



Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators

ZERO TO THREE is a Washington, D.C.-based organization dedicated to ensuring that all infants and toddlers receive a solid foundation that will serve them throughout their lives. The Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™ were published in 2016 to support ZERO TO THREE's mission, and to provide the infant-toddler workforce with evidence-based practices to meet the diverse needs of our youngest children.

This comprehensive set of competencies is meant to build on national criteria for “stackable and portable professional development” (Dean et al., 2016, p. 4) for educators working in group settings, illustrating the demonstrable skill set that effectual early education practitioners use to foster optimal infant and toddler social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy development. Child development research indicates that strong teacher-child relationships and exchanges within these developmental areas are closely linked to positive academic and health outcomes, especially for children at risk for developmental delays (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Curby et al., 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Mashburn et al., 2008).

Within our newsletter, we feature one specific competency within one of the learning domains: Social-Emotional Development; Cognitive Development; Language & Literacy Development. These practices have been aligned with the Infant-Toddler Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R), the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation Standards.

References

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ZERO TO THREE SE-1: Building Warm, Positive, and Nurturing Relationships

Nurturing relationships with infants and toddlers are built throughout the day in warm, positive, and responsive interactions with educators that include verbal and nonverbal communication, and respect for the infant and toddler state. Tone of voice, facial expressions, and touch impact young children and can provide the basis for children's social-emotional learning through the creation of a positive and encouraging early care and education environment. Nurturing relationships with infant and toddler teachers increases children's engagement in classroom activities and in interactions, subsequently boosting key social skill development that will provide lasting benefits (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). The following are observable skills infant and toddler teachers exhibit that build warm, positive, and nurturing relationships with young children:

- SE-1a: Convey warmth and affection toward children by smiling, laughing, and also by showing empathy when a child is sad or upset
- SE-1b: Frequently engage in nonverbal positive affirmations with children while respecting and expressing variations in affirmation across cultures (e.g., nodding, lowering voice, raising eyebrows in surprise, as appropriate and consistent with the child's culture)
- SE-1c: Use gentle and nurturing touch to provide emotional support and to communicate affection
- SE-1d: Use children's names during communication
- SE-1e: Make positive comments about children and their activities
- SE-1f: Sit in close proximity to children depending on age
- SE-1g: Make eye contact with children when culturally appropriate and talk with them at eye level
- SE-1h: Demonstrate interest in children's activities by joining play or commenting about children's actions when culturally appropriate
- SE-1i: Use a tone of voice, facial expression, and level of enthusiasm that is in synch with each child's
- SE-1j: Support children's attempts at autonomy by promoting self-initiated exploration while remaining available to provide help when a child indicates a need for it

Considerations for Vulnerable Populations

Regardless of background or classroom behavior, children all need consistent, positive, and predictable interactions with their infant and toddler teachers. Educators can work with families to develop consistent routines across settings. Some children with disabilities may need to be taught interactions very explicitly so they can join in play with peers and enjoy interactions with teachers. Mental health providers and early intervention specialists can assist with strategies to build these warm and positive relationships.

Considerations for Dual-/Multi-Language Learners

For children learning more than one language, it will be critical to support and reassure them with positive nonverbal communication. Educators can also work with families to understand which classroom behaviors may be the result of their culture, or if some behaviors stem from the frustration of experiencing difficulties communicating with peers and teachers. Educators can also use children's home languages as often as possible in the classroom, with assistance from family members.

References:

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Here are some examples of what the SE-1 skills might look like in a classroom:

Young Infants

Cindy is building warm relationships with young infants by taking the time to connect with them. For example, diaper changing is a perfect opportunity for Cindy to spend quality one-on-one time with Jamal. When preparing to change Jamal's diaper, Cindy approaches the young infant, calls him respectfully by name, gently touches him and lets him know he is going to be picked up and taken for a diaper change. As Jamal acknowledges Cindy through non-verbal communication (smiling, reaching, icking feet), Cindy picks him up and brings him to the diaper changing table. Cindy makes sure to stay in close proximity to Jamal during this special time, continuing to make eye contact and to talk and sing his favorite songs. Cindy even communicates the diaper changing steps to Jamal which will enhance on only their relationship but also Jamal's social-emotional and language developmental domains. This warm relationship between Cindy and Jamall helps establish his trust and helps him to feel safe and secure. Cindy is always mindful of her facial expressions and tone of voice, and shows empathy out of respect for Jamal as a unique person.

Mobile Infants

During one on one play, Tamera places age appropriate music blocks on the floor for Asia to explore. Sitting in close proximity to Asia, Tamera engages her in playing with the blocks. Together, they stack the blocks, line them up, and shake them to hear sounds. Tamera supports Asia's independence by promoting her self-exploration: letting her explore/engage with the blocks on her own. During this engagement, Tamera makes sure to provide help to Asia when she indicates a need for it, such as when she looks at her expectantly and shakes the blocks at her. Tamera pays close attention to Asia's signals of becoming overwhelmed, and when Asia begins to scrunch her face when she has difficulty stacking the blocks, she adds animal figures to broaden the scope of her attention. The entire time, Tamera tells Asia what she is doing, and even invites her to explore the new additions. Tamera shows interest by commenting on Asia's actions and makes positive statements about her explorations. "Asia, you picked up the cow and placed it on the red block!" Tamera says with a smile. Tamera makes sure to match her level of enthusiasm and her facial expressions with Asia's, and varies her tone of voice based on Asia's expressed emotions. To build object permanence, Tamera hides a red block with a blanket and asks Asia, "Where did the red block go?" She then allows Asisa time to search for and find the block. When Asias figures out that the block is underneath the blanket, Tamera says excitedly, "Kyle! You found the red block!"

Toddlers

Mr. Anthony is a toddler teacher working with one and two year old children. Each morning he reminds himself of the skills and traits that he wants to be sure to incorporate into his day. He knows that building warm, positive, nurturing relationships begins with respecting each child in his care as an individual. With his early drop off group he pays particular attention to positive greetings for both children and families; formulating questions to promote serve and return opportunities; knowing and remembering each child's preferences for physical contact; knowing what each child is interested in; understanding the difference between equal and equitable treatment, so he can meet children where they are socially and emotionally; while being sure to provide positive attention to children's accomplishments and attempts.

Ethan has begun struggling during morning separation. Anthony spoke to Ethan's father about the change he has noticed. Ethan's father explained his work hours have changed, leaving him with less time with Ethan. During the day, Ethan responds well when Anthony joins him in play and makes positive comments about his behavior. Anthony encourages Ethan's father to walk him into the classroom and after handwashing takes him to choose an activity. Anthony joins them in play and initially comments on how well Ethan is working.