

Great Places for Babies™

Infant Signature Practices

The Great Places for Babies program is expanding to include Infant Signature Practices. When Great Places for Babies was initiated, the program focused primarily on infant environments through the [Infant Room Environments Checklist](#). Many centers made significant changes in order to have their infant rooms take on more of a “nursery feel.” Soft lighting, natural items, and a reduction of clutter help create comfortable, homey environments for babies.

Now, several years later, as we have had the benefit of age-group initiatives for toddlers and preschool/kindergarten prep, we are initiating signature practices for infant rooms. These signature practices are focused on the daily program for babies. When practiced fully, they have the ability to positively impact an infant’s day in a Bright Horizons center.

The six signature practices for infants are:

- Maximizing Prime Times
- Reading to Infants Daily
- Daily Exposure to the Arts
- Using Sign Language
- Using Treasure Baskets
- Daily Outdoor Exploration

The expectation is that these six practices are evident in every infant room. Please read this entire booklet for specific guidance.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Infant Rooms:

Developmentally appropriate practice refers to using what we know about child development to make thoughtful and appropriate decisions for early childhood practices. It involves understanding how children develop and learn at various ages and stages and takes individual differences into account.

Inappropriate practice often focuses narrowly on cognitive learning. Some teachers feel the need to implement a direct instruction method to “teach” infants and end up developing lesson plans that are beyond infants’ level of cognition. Teachers may select themes and activities that are a water-downed version of what is appropriate for older children.

Appropriate curriculum for infants gives them opportunities to explore and understand their **immediate** world. The focus for lesson planning, including experiences, activities, and materials, should be to support their exploration and the discoveries they make. No one has to teach a baby to explore!

Each of the signature practices is based on what is known about what is important for infant development. It is not that you are “teaching” infants how to make art or how to read, but instead you are providing experiences that allow infants to use their senses to freely explore different and interesting materials and to hear language on a daily basis. You are providing opportunities for them to make new discoveries in the outdoor environment every day. Guiding and supporting infants’ exploration is how you teach them. During daily routines, you are connecting, bonding, and even modeling new ways to communicate through sign language.

Emergent curriculum in the infant program means you are observing, listening, and paying close attention to how infants respond to these experiences. Follow their lead instead of imposing what you want to “teach.” Repetition of experiences is also key to development- their brains crave it! Through repeated experiences, infants get the time to make sense of experiences and to practice new skills. This is what a developmentally appropriate curriculum looks like in an infant program. Learning *does* take place, but it is through free exploration and joyful spontaneous play. When planning and implementing these signature practices, ask yourself, “How does this fit with what I know about infants and their stage of development?”

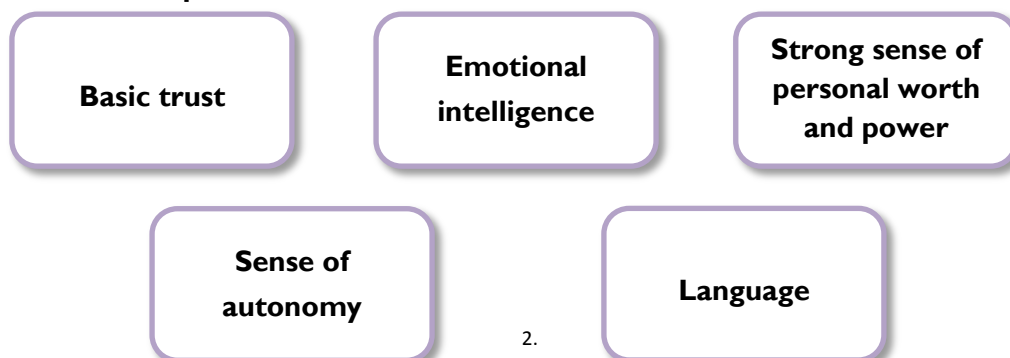
Maximizing Prime Times

Why is this Important?

