

# **Solving the Puzzle of Infant Curriculum: A Model for Infant Curriculum Development**

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## **Curriculum and infant childcare**

The Children's Defense Fund (2003) estimates that in the year 2000 there were six million children under the age of three in child care, and 55% of mothers with infants younger than one year of age in the workforce. Despite the number of infants in child care, there are few models to guide curriculum planning for infants. The term curriculum is defined as "all the courses of study offered by an educational institution" (Pickett, et al, 2000). Curriculum guides, curriculum standards, and curriculum frameworks are all part of the national education agenda. These structures often separate the curriculum development process from the teacher, the specific classroom, and the individual children involved. The concept of formal curriculum is counter to the prevailing belief among early childhood educators that infant curriculum should be focused on responsive care of each individual, with caregiving routines and daily schedule determined by the infant's needs, not by a formal plan (Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer, 2001).

Early childhood educators often find themselves using a curriculum model of themes, activities, and learning centers as the basis for their curriculum planning. This approach may be developmentally appropriate for preschool and kindergarten children, but is it the most effective way to think of infant curriculum? The early childhood field must be clear in articulating what is developmentally appropriate curriculum, in order to avoid the problem of developmentally inappropriate lessons being pushed down to younger ages. For example, dittos and worksheets that focus on phonics are inappropriate for young preschool children, because young children need hands-on experiences with language and books to promote their literacy learning (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; NAEYC and IRA, 1998). This same downward pressure is coming to bear on infant classrooms, in part because infant teachers don't necessarily have alternate models at their disposal. We must avoid the trap of "getting them ready" for the next step of life and focus instead on who our children are now and what they need to grow and develop in an optimal way while in group care. This article will explore an alternate model for

infant curriculum development that focuses on the important human and physical components of the infant classroom.

The Child Development Center at Keene State College in New Hampshire is the laboratory program for the Early Childhood major, and also provides observation and field experience opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students in education, psychology, physical education, music, and other appropriate disciplines. Early Childhood majors, who are eligible for Birth-to-age-8 teacher certification upon graduation, complete both a semester-long part-time field experience and a full-time 7-week student teaching placement in one of the Center's four classrooms. The challenges that student teachers faced when planning infant curriculum motivated us to articulate a model for infant curriculum that was unique to the age level rather than 'watered down' preschool curriculum.

#### **New model: 4 building blocks for infant curriculum**

Creating a successful teaching and learning environment for infants is a process and must continually be re-evaluated based on the developmental needs of the specific infants enrolled in the program. Thus a set of lessons and themes, planned in advance, or a pre-planned daily schedule for toileting, feeding, play, and sleep, will not provide a successful infant curriculum. Instead, the successful curriculum comes from the relationships that are developed between the children, the families, the caregivers, and the space. We have identified four important "building blocks" to our model:

- ✓ personal relationships
- ✓ classroom environment
- ✓ family connections
- ✓ caregiving routines

Each of these building blocks provides a solid foundation and is an important component of the infant curriculum. By identifying these four important building blocks, we can help the novice focus on curriculum planning in ways that will build the learning environment and foster positive growth and development for the children, their families, and the infant educators. (While there are many different terms used to identify adults who care for and educate infants, we will

use the term “infant educator” to represent the person who fulfills the these roles with infants in a group setting.)

### **Block 1: Personal relationships**

The first building block of our curriculum model is the development of personal relationships with each infant. This involves learning the signals and communication style of each child, responding when the child cries, communicating with respect during routines, during play, and through physical contact. One of the most important components of successful emotional development in infants is attachment (Stern, 1977). Erik Erikson’s (1950) concept of Trust vs. Mistrust characterizes the key developmental “crisis” for infancy as learning that the world is a safe place and that the adults in it can be trusted to respond and to care for the infant. Researchers have thoroughly studied the effects of attachment on children, and many studies have examined the impact of infant childcare on the successful attachment of a child (Booth, 2002; Egeland & Hiester, 1995; Belsky, 1988, 1990). We know that infants can successfully develop attachments to more than one adult, if the conditions are appropriate (Goosens and van IJzendoorn, 1990). Appropriate infant curriculum must support the attachment needs of young children by providing consistent, caring adults who each forge an individual, personal relationship with the children in their care.

