

Who Needs It?

by Laura J. Colker, Amy Laura Dombro,
and Diane Trister Dodge

*Sometimes it seems like all I do is change diapers, wipe snotty noses,
and talk with cranky parents."*

Have you ever felt this way?

If you work as an educator of babies and toddlers, it can be hard to remember how valuable your contributions are as you face the fourteenth diaper change of the day. Or reach for the tissue box once again. Or explain to an upset mother that one of her child's socks is missing. And, yet, educators are the key to quality.

Caring for children under three is an awesome responsibility. We know from research that more growth and development takes place during the first three years of life than at any other time. During these years, children are just finding out who they are, whether they are

worthy of being loved, and if they are competent. Their brains are being "wired" for lifelong learning, thus establishing patterns for emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development.

Those who work with children during the critical period of life are helping to build both a foundation and a future for children and families. Many names are used to describe your role: caregiver, provider, teacher, program leader, or child development specialist. In our minds, you are all these things and more — nurturer and educator, protector and leader. You enable children to realize their promise.



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What Is a High Quality Program for Babies and Toddlers?

Quality is not a goal you achieve and check off as done. Creating a quality program requires your commitment to an ongoing process of learning — about yourself, children, and families. It requires you to constantly assess what you are doing and be flexible enough to change your practices based on what you observe and learn.

Seven key indicators can be used to identify a high quality infant and toddler program.¹

- The program is based on an understanding of child development.
- The program is individualized to meet the needs of every child.
- The physical environment is safe, healthy, and cozily inviting. It contains a variety of toys and materials



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that are both stimulating and familiar.

- Children may select activities and materials that interest them, and they learn by being actively involved.
- Adults show respect for children and interact with them in caring ways.
- Parents feel respected and are encouraged to participate in the program.
- Staff and providers have specialized training in child development and appropriate programming.

While these guidelines may apply to all early childhood programs, there are some specific elements that are especially important for infant and toddler care. We know that at each stage of life children take on special growth tasks related to their socio-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Babies and toddlers are using their senses to explore the people and objects in their world and gain a sense of security and identity. The key to meeting their developmental needs can be found in the relationships children build with the important adults in their lives — including you. This is why it is so important to have small group sizes, low adult-to-child ratios, and primary caregivers paired with each child who stay with the child over time. **The development of trusting, caring relationships should be the focal point of baby and toddler programming.**

Young children need adults who will respond immediately and appropriately. This means not just talking with children in soothing voices, but responding to a child's needs to be held, rocked, and comforted. It also means being a sensitive and responsive communicator.

Even children who are not yet able to talk need you to engage in meaningful conversations with them. Babies and toddlers are most likely to thrive when they are cared for by nurturing educators who are there to share the highs and lows of each and every day, reflecting the child's emotions and experiencing together the joys of childhood.

The Relationship of Curriculum to High Quality Programming

What, why, and how you do things is the essence of a curriculum. A curriculum guides you through the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating developmentally appropriate practices. It is no wonder, then, that every high quality early childhood program ought to have an appropriate curriculum in place.

While most people would agree with this in theory, the idea of having a curriculum for children under three makes some educators simply feel uncomfortable. Believing that children this age are too young to formally educate, those who share this viewpoint frequently cite the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice² as being enough. They rightly note that the guidelines introduce the components of quality as well as defining how to interact in ways that promote children's growth and development.

We take the position, however, that the guidelines alone are not sufficient. While a clear definition of developmentally appropriate practice is a vital part of quality programming, it only provides a basis for a curriculum; it is not a substitute for it. Developmentally appropriate practice does not pull all of the pieces together. This is the role of curriculum.

A curriculum provides a vision of where the use of developmentally appropriate practices will take you. By matching children's needs with goals and strategies for reaching those goals, the curriculum moves children forward toward attainment of their full potential. At the same time, the curriculum helps you address individual and family diversity and shows you how to respond to each child's special circumstances, developmental capabilities, and learning style. It offers the "big picture" of where you want to lead each and every child and family — as well as yourself. It is your blueprint for learning.

What happens if a program does not have a curriculum in place? Too often, programs for infants and toddlers become watered down versions of pre-school programs. Or they follow no model at all. Activity books commonly become poor substitutes for the missing curriculum.

A Curriculum Model for Infants and Toddlers

All curricula should specify **content** (what is to be taught), **processes** (how it is to be taught), and the **context** in which learning best takes place.³ For babies and toddlers, relationships with the important adults in their lives are *the* central context from which curriculum flows.

We visualize curriculum this way:

