Building Blocks of Infant/Toddler Development: Relationships, Environment, Experience

Infant/Toddler Community of Practice Seminar
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UW-Madison — Office of Child Care and Family Resources
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**Behaviors Tell a Story**

Infants and toddlers experience feelings of stress, confusion, and excitement much like adults, and sometimes lack the understanding or language to communicate their emotions.

Every child has a unique personality and temperament, and along with it unique needs. Each behavior means something, and there will be times when caregivers may not be able to accurately identify the reasoning for a child’s actions or behavior. In any case, we are their guides - it is essential for a caregiver to be physically, emotionally and mentally available to offer comfort, support and guidance to the child...and understand what the child is trying to tell us.

The following behaviors are common in the lives of infants and toddlers, and are their ways of telling us what is going on inside of them. While adults may be puzzled or perhaps feeling ineffective, it is best to reflect on what the behavior may mean, and try to understand what this behavior is telling us.

By monitoring and regulating our own responses, we serve as a guide and model, helping babies and toddlers to work through the challenging emotions they are experiencing.

**Remember:** loving and responsive relationships give young children a sense of comfort, safety, confidence and encouragement. Strong, positive, supportive relationships help children develop trust, empathy, compassion, and a sense of right and wrong.

### Young Infant (birth to 8 months) — Security

Babies at this stage are learning all about themselves, their people, and their world. They learn what to expect by the way they are treated. The messages they receive in every interaction shape their sense of self-esteem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Possible Meaning</th>
<th>Strategies / Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>They are communicating that they need something</td>
<td>Respond to their needs as quickly as possible. Comfort and reassure child that you are there for them. Calm the environment down; calming behaviors, lots of physical comfort. Tune into their different cries and what they mean.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks at you in interaction, then turns gaze away; wrinkled brow</td>
<td>Baby is tired, overwhelmed, or over-stimulated. Attention or activity is a little too much for them. They're not fond of what is being presented to them.</td>
<td>Take notice, pause, respect their need for a little break. Wait quietly for their cue to resume in the interaction. Once they are rested up, they'll return their gaze and show interest in you again – and engage with them again. If they don't like what you're doing (ie green beans!) relax, and try again later, or try something different.</td>
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### Mobile Infant (6 to 18 months) — Exploration

Young ones at this stage are developing their self-awareness and their love for learning. They learn about their world – and their competence - by exploring everything around them, with adults there to provide a secure base, encouragement, and reassurance. The messages they receive shape their sense of confidence and competence.

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<td>Emotional meltdown</td>
<td>Overwhelmed, unable to cope Disruption of routine (tired, hungry) Frustation (trying to express themselves, trying to complete a challenging task)</td>
<td>Attend to their feelings first, comfort their emotions, calm down. Slow down, take a break. If they are tired or hungry, tend to their needs. Move to possible supports and solutions after they are calm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Again, again!”</td>
<td>Enjoying a novel or well-loved experience, learning moment Repetition – important for brain development Delight, thrill, enjoyment in interacting and in learning</td>
<td>Offer lots of opportunity to explore, repeat, try again! Accept their invitation and give the gift of time. Read that story “one more time” – together!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“No, no, no!”</td>
<td>Asserting independence Experimenting with boundaries Emerging language, limited vocabulary to express their feelings</td>
<td>Offer reasonable choices, describe what they CAN do, then wait for their response. Give simple explanations about ‘ground rules’ –what and why– in positive terms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinginess; difficulty with separation</td>
<td>“I'll miss you!” “I love you!” Separation anxiety Emerging understanding of object permanence Habit (goodbyes at drop-off)</td>
<td>Establish a “Good-Bye” routine, ending with “I love you, I will miss you, I'll be back!” Bring comforting items from home (mom's scarf, pictures, soft blanket) for reassurance. Remember, separation anxiety is a normal and health developmental stage. Support them in working through this in a healthy way.</td>
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### Older Infant (16 to 36 months) — Identity

The toddler at this stage is discovering their sense of self, their identity, their separateness and independence from others. They learn about thoughts and feelings – their own, and others’ – and the social expectations of their world. The messages they receive teach them how to cope with and regulate their emotions, and ways to be a good human being.

