

Infants & Toddlers Learning Environments

Learning Environments: An Introduction

Research tells us infants and toddlers learn best in environments where they can have secure relationships with caring and responsive adults, where they feel safe, and where they feel free to explore and learn. A well-arranged environment can help you meet the needs of infants and toddlers. This lesson highlights the importance of the environment and provides an overview of what to consider when creating and maintaining developmentally appropriate infant and toddler learning environments.

Objectives

- Recognize the effects of learning environments on infants and toddlers.
- Identify features of environments that help infants and toddlers feel secure, comfortable, welcome, and ready to explore and learn.
- Describe how to design and maintain a safe and developmentally appropriate environment for infants and toddlers.
- List potential learning areas found in infant or toddler environments.



How Do Environments Affect You?

When you choose to visit a favorite restaurant, a local park, a sporting arena, or a good friend's home, you likely feel good about these experiences because you enjoy them. What is it about those places that make you feel welcome or secure? Thinking about these places might ignite certain positive feelings related to the experience (things you see, feel, hear, or smell).

Now consider places you do not like to go. Environments like the dentist's office, the airport, or a noisy restaurant may be less pleasant for you. In some settings, we feel relaxed and comfortable, yet in others, we might feel tense, overwhelmed, and confused. Environments can affect us in many different ways. They can influence how

we feel, what we do, and the ways we respond in certain situations. Some of us dislike places where we feel we cannot control or predict our experiences. In some spaces, we may feel like we do not belong or are not appreciated.

As with adults, infants and toddlers are affected by their environments, even if they cannot yet tell us directly how they feel. It is our job to ensure learning spaces make infants and toddlers feel welcome, secure, and ready to learn.

Designing Your Space to Meet Infants' and Toddlers' Needs

Families are infants' and toddlers' first and primary teachers. However, many infants and toddlers spend time in care settings outside of their homes. Experiences during the first few months and years of life are critical because they set the stage for the child's future development and learning. The quality of these early experiences is shaped by the individuals and environments with which infants and toddlers spend their time. Thus, the infant and toddler learning environment must provide a flexible climate that supports child-directed practices, spontaneous exploration, curiosity, and the creation and maintenance of positive relationships between adults and children. As such, the learning environment is an essential component of curriculum for infants and toddlers.

Creating a supportive learning environment requires time, reflection, and planning. An emotionally supportive environment helps prepare infants and toddlers for learning (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005), and may be especially important for at-risk children who may not have high-quality relationships outside the learning space. Military children are a particular group that may experience a great deal of change in their daily lives so the supportive learning environment you provide can be an important source of consistency for them. A supportive environment is well-organized, dependable, and flexible.

Supportive environments send children a variety of positive messages about their learning (Dodge et al., 2010), such as:

- This is a good place to be.
- You belong here.
- You can trust this place.
- There are places where you can be by yourself when you want to be.
- You can do many things on your own here.
- This is a safe place to explore and try out your ideas.

Watch the video to see examples of ways these messages appear in learning environments.

Environments affect how we feel and send messages about how to act. They can influence what we learn. The Reggio Emilia approach to early-childhood education recognizes the tremendous impact of the environment by referring to it as the "third teacher" (with parents and teachers as children's first and second teachers,

respectively). The Reggio Emilia approach was developed by Loris Malaguzzi and named after an area in Italy. This approach demonstrates that children are powerful learners and that their interests should guide adults' decisions surrounding learning, including how the environment is arranged and what materials are provided. The Reggio Emilia approach believes the learning environment plays a critical role, and that intentionality (thoughtful planning and action) on behalf of teachers in the design of spaces and the selection and arrangement of materials significantly influences children's level of engagement and learning (Edwards, 2002). We will revisit this approach to early childhood education in future lessons in this course.



Special Considerations for Working with Infants and Toddlers

The role of relationships on the environment

The infant and toddler learning environment includes many interrelationships:

- Caregiver–family
- Caregiver–child
- Caregiver–caregiver
- Administrator/trainer/coach–caregiver
- Child–child

Each of these relationships affect infants and toddlers and each should be equally supported. Although adults often assume infants and toddlers are too young to understand what happens between adults in their environment, recent research shows that they can quickly recognize tension between adults (Du Rocher Schudlich, White, Fleischhauer, & Fitzgerald, 2011). Such tension could mean some infants and toddlers spend eight or more hours in stressful environments. Positive, respectful relationships among all adults in a program affect the emotional climate for everyone—children, staff, and families (McMullen & Dixon 2009).