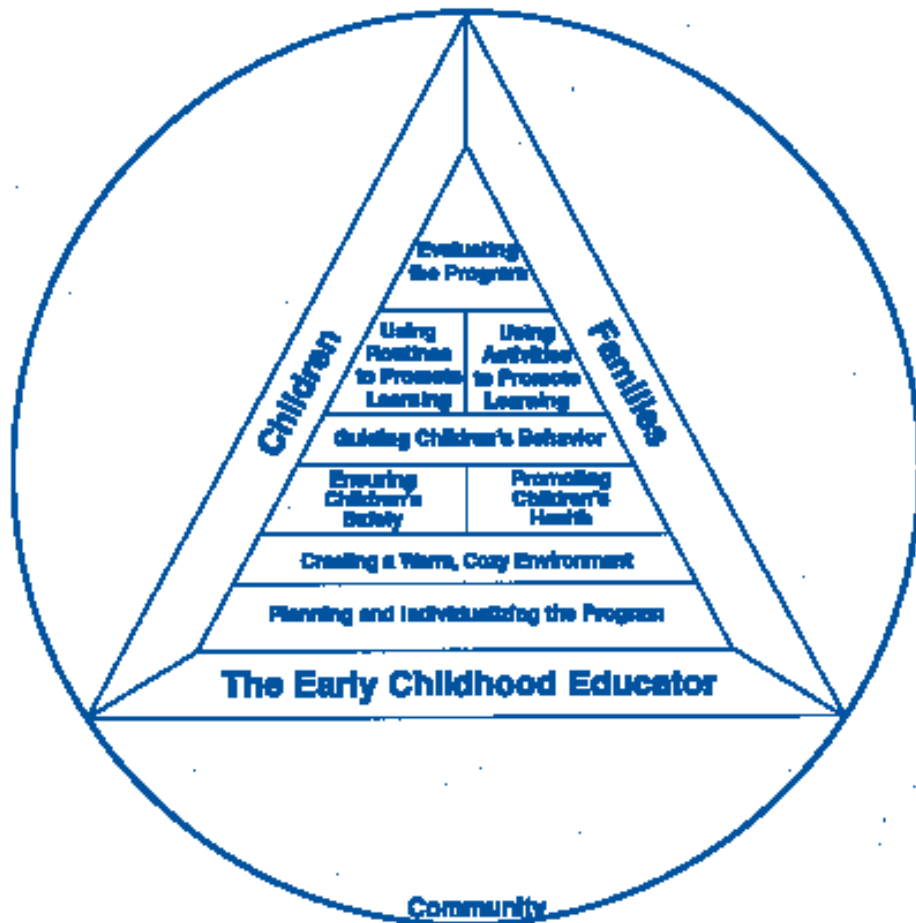
Context —As you can see, it is you, the educator, who is at the foundation of the curriculum. The children and families in your program are the focal point of your work. They are also your equal partners. Your relationship with them is integral to all that happens in your program. Surrounding all of you is the community in which you live. The values and culture held by society are a constant, if less immediate, influ-

ence on all that goes on in your program.

Content — The content of the curriculum emerges from goals and objectives that help children to become confident, competent, and self-fulfilled. Emphasizing the importance that relationships play in the infant and toddler curriculum, we specify goals and objectives not only for children but also for the other key players in the learning process: the children's parents and you, the caregiver. Children do not learn in a vacuum. We are all a part of the community of learners in which children live. As such, the "big picture" for learning includes all those who play a significant role in a child's education.

Processes — To implement the program, you set the stage for learning. You do this by planning and individualizing; by creating a warm, inviting environment; and by ensuring that children are safe and healthy. Through constant observation and reflection, you make appropriate decisions about the children's learning. You strategize ways to help them learn through routines and activities. Finally, you evaluate the program and revise your plans accordingly.

How does this framework translate into practice? How does the curriculum relate to what you do all day long? The best way to illustrate this process is to focus on the concept of decision making. If you think about it, decision



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making is at the core of everything you do. You are constantly making decisions — both big and small — in your work with children and families:

- Should I hand the teething ring to the baby or let her reach for it?
- How can I greet Tiffany and her father if I'm in the middle of changing Julio?
- How many books should I leave out for my toddlers to look at?
- Do dramatic play props reflect the children's home cultures?
- How do I know that the outdoor equipment is safe for the children to use?

- What is the best way to work with Leo's parent to help him use more language?

While decision making occurs whether or not you have a planned educational program, what the curriculum does is to make these decisions **purposeful**. Using this framework, you will not constantly worry, "Did I do the right thing?" You will act based on knowledge, your observation, and thoughtful reflection.

Using a formal curriculum of the type we've described will also help you to become aware of decisions that are sometimes made at what seems like an instinctual, gut level. For example, if two toddlers are fighting over a toy, you — perhaps automatically — step in to mediate the fight. But how you react once you step in demands more than an automatic response. You need to consider the following:

- Is either child being hurt?
- Is comforting needed?

- Are the children likely to resolve the conflict themselves?
- Should you redirect the children's play?

- Do you need to get a duplicate toy to prevent future fights?

Curriculum transforms such decision making into a conscious, thoughtful process. It recognizes that programs, educators, children, and families each have unique goals and needs, and establishes criteria to help you balance those needs. With it, you can make decisions that are appropriate for all of the children and families you serve.

Next Time: "An Infant and Toddler Curriculum in Action: A Day in the Life of an Educator."

Notes

¹ See Derry G. Koralek, Laura J. Colker, and Diane T. Dodge, *The What, Why, and How of High-Quality Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for On-Site Supervision* (Revised Edition). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995, Chapter One, for a further discussion of quality.

² J. Ronald Lally, Abbey Griffin, Emily Fenichel, Marilyn Segal, Eleanor Szanton, and Bernice Weissbound, *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice*. Arlington, VA: ZERO TO THREE/The National Center, 1995.

³ See Sue Bredekamp and Teresa Rosegrant (editors), *Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment for Young Children*, Volume I. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1992, page 10, for a discussion of the definition of curriculum.

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