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## Overview of Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide

*Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* was distributed to the early learning and child care sector in the spring of 2008. The *Guide* is a resource for educators to promote high-quality, age-appropriate, play-based learning experiences for young children: primarily three-, four- and five-year olds.

The *Guide* focuses on the vision, principles, and foundational elements of quality early childhood programs.

The foundational elements include:

- Children as Competent Learners
- The Changing Role of the Educator
- How Young Children Learn
- Observation and Reflection - Critical Skills
- High Quality Programming - What does it look like?

This companion booklet, like *Play and Exploration*, features experiences and photographs from early learning environments across Saskatchewan.

To obtain printed copies of *Play and Exploration for Infants and Toddlers* or *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* email the Ministry of Education at [ecedd@gov.sk.ca](mailto:ecedd@gov.sk.ca). To learn more about workshops and additional resources, please visit the early years portal at [earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca](http://earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca)



## Acknowledgements

Special appreciation is extended to the staff and families of the many facilities throughout the province who were willing to share their stories and photos so others may benefit from their experiences.

## **How does this companion booklet, *Play and Exploration for Infants and Toddlers*, connect to *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*?**

*Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* was written primarily for three-, four- and five-year old children. The purpose of this companion booklet is to support early childhood educators in the implementation of the vision with children under three years of age. This document will assist educators to follow the Principles of Early Learning identified in the *Guide*, while taking into account the unique developmental and safety needs of infants and toddlers.

### **A Note About Safety:**

Safety and supervision of infants and toddlers is key to all experiences and environments for these very young children. Some of the activities discussed in this guide and the accompanying online training and supports, while beneficial, require intense supervision. Early childhood educators are trained in the development and observation of children. This knowledge combined with the relationships built with the children, enables educators to plan, observe and reflect on learning experiences which are safe for children but also allow for challenge, delight, and engagement in learning through play and exploration.

## Infants and Toddlers as Competent Learners

The idea that preschoolers are competent learners is discussed in *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*. Children are seen as capable and active learners whose ideas and preferences are valued.

Educators are encouraged to examine their beliefs about the competency of young children and reflect on how these beliefs affect the care and learning provided for infants and toddlers. If infants are thought to be helpless, then they will be treated as helpless, and the learning opportunities and experiences provided will be limited. If young infants are appreciated as active learners who demonstrate various ways of knowing, doing, and learning through their multiple ways of communicating, the stage is set for providing stimulating, active learning opportunities for young children.

### **At only three months of age, infants are capable of:**

- Laughing
- Reaching out
- Having back and forth exchanges of cooing with adults
- Identifying voices and faces
- Using various cries to express different needs.
- Anticipating routine activities
- Searching for sound
- Repeating activities that have produced interesting results

*"All children have preparedness, potential, and curiosity; they have interest in relationship, in constructing their own learning, and in negotiating with everything the environment brings to them."*  
(Gandini, Etheredge & Hill, Eds, 2008, p. 25)

These powerful skills show that even early in life, infants are developing in many ways.

Believing that young children are competent is a strength-based way of thinking that will encourage children's independence and competence as they grow, mature, and achieve new skills.

Observing closely to understand and respond to the cues of infants demonstrates that they are worth listening to and have something worthy to tell us even if it is not with words. For example, if an infant is gazing towards the window, an educator could respond by picking up the child and taking her to the window to look out. Further, the educator could model vocabulary while describing what is visible through the window.





## Additional examples of educator actions that represent the belief that infants and toddlers are competent learners:



### Providing real art materials such as paint and clay for children to explore

- Providing safe spaces and opportunities for children to explore large muscle movement
- Designing environments so that children can access materials independently
- Supplying materials that allow for the exploration of temperature, texture, size, and shape as well as materials that can be taken apart, opened, and closed, filled and dumped
- Allowing children to clean up minor messes they may have created, such as sweeping up sand spilled from the sand table
- Giving children real tools such as spoons to feed themselves, even if it is messy
- Honoring children's preferences; for example, putting them down if they do not wish to be carried or allowing them to choose whether or not they would like to paint at the same time as the other children
- Allowing infants/toddlers to make choices about which books they would like to look at or have read to them
- Permitting children to decide when an activity is complete
- Giving full attention to infants during routine activities such as diaper changing to convey that they are valued and cherished
- Encouraging mobile children to walk to the diaper-changing area instead of carrying them
- Encouraging toddlers to pull up their own pants after diaper changing
- Allowing toddlers to put on their own shoes

*"As they play, these young explorers can be totally absorbed. Opening and shutting, filling, and dumping, and picking up and dropping are endlessly fascinating activities that challenge infants' mobility and dexterity as well as their ideas about objects and what they can do."*

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 61)

Thoughtful planning and patience allow children to develop independence and to grow socially and emotionally in a safe and supervised environment.

## Quality in Action

After noticing that this child was interested in lacing activities, the educator responded by showing the child two buckets of beads on the shelf.

The child examined the beads and selected a few rubber beads out of the bucket. She put a bead on her string and watched it fall right off the end of the string. She looked at the bead on the floor and at the string. She handed the string to the educator who tied a knot in the end and returned it to the child.

