

What Does a High-Quality Program for Infants Look Like?

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A brightly colored mat on the floor, an unbreakable wall mirror low enough for babies to look at themselves, squishy blocks within reach on low shelves—everything's so inviting! When you visit a program, how can you tell if it's also safe and supportive for your baby?

While each room might look a little different, some factors stay the same for all high-quality environments. Here are things to look for:

A soothing environment. Babies can get overwhelmed easily, so caregivers make sure the lights aren't too bright, the room isn't too cluttered, and recorded music is played only once in a while.

Defined areas. The room is divided into separate areas for sleeping, playing, eating, and changing diapers. That way, everything and everyone stays clean and safe, and playing infants don't bother sleeping ones.

Secure open spaces (both indoors and outdoors). Babies need to move on firm surfaces without being in a device or carrier—that's how they strengthen their muscles. Plus, they can explore the toys and objects that interest them.

Personal touches. The room contains objects that are familiar to each child, like family photographs.

Simple, interesting materials. The toys and objects can be used in a variety of ways, like baskets and pails that babies use to dump and fill. There are different types of the same toy, like blocks or balls, in various sizes and made out of different materials. When they're a little older, babies compare objects and learn to understand words like big, soft, smooth, and shiny.

Child-size furniture. Chairs, tables, and shelves are sturdy, safe, and the right size for babies so they can be more independent as they start crawling or walking.

Small physical challenges. Caregivers might put an interesting object just out of reach so that babies learn to coordinate their movements to stretch and grasp the object. Or they might add a short riser or a single step to give older infants some climbing practice.

Diverse books. Caregivers read simple stories to children and provide them with sturdy board books. The books reflect the children's cultures and families.

How Do Caregivers Plan Learning Experiences for Infants?

You might wonder how caregivers plan experiences for babies that nurture their growth and development. Below are some general guidelines they follow to support your child's learning.

High-quality programs use developmentally appropriate practice. This means that caregivers provide challenges that are not too hard or too easy—something babies can do with a little help. It also means that caregivers

- Plan based on each child's individual age and stage of development
- Help each child meet goals that are just right for that child
- Value each child's family and culture

When caregivers choose materials, activities, and strategies to use with infants, they think about

- What most infants need—like toys of different shapes, sounds, and textures
- What individual babies need—like a special goodbye routine with Dad at drop-off time

- Ways to support every child's family and culture—like saying a few comforting words in the family's home language

Caregivers balance your child's schedule so she gets the sleep she needs, eats healthy food, moves around, explores interesting objects, learns how to get along with others, and actively helps with her own care as much as she can.

Caregivers focus on four main areas of your child's development:

Physical development. Babies love to move, and all actions are learning activities for them. As your baby tries new skills and masters them—standing, walking, climbing—his caregiver responds to his growing independence by giving him more complicated toys and materials to explore safely.

Social and emotional development. From the moment infants are born, they're ready to learn through meaningful interactions with people who care for them. As your baby grows, his caregiver will be there helping him learn how to share, take turns, treat others gently, and make friends. She'll encourage and guide him when necessary.

Thinking (cognitive) skills. Your child is curious about the world around her. Your child's caregiver provides experiences that help her learn about cause and effect, imitate adults in her play, and use her problem-solving skills.

Language development. Your child's caregiver helps him learn new words—and how conversation works—when she talks to him, waits for his response, and then responds to his sounds.

Families and Caregivers Working Together

Caregivers in high-quality programs know that you are the most important person in your child's life—and her first teacher. They want to partner with you to build a trusting relationship so that together, you support your infant's growth and development. Here are some things that make this great partnership work:

Respect. Caregivers and families respect children's individual personalities and abilities. They also respect each other's differences, cultures, and backgrounds. Caregivers listen to families and try to understand their goals and concerns for their children.

Communication. Caregivers share with families what their children are doing in the classroom, and families share with caregivers what their children are doing at home. Caregivers talk with you about your child's progress and accomplishments in all areas, such as her language and physical skills. They also talk with you about your child's napping, toileting, and other events. That way, they can do some things (like feeding) the same way you do them at home. Making routines more familiar for children helps them feel comfortable.

If families and caregivers speak different languages, caregivers find ways to pass on important information (like taking photos of what a child is learning at the program, or sending home translated materials). The more families and caregivers communicate, the better they can meet children's changing needs.

Openness. Caregivers welcome families in the program at any time. You take part in decisions about your child's care, and you have opportunities to get involved with the program that take into account your family's interests and schedule.

Primary caregiving. High-quality programs provide primary caregiving—one caregiver is mainly responsible for caring for a child's needs and interacting with his family. She isn't the only one who ever interacts with your child, but she's your main contact, and your family can depend on her. When your child knows his needs will be met, he feels confident to try new things.

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