

Planning curriculum for infants

by Terri Jo Swim and Robin Muza

Maria and Antonio are teachers in an infant classroom. They have eight children enrolled in their room, although they never have more than six infants on a given day. They follow their state's guidelines for infant care, but still do not know what to say when parents and co-workers ask what they "teach" the babies. In fact, they wonder themselves if and what they are teaching. It seems as though they spend the greatest amount of time feeding, rocking, and diapering children.

This feeling is not uncommon for infant teachers. The traditional notion of teaching seems—and is—inappropriate for infants. They won't sit in a group (if they can sit at all). They can't talk. So how do teachers recognize the needs, interests, and abilities of infants to create a curriculum that teaches them? Theories of child development and principles of developmentally appropriate practice can guide your answers to these questions.



Developmentally appropriate practices for infants

Experienced teachers of infants recognize the needs, interests, and abilities of infants in their classroom (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). Some of these needs, interests, and abilities are common for a particular age of children. Typically, infants follow a developmental pattern. For example, infants typically are able to sit without help around 7 months of age. When they are able to sit in this manner, they usually begin to creep or crawl (Berk, 1996).

Development during infancy is different than during any other period of life. Here are five reasons:

- This period of growth and development is rapid. Noticeable changes occur monthly, weekly, and, in some cases, daily.
- All areas of development are intertwined. Mental, or cognitive, development, for example, cannot be separated from physical development. Changes in one area result in changes in another area.
- This time is a foundation for later development and learning (Shore, 1997).
- Infants depend upon adults to meet all their needs.
- Infants have no effective skills for coping with discomfort and stress, so they are open to harm (Morrison, 1996).

While some needs, interests, and abilities are typical to all infants, others are specific to a particular child. These represent the unique characteristics of each child in your room (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). Most of these differences are the child's desires or special preferences. For example, José likes to have his back rubbed before he falls asleep at naptime, while Naomi likes to hug her blanket and be alone.

Also, some needs, interests, and abilities are specific to cultures or subcultures the children experience in society and in their homes (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). In other words, these are the beliefs and values held by each individual's family. For example, Houa lives with his father in an extended family. In this household, family needs are more important than individual needs. Therefore, you might expect that Houa's reaction to situations, such as stress, would be different than other children's.

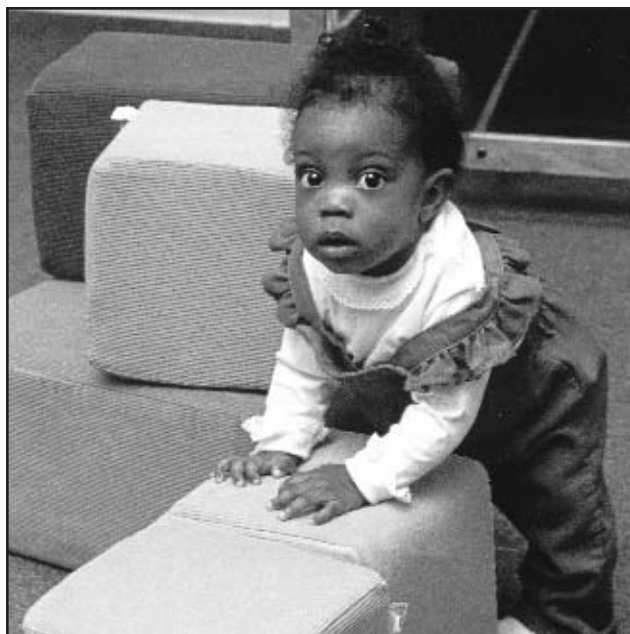
How infant development impacts curriculum

Curriculum is everything you do with a child day-by-day and throughout the year. According to Greenman and Stonehouse (1996), "curriculum is the framework and rationale for doing what you do, not a list of activities." If your curriculum is developmentally appropriate for infants, it will reflect both the typical features of infant development and the unique characteristics and cultures of the children in your care. Ideally, an infant curriculum will do the following:

- Emphasize relationships with people.

The teachers assist infants in learning that they are a vital part of a relationship. For example, teachers who consistently respond to cries in a caring manner teach that communication is an important tool for getting needs met. In this case, they are building a strong sense of trust and helping the infants to learn that they can count on others during times of stress.

According to psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1950) and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1980), developing a sense of trust is one of the main developmental tasks for infants. Both theories suggest that learning to trust others affects how well children will fare socially later in life. In fact, researchers have found that infants who trust their caregivers have better relationships with peers later in life than



those who don't (Cassidy et al., 1996; Park and Waters, 1978; Turner, 1991).

- Establish a safe and emotionally supportive environment.

A reliable set of routines provides a sense of security, especially those associated with pleasurable feelings (Herr and Swim, 1999). Knowing that outside play follows naptime, for example, helps infants order and predict events.

However, these routines need to be flexible to ensure that individual needs are met. Meeting individual needs within a set of routines creates a comfortable environment, free from too much stress. For example, it is getting close to lunchtime and Faustina is unusually tired today. You decide to feed her first so that she can be in her crib earlier than normal. By meeting Faustina's individual needs, you are lowering her level of stress.

- Focus on learning through play.