The child examined the knot and then returned her attention to the beads. She selected all the rubber beads and began lacing the beads one after another, carefully moving each bead along the string as far as it would go. When she had used all the rubber beads, she began to use the plastic beads until the string was full. She looked in the bucket to discover there was one bead left.

She attempted to add the last bead to the string but realized it would not fit. She then tried to add it to the bottom of the string but realized that would not work either. She put the bead back in the bucket and happily examined her string full of beads and gently swung it around.

**Viewing this toddler as a competent child, the educator is able to observe many areas of competency demonstrated by the child during this activity:**

- Ability to recognize the differences between the attributes of the beads
- Ability to make decisions
- Fine motor control to be able to lace the beads
- Hand-eye coordination required for lacing
- Ability to nonverbally request assistance from adults (to tie the knot in the end)
- Perseverance in attempting various ways to add the final bead
- Acceptance that the last bead would not fit
- Ability to decide how to proceed when confronted with a challenge
- Self-regulation of emotion in handling unexpected difficulties
- Sense of pride and accomplishment at the completion of her task
- Confidence in exploring and interacting with the materials in various ways

## Reflection and Decision Making

### Reflection

What do I believe about the competency of infants and toddlers? Do these beliefs impact the learning opportunities I provide for children?

### Action

How can I adjust my practice to treat infants and toddlers as competent learners?

### Evaluation

How will it be evident in my practice that I view infants and toddlers as competent learners? What will it:

- look like?
- sound like?
- feel like?



## How Infants and Toddlers Learn

Infants are in the sensory motor stage of development and therefore learn by exploring and receiving feedback from their entire body. As they develop control over their muscles, they are able to gradually focus their learning.

Infants and toddlers learn through all of their senses by touching, smelling, hearing, seeing, and tasting the items in their environment. They gain valuable information about their world. This interaction with materials offers experience and knowledge upon which to build later experiences.

Recent brain development research has given us valuable information for working with young children. We now know that while the physical brain is developed at birth, the early experiences of children have a huge influence on brain development. Synapses are connections that form between neurons in the brain.

Exploring new materials allows new synapses to form. These connections in the brain help various parts of the brain work together to process information more effectively and to derive meaning from the sensory experiences in which children take part. Repeated exposure to positive interactions and experiences builds stronger connections that can be maintained through life.

*“Babies are naturally curious. They are driven to explore, to learn, and to practice new skills. They need constant, safe opportunities to move about and try things for themselves -- with adults available to steer them away from danger and support and celebrate their successes.”*

(Johnson, 2010, p. xii)