Caregivers must be warm, respectful and understanding, but most importantly, they need quality time with each individual child. National standards for quality childcare recommend a ratio of one adult per three infants (NAEYC, 1998). Adults should demonstrate positive affect through their facial expressions, a warm and friendly tone of voice, and open body language. Preverbal children are extremely sensitive to the way the infant educators conduct themselves in the classroom. Even when we are busy with other children or conversing with a colleague, our actions are being observed and evaluated by the children in the classroom: How do we treat adults? Are we caring and gentle with children? Responding warmly and gently helps facilitate a trusting relationship between infant and caregiver. Responding quickly when a child cries, through verbal reassurance and physical contact, helps develop a sense of trust and security. It also teaches other infants who observe this interaction that when there is a problem, they can count on their caregiver. The feeling of security that develops from a positive personal relationship with the infant educator will encourage the infant to try new things in the environment.

## **Block 2: Classroom environment**

The second building block of our model focuses on the classroom environment. The classroom environment includes both the physical space and the emotional and social environment created by the interactions between the children and the adults (Danielson, 1996). Safety is a primary concern. Is the physical space free from hazards and harmful elements so that children may explore the environment? Are there adequate spaces for diapering, cleaning, feeding, sleeping, and exploring within the space? Classroom design principles recommend areas that are appropriate for wet, dry, noisy, and quiet activities (Kritchevsky and Prescott, 1977). Traffic flow patterns and open spaces are important, as are soft elements (e.g. rugs, pillows, soft chairs) and lines of sight for supervision and visibility. Sensorimotor exploration is fostered by providing a variety of colors, shapes, textures, smells, sounds, and manipulative materials in the space. Contact between infants and adults that is positive, where individual needs for socialization and friendship are supported, provides the emotional aspect of this component of infant curriculum.

It is important to have an environment that is furnished, equipped, and arranged to maximize the time that infant educators spend with each child. The classroom must be set up to facilitate adult-child interaction, and reduce the need for excessive adult conversation. The room arrangement should send clear messages to all who enter, with a well-defined diapering area, extra clothing and other supplies readily available, feeding and sleeping areas, play spaces, storage shelves and/or cabinets that are clearly labeled, and an effective system for staff and family communication. A well-designed responsive classroom will minimize time spent looking for bottles or bowls, diapers, clothes, or any other materials. Written documentation will communicate each child's individual schedule as well as classroom procedures and policies to all adults, family members and infant educators alike.

Ideally, the play space will be visually interesting and full of many built-in opportunities for growth and development. Since so much infant development focuses on motor development, separate floor space for both non-walkers and beginning walkers is essential. Areas for group play, as well as small defined spaces for individual exploration without too much adult intervention, will allow infants to develop their motor skills of rolling, reaching, crawling, and standing. Carrying children around should be kept to a minimum; the goal of the infant educator is to provide educational opportunities through the classroom environment. Providing colorful

sights, pleasant sounds, and varied textures will stimulate infant cognitive development as the babies begin to recognize objects, discover how to use them, solve problems, and actively explore the materials and the environment around them. Talking with the children about what they see and do will foster language development. Spending time with other children will support the emerging social development of infants.

Many preschool teachers get down on their knees to view the classroom from the child's perspective. To see the classroom from a baby's perspective requires lying on the floor and asking these questions: Are there opportunities for motor and sensory stimulation? Will the materials on the shelves capture the interest of the specific children in this classroom - not any program, this one? Are there opportunities for choice and participation on the part of each infant? Is the environment focused on the infants or on the adults who will inhabit it?

