Curriculum: Decision-Making

As you think about curriculum for the infants and toddlers in your care, try to use their interests as the focus of your planning. After you read the following pages, describe how you might use a child’s interests to plan developmentally appropriate experiences.

All of the following excerpts are based on the NAEYC article “Following a Child’s Lead: Emergent Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers” compiled by Susan Friedman and Michelle Soltero originally available on Young Children on the Web July 2006:

Responsive infant toddler teachers make careful observations about each child in their care to understand what ignites a child’s interest, what motivates them, and what their needs and feelings are. Responsive teachers allow each child’s interests and motivations to flourish as they use those interests to guide the curriculum. Observing a child’s interests and being responsive to those interests is crucial particularly for children under age two. When a child’s interests are honored at this life stage, it enables a positive developing sense of self; they learn about the world, guided by their interests, and at the pace at which they develop those interests. They learn that they are active participants in the world and their ideas matter.

What does such an emergent curriculum look like in infant and toddler classrooms? In the illustrative examples excerpted from the article mentioned above, infant/toddler teachers describe how they planned or adjusted the curriculum to follow a child’s particular interest or need. Responsive teachers use observation, knowledge, and creativity to find ways to fill the emotional and learning needs of every child in their care. Read these vignettes:

- A child continually pushes his friends down.
  - Determine the reason for the behavior and create a situation that allows the child to explore their interest in a less disruptive way. For example, create a situation in which the child could cause objects to fall again and again in a less disruptive way. For example:

  Jerome had two challenging behaviors: he repeatedly pushed his friends down, and also pushed all materials stored on shelves onto the floor. Jerome’s teacher, Master Teacher Gomez, decided first to reach out to Jerome’s parents to learn their thoughts about this behavior. They indicated their son really enjoyed seeing things fall. Acting on this information, Gomez adapted an outside play area so that Jerome could participate in an activity he enjoyed without being disruptive or hurtful. Gomez put a large number of materials at the top of a climbing structure so that Jerome could throw the materials (such as balls, and soft blocks) from a height. The first time Jerome saw the materials outside at the top of a climbing structure, he immediately went to it and engaged with it by dropping and retrieving materials repeatedly. After two days of continued interest, his interests changed. Because his interest was channeled creatively, he was able to express his interest, experiment, and as a result, the challenging behavior was resolved: he no longer pushed his friends down or pushed materials off shelves.

- A group of children show a natural interest in learning more about snails, bugs, worms, and other small creatures they find outdoors.
• Allow the study of snails, bugs, and other small creatures to take on a life of its own. Include live animal exploration, stories, and discussions about being gentle with animals and people. For example:

A group of two-year-olds began to show interest in a snail. Some children had no interest in touching the snail, but two-year-old Tessa remarked that said she had a lot of snails outside at home. Tessa showed the other children how to touch a snail. Master Teacher Gomez took note of the children's growing interest which ultimately supported a semester-long study about a variety of small creatures that live outdoors. A parent became engaged and shared a salamander. The children created habitats for the creatures, offered what food they suspected the creatures might eat, and learned how to gently touch the creatures. Their interest fueled sophisticated learning such as how to make and test their predictions, and how to be gentle with others.

• An 18-month-old child pinches other children so fiercely that children are afraid to be near
  • Suggest ways of touching other children that don’t hurt. Offer safe pinching materials like the creative solution, “the pinching sock,” or playdough for the child to explore. For example:

Master Teacher Aldridge observed that 18-month-old Chris pinched other children so hard and so often that other children were afraid to be near her. Aldridge consulted with other teachers to try to understand what Chris was saying with her pinches. They determined that Chris was expressing two things. First, Chris wanted to learn more about her classmates. Second, Chris was exploring her fine-motor skills. The teachers helped Chris learn to interact socially with her classmates by moving quickly to intervene when Chris got close to another child. They would then model interaction, by making comments such as “You’re standing next to Sara now. Let’s say hi to Sara.” Chris would then say, “hi, hi.” To help learn soft touches, Aldridge would suggest ways to touch that don’t hurt, such as, “Should we ask Sara if we can touch her arm?” They also talked about how to predict how another child might feel if pinched instead of touched gently. For example, she said, “I remember yesterday you pinched Sara and she cried. Remember how she cried? I also remember how today you patted her arm gently, and she laughed. Let’s try touching her gently again.” The next set of questions, about fine-motor skills, was solved creatively. First, at circle time, a story was told using dolls about how it feels to be pinched. Second, the teachers introduced “pinching socks.” These socks were hung on a piece of twine along the wall, within reach. Each sock contained different material and different textures, soft things like cotton balls, crunchy textures like crinkly paper, etc. The children enjoyed feeling the different textures and listening to the different sound each material made when pinched. This creative solution honored Chris’ interests and needs, and let her know her interest in pinching could continue, only not on people.

• A toddler explores making holes in dirt and finding holes in the world around them.
  • Allow children to make safe and choices and explore physical science concepts with teacher support. For example:

Cooper, a toddler, noticed a gopher hole in a garden patch. The responsive teacher Aldridge talked about who lived in the hole, and when Cooper tried to put his hand in the hole, Aldridge explained that she wasn’t comfortable with that because the gopher might respond with a bite. Cooper solved the problem on his own by experimenting with a long spoon. Aldridge wanted to ward off any possible gopher interaction, so suggested they walk around the yard and find as many holes as
Cooper could find. Cooper enjoyed this activity very much as he made discoveries about spatial reasoning, such as ‘what fits into what?’. Cooper also learned that teachers are there to help ensure your safety.

- A child with attachment and separation anxiety.
  - Encourage their natural interests. A child’s natural interest can develop in a way to help them focus less on a need for physical contact with the teachers and more on other developing interests. For example:

Master Teacher Cerna cared for a Simone for two years. Simone came to the center with a lot of emotional needs. She was born prematurely and required constant physical contact from the teachers. If Cerna moved away, Simone would panic. Simone was small but competent. Cerna worked with Simone’s strengths and noticed Simone would pick up a book and carry it around all day. Cerna and the other teachers encouraged this interest in books. They noticed that the books helped her focus less on a need for physical contact and more on new interests, resulting in less emotional worry. Cerna used books in many ways to help develop Simone’s language skills, both verbal and sign. Cerna also used the books to engage Simone in play, which in turn sparked interest from other children in care.

Now read the following scenarios and describe how you might use this child’s interests to plan developmentally appropriate experiences.

1. Two-year-old Marrieah repeatedly splashes other children at the sink area when washing her hands for snack or after using the bathroom. She also enjoys running over to the water table and dropping baby dolls and other toys repeatedly into the water. The children at the sink and water table become frustrated with Marrieah and usually end up crying or yelling at her. How might you use Marrieah’s interest in water to plan developmentally appropriate experiences for her?

   Since Marrieah is so interested in water, you might try planning experiences where it is okay to get objects wet. Provide Marrieah with a small basin and gather an assortment of items that can be washed: play silverware from the housekeeping center, baby dolls who need a "bath," cars and trucks that need to go to the "carwash", etc. At the sink area you can also teach Marrieah some songs about water that you can sing together as she washes her hands.

2. Eighteen-month-old Cody enjoys repeatedly dropping his sippy cup from his high chair. You have tried keeping the sippy cup on the nearby counter until Cody asks for his cup, but he drops it to the floor as soon as you hand it to him. How might you use Cody’s interest in dropping objects to plan developmentally appropriate experiences for him?

   Since Cody enjoys dropping items, watching them fall, and having his caregiver hand the item back to him, you might try gathering a bin of items that Cody can drop, watch as they
fall, and then have his caregiver hand back to him. Possible items include various sizes of balls, soft blocks, plastic dishes, soft dolls, etc.