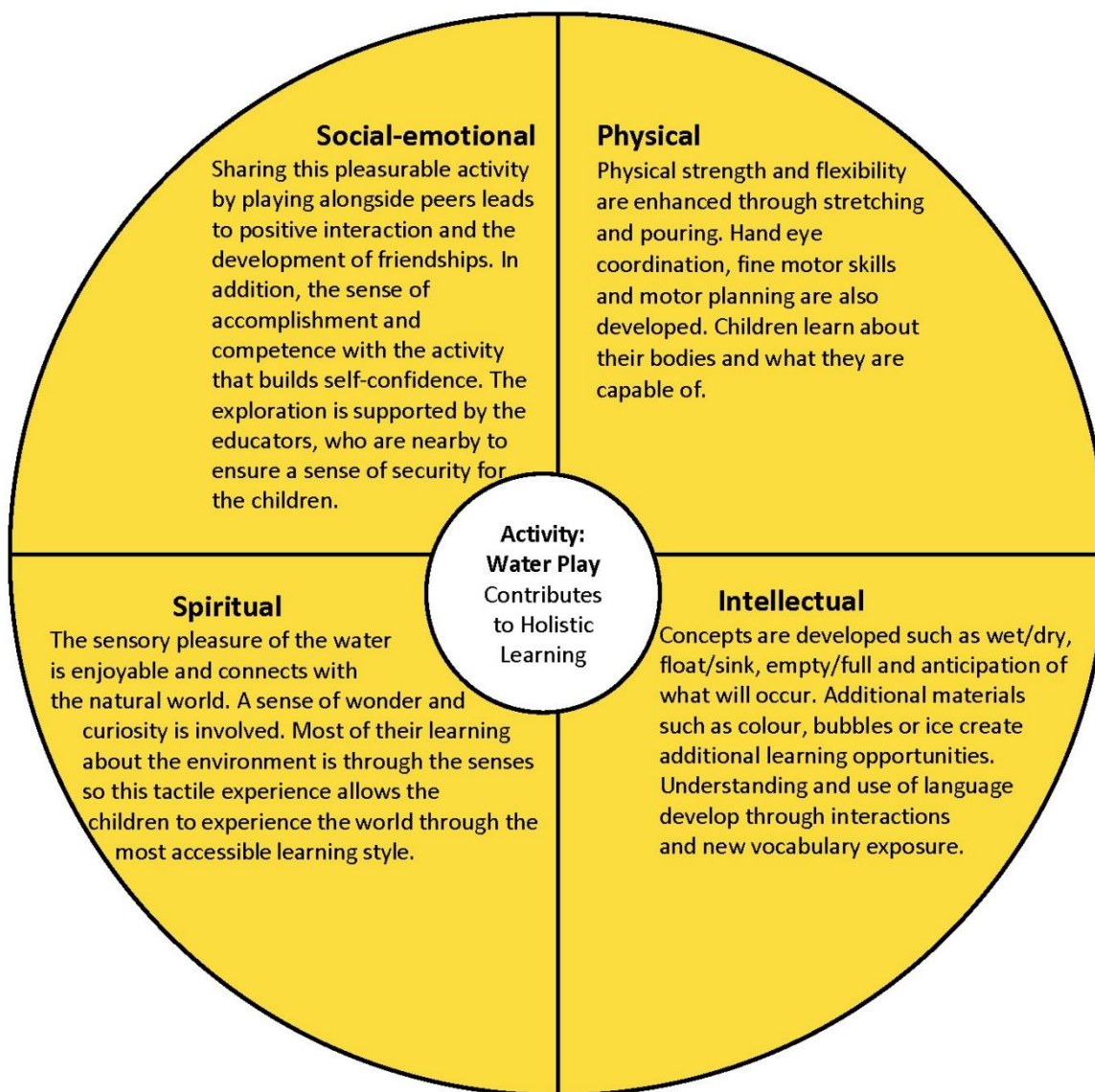


**Provide children with numerous opportunities to touch, explore and manipulate (play with) different materials from an early age.**

## Reflecting on Holistic Learning and Development

How can a play activity represent holistic learning and development? The illustration below outlines how water play contributes to holistic learning.

The educators' role is to be mindful of all areas of development as they support children in their play and plan for additional learning experiences.



Note: A blank copy of this resource can be found in the Resource Sheet section of *Play and Exploration Early Learning Program Guide*

## Intellectual Development

Research has confirmed that there is an astounding amount of development in children's brains during the infant and toddler years. This development sets the stage for later capabilities. Early childhood educators create learning experiences that allow children to reach their maximum potential.

As infants and toddlers gradually explore their environments, they are observing and learning cause and effect. "If I do this ... then this ... happens." This learning can be observed when infants discover their toes, learn to roll over, crawl, balance and walk.

We observe children's intellectual development as they learn that shaking a rattle produces noise; something is not gone when out of sight (peek-a-boo); items can change shape (doors open and close, lids come off and go back on); or that items must be smaller than the hole in order to go inside (such as shape sorters or stacking blocks). Children must have repeated and varied experiences with these concepts in order to build understanding. Intentional planning by the educator ensures materials and experiences are offered to children to enhance intellectual development.



Observing and responding are key components to enhance learning. Consider this example: An infant may accidentally kick a toy, which then makes a sound; the child stops kicking and turns her head to listen; then she might kick out again to see what happens.

### **To further learning, the educator could:**

- Ensure the toy is reachable for the repeated kick attempts
- Show the infant the toy and how it makes noise
- Place the toy near the infant's hand so he/she can reach out and explore the item through tactile (touch) and visual means
- Provide additional materials with similar properties to explore
- Talk about the toy and pause to allow the infant an opportunity to respond

### **How can you encourage intellectual development in infants and toddlers?**

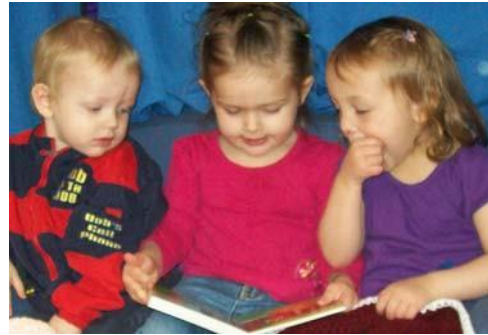
- Provide a safe and stimulating environment for children to explore
- Objects to look at and reach for
- Objects that can be used in different ways
- Materials appealing to infants placed close to them but slightly out of reach so that they must problem solve how to get them
- Toys and other objects with sound effects that are easily triggered by infants' reaching or kicking
- Materials for children to dump/fill and carry around
- Encourage children to imitate sounds and actions
- Play games that teach object permanence (peek-a-boo, hide and find a toy under a blanket)
- Establish consistent schedules and routines to allow infants and toddlers to anticipate events
- Respond consistently to the children's cues
- Expose infants and toddlers to language stimulation

## Language Development

The development of communication and language from birth to age three is a critical and amazing process. During this time, the brain is preprogrammed to learn language. The process of learning language involves nonverbal communication, processing of sounds into meaningful messages and learning to reproduce those sounds to create spoken language. This complex process goes quite smoothly for most children, and it is critical to provide support and opportunities for the child's exploration and development of language during this time.

### How can educators encourage language development in infants and toddlers?

- Talk with young children about what they are experiencing and/or what is in the environment
- Take turns cooing and babbling with babies
- Make eye contact with babies – not all communication is verbal
- Look at books together and talk about the pictures
- Sing with babies, recite rhymes, and share oral stories
- Listen to children and respond whether they are speaking real words or not. Imitation of the babble they create can be a response.
- Enjoy genuine conversations with children during regular care routines such as snack, meal time, diaper changing and settling for nap
- Provide toddlers with choices to encourage them to use words; for example, "Would you like milk or water?"
- Model appropriate vocabulary rather than baby talk; for example, "blanket" instead of "banky-wanky"
- Introduce new vocabulary to children through genuine and meaningful experiences; for example, the word "hamster" could be introduced at the pet store while you are showing a hamster to the children.



