

Approaches Toward Learning – Foundations of School Readiness Part 2

Foundations of School Readiness Pt. 2

Attention

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Welcome to Part 2 of this edition of *News You Can Use*! Part 1 introduced the **approaches toward learning** domain, which focuses on learning styles, habits, motivation, and attitudes that reflect the many ways children involve themselves in learning—how they go about developing new skills and concepts across all of the essential domains. It identified key aspects of approaches toward learning—attention, curiosity, information gathering, memory persistence, problem solving—and described self-regulation—an important skill that helps infants and toddlers use different learning approaches more effectively. It also stressed the importance of working in partnership with families to understand and support children’s approaches toward learning in a culturally responsive manner. In Part 2, we explore attention, curiosity, and information gathering.



Attention

Seven-month-old Kiran sits on Noor’s (her teacher’s) lap while they look at photos of Kiran engaged in daily routines and experiences in the classroom. Noor talks quietly as she describes each photo to Kiran. Noor holds up one of the photos and says, “Look, Kiran! Here’s a photo of us sitting in our favorite comfortable rocker!” Noor then points to the rocker and says, “And there it is—our favorite rocker!” Kiran’s gaze follows Noor’s pointing finger. Then Kiran looks up at her teacher’s face and back again at the photo.

With Noor’s support, Kiran is on her way to learning how to focus and pay attention to things and people in her world. The simple things that Noor does—holding Kiran in her lap, talking quietly to her, describing the photos and linking them to what Kiran can see in her classroom—help Kiran feel comfortable, secure, and focused. Sharing an experience that is based on Kiran’s interests also helps her maintain focus and attention.

The ability to pay attention—to maintain focus on a person, object, or event or become deeply involved in an activity or interaction even when there are internal or external distractions—is directly related to school success and success in life in general. Can you imagine trying to learn without being able to really focus on and pay attention to something or someone? Attention is also directly related to self-regulation (see Part 1 for more information). A young child’s “regulation state” (e.g.,

level of comfort, discomfort, alertness, sleepiness) directly affects her ability to pay attention. Adults who are alert to regulation states can respond in appropriate ways. A child, even a very young one, is more likely to be able to pay attention to something she is interested in when she is rested, awake, and comfortable!

There are many ways you can help infants and toddlers increase their attention span. Here are just a few examples:

- Provide children with space, time, and a variety of interesting, culturally- and age-appropriate toys and materials to explore. Allow them to use toys and materials in their own ways and to repeat actions and activities. Play simple games from home and school that involve repetition, such as peek-a-boo.
- Observe! Notice what toys, experiences, people, and interactions maintain or increase their interest. Describe what children see, hear, and do. For toddlers, interpret and expand on what they do and say.ⁱ Ask open-ended questions, such as “How did you do that? Tell me more.”ⁱⁱ
- Use children’s names to get their attention: For example, say “Look, Derrick!” as you begin to talk.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Give young infants one or two toys or materials at a time to play with. Switch the toys/materials with something different when you notice children losing interest. As they get older, rotate indoor and outdoor toys and materials more regularly to maintain children’s interest; provide new ones that build on those already familiar to the children,^{iv} such as wind chimes, wind socks, flags that move in the wind, bird feeders, and new photos of family members.^v
- Help children regulate their reactions to internal feelings (e.g., hunger, tiredness, overexcitement, etc.) and to things in the external environment (e.g., lights, sounds, temperature, other people). Try to limit environmental distractions while children are engaged in routines and experiences (e.g., turn off background music while children are playing).
- Make routines and experiences comfortable and enjoyable (e.g., snuggle in a comfortable chair or rocker while reading a book, or gently bounce a child on your knee to the beat of a nursery rhyme). Have books that contain authentic images and text and nursery rhymes that reflect the cultures and languages of the children and families.





Curiosity

Miss Cora, a family child care provider, sits on a grass mound next to the small group of toddlers she cares for in her home. Thirty two-month-old Abby and 21-month-old Davion are crouched down beside a hole in the ground they discovered. They stare down into the hole. Then Abby sees a nearby stick. She grabs it and pokes it into the hole. Davion watches her for a moment, then sticks his finger into the hole. When he pulls up his hand, he sees dirt sticking to his finger and shows it to Miss Cora. She asks him, "Where did that dirt come from?" Davion points down to the hole.

