

Developmentally Appropriate Teaching: High Priority Strategies for Infants and Toddlers

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In infant and toddler classrooms, activities should be planned with purpose – to engage children in positive relationships and learning that strengthens all areas of development. Teachers need to provide a wide range of choices and add complexity as children’s skills advance.

Sit on the floor just inside your classroom. Observe, seeing through the eyes and experiences of the children. Are materials at their eye level? For toddlers, are the activities adequately challenging? Do they promote active play? As you observe, ask the question: “What are children learning?” (Not, “What are they doing?”) Below is a checklist to help you evaluate your spaces and interactions.

Starting with Powerful Observation

- Where would you go first in your classroom, if you were a child? What would be inviting to you?
- Are there a range of challenges in each play area? Do I match activities to the skill level and interest of each child?
- Is the space adequate for the number of children and materials?
- What do you notice that might invite frustration to the children?
- Are high-interest materials placed in open areas where children can easily access them without competing with other children?
- Does each child have the skills to manage a particular event, activity, space, or material?
- Are the spaces for active play large/open enough for big-body movement?
- Do children have access to active physical play, both indoors and outside daily?
- Are active and quiet play areas separated?
- Do children use all the spaces in the classroom? How else could table tops and other areas be more effectively used?
- Do activities match and engage children’s energy levels?
- Is the situation over- or under-stimulating (i.e., peers, noise, duration)? Do you anticipate and respond immediately to meet these needs?
- Are children comforted and soothed as part of the curriculum during transitions to and from the program, as well as during daily routines and play?
- Is there a protected, soft area for quiet play and escape?
- Do materials invite exploration, like puzzles, building materials, art, music, literacy, fine motor, and open-ended nature materials?
- Are open-ended materials present for children to use in novel ways? For example, are there natural materials for children to stack, balance, and use for exploring?
- Are the dolls dressed to represent children’s family traditions? Are there strollers, blankets, clothing and care item for multiple children to play with the dolls?

- Are new materials and thematic books are displayed at eye level?
- Is there a daily lesson plan that lists vocabulary, concepts, songs, and activities, with the purpose of the activities identified?
- Is daily planning and support individualized for each child?
- Are you consistently tuned-in to (carefully supervising and remaining in close proximity) the children during play? Do you respond with them individually as a play partner, modeling new ways to interact with materials?
- Are meals, snacks, and play materials prepared ahead of time, so children do not need to wait, be unattended or left without interaction?
- Do you focus and remain attuned to individual children? Do you notice and interact with quiet children, as well as those that elicit your attention?
- Do you talk personally and use encouraging, positive interactions during caring routines?
- Is there primary caregiving, so one teacher tends to a specific group of children during caring routines?
- Do you and your teacher coordinate tasks, and talk daily to reflect on what is going well and what can be adjusted to be more effective?

Create successful play experiences.

Notice the way children interact with materials and spaces. Monitor spaces and make adjustments to spaces and materials. Provide a wide range of choices.

- Rotate materials and add complexity and interest to match emerging skills.
- Focus on back-and-forth interactions to support learning and vocabulary.
- Follow children’s interests. When a toddler asks questions, follow up with experiences, books, and conversations to provide additional information and support.
- Be responsive to child’s cues to move on to another activity – before frustrations occur.
- Support individual (solitary) play, protecting children from the intrusion of others.
- Read to individual or several children throughout each day. Make reading fun – pointing to and talking about illustrations, providing props for children to hold (e.g., dolls for a book about caring for babies), and selecting books that represent the children’s lives.
- Make conversations personal – and throughout the day – so that you are talking with children personally during routines (diapering, toileting, snacks and meals, dressing, handwashing) as well as during play.

Explore more teaching strategies for infants and toddlers in the following books:

- *Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Care for Infants and Toddlers: Strategies for High Quality Teaching*, Teachers College Press, 2025.
- *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable & Joyful Learning with Infants and Toddlers*, NAEYC, 2024
- *Let’s Talk Toddlers: A Practical Guide to High Quality Teaching*, Redleaf Press, 2018

Find more resources and contact Marie Masterson at: www.mariemasterson.com