## English as an Additional Language

It is now quite common in our society to have children in a child care setting whose primary language is not English. Some may never have heard English, and their parents may have little to no proficiency with the English language.

Caring for and interacting with dual language learners can prompt many questions for educators: whether to be concerned if children are not using English according to the norms of child development or whether it will be detrimental to a child's language development (set them behind) to learn more than one language.

Children who have been exposed primarily to one language and then to another may take longer to begin speaking. Especially during the initial months of exposure to a new language, they may be quiet while they absorb the language and build confidence and competence. During this time educators monitor for understanding and provide visual supports as needed to ensure comprehension.

*"An effective learning environment for the young dual language learner is one in which strategies are in place to intentionally and continuously support bilingualism. Such practice validates children's home language. It also helps them develop a sense of self."*

(Prieto, 2009, p. 52)

Children have the capacity to learn more than one language at a time. In fact, the brain is preprogrammed to learn language and young children can easily learn more than one language if exposed to it regularly and encouraged to use their language skills (Trister Dodge, 2006; Prieto, 2009).

Educators should encourage parents to continue to speak their home language with their child. Pride in culture as well as the sense of belonging through being able to communicate with family members and others within their cultural community is important (Prieto, 2009).

Educators can learn and use a few words in the child's home language to encourage pride in language and culture.



### How can you encourage children learning more than one language?

- Respect cultural diversity of families including their home language
- Reassure parents that continuing to speak their home language with the child is beneficial and won't harm the child's learning of English
- Use interpreters if needed to communicate with parents to establish a positive relationship
- Ask family members to teach you a simple song, rhyme, or words of comfort in the home language that you can share with the children



- Record family members reading/telling a story and play it for the children
- Greet children using their home language
- Provide a language rich environment. Introduce vocabulary by verbally labeling (naming) items in the environment that the child is interested in or interacting with
- Be responsive to the children's needs and interests

## Social-Emotional Development

Social skills are learned from birth. Infants need to experience positive interactions and relationships in order to master self-regulation and develop healthy relationships later. The development of relationships and social skills is influenced by both interactions with and attachment to caregivers as well as by individual temperaments.

Babies enter the world ready for relationships (Zero to Three, 2008). They are interested in faces and people and are able to recognize voices. Young infants (birth to nine months) seek security. They rely on and trust the adults in their lives to make them comfortable, to keep them safe and to be predictable and responsive to their needs. Infants who are treated with respect and caring by an educator learn that their needs will be met and thus are able to develop trust and emotional security.

These relationships with caring responsive adults allow the infant to express, process and learn to regulate their emotions as well as begin to explore their environment.

Once infants start to become mobile, they are able to use the security of the relationship with their educator as a base from which to explore. Infants rely on the educator to provide interesting environments and activities to explore.

As infants transition to toddlers, they are able to distance themselves more from their educator and begin to see themselves as separate from the adult. This helps children form their own identity and sense of self.



*"Through relationships with important adults in their lives, infants and toddlers develop mental health, or social emotional wellness, which includes that ability to form satisfying connections with others, play, communicate, learn and experience the full spectrum of human emotions."*

(Parklakian & Seibel, 2002, p. 1)



*“A healthy attachment between a child and at least one adult helps to ensure that the neural pathways within the child’s brain become sculpted with the best possible connections made to handle stress, reduce anxiety, and easily absorb new information and experiences.”*  
(Miller, 2001)

### **How can you encourage social development in infants and toddlers?**

- Welcome all children and parents warmly so they feel accepted and that you are truly glad to see them
- Identify emotions for infants and toddlers; for example, “You look sad. You have tears on your face” or “You look angry”
- Model positive options for toddlers to express their feelings “You look upset. You could say ‘I am angry’
- When children are upset, help them to relax or divert their attention through comments such as, “Would you like to cuddle and read a book or play by yourself at the light table for a little while?”
- Assist children in recognizing the feelings of others and model an appropriate response; “Mikayla looks sad, I wonder if she would like her blanket?”
- Praise children for positive choices such as comforting a friend
- Avoid discussing negative observations about children or their families in front of them, even very young children who we may believe are too young to understand
- Follow a predictable schedule that allows infants to feel safe and secure
- Situate non-mobile infants where they are able to view and interact with other children
- Place mirrors at the child’s level to assist them in developing their identity



### **Attachment**

Attachment is one of the most important factors to consider for infants and is believed to influence relationships with others later in life. Miller (2001) has highlighted numerous long-term results linked to forming a healthy attachment with at least one adult early in life.

- Higher self-esteem and confidence
- Greater willingness to explore
- Better ability to deal with emotions
- Fewer behavioral problems in school
- Greater problem-solving abilities and coping skills
- Better communication skills and higher literacy levels
- Better social skills and more positive relationships with other children

It is important to ensure that the attachments that form are positive. Healthy relationships allow children to be more resilient and are a protective factor that can reduce the impact of other unhealthy influences that the child may encounter.