Prime Times are those moments of one-to-one responsive, nurturing interaction between you and a child– those moments when the child has your full human presence. These are the times when the child’s basic human needs of nurturing, food, rest, and learning with others are addressed. These times occupy a large part of the day in child care; therefore, maximizing prime times is an important signature practice.

The often-heard complaint of some caregivers that, “All we do is care for the babies; we never get to the teaching,” fails to recognize that those moments are prime times for learning. There is no need to rush through prime times to “get to the curriculum” because maximizing prime times *is* the curriculum! Often infant teachers think of activities as only those experiences that they planned for their lesson plan, but activities also include all the important parts of an infant’s experience. Eating is an activity. Diaper changing is an activity. They are just as much learning activities as the ones on lesson plans and they develop important skills when we take the time to maximize them.

Prime Times develop:



It is easy to become focused on tasks vs. interactions with babies. We recognize the importance of the documentation which is required; however, when you become too focused on tasks alone, you miss opportunities to develop valuable relationships that allow infants to thrive. Routines have the potential of becoming more like an assembly line of infants being diapered, fed, and put to sleep, while teachers can become automatic in their caregiving as if they are on autopilot and miss the chance to share their full human presence with each baby.

In order to implement this signature practice, you need to slow down. For example, when changing a diaper, talk, sing, and laugh with the baby. Allow the baby to hear the sound of the water as you wash hands or talk to her about how it feels. In order for you to have relaxed time to diaper, feed, and interact with other infants, the environment must have interesting and developmentally appropriate materials readily available that keep infants engaged. Here are some additional guidelines for maximizing prime times and implementing this signature practice.



Guidelines for Maximizing Prime Times:

Be “fully there.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give your full attention and minimize interruptions. It is easy for the mind to wander sometimes or zone out away from what you are doing. • Being present helps you to connect and bond with the infant.
Tell the infant what you are going to do.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk to and physically handle infants with respect when checking diapers, undressing, feeding, and nurturing. • Tell each baby what you are about to do before you do it and why: “Alfonso, I think I should check your diaper, okay? You’ll feel much drier when we’re finished.” This gives a signal or cue that something is about to happen and helps infants to understand and anticipate your next move.
Talk directly to the infant, not to other staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be sure to spend more time talking <i>to</i> infants rather than <i>about</i> them to other adults in the room. • Remember your focus while in the classroom is interacting and building connections with the infants in your care.
Speak positively to the infant about unpleasant care routines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say things like, “Why don’t we clean you up?” rather than “Oh, you are stinky.”

Pay attention to your body language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smiling, laughing, and holding open arms to infants can sometimes be more powerful than words. Infants use cues from your facial expressions and body language to know how you feel about them and if they are in a safe and welcoming place.
Focus on the needs of the child.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concentrate on the infant's experience of discomfort, fear, or need to be nurtured.
Remain aware of the needs of other infants while you are working one-to-one.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As you are interacting with one infant, frequently keep your eyes and ears on the rest of the group. If another infant needs you, verbally acknowledge his presence by saying, "I hear you and I will be with you as soon as I'm done helping [other baby]."
Offer infants the opportunity to help based on their developmental stage.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help infants develop physical abilities, positive self-concepts, and autonomy during care activities by offering them choices to do some things by themselves. For example, allowing an infant to hold his own clean diaper during a change or holding a spoon during a feeding, when ready.

To Learn More:

- See Teaching Essentials for Infant Teachers: Prime Times on MAT U
- Read *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs* by Jim Greenman, Anne Stonehouse, and Gigi Schweikert
- Read [The World of Infants and Toddlers](#)- Chapters 6 & 7

Reading to Infants Daily

Why is this Important?

Reading aloud to children is the single best predictor of a child's later success as an independent reader. Children who are read to often develop an interest in books, perfect their listening skills, develop a diverse vocabulary, and develop related skills like rhyming and decoding of words. The reading experience is very different with infants from older children. Typically the infant is on your lap. Turning pages, or holding or chewing the book are part of the experience. Whether you look at one page or many pages together, infants are introduced to the book and the stage is set for a lifelong love of reading.

