

Tip Sheets

Setting Up Activity Areas



Children should be given the freedom to do what interests them, even if it differs from what caregivers may have planned. In an infant or toddler environment, creativity and responsiveness, rather than rigidity, should be the rule.

Infants and toddlers will surely bring materials from one activity area to another, and they should be encouraged to do so. A thoughtful and responsive caregiver plans the environment carefully, then flexibly responds to the interests and needs of the children. Planning environments for infants or toddlers takes place in two primary steps:

1. Defining activity areas
2. Setting up activity areas

When **setting up activity areas**, each area should look and feel different from the others while contributing to a sense of warmth, order, and wonder. Activity areas should invite children to explore, investigate, and build relationships. Consider the following when setting up areas.

Personal Care Routines

- Child-sized tables and chairs allow older infants and toddlers to enjoy snacks/meals with peers and practice their emerging self-help skills.
- Infants, who cannot sit on their own, can be held in a caregiver's lap for meals or bottles.
- Comfortable adult seating in the nap/rest area enables caregivers to meet children's individual sleeping styles by holding, rocking, or reading.

- Personal care supplies should be conveniently located to promote safety and foster relationships (i.e. bibs/washcloths stored in the meal area so caregivers can sit with children).
- An area for charting routines should be placed near the areas for these activities. Place a clock nearby for recording diapering times, etc.

Learning, Development, and Play

Social-Emotional Development

Caregivers can intentionally plan environmental elements to promote emotional security, self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationships by:

- Anticipating and responding as quickly as possible to a child's needs.
- Reducing overstimulation from noise, lights, temperature, hunger, and sleepiness.
- Structuring the environment so children do as little waiting as possible.
- Providing ways for children to take initiative (e.g., toys are readily accessible).
- Providing attention to each child, recognizing and naming emotions, and acknowledging individual interests and preferences.
- Displaying photos of children and their families to maintain their connection, and creating a goodbye window or other ritual for arrival time.

Physical and Motor Development

A supportive environment allows children to safely engage in child-initiated physical exploration and provides opportunities to develop motor skills.

- Gross motor equipment to consider:
 - Padded mats for safety

- Push/ride-on toys
- Tunnels, ramps, slides
- Balls and large foam shapes
- Containers to carry, push, pull, dump
- Child-sized brooms and mops
- Fine motor equipment to consider:
 - Lightweight, easy to grasp objects
 - Cause and effect toys
 - Small blocks, pegboards, puzzles
 - Crayons, play dough, paint brushes

Place a bin for mouthed or “tasted toys” in areas where fine motor exploration is likely to happen.

Messy Sensory Play

Children gain much information about the world through sensory and creative activities. Provide indoor and outdoor areas to play with sand, water, paint, mud and other natural or artistic materials.

- Equipment to consider:
 - Sand/water table/tubs
 - Buckets, scoops, funnels, and rakes
 - Toddler-height easels and paints
 - Play dough

Non-messy Sensory Play

- Equipment to consider:
 - Crinkly paper and bubble wrap
 - Scarves
 - Mobiles and wind chimes

Language Development

This is best supported through a caregiver’s daily interactions, such as responding to verbal and non-verbal cues, participating in back-and-forth interactions, and sharing songs/stories. Consider:

- Cozy seating where caregivers and children can talk, sing, or read together.
- Books that reflect children’s developmental stage, interests, and home language.

- Photos and images to encourage conversation.

Cognitive Development

Children feel freest to explore when they feel safe. Trusting relationships with caregivers provide a secure base for exploration and discovery. Build on children’s prior knowledge and skill by introducing new experiences and challenges that require problem-solving skills.

- Equipment to consider:
 - Pretend play materials
 - Simple puzzles
 - Open-ended materials such as blocks

Adult and Community Interactions

To reduce stress and increase the time that family members have to interact with children, caregivers, and other adults, create spaces that make things more convenient. Designate storage spaces for car seats, strollers, etc. that families may bring. Each child’s storage area should be clearly marked and located in an accessible, central location.

Additional Resources

Early Introductions to Sensory Gardens
<https://growing-minds.org/early-introductions-to-sensory-gardens-infants-and-toddlers>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

Copyright © 2020 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services.