## How can you promote healthy attachments for infants?

- Pair each child with a primary educator
- Practice responsive care by picking up crying children and being alert for signs of hunger and tiredness
- Provide calm and relaxed care
- Ensure predictable pleasant routines for eating, sleeping and diapering
- Hold and communicate (speak/sing) to infants during bottle feeding
- Respond to children's attempts to communicate through a verbal response, positive physical contact, or adjustment to the environment (e.g., adding music and materials for visual stimulation)
- Talk to children about their experiences to help them learn to identify emotions and make sense of their world
- Communicate and build relationships with the parents or primary care giver to benefit both children and families



Family members can sometimes become concerned if they think their child is growing too attached to persons outside of the family. They may be concerned that this close connection to someone else diminishes their role and that consequently their child will not be as close to them. It is reassuring to share with families that educators are not trying to replace the role or relationship of the primary care giver. Infants are able to form bonds with many adults in their life. The more healthy attachments a child forms with caring adults, the better it is for the development of the child.

*"Healthy attachments to other significant care givers do not take away from a child's attachment to his or her mother. In fact, the more healthy attachments a child has, the greater chance the child has to develop resilience -- the vital ability to cope with life and all its ups and downs."*  
(Miller, 2001)

## Temperament

Every child is unique and special. Even very young infants have their own personalities and likes and dislikes. Children can be easygoing or demanding. One infant may be easily soothed and distracted while another demands immediate attention. These differences influence how we respond and interact with children, especially in group care situations.

Every individual has specific and personal tolerance levels that can vary based on factors such as tiredness or hunger. One child may be content in an environment with lots of activity and another child may be over stimulated and become upset quickly by too much activity. Educators should be observant of these personal preferences and tolerance levels and reflect on how they influence the care provided

*"Babies learn through movement. As they move their arms, legs and other body parts and encounter the world through touching and being touched, babies become more aware of how their bodies move and feel. They soon discover that they can change what they see, hear, or feel through their own actions -- how delightful to kick, see the mobile move and, be able to do it again."*

(Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 55)

## Physical Development

Babies learn about their bodies including how their body parts feel and how they move by exploring, rolling, climbing, falling, and experiencing touch from others.

During the first few years of life, children experience amazing changes in both body size and control over the movements of their body. In the first-year children typically double their body weight and learn to smile, hold up their head, roll over, sit independently, scoot and/or crawl, pull themselves into a standing position, walk with support and perhaps even take their first independent steps.

Children achieve these milestones at different rates, but they follow a predictable pattern. Average ages for skill development provide an idea as to when the skills will likely be accomplished but these are guidelines, and some variance is expected. Educators are able to support development by providing appropriate experiences based on developmental progress and ensure the safety and learning of children as they pass these milestones.

### How can you encourage physical development in infants/toddlers?

Provide stable and safe equipment for infants to pull themselves up to stand and walk from one space to another (such as mirrors with a pull up bar or low shelving)

Encourage infants to explore their toes and rattles and to interact with people and other aspects of their environment

- Play music and encourage children to dance and move
- Add props such as tunnels, pillows, mats, and boxes to explore under, over, in, out and through
- Provide riding toys that can be pushed with the feet to challenge children as they grow and acquire more advanced large muscle skills
- Expose children to various types of materials to crawl or walk on indoors and outdoors, as well as slopes or hills to climb up and roll down
- Provide soft balls to roll, throw and kick
- Model different body movements and encourage children to imitate
- Use dramatic play props (such as a horse, duck, or frog) to encourage children to move in different ways



## Spiritual Development

Spiritual development begins in infancy with feelings of security and a sense of wonder. Feeling loved and cared for establishes a sense of worth and inner peace even in very young children. This feeling of belonging and having a place in the world is vital to healthy development.

Offering experiences that invoke curiosity and wonder nourish spiritual development. Many of these experiences for young children will be through sensory explorations both indoors and outdoors in the natural world. During outdoor time they can be encouraged to appreciate nature, observe its beauty, and wonder and treat it with respect.

We can see and hear positive spiritual development in the smiles, laughs, giggles and content cooing of infants. These behaviours are the evidence of being cherished. Being valued assists children to build relationships where they can value and care for other people.



### How can you encourage spiritual development in infants/toddlers?

- Treat all children and their families with respect
- Encourage, support, and show affection for the children in your care
- Build relationships and observe children closely so they are able to feel safe, secure and loved
- Model an appreciation of the people, materials, and experiences in your own life
- Smile and laugh with children
- Slow down and appreciate the small moments with the children
- Create opportunities for children to observe and interact with living things. For example, observe birds, butterflies, and bugs; feel the bark of a tree; crawl in the grass or play in autumn leaves
- Cloud watch with children
- Encourage sensory play: sand, dirt, water, snow, etc.



### Quality in Action

Often educators provide playdough as an activity for young children. Sometimes preschoolers are allowed to make the playdough... but what about younger children? Are infants and toddlers capable of this task as well?

These early childhood educators believed so. The educators pre-measured the ingredients for making playdough and gave them to the children as an opportunity or an invitation for learning.

This authentic and holistic learning activity allowed the children the opportunity to combine the ingredients and experiment with spoons to mix the ingredients. Physical development was enhanced through the mixing process; intellectual development through the observation of the changes that occur to the ingredients when they were combined; spiritual development through the wonder of creating something; and social-emotional development through the pride of accomplishment and positive interactions with others.

The educators also believed the children were competent enough to clean up when the activity was completed, further advancing the children's belief in themselves as capable and competent.

## Reflection and Decision Making

### Reflection

How am I currently considering holistic development in the opportunities I provide to young children?