Guidelines for Reading to Infants Daily:

Select books carefully.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Choose sturdy board books that can withstand being chewed on or dropped.
Read frequently with infants in various ways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Read in small groups, large groups, and individual reading in a comfy spot with the baby in your lap.
Follow the infant's lead.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Choose a time to read when babies are well rested and alert. Be prepared to stop after 1-2 pages if the baby loses interest.
Use face and hand gestures and change the inflection of your voice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Being animated and varying your voice at appropriate times helps to hold the baby's attention.
Engage the infant while reading.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Play point and find games, "Where is the monkey? Where is the flower?, etc."Let the baby turn the pages if interested.
Include teacher made books.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Make books using pictures of people and things the babies will recognize, such as family members and pets.

To Learn More:

- See Teaching Essentials for Infant Teachers: Offering Animated Storytelling on MAT U.
- View Creating a Reading Culture: Reading Aloud on MAT U. This online course is about reading aloud to all age groups (infants – school-age).
- See the Child Development: Curriculum and Caring- Communication online training on MAT U. In particular, look at these sections:
 - o Tips and Techniques: Selecting Books and Sharing Books with Infants
 - o Other Literacy Advice: Infants Can't Read.
 - o Also complete the related sections of the Notes and Reflections Worksheet. If you have time, review the whole module.
- See the [Language Works](#) Guide.
- See [World Spotlights](#) on Education and Development at Your Fingertips on BrightWeb.
- See the [Growing Readers](#) site for infant book ideas. Also consult the [Growing Readers Activities](#) for ideas on how to use these books in the classroom.



Daily Exposure to the Arts

Why is this Important?

Children are naturally creative and even the youngest children appreciate opportunities to explore the arts, including visual arts, music, dance, and drama. The arts give babies another opportunity to explore their world through their senses – seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling. Exposure to the arts through their senses enriches their learning opportunities.

Visual Art

Visual art for babies is a total sensory experience of smearing, patting, poking, and moving with their whole bodies. Art materials can be explored from the tray on a low chair, from a lap, at a small table, or on the floor. Art is not just “pictures” and painting; it is also sculpture, light, and motion.



The emphasis should be on the process of making art, not the product. Even hand prints and foot prints, a popular infant room activity, are more product- than process-focused. While an occasional hand print for families will be a cherished keepsake, the vast majority of visual art activities should be process-focused. Since the product isn't the most important part, you can take photos of the process babies went through in addition to posting the artwork itself on documentation boards.

Parents often want to display their infant's artwork, so the absence of products may be taken by parents as an indication that their children aren't doing much. The way to resolve this dilemma is to recognize and articulate the distinction between "artifact," which is simply visual evidence of the effort, and "art." First, help parents understand what is developmentally appropriate. But also satisfy the parent's need for artifacts by providing photographs of children's activities and pieces of what has resulted from the child's process-oriented efforts at finger-painting, gluing, or scribbling.

Music

Expose babies to all kinds of music: classical, popular, hip-hop, folk, etc. One of the most common kinds of music sung or played for babies are lullabies. Lullabies are present across cultures and languages. The lyrics tend to share themes like communicating caring and tenderness, singing about beautiful things, bringing gifts, or telling a story. Lullabies include old favorites like "Hush Little Baby" or other favorites re-purposed as lullabies like Gershwin's "Summertime."

When singing to babies, it doesn't matter if you think you have a good voice or not. The infant brain is pre-wired for language and music, so hearing it is what is most important. Make up your own songs using familiar tunes. The repeated patterns stimulate the brain in a way that will support later phonemic awareness and mathematical thinking.

Expose infants to different musical instruments. Infants are very attentive to sounds and are especially interested in cause and effect. Allow them to explore instruments, including real instruments with a variety of textures and sounds.



