



Preparing the Environment

No space is marginal, no corner unimportant, and each space needs to be alive, flexible, and open to change.

—Cadwell, 1997, p. 93

You can create a high-quality infant and toddler environment by planning and creating spaces that support infants' and toddlers' development, engagement, and overall well-being. Careful thought and planning for infants and toddlers can facilitate the development of positive relationships with nurturing, responsive adults who support their learning and development. For example, a comfortable easy chair that is roomy enough for an adult and a couple of children provides an opportunity in the environment for togetherness. Partnering with and learning from parents is also an important part of this planning process because it supports individualizing your setting to meet the needs of infants and toddlers in your care.

As you consider spaces for infants and toddlers, it is helpful to reflect on the following topics:

- ◆ Ensuring children's health and safety;
- ◆ Supporting the development of positive relationships;
- ◆ Enhancing children's learning through engaging and appropriate experiences; and
- ◆ Being responsive to children's individual needs.

Each of these topics is discussed in more detail in this article.

1. Creating Spaces for Infants and Toddlers that Ensure Safety and Promote Health

One of the most important considerations when designing any space for infants and toddlers is to ensure young children's health and safety. Safe settings ensure that infants and toddlers can explore freely, which in turn supports their developing sense of self. It also supports you as a caregiver. Instead of spending most of your time monitoring infants and toddlers to keep them safe, you have more opportunities to interact with and respond to them. A healthy environment decreases the possibility of contracting and spreading illness and enhances infants' and toddlers' overall well-being (Lally, Stewart, & Greenwald, 2009).

Keeping your environment safe and healthy for infants and toddlers involves many details. Using a checklist to do regular health and safety assessments can help you keep track of these details. This [Health and Safety Screener](#) (n.d.) from the Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services was developed for Head Start programs. However, it can be used in any early childhood program. In center-based child care programs, you can discuss what you learn from checklists with your program director as you work together to consider changes to the environment. If you are an assistant in a family child care home, you can discuss your reflections with the main provider as you work together to ensure that the environment promotes health and safety.

Your state or territory may have additional health and safety requirements. Check with your state or territory's child care licensing agency and quality rating and improvement system to learn more about requirements and recommendations that may be specific to your area.

An important way to create a safe environment is to meet appropriate group size and child-to-adult ratio limits (Gonzalez-Mena, & Widmeyer Eyer, 2012). Smaller group sizes and lower child-to-adult ratios help you create



and maintain an environment that promotes health and safety for all infants and toddlers in your care. States and territories define group sizes and ratios through their licensing agencies, quality rating and improvement systems, and their Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) programs. Research-based recommendations for group size and ratios can be found in [Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Early Care and Education Programs, 3rd edition](#) (2015) by the National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education, and the [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#).

2. Designing Spaces for Infants and Toddlers that Support Positive Relationships

Thoughtfully designing child care settings means setting up an environment that promotes respectful and responsive relationships, which are so important to infants' and toddlers' growth and development. You can design settings to support relationship-building between children and caregivers, families and children, caregivers and families, caregivers and their colleagues, and children and their peers.

The following are several ways you can make sure that the environment promotes relationship development. As you look at this list, consider the following questions: What are you already doing and how is it working? What ideas would improve your environment and provide more support for relationship development? What ideas do you have that are not listed that you might share with other child care providers?

- ◆ Create an environment that supports meaningful interactions between caregivers and infants and toddlers.
 - Include several spots where adults can sit comfortably with infants and toddlers, such as cushions on the floor, love seats, benches, and tables for meals.
 - Design spaces where infants and toddlers can freely explore and caregivers can be close by. This allows you to pay more attention to engaging in responsive interactions with children. Also, an environment that is safe for infants and toddlers to move and explore freely supports their developing sense of independence and lessens the need for redirection.

Think about this example:

Ms. Shay, a family child care provider, knows how important it is for infants and toddlers to have frequent experiences with books. She arranges her space so the book area is easily accessible to children. She places books on an accessible bookshelf and has a basket of books in each of the cozy areas. She selects books about topics that interest them, reads with children every day, follows their lead, and comments on their reactions as they explore a variety of board books and soft books. As the children in her care become more mobile, Ms. Shay gets nervous when the infants and toddlers play near the book shelf for fear that it will tip over. She finds herself frequently saying, "No ... don't pull on that shelf!" and constantly relocating children to other parts of the room. After reflecting on the situation, she decides to secure the bookshelf to the wall to stabilize it so there is no danger of it falling over and hurting a child. She also realizes that the children in her care need more opportunities for gross motor movement, and she adds ramps and foam cubes to create more climbing opportunities. As a result, Ms. Shay realizes that she now spends less time saying "no" and more time engaging in interactions that are meaningful, positive, and supportive of children's learning, development, and interests. Also, the infants and toddlers are now free to practice climbing safely on foam cubes and are not at risk of being hurt by the bookshelf.