A stimulating infant classroom allows infants to learn through their senses. The environment has safe, interesting items that infants can see, touch, taste, hear, and smell (Piaget, 1952). True exploration requires that infants be free to move their bodies. Laying them on blankets indoors and outdoors, propping them up with pillows (after creating a safe fall zone for them), and urging them to crawl across the floor are all ways to support their learning.

Infants do not learn a new concept or skill by engaging in an experience one time. They need lots

of repetition. They are just as interested in the 50th reading of *Good Night Moon* (Brown, 1947) as they were in the first! Infants also need the opportunity to learn new skills independently through trial and error. Sometimes, there is no better way for them to figure out something new than to start with something that does not work.

- Encourage learning through social interactions.

Infants, like older children, do not learn in a vacuum. They learn by watching others and imitating what they see. They also learn by interacting with others. Infants need the chance to interact with toddlers, but with close supervision to prevent accidents. Although infants are not skilled at interacting with each other, they can benefit from observing. For example, propping up Bradley so that he can see Carmen while playing provides each child with an example of how to explore toys. Infants also need the chance to interact with older children and adults.

- Help infants meet developmental milestones in all areas of development.

An ideal curriculum addresses all developmental areas—physical, self-help, cognitive, language, social, and emotional. It considers the whole child; it does not over-emphasize one area and ignore another. For example, Natasha's learning to separate from Mom is just as important as her learning to creep, crawl, and walk or to find toys hidden from sight. However, because children develop at their own individual rates, teachers may need to spend a little extra time with a child on one area or another.



Assessment of infants

A teacher learns about an infant's needs, interests, and abilities through assessment. This means that you observe, record, and evaluate a child's behavior so you can make decisions about that child's developmental needs (Herr and Swim, 1999).

Assessments, like curriculum activities, need to be developmentally appropriate (Bredenkamp and Rosegrant, 1995). This kind of assessment has the following characteristics:

- It is designed to gather information about all areas of development for each infant.
- It focuses on understanding and valuing infants for their current level of development. In other words, the goal is to recognize each child's strengths.



- It results in benefits to the child. For example, you observe that Carrie sleeps fitfully near the window, so you move her crib to a quiet corner.
- It reflects the ages and experiences of the children in care. At the same time, it recognizes individual variations in learners and allows for differences in styles and rates of learning. For example, when doing a language assessment, you take into account the fact that Yuji speaks Japanese at home and English in child care.
- It happens regularly. Teachers observe each child in a wide variety of situations—while being fed, resting, playing outside, having a diaper changed. Therefore, assessments are embedded into the curriculum and integrated into the daily routine. In this way, evaluations of the children's behavior take place in a natural setting.
- It involves parents. Teachers communicate with parents or other family members through conversation and written notes about each child's experiences at home and in the classroom. Teachers use this information in evaluating a child's development.

How assessments impact curriculum

What teachers learn about children through assessments helps determine what will be in the curriculum. Ideally, you will plan a balance of activities that support, enhance, and foster all areas of development (Herr and Swim, 1999). Some experiences will be repetitious and represent developmental tasks the child has accomplished. Some experiences will provide opportunities to master developmental tasks the infant is working on. Other experiences will challenge and extend the child's development by requiring a slightly higher skill level. This last experience works much like scaffolding, connecting the known with the unknown. As infants struggle at this higher level, they may need more support and help from adults to build their confidence as competent learners.

What does curriculum development look like in real life? Here's an example to illustrate.

Maria and Antonio, the teachers mentioned earlier, have assessed their infants during routine care times such as feeding, diapering, and the transition

to naptime. They have begun to notice several things. In feeding, José and Sophia are just beginning to put their hands around the bottle to help hold it. Naomi and Zachary hold on to their bottles well, and they are also beginning to show interest in holding spoons. Meanwhile, Faustina and Houa feed themselves finger foods and are improving each day in their use of spoons.

As a result of their assessments, Maria and Antonio have decided to make some changes when feeding the infants during the upcoming week. With José and Sophia, they will encourage each child to hold the bottle independently. With Naomi and Zachary, they will continue to invite each child to hold the bottle independently. In addition, they will give each child a spoon to hold while being fed and say something like, "This is a spoon. You can use it to eat your cereal." With Faustina and Houa, Maria and Antonio plan to cut the finger foods into smaller pieces to really work the small muscles of the thumb and forefinger. They will also continue suggesting that these two infants feed themselves using a spoon.

How to communicate with others about your curriculum

You have observed, recorded, evaluated, and implemented a curriculum that reflects the individual needs, interests, and abilities of the infants in your room. But your job as a teacher is not finished. You still need to communicate with others about what you are doing and why. You can accomplish this in several ways:

- Display information about development on a bulletin board.
- When talking with parents or guardians at the beginning or end of the day, share things you have noticed about their individual child.
- Hold regular parent-teacher conferences to discuss the developmental progress of their child.
- Share information with parents.

Provide weekly newsletters to tell parents about experiences that you have planned or implemented to promote learning and development in your classroom. When appropriate, you can suggest ways to adapt those experiences at home.

What do infant teachers teach? They teach the beginning skills that are the building blocks for later



development and learning. They teach these skills in their daily interactions with infants and families and in the curriculum they create for the children. By paying careful attention to the needs, interests, and abilities of the children in their care, infant teachers can and do foster development and learning.

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