



IN THIS ISSUE

FEATURE ARTICLE:

**Building Intentional
Routines for Infants
and Young Toddlers**
page 1

CLASSROOM HINTS:

**Creating a Responsive
Classroom Schedule**
page 6

TRAINER-TO-TRAINER:

Responsive Routines
page 9

ASK US:

page 11

NEWS BRIEFS:

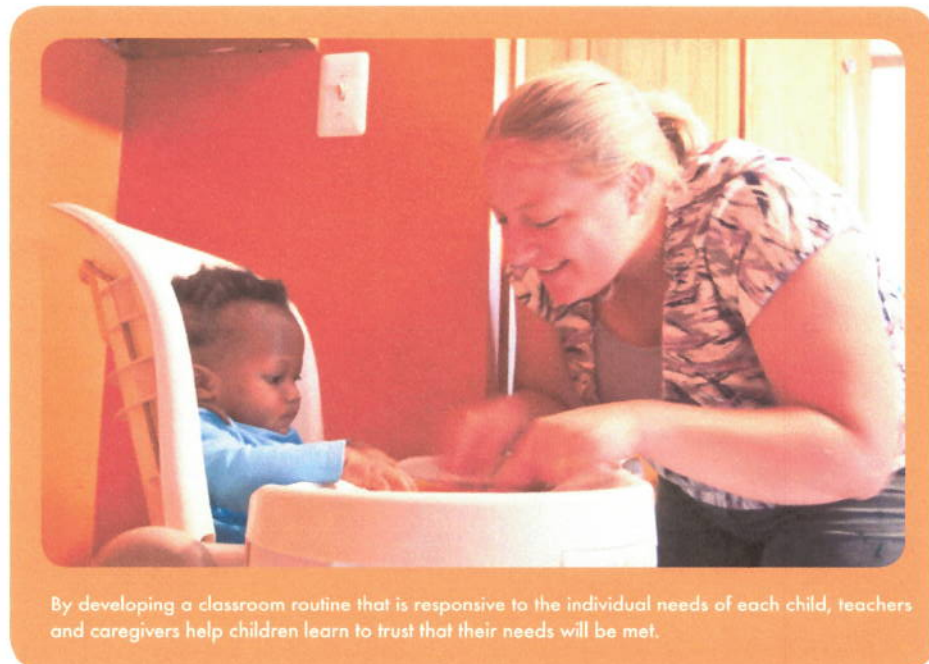
page 12

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Building Intentional Routines for Infants and Young Toddlers

BY CHRISTINE SNYDER, HIGHSCOPE EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

Teaching any age group requires balancing a variety of expectations — these include, but are not limited to, curriculum content, the individual needs of children, expectations of parents, and licensing and accreditation requirements. In an infant classroom, children's individual needs vary so widely that it can seem challenging to create a schedule that meets all of these expectations. Developing an intentional but responsive schedule requires great care in gathering information from children's families, observing children in both their home environment and the group setting, creating a classroom schedule as a teaching team, and frequently reflecting on the routines in connection to children's rapidly changing needs.



By developing a classroom routine that is responsive to the individual needs of each child, teachers and caregivers help children learn to trust that their needs will be met.

“While there may be some commonalities, each child in a group setting will have an individual routine that varies at least slightly from those of the other children in the classroom.”

What Is an “Intentionally Responsive Routine”?

Simply put, implementing an intentionally responsive routine means developing a daily schedule with genuine consideration for each child’s needs. The arrangement of daily events — feeding, naptime, bodily care, choice time, outside time, and group times — is in direct response to the children’s biological rhythms, individual temperaments, preferences, and typical schedules at home. The order of daily events, the length of each part of the day, and the frequency of each event are determined by the unique needs of individual children. While there may be some commonalities, each child in a group setting will have an individual routine that varies at least slightly from those of the other children in the classroom. Likewise, the overall group routine for one infant room will vary from those of other infant rooms. However, each routine will contain the same components — just with a different order and frequency.

Why Is an Intentionally Responsive Routine Important?

Creating individual routines in response to children’s unique biological rhythms and needs has multiple benefits for the children, the families, and the classroom as a whole.

Benefits for Children

During infancy, infants’ brains and bodies are in a phase of rapid development. Therefore, it is essential that children have ample opportunities to rest, consume nutritious foods, and interact with a supportive and familiar caregiver. With that said, children’s temperaments and varying rates of development can impact the duration,

frequency, and style in which these essential components occur. When these basic needs are met, children are more capable of developing in other areas through engagement in social interactions and exploration of their environment.

Transitioning from the familiar spaces, smells, sounds, and people at home to the newness in a group setting can be unsettling for infants and young toddlers. Having to adjust to a schedule that is drastically different from the familiar home routine can be stressful and is often unnecessary. When the classroom routine reflects the children’s home routines, children are more capable of adjusting. In addition, it is easier for children to follow a routine when it is consistent each day.



Developing a routine that is consistent helps children adjust more quickly to the classroom, and with less stress.

PUBLISHER CREDITS

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Jennifer Burd
Adam Robson
Joanne Tangorra
Editors

Nancy Brickman
Director of Publications

Nancy Goings
Publications Assistant

Sherry Barker
Membership Manager

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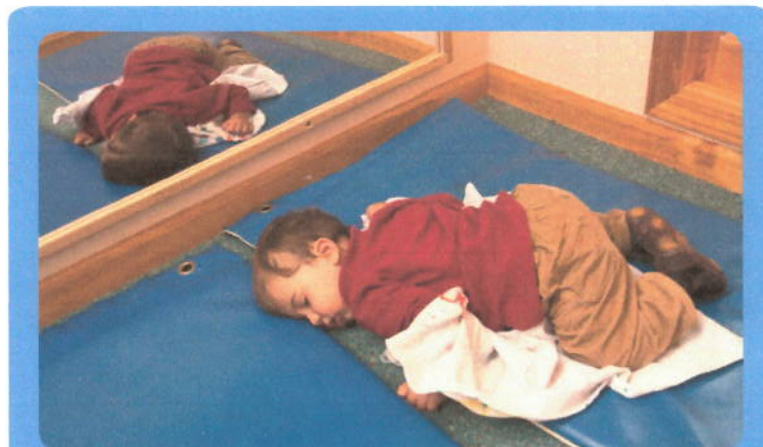
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“When you show genuine interest in their child and their parenting choices, family members feel valued and respected.”

First and foremost, when infants enter into group care, teachers must work to establish trust and attachment with each child. This is developed through careful observation of, and responses to, children’s individual needs. Infants cry to express hunger, fatigue, or a need for attention. This is their only way to communicate, and when adults respond warmly and sensitively, tending to their needs, infants learn to trust that their attempts to communicate are effective and that the adult is someone they can rely on to meet their needs. In infancy, children need to know that they can count on their caregivers to provide food, rest, and comfort. When routines are consistent between home and school, this trust can be established more quickly.

Benefits for Families

Establishing a positive relationship with families has many benefits for children, teachers, and parents. One way to build a positive relationship with families is to find out during home visits what their routines look like at home. When you show genuine interest in their child and their parenting choices, family members feel valued and respected. This can build trust and can set the tone for a give-and-take relationship. When parents get the impression that you value their perspective, they will be more likely to be open with you and come to you with other information — such as when they are introducing new foods to their child or when the child has had a night of little sleep. As a long-term benefit, inviting the families into a conversation about meeting individual needs in the classroom sets a tone for the parents’ engagement in understanding what happens at school and advocating for their child.



Finding out from parents about their children’s schedules for eating, sleeping, and personal care can help caregivers create a schedule that is consistent with what children are used to at home.

“When the schedule matches what each child needs, it can foster valuable interactions.”

Gathering information from the families allows you to create a schedule at school that is consistent with what the children are used to at home. In addition to the benefits for the child, this can also minimize stress on family members and allow them to maintain the schedule they are used to. Bringing their child to group care can be a big adjustment for parents, too; if their child is able to follow a consistent schedule between



Creating a schedule that is responsive to each child's individual needs helps build positive relationships with both children and their family members.

both locations, that is one less adaptation for everyone involved to try to make.

Separating and reuniting can be difficult for both young children and their parents. When children can transition easily between home and classroom, it is much easier for parents to say goodbye and return later. Conversely, when expectations or routines are

different between the two environments, children can feel unsettled, which can then make other children as well as parents feel that way too. In addition, when classroom schedules are inconsistent or change frequently, parents may worry about their child getting enough to eat or sleep. A schedule that is consistent with children's home schedule helps avoid these problems. When trust is established through responsive and warm interactions, children can adjust more quickly.

Benefits for the Classroom

Taking home schedules into consideration when creating school schedules isn't just for the benefit of the children and families — it can also have tremendously positive implications for the caregivers and for the classroom overall. When we make assumptions about what children might need, including when and for how long, the result can be stressful and chaotic. For example, expecting children to nap when the group naps, rather than based on their own personal schedules, can result in power struggles, stress on children and adults, and inadequate rest for the child.

However, when the schedule matches what each child needs, it can foster valuable interactions. When there is less stress, there are happier children and happier teachers! For example, it is unlikely that all the infants in a classroom will sleep at the exact same time for the exact same duration. This means that some children will be awake while others are sleeping. This scenario, which is different from those involving most other

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Christine Snyder is a HighScope Early Childhood Specialist. She has worked with young children for 17 years in a variety of settings. She enjoys the ways in which children are genuine, playful, and creative. Christine holds a master's degree in early childhood education from Eastern Michigan University.

age groups, allows a unique opportunity for more one-on-one time between children and caregivers, and for interactions in small groups of two or three children per caregiver. Teachers can use this time to have more authentic interactions with children; for example, adults have more time to make bodily care routines personal and playful. Further, when teachers are able to engage with children in small groups or one-on-one, they are more capable of making specific, child-focused observations, allowing for more differentiation in lesson planning and more accurate assessment of growth and development.

Conclusion

Creating a classroom schedule that is responsive to each child's personal schedule is essential for building positive relationships with children and families. It strengthens the attachment process while also creating a group-setting experience that allows children to feel safe, respected, and comfortable. This type of schedule can be easily developed with input from the parents, child observations from the caregivers, and intentional planning from the whole teaching team. When young children's needs are met in this way, the children are more able to build relationships with others, take initiative, and engage in learning about their environment. Strategies for creating a schedule that meets the needs of individual children as well as the group as a whole are described in this issue's "Classroom Hints" article.



A responsive classroom schedule strengthens the attachment process and helps children to feel safe, respected, and comfortable.