

More Purposeful and Intentional Infant and Toddler Care

by Pam Schiller



Pam Schiller, Ph.D., is a National Curriculum

Specialist for The Wright Group/McGraw-Hill and an internationally recognized author and public speaker. Dr. Schiller has been a child care administrator for several years and has also taught in the public schools as a kindergarten teacher. She served as Head of the Early Childhood Department at the University of Houston where she also directed the Lab School. She is senior author of five early childhood curriculums, including *The DLM Early Childhood Express* for The Wright Group, ten children's books, and more than 30 teacher and parent resource books. Pam lives in Cypress, Texas.

Nine-month-old Audrey stirs from her nap. As Ms. Rose passes Audrey's crib while she is on her way to place Evan in his crib for his nap, she says to Audrey, "Hi, Audrey, I will be there to get you in just a minute." Ms. Rose gives Evan a hug and says, "Sleep well, Evan. We'll see you when you wake up." Evan starts to fuss. Ms. Rose pats him on his back and says again, "We'll see you when you wake up."

Ms. Rose leaves Evan, who is still fussing just a little, walks over to Audrey, smiles at her and says, "You had a long nap. I think you are ready to play for awhile." As she lifts Audrey from her crib, she gives her a hug and begins singing softly.

*You're not sleeping.
You're not sleeping.
You're awake.
You're awake.
Now it's time for playing.*

*Now it's time for playing.
Audrey's awake.
Audrey's awake.*

Ms. Rose walks to the changing table and begins to change Audrey's diaper. "Let's get you a dry diaper. Did you have a good nap?" Audrey starts to babble, "ma-ma-ma-ma." Ms. Rose waits for a break and then interjects. "Listen to you talk! Are you telling me about your dreams?"

Audrey hears laughter across the room and turns her head in the direction of the interesting noise. Ms. Rose notices and says, "You hear Gabrielle laughing." After finishing Audrey's diaper change, Ms. Rose plays a couple of rounds of Pat-a-Cake with Audrey, then picks Audrey up and brings her to the play area.

Gabrielle and Madison are playing with a few toys on the floor. Ms. Rose sits Audrey down near her and says, "Hi, Gabrielle and Madison! Audrey wants to play by you." She hands Audrey a drum and small "drumstick" (small round stacking disk). Audrey watches the other children for a minute and then hits the drum with the "drumstick." Ms. Rose says, "Listen to the sounds you are making with the drum! Here is a larger 'drumstick' (larger stacking disk). Would you like to hit the drum with

this?" Audrey stares at the new drumstick for a moment and then drops the smaller drumstick in order to take the new one. She immediately uses it to hit the drum. The noise is louder. Audrey shows her excitement by smiling and shaking from head to toe. Ms. Rose laughs and says to Audrey, "The bigger drumstick makes a louder noise."

Ms. Rose is using what she has learned from her training to guide her interactions with Evan, Audrey, Gabrielle, and Madison. Ms. Rose is becoming a more intentional caregiver. She knows that intentional care optimizes development for all children.

The intentional and purpose-focused caregiver

What are the characteristics of an intentional caregiver?

- An intentional caregiver focuses on what is developing with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children's development and learning. For infants and toddlers, she focuses on each of the developmental domains: cognitive, social-emotional, motor, and language.
- The intentional caregiver possesses a wide range of knowledge. She knows and follows the "windows of opportunity" from early brain development

research. She understands how to accommodate individual differences among little ones with different temperaments, personality styles, and learning styles.

- An intentional caregiver provides a balance of classroom experiences so that children and caregiver take turns leading activities.

Using neuroscience as a guide

When caregivers use the guidelines provided by the “Windows of Opportunity,” they create a purposeful classroom. The information in these developmental timetables are based on scientific research. They are the same for all children no matter where they are born. They are the same for all children whether they are born on time, prematurely, or with developmental delays. The “windows” open at birth and “wire” with experience until puberty. All future wiring will be based on this foundation. The chart below shows the fertile time for wiring in each domain, as well as the optimum time for reinforcing the wiring with repetition and practice.

As you can see, infant and toddler caregivers play a crucial role in the lifelong learning of each child in their care. The

initial wiring for all domains is forged between birth and age three. Infant and toddler caregivers write on the soul of every child they encounter.

- In the opening scenario for this article, Ms. Rose effectively used information from the “windows” and applied that information to her interactions with Audrey. Ms. Rose managed to include at least one activity to promote development in all five domains.
- Ms. Rose spoke to Audrey to let her know that she noticed that Audrey was awake. Ms. Rose told Audrey, “I’ll be there in a minute.” (trust/attachment)
- Ms. Rose smiled and hugged Audrey when she picked Audrey up from her crib. (trust/attachment)
- Ms. Rose sang a song to Audrey as she held Audrey and walked with her to the changing table. (early sounds)
- Ms. Rose talked with Audrey during diaper changing. (vocabulary)
- Ms. Rose responded when Audrey heard other children laughing. (cause and effect)

- Ms. Rose played a couple of rounds of Pat-a-Cake with Audrey. (motor)
- Ms. Rose talked about the different sounds that different drumsticks make. (cause and effect)

Intentional activities and experiences optimize children’s learning! Doing just one activity each day, for each child, in each domain is infant and toddler curriculum.

Selecting toys and equipment with intentionality and purpose

An effective way to build a more intentional and purposeful infant and toddler environment is to use the “windows of opportunity” as a guide for selecting and using the toys and equipment in the classroom. It will enable you to engage children with specific outcomes in mind. Many items overlap domains because they have multiple uses. Make a list of items in your classroom and then sort them by domain. Take a look at each item under each domain and think about how you might use that item to provide experiences that correlate with the “windows of opportunity.” A few examples are shown on page 11.

