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Infants and Toddlers

What Works? Assessing Infant and Toddler Play Environments

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS AFFECT the behavior of the people who spend time in them. The goal for infant and toddler play environments is to make them comfortable and homey while offering the right amount of interesting, exploratory learning experiences. Further, the teachers tend to be more effective and their jobs more satisfying in the right environment. This article uses a particular approach called Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments to analyze the play areas in an infant and toddler setting.

Some time ago Sybil Kritchevsky, Elizabeth Prescott, and Elizabeth Jones, at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California, came up with the dimensions approach (Kritchevsky & Prescott 1977; Jones & Prescott 1984). They named and

defined five dimensions: open/closed, intrusion/seclusion, simple/complex, high mobility/low mobility, and soft/hard. The dimensions are as valid today as they were years ago. Though not widely known now, Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Jones's research and its emphasis on developmentally appropriate *balance* is a helpful way to set up and analyze environments that work for young children.

Let's look at an infant and toddler program designed for children from 6 weeks to 2 years old. (The analysis is not of actual rooms in an existing program, but rooms compiled from my observations of infant and toddler environments over many years in the early care and education field.) In the first classroom are two distinct groups. In the younger group are immobile babies mostly

under 6 months of age. They are in their own play area surrounded by low walls that define their space. Also in the area with them is an older baby whose developmental level more nearly matches theirs than the older group's. In the older group are babies who creep and crawl. The youngest is 4 months, and the oldest is 14 months.

Make infant and toddler play environments comfortable and homey while offering the right amount of interesting, exploratory learning experiences.

In a room next door is another, larger, play space for toddlers who are ages 12 to 24 months. One child is not yet walking at 20 months but is in this group because she fits better with the toddlers than with the creepers and crawlers. Please note that *toddler* can be a misleading term because some children with special needs may never walk, but their developmental level matches that of their peers.

The open/closed dimension

Walls, fences, and dividers define the spaces in the first room so the younger babies and the child with special needs are protected from busy crawlers. The barriers of a closed dimension provide safety and a sense of security for those inside the confines. The barriers are also helpful for the teachers. One who had previously worked with a wider mixed-age group remarked how much easier her job was now that she didn't have to keep the crawlers off the younger babies. The play space for crawlers and creepers is larger than that of the young babies. The toddler play space next door is even larger, and it provides free access to an outside play area. Toddlers use open space to walk and run. Closing some of the toddlers' open space to create cozy areas invites social experiences among peers and provides for quieter, more focused sedentary play.

These three spaces in the two rooms include both open and closed toys and materials. Open, or open-ended, toys can be used in multiple ways and are appropriate for all three age groups. The youngest children are intrigued with things they can reach, grasp, and manipulate. A teacher has placed a metal bowl and a good-size plastic ring within reach of one of the babies. Another nearby baby is exploring and mouthing a plastic funnel. Closed toys are toys that have one right way to do something and are most appropriate for older toddlers. Shape boxes and simple wooden

puzzles are examples. Toddlers may make puzzles into open toys by dumping the pieces just to hear the sounds.

Closed storage keeps the environment more organized and excess toys hidden away. Having too many items to choose from can overwhelm some children. Open storage shelves provide easy access to dolls, balls, cars, and blocks and invite the mobile infants and toddlers to make choices.

The intrusion/seclusion dimension

This dimension fits right in with the open/closed dimension. The open play area for each group allows for interactions as children intermingle and share the space, so even the youngest babies interact with each other (Hammond 2009). Creating small secluded spaces for mobile infants and toddlers helps children get away from the group and be alone or with one other child. For example, a wooden box with two open sides (the ways in and out) allows the feeling of seclusion. Because the box is open to view, it is easy for teachers to supervise and observe children's play. Another aspect of seclusion is protecting children from streams of visitors interrupting their play. One way to do this is by having an observation area or an observation room. Optimum intrusion includes letting the outside environment come inside. This program borders on a street and has windows at child height in the fence around the outdoor play area so the toddlers can see their neighborhood. They watch neighbors weeding or raking leaves.

The simple/complex dimension

The younger the baby, the more important simplicity is. Complex, commercial, stimulating toys for babies may provide entertainment more than actual learning opportunities.



About the Author

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In group care programs the amount of sensory stimulation can easily exceed a baby's limits, unless teachers know how to control sensory input. Babies benefit less from complex, busy toys than they do from manipulating simple play objects in a relaxed manner. Magda Gerber, Los Angeles infant expert, used to demonstrate how a simple cotton table napkin provides multiple opportunities for exploration even for very young babies. As babies become toddlers and their worlds expand, they learn from more complexity. Blocks to stack and wagons to fill are examples of complexity because they involve multiple objects. A ball is simple. Adding a ramp to roll the ball down brings complexity. Water is something simple. Toys in the water create complexity. Adding sand to water and toys creates even more complexity.