Drama

The beginning of dramatic play with infants starts with self-awareness: seeing yourself in a mirror and eventually realizing that is you. Puppets also are tools for dramatic play with infants. Puppets can be used to greet children, talk to them, tell a story, and so much more. Similarly, simple songs with motions like “I’m a little teapot” or simple dress-up clothes like hats or gloves set the stage for later pretend play, an important part of most early childhood classrooms.

Guidelines for Daily Exposure to the Arts:

Focus on the process of art experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Allow infants to explore various materials focusing on the experience instead of a finished product.
Introduce infants to the work of great artists.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look at books focused on great art.• Hold and walk a baby around the room and show him the artwork of his peers, or point out permanent artwork on the walls.
Ask open-ended questions and talk to infants during art experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use open-ended questions (“What do you see in that picture?”).• Give words to the child’s visual or tactile exploration (“It’s really big, isn’t it?”; “Do you like how the gooey paint feels?”).
Play a variety of music.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Soothing classical music may help young babies settle into sleep.• A more rousing selection of children’s music may work well when several babies are up and ready to move to the music.
Avoid playing music constantly in the classroom.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be cautious not to over-stimulate babies and be thoughtful about how music opportunities are provided.• Having music constantly playing is not appropriate; instead be thoughtful about what music to play/sing when it is appropriate.
Engage in dramatic play with infants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use puppets to interact with babies.• Demonstrate how to use dramatic play items- putting on a hat, stirring a pot, rocking a soft baby doll.

To Learn More:

- Lewin-Benham, A. (2010). *Infants and Toddlers at Work: Using Reggio-Inspired Materials to Support Brain Development*. NY: Teachers College Press.
- Honig, A. S. (2008). [The Language of Lullabies](#). In D. Koralek (Ed.), *Spotlight on Young Children and the Creative Arts* (pp. 4 -5). Washington, DC: NAEYC.
 - This article is available for download with NAEYC’s permission on Education and Development at Your Fingertips.

Signing with Babies

Why is this Important?

Signing with babies is a unique way to communicate with babies before they are able to speak words on their own. Dr. Joseph Garcia who developed *Sign with your Baby* recommends that we start signing with babies when they are around 7 to 8 months. Typically around 8 to 9 months, babies will start producing the signs that you have shown them.



Some Signs to Start with:

Choose signs that represent common aspects of the infant's day and that are relevant to the infant according to their experience and interests.



When Babies Start to Speak

Continue to use signs. As babies become more proficient with language, they will typically phase out the use of signs. This typically happens around 18 months of age.

Guidelines for Teaching Signs:

Teach signs first in the baby's field of view.
Choose signs relevant to the baby's life.
Wait for the child to be in the right state of mind (i.e., not upset or distracted).
Once a sign is introduced, keep using it over and over again.
Take advantage of natural opportunities to teach a new sign like at meals or diaper changes.
Guide the child's hands if she lets you teach a new sign.
Keep learning fun!
Reward each baby's efforts. Initially babies will approximate the sign; look for and acknowledge those efforts. Babies may also make the sign a little differently than you do; that is fine. You continue to sign in

the same way that you did when you introduced the sign.
Babies may make up their own signs. Acknowledge these efforts as well.
Sign as you read to babies.
Introduce new signs with songs or games ("Where's my shoe?")
Don't have children perform for others.
Be patient. The process can take time.

To Learn More:

- Garcia, J. (2005). *Sign with your baby: How to communicate with infants before they can speak*. Seattle: Sign 2 Me.
 - Your center received the DVD and poster to help you learn common signs. Additional posters can be purchased on Bright Buy.
- Caring for Little Ones: Using Sign Language as a Tool to Communicate. *Exchange Out of the Box Training*.
 - NOTE: you can use your one free Out of the Box Training that comes with your center's Exchange subscription to download this training from their website.

Note: This signature practice is optional in back-up due to not having the same children every day.

Using Treasure Baskets

Why is this Important?

