



INFANT AND TODDLER PROGRAMS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A STIMULATING LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Recommended Practices

Recommendations for practices that strengthen early childhood programs are proposed based on findings from two studies. In one study, researchers in the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium conducted a study to assess program quality. In the second study, observations were conducted using the Environment Rating Scales as part of the Missouri Quality Rating System Pilot Study. The Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised is widely used to assess infant and toddler classrooms. A total of 102 infant and toddler classrooms in Missouri were observed for these studies and provide the basis for information in this recommended practices document.

Items from the Environment Rating Scale that were consistently rated as below average were divided into three program components: room/furniture design, displayed materials, and play materials. Specific recommendations for improving programs are outlined below.

Room/Furniture Design: Few programs correctly incorporated and used cozy/soft areas in their classrooms.

Recommended Practice: Children need an area with a significant amount of softness from furnishings (e.g., carpet, mats, padded seating, mattresses, pillows) and toys. A cozy area provides a place for children to relax and be away from the harsher noises and activity of the typical environment. This area is often shared with the book area and should be protected from active play and accessible to children for most of the day. Staff should bring non-mobile children to the cozy area so that they can experience the calm atmosphere. Soft furniture that can be used during play should also be found in areas of the room apart from the cozy area. It is very important to have soft furnishings and toys that are easy to wash so they can be kept clean.

Displayed Materials: Most programs observed did not have familiar photographs and three-dimensional objects visible to children.

Recommended Practice: In order to make the environment a valuable experience, staff should be aware of what children see. Photographs of the children and their classmates, families, and pets should be displayed at the eye-level of most mobile children. Non-mobile children may have to be held near the photographs in order to see them or photographs can be protected with lamination or Plexiglas and posted within reach. These photographs help children feel comfortable with images of real-life experiences and the familiarity keeps them interested. Three-dimensional items also should be displayed to make the room more varied and interesting. Whether for sight and touch or sight only, plants, mobiles, and lightweight textured objects should be hung at varying heights so that they are visible to multiple children at once. (Make sure plants are safe and items are not hung from the ceiling.)

Play Materials: Additional books, musical materials, and blocks were needed in the majority of the programs.

Recommended Practice:

Books – Providing infants and toddlers with opportunities to become familiar with books is an important first step toward literacy. Programs should have a wide selection of books (cloth, vinyl, hard cover) with varying content (e.g., animals, science, familiar routines and objects, and people of different races, ages, and abilities) to broaden children’s experiences. Children should be read to every day.

Musical Materials – Musical materials should include instruments, toys, and music players such as tape recorders or a CD player. Rather than producing loud, startling noise, the materials should make soft, pleasant sounds that do not add to the noise of the room or disrupt a group. Such items should be available to children for most of the day. Music from different genres and from different cultures and languages should be played.

Blocks – Infant and toddler programs should have three different sets of blocks with 10 or more blocks per set. All of the blocks should be larger than two inches to prevent choking. Varying types of block materials include fabric, lightweight cardboard, wood, hard and soft plastic, or foam. They can also vary by having bells inside or be homemade from cereal or tissue boxes that are covered with paper or plastic. The blocks should be available to children for most of the day.

Sources

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- Harms, T. (1994). Humanizing infant environments for group care. *Children’s Environments, 11*, 118-136.
- Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R. (2006). *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale—Revised*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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