### Action

How can I encourage myself and others to practice a holistic approach to caring for children?

### Evaluation

How will I know that I am successfully planning for the holistic development of young children?



## Relationships with Infants/Toddlers and their Families

### Role of the Educator

*“The one critical thing we can do to promote and foster resilience is to make sure every child grows up having a positive relationship with a competent, caring care giver. Making sure every child has a supportive, positive relationship with at least one adult is the most powerful protective factor we can provide. The bottom-line conclusion... is that resilience is about relationships.”*

(The Learning Partnership, 2009, p.6)

The educator’s role is to thoughtfully plan activities for infants and toddlers to explore in an environment in which they feel safe and secure. Educators should know not only what they are doing but also why they are doing it. To be effective in providing responsive and developmentally appropriate care and learning environments for infants and toddlers, an educator must have a good understanding of child development and high-quality practice.

The first responsibility that educators have is to know the children in their care. Observe the children and converse with their families. What do the children like to do? How do they behave when hungry, tired or in new situations? What routines are they used to? How do they prefer to fall asleep? In which positions do they prefer to be held, fed, and burped? What other preferences do they have? What other information may be relevant to providing quality care?

*“The key element to keep in mind when caring for babies is that relationships are primary to infant health, especially in the early years of life.”*

(Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles, 2008, p. 23)

By knowing the individual needs and preferences of children, the educator is able to be responsive. When children are comfortable and their needs are met quickly, they will view the environment as predictable and safe. Children realize that the educator will respond appropriately. This positively affects the children’s sense of security, safety, and confidence.

Routines allow young children to feel comfortable and relaxed. Having a predictable routine decreases anxiety, which can be caused by fear or insecurity of what might happen next. It is important not to over schedule the children with too many transitions. Following the children’s lead will assist in determining a responsive and comfortable daily schedule.

Young children thrive on repetition. They love to look at the same books, sing the same songs and play the same games over and over again. Repeating these experiences is critical for infants and toddlers to develop language skills and a sense of security. Introduce new material slowly and balance it with familiar objects. Care routines such as diapering and feeding should be pleasant and interactive, so children develop positive ideas about their bodies and themselves. This is a great opportunity for one-on-one interaction to convey to the child that he or she is valued and cherished.

## Connections with families

It is difficult for parents or primary caregivers to leave their infant or toddler in the care of someone else. They may never have left their baby with anyone except close family members or friends. Care providers must acknowledge that parents' anxiety about separation is a real issue in order to build a trusting relationship.

In order to understand what families believe and value about raising their children, educators can initiate discussion to determine what is important to the family. Be sure to ask questions that clarify information and avoid making assumptions.

Understanding the diverse perspectives of the families ensures that family values are respected and accommodated as appropriate and promotes a team approach to caregiving that benefits the children.

### How can you develop relationships with families?

- Ensure children have one primary educator to enhance attachment to the educator and build a relationship with the families
- Follow an open door policy so parents and families always feel welcome
- Prepare a welcome area with comfortable seating, natural elements, reference materials and documentations of the children's learning activities for families to enjoy
- Greet each child and parent warmly by name upon arrival each day
- Allow time daily for the child to transition into the environment and for families to share any relevant information upon arrival
- Invite families into the facility by providing many opportunities for family involvement. Families may attend special events, e.g. ("Meet Your Child's Friends Day"), share story time or an art activity; demonstrate a special talent; assist on a field trip or a walk to the park; or meet or join the board of directors
- Research and ask parents about the cultural practices of families in order to better understand their beliefs and the implications for care of their children
- Show respect for family cultures and beliefs by reflecting them in the child care environment, including a display of photos of the children's families
- Display documentation of children's learning experiences and new accomplishments to share with families
- Share photos of children engaged in play with the parents so they can feel informed and see that their children are settled in the environment
- Use various methods of communication such as telephone calls, scheduled meetings, e-mail updates and newsletters in addition to daily exchanges
- Record daily care information such as diapering and eating to ensure families receive necessary information even if there is a staff change during the day
- Develop a transition plan for new children with the family



## Reflection and Decision Making

### Reflection

How do I partner with parents/families? What opportunities for family involvement, sharing and relationship building do I provide in the early learning environment?

### Action

What will I do to enhance family partnerships? How will the early learning environment reflect this?

### Evaluation

How will I know I have improved family partnerships?

## Environments for Infants and Toddlers

Environments should be relaxed, safe and comfortable. A home-like feel is ideal, so children and families feel welcome and content. Prepare spaces for children to be quiet, cozy and cuddled by educators as well as spaces to actively explore, build and create.

Environments for infants/toddlers need to be a mix of novel materials and activities for exploration and stimulation as well as familiar and predictable materials and activities for comfort and security.

Very young infants, who are not yet mobile, rely on the educator to bring items to them. As infants become mobile, the educator can intentionally place materials nearby to encourage them to move to interact with the materials.

Infants spend a lot of time on the floor, which must be clean and comfortable. Display interesting things to look at, such as photos at the child's level. For infants and toddlers, the child's level means very low on the wall or even on the floor.

Place pictures or work that children have created under plexi-glass and allow children to walk, crawl, roll, or lie on the item to view the image.

