



IDEAS FOR TRAINING STAFF

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Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers

Whenever I work with infant and toddler caregivers, I hear stories of how foolish they feel planning a *curriculum* for babies. Curriculum is a school word and obviously, our very youngest children don't need to be in school settings, but rather, home-like environments. How might this home-like context reshape our idea of curriculum? Certainly there are interesting activities we can offer babies, contributing to their brain development and learning, but I believe that building relationships is our primary curriculum with infants and toddlers. In that back and forth dance of reading cues with their caregivers, babies begin to get a sense of who they are, who they can trust, and what is valued and possible in their world. This is curriculum far more significant than the name of some song we write down in a box on a schedule.

Whether changing a diaper, offering food, or playing peek-a-boo, each ordinary exchange with a baby is helping answer fundamental questions for this stage of life:

- Is the world a safe place?
- Will my needs be met?
- Am I a successful communicator?
- How can I get my message across?
- Will you accept my uncensored feelings?

I think of these issues as our *curriculum themes* with infants and toddlers. And though they develop rapidly in their early years, my preference is to think of all children up to the age of three years old as babies. I say this not to demean or discount their capabilities, but rather to

protect this precious time of life from too many adult agendas. Other big themes for these babies include autonomy, separation, and control.

- Can I meet my own needs?
- Do I have any power?
- If we part, will you still be there?

Tending to these themes, rather than more superficial topical ones, can lead to a healthy identity development as babies forge and maintain strong connections with their family and caregivers, and later, others.

Considering what this all means in everyday practice, here are some of the training strategies I often use in my work with infant and toddler caregivers.

Stories Shape Our Lives

While most of us don't have clear memories of the time we were babies, we often have stories or photos, which offer vivid impressions of what we were like as young ones. These impressions stem from the cultural, socio-economic, and emotional context of our families, as well as the historical times and influences into which we were born. If we don't have any stories, physical or emotional mementos from our early childhood, then that absence or void has helped shape our identity development as well.

For very young children in child care settings, we who spend our days with them must spot, tell, and preserve for them the stories that unfold as part of their development and evolution with us. This

should be central to our understanding of curriculum for these young ones.

Strategy:

Remembering stories about you as a baby

Spend time as a staff with each telling a story that has been told about them as a baby. Perhaps it is a story of their birth, how they got their name, or some particular quality, behavior, or pursuit that has become legendary. The vitality that usually accompanies this story telling is worth noting. It leads us to consider the role of stories in shaping our identity.

Strategy:

Read good picture books aloud

To explore the developmental themes for babies I find picture books often more useful than textbooks. For example, *On the Day I Was Born* by Deborah Chocolate (Scholastic, 1995) has illustrations and language that immediately remind us of the themes of softness, a sense of belonging, and being the center of attention and delight of everyone's eye. How can we plan for these themes in our programs?

Another good example is *Welcoming Babies* by Margy Burns Knight (Tilbury House, 1994) which shows how different cultural traditions convey a sense of identity and affinity to young children. Discussing the elements in this book can enlighten our caregiving practices.

Goodnight Moon (Harper, 1947) has simple, clear pictures and text, naming familiar objects over and over again,

reminding us what children need in the way of consistency and routines to feel safe and trusting.

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper, 1942) and *Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara Joosse (Chronicle Books, 1991) emphasize the intense themes of trust and autonomy for toddlers: If I run away, will you come after me? If I have a big tantrum or am naughty, will you still love me? Our curriculum with infants and toddlers is to reassure them of this.

Strategy:
Regularly tell stories of what the babies are doing

A primary component of our curriculum for babies is to make their lives visible with stories told to them, their families, and others in our program. These can be oral or written and supplemented with photographs. In the language of school, these stories might be called reports, portfolios, documentation, or developmental assessments. In the language of home, they are baby books. The important thing is the rich language of detail that we use, the way we show character development, and the child's perspective, rather than adherence to our adult goals or agenda. And, if they are to be stories told back to the babies as well as to adults, the language in some of our stories will need to be visual, simple, lyrical, and rhythmic.

Environments and Interactions Shape Our Stories

Everyday stories are in the making in our child care programs, and our environments and interactions are the primary influences on the authors. Here are some strategies to help staff keep this in mind.

Strategy:
Know your preferences and aversions

Gather a collection of pictures of infants and toddlers in various activities (some likely to be provocative) from magazines, newspapers, and books. Help staff get insight into their own preferences and aversions by answering the following questions for each picture. Honesty is what is important in this activity. There are no right, wrong, or unacceptable answers. The challenge is to become self-aware and then thoughtful on behalf of a healthy identity development for a child like this.

- How does this picture make me feel? What is my uncensored response?
- What do I think this child needs?
- How do I know this?
- What would my response and specific behavior be with this child?

Strategy:
Assess your environment

If we are to create environments which shape wonderful stories for children's lives, we need to be thinking beyond a good rating scale. Have staff draw a brief floor plan of their environment, indoors first, then outdoors. Ask them considerations like these to be filled in with code letters on their floor plan:

- Put an *I* in all the places where the babies' identity, family life, and culture are reflected and nourished.
- Put an *H* where parents feel at home, relaxed, and respected in the room.
- Put a *P* where children can feel powerful, independent, important, and competent.
- Put an *R* where relationships can be nourished with special time, sharing, and enjoyment between caregivers and babies.

Strategy:
Explore the story potential of different materials

Gather collections of home-like materials for staff to explore. Examples might include fabric pieces of different textures and colors, brushes of all kinds, jewelry boxes, eye glass cases, coin purses, a variety of balls, mirrors of all sizes and shapes, gift ribbons of all textures and colors, and tubes of various sizes.

Ask staff to choose one of these collections to explore non-verbally, approaching it as if it is something they have never seen before and want to learn about. After a few minutes of sensory exploration, ask them to take pen and paper and make notes along the following lines:

- List at least five words (adjectives, adverbs) which describe the sensory aspects of the objects.
- List at least five things this object might do or be.
- List some phrases which describe how you might use this object to build a relationship with a baby.
- List at least five things that can be learned when a child uses this object.

Once these lists are made, ask each staff member (or team) to think of a particular baby they know well and imagine that child using these objects. Then, using the notes taken, string some of these words and phrases together to tell a story of how this particular child might use these objects.

By trying to take a child's point of view, this activity can lead to new ideas about the value of ordinary materials and interactions as curriculum for babies. For those hesitant about storytelling or

writing, it also offers a simple strategy to generate words about details to be shaped into stories.

When we train our minds to think about curriculum for babies as a relationship, not a school affair, a new set of possibilities opens up. Caregivers no longer feel foolish, but delighted with what they are learning from and with these little ones.

Margie Carter has a renewed interest in babies now that she is a grandmother of an infant and toddler. She has developed a staff training video, *Time With Toddlers*, which is described on her website at www.ecetrainers.com.

**Order Margie's books on-line by visiting our web site:
www.ChildCareExchange.com.**

**Contact Margie through her web site with Deb Curtis at
www.ecetrainers.com.**