

You Are a Teacher

Adults working with infants and toddlers sometimes shy away from thinking of themselves as teachers because they worry the name is associated with more structured and adult-led activities than babies are ready for.

The act of teaching is technically defined as “activities that impart knowledge or skill”.

Research

Research during the past decade has revealed much about how children learn and develop. Studies have shown that early childhood is a time when developmental changes are happening that can have profound and lasting consequences for a child’s future.

Research has also shown that much more is going on cognitively, socially, and emotionally in young children – including infants – than scientists or care and education professionals previously knew.

- It was once believed that infants lacked the ability to think or form complex ideas and remained without cognition until they learned language.
- It is now known that babies are aware of their surroundings and interested in exploration from the time they are born.
- From birth, babies begin to actively learn. They gather, sort, and process information from around them, using the data to develop perception and thinking skills.

Development of the Brain – Executive Function

70%

80%

- The best exercise for the brain is exercise.
- The brain is pattern seeking and survival oriented.
- Connections on the outside with other people builds neural connections on the inside.
- The brain functions optimally when we feel safe.

Executive functions lay the groundwork for school success. That is why it is so important that young children begin to develop these skills before entering school.

- Although it continues to develop well into adolescence, the first signs of executive function—the conscious control of thought, action, or emotion—emerge as early as the end of the first year of life.
- When babies are about eight months old, for example, they can usually be encouraged to search for hidden objects after a brief delay—a form of “hide and seek.”
- That is, if a baby is playing with a doll and her father covers the doll with a cloth, the baby may remove the cloth and retrieve the doll. This behavior by itself suggests some degree of executive function because the baby keeps the doll in mind and performs one action (removing the cloth) in order to perform another action (retrieving the doll).

The critical factors in developing a strong foundation for these essential skills are children's relationships, the environment, activities and experiences they have opportunities to engage in, and the collaborations between teachers/caregivers and families.

Your Role as a Teacher

- Young children thrive when they have secure, positive relationships with adults who are knowledgeable about how to support their development and learning.
- Babies learn from their environment and the people in it, so it's important for teachers to feel confident that the knowledge and skills they are teaching are developmentally appropriate for the age of the children in their groups.
- Developing a positive relationship with parents is critical to providing the best care possible for young children.

Strategies to Implement

Working with a partner or with your small group:

- ✓ Read through at least one of the following sections – Developing Positive, Responsive Relationships, Create an Effective Environment or Share the Care
- ✓ Discuss some strategies you implement
- ✓ Document new strategies you can implement
- ✓ Be prepared to share with the large group

Develop Positive, Responsive Relationships

Responsive care giving of very young children and infants is focused on each child as they develop a sense of wellbeing, belonging, exploration, communication, and the contributions they make to their world.

- **Slow down.**
 - Life is busy, and you have a lot to do each day.
 - As a teacher/caregiver, you provide the extremely valuable service of caring for infants and toddlers.
 - Instead of constantly thinking about what comes next, take a deep breath to help yourself consciously slow down and fully experience what is happening in the moment.
 - For example, rather than rushing through feeding an infant, you might slow down, carefully watch the infant's cues, engage in back-and-forth communication, and feed at the infant's pace.
- **Be present.**
 - Being present means taking a moment to clear your mind of all distractions so that your focus is only on connecting with children.
 - With this focus, you can think carefully about responding to individual children's cues and needs in that moment.

