

# Learnscaping



## Creating appropriate environments for infants and toddlers

The information in this module will equip providers to promote quality practices in the classroom through the use of developmentally appropriate furnishings and materials. This training will offer evidence-based information and short vignettes to demonstrate intentional teaching strategies when engaging young children in play.

Early Care and Education professionals need to have specific knowledge, competencies, and characteristics to work effectively with very young children. This training promotes Kentucky's Early Childhood Core Content; specifically addressing the area of Learning Environments and Curriculum. The competency speaks to how positive interaction with age-appropriate materials foster a child's physical, cognitive, communicative, creative, and social development.

### Training objectives:

The Training objectives for this course are for you to take the knowledge acquired and be able to:

- Identify age-appropriate materials with varying skill levels to support infant/toddler play
- Understand how materials supports cognitive, physical and social-emotional skills of infants and toddlers
- Design exciting interest centers that invite very young children to interact safely with materials

### Essential Elements to Support Quality:

All early care settings should include the following essential elements to support and promote quality:

1. Ensure all children are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Ensure all children have the opportunity to \_\_\_\_\_ and build relationships with \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Ensure all children have a variety of experiences to engage and use \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_, hands-on \_\_\_\_\_ within the learning environment.

Your role is critical because YOU determine the design of the classroom and the kinds of experiences children will have while in your care. You may ask: *How do I arrange an effective learning environment for infants and toddlers? What materials will I need? How can I provide active learning for this age group?*

To help you create a positive learning environment for infants and toddlers, we will examine four (4) key components to help you set the stage for learning:

1. Developmentally appropriate environments
2. Discuss activities and play experiences
3. Examine daily routines and transitions
4. Share strategies to support and extend learning

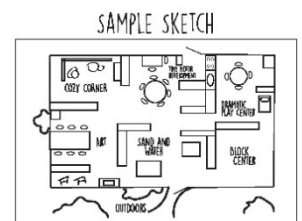
## Designing Spaces for Infants and Toddlers

One important way infants and toddlers learn is by exploring their environment. At birth, infants begin to use their hands to discover their own bodies and the world around them.

What did you observe in the video clip of Ms. Stefani?

## Sketching Your Infant and Toddler Classroom

Sketch your room's arrangement using the template provided on the next page (or on a separate piece of paper). Include the interest areas you currently have available for the age group you serve.



Once you complete your simple illustration, make a note or highlight the top two (2) areas you would like to enhance. Keep the sketch close by as you will be asked to make notes on ways to improve the areas you have highlighted.