The high mobility/low mobility dimension

Infants are necessarily less mobile than crawlers and toddlers. However, the staff and philosophy of this program highly value the free movement of even the youngest babies and ensure that the environment offers children safe places to move (Pikler & Pap 2006). Teachers place all the babies in the youngest group on their backs in the play area. This particular program has been influenced by both Magda Gerber's RIE approach (Hammond 2009; Greenwald & Weaver 2013) and the research of Dr. Emmi Pikler at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary (Kállo & Balog 2005; Pikler & Pap 2006; Tardos 2007).

Pikler, a colleague of Gerber, was a pediatrician, theorist, and researcher who studied what she called "natural development" during the 65 years of the residential nursery—now called the Pikler Institute—she established in Budapest after World War II. Before the back-to-sleep movement, Pikler had babies on their backs both to sleep and when awake, because that is the position in which they

are free to move. (See "What About Tummy Time?") She noted that even young infants change position an average of once a minute. The average observer may not perceive high mobility, yet it is there. Low mobility comes during sleeping and caregiving times.

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The Pikler approach is not common practice in the United States, so it's important to note again that families in this program choose this room for its philosophy related to babies' mobility. They understand and appreciate why there are no low-mobility periods when infants are propped in sitting positions or strapped in infant carriers, high chairs, or swings.

This center values diverse philosophies and approaches; therefore, families can choose other options than this particular room. Ensuring that families have choices is a valuable aspect of any early childhood education program (Gonzalez-Mena 2008) and comes about through family-professional partnerships, as stated in NAEYC Standard 7, Families (Ritchie & Willer 2008).

The older group of babies has plenty of space to crawl and creep. They are used to the idea that eating is a low mobility activity, although they may push for high mobility during diapering. By toddlerhood, mobility begins to look like an obsession. Toddlers are born to move, and their environment encourages movement. The children use their gross motor skills both indoors and outside. As with the other groups, low mobility is required during caregiving times.

What About Tummy Time?

When teachers place the babies in the youngest group on their backs in the play area, how do these infants get "tummy time"?

Although tummy time is recommended practice in the United States (and necessarily so, because of the effects of babies being on their backs while sleeping, some even swaddled, and strapped into various devices when awake), the babies in this program don't need tummy time before they can roll over on their own.

The families of these babies follow a philosophy of free movement and do not strap their babies into swings, strollers, backpacks, high chairs, or baby carriers (the exception being car seats when in moving cars). The same philosophy is carried out in the center. It isn't for all families, but these families have chosen this particular way of supporting their babies' development. Their babies get tummy time when they can roll over on their own.

Anna Tardos, Emmi Pikler's daughter and the present director of the Pikler Institute, is clear: the problems early in life that tummy time helps correct, such as weak chest muscles and misshapen heads, were not exhibited during the 65 years of the Pikler Institute's residential care program (where this particular philosophy originated) because babies were on their backs and free to move when sleeping and when awake.





The soft/hard dimension

Spaces for infants and toddlers balance soft and hard features. All the children play mostly on hard surfaces, including the younger babies, who lie on a cloth-covered floor instead of a rug. It may be difficult to imagine young babies needing hard surfaces, but research from the Pikler Institute indicates that a hard surface gives support, provides resistance, and enhances natural development by making rolling over easier (Tardos 2007). Children who are mobile but not yet walking explore low wooden platforms with ramps (hard) but also cushions and pads to crawl onto (soft).

Cribs for all the infants offer appropriate softness—that is, they are softer than the floor, but not so soft as to put the babies at risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). To reduce the risk of SIDS, the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1992 recommended a “safe sleep environment,” which included providing a firm sleep surface for babies and avoiding soft bedding. More recently they expanded this recommendation beyond just preventing SIDS deaths to include prevention of all sleep-related infant deaths (Task Force on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome 2011). Teachers put both soft and hard toys in all the play areas. The toys are simple play objects made of cloth, wool, metal, wood, and plastic—objects that encourage the babies to grasp, finger, and mouth them.

The toddlers enjoy hard surfaces for using the wheel toys that they love to both push and ride. The toddlers also appreciate resilient surfaces, both indoors and outdoors. Grass and the spongy surfaces under climbing structures are soft and provide a contrast to hard floors and concrete areas. Teachers create soft, cuddly spaces with stuffed animals and cozy furniture for toddlers to snuggle in. Toddlers take pleasure in soft blankets, cushions, and especially adult laps.

Of course, there is a good deal more to consider when planning infant and toddler environments, but this is one way to analyze an existing one. If you are new at setting

up an infant and toddler environment, consider how you might use the information in this article. If you already have your own ideas and experiences related to infant and toddler environments, consider how the dimensions approach might work as an analysis tool for you. Give it a try!

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