



# Responding to the Needs of Babies and Toddlers

## Self-Guided Learning Package

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## About Self-Guided Learning Packages

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Self-Guided Learning Packages can be completed in your own time and convenience and offer an alternative to attending training sessions. This package aims to develop skills and knowledge that will be valuable to you in providing quality education and care programs. Packages are often used for professional development by staff teams, networks and other groups of children's services professionals. You can work through the package with colleagues by reading the package together, discussing the information and collaborating to complete the one assessment task.

Gowrie Victoria Leadership and Learning Consultants are available to support you while working through the package. Feel free to phone or email if you require any assistance completing the tasks within the package. Phone 1800 103 670 (freecall) or (03) 9347 6388 or email [psc@gowrievictoria.org.au](mailto:psc@gowrievictoria.org.au)

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# Responding to the Needs of Babies and Toddlers

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You have chosen to complete the 'Responding to the needs of babies and toddlers' package. The aim of this package is to provide information to new and experienced educators of babies and toddlers on the most effective ways of meeting their specific needs in child care settings.

## Introduction

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*'From before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place. Their earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children's first and most influential educators' (EYLF, 2009, p7).*

*'From birth, children live and learn with others in families, early childhood settings and local communities. Children's connectedness with and different ways of belonging to people, country and communities help them to learn ways of being, reflecting the values, traditions and practices of their families and communities' (VEYLF, 2009, p20).*

Current research in human development has highlighted the crucial importance of the early years in laying a foundation for future development. The future success of children in children's services depends on quality programs that are based on sound observations and knowledge of child development, an active learning environment and, most importantly, responsive educators. Truly responsive care requires a thoughtful, active attitude which leads the educators to read and interpret the children's cues, and respond in a way that lets the children know they are understood.

## Definitions

In this document, 'babies' generally refers to children from birth to 1 year of age, 'toddlers' relates to children from 1 year to 2 ½ years of age. Educators may have their own preferences; slight variations in the age ranges will not affect the understanding of this work.

## Babies and Toddlers in Education and Care Settings

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Many educators would know that babies and toddlers present unique challenges in any group care setting. However, in an education and care environment of competing concerns and diverse work styles, the distinct and complex needs of babies and toddlers are often overlooked or inadequately catered for. This can result in one of two extremes:

- an environment that is dominated and controlled by routine tasks of nappy changing, meal and snack times and sleeping;
- a focus on 'free' play, where children are given plentiful opportunities to play, but little thought is put into the setup of the environment, children's skills and abilities are not sufficiently challenged and the quality of the materials provided is poor.

In both cases, the setting is not responding to the needs of the children. Achieving a balanced program that meets all of the needs of all the children equally requires a great deal of thought and creativity from educators.

In general, babies and toddlers have the same needs as older children: care, affection, attention, meaningful interactions, quality play materials and much more. However, their specific needs are very



Therefore, when a baby or toddler first commences in an education and care setting, it is essential to draw on the experience and knowledge of the parents (and/or any other significant person in the child's life). More than anyone else, they will have become accustomed to interpreting their child's cries, coos, smiles and body movements, and learnt over time their child's likes, dislikes and habits. Principle two of the Early Years Learning Framework is Partnerships, this principle assists educators to recognise that families are children's first and most influential teachers. Educators need to create a welcoming environment where all children and families are respected and actively encouraged to collaborate with educators about curriculum decisions in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful (EYLF, 2009, p12).

This knowledge is not gathered from an enrolment form, or a five minute introductory visit to the service. Initially the parents should be asked to provide a general impression of the child's home life, daily routines and patterns (or lack of), as well as some specific details such as how the child prefers to be held and how she/he signals her/his needs in different situations. These should be noted down and shared with relevant educators.

Later, as you begin to develop your own knowledge base, it is important to compare and contrast your experiences of caring for the child with the parents' experiences, for your mutual benefit. As the child grows and develops, her/his life experience expands. The experiences that you share with the child as an educator will be different from those parents and others experience with the child. Sharing stories with the parents opens their eyes to parts of their child they are not aware of.

When the parents share their stories with you, they are providing valuable information for your program. For example, a simple remark from a parent that they visited a farm on the weekend opens up opportunities for you to build on that child's experiences in a number of areas. Stories, songs, pictures, farm play materials and conversation about farms can be shared with all the children.

Parents will also appreciate hearing stories and anecdotes about their child, especially when they provide insights that may help them to care for their child at home. It is wrong to assume that parents will know everything about their child; in fact, it is likely that they will learn as much from your experiences as you. For example, hearing that their child may prefer to sleep with their blanket near their face may help solve sleeping problems at home.

Another element of learning to read children's cues is to find ways of sharing that information with other educators. Some educators may use an in-house communication book, a whiteboard (though not for sensitive or highly personal information), a planning folder, or simple face-to-face discussion when possible. Whatever system you use, it must work effectively for your team (including relievers) and include the kind of information that will lead to the children's needs being met across the day

**Self Help Question 2**

Describe the process you use with other educators to share the knowledge you have about the children in your care, or describe how you could do this in future.