Davion has just discovered that one thing you can find in a hole is dirt. This might not seem like an amazing discovery to an adult, but Miss Cora understands that young Davion is displaying curiosity about what might be inside the hole he and Abby found. Miss Cora allows him to follow through on this urge to explore the hole even though he might get a little dirty. She knows that experiences like this help Davion understand that he can create a question in his mind and answer it through his own exploration.

Curiosity is something that usually comes naturally to infants and toddlers. After all, there is just so much to discover about objects, people, and the way things work! Curious children are eager to learn new information, including the information they will learn at school! Here are some ways to foster young children's curiosity:

- Enliven children's senses—sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste—to encourage them to react and move. For example, place one or two colorful toys within an infant's reach during tummy time or invite toddlers to taste different varieties of apples.^{vi}
- Observe what children are doing. Stay near them but try not to interfere. Watch and listen for cues (e.g., body movements, facial expressions, vocalizations, children approaching you) to know when to respond warmly and with thoughtful comments or questions that reflect what children might be wondering, thinking, or trying to discover. When children discover new things, be enthusiastic! Share their excitement and delight.
- Create an "environment of yes!"^{vii} The home, family child care, or classroom environment can be set up to encourage exploration. When the environment is safe and materials are age-appropriate, adults do not have to spend time taking things away from children or telling them "No, stop, don't touch that, don't do that!" An "environment of yes" that nurtures and celebrates children's curiosity provides safe, interesting spaces for children to explore and toys, materials, and equipment they can easily get to and use that reflect their cultures and communities.
- Offer a range of open-ended toys and materials that infants and toddlers can physically

manipulate in many ways. Remember: There is a lot to learn about shapes, objects in space, balance, and gravity from stacking boxes or blocks!

- Step back and let infants and toddlers try things their own way. Sometimes it can be difficult for adults to watch young children attempt something that they know will not work. How do adults know something won't work? They have more years of experience in trying things and failing than young children. Letting children attempt, fail, and even become a little frustrated is a gift (though this view does vary among families and cultures). It allows children to eventually gain the understanding that it is okay to try and fail. They might even find that frustration can be a good motivator to try a different approach. This also helps children build **resilience**, the ability to handle stressful situations and still function effectively.

Information Gathering

Cassandra holds her 2-week-old daughter, Vivienne, while talking to the nurse, Anne, during her newborn home visit. Anne explains to Cassandra that right now, Vivienne can only see about the distance from her mother's arms to her face. When Vivienne is awake and alert, looking at her mother seems to be her favorite thing to do. As Cassandra talks to Anne and asks questions, Vivienne watches her mother, listens to her words and then wiggles a bit and begins to fuss. Cassandra gently shifts Vivienne's position in her arms and Vivienne calms.



Can a 2-week-old baby really gather information about her world? Absolutely! In fact, babies are learning about the world they will enter even before they are born. From within the womb, they can hear their mother's voice, taste the flavors of the foods she eats, and tell the difference between the two languages she speaks!^{viii} These experiences give babies a glimpse of information about what to expect when they are born. Even Vivienne at 2 weeks of age is gathering information about her mother: how she looks, what she sounds like, what she smells like, how her skin feels, and how she responds to Vivienne's cues.

Infants and toddlers are so interested in the world around them. In fact, you can say that they're "designed to explore!"^{ix} Young children are drawn to things that are new and unexpected; they are also interested in things that adults who care about them are interested in. Even young infants will follow an adult's gaze or look to see where an adult is pointing. This information gathering is the "work" of young children, and it's important work for school readiness. So what can you do to support and encourage it? Don't be surprised if the following suggestions sound familiar to you!

