



## Selecting Materials and Equipment in Infant and Toddler Settings

Caregiver-child relationships, and the moment-to-moment interactions that make up these relationships, are the foundation of infants' and toddlers' learning. It is important to remember that materials enhance, and do not replace, the interactions between infants and toddlers and adults. By closely observing infants and toddlers, you can consciously select materials that match each child's interests, support individual development, and enhance relationships.

It is important to start with knowledge of child development and some anticipation of emerging abilities. However, you are also continuously learning through your interactions with and observations of infants and toddlers. When you can, step back and watch infants and toddlers explore their environment and wait for cues that children are ready to interact or are in need of support. Sometimes you may provide just enough support to allow a toddler to explore materials and engage in a task independently. At other times, through interactions and play, you may extend infants' and toddlers' learning by adding new materials, interacting side by side with them, or asking questions.

Take some time to look around your play space and think about how the materials are supporting infants' and toddlers' learning and development. As you reflect on the materials in your environment, consider the following questions:

- ◆ **Are materials safe, clean, and in good working order?** By paying careful attention to the quality of materials available to children, you can make sure that toys are clean and in working order. This close attention allows you to quickly remove toys that are unclean, broken, or that otherwise pose a health or safety hazard. Also consider incomplete materials. For example, a puzzle that is missing pieces can be very frustrating for young children.
- ◆ **Are materials well constructed and of high quality?** Infants often explore first by grabbing, mouthing, and sliding objects along the floor, eventually banging them together and stacking. Toddlers tend to collect objects and put them in containers. Containers such as baskets, bowls, and tubs give infants and toddlers a chance to explore freely. Make sure that containers are sturdy, are different sizes and shapes, and are made of different materials. Ensure they can be cleaned and sanitized regularly and that they don't break easily. Remove and replace any containers that become chipped, cracked, or frayed.
- ◆ **Are materials age appropriate?** Infants and toddlers can lose interest or get frustrated with materials that are either too challenging or not challenging enough. Watch closely to see how children use the materials you provide. If you aren't sure whether a toy is age appropriate, you can talk with other infant and toddler teachers who may be aware of resources on age-appropriate materials. You can find guidance on age appropriate materials on the National Association for the Education of Young Children's [website](#).
- ◆ **Are materials developmentally appropriate?** A child's age may not always be enough information to help you select the right materials. Infants and toddlers are unique in their development and interests, and they change quickly. By observing as they explore and play, you can learn more about how you can use specific materials to support their individual strengths, needs, and interests.



- ◆ **Are materials culturally appropriate?** Classroom materials should reflect children’s backgrounds and celebrate the diversity of the world around them. For example, pick books that have characters representing diverse races, ethnicities, abilities, and genders. Also provide books in children’s home languages. It is also important for dolls to have diversity in skin tone and hair texture and that there are pictures around the room that reflect diverse children and families.
- ◆ **Are materials an appropriate size?** Providing furniture and equipment that is the right size for the infants and toddlers in your care allows them to be safe and independent during exploration and routines. For example, stools and chairs should be low enough for toddlers’ feet to touch the floor.
- ◆ **Are materials interesting to children?** You can learn about children’s interests by watching how they explore. For example, infants are often interested in exploring simple, common objects that they can feel, mouth, bang, and study. Infants often return to the same objects over and over again. Being aware of their interests makes it easier to set up environments they enjoy. Objects that relate to children’s first-hand experiences are often interesting to them. For example, toddlers who live in a farming community may particularly enjoy playing with tractors in the sand box, while those who live near the coast may enjoy playing with pretend sea animals or toy boats.

As you reflect on your infant and toddler environment, you might also consider the following:

- ◆ Are materials open-ended, allowing infants and toddlers to explore in multiple ways?
- ◆ Which materials are most popular, and why?
- ◆ Which materials are least used? Is there something you could take away?
- ◆ Is it time to change any materials—such as adding materials, exchanging materials, or reducing or increasing the quantity of particular items?
- ◆ Are there enough materials that allow for sensory exploration?
- ◆ Can materials be adapted to accommodate the abilities of all infants and toddlers in your care, including those with special needs?
- ◆ Do materials reflect children’s home environments?

*The State Capacity Building Center (SCBC) works with state and territory leaders and their partners to create innovative early childhood systems and programs that improve results for children and families. The SCBC is funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Care.*

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