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## Responsive Educators

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Perhaps more than anything else, babies and toddlers need responsive educators, however this means more than simply catering for their needs. Educators must first understand the children's cues correctly, and then react in a way that lets the child know that their needs are understood and respected. In this context, the word responsive implies a thoughtful, active attitude.

Of course it is not always possible to understand what babies and toddlers need or want, especially when they may not know themselves. However, a perceptive educator will assess the situation, the environment, what they already know about the child and other indicators, and respond accordingly. Truly responsive educators also work actively to ensure that babies and toddlers understand they will not be ignored, devalued, belittled or unfairly denied in the child care environment. Thus they will learn that their needs are important, valued, respected and will be fairly considered by their carer's.

Consider the following quote:

*'Responsiveness of care-giving applies to every aspect of care, from providing toys geared to the child's developmental capabilities to providing food when they signal they are hungry to responding with a smile and vocalisation to the child's smiling and sounds'*(Greenman et al, 2007, p49).

The authors have identified the fundamental elements of an Educator's work: responding to the developmental, physical and emotional needs of children throughout the day.

## Observations and Planning Programs for Babies and Toddlers

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The Educators Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework (2010) is an invaluable resource for educators to support their curriculum decision making and is intended to provoke, inspire and challenge educators. According to the guide, educators should consider the following when developing their curriculum

- 'belonging, being and becoming and their links to learning
- principles, practices and pedagogy, including play and partnerships with families, to support learning
- reflective practice
- curriculum decision making to foster children's learning in areas identified by five broad learning outcomes
- facilitating children's transitions in the early years
- developing cultural competence
- Australian Indigenous cultural competence
- using theoretical perspectives' (Educators' Guide to the EYLF, 2010, p4).

For the educators in each room, the curriculum must be developed based on their observations, their knowledge of each child's needs and interests, the service philosophy and input from the families. According to the Educators' Guide to the EYLF (2010, p10), early childhood educators have been found to make 936 curriculum decisions in a six hour day, so we must be clear about what informs the decisions we make.

The key to planning appropriately for babies and toddlers is balance. Following are some issues that must be given equal consideration in planning:

<b>The needs of the group</b>	<b>The needs of the individuals</b>
Routines	Play
Short Term Goals	Long Term Goals
Indoor Time	Outdoor Time
Needs of Young Babies	Needs of Older Toddlers

No one issue must take precedence or be given more attention than the other; each is balanced by the other, and in most cases each can complement the other.

In every instance, educators must have the needs of the children as their primary concern. This does not always happen. Consider whose needs and interests are being served in the following examples:

- Most toys and activities are packed away before 5.00pm, even though half of the group still remains in the room and the centre closes at 6.00pm;
- Messy activities such as painting and play-dough are not included in the 0-2 room program, even though 3 of the children are nearing 2 years old;
- Outdoor play is kept to a minimum during winter for the babies and toddlers, even when it is cold but not wet.

In each case, it is the interests of the educators and/or the service that are considered over those of the children. Now consider the following positive examples:

- Educators work to ensure that crawling babies are given the opportunity to move about safely and freely, and older toddlers have access to activities they enjoy such as painting, by using room dividers, and making good use of certain times of the day when it is easier to do so (e.g. early and late in the day, sleep times, etc);
- Educators ensure that all parents send adequate appropriate clothing for their child to suit the weather conditions of the season, so that they can spend plenty of time indoors and outdoors;
- Educators understand that routine times (such as nappy changing and meals) are also learning times, and they keep a supply of play materials nearby, talk to the children and sing songs and rhymes when appropriate.

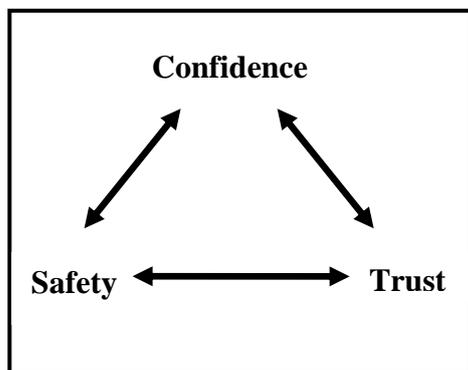
These examples demonstrate how educators have achieved a successful program by taking a balanced approach in their work.





is a potentially upsetting situation; for babies and toddlers, initial feelings of loss and abandonment must be overcome. Educators who understand and acknowledge such feelings and work to win the trust of the children will assist them to adjust more quickly and successfully to the new environment.

Feelings of confidence, trust and safety are interlinked. Babies and toddlers will gain confidence in their educators when they learn to trust them, and they will gain confidence in their surroundings when they feel they are safe, and so on. Educators can instil confidence in the children by maintaining a warm, comfortable and predictable environment.