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<td>Biting</td>
<td>Teething Experimenting with cause &amp; effect Curiosity Need for attention Frustration Social problem-solving skills and impulse control are developing.</td>
<td>Be clear about unacceptable behavior, in a guidance (not punitive) way. “We bite our food, not people.” Offer items to bite, observe precursors in environment and shadow, guide through frustration by interpreting &amp; giving words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mine”</td>
<td>Sense of identity – of “me” and “others”; of “mine” – is being established Feeding ownership for something: a person, a material, an item They were using something in a learning moment and walked away….and now, they remember that they wanted it!</td>
<td>Provide duplicates of favorite toys when other children are involved. Redirect to other interesting materials, use ‘switching’ strategy. In simple words, explain the situation, and help to resolve the ownership issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I Need My Space”</td>
<td>Sensitive to environment, number of people, social demands. Temperamental differences.</td>
<td>Notice if your child is sensitive to environment and space, respect their tendencies, and plan your environment with ‘own spaces’. Shadow the child in group settings, and coach them in using the words “I Need My Space!”</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*These three developmental stages (Security, Exploration, Identity) were established by PITC.*

www.pitc.org
Domains of Learning and Development

Health and Physical Development  Social and Emotional Development  Language Development and Communication  Approaches to Learning  Cognition and General Knowledge

HP  SE  L  AL  CGK

These domains appear in the “Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards” (WMELS) created by the State of Wisconsin Departments of Children and Families (DCF), Public Instruction (DPI), and Health Services (DHS).

HP1. 
When I take a nap, I...
- Learn to notice how my body is feeling
- Practice soothing myself
- Learn that rest is important

HP2.
When I explore water, sand, leaves and other interesting textures, I am...
- Practicing my fine motor skills
- Learning about the physical properties of materials (texture, softness)
- Learning about spatial relationships (close, far, next to, under)
- Exploring cause and effect
- Building my skills of concentration
- Learning that hands-on manipulation of sensory materials can be calming when I may need to take a break

HP3.
When I am curious and free to naturally explore, I am...
- Building coordination and strength of my body/kinesthetic abilities;
- Learning how my body functions
- Learning about the effects of my actions

HP4.
When you give me the opportunity to run and go fast, I...
- Practice using my body in exciting and skillful ways
- Learn appropriate risk-taking
- Feel your confidence in my judgment
- Learn what is safe and what is not
- Build strength, agility, balance, and control of my movements

HP5.
When I experience rough & tumble play, I...
- Learn to roll, fall, move and bounce in a fun and safe way
- Understand more about how my capabilities and how my body works
- Learn how to plan interesting ways in which to move my body
- Connect what I am thinking with what I can do, a ‘mind/body’ connection

HP6.
When I run, jump, swing, creep, climb, crawl and move in new ways, I...
- Learn how my body moves in space
- Feel competent, confident, and amazing
- Practice and master new challenges
- Learn the value of practice and persistence

SE1.
When you take the time to help me settle into my routine outside of home (child care or care with others), I...
- Feel calm to start my day
- Am not confused
- Learn how to successfully separate from and reunite with you

SE2.
When I cry, I am...
- Letting you know how I feel and what I need
- Looking to you for help in calming, soothing and meeting my needs

SE3.
When I am encouraged to notice other people’s feelings, I am...
- Learning that other people matter and that what I do can make a difference.
- Developing patience and kindness
- Developing the capacity for empathy

SE4.
When I am part of a group experience, I...
- Coordinate my needs with the needs of others
- Practice my language and social skills with more than one person at a time
- Experience joy through relationships with others
- Can refine my listening and attention skills and practice learning how to adjust
- Learn how to take turns

SE5.
When you comfort me, respond to me and my needs, I...
- Learn that my needs are respected and understood
- Know that you understand what I mean to communicate
- Trust that you will be there to help when I need you
- Learn how language and communication work to build our relationship

SE6.
When you hold me close to you, I...
- Feel safe and cared for; I can feel your heartbeat.
- Can follow your lead and calm down when upset
- Learn that how I feel matters
- Feel safe and trust you
- Develop trust and emotional attachment to you

SE7.
When I have to wait a short while sometimes, I am...
- Learning how to calm myself and manage my emotions
- Learning that I am important but separate from you
- Recognizing that I am able, which makes me feel confident

“No significant learning takes place without significant relationship.” —Jeree Pawl
L1. When you talk with me, I….
- Learn about the rhythm of language
- Practice turn-taking, back & forth interaction
- Develop my conversational skills
- Experience the joy of connecting with others through communication

L2. When you read to me, I….
- Feel connected to you
- Learn to find pleasure in books
- Look at what you’re looking at and follow your gaze
- Learn that books can tell a story
- Learn new words and emotions as you expand the stories with me

L3. When you stop to describe, explain and ask questions when we’re reading a book together, I…
- Am expanding my vocabulary and understanding of words
- Learn that books are much more than just words on a page
- Notice how stories convey a message
- Experience the joyful, fun and participatory pleasure of reading

L4. When you describe my world and all that is going on around me, you…
- Give me the words to all the sensations that I experience
- Expand my interests
- Increase my vocabulary and use of language
- Show me how conversation can be informative

L5. When you read songs and rhymes with me, I….
- Practice verbal repetition and expand my vocabulary
- Practice the sounds of letter combinations that I will later use for reading (phonological awareness)
- Refine my pronunciation and increase my articulation skills
- Express myself in another way

L5.