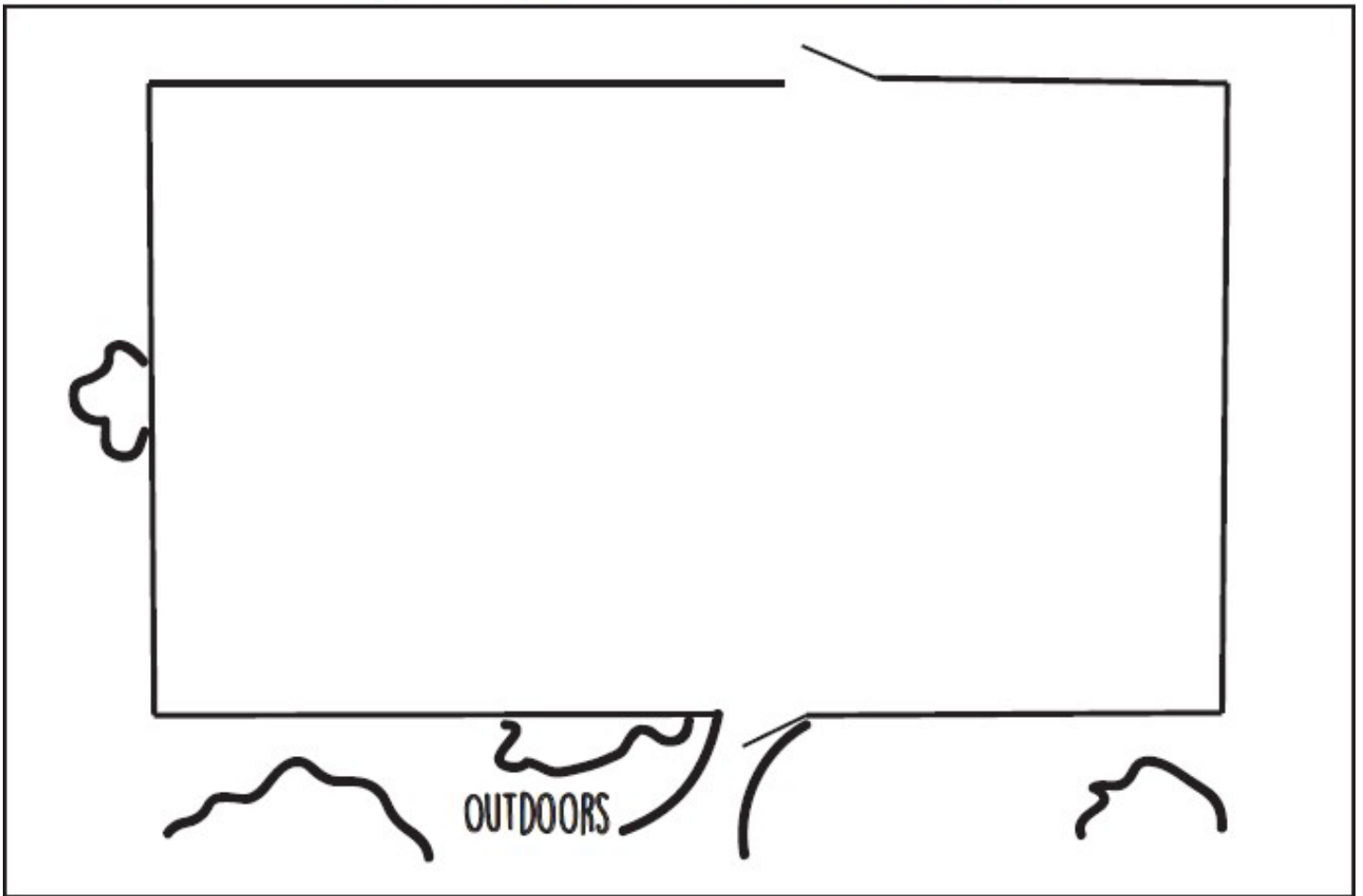
These are the questions you should be asking yourself as you move through the rest of this module:

- Does my learning environment provide enough room for various activities to go on at once, without causing stress or competition for space?
- Does my classroom provide a comfortable, cozy, and supportive environment for infants and toddlers to learn?
- Does the classroom setting provide children opportunities to freely explore all the materials in a safe and healthy way?

## Classroom sketch worksheet

Sketch your room's arrangement using the template below (or on a separate piece of paper). Include the interest areas you currently have available for the age group you serve.

# SKETCH YOUR OWN!



## Enhancing Playspaces

A properly designed learning environment is essential for infant and toddler development. When considering the space and furnishings in an infant or toddler setting, it is important to ensure that the space is not too crowded or too open.

Remember that non-mobile infants need protected areas and cannot safely be in a large space with mobile infants. For toddlers, there should be adequate space for push and pull toys, block building, jumping, and of course, a cozy area.

Also, look at your environment to ensure there are proper spaces and furnishings that promote self-help skills; such as step stools, child sized furniture and low shelving.

Remember: A well-organized classroom design should allow for quiet or active play and provide well-equipped interest areas with enough hands-on, age appropriate materials to prevent conflicts from arising. This type of environment supports and contributes to the overall quality of the program.

## Revisiting your Sketch

Review the areas you highlighted and make notes on what you would like to change.

- Does my learning environment provide enough room for various activities to go on at once, without causing stress or competition for space?
  - Is the room is cluttered or disorganized?
  - Are the materials within reach for the child?
  - Is there ample room for infants to work on motor skills such as rolling and crawling?

Mobile infants and young toddlers are able to explore and learn when their environment is well organized and materials they need are within reach.

- Does my classroom provide a comfortable, cozy, and supportive environment for infants and toddlers to learn?
  - Do you offer a soft place for children?

Cozy areas can be designed with the use of thick mats covered with soft fabric or padded oversized rugs. Provide plush dolls, stuffed animals, and large pillows. Place cozy areas in a quiet corner of the classroom, away from active centers such as the block area or music area and in clear view for appropriate supervision.

- Does the classroom setting provide children opportunities to freely explore all the materials in a safe and healthy way?

## Meaningful Play Experiences

The design of the classroom setting presents the baseline for a supportive learning environment. Embedding activities and meaningful play experiences for children is the next step to encourage and promote quality practices.

For infants and toddlers, play is instrumental in their early years of development. At birth, infants begin to use their hands to explore their own bodies and the world around them.

Understanding basic child development and expectations for this age group, allows you choose materials and activities to meet the unique needs and interests of the individual child. As infants mature into toddlerhood, their skills develop. The more they learn to do with their hands, the more resilient these skills become.

As we strive to offer a variety of different materials that captures the interest of infants and toddlers, selecting those materials can be a frustration for even the most seasoned professionals.

The role of the Teacher is to provide children with a variety of choices with interest areas such as blocks, books, music and movement, and housekeeping. In this segment, examine several different areas of interest that foster learning opportunities through play.

## Creating Cozy Corners

To create an inviting book area, teachers need to offer:

- a comfortable place for children to engage and explore books
- soft furnishings
- child accessible bookshelves
- a selection of sturdy board books, vinyl books, books with different textures
- books that depict a child's personal daily routine, including families, community, the larger world, and the child's environment

Reading has a significant impact on young children's language skills and emergent literacy. Allowing infants and toddlers the opportunity to interact with a variety of books, exposing them to words and symbols, helps to promote and nurture an interest in early literacy development.

## Fine Motor Materials

Fine motor skills are the coordination of small muscles, especially in the wrists, hands, and fingers. Fine motor materials, then, are toys and activities which support and engage young children depending on their stage of development. As teachers, we can intentionally select toys that foster curiosity, promote eye-hand

### Learning through play

Research continues to suggest that children at any age learn best when they are actively engaged with hands-on activities. "Through **play**, children **learn** about the **world** and **engage** in activities that **encourage** their **cognitive**, **emotional**, and **social** development" (Elkind 2007).

### Learning to love reading

Children do not learn language and literacy in isolation. Therefore, we need to understand how both support and build on one another (ZERO TO THREE, *Cradling Literacy*, 2007).

coordination, contribute to problem solving, and develop language skills.

When we offer these resources, we simply provide opportunities for infants and toddlers to involve the use of their smaller muscles. Watch how Ms. Stefani selects manipulatives to create a rich and engaging fine motor interest area for her infants and toddlers.

## Learning through Music and Movement

To create an interest area that safely exposes very young children to music and movement, teachers should provide a variety of sound-making instruments and props. Teachers need to respond to the child's need to engage in, create movement, and experience sounds through this form of art.

Not only should music and movement experiences allow for young children's active participation, but they should also foster opportunities to explore various rhythms, textures and sounds. Select a variety of sensory play toys like instruments, scarves, ribbons, and sound making toys.

Name at least 4 musical instruments or props you saw Ms. Stefani use in the video for this lesson. Are there others you would provide for your infant/toddler classroom?

## Creating a Construction Zone

For infants, providing soft, textured blocks within reach motivates them to use both large and small muscles when grasping for objects. As they grow into the toddler stage, children learn how to hold blocks, examine the bright colors, and begin to carry toys and objects around. Soon, toddlers are learning cause and effect as they are filling and dumping, stacking, knocking down, and laying blocks side by side on the floor. Include people, animals, and vehicles alongside building blocks to support and strengthen children's imaginations.

Have you considered placing the block center next to the dramatic play area? This can help nurture and support the cooperative aspects of play.

### Discovery play

An intentional early childhood teacher follows the interests of the children and leads them through exciting ventures to discover new things, freely explore opportunities and learn through play. (Bredekamp, 2013).

## Enticing Science Exploration

Infants and toddlers use all of their senses to make discoveries within their world. Offering an interest area specific to nature and science, contributes to the development of observation and exploration.

Here are a few ideas for Science interest areas:

- Realistic looking animals
- Puzzles
- Sensory bottles
- Photos of items found in the outdoors (i.e. plants, flowers and butterflies)
- A birdfeeder close to a window where children can watch and observe
- Oversized floor puzzles, which create larger than life pictures of nature
- Adding an aquarium or classroom pet
- Plants that are non-poisonous for children

## Nurturing Pretend Play

Whether a family certified home, or a licensed program, a Dramatic Play center is common to see in any early childhood setting. When we provide dolls, dress-up clothes, pots and pans, soft animals, and toy telephones, we make it possible for very young children to make sense of their world.

Remember to label the shelves with pictures and words to display a print-rich environment.

## Sensing the Arts

A prepared art area complete with tools and activities allows young children the freedom to manipulate and use open-ended materials to explore and experiment safely.

Teachers should offer:

- jumbo crayons or markers to use on large pieces of paper
- chubby paint brushes to use with watercolors
- soft playdough with modeling tools to mold and manipulate

What materials will you provide to help toddlers experience their sensory world?

# Establishing Routines and Transitions

## Confidence and control

Stable routines allow babies and toddlers to anticipate what will happen next. This gives young children confidence, and a sense of control of their environment (ZERO TO THREE, 2010).

Teachers need to be aware of the importance of providing daily routines and transitions in the infant and toddler setting. As teachers, when we provide consistent, established routines, we are simply providing guidance and instruction. Routines are key when ensuring the safety and security of young children. Further, these practices help to reinforce positive behavior.

A **daily schedule** is a written plan that includes learning activities, play experiences, personal routines, and transitions. Teachers need to provide transitions between these daily events. Implementing smooth transitions lessens the negative impact of moving from one event to another within the schedule. These familiar patterns help infants and toddlers know what to expect and when to expect it.

Try these activities during transitions:

- Finger Plays
- Countdown Songs
- Puppets

What is your favorite way to support children as they move from one activity to another?

Schedules provide the framework for the day. It is the ritual of a routine that allows for teachable moments with young children. Routines help to establish positive, healthy relationships and build trust between the child and caregiver.

What did you observe in Ms. Stefani's classroom in the video?

## Learning to trust

Early attachment in relationships significantly affects the development of the whole child (ZERO TO THREE, 2000).



When teachers are involved with children during their routines and play experiences, they help them to make sense of their world and foster awareness for discovery. When we set the stage for learning by establishing a developmentally appropriate environment and play experiences, provide consistent routines and smooth transitions, and take advantage of teachable moments, young children reap the benefits.

## Summary and Wrap-Up

If you would like free technical assistance with your room arrangement, contact your Child Care Aware Quality Coach. To locate the coach in your area, visit the Find your Coach page at [ChildCareAwareKY.org](http://ChildCareAwareKY.org).

This online training is approved by the Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Division of Child Care, to support program participation in the Kentucky All STARS Quality Rating Improvement System. Upon successful completion of this course, you will receive 1 early care and education clock hour. Be sure to complete the Summary and Wrap up section in order to receive credit for your coursework in ECE-TRIS.

If you have any further questions about this online module or course credit, contact [kentucky-partnership@lsv.uky.edu](mailto:kentucky-partnership@lsv.uky.edu) or (859) 257-4918.

## Resources

Here is a list of free electronic newsletters and websites that are full of science-based information and helpful tips for people who work with infants and toddlers.

### Newsletters

Review the descriptions of each of the newsletters below and sign up for one or more that interest you. There is no cost to these e-newsletters and they are delivered right to your inbox. You will receive current, evidence-based information to apply in your classroom, share with the families you serve, or even include in your own newsletters.

- The **ECE Insider** is the **Division of Child Care's** quarterly newsletter for early care and education child care providers. Join the DCC's Listserv mailing list to receive the newsletter, policy updates, tips, articles, and more. Step-by-step instructions for joining the DCC listserv can be found on the Child Care Aware of Kentucky website at <https://www.childcareawareky.org/joining-the-dcc-listserv/>.
- **Safe Babies** is the latest resource newsletter from **ZERO TO THREE**. Each quarterly newsletter offers science-based information for encouraging the transition from *child welfare* to *child and family well-being*. Subscribe to the Safe Babies newsletter on ZERO TO THREE's website at <https://www.zerotothree.org/resource/safe-babies-quarterly-newsletter/>.
- The **National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)** offers multiple newsletters for ECE professionals, including **NAEYC Notes**, a weekly review of headlines and stories affecting educators. A complete list of NAEYC newsletters is at <https://www.naeyc.org/newsletter-signup>.

## Web resources

- The mission of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is to promote high-quality child learning by connecting practice, policy, and research. Their website is a treasure trove of resources for early childhood educators. They offer *Teaching Young Children*, an award-winning magazine for preschool educators. NAEYC also publishes *Young Children*, a peer-reviewed journal that combines research and practice and supports educational excellence. It focuses on meeting the needs of children from birth through third grade. Visit NAEYC online at <https://www.naeyc.org/>.
- While best known for their flagship television show, the Sesame Workshop has been at the forefront of child development for more than 50 years. Their website includes resources from a wide range of topics for educators and parents alike, helping preschoolers learn and grow and bringing them important early education on screens, in classrooms, and in communities. They provide school readiness and early education resources at <https://sesameworkshop.org/our-work/impact-areas/school-readiness/>.

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