### **Block 3: Family connections**

The third building block for infant curriculum is the importance of building a firm connection with families. Early childhood literature has long advocated family-centered practices as a way to establish the family as an important part of the curriculum (McBride, 1999). An ecological approach to development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) encourages caregivers to be in relationship with family members to construct the most supportive and responsive environment surrounding the child and his/her family. Thus involving the family becomes a key component of the infant curriculum.

Working with parents and families is important in all early childhood education settings, but it is uniquely challenging for families of infants. For the parents, the infant educator is the first exposure to the outside educational influences that will impact their children's lives. Parents struggle with the guilt over leaving their baby with a "stranger", and worry that they will miss important milestones in their baby's first year or be judged on their parenting style by the infant educator (Galinsky, 1987). It is an emotionally charged relationship for both the infant educators and family members who must have faith in the quality of the caregivers and hope that the environment will be a positive one for the child (Galinsky, 1987). Infant educators must build relationships with the parents and guardians of the infants in their care in order to establish trust and communication with them (Gonzalez-Mena and Eyer, 2001). Strategies for dealing with situations that can arise are therefore an important part of the infant curriculum.

The first step towards establishing a partnership with the family is the home visit, preferably made prior to the first day of enrollment in the program. During this home visit, information about feeding and diapering schedules; sleep habits; the child's preferences for food, toys, and comfort objects are exchanged in an informal chat. The infant educator should seek to determine the hopes and dreams of each family for their child's experience in the program in order to provide individual care within the context of the group setting. The goal is to honor and value the diversity each family with this careful attention to individual routines, schedules and cultural values.

As a second step, the parents are invited for an orientation at the center to familiarize themselves with the building, the classroom, and the infant educators who will be caring for their child. A staff member who can focus on the needs of the adult family members should accompany the parents on the tour. This will allow the other teaching staff to stay focused on the needs of the children, thus demonstrating to the family members that their child's needs will be of paramount importance to the infant educators in the classroom. The "tour guide" can also interpret the interactions that are being observed, explain how the classroom environment facilitates their child's learning, and answer questions that parents may pose. Parents often need reassurance that it is "normal" for infants to cry and that the infant educators will respond in a caring and appropriate way.

Communicating with parents on a daily basis is the third step in the partnership with the family and the infant educators. This is accomplished through conversations at drop-off and pick up, and through written communication about feeding, diapering, sleeping, health, and behavioral changes. This written documentation should also include a "highlight" of each child's day. There is no bit of information too small to report. Parents want to know about the everyday things that happen in the life of their child; infants can't share about their day at the supper table.

#### **Block 4: Caregiving routines**

The fourth building block for infant curriculum focuses on the importance of individualized caregiving routines that are tailored to meet the needs of each child within the group setting. This aspect of the curriculum becomes important in the cognitive and social development of the child, for significant learning about the self and the world occurs through feeding and physical care routines such as diapering and sleeping. Indeed, the term "educarer" (Gerber, 1978), often used to describe the blending of teaching and caregiving, captures the

importance of physical care as part of the educational approach with very young children. Programs designed to support families often focus on strategies that use these routines to build language, cognition, social, and emotional development. Planning for caregiving routines is therefore an important component of curriculum planning for infants.

Routines are important for young children, particularly those who must depend on adults to meet their needs. The effective infant curriculum strives to honor the unique rhythm of each individual child, adapting to the child rather than making the child adapt to the program. Each child will be diapered in the way that respects her needs; each baby will be fed the foods that his family has provided or requested; each infant will have a sleeping schedule that adjusts to the developmental needs of the day, and to the changes in these sleep needs. The infant educator will plan play opportunities and provide materials that challenge each infant in a way that targets the zone of proximal development of that child (Vygotsky, 1962). This aspect of the curriculum provides evidence that the child and family are respected and that individual needs will be met.

