

What You Want to See in a High-Quality Infant Program

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We describe a few features of great infant programs, like a supportive physical environment and positive relationships. What else should you look for? Here are some examples of what you want to see.

Time for children to explore and play. Caregivers provide interesting materials that give babies a small challenge. They let infants explore for long periods of time. Caregivers

- Watch what children are doing and comment on their play. “Mateo, I see you looking at the rainbow ball. Do you like all the bright colors?”
- Play games, like peekaboo, with babies. Very young children learn best when adults join in their play.
- Hold infants on their laps to enjoy a book together. Caregivers talk about the pictures and the story. “Look at these bunnies. They're hopping on the bed!”
- Offer play objects that babies can hold, mouth, and handle safely—like wooden spoons, fabric pieces of different textures, and containers in various sizes.

Routines that address children's needs. Routines—like eating, sleeping, and changing diapers—ensure that your baby's needs are met. They help infants feel secure and start understanding what will happen next. Caregivers

- Explain what's happening during routines and encourage infants to help. “Tanisha, let's put your socks on. Please give me your foot.”

- Hold babies when giving them a bottle. When possible, babies are fed by their primary caregiver. “Julio, it's time for your bottle. I'm going to pick you up so we can snuggle while you drink.”
- Encourage children to feed themselves—even if they don't do it perfectly. Each child decides how much to eat. Caregivers make mealtime a happy time.
- Try to include a family's preferences. “Chloe, Mommy wants you to learn to feed yourself. Here is a spoon you can use to eat your yogurt.”
- Follow special goodbye rituals with family members to ease the drop off transition. “Okay, Oliver, Daddy has to go to work now and it's time to say goodbye. You know what to do: give him a kiss and a hug, and then we'll go to the window. Watch—when Daddy gets to the car, he's going to turn around and wave to you.”
- Use diaper-changing time as a personal, one-on-one interaction. “Nadira, I see your toes wiggling. Do you want me to tickle them? I'm going to unsnap your pants next. Will you help me today?”

Policies that support children's health and safety. At high-quality programs, health and safety come first to protect the children and staff, and to make sure babies are ready to learn.

- Caregivers follow health and safety procedures, like proper hand-washing methods. These procedures are clearly posted in the room.
- The space is set up with health and safety in mind. For example, caregivers use easy-to-clean paint. They have separate areas for preparing food and for changing diapers. Each child has his own space for personal items.
- Caregivers have training in infant development and caregiving, and they enjoy working with infants.
- There are enough adults working so caregivers can spend some time with each infant individually. Infants have a primary caregiver and the program provides continuity of care—infants stay with one teacher for as long as possible instead of being moved from room to room (and to a different teacher) every few months.

Warning Signs

When you visit infant programs, what are some ways to tell that your child might not thrive and be supported there? While no program is perfect, you'll want to be on the lookout for signs that a program may not be using the best practices. Here are a few.

Relationships aren't emphasized. Caregivers don't have meaningful interactions with babies. Instead of forming a strong relationship with one or two main caregivers, infants interact with many adults throughout the day. Children may be moved from one room to another based on their age or skills.

Environments don't support infants' needs. The space is too colorful, cluttered with toys, or noisy, so it overwhelms babies. Many of the toys are electronic or can only be used in one way. The room doesn't have separate areas for different activities.

Infants have little time to explore and play. Babies spend a lot of time in devices like swings or bouncy seats, where they can't move around freely. They don't spend much time on the floor, moving and discovering on their own. Older infants might be expected to do group activities, like circle time, which are more appropriate for preschoolers. Children don't get to explore outside daily.

Families aren't included as partners. Caregivers don't regularly update families about what's happening, ask for their input, or respect what they want for their child. Families don't have many opportunities to get involved.

Health and safety aren't priorities. Health and safety guidelines aren't obviously displayed. Toys, carpets, and equipment look old, dirty, or broken down. Procedures for diapering, cleaning, or food storage and preparation aren't written down.

Questions to Ask

It's essential for you to know that your child will be well cared for. When you talk to a caregiver or director of an infant program you are considering, ask these questions to see if the program meets your family's needs:

- How will the program include my family and our preferences in the daily caregiving?
- How long will my baby stay in this room and with these caregivers?
- How long has each caregiver been with the program? What kind of training do these caregivers have?
- What is each caregiver's schedule?
- What is the policy when my child or a caregiver is sick?
- What kinds of toys and materials do the babies play with? How much time will my baby have to explore them?
- How will the program communicate with my family?

The first few years of your baby's life are such important learning years. Connecting with warm, caring adults from the beginning helps your baby connect with others throughout his life. Together, you and your child's caregivers can make good choices that'll give your child a great start!

Audience: *Family*

Age: *Infant/Toddler*

Topics: *Other Topics, Educational Settings*

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