- **Remember that being with children is the first priority.**
 - Helping to support the growth and development of the children in your care is your greatest and most important role, placing all other responsibilities second.
 - When you are faced with many tasks throughout the day, it might be easy to be distracted by doing laundry, cleaning cots, or completing paperwork. It is not easy to be present when other tasks need to be done.
 - Reminding yourself that being present with children is the first and most important role that you play helps you prioritize time and the other tasks that need to be completed.
 - Understandably, there are a lot of tasks to complete as an infant and toddler teacher in a child care center or family child care home.
 - If it feels challenging to balance these tasks with being present with children, you may want to talk with your director or colleagues and develop approaches that will help you keep your focus on the children.
- **Take time to understand children's individual needs.**
 - When working with infants and toddlers, it is important to get to know them as individuals who have unique interests, needs, and preferences.
 - Working to understand each child's interests, needs, preferences, and culture builds a foundation for connecting with infants and toddlers in meaningful ways.
- **Support children's learning.**
 - When you are in tune with children's individual needs, you are able to make responsive and sensitive decisions about the next step in each child's learning

New Strategies to Implement - Develop Positive, Responsive Relationships

Create an Effective Environment

- Structure a high-quality learning environment based on babies' and toddlers' development and interests.
- Provide a variety of toys to allow children to explore (for example, toys that go in and out, busy boxes, blocks, nesting cups) and make sure nonmobile infants can reach and explore them. Change materials regularly to offer novel experiences.
- Slow down, wait, and watch what children are doing. Think about how, when, and why you want to interact with the child to make the most of opportunities to extend learning.
- Watch for both verbal and nonverbal responses to promote back-and-forth conversational interaction.
- Ask questions or wonder, even with babies—"Oh, what's happening? You are touching the busy box. I wonder what will happen when you push that button."

- Provide verbal support and modeling to extend children's exploration of toys and experiences.
- Offer specific information or guidance when children need help understanding concepts (for example, helping babies develop an understanding of cause and effect: "When you move your hand this way, the toy makes a rattling sound").
- Help children name and understand concepts by verbally labeling things like color, shape, sound, size, letters, numbers, and feelings. Promote a language-rich environment by narrating children's play and describing children's exploration and discoveries.
- Be available as children begin to participate in imaginary play and actively participate in it. Ask children, "What should I be? What should I do?" Follow their lead, adding context or vocabulary in the setting of their play. Respond to children's prompts or ideas, offering props to enrich the pretend scenario, such as suggesting the addition of blocks to serve as groceries in dramatic play about shopping.
- Connect descriptive words with nouns while you narrate children's actions: "Sally, you're holding a small soft ball that rolls slowly. Joey has the large rubber ball that bounces very high."

New Strategies to Implement - Create an Effective Environment

Share the Care

Caring for infants and toddlers also means working with and supporting their parents so that you can benefit from their knowledge and experience. Here are some ways you can help parents feel comfortable in your program:

- Be friendly but not overwhelming so that parents can begin to open up to you at their own rate.
- Let everyone know that you respect and appreciate the hard work of parenting.
- Be sure your room is arranged in a way that encourages families to want to spend time there. Keep the entrance area open and uncluttered with simple but attractive signs welcoming them. If possible, have a space for families' coats or belongings. Consider setting up a large board on a wall near the center of the room for parents to leave daily messages. This sends families a clear signal: Please come in and let us know what is happening with your child. Include some comfortable spots, such as pillows on the rug or a small sofa, so parents can read a picture book to their child or a small group of children.

- Encourage parents to participate in their children's activities when they are in the room. When parents feel that they belong in the room, children naturally feel more comfortable as well.
- Spend time with parents as they interact with their children in the room. This helps to confirm to parents your support and interest in working as a team.
- Show parents where important supplies are stored so that they have access to the things they need for their children when they are in the room.
- Acknowledge that mothers and fathers are the experts when it comes to their children - they know how their babies like to be fed or put to sleep-but remain available when parents turn to you for help.
- Include special objects or customs from a family's culture to help them feel valued as members of the community.
- Have coffee and bagels available one morning a week and invite parents to spend a little time in the room after drop-off. This is a great way to encourage casual information exchanges in a relaxed, informal setting.
- Hold monthly potluck dinners for families who cannot spend time during daytime hours.

New Strategies to Implement – Share the Care

MVPI

Most Valuable Piece of Information

What was the most valuable piece of information in today's sessions?

How might you apply it to your practice?

Share with a partner.

