

Tip Sheets

Defining Activity Areas

Planning environments for infants or toddlers takes place in two primary steps:

1. Defining activity areas
2. Setting up activity areas



Defining activity areas involves planning the layout of the indoor and outdoor environment. When doing so, it is important to consider

how the space can be divided into activity areas that will support children's development in all domains, accommodate individual interests and needs, and create a sense of community.

Structure and Consistency

In open or poorly defined spaces children tend to wander aimlessly, follow the caregiver, or have difficulty focusing on an activity. Defined activity areas, by contrast, support sustained interactions and exploration of materials by providing a sense of structure and consistency.

Infants and toddlers benefit from a balance of predictability and novelty. Avoid environmental changes that are too frequent or too sudden (e.g., frequently rearranging furniture, reassigning areas for personal belongings, etc.). This can be confusing for young children and family members.

Separating Areas for Each Activity

It is also important to think about how the layout of the overall environment (indoors and outdoors) can support the function of each activity area such as

areas for personal care routines; learning, play and development; and adult/community interactions.

Personal Care Routines

- Diapering/toileting areas should be separate from food preparation and eating areas with separate sinks for each function.
- Child-height sinks allow children to participate more fully in personal care routines. A child-height sink outdoors enables handwashing without interrupting the flow of interactions and exploration.
- Nap/rest areas should convey a calm and restful mood and should be set up in a quiet area of the program away from active play and high-traffic areas.
- Soft lighting and a quiet environment can help children transition into sleep. *Sleeping infants and toddlers should be supervised at all times.*

Learning, Development, and Play

- Separate areas for active play from areas for quiet play to help minimize conflicts.
- Provide children with clear, consistent, and gentle guidance as they learn about each space and how to use it
- Set up for messy play in an area that is easily cleaned (over a hard floor rather than carpet and within reach of water/cleaning supplies).
- Each activity area should have enough space so that children can play together without being too crowded.
- Each area should have enough room for an adult to be in or near the space.
- Use physical boundaries or barriers, such as low shelves and area rugs, to define spaces. Barriers should be low enough to provide

visibility of the entire space and secured to the floor/wall to prevent them from tipping over.

- Raised and carpeted platforms help structure the space, define activity areas, provide children with a sense of perspective, and support motor development.
- Include an open area that provides a sense of spaciousness that can be adapted to meet the interests of the children.

Adult and Community Interactions

- Foster adult interactions and a sense of community in specific areas—entry/exit, family communication, meeting, gathering—by considering adult comfort and convenience.
- Encourage family members to linger by providing comfortable seating in the entry/exit area and outdoors.
- Set up the environment to encourage conversations between caregivers and family members.
- Include an area where caregivers can plan, document and meet with families or coworkers.

Additional Considerations

After mapping out areas for activities and personal care routines, step back and consider the environment as a whole. Ask the following questions:

- Do the areas work together in terms of flow and function?
- Do the areas work together to create a warm and welcoming environment?
- Is there a balance of predictability and novelty?
- Is the environment adaptable to the needs and interests of the children?
- Does the environment reflect diverse perspectives as well as children’s home experiences?

Additional Resources for Supporting the Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress: Minnesota’s Early Learning Guidelines for Birth to 3 (PDF)

https://education.mn.gov/mdeprod/idcplg?IdcService=GET_FILE&dDocName=050750&RevisionSelectionMethod=latestReleased&Rendition=primary

Early Introductions to Sensory Gardens: Infants and Toddlers

<https://growing-minds.org/early-introductions-to-sensory-gardens-infants-and-toddlers>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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