

Planning Guide for Interest Areas for Infants and Toddlers

Sand and water

Sand and water play can be done in a sandbox, a sensory table, table top bin or shallow tub, a water hose, sprinkler, potting soil, gardening, etc. There should be a **daily** learning experience with sand or water for children over 18 months old. Materials that can be used are sand, colored sand, potting soil (read the label because some soils have fertilizers that can be dangerous if eaten), water, bird seed, soap and water, water with food color added, feathers, leaves, pine needles, pine cones, snow, ice, wet sand, and shredded paper.

Materials that are **not** to be used are Styrofoam, small beads, dried beans, small pebbles, small shells, corn meal, or other food items. Food items should never be used in a sensory table because it gives a misleading message to the proper use and respect for food.

During the activity, there should be a **variety** of items for the children to manipulate and play with the materials provided. Some examples of accessories are measuring cups, measuring spoons, funnels, tongs, bowls, various sizes of containers with lids, small pitchers, shovels, water mills, beakers, plastic trucks, boats, molds, sifters, foam shapes, turkey-juicer, scoops, spray bottles, large shells, sea stars, sponges, watering cans, plastic baby dolls, baby baths, wash cloths, items that sink and float, large corks, or colanders.

The teacher should group the items to help introduce and explore certain ideas or concepts. A few examples of this might be placing soap and water in the sensory table or table top tub, with dishes, sponges for washing, placing sand in a sensory table or table top bin and adding measuring cup, pitchers, spoons, and small container for pouring and measuring, or adding items for exploring the concept of sinking and floating.

Art

Children under the age of 12 months are not required to have art experiences. The teacher should provide children who are 12 – 23 months art activities three times each week. For children 24 months – 30 months art experiences should be provided **daily** with three different types of art supplies used each week. Some suggested art supplies for infants and toddlers: washable tempera paints, water colors, washable markers, colored pencils, chalk, finger paint, foam paint, crayons, play dough, clay, molds, feather, stamp pads, different size brushes, dot markers, spray bottles, sponges, tissue paper, or easels.

Materials that are **not** to be used are food items, glitter, shaving cream, scissors, and any other material according to directions and instructions restricted for the age of the children in care. Some of these materials can be potentially dangerous to young children. Food items should never be used as art items because it gives a misleading message to the proper use and respect for food.

The art materials should be available and easily accessible to the children at the table. Teachers can verbally give instructions or examples of what the children can create. As an example, if the topic is family, the teacher could suggest drawing or painting the child's family. Dittos, crafts and copied

worksheets that require all of the children's artwork to be prepared or look the same are **not** to be used. Art is meant to be a process for the children to create their artwork. Artwork completed during the week should be displayed throughout the classroom at the child's eye level.

Blocks and construction

Three different types of building blocks should be available **throughout** the day. Blocks should be at least 2 inches by 2 inches and should not be interlocking. Some examples of blocks are foam blocks, cardboard blocks, vinyl blocks, soft cloth blocks, and wooden (depending on the size of the blocks and the age of the children.) Some accessories would be adding plastic people (including people of different ages, people of different cultures, people of different abilities, and people representing different careers), plastic animals (wild, domestic, sea, farm), plastic trees, cars, fire trucks, dump trucks, ambulances, tractors, trains, airplanes, boats, rocket ships, street signs, castles, gas stations, airports, dolls houses, doll furniture, etc.

By carefully providing and placing accessories in the block area and conversation during play, the teacher will guide and help the children expand their ideas through play. Some examples would be encouraging children to use the blocks and accessories to build roads, train stations, homes, zoos, farms, etc.

Remember, it is the teacher's job to play just enough to get things started and listen and interject when the children get stuck and then help add or introduce suggestions and ideas that get the children's play going again.

Music and movement

Instruments and movement items should be available daily, **varied and rotated often**. Some examples of musical instruments and movement items that can be used are drums, shakers, sensory bottles, rattles, pianos, chime toys, maracas, rain sticks, rhythm sticks, tambourines, xylophone, cymbals, sleigh bells, hand bells, scarves and bean bags, etc. The children should be able to freely play with the instruments and movement items and the teacher should be planning **at least one** music and movement experience each day.

An example of an activity can be having the children listen to different types of music and repeating beats and rhythms using instruments, body movements or clapping. A variety of music should be introduced and used with the children to help them develop an appreciation for other cultures. Teachers should play Jazz, Classical, Spanish, and African music. The teacher can also use music and songs that would be considered traditional children's music.

The teacher's should participate and encourage children to chant, sing and dance. Music and CD's should not be used for long periods of time except for rest time.

Active play

Children should experience active play **indoor and outdoor each day**, weather permitting. The teachers should provide a variety of many different types of play items that encourage large muscle development. Items used with children should help the children practice their skills to crawl, walk, balance, throw and roll objects, step, climb, slide, etc. Some of the items to have available are different size balls, parachutes, slides, steps, balance beans, bean bags, play mats, tunnels, push toys, small tricycles, pull-up bars, and soft play climbing cushions. These items should be available as free play and each day a teacher should plan **at least one** activity for the children to use different muscles. An example of a planned activity would be a parachute group activity with the children following the teachers directions to pull the parachute up, down, walk to the left with the parachute, then switch to walking the other way. Another activity could be setting up a short obstacle course that requires the children to crawl, jump, walk-over, roll, etc.