Babies need opportunities to touch and interact with interesting, sensory-rich objects and materials. They need chances to manipulate a variety of real objects which are part of their world; not just plastic toys. Using treasure baskets has always been a recommended practice for the *World of Infants and Toddlers*. As a signature practice, you will incorporate treasure baskets into your learning environment and weekly lesson plans.

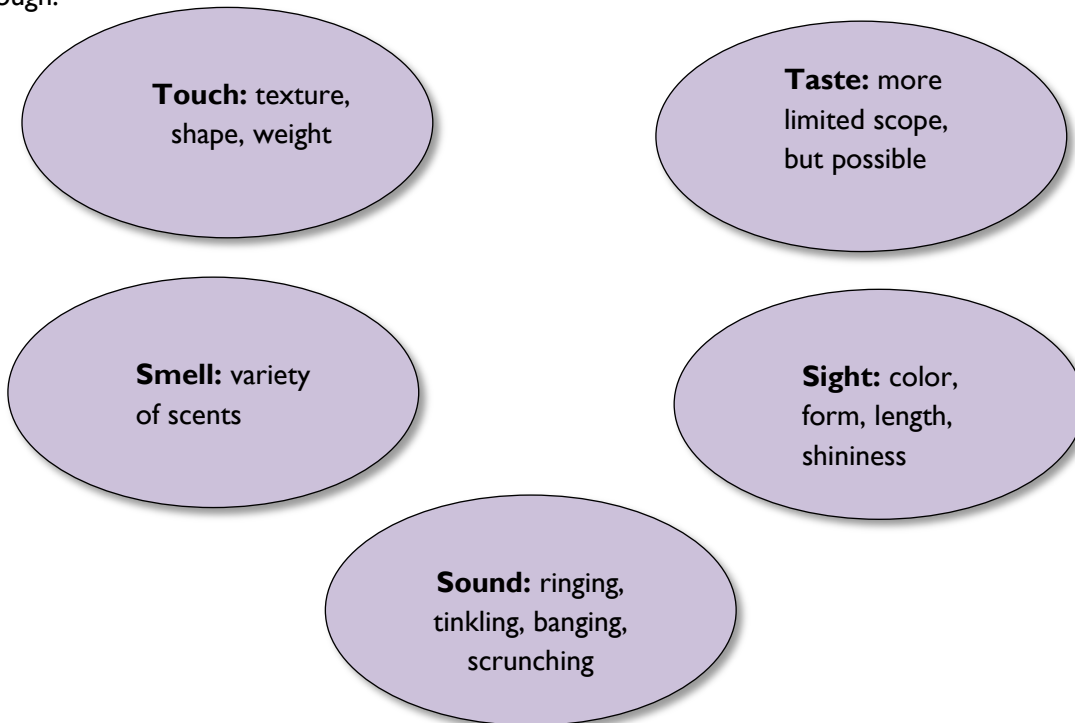
What is a Treasure Basket?

A treasure basket is a basket that contains natural and everyday household objects. It serves as both a mobile variation of a learning station and a variation of an activity box. It is a practical way to assemble different objects to engage with and stimulate developing senses and understanding, particularly for infants who can sit independently but not yet control moving to an activity or experience.

In the book, *People Under Three, Young Children in Day Care* (1994), Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson discuss one concept of a treasure basket:

We know that babies' brains are growing fast, and that the brain develops as it responds to streams of input coming from the baby's surroundings, through the senses of touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight and bodily movement. The Treasure Basket gathers together and provides a focus for a rich variety of everyday objects chosen to offer stimulus to these senses. The use of the Treasure Basket is one way that we can ensure a richness in the baby's experiences when the brain is ready to receive, to make connections and so to make use of this information.

Most of the objects in a treasure basket are not plastic, nor a "bought toy". Most are in common everyday use by adults or items from nature. The purpose of this collection is to maximize interest through:



How to Use Treasure Baskets

You can introduce a treasure basket when there is time to sit with infants. Your role is to observe - this serves as a perfect opportunity to record an observation. Use descriptive and reflective language with infants as they explore the properties of the objects and ensure safe exploration. Baskets with lids are best to use for treasure baskets to encourage interaction with the basket and also for fostering the development of object permanence for older infants.



