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ABSTRACT

A survey of research findings on environmental and person variables provides clues as to what is required in a high quality infant-toddler program. One of the most important components of such a program is a loving, responsive caregiver. Research has shown that there are specific adult qualities that nurture the roots of intellectual competence, cooperative interactions, and resilience in coping with stress. Some of these qualities are: (1) tender, careful holding; (2) the ability to provide feedings that respect individual tempos; (3) accurate interpretation of, and prompt attention to, distress signals; (4) provision of opportunities and freedom to explore toys on the floor; and (5) the ability to give babies control over social interactions. In addition, opportunities for language interchanges and turn-taking talk are important in promoting optimal development. Adults also need to understand infant developmental levels and sensorimotor states when planning environments for infants and toddlers. Optimal nutrition and preventive health care are also important aspects of a quality program. Finally, adults should be aware of the importance they have as rule-givers and role models. Adults can encourage prosocial, altruistic behaviors in children by their own actions and by the way in which they handle conflicts. Quality infant-toddler programs can have a positive effect on the facilitation of cognitive and social development in very young children. (PCB)

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Quality Infant/Toddler Caregiving: Are There Magic Recipes?

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A magic elixir for helping infants and toddlers grow into successful school achievers, socially adept with parents, peers and teachers would fetch a high price from today's parents and other caregivers. Busy with professional commitments, parents often hopefully expect that child care professionals will reveal the programmatic package, the right toys, the exact exercises and other "cookbook" ingredients to produce that well-adjusted eager young learner so devoutly desired.

A survey of research findings on environmental and person variables that can support dreams for children's success provide clues to many of the ingredients required for a high quality infant-toddler program (Honig, 1985a). Yet most of these ingredients are neither specifically nor routinely taught in schools, nor can they be easily bought nor prescribed uniformly in identical doses as panaceas for child rearing.

Individualized Attentive Loving

The primary ingredient to help young children flourish consists of loving, responsive caregivers, generously committing energy, body-loving, and tuned-in attentiveness to their child's well being. And every ingredient counts! Since infants come into the world with different temperaments and styles of adjusting, this commitment requires much patience and much flexibility as new parents and caregivers tune into and learn

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about their child's unique qualities. Getting to know a baby takes time and committed interest. The new baby may be more or less impulsive or reflective, more or less adaptable, irritable or slow-to warm up (Thomas, Chess & Birch, 1968). Adults have to be aware of differences in temperament, lest, for example, they respond to the intense baby's irritability with negative or exasperated tensions. Such responses can create miseries for an infant who already has troubles (Wittmer and Honig, 1988). Perhaps she finds it hard to get a thumb to her mouth to suck for self comfort and lacks the easy adaptability of a temperamentally calmer child. Each baby needs a caregiver who recognizes and validates his or her special self. Dancing an Eriksonian duet of "giving and getting" in infant nurturing requires the commitment of both partners (Honig, 1987). But the caregivers need to be the skillful initiators. Adults are the driving force in the spiral growth of baby loving and cooperating. It is the adult "expert" partner who imbues the early relationship with somatic certainty and the predictability of daily rhythms.

Creating a meaningful harmony for the personal interchanges required in infant care poses a radically different problem in selecting caregivers of infants compared to caregivers of preschoolers. Furman (1986) in her perceptive book for nursery teachers, advises that preschool teachers should leave sensuous and intimate relations to parents. But for babies, such relations are integral to their care. The quality infant/toddler caregiver must be involved and, of course, needs to be relaxed

and accepting of the sensuous nature of intimate ministrations such as feeding, burping, cuddling and diapering.

Respecting Tempos and Exploration Needs

Researches have clarified specific qualities of caregivers that nurture the roots of intellectual competence, cooperative interactions and resilience in coping with stresses (Honig, 1986). Some of these adult qualities are: Tender, careful holding in arms; feedings that respect individual tempos; accurate interpretation of and prompt, comforting attention to distress signals; giving opportunities and freedom to explore toys on floor; and giving babies control over social interactions (Martin, 1981). Feedings should be as lengthy or short as the nursing baby desires. Holding and cuddling on hips and shoulders and laps should be leisurely. The toddler who needs to confirm your presence by piling toys into your lap after brief trips away from you needs to know that you will accept these tokens, these demands for attention. Toddlers often seesaw wildly between needs for securing adult involvement and needs to defy adults with indifference or disobedience.

Adult generosity promotes cognitive alertness in babies and secure trusting attachment to caregivers (Ainsworth, 1982; Stern, 1985). Such gifts set foundations for an inner sense of safety and of high self-esteem (Honig, 1982a). All is right with the world. Grown-ups are predictable and kind. People can be counted on to care for baby, to fix and soothe troubles, whether a scraped knee or a fearful feeling or a hunger crankiness.

Tender, tuned-in caregiving energizes toddlers' joyous and courageous explorations of strange environments. Courage to cope flows from adult caring and, significantly, also leads to increased compliance and cooperation with caregivers (Honig, 1985b; 1985c).

Language Mastery Experiences

Rich language interchanges and lengthy sequences of turn-taking talk are further critical ingredients to promote optimal development (Honig, 1984). When caregivers read books in leisurely, involved fashion on a daily basis with young children, this reading correlates with later intellectual zestfulness, language skills and child success at school entry (Swan & Stavros, 1973). Research in family day care and center care as well as in families confirms the importance of providing language mastery to boost cognitive competence of infants and toddlers (Carew, 1980; Clarke-Stewart, 1973; Tizard, 1981).

Joint Shared Activities

Colorful toys and environmental set-ups can indeed aid early learning. Yet provision of graded materials for children's learning also needs genuine insightful thoughtfulness from caregivers using equipment. Adults need to understand infant developmental levels and sensorimotor stages when providing toys to promote understandings of space and causality. Adults need to engage in joint shared activities as grist for child learnings. Roll a ball back and forth. Watch what interests a baby and talk about what she is pointing to, jabbering at, or exploring with

eyes or hands. Otherwise, too many toys in a center may simply result in babies crawling and toddlers wandering aimlessly among scattered playthings or engaging in chaotic, even destructive behaviors with materials.

The too-difficult toy or learning game urged by a pushy parent or caregiver can turn off a child's interest in learning. Toddlers often show us that we have chosen just the right toy by enthusiastically tackling that activity (such as stacking cups or pushing poker chips through a coffee can slot) over and over again. Thus, young children need both ingredients -

- 1) responsive adults who ensure children's well-being through innumerable small interchanges of mutually pleasurable caregiving, language-permeated playfulness, and bodily cherishing as well as
- 2) a variety of learning opportunities and challenges tailored to children's capabilities and interests. Such a "prescription" is most likely to lead to young children with ego-resilience, self-control, and the internal motivation to persist positively at difficult problem-solving tasks (Matas, Arend, and Sroufe, 1978).

Feeding Finesse and Health Care

Optimal nutrition and preventive health care measures to boost wellness are important ingredients that are sometimes given insufficient attention as promoters of intellectual motivation and achievement. For example, iron deficiency, even without anemia, is associated with infant irritability, shortened attention span, solemnity and lowered IQ. Fortunately,

administration of intramuscular iron to such infants has been found to produce higher IQ scores and more infant responsive smiling for a caregiving adult within a week (Honig & Oski, 1986). Scrupulously careful handwashing procedures can reduce the frequency of infectious illness, particularly diarrhea, in centers (Lee & Yeager, 1986).

Promoting Baby Altruism

Another domain sometimes neglected in setting up infant/toddler programs has to do with the nurturing of prosocial, altruistic behaviors. Adults need to be aware of how important they are as early rule-givers and role models for caring, sharing, and helping. Yarrow and colleagues (Pines, 1979) found that when mothers categorically rejected aggression and hurting as a way for their toddlers to resolve social problems, and consistently displayed empathic comfort for the toddlers' own hurts and frights, then well before two years of age these children were showing concern for others' distress. Toddlers were proffering comforts (such as their own bottle or blanket!) to upset peers and tired family members. Such "baby altruism" was quite stable when the children were studied through teacher report five years later.

Caregiver expectations about children can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies. Baumrind (1977) describes "authoritative parenting" where families with high involvement and commitment to their young ones and high expectations and firm rules with reasons, have children most likely to be good learners and

reasonable with preschool teachers and peers. Adults who expect toddlers to be terrors may very well see their fears fulfilled. Calm caregivers with a sense of humor and extra supplies of patience and admiration will find toddlers brave (though unsteady) adventurers on the rough trails toward independent, self-actualized functioning. Adjusting one's will and wishes to those of peers and teachers is bound to be a struggle. Adult empathy can ease the toddler's inevitable trials. The no-saying toddler who insists he wants to take a bath with his new shoes on can be exasperating - but also a remarkable little person in stretching a caregiver's coping ingenuity. The hungry yet defiant toddler who gleefully runs away calling "No no no" when called for lunchtime, will cheerfully charge back to the lunch area if lured with comments such as "Yummy hamburgers; good carrots!"

Continuity of Care and Cognitive Facilitation

One of the concerns child development specialists have is whether "innoculations" such as high-quality enriched out-of-home care can provide a supplemental boost for infants and toddlers who have otherwise had insufficient loving and language experiences. A further question is whether such enrichment for young children will have lasting effects. Will family and school need to continue to provide optimal supports for children over many years? Longitudinal researches suggest that long range effects of early stimulation do depend crucially on the stability and continuity of care. For example, early optimal home

stimulation scores are more likely to correlate with positive outcomes for children when later home scores also show parental facilitation of cognitive development. On the other hand, remedially enriching early education programs as a supplement for disadvantaged infants and preschoolers do indeed seem to prevent a typical downward slide in intelligence test scores for children from low-education families (Honig & Lally, 1982; Ramey & Gowen, 1986). Quality infant/toddler programs have even been found to decrease social delinquency in later adolescent years (Berrueta-Clement, et al., 1985; Lally et al, 1986).

Conclusions

Lest these various prescriptions for an optimal infant-toddler rearing environment seem too difficult to expect from adults who may not have much training initially in child development knowledge and skills, it is important and cheering to note how many easy-to-read materials are currently available for caregivers. Many journals, such as Young Children or Day Care and Early Education, frequently provide special articles for infant/toddler teachers with creative curricular ideas and special insights about aspects of early development. Books are available with homey, easy-to-carry-out learning games with toddlers (Honig, 1982b; Miller, 1985).

Directors and trainers of infant-toddler caregivers will also find materials to enhance their ongoing in-service efforts to ensure high-quality care (Cataldo, 1986; Honig & Lally, 1981; Willis & Ricciuti, 1975). Such resources can especially help the

busy caregiver to restructure daily routines into enriching experiences. Metamorphosed through adult sensibilities, skills and creativity, daily care situations can be turned into prime opportunities to further the early learning careers of infants and toddlers.

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