

Infant Environments: Let's Take a Closer Look

The goal of an infant program is to offer optimal opportunity for growth and development, as well as offer a safe and nurturing environment. What do we need to consider for optimal infant environments?

Create a Vision

A good place to start is to create or review your program's vision or philosophy. This information will help guide infant environments by focusing on what we will need in order to care for infants and provide the best for infant care. Some visions may include ideas such as these:

- Providing adults knowledgeable in child development
- Including developmentally appropriate materials and practices
- Encouraging loving interactions with eating, sleeping, and exploring
- Respecting infants/families and honoring their importance
- Incorporating comfortable environments that portray home-like settings in positive, safe, encouraging ways

Optimal Environments

It is important that the environment match each infant's needs and support their individual development. Therefore, the adult needs to know each child well: What they like or don't like, how they can be soothed, what developmental milestones they have mastered and those they are working on, home routines, and family background information.

Tip: The most important element in an infant environment is the adult. Research shows that infants need personal bonding relationships with their caregivers in order to thrive and grow.

Optimal environments also include clear health, safety, and supervision guidelines for infants and their caregivers. Spaces for proper toileting, diapering, and assisting personal needs (feeding, bonding, resting, and playing) are necessary and are a part of all experiences.

Supportive Materials

Infants learn about their world by manipulating materials, exploring their environment, and interacting with others. Materials that are enticing, interesting, and easily accessible will encourage children's interactions and learning. Provide low shelves and easy-to-see baskets/containers to hold materials. *All materials should be evaluated for safety and choking hazards.

Consider the following:

- Search for materials that can be used in a variety of ways, are easy to handle, stimulating, and are developmentally appropriate
- Offer equipment to climb on, crawl into, or that children can pull themselves up on, that are sturdy and safe
- Provide sensory experiences, such as supervised water play, textured materials, clay, play dough, and paint
- Consider shatterproof mirrors at child levels, for children to explore themselves as well as others



Tip: Container devices, such as play pens and infant swings, should be used minimally (or not at all), as they inhibit natural movement and can be confining.

Making Connections

Infants need to form connections in their environments. One important connection is for the child to have a sense of belonging. Consistent, loving adults will help make this connection and so will having items that portray a sense of home. Consider soft lighting, comfortable chairs (for both adult and child to sit and cuddle in), calming music, cozy carpets and pillows (to lean on or be propped up with), and photos of families and friends (displayed at the infant's eye level).

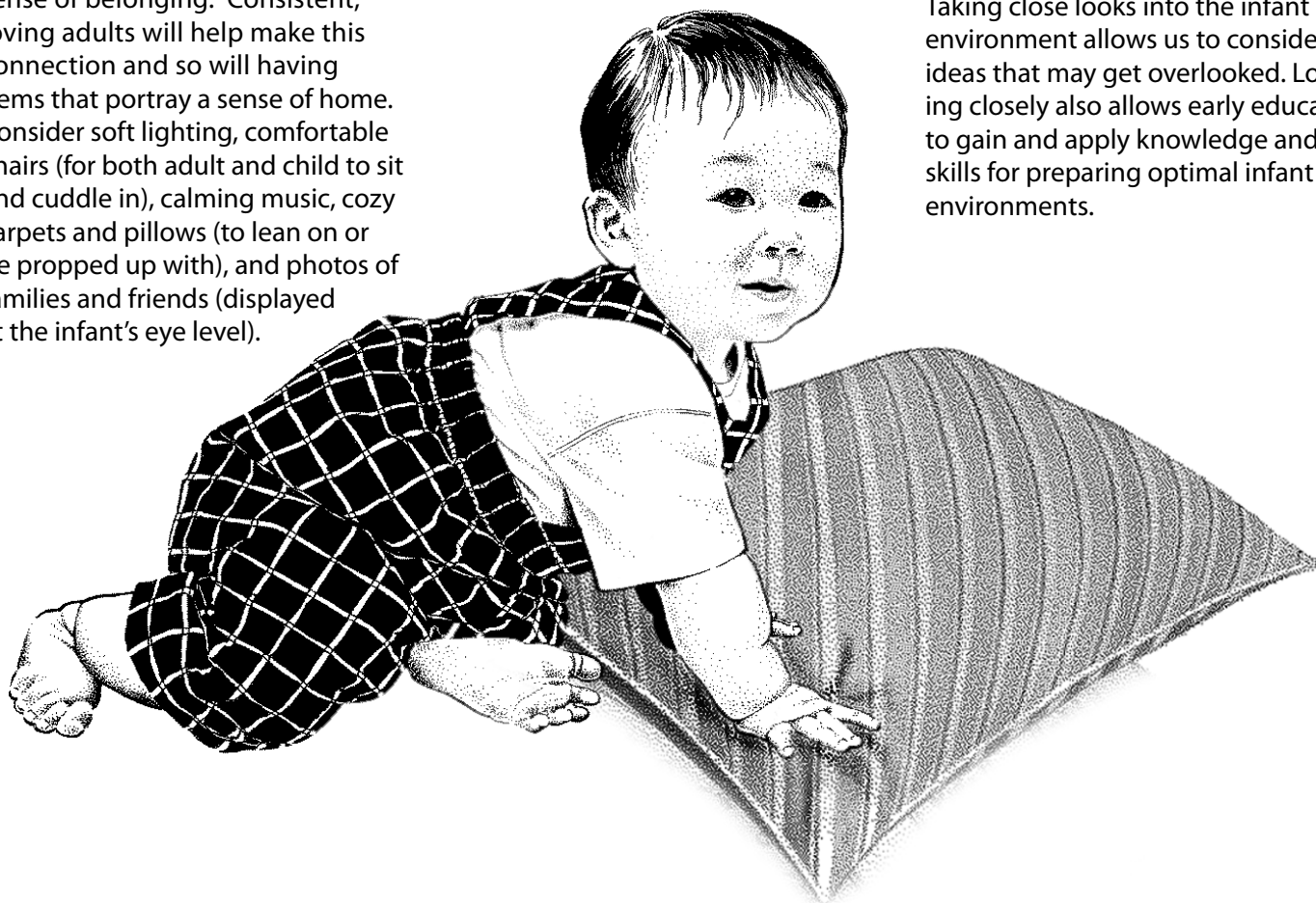
Infant Views

Imagine you are the infant. What would it feel like in the environment you have prepared? Try lying down on the floor in your environment and looking around to achieve an infant's view. Take in what the space feels like, smells like, and looks like. Is it comfortable, engaging, and interesting? When looking around the environment, what do you like? What don't you like? What could be added or taken out?

Tip: How much plastic? Be careful that the infant's environment is not filled with plastic materials. Infants respond to rich, soothing textures, such as soft fabrics, smooth wood, and other natural materials. Consider using a variety of materials for toys, furniture, and equipment.

Close Looks

Taking close looks into the infant environment allows us to consider ideas that may get overlooked. Looking closely also allows early educators to gain and apply knowledge and skills for preparing optimal infant environments.



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