- Allow infants and toddlers to explore safe but appropriately challenging indoor and outdoor environments that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Offer a range and variety of interesting toys and materials to children, and watch to find out what kinds of experiences interest them.
- Give children information about things that interest them: Name objects, people, actions, and feelings. Expand on their interests. For example, if a child is interested in leaves, find ways to support her interest, such as giving her opportunities to go outside and collect leaves; encouraging her to watch leaves blowing in the wind and inviting her to move like the leaves; and taking photos of different kinds of leaves, creating a leaf book, and talking with her about the photos.^x
- Ask questions (yes, you can ask infants questions!) and actively involve children in finding answers (e.g., “I wonder where your lovey went. Where do you think we should look for it? Oh, there it is—it’s in your backpack! I wonder how it got there.”).^{xi}

Conclusion

Attention, curiosity, and information gathering are important learning approaches for infants and toddlers. These approaches—like development in all of the essential domains—are connected to and support each other. And did you notice that strategies for helping young children develop these approaches are similar? Each strategy has multiple uses and supports learning in many ways. Think about the infants and toddlers with whom you work. How do they demonstrate attention, curiosity, and information gathering? Do you see this the same way their families do? What do you already do support these approaches? What else might you try? How might you engage families in nurturing their children’s attention, curiosity, and information gathering? Remember: When adults support learning approaches, they are helping infants and toddlers develop a strong foundation for future learning, success, and enjoyment of life!^{xii} Stay tuned for Part 3, which will focus on memory, persistence, and problem solving.

ⁱCate Heroman et al., *Teaching Strategies GOLD Objectives for Development & Learning: Birth Through Kindergarten* (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, LLC, 2010), 65.

ⁱⁱDepartment of Education and Early Development and Department of Health and Social Services, *State of Alaska Early Learning Guidelines: A Resource for Parents and Early Educators* (December 2007), 98, accessed July 19, 2012, <http://www.eed.state.ak.us/publications/EarlyLearningGuidelines.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱHeroman et al., 2010.

^{iv}*Ibid.*

^vMassachusetts Association for the Education of Young Children and Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, *Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers* (May 2011), 56, accessed July 19, 2012, http://www.eec.state.ma.us/docs1/curriculum/20110519_infant_toddler_early_learning_guidelines.pdf.

^{vi}North Carolina Infant and Toddler Early Learning Guidelines Task Force and North Carolina Division of Child Development, *Infant–Toddler Foundations: Guidelines for Development and Learning for North Carolina’s Infants and Toddlers (Birth to 36 Months)* (2008), 54, accessed July 19, 2012, http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/pdf_forms/dcd_infant_toddler_early_foundations.pdf.

^{vii}Early Head Start National Resource Center, *News You Can Use: Environment as Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers* (July 2010), accessed July 19, 2012, http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/tta-system/ehsnrc/Early%20Head%20Start/early-learning/curriculum/environment_nycu.htm.

^{viii}Krista Byers-Heinlin, Tracey C. Burns, & Janet F. Werker, "The Roots of Bilingualism in Newborns," *Psychological Science* 21:3 (March 2010): 343–348; Johanne Paradis, Fred Genesee, & Martha B. Crago, *Dual Language Development & Disorders: A Handbook on Bilingualism & Second Language Learning*, 2nd edition (Baltimore, MD: Brookes, 2011), 83.

^{ix}J. Ronald Lally, "School Readiness Begins in Infancy: Social Interactions During the First Two Years of Life Provide the Foundation for Learning," *Phi Delta Kappan* 92, no. 3 (November 2010): 18, http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v94/17pdk_92_3.pdf.

^xNorth Carolina Infant and Toddler Early Learning Guidelines Task Force and North Carolina Division of Child Development, *Infant–Toddler Foundations: Guidelines for Development and Learning for North Carolina’s Infants and Toddlers (Birth to 36 Months)* (2008), 55, accessed July 19, 2012, http://ncchildcare.dhhs.state.nc.us/pdf_forms/dcd_infant_toddler_early_foundations.pdf.

^{xi}*Ibid.*

^{xii}North Carolina Infant and Toddler Early Learning Guidelines Task Force and North Carolina Division of Child Development, "Infant–Toddler Foundations," 2008.