As you reflect on this example, consider how it applies to your infant and toddler setting:

- Are there places in your child care space where you find yourself saying "no" and redirecting children again and again?
 - Are there ways you can adjust your environment to support infants' and toddlers' exploration?
- ◆ Create an environment that offers a variety of places for adults and children to comfortably be together.
 - Offer places for children and adults to snuggle, like a glider or rocking chair or a comfortable couch, where adults can hold children in their laps to offer comfort, have quiet interactions, or read books.



- Design an area for meals that includes appropriately sized furniture for the infants and toddlers in your care as well as comfortable seating for you, other caregivers, and nursing mothers. As you consider how to arrange this area, think about what you need to feel comfortable when holding a child and feeding her a bottle as well as when you are sitting next to her at a table while she feeds herself.
 - Create comfortable ways for adults to sit at infants' and toddlers' levels and have meaningful interactions with them. Some caregivers like to use a floor chair that is low to the floor and has a cushioned seat and back support. By finding ways to sit comfortably on the floor, you can give more attention to engaging in responsive interactions with infants and toddlers.
- ◆ Design an environment that welcomes and supports communication between families and caregivers.
- Take time to talk with families every day at drop-off and pick-up times to exchange information about their children's experiences at home and at the program. You can support this open communication by having a space for each child, such as a cubby, bin, or clipboard. You can also provide daily notes for families that describe how their children's meals, naps, diapering/toileting, and play occurred throughout the day. You might also have a space for parents to leave notes for you if there isn't an opportunity to share information in person.
 - Create a space to post important information for families, such as a class calendar, parenting tips, or photos of children exploring at the child care program. If you are in a child care center, you might post these items on a bulletin board somewhere in the room, or in the hallway outside the room. If you are a family child care provider, you might use a refrigerator door or hang a whiteboard near the front entrance. Either way, consider putting these in a place that is away from the flow of traffic, where families can easily see them and talk with you and other families.
 - Adopt an open-door policy that helps families feel welcome to come into the room and interact with their children and you at any time. This includes providing a space for nursing mothers to comfortably feed their babies.
 - Design an environment that displays your interest in and respect for all the families in your program. Ask family members about ways to help your program feel more like home for their children. For example, use words from languages that reflect the families of all children in your care on wall displays and information boards; display family photos on a family board, in a basket, or in a photo album; and incorporate items from children's homes into your environment, such as fabrics, foods, and music that are familiar to the families.

3. Creating Spaces for Infants and Toddlers that Support Their Development

- ◆ Allow for safe freedom of movement.

Movement supports children's growth by allowing them to practice physical skills, develop thinking skills, and practice independence (Lally, Stewart, & Greenwald, 2009). As you prepare a safe environment that allows infants and toddlers to move around freely, you help them fully explore the space and do what comes naturally to them, including crawling, scooting, running, climbing, jumping, and walking. As you reflect on creating a space that allows for this safe freedom of movement, consider the following:

- Make sure floors are clean and not slippery and offer a safe place for infants and toddlers to land if they fall.
- Find safe spaces for infants and toddlers to explore movement at all levels of development and avoid placing them in restrictive devices, such as swings, bouncy seats, or high chairs. These devices restrict natural movement, preventing children from using their muscles to roll, scoot, and pull themselves up.
- Arrange furniture so that there are clear pathways for children to easily make their way through the room.



- Use low shelves, dividers, and other furniture that allow you to easily see over them and monitor children in all areas of the room at all times.
- Create safe opportunities for different kinds of movement by providing furniture and equipment that allow infants and toddlers to crawl through, climb on, jump off, and pull up. For toddlers, provide opportunities for vertical movements, such as slopes, stairs, or small ladders.

◆ Allow infants and toddlers to have plenty of choices.

Offering infants and toddlers a variety of choices throughout the day helps them stay interested, engaged, and happy. Some examples of choice include:

- spending time with others or spending time alone;
- playing quietly or being loud and more active;
- being able to eat, sleep, and play based on individual needs;
- exploring a variety of age-appropriate materials and activities, including books, building toys, art supplies, pretend play materials, sensory play materials, and so forth; and
- exploring a variety of play surfaces, levels, and equipment, such as soft chairs, lofts, risers, and mats.

◆ Arrange the room into areas that support different kinds of exploration.

You can organize spaces for infants and toddlers that support a variety of exploration and routines. For health and safety reasons, it is important that areas for eating, food preparation, sleeping, and diapering are separate from play areas. In addition, play spaces can be arranged into areas that support different kinds of learning and development. For instance, Lally, Stewart, and Greenwald (2009) suggest designing small areas that support the following activities:

- Small-muscle activity;
- Sensory perception;
- Large-motor activity; and
- Creative expression.