**Freedom &  
Security**

Babies and toddlers need both freedom and security. Freedom to explore their environment, test and extend their skills and express themselves in many ways. Security to know that if they fall, help will be given. If they cannot reach something, someone will reach for them, and if they scream at the top of their lungs, they will be heard. Freedom to try new foods, sounds, physical challenges and adventures beyond their usual boundaries. The security of foods they know and love, songs and actions they remember, and activities they know they can achieve.

Again, these feelings are interlinked. The more that babies and toddlers feel that their physical and emotional security is guaranteed, the more free they will feel to reach out to the world and explore it. Conversely, children who are insecure in the education and care environment will lack the confidence to explore their environment freely, and often express themselves in negative ways.

Babies and toddlers will feel security when their educators demonstrate calm control of situations, emotions and events, and a peaceful, predictable, loving and stimulating environment is maintained. Yet within this, they need wide boundaries, so that when they are ready to stretch their limits (and perhaps yours) they will be able to do so. For example, a child will be more likely to attempt a first climb up a set of stairs if they know that the educator is nearby, giving warm encouragement but not unnecessarily interfering. The previous experience will also tell them that if they fall, they will be comforted by their educators and assisted to try again if and when they feel like it.

Of course, there are limits to freedom, and babies and toddlers' security will also be enhanced when they know that their educators will consistently and fairly apply limits to their actions and behaviour. Even though some children will test the limits that are applied, the long term benefits of learning self-control will outweigh any short term frustrations.

**Self Help Question 4**

Using reflective practice as outlined in principle five of the EYLF, how could you encourage babies and toddlers to feel both freedom and security in the following situations, as in the examples given above? Think of an example for each:

**Morning tea**

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**Outdoor play time**

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**Sleep time**

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**Responding to babies and toddlers’ developmental needs**

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All too often, the developmental needs of the youngest children in children’s services are ignored or come a poor second to their essential physical needs. It is true that the routines of feeding, changing and sleeping take up a lot of their time, and these are necessary and important in their way. However, these children also have a need and desire to learn about their world, and educators should be aware that every moment in a young baby’s life is a learning moment.

In the first few months, the learning that takes place for babies is limited to the people they come into contact with, their immediate surroundings and the sights, sounds, feelings, smells and tastes that come their way. Therefore, in most ways the opportunities for these babies to learn is dependent on educators

who provide them with interesting, diverse and challenging environments and activities and, most importantly, give them their attention. Babies will appreciate a variety of toys to explore and places to be, but none of them compare to being with you, their educator. While changing nappies, feeding, dressing, putting to sleep and playing on the floor, educators can devote their total attention to talking, smiling, singing, game playing, exploring and anything else that generates positive stimulation in babies. If you are truly responding to babies' developmental needs, you are planning to devote as much of your time to being with them, rather than spending too much time on 'non-contact' chores. It is worth the effort to arrange your day so that babies do not have to compete with laundry, sweeping and dishwashing for your attention.

As babies gradually enter toddlerhood, their developmental needs become more complex and wide ranging, and they are more able to reach out to their environment. They still learn primarily through their senses, but they have more ability to move about, choose the materials and people they interact with and explore their environment. Positioning materials thoughtfully around the play space will encourage toddlers' intellectual curiosity and exploration. A mix of familiar and new activities and materials invites comparison, and allows for those who seek the new and exciting and those who gain confidence through familiarity.

The toddlers' new mobility and curiosity will also help educators to better understand their needs. Their movements will indicate where their interests lie and what their abilities are. Educators can then maintain what is of interest and modify elements that are not suitable. For example, if carefully constructed play areas are ignored in favour of climbing onto furniture, the toddlers are clearly signalling a need to participate in challenging climbing activities. As toddlers' needs change almost from moment to moment, educators should not be afraid to respond accordingly and modify, add to or abandon activities when required.

## Conclusion

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The information provided here may be advocating an approach to working with babies and toddlers that differs from your current practices. Alternatively, it may seem to present challenges to your work in specific areas (e.g. difficult room space, equipment in poor condition). Nevertheless, these hurdles need not prevent you from providing truly responsive care for babies and toddlers, because you are the key. Through imaginative use of the space you have, gathering play materials that babies and toddlers are interested in (often which cost nothing), and devoting your time to being with the children, you will provide them with all they need.

## References and Resources

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# Assessment Task

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## 1. Responding to babies and toddlers' physical needs

In **each** of the following situations, describe in detail providing **at least three** points as to how you meet the physical care requirements of the babies and toddlers in your care, while also ensuring that the child is happy, relaxed and learning:

**Nappy Changing**

**Lunch Time**

**Rest Time**

## 2. Responding to babies and toddlers' emotional needs

How do you promote feelings of confidence, trust and safety in the babies and toddlers in your care? Write down **three detailed** examples of how you currently make this happen, or how you could in future.

## 3. Responding to babies and toddlers' developmental needs

Write down **three** detailed examples of how you have recognised a need or interest that a baby or toddler has expressed, and how you met that need (i.e. by arranging the environment, providing specific materials or activities.)