



INFANT AND TODDLER PROGRAMS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR QUALITY CHILD-TEACHER INTERACTIONS

Recommended Practices

Recommendations for practices that strengthen early childhood programs are proposed based on findings from two studies. In one study, researchers in the Midwest Child Care Research Consortium conducted a study to assess program quality. In the second study, observations were conducted using the Environment Rating Scales as part of the Missouri Quality Rating System Pilot Study. The Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised is widely used to assess infant and toddler classrooms. A total of 102 infant and toddler classrooms in Missouri were observed for these studies and provide the basis for information in this recommended practices document.

Items from the Environment Rating Scale that were consistently rated as below average are divided into four program components: displayed materials, block play, pretend play, and free play. Specific recommendations for improving programs are outlined below.

Displayed Materials: Most of the observed teachers did not talk with children about the displayed materials.

Recommended Practice: Interaction with adults improves children's language and concept development. Talking with children about items in the room helps children to associate spoken language with what they are seeing, hearing, and touching. Teachers should display materials at the child's eye level, including on the floor for crawlers. Examples of appropriate staff practices include:

- Responding to children's interest in objects
- Pointing out familiar people in pictures (family pictures)
- Hanging up children's artwork (scribbles) and their names
- Naming familiar animals or objects commonly used by children
- Describing actions shown in pictures
- Talking about what children are seeing, touching, or hearing from three-dimensional objects hanging in space (such as mobiles, plants, or wind chimes—these objects should be hung from the ceiling)

Block Play: Few of the observed teachers engaged in simple block play with the children.

Recommended Practice: Teachers should touch and use the blocks alongside children as they play, rather than just observing and remarking on children's play. By participating with children at their ability levels, teachers can help them progress to the next step in skills and development. This type of play is a way for children to learn informally, rather than with specific direction or instructions. Also, children tend to play longer with materials when teachers are actively involved in their play without taking over the activity. Block play is more fun if there are cars, animals, or other accessories with the blocks.

Pretend Play: Most of the observed teachers did not actively pretend with children during play.

Recommended Practice: Adults can lengthen and enhance children's play by pretending with them, initiating dramatic play, and extending children's ideas. When adults role play, the children may imitate their pretend play, choose to continue playing instead of wandering aimlessly, and learn new words for items and actions. For infants and young toddlers, teachers should avoid giving commands or only setting up materials and activities without actively engaging in play with them. As the children get older, some will explore the materials with less adult involvement, but teachers need to remember that this is an opportunity to help develop children's language.

Free Play: Many of the observed teachers did not encourage extra learning while supervising children during free play.

Recommended Practice: Supervision of children during free play can be used as an educational interaction. To encourage extra learning, staff should talk with children socially, show children how to use a toy, play/pretend with them, help children work through disagreements, and have toddlers explain what they are doing. Teachers should interact without intruding on the child or the activity.

Sources

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- De Kruif, R. E. L., McWilliam, R. A., Ridley, S. M., & Wakely, M. B. (2000). Classification of teachers' interaction behaviors in early childhood classrooms. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15*, 247-268.
- Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R. (2006). *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale—Revised*. New York: Teachers College Press.

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