Keeping infants and toddlers safe

Safe and secure environments promote positive interactions between children and adults, and allow caregivers to devote their time to playing and developing relationships rather than keeping children away from hazards. In a safe environment, attentive caregivers who are aware of infant and toddler needs, can help them move about freely, explore, and play with materials that are sturdy, in good repair, and a safe size. Mobile infants develop rapidly. Their increasing motor skills require caregivers to be alert and anticipate their actions and possible new hazards, such as reaching things they could not reach before. Toddlers are incredibly curious and may not be fully aware of what is dangerous. Caregivers must support and balance exploration and curiosity with a careful eye and use simple language to explain what is safe and unsafe. Caregivers must also complete ongoing safety checks and provide families with information about keeping young children safe at home. For more information on safe and appropriate materials for infants and toddlers, please see this section's [Materials](#) lesson and the [Safe Environments course](#).

Understanding what is developmentally appropriate

Caregivers can support the natural desire of infants and toddlers to actively explore their environment with their whole body by knowing about this age group's development. Having this knowledge helps caregivers better understand and predict what interactions, materials, and experiences will be safe, engaging, and most supportive to best promote learning and development. The courses on cognitive, physical, social emotional, creative, and self will help build and strengthen teachers' understanding of infant and toddler development.

Knowing individual characteristics

Caregivers can be most responsive when they understand the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child in their care. Knowing the individual characteristics of infants and toddlers enables caregivers to offer adaptations essential for children with various temperaments and special needs.

Connecting with families

Caregivers should take time to connect with families to better understand their cultures, values, beliefs, expectations, goals, hopes, and dreams. This offers caregivers the opportunity to create learning environments that include interactions and experiences that are respectful, supportive, and meaningful for infants, toddlers, and their families. Children's experiences at home and in their communities influence their reactions to care and learning environments. The environment you design should represent and celebrate the children's diversity, ethnicities, abilities, and cultures. Understanding the infant's or toddler's home culture and language can help caregivers create a more familiar and comfortable care and learning environment.

Supporting caregivers' needs

Although the focus of supportive learning environments for infants and toddlers is on the children, supportive environments also consider and accommodate the needs of caregivers. Caring for infants and toddlers is rewarding but can also be tiring. The environment should be set up to make the caregiver's job as easy as possible. For example, adult-sized rocking chairs allow caregivers to provide responsive care while feeding infants or rocking them to sleep. Storage spaces for adult personal items (e.g., purse, coat), may help reduce anxiety about children's safety. If possible, caregivers should have a quiet space such as a lounge in which they can take breaks from their work and recuperate their physical and emotional energy. Such spaces can also be used for private conversations between caregivers and parents.

Regular communication with your trainer, coach, or administrator will help you maintain a supportive learning environment and allow you to consider different methods and processes for reflecting on and further examining your space. Environmental rating tools are surveys completed by observers that examine and help provide an overall picture of the environment that has been created. These tools, such as the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2017), can be used by staff to gather information about an environment to support caregivers, improvements, and approaches to infant and toddler development and learning. You can ask your trainer, coach, or administrator for more information on the kinds of tools your program uses to assess or provide feedback on indoor and outdoor environments.

Creating Developmentally Appropriate Spaces for Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers grow and develop both quickly and at their own pace. Environments must be created to meet their current and emerging developmental skills while keeping in mind the appropriateness and safety of the space and furniture.

Young infants react to the new world around them and need to feel secure in order to engage in exploration and learning. Caregivers can provide spaces and experiences that encourage trust and strengthen bonds, such as cozy spaces for caregivers to hold and care for infants.

Mobile infants have a strong desire to move and explore. Caregivers should provide spaces that are safe, clean, and stimulating. Soft, thick floor coverings, such as vinyl mats, will help mobile infants feel comfortable moving on the floor. Adding features such as tunnels to the environment will encourage further development of motor skills and exploration. Offering safe furniture upon which infants or toddlers can pull themselves up and cruise or creep along is also helpful.

Toddlers are learning to focus their attention on desired experiences. Caregivers can offer a variety of materials and sensory experiences to support toddlers (e.g., sand and water table, sound area). Learning areas should be organized to foster toddlers' developing independence. Materials should be placed on low, open shelves and labeled with pictures and words. Toddlers will avoid frustration when they can find what they need and want.



For rooms with only young infants, setting up specific learning areas may not be appropriate, as the entire room forms the learning area for infants. However, caregivers should offer a variety of experiences and materials and should be prepared to rotate materials and experiences or rearrange spaces when children's developmental needs change. Keep in mind that offering too many materials at one time may overstimulate children. It is important to explore the environment from the perspective of infants and toddlers e.g., crawl around on your hands and knees or lay on the floor to understand how well it functions for very young children.

Creating Learning Areas for Infants and Toddlers

Using the environment to support development for infants and toddlers helps caregivers concentrate on specific experiences. A learning area is an area within an infant-toddler room that allows caregivers to support particular developmental domains (e.g., a climbing or grasping area to assist with gross or fine motor development) or exploration of certain ideas (e.g., a block area to explore cause-and-effect and balance). Although learning areas may be designed to support particular aspects of development or interests, they should not be used exclusively for one purpose. Rather, learning areas should include many engaging possibilities, with each area serving multiple functions. For example, a cozy book area, not only provides young children with early-literacy experiences, but also provides a quiet, calm space to relax alone or with a caregiver.