For younger infants, active play will provide the child with the greatest number of activities during the day as the child learns to roll, sit up, crawl, pull-up, cruise, stand, and shuffle.

Housekeeping and pretend play

In this area, there should be items that represent the “real” world. Remember an infant and toddler’s world is still very focused on common places, their homes, their family, and their house and pets. The housekeeping and pretend interest area should be available **throughout** the day.

Items needed for infant: multiple culturally diverse dolls, multiple soft animals, pots, pans and telephones.

Items needed for toddlers: dress-up clothes (shoes, purses, aprons, etc.), child-sized house furniture, like a play kitchen, stove or refrigerator, cooking and eating accessories, pans, pots, dishes, utensils, play food (multi-cultural), dolls with doll furniture, soft animals, small buildings with accessories, and toy telephones.

Other items that can be added could include child-size tables and chairs, mirror, fake house plant, plastic career hats (fireman, construction, cowboy, etc.) child size brooms, career dress up vest or clothes, etc.

As the children grow older, the teacher will introduce items when exploring different learning experiences. An example is if a child has a new sibling at home; the teacher might choose to introduce more baby items, like a stroller, high chair, baby bottles, etc. When it is possible and safe to do so, the teacher should provide as many real items for the children to play with as possible. Items could include real bottles, real baby clothes, baby blankets, diaper bag, pacifiers, or rattles.

The key to this play center is providing just enough materials, and have those materials organized to encourage and enhance pretend play.

As the children move into the preschool ages, teachers could use prop boxes in order to introduce and explore expanded ideas.

Science and nature

Science and nature should be available and accessible to the children indoor and outdoors **throughout** the day. Some examples of science and nature items are sound blocks, magnifying glasses, binoculars, growing seedlings, caring for a classroom pet, caring for a classroom plant, color paddles, sensory bottles, realistic plastic animals and pretend food, books that have realistic pictures of animals, rain sticks, raising butterflies or ladybugs, bird feeders, humming bird feeders, rain gauges, thermometers, wind socks, pin wheels and flags, wind chimes, displaying realistic lawn art, bird houses, and butterfly houses.

Teachers should provide **daily** experiences expressing an appreciation for nature. By recycling, taking care of the classroom pet or plant and discussing the weather, the teacher helps the children become aware and respect the natural world around them.

Other examples of science and nature are displaying pictures of realistic animals; having the teacher point out the trees, clouds, wind; children feeling and smelling items from nature like flowers, grass, and trees, caring for an outdoor plant container or garden, and blowing bubbles.

Fine Motor

The teachers will provide many activities and items that allow the children to work on their fine motor skills **throughout** the day and **rotated** monthly. The fine motor items for both groups of children should be varied by skill and varied by size, color, shape, texture, sound and option.

Some examples of fine motor items for infants: grasping toys, busy boxes, nested cups, containers to fill and dump, textured toys and cradle gyms.

Some examples of fine motor items for toddlers: shape sorting games, large string beads, big peg with peg boards, simple puzzles, pop beads, stacking rings, nesting toys, interlocking blocks and crayons.

Other items include: waffle blocks, chunky and large knob puzzles, tongs, Legos, rattles, and large connectors.

Teacher should remember that children learn through experience and repetition. Children will connect, link, grasp, turn, pull, and problem solve during fine motor play. They will also experience and learn cause and effect and gain control over their hands and fingers, which is important for pre-writing.

Books and language

Books provided for infants and toddlers should be heavy board books in good condition that are varied in topic and include ideas of people of various cultures, ages and abilities, and of familiar routines, families, pets and animals. No less than 2 books per child in care, but no less than 12 available at all times. These should be appropriate books, accessible **throughout** the day, and the books should be **rotated** often.

For young infants and young toddlers, the teacher is the person responsible for showing the children how to use books and developing language skills (listening and communicating.) It is not enough to hand an infant a book or place books where the infant or young toddler can reach them, the teacher should be holding the child closely in their lap and reading, pointing out pictures and talking about the book with the child.

For toddler, the books need to be accessible to the children in a basket or shelf and the teacher should still read with the children individually and in small groups throughout the day.

Using puppets during reading activities, using a puppet to tell stories, singing and doing finger plays and using felts boards to tell stories are other ways to use stories in the classroom.

Appropriate Planning

Although the interest areas above are sorted, providing these experiences are **not** meant to be conducted separately during the day. As you plan your activities, some of these areas will be happening at the **same time**. Teachers should avoid the pitfalls of a traditional preschool planning model. This model was adapted from grade school model where the teacher moves from one activity to another and all the children are required to do or offered one particular interest area at one time. This includes the idea that the children should have set group time like a circle time or art time. Activities should be incorporated in free play and outdoor play. Your efforts as a teacher are better spent in small group activities instead of taking the time to “fish” all the children in at once. Such a practice is not appropriate for the attention span of an infant and toddler and is frustrating for the teacher and for the other children having to wait for their activity to begin.

Notes and Credits:

This guide was compiled to be used with the Infant and Toddler Environmental Rating Scales - R, written by Thelma Harms, Debby Cryer and Richard M. Clifford. Some of the information provided in this document was taken from the scales in order to help teacher’s plan the appropriate interest areas and activities for infants and toddlers. This document is designed to be used with the Individual Monthly Lesson Plan for children birth – 17 months and the Weekly Lesson Plan for children 18 – 30 months created by Careers in Child Care.