AL1. When you play peek-a-boo and other back-and-forth games with me, I….
- Learn that interactions with others are enjoyable
- Learn the ‘rules’ in playful social interactions
- Can watch and imitate the action of others
- Learn about cause and effect
- Am practicing taking turns

AL2. When I have consistent routines and rituals, I…
- Learn my world is a predictable place
- Know I can count on you
- Feel safe and secure
- Can anticipate what comes next and feel calm
- Begin to understand the concept of time and sequence
- Learn to be patient

AL3. When you give me choices, I….
- Learn to trust my own ideas and identify my preferences
- Start to engage in critical thinking
- Expand my memory by thinking about several things at once
- Know that you trust my opinion
- Feel confident and competent, 'master of the universe'
- Feel empowered as a learner

AL5. When I use art materials in my own way, I….
- Am learning to take responsibility for myself
- Gain experience in my daily living skills
- Am learning more ways to expand my play and use materials in different ways
- Become independent, competent and proud

AL6. When you encourage me to try things myself, I….
- Am learning to practice feeling and expressing different emotions
- Practice social and language skills in familiar roles and relationships
- Practice and learn to understand symbolic use
- Use my imagination and think symbolically
- Can watch and imitate the action of others
- Am learning that thought and ideas can be represented by symbols

CGK1. When I explore toys, I am….
- Developing problem-solving strategies
- Learning that parts make up a whole
- Learning that actions can have an effect
- Learning about the properties of objects
- Increasing my ability to concentrate and complete activities

CGK2. When you provide me with basic, interesting materials, I….
- Can match my interests and abilities at a level that is "just right" for me
- Develop my imagination and thinking skills
- Have another way to communicate with you and others around me

CGK3. When I scribble, I….
- Am learning to express myself in a different way
- Develop fine motor strength and finger control that I will use in writing
- Am learning that thought and ideas can be represented by symbols

CGK4. When I pretend, I….
- Use my imagination and think symbolically
- Practice and learn to understand familiar roles and relationships
- Practice social and language skills in meaningful ways
- Can practice feeling and expressing different emotions
- Help you understand and engage with me

“A child needs the enduring irrational involvement of one or more adults in care of and in joint activity with that child. In short, somebody has to be irrationally crazy about that kid.” —Urie Bronfenbrenner
Creating a “Yes” Environment for Infant/Toddler/Twos

- Find times throughout the day to connect lovingly and playfully.
- Develop consistent routines and rituals around meals, bath, nap/bedtime, morning routines, etc.
- Communicate what is coming next—even to the youngest infants.
- Ask permission/announce/describe what you are doing when you are changing their diaper and with other caregiving routines.
- Provide a beautiful environment: beautiful objects, art pictures, flowers. Notice what’s at child’s eye level.
- Be aware of overstimulation: lights, noise, other; babies can show stress by furrowed brow, turning away, hiccups, whimpering.
- Set up for safety: gates, outlet covers, chemicals locked up so all areas can be explored.
- Rotate toys/materials to provide renewed interest.
- Designate specific places for toys/materials that invite self-directed play and clean-up. Use small baskets, bins for sorting, etc.
- Check to make sure all materials are complete or intact to prevent frustration
- Have child’s shelf or basket available in all areas so the child will feel welcome in all spaces.
- Invite toddlers to help with daily living skills: food prep, table setting, cleanup, folding laundry.
- Have child sized cleanup materials available (dust pan and broom).
- Set up opportunities for independence in routines and meals so children can develop their own sense of competence and confidence (examples: child-sized utensils and serving dishes; place to put coat and shoes; help with diaper; etc.).
- Have potty always available and encourage use at predictable times such as before bath.
- As child is able, use booster seat to sit at the table, or child-sized table and chair (adult can sit on a stool) rather than high chair. Toddlers can get in/out with help rather than being put there.
- Offer choices whenever possible (choices the adult can live with).
- Give clear expectations and follow through with them.
- Deal with frustrations and temper tantrums calmly and matter-of-factly — not punitively. Invite child to rejoin when he/she has regained calmness.
- Have a designated peaceful and comforting place for child to take a breather if necessary.
- Model appropriate emotions and label emotions.
- Slow down with infant routines, be in the moment; focus on and respond to their cues.
- Focus intently on the child in your interactions; avoid multi-tasking.
- Dress infants and toddlers in clothing that promotes freedom of movement.
- Honor the child’s individual temperament and unique needs — adapt to their ways.