Consider the following treasures:

**Note: Refer to World of Infant and Toddler Guides for additional suggestions.*

Natural Objects/Objects Made of Natural Materials		
Pine cones (differing sizes)	Yarn	Bamboo whistles
Large stones, pumice stones	Woolen ball	
Shells	Fruit (apples, oranges, lemons)	
Dried gourds	Corks (large sizes)	
Avocado pits	Pieces of loofah and natural sponges	
Brushes		
Toothbrush	Broad paintbrush	
Shaving brush	Cosmetic brush	
Shoe-shine brush		
Wooden Objects		
Small boxes, velvet lined	Castanets	Napkin rings
Cylinders (bobbins, thread spools)	Clothes pegs	Curtain rings
Wooden rings	Egg cups	
Spoon/spatulas	Rattles- various types	
Wooden dowels/knobs	Small drum on wooden frame	
Metal Objects		
Spoons- various sizes	Tin lids	Bicycle bell
Bunch of keys	Tinfoil	Lemon squeezer
Bells	Small egg whisk	
Triangle	Key rings linked together	
Tea strainer	Closed tins containing rice, beans, salt, etc.	
Objects in Leather, Textile, Rubber, Fur		
Scarves, gloves	Rag doll	Rubber tubing
Small leather bag with zipper	Wax paper	Small teddy bear
Leather case for glasses	Velvet powder puff	Bean bag
Small cloth bags containing lavender, rosemary, thyme, cloves		
Objects Made of Paper or Cardboard		
Cardboard pieces	Paper towel tubes	
Small cardboard boxes	Textured paper	
Little notebooks with spiral rings		
Balls		
Tennis balls	Fur balls	
Golf balls	High bouncer balls	
Whiffle balls		
Plastic Objects		
Tubing	Funnels	
Hair curlers	Cylinders	
Shower curtain rings		

Note: You should always be aware of the hazards materials present since infants use their mouths to explore. Keep a choke testing tube handy when equipping centers. **Close supervision is important at all times** but especially when children of mixed ages are present; an older child has the strength to lift objects which are too heavy for a baby, and in their hands a heavy pebble or a small spoon, perfectly safe for a baby to play with, can become an unsafe object. Refer to the [Safety and Child Injury Prevention Policy](#) to ensure the materials meet safety guidelines.

To Learn More:

- Read [World Spotlight: Treasure Baskets](#)
- Read [The World of Infants and Toddlers](#) - Chapter 5

Baskets and some materials to fill them are available for purchase on BrightBuy. On the home page of BrightBuy, use the “Signature Practices” button and choose “Infants” to locate these materials.

Daily Outdoor Exploration

Why is this Important?

What does the outdoors offer that the indoor setting cannot? It offers fresh air, new worlds to explore, and a wider field of play. Even the youngest children benefit from a connection to nature. The natural world is full of learning opportunities for babies. Nature provides beautiful objects to look at, wonderful sounds and smells and interesting textures to explore.

An exclusively child-oriented world, filled with bright plastic things and pictures of animals and fairy tale characters, is a very limited and artificial world in which to spend forty to fifty hours a week. Instead, good child care emphasizes a focus on natural experiences. There is an effort to bring the real world into the center as well as expose children to the community around them.

The outdoors provides a great place to be with a very young child:

- A place for motor and sensory exploration
- A place for environmental experience
- A place for nurturing interaction and adult-child “conversation”



What to Do with Babies Outside

Being outdoors is a wonderful place for to be *with* a baby. It enables you to enjoy the world outside the walls of your room while taking pleasure in the growing power and competence of the children. There are many things that infants can do outdoors in addition to being pushed in a stroller or buggy. Strollers, buggies, and carts are wonderful vehicles to take children on walks. But remember, babies can crawl. Don't substitute the passive ride for the active outdoor experience. Combine the two. While many of these activities can also take place inside, the activities become richer when done outdoors.