Infants also spend a lot of time looking up at the ceiling. What impact does this have on environmental design? Are there interesting things to look up at in areas where children are lying down? Would it be possible to have something interesting for children to look up at during diapering routines?

Mirrors provide opportunities for children to see themselves in the reflection and to observe how their bodies look and move. Observing their bodies develops children's self-confidence and awareness.

Intentional placement of materials is an important determining factor of their effectiveness. For example, where should mirrors be placed in an infant or toddler environment for the most effective impact on learning?

Toddlers require room to move and explore. They are now capable of walking, running, jumping, and climbing and want to use these skills to explore their world. Their fine motor skills are advancing as well as their social development, which allows for new challenges and experiences. They enjoy more imaginative play and more complex interactions with peers so their environment should provide opportunities to engage in these types of activities.

See the supporting materials online for more information and examples regarding learning environments for infants and toddlers.

*"The spaces that teachers create for children seem to hold enduring memories for them that have a powerful influence on what they will value later in life. It is important, therefore, that teachers think carefully about their own values and how they affect the decisions they make about the arrangement of space, equipment, and materials in the classroom."*

(Fraser, 2006, p. 102)

*"What a difference it makes in the toddlers' behaviour when these types of things are set out for them. Normally we experience some running around and throwing stuff, but these have kept their interest for so long, the day goes by so quickly!!! I will certainly continue to set up frequent invitations."*

(a Saskatchewan early childhood educator, 2010)

## What About Invitations for Learning?

Providing invitations for infants and toddlers does not need to be intimidating. Invitations provide an appealing way to present an opportunity for children to explore materials. An educator usually plans an invitation in response to children's interests or to extend previous learning. An 'invitation to learning' may also be prepared to introduce new concepts, words, or skills. An educator may want to use an invitation to introduce a new book by combining it with related materials.

### Infant invitations may include:

- A paddling pool with warm water and some sink/float materials
- A large box to climb in and out of
- A blanket on the floor with materials hanging above it so babies can touch and move them
- Blocks with various textures
- Balls of various sizes and textures

### Toddler invitations may include:

- Balls and clear tubing
- Pussy willows, pine cones and cattails
- Water table with some clear containers to pour and scoop with
- Selection of blocks and a book with pictures of buildings
- Rubber boots and a puddle
- Clear flexible tubing and funnels attached to the fence

A caution when providing invitations for very young children is that they learn through oral experiences or by putting objects in their mouth. For this reason, it is necessary to ensure that children are carefully supervised and that materials are nontoxic and are not choking hazards. In addition, care should always be taken when children are in the proximity of water.

See the supporting materials online for more information regarding infant and toddler invitations for learning.



## Reflection and Decision Making

### Reflection

What does the environment look like from the perspective of an infant or toddler? (Get down on the floor and look around). What feelings come to mind based on these observations?

### Action

What changes can I make to the environment to support active learning for infants and toddlers?

### Evaluation

How will I know that the learning environment is effective? How will I know that the environment supports engaging learning experiences for infants and toddlers?



## Key Recommended Resources

Attachment Network of Manitoba. (2007). *Listening to baby*. [DVD] Manitoba: Attachment Network.

Greenman, J., Stonehouse, A., & Schweikert, G. (2008). *Primetimes (2nd ed.): A handbook for excellence in infant and toddler programs*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Harvest Resources. (2006). *Visionary infant and toddler program environments*. [CD slideshow].

Isbell, R., & Isbell, K. (2003). *The complete learning spaces book for infants and toddlers*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Kovach, B., & Da Ros-Voseles, D. (2008). *Being with babies: Understanding and responding to the infants in your care*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Post, J., & Hohmann, M. (2000). *Tender care and early learning: Supporting infants and toddlers in child care settings*. Ypsilanti, MI: High Scope.

Smith, D., & Goldhaber, J. (2004). *Poking, pinching & pretending: Documenting toddlers' explorations with clay*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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Zero to Three. (2002). *Building strong foundations: Practical guidance for promoting the social emotional development of infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three.

Zero to Three. (2008). *Caring for infants & toddlers in groups: Developmentally appropriate practice (2nd ed.)*. Washington, DC: Zero to Three. [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

### For Leaders

Carter, M., & Curtis, D. (2010). *The visionary director (2nd ed.): A handbook for dreaming, organizing and improvising in your center*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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- Johnson, J. (2010). *Babies in the rain: Promoting play, exploration, and discovery with infants and toddlers*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
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Raikes, H., & Pope Edwards, C. (2009). *Extending the dance in infant & toddler caregiving*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishing, NAEYC.

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. (2008). *Play and exploration: Early learning program guide*. Regina: Author.

