Children’s approaches to learning include how they go about developing new skills and concepts and their attitude toward learning. All children are born learners. Each child approaches learning in his or her own way, figuring out what “works.”

For infants and toddlers, approaches to learning begin with their interest in the world around them and their desire to make things happen. They show curiosity and eagerness to interact with people and objects and excitement about their discoveries. Young children may express wonder and delight with smiles, movement, sounds, laughter, and later with language. They learn by doing and trying, when they succeed and even when they do not.

They may try a variety of different ways to get what they want, which is how they begin to solve problems. When infants and toddlers do the same things over and over, they learn new concepts and strengthen their skills. Toddlers may become more creative and begin to use their imaginations during play, music, and art.

All children face challenges. Their learning is affected by culture, language, and individual circumstances. Some children are challenged by developmental delays, poverty, or other risk factors. These children may need additional support and encouragement to develop a sense that they can be successful. For example, children with cognitive challenges may need extra help and direction to learn how to play with toys. A child with autism may show he is having fun in a different way from other children, such as by squealing or jumping. To encourage further efforts, adults must respond positively to children’s enthusiasm.

When adults support their efforts, infants and toddlers become more willing to try new things and take risks. Adults encourage children’s enthusiasm for learning by honoring their culture, valuing their curiosity, and setting up safe, interesting environments. High quality indoor and outdoor environments invite infants and toddlers to explore and “get into things.” Adults who nurture healthy approaches to learning lay a strong foundation for future learning, success, and enjoyment of life.
Curiosity and Eagerness

Infants and toddlers show an interest in the world and want to find out how things work. They show excitement at their discoveries.

What to Look For

**Infants may begin to:**
- Show interest in themselves (watch own hands, play with own feet).
- React to new sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and touches (stick out tongue at first solid food, turn head quickly when door slams).
- Show interest in things around them (reach for toys, gaze at trees, stop and listen to sound of clock chiming).
- Explore the environment using their senses – smell, hear, see, feel and taste.
- React positively to caregiver’s face, voice, touch, or actions (smile or gaze at caregiver, make sounds, move body).

**Young toddlers may begin to:**
- Show enthusiasm for exploring and learning (clap, smile, try again and again).
- Show curiosity (with pointing, facial expressions, words).
- Move toward people and things that interest them.
- Be willing to approach new people, things, and experiences.
- Start activities that interest them and try to get others involved.

**Older toddlers may begin to:**
- Seek more information about people and things around them (“study” an object carefully, stare for long moments, become completely occupied in figuring out a situation).
- Be more willing to try new things.
- Explore the indoor and outdoor space around them independently.
- Choose their own activities more often.
- Show pleasure in new skills and in what they have done.
- Show interest in what others are doing.
- Try to involve other children in play.
- Talk about what they want to do, ask questions, and make their choices known using gestures, facial expressions, or words.

What to Do

- Stimulate children’s senses – smell, touch, hearing, sight, and taste – to encourage children to react and move. For example, place colorful toys around an infant during tummy time, hang wind chimes outdoors, or invite toddlers to smell flowers.
- Be sensitive to infants and toddlers with special sensory needs. Avoid overwhelming children with stimulation. Provide quiet, uncluttered spaces for children who need them.
- Talk with infants and toddlers about what they are experiencing and what is happening around them. Notice and respond to children when they react to what is happening.
- Provide non-mobile children with a variety of materials (colorful toys, rattles, mobiles) to look at, listen to, reach for, and touch.
- Provide a wide variety of sensory materials for infants and toddlers to explore.
- Provide both familiar and new materials in response to children’s interests. Include materials that are found in their homes.
- Allow infants and toddlers to choose materials and activities. For some children with special needs, caregivers must introduce toys, begin activities, and play a more active role. Follow children’s signals to decide whether to continue, vary, or end an activity.
- Allow infants and toddlers plenty of time to explore at their own pace indoors and outdoors.
- Provide safe spaces and remove dangerous items indoors and outdoors so infants and toddlers can explore safely.
- Show enthusiasm for children’s discoveries.
- Offer toys and activities that are challenging and exciting for each child at his or her individual level.
- When children express interest, show them what toys will do and how materials can be used.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage curiosity. For example, “What will happen when we add the water