



Providing Care for Infants and Toddlers

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You know it's important to give babies love, safety, and a sense of security. But love is *not* all they need! Babies start learning - and adults start teaching them - as soon as they're born. Brain research shows that from birth to three, babies are learning faster than at any other time of life. Their brains are growing rapidly and developing the "architecture" that will support future learning and development. But infants' and toddlers' needs and learning styles are very different from those of older children, so you need particular skills and understanding to support their development. Infant and toddler care giving focuses on a few key principles:



LET THE CHILD LEAD

You can see infants' and toddlers' powerful drive to explore their environment and experiment with their own developing abilities. That drive to learn is the child's most important educational resource. Build on it by supporting and enhancing the play and exploration she initiates, rather than setting up artificial "lessons." Now is the time for children to explore how the world works, combining cognitive, emotional, social, and physical learning through activities that are meaningful to them. This exploration gives them the best foundation for later "academic" learning.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Infants and toddlers need secure attachments with familiar caregivers to develop trust that their needs will be met and that they are loved. They build their own identity by interacting with caregivers; in these intimate relationships, children can learn about the caregiver and how she responds to their cues. When the caregiver reads and responds to his messages, the child feels understood and noticed, feels he is important to someone. These relationships are essential supports and powerful motivators for young children as they try new skills and explore their world.

OBSERVE AND RESPOND

Caregivers need to learn about children through attentive observation of the child's cues: when they are tired, hungry, or over-stimulated, what kinds of experiences soothe or interest them? What challenges or skills they are working on? This knowledge is essential in providing the individualized experiences that best support each child's mental, social, and physical development.

For more ideas:

Contact 4Cs
Child Care Provider Services Specialists
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ENCOURAGE COMMUNICATION

Even before children start to use words, you can build their confidence and language ability by paying attention and responding to their efforts to communicate. You can build their vocabulary and interest in verbal communication by “narrating” your own and the child’s actions. (“Now I’m putting on your bib for lunch.” “You built the giraffe a house with the blocks!”)

When the child starts to speak, try to understand and respond appropriately. Ask questions - and be sure to give her time to process your question and come up with an answer. Respond to his questions, even if the answer is “I don’t know, let’s try to find out.” Encourage her to tell you about what she’s doing. Play with words: rhyming, repetition, songs. Make language fun, interesting, and part of the warmth of your relationship.

CONNECT WITH FAMILY AND CULTURE

An infant or toddler grows as a part of a family and culture that shape his sense of who he is and what is important. A child should feel continuity - not conflict - between home and child care environments. To provide the best support for each child, caregivers need to learn about her culture and family: What is valued? What are the childrearing practices? It’s important to communicate with and listen to the family, to acknowledge and respect cultural differences, and to develop skills in negotiating these differences for the wellbeing of the child. Children feel more secure if they see you relating to their families with warmth and respect.

PROVIDE A PRIMARY CAREGIVER

When each infant or toddler has a primary caregiver, there is one person who knows him best, who provides that basic attachment and security that allows him to explore and take risks. Continuity in this relationship is essential to the trust each child needs. Many infant/toddler programs keep caregivers and children together - teachers move with the children. If that is not possible, plan gentle, gradual transitions.

RESPECT THE CHILD'S RHYTHMS

Times for eating and sleeping should be flexible: feed infants on demand and put them down to sleep when they need it; have snacks on hand for toddlers and suggest rest if they are tired. As much as possible, allow them to play alone or interact with caregivers and other children when they choose. They get the most out of activities when they’re ready for them.

CREATE AN INTERESTING, SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Infants and toddlers need small groups so they are not overwhelmed by noise and stimulation. Small groups provide the kind of flexible, intimate environment that promotes individualized learning. Manageable-sized spaces give children a sense of security.

The space should be safe enough to allow the children to explore freely, with all dangerous and “forbidden” objects removed. Young children are bold explorers, excited about experimenting with everything they can reach. You don’t want to inhibit that drive to learn by saying “no!” too often. The space should include toys and other interesting objects that children are free to explore in their own way (a block can be tasted, a pot can be a hat).

The environment should allow children to move around - physical movement not only develops their bodies and physical skills, but also supports mental and emotional development. Infants need time on the floor to learn to crawl and walk -- spending long periods in swings or walkers keeps them from developing those physical skills. Toddlers need room for active movement - running, climbing, jumping, dancing.

The environment should also include comfortable places for adults (including parents) to sit, play, or cuddle with children.

More Resources:

The Program for Infant/Toddler Care,
www.pitc.org
Zero to Three, www.zerotothree.org