Learning areas must be accessible and adaptable for all children. Young infants will need caregivers to bring them materials. Mobile infants and toddlers will have the ability to take materials or toys with them across the entire room, and others may need adaptive equipment to explore the space.

Learning areas to consider when creating infant or toddler rooms:

- Cozy spaces to safely take a break from the group
- Reaching, grasping, and kicking area
- Climbing area (stairs, platforms, risers, low cubes)
- Mirror area
- Blocks and building, construction area
- Soft toy area
- Books and language areas
- Dramatic play area (play kitchen, dress-up materials)
- Messy area (art and expressive materials, sand and water table)
- Sound area (chimes, instruments, music, CDs, and player)
- Sensory area (scented items, natural materials)



Carefully consider how learning areas are arranged next to one another. Think about placing quieter learning areas next to each other or near the napping space, or anticipating how infants and toddlers may want to use materials across learning areas. Freedom to move materials from one learning area to another provides infants and toddlers an opportunity to take charge of their learning and make their ideas come to life. For example, moving a dinosaur from the block area to the dramatic play area to be “washed” in the play sink offers a toddler a way to express their budding imaginative play.



When creating supportive indoor learning environments for infants and toddlers, there are many factors to consider. Watch this video for examples of messages infants and toddlers receive from supportive environments. What do you notice?



When designing and arranging learning environments to benefit infants, toddlers, and yourself, you should:

- ◆ Ensure safety and health by making sure physical spaces and materials are appropriate for infants and toddlers.
- ◆ Observe the children in your care closely so you become familiar with their likes, dislikes, needs, and interests. Getting down on the floor and viewing the learning area from the perspective of infants and toddlers can help inform your design with respect to safety and stimulation.
- ◆ Provide a variety of materials and experiences for infants and toddlers. Periodically rotate materials or rearrange the room as children's developmental needs change. Take care not to overstimulate children.
- ◆ Arrange the environment to support caregivers' well-being, which will ultimately also benefit the children in your care.
- ◆ Design learning areas that promote making choices and allow for freedom of movement between areas.

Completing this Course

For more information on what to expect in this course, the Learning Environments *Competency Reflection*, and a list of the accompanying Learn, Explore and Apply resources and activities offered throughout the lessons, visit the Infant & Toddler Learning Environments [Course Guide](#).

Please note the References & Resources section at the end of each lesson outlines reference sources and resources to find additional information on the topics covered. As you complete lessons, you are not expected to review all the online references available. However, you are welcome to explore the resources further if you have interest, or at the request of your trainer, coach, or administrator.



Explore

Think about how environments affect you and the children in your care. Download and print the Environments Affect Behavior activity. Answer the questions about each space in your learning environment and share your responses with your trainer, coach, or administrator. Finally, compare your answers to the suggested responses.



Environments Affect Behavior

Observe and consider how the setup of learning environments may affect children

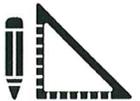


Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator



Apply

Use the *Tools to Use* attachment to help you arrange and rearrange your environment—all without breaking a sweat! Take a moment to review the resources below and revisit as needed to ensure you are creating a safe, comfortable, and stimulating space for the infants and toddlers in your care.



Tools to Use: Designing Your Infant-Toddler Environment

Use these tools to aid in your classroom design

GLOSSARY

Developmentally Appropriate Environment:

An environment that fits the stage of development the children are in but is still flexible enough to allow for differences between skills, interests, and characteristics

Environmental Rating Tool:

A tool, such as a survey completed by an observer, that helps examine and provide an overall picture of an environment created for infants, toddlers, and the adults who share that setting

Fine-Motor Skills:

Skills that involve the use of smaller muscles in the arms, hands, and fingers that allow a child to perform tasks such as drawing, cutting with scissors, stringing beads, tying, zipping, or molding clay

Gross-Motor Skills:

Skills that involve the use of large muscles in the legs or arms, as well as general strength and stamina; examples of such skills include jumping, throwing, climbing, running, skipping,

or kicking

Learning Area:

An area within an infant-toddler room that allows caregivers to offer children specific nurturing and learning experiences but does not limit the ideas and exploration that can occur to be exclusive to the label for that area

Reggio Emilia:

An educational approach that believes children are capable & competent learners, adults should take their lead from the children's interests, and the learning environment plays a critical role as the third teacher

**Demonstrate**

Q1 True or false? Infants and toddlers can recognize tension between adults in their environment.

*

- True
- False

Q2 Which of the following is not an appropriate learning area in infant and toddler rooms? *

- Mirror area
- Sound area
- Messy area
- Computer area