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## Appendix A: Considerations for Administrators and Families of Infant/Toddler Programs

Key Practice	Applaud	Question
<b>Respect for children during care routines</b>  Diapering  Feeding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator uses change table for all diaper changes</li> <li>• Children are cleaned and creams are applied as needed to ensure comfort and health</li> <li>• Conversations occur with children making the daily care routine a pleasant experience</li> <li>• Infants are held during bottle feedings</li> <li>• Educators speak or sing comfortingly to infants as they eat</li> <li>• Educator discontinues feeding children who turn their heads away</li> <li>• Children are provided healthy meals and snacks such as fresh fruit and vegetables, whole grains, milk</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educator changes wet diapers while children are standing to save time</li> <li>• Children are only cleaned when absolutely necessary (bowel movement)</li> <li>• Educator does not converse with children during diapering routines</li> <li>• Children are shamed for toileting accidents</li> <li>• Infants are laid on the floor and/or bottles are propped</li> <li>• Educator continues to feed children who have indicated they are no longer hungry</li> <li>• Educators provide unhealthy meals or snacks such as cheezies, candy, jello, cake, cookies</li> </ul>
<b>Respect for families</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children and families are welcomed on arrival every day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators are busy and only acknowledge the children when parents bring them to the educator</li> </ul>
<b>Responsive care</b> Persistent crying  Attention to children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educators respond to crying children quickly</li> <li>• Educators ensure basic needs have been met and then comfort children until they calm down</li> <li>• Educators are supportive and assist children to learn to calm themselves as appropriate</li> <li>• Caregiver is focused on the children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are left to cry it out</li> <li>• Caregivers do not provide basic needs until the scheduled time, making children wait for food or diaper changes</li> <li>• Children are placed in a crib or playpen and left to figure out how to calm themselves</li> <li>• Caregiver is focused on talking with other staff</li> </ul>
<b>Relationships</b> Consistent caregiver  Transition to care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children have one primary care giver who knows them and their family well</li> <li>• Extra staffing is temporarily provided to allow the care giver to observe and bond with children new to the facility and meet with parents/family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregiver is not consistent or turnover is frequent</li> <li>• Facility has no plan to help children become comfortable in the new environment and bond with caregiver</li> </ul>

<b>Environment</b>		
Displays	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Photos of the children engaged in various activities and family photos are evident in the environment</li> <li>• Art work on display is unique and created by the children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The children are not able to see themselves or their families in photos in the environment</li> </ul>
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Display materials reflect the recent interests and activities of the children</li> <li>• Care givers ensure safety hazards are quickly rectified (e.g., plug ins capped)</li> <li>• Child sized shelving, seating, and other materials</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Displayed materials are commercially produced or crafts are all identical</li> <li>• Displays are not current</li> </ul>
Accessibility of materials	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children can safely access materials independently</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caregivers do not observe potential hazards</li> <li>• Feet do not touch the floor when sitting in chair</li> <li>• Children are required to ask for materials</li> </ul>
Learning experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children are encouraged to actively explore their environment and materials in the environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children spend a significant amount of time in a crib, playpen, swing, or other restrictive equipment</li> </ul>

A more complete chart of appropriate practices is available in the resource book *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, pp. 76 - 90 for infants and pp. 90 - 107 for toddlers.

## Appendix B: Online Supports Slide Show Viewing Suggestions

For those interested in accessing the slideshow, visit: [earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca](http://earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca)

The slide shows may be of interest to a variety of individuals or groups that may include:

- Educators who care for infants and toddlers
- Family child care home providers
- Educators who care for preschoolers (the ideas can be adapted)
- Child care directors
- Board members
- Private care providers
- Parents
- Community organizations who work with child care and/or infants and toddlers
- *KidsFirst*
- Speech language pathologists
- Occupational or physical therapists
- Early childhood psychologists
- Early Childhood Intervention Programs (ECIP)
- Others who are interested in providing high quality care for infants and toddlers in Saskatchewan

### Ways to Share the Slide shows:

#### Educators:

- View a slide show during planning time, then discuss with colleagues
- Take turns leading a discussion including why the topic is important and the relevance to site (e.g., physical, social development or the role of the educator)
- Present information highlighting items of importance and relevance to the board of directors
- Share ideas and develop a plan with the director and board for changes
- Use the chart provided to record ideas while viewing the slideshow

#### Child Care Directors

- Dedicate a staff meeting to view a slide show and engage in a discussion
- Discuss particular areas with individual staff based on their interests
- View and/or have previewed the slide shows and discuss at a regional director's meeting
- Discuss plans for implementation with your early learning and child care consultant
- View slide shows several times to focus on different areas or perspectives (e.g., first viewing focus on environment; a month later view again to focus on role of the educator)
- Present information highlighting items of importance and relevance to the board of directors
- Use the chart provided to record some of your ideas while you are viewing the slide show

#### Board of Directors

- View slide shows either during a meeting or independently prior to a meeting and discuss what supports the board could provide to assist the facility in its journey towards best practice
- View a slide show at each meeting over the next year and engage in a discussion on how the information applies to the centre
- Hold a special meeting with staff to collaboratively plan both short and long term
- View the slide shows, then observe in the centre, and recognize and comment on positive aspects you observe



- Use a portion of a slide show at your Annual General Meeting or other gathering to explain changes you are making to the program to stay current with best practices
- Use the chart provided to record ideas while viewing the slideshow

#### **Guiding Questions for Slide show Discussions**

1. What did you find interesting? Which ideas did you find most exciting?
2. How can we provide a more holistic learning program for the children?
3. Which ideas would you like to implement in the work you do?
4. What changes would you like to make in the environment?
5. What changes would you like to make in the program and/or interactions with the children?
6. What questions do you have? With whom can you discuss your questions?
7. What supports/resources are needed as you explore developing these ideas (e.g., time to collaborate with other staff, further training, reading or site visit)?

Things we are already doing:	Things I would like to try: