

Infants & Toddlers: Setting the Stage for Learning

Help babies feel comforted and cared for while boosting their interest in learning

By Alice Sterling Honig, PhD | September , 2006

WHAT'S GOING ON?

As you provide competent care, every day in every way, you are teaching a baby what love and trust are in a very deep and real sense. Your countless nurturing interactions and your enthusiasm for supporting early learning are the threads that weave the strong blanket that babies experience as love, comfort, and a readiness to learn.

Learning through Routines

All the daily routines you perform for the babies in your care, including feeding, cleaning up, diapering, undressing, dressing, and settling into sleep, help you provide them with emotional comfort as well as the courage to learn. Babies learn just how you, in your own unique way of providing care, offer them comfort. They feel secure in your arms as you carry them around. Your low voice tones soothe them when they are hungry and may have to wait a bit for you to warm a bottle.

A gentle smile as you lean over the crib after a nap soothingly reassures a baby that soon you will be diapering her, feeding her, and filling her little tummy with soothing milk.

A calm voice tone and gentle verbal reassurance provide a boost for healthy emotional growth, just as food provides nourishment for the body.

Caressing touches help awaken babies' feelings of love. Be sure to use your full palm as you stroke a baby's tummy, rub a baby's back, or caress a toddler's tousled hair. Feeling your slow, reassuring warm touch, each little one relaxes into feelings of emotional safety. Firm, gentle, and frequent touches are a key to creating feelings of comfort for young children.

Close bodily contact comforts babies. Carry each baby around frequently during the day. When you have to go get a new bottle of lotion from the closet, be sure to take a baby with you who has been looking up at the ceiling from the crib. This journey in your arms gives the baby a new vantage point from which he can observe the world. When draped on your shoulder, a baby gets what is called a "neurological alert," where his eyes widen and his head is held more firmly as he scans the room. Simple, thoughtful actions, such as propping a baby in his crib so that he can see more of what is going on help to

give him new visual vistas, new possibilities for scanning and trying to make sense of the world before his eyes.

Boosting Early Learning

Toddlers are always on the go. Lying still for diapering does not come easily for toddlers. Rather than make this a prolonged activity, sing out cheerfully that the toddler needs a diaper change and that, as soon as he is cleaned up, he can be back on his way to exploring the toys in the room.

Use a loving touch with toddlers to confirm that, despite their sometimes boisterous and even rambunctious behaviors, they are still lovable. Stroke their hair. Give a tender shoulder and back rub to a toddler sprawled on the floor examining a toy or a favorite book.

Read daily with toddlers. Choose books with familiar activities, such as bathtime or playing with a ball. Toddlers love baby animals and will spend more time focusing on the pictures if you choose stories that involve positive, friendly actions by animals. As you share books, you confirm a child's lovability and your affection for them as well as boosting their understanding of the many pleasures that books can provide.

Use words of admiration and affirmation during the day. For example, when a toddler waits his turn for a planned activity, comment admiringly on his "patience." When a toddler lifts up his legs on the diapering table to make it easier for you to slip on a clean diaper, express your appreciation for his cooperation and helpfulness.

Encourage children to work together. Give two toddlers plastic mallets and encourage them to work together on a pegboard. Provide lots of wooden train tracks that need to be put together so that toddlers can work with one another to make a train run on those tracks (along with lots of their own special sound effects).

Loving, comforting, and learning are intertwined in the early years of life. You are the craftsperson who can make this intertwining into a work of teaching artistry!

About the Author

Alice Sterling Honig, PhD, a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books on infants and toddlers, including *Behavior Guidance for Infants and Toddlers* and, with H. Brophy, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School*
