2010, July 16). English Language Learning in Children under Three. Presented to Workforce Solutions – Childcare Services, Austin, TX.


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