Using activities with intentionality

Looking at the activities and experiences you offer children with the same guide will also help you create a more purposeful environment. The following chart describes activities that promote early development in each developmental domain. The activities correlate with the “windows of opportunity.”

Singing with intentionality and purpose

Children’s songs are a wonderful tool for learning. They are far more effective, however, when you use them with a specific outcome in mind. For example, you might change the word “little” in

Windows of Opportunity		
Window	Wiring Opportunity	Greatest Enhancement
Thinking Skills	0–48 months	4–puberty
Cause and Effect	0–16 months	
Problem-Solving	16–48 months	
Motor Development	0–24 months	2–5 years
Language	0–24 months	
Early Sounds	4–8 months	8 months–10 years
Vocabulary	0–24 months	2–5 years
Emotional Intelligence	0–48 months	4–puberty
Trust	0–14 months	
Impulse Control	16–48 months	
Social Development	0–48 months	4–puberty
Attachment	0–12 months	
Independence	12–36 months	

“Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” to *tiny*, *gigantic*, *silent*, or *blinking*. You can also change your voice and add hand motions to help emphasize the differences between each word. When you refocus a traditional song in this way, it offers a great vocabulary lesson. Or, when you suggest that children pretend to be the spider, using full body movement, to accompany “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” you add the benefit of gross motor development to the song. Discussing what caused the spider to fall instead of just assuming children understand the cause-and-effect connection will enhance their cognitive development.

If you stop to define words such as *waterspout*, you also will be using the song as a tool for developing vocabulary.

The challenge

All caregivers and teachers of young children face the same challenge — finding strategies that will lead to a more purposeful learning experience for children. All are striving to become intentional teachers and caregivers.

Here are three suggestions for moving toward more purposeful care:

- Think of desired outcomes as you plan and move through daily routines. This will automatically lead you in a more purposeful and intentional direction.
- Strengthen your knowledge of the research that supports early development. You will become more effective in selecting outcomes that are beneficial.
- Remember that teaching is as much about following as it is about leading. Teachers who are keen observers of children learn as much from the children as the children learn from them.

Ann Epstein, author of *The Intentional Teacher* (2007), says that “the quality of learning rarely exceeds the quality of teaching.” Every child has a right to a quality learning experience. Are you a quality caregiver? Do you provide purposeful care?

Bibliography

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Window	Wiring Opportunity	Toys/Equipment
Thinking Skills	0–48 months	
Cause and Effect	0–16 months	rattles; busy boxes; musical instruments
Problem-Solving	16–48 months	puzzles; blocks; stack-and-nest sensory toys; pop-and-lock beads
Motor Development	0–24 months	balls; climbers; giant sight-and-sound tubes; baby band; large push vehicles; pull toys; riding toys; scarves
Language	0–24 months	
Early Sounds	4–8 months	talk-to-me telephone; music CDs; books; baby band
Vocabulary	0–24 months	giant sight-and-sound tubes; me in the mirror; puppets; single word books; photo cards
Emotional Intelligence	0–48 months	
Trust	0–14 months	one-on-one interactions with caregiver with or without toys; CDs with one-on-one activities; see activities chart in this article; resource books that suggest one-on-one activities
Impulse Control	16–48 months	“This is all about setting boundaries — impulse control is learned through interactions with peers and caregivers.”
Social Development	0–48 months	
Attachment	0–12 months	one-on-one interactions with or without toys
Independence	12–36 months	CDs with one-on-one activities; CDs with group activities; group games; mirrors; zipping and buttoning boards

Domain	Games/Activities/Experiences*
Cognitive	<p>Keep your eye on the ball (6 months) Roll a ball across the floor, encouraging little ones to keep their eye on the ball.</p> <p>In the bag (12 months) Show one child two familiar items such as a rattle and a block. Place both items in a bag one at a time in front of the toddler. Ask the child to reach into the bag and find the one of the two objects, for example, the rattle.</p> <p>Real object match (toddlers) Trace the outline of objects, such as rattles, puzzle pieces and eating utensils onto a sheet of posterboard. Give toddlers the poster board and the real objects to match.</p>
Motor	<p>Pat-a-cake feet (3 months) Play pat-a-cake with baby's feet instead of hands.</p> <p>Tactile crawl (6 months) Place a few sheets of different textures of fabric in a pathway on the floor. Invite crawlers to crawl over the fabrics. Narrate their crawling experience.</p> <p>Walk the line (toddlers) Place a strip of masking tape on the floor. Help toddlers to walk the line of tape.</p>
Language	<p>Mirror talk (3 months) Place baby in your lap and face a mirror. Talk to the baby in the mirror.</p> <p>Talk walks (6 months) Walk baby around the room or outdoors. Talk about the things you see.</p> <p>I spy (toddlers) Give a description of something close by and see if the toddler can identify the thing you are describing.</p>
Social-Emotional	<p>Tummy to tummy (3 months) Lie down on your back and place baby on your tummy. Talk to baby.</p> <p>'Round the house (12 months) Hold baby's hand palm up. Trace a circle on the palm as you say, "Round the house, 'round the house, goes the little mousie." Walk index finger and middle finger up the baby's arm as you say, "Up the stairs, up the stairs, goes the little mousie." Tickle baby gently under the arm as you say, "in the little housie."</p> <p>Piggyback rides (toddlers) Take toddler on a piggyback ride.</p>
<p>*Activities taken from <i>The Complete Resource Book for Infants</i> and <i>The Complete Resource Book for Toddlers and Twos</i>, both published by Gryphon House.</p>	