

Stimulating Environments

Environments that are stimulating for babies and young children up to age 5 are filled with safe objects to explore, allow freedom of movement, and provide a variety of experiences. A stimulating environment can be created in one room of a home, in a home child care setting, or in a center-based environment.

The following suggestions may help you create a stimulating environment for your baby or young child and may help you evaluate other settings where your baby or young child spends time. The most important aspect of a stimulating environment is a caregiver (or caregivers) who can create inviting, challenging play spaces in which to interact with babies and young children, can set limits and be emotionally available to babies and young children, and can read babies' and young children's cues and support them when they become overstimulated, fatigued, or bored.

- Organize materials in some fashion (e.g., fill containers with blocks, provide babies with items to dump and fill, provide toddlers with boxes of toy vehicles or plastic animals, provide older children with items for dress-up and pretend play).
- Make containers accessible to babies and children so they are free to choose what they want to play with. Change some toy choices regularly so that babies and children are exposed to different objects from which to choose.
- Provide safe access to windows so babies and children can look out onto the world, unbreakable mirrors for them to look into, and brightly colored pictures at their eye level.
- Create varying floor surfaces for practicing crawling and walking (e.g., mats, carpets, smooth floor surfaces, carpet squares on tile floors).
- Design safe spaces for crawling in or climbing over, using sofa cushions, cardboard boxes, and sheets.
- Provide space where a baby or child can take a time out from the excitement of group activity.



Try to read babies' or children's cues when they become overwhelmed by all the stimulation, get bored with a toy, or need to be moved to a new place to play in the room, such as from the infant seat to a safe place on the floor where they can have some "tummy time." When babies or children begin to rub their eyes or ears, when they fuss or whine, when they wander around without interest, or when they become aroused and begin to play inappropriately, they are sending cues that they need help redirecting their activity.

- Plan spaces so that caregivers have a clear view of the babies' or children's activities and have multiple opportunities to interact with the babies and children.
- Provide developmentally appropriate toys for young children to give them chances to practice their new skills in movement, thinking, and interacting. The following is a list of activities and of the toys appropriate for learning skills associated with each activity:
 - **Movement:** Walker wagon or ride-on toy (with a push handle for early walkers); pull toy (string must be less than 12 inches long); big, bouncy balls.

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- **Using hands:** Blocks (made of wood, plastic, or recycled milk cartons or boxes); shape sorter, nesting cups, simple puzzles; dump-and-fill containers (use recycled plastic containers); scrap paper, old magazines, paper grocery bags, drawing paper; crayons; an old set of keys; a flashlight; nontoxic play dough.
- **Water play:** Squeeze bottles; sponges; plastic cups; soap crayons.
- **Pretend play:** Parent's old clothes for dress-up; toy phone; plastic kitchen utensils, spoons, and empty cereal boxes and milk cartons; dolls, bottles, and blankets; mirror; toy tool set; toy vehicles.
- **Music:** Drum or old pots and pans; musical tapes; singalong videos; child's audiotape player.
- **Language:** Sturdy, colorful board books.

The most important thing you can do to make sure that the environment is safe for babies and young children is get down on your hands and knees in each room of your home to look at it from your baby's or young child's perspective. Other guidelines include the following:

- Have Syrup of Ipecac on hand
- Have a fire extinguisher in your home
- Change smoke alarm batteries every 6 months
- Have emergency numbers and your address and phone numbers next to every phone
- Put covers on all electric sockets
- Use toy chests with lids that come off easily or stay up well
- Put gates on all stairs (both at top and at bottom)
- Have furnaces and fireplaces checked for carbon monoxide; install a carbon monoxide detector
- Lock cabinets in the kitchen and bathroom; install childproof latches
- Use back burners when cooking, and turn pot handles away from babies' and children's reach
- Keep chairs away from kitchen counters
- Take plastic covers off crib mattresses
- Use plastic guards for sharp corners on furniture
- Remove all cleaning supplies from low cabinets
- Never leave a baby unattended
- Do not put a baby's crib near blinds, curtains, or anything with cords that hang down
- Do not use pillows in the baby's crib
- Do not tie a pacifier around the baby's neck
- Do not let the baby sleep wearing a necklace
- Do not drink hot beverages while holding the baby
- Do not let babies or children play in the bathroom
- Do not leave breakable items within reach of a baby or child
- Do not put high chairs close to counters

Cite as: Kaplan-Sanoff M. 2002. Stimulating environments. In Jellinek M, Patel BP, Froehle MC, eds., *Bright Futures in Practice: Mental Health—Volume II. Tool Kit*. Arlington, VA: National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health.