

Quality Infant Care

Most people love spending time with babies. How could you not? Infants are great for snuggles, giggles, and sweet baby talk. But working with infants in a child care setting is so much more than that!



Our youngest children are deserving of just as much attention and planning as the older children. The American Academy of Pediatrics states that a child's brain grows and changes more in the first 1,000 days of life than any other period of time. This puts tremendous responsibility in the hands of early learning professionals. Infants require the widest range of care. A baby at 8 weeks has very different needs than a baby at 11 months. It is important for us as early learning professionals to understand how to support them in learning and growing throughout infancy. So what does quality infant care look like? This month we are providing you with tips for working with our littlest learners!

Daily Schedule

When it comes to infants and daily schedules, it is important to take into consideration each baby's individual needs. Flexibility is most important in planning an infant's day.

Young Infants

Our younger infants need the most flexibility in their schedule. They should be able to eat and sleep according to their cues. Keep in mind that at this age some babies will need to be held often. By holding them, an early learning professional is responding to their needs. This helps the babies form secure attachments with the adults in their lives. Trust and security set the foundation for future learning. For those who may be concerned about the Environment Rating Scales (ERS), this would not count against Much of the Day (MOD). MOD states that an infant should have access to materials for most of the time that they are awake and ready to play. The infant being held for comfort would not be considered "ready to play." Playtime and other activities can be fit in between, and even during, routine care. Learning takes place throughout each part of an infant's day. Each baby may actually have their own "daily schedule."

Older Infants

Older infants may start to be on more of a schedule, meaning they may be hungry and tired around the same time each day. Those eating baby food or solids may become hungry around typical mealtimes. Older infants will be awake for longer stretches of time, creating more opportunities for activities and playtime. Pay attention to when each baby seems more active. This is the best time to do activities. It's best to plan a few activities for the week and work on them individually or with a few babies at a time. These activities could include songs/finger plays, stories, gross motor games, using materials or toys, or even simple art activities.

Older Infants (con't)

Be sure to add outdoor time to your schedule, weather permitting, for all babies. Infants love to go outside as much as bigger kids! Bring a blanket and some materials outside and let them experience nature. Talk to them about the weather and the birds flying in the sky. Let them feel the grass. There are many benefits to outdoor play, even for infants.

Keep in mind the most important thing is to engage with the babies. They absolutely love to hear the sound of your voice and see your face!

Continuity of Care

It is so important for young children to have consistency in caregivers. Even the youngest infants are learning to form attachments. Secure attachments lead to a more supportive learning environment for the child. Infants experience security and comfort when they are surrounded with familiar faces and voices. In family child care it is typical for the babies to interact with one or two early learning professionals. In centers, due to scheduling and number of children, there may be more teachers in the classroom throughout the day. For center administrators, if you have part-time or floating staff that help out at different times, try to be consistent with age or classroom for each of these staff members. It is best practice to institute primary caregiving. This is the practice of assigning each teacher to a smaller group of children within the classroom. For example, if there are 8 babies and 2 teachers in an infant room, each teacher would be responsible for the care of the same 4 babies each day.



This will also help with standard LE1 in the Delaware Stars Early Care and Education Center Standards.

Infant Activities and Materials

There are many ways to engage and play with infants. They enjoy playtime just as much as older children. It is important to have periods of free play for infants. For younger, non-mobile infants, teachers can bring different toys to the infants. Older, mobile babies should be given opportunities to explore materials on their own. Be sure to include a variety of materials throughout the infant space. Below are some ideas of materials and ways to engage infants.

Fine motor- Some examples of fine motor materials for infants include, nesting cups, stacking rings, interlocking toys, shape sorters, musical materials, and puzzles with large knobs. These materials are great for infants to explore on their own or with an adult.



Infant Activities and Materials (con't)

Dramatic play- Baby dolls, pots and pans, toy telephones, and stuffed toys are great examples of dramatic play toys for infants. For family child care providers, many of these materials are also great for toddlers and preschoolers, which helps to save space.

Books- The best type of books for infants are board books or indestructible books. As with older children, infants should have a wide variety of categories of books. These books should be easily accessible by the babies. Bookshelves may be too tall for the babies so books may be placed in baskets for easy access. This allows the infants to explore on their own.

Gross motor play is also an important part of development for infants. For younger babies, tummy time should be incorporated into playtime. You can also bring out different toys and encourage the babies to reach for them and eventually roll over or crawl when they are ready. This can also help you to see which toys capture their attention. Cradle gyms are also a great experience for babies because they can grab or kick at the items hanging. For older babies, be sure to have space for them to crawl and move freely. Soft, vinyl, indoor climbing structures are great for this age. Simple materials such as balls or push toys can be used for many activities. Remember, gross motor play can occur indoors or outdoors.

Keep in mind that just having the materials is not enough. We need them to be accessible to the children. Putting together baskets of infant toys can help make things accessible and organized. These baskets can be used by teachers to offer non-mobile babies a variety of toys. Older babies can crawl to the baskets to choose their own materials.

Language and Interactions

Babies should be hearing your voice all throughout the day! Listening to and interacting with infants is the most important thing that an infant teacher can do. Keep in mind that physical affection is also a way of communicating with babies. There are so many opportunities throughout the day to engage with the infants in your care both during routine care and playtimes.

During routine times such as feeding and diapering, it is important to keep the atmosphere warm and positive. During bottle feeding, holding and snuggling the baby provides them with security and comfort. While feeding solids, talk to the baby about what they are eating using words such as full, empty, or almost all gone. You can also incorporate math by counting the foods they are eating.

Diaper changes are another great time to incorporate individual interactions by simply describing your actions. Consider hanging some decorations from the ceiling that you can talk about with the child during changes. You could also sing some of their favorite songs during this time.



Language and Interactions (con't)

During playtime, be sure to get down on the floor and interact with the babies. Show them how to use the different toys and materials. Take time to read them books and talk about the pictures. For family child care providers, if you have an infant that is on a different schedule than the older children you may want to use some of naptime to engage with them individually.

Providing quality child care for infants is one of the best ways to set a child up for success. Our youngest children deserve the best from all of us in the early care and education field. The good news is that there is plenty of support! Check out our list of resources and quality-assured training below!

Resources

- Zero to Three- <https://www.zerotothree.org/> -This website is a wealth of resources for caregivers of children birth to three years old.
- NAEYC- <https://www.naeyc.org/> - NAEYC is a great resource for all things early childhood. Use the search bar to type in "infants" to find information on quality infant care.
- All About the ITERS-R - A detailed to be used in conjunction with the Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scale Revised Edition
- Delaware Stars Infant and Toddler Specialty Technical Assistance- Technical assistance designed to improve the quality of care for infants and toddler in group settings. Contact your TA for information or reach out to Molly at mvan@udel.edu or Melissa at melissab@udel.edu.

Quality Assured Training

- Planning with Intention: Infants and Toddlers
- Developing Relationships, Developing Brains: Infants and Toddlers