Other areas of exploration include block play, fantasy play, multilevel areas, a quiet area to explore books, and cozy areas (WestEd, n.d.).

Dividing the room into areas helps you create an organized and meaningful environment. Remember, however, that infants and toddlers are natural explorers and will likely carry toys and materials from one area of the room to another. Young children gather, spread, dump, and rearrange materials as they explore and learn. Rather than limit movement between areas, you can support children's natural desire for exploration and recognize its value.

Can you think of times when infants or toddlers moved materials from one area of the room to another? How have you supported their exploration? What challenges do you face when supporting this freedom of movement? How have you overcome those challenges?



It is also important to think about how you arrange materials within each area in your space. For example, displaying materials that are at infants' and toddlers' levels and easily accessible supports their independent exploration and your ability to follow their lead. It is also helpful to provide a few types of the same materials so that several children can play without having to take turns, which can be a source of conflict. However, it is important to avoid offering too many materials since a cluttered room can overwhelm children. Regularly rotating materials is helpful. This way children have a balance of familiar materials and new materials, which helps them maintain their interest and provides age-appropriate challenges.

4. Designing Spaces for Infants and Toddlers that Are Responsive to Their Individual Needs

It is important to respond to individual infants and toddlers by adjusting the environment to each child's unique preferences, interests, and needs. Consider these examples:

Manuel has just started to crawl and is happy to be moving around the room. He enthusiastically explores every inch of the classroom throughout the day. His teacher, Ms. Kara, notices that he is starting to reach up to grab the toy shelves as though he might want to pull himself up to a standing position. Looking around the room, she realizes that there aren't many things for Manuel to grab onto and pull himself up. She decides to take some sturdy bins, which have been previously used for book storage, flip them upside down, and move them to various places around the room. Now Manuel has several places where he can happily pull himself to a standing position and see the room from this exciting new point of view.

Marcus and Leanne work together as caregivers in an infant classroom and have learned that the children in their care like to get ready for their individual naptimes in different ways. For example, Leila and Samuel like to be rocked and sung to while Leanne gets them ready to sleep. Carlos and Leo prefer to lie on their backs in their cribs, while Marcus gently rubs their tummies. Sharice often resists sleep and her father shared that she is sensitive to light and sound. Leanne has learned that dimming the lights and securely attaching a thick blanket to the wall next to her crib to reduce sound helps her fall asleep. The napping area also has a rocking chair in a nearby corner and a music player with lullaby music on a shelf near the cribs. Marcus and Leanne continue to pay attention to how the infants in their care are transitioning to sleep and, over time, they continue to adjust the environment.

As you reflect on these examples, consider your infant and toddler setting. Think about the following:

- ◆ How do you adapt your environment when infants' and toddlers' interests and developmental needs change?
- ◆ How do you adapt your environment to support how infants and toddlers in your care like to go to sleep?
- ◆ How do you adapt your environment to support individual sleep schedules?
- ◆ How do you partner with parents to consider ways to adapt the environment to meet the needs of infants and toddlers?

In these examples, the caregivers were easily able to arrange the environment to be flexible so each child's individual needs and preferences were met. These adaptations are not complicated, but they are an important part of respectful and responsive care. Evaluating your environment and making appropriate changes as needed is an ongoing process that addresses infants' and toddlers' unique needs and values their developing skills and interests. The infant and toddler child care environment is "... never determined once and for all. Planning, arranging, evaluating, and rearranging is an ongoing process as caregivers strive for quality and find what works best for them and for the children as they grow and change" (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2012, p. 285). Committing to ongoing reflection and adaptation can enhance the quality of your infant and toddler spaces and support children's continual exploration and learning (Bergen, Reid, & Torelli, 2009).



Resources

The Office of Head Start's Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC) offers videos, podcasts, and articles about preparing learning environments for children. There is specific information for infant and toddler child care settings. You can find resources on ECLKC's [Learning Environments web page](#), including the following:

- ◆ [Early Essentials, Webisode 7: Environments](#) (2018) is an 18-minute webisode that explores the impact of environments on infants, toddlers, and adults. This video is part of the *Early Essentials* series, which offers key messages and helpful resources to get staff started with the youngest children and their families. This video has a [Quick Start Guide](#) with teaching strategies and resources.
- ◆ [Let's Talk About Environments](#) (2017) is the fourth installment in the Office of Head Start's *Caring Connections* podcast series. This 14-minute podcast explores the message that environments convey to infants and toddlers and how environments affect adult-child relationships. There is an accompanying [Information Sheet](#) with related resources.
- ◆ [News You Can Use—Environment as Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers](#) (July 2010) provides information about how infants and toddlers learn through exploring their environment and how caregivers can create spaces that support this learning.
- ◆ [News You Can Use—Learning at Home and Homelike Environments](#) (February 2011) presents ways to create homelike environments for infants and toddlers and ways to help families discover learning opportunities that exist in their homes.

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