An infant can:

Be fed	Be held and sung to	Be rocked	Crawl over, under, through
Listen, explore sounds	Pull up, stand up	Roll	Touch, explore texture and form
Smell	Explore water	Reach, hold, drop	Paint
	Kick	Explore people	

(From Greenman, Stonehouse and Schweikert, 2008)

Loose Parts

Adding loose parts to the outdoors provides lots of opportunities for exploration. Spread out a quilt on the grass and provide some of the following:

- Balls of a variety of sizes, colors and textures; beach balls, slightly deflated; fabric balls
- Soft blocks
- Transparent scarves or other textured fabric squares
- Pine cones, leaves, twigs (monitor closely for safety)
- Real objects – pots and pans; wooden spoons
- Nesting toys
- Shoe boxes with lids



In addition, consider:

- Bringing treasure baskets outside
- Provide small amounts of sand and water, under careful supervision
- Puppets and books
- Different surfaces to crawl or walk on
- Push and pull toys for older infants
- Wind chimes



Outdoor Health and Safety

Many infant caregivers have trouble allowing babies to explore. All their instincts tell them to catch the baby before he stumbles and to try to protect him from even the slightest scratch or risk of discomfort. Without the assurance that babies will be safe, caregivers severely restrict what babies are allowed to do. Most accidents are the result of falls, bumps, blows, cuts, and burns from metal equipment; and ingestion of toxic or choke able materials. The cause of most accidents is not equipment failure as much as poor playground design, lack of proper supervision, ill selected equipment, and irregular maintenance. Your watchfulness is most important. Outdoor environments should take into account the nature of babies: little scientists investigating predominantly with their eyes, mouth, other senses, and entire body, as well as their hands.

Families need support in recognizing the value of the outdoors. Daily outdoor exploration for infants is a new concept for most families. Parents need to understand and see safety precautions. With visual documentation of outdoor explorations, parents will soon understand its value.

Guidelines for Daily Outdoor Exploration:

Make every effort to get infants outdoors every day (weather permitting).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Preparation and planning are key to successful daily outdoor exploration for infants.• Going out with infants requires forethought. Will you need to change diapers, bring bottles or sunscreen? Who has an upcoming nap time?
Look for health and safety hazards.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Before taking infants outdoors, be sure the environment is safe for infants.• Provide proper supervision and position yourself where you can see all infants and are close to those that are less mobile.• When possible, seek shady spots.• Water always requires strict supervision, even small amounts

Participate in the exploration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage active engagement with the environment and interact with infants as they explore. • Ask questions and give words to what they are seeing, feeling, experiencing, etc. (“Do you hear that bird?” “The leaf is crunchy.”)
Use what your outdoor environment has to offer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make the best use of what you have, remembering that even small spaces, such as planter boxes, patches of ground, or sidewalks, can be sites for quality outdoor experiences.
Provide equipment and props that enhance the experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring a blanket and additional materials, including loose parts to the outdoor environment.

To Learn More:

- Williams, A. (2011). [Exploring the Natural World with Infants and Toddlers in an Urban Setting](#). In A. Shillady (Ed.), *Spotlight on Young Children and Nature* (pp. 20 – 23). Washington, DC: NAEYC.
 - This article is available for download with NAEYC’s permission on Education and Development at Your Fingertips.
- Starbuck, S, Olthof, M. & Midden, K. (2014). Gardening with Infants and Toddlers, Chapter 6. *Gardening with Young Children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
 - This article is available for download with Redleaf’s permission on Education and Development at Your Fingertips.
- Read Chapter 18, Infants and Toddlers Outdoors in Greenman, J., A. Stonehouse, and G. Schweikert (2008). *Prime Times: A Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- See *Prime Times* job aids (see disk in *Prime Times* resource book)
- Read [Playgrounds at Bright Horizons](#)
- Read [Movement Matters for Infants and Toddlers](#)
- Read [Twenty Five Ways to Improve Your Outdoor Space](#)