### **Putting the puzzle together: Building the infant curriculum**

Of course, these four elements of infant curriculum cannot exist apart from each other. Each one is vitally important to the success of the overall curriculum, and each builds on and integrates aspects of the others. Creating positive personal relationships with an infant relies on the family connection for information about likes and dislikes. Caregiving routines are based on information from the family, and adjusted to reflect knowledge gained from the personal relationships. The classroom environment provides the setting for relationship development and caregiving routines, and must recognize the needs of families in its layout (arrival/departure area, communication, storage, cubbies, etc.). The personal relationships inform the arrangement of the classroom environment so it can adapt to the changing needs of each child, both for the routines and for further exploration and motor development. Each component is more like a piece of a large puzzle than a separate and discrete building block. The four building blocks intersect to create a whole curriculum that is responsive to the individual infants and their families.

### **Summary**

By identifying these four components of infant curriculum, we have been able to support novice teachers (student teachers) in their work. A unit planned for infants includes a plan for

developing relationships with each child as part of an assessment of current level of ability and knowledge. It includes family communication and involvement, attention to the classroom environment and materials available, and a focus on caregiving routines. Using this model, we have seen an improvement in the quality of our student teachers' interaction and planning, and we have clarified for colleagues and families how we plan for our youngest children. It is our sincere hope that this approach will create a more positive learning environment in group care settings for infants in the future.

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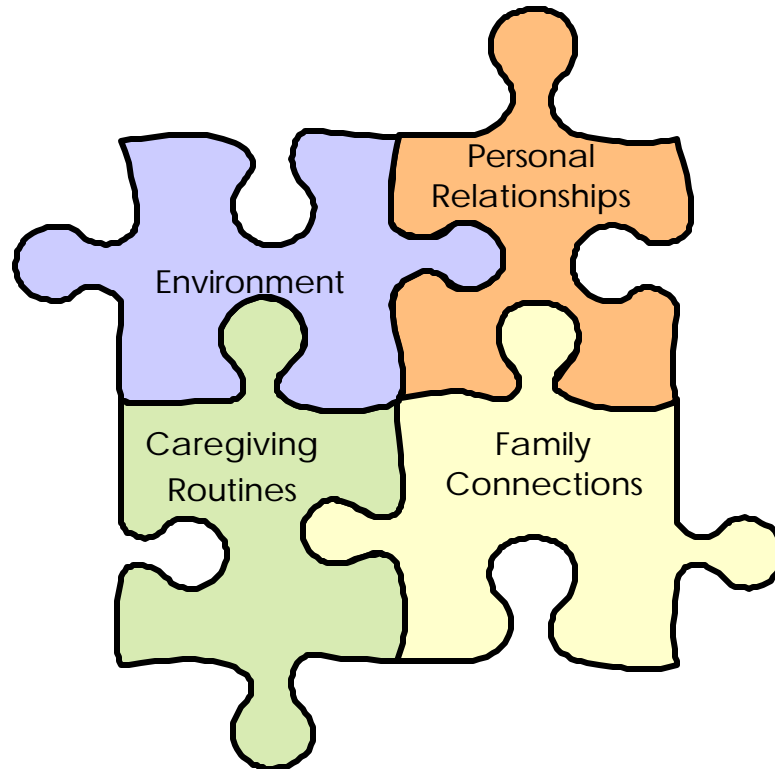
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[Editor's Note: See illustration and suggestion for a boxed vignette on next page.]



Stacey advises: “Watch, listen and learn.” These are the components to a successful home visit that will ultimately lead to a positive curriculum for the baby, the family and the infant educator. During a recent home visit, I listened carefully as a mother sensitively described her five-month-old son, Jason. She had recently gone back to work and dad had been taking care of Jason full time during the day. The transition from “days with mom” to “days with dad” was reportedly tough and mom was concerned about another transition so soon. She told us many stories about her son’s favorite toys and some of their favorite things to do together. One of those activities was diapering. Both mom and son looked forward to this routine and took the time to enjoy each other’s company. Mom gave us some ideas of what to do during this time to help form an attachment with Jason. Because of this visit, we had information to use to develop our personal relationship with him and to plan for the diapering environment and caregiving routines for this particular child. By using her suggestions, I was able to form a trusting relationship with both mother and child.