Qualities of an Infant/Toddler Caregiver

**Respectful**
Respectful of children, adults, and families
- Tuned into and follows the lead of the infant and toddler
- Partners with families in all aspects of caring for child
- Inclusive and collaborative approach to care
- Accepting, nurturing, patient, empathetic, compassionate, loving, mindful
- Offers predictable, unhurried time

Sensitive to the unique cultural ways of each family and child
- Seeks to understand and honor family ways
- Cultural consistency in practices at home and in care
- Respectful and adaptive to temperaments and personalities

Sees infants and toddlers as competent, confident, inquisitive learners
- Celebrates their accomplishments
- Tolerant and accepting of children at different levels of maturity
- Serves as a guide in their learning and becoming

**Responsive**
Physically available and emotionally present for children
- Nurturing, close physical presence
- Available, actively engaged
- Comforting, holding, lifting, playing, frequent tender contact
- Brings joy, delight, and a sense of humor into interactions

Reciprocal interactions
- Tuned in to child, takes note of their ways, interprets and acts on their cues
- Reflective and intentional with interactions
- Consistent and flexible in engagement with child
- Enthusiastic and genuine in engaging child on child’s terms
- “Dances” in relationship with child: invites and supports, follows the child’s lead, notices their response, takes next steps accordingly

“Sets the stage” of environment and experiences
- Provides environment and experiences that promote exploration, ongoing development and a compassionate sense of wonder
- Relationship, and routines of every day life are the curriculum

**Relationship**
Everything is in relationship with child
- Loving, nurturing, playful interactions form close bonds
- Daily caregiving routines are an opportunity for meaningful connections
- Is emotionally engaged with child, authentically attentive and genuinely interested, ‘smitten’
- Supports the child in relationship - takes turns and ‘dances well’, sometimes leading, sometimes following, in partnership

Shared Expertise: Family and Caregiver
- Appreciates and seeks out expertise of family
- Shares expertise and knowledge as caregiver
- Works together towards best care practices and solutions to issues that arise

**Professional**
Knowledgeable and informed about infants and toddlers
- Unique developmental stages in first three years of life
- Intricacies of brain development in the early years
- Social-emotional milestones
- Temperament and individual characteristics
- Foundational years for life-long learning and relationships

Dedicated
- Committed to the importance of relationship in child’s life
- Predictable, consistent and reliable
- Works in collaborative partnership with family
- Keeps current in professional knowledge, trends and issues
- Advocates for best practices with infants, toddlers and families
Resources for Research, Best Practice and Family Education and Support

Families often seek the insight and experience of friends, relatives and professionals during the child rearing years. Juggling work and parenting responsibilities requires a community support network. Educators and parents seek current research and best practices to ensure the needs of all children are met within early care and education programs. While not exhaustive, this list contains multiple resources to support the earliest developmental needs of young children and their families.

Community
- City of Madison Office of Child Care: www.cityofmadison.com/commserv/CommunityAccreditation.html
- Community Coordinated Child Care: www.4-c.org
- UW Madison Office of Child Care & Family Resources: www.occfr.wisc.edu

National
- Brazelton Touchpoints Center: www.brazeltontouchpoints.org
- Family Resources: www.brazeltontouchpoints.org/family-resources/
- Center on the Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning: www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu/
- Devereux Early Childhood Initiative: www.devereuxearlychildhood.org
- Mindful Parenting: www.themindfulparent.org
- Montessori Infant/Toddler: www.montessoritraining.net
- National Association for the Education of Young Children: www.naeyc.org
- PBS Parenting Page: www.pbs.org/parents
- J. Ronald Lally/West Ed: www.wested.org/personnell/j-ronald-lally
- Toni Christie’s Childspace: www.childspace.co.nz
- Zero to Three: www.zerotothree.org
  - Early Experiences Matter: www.zerotothree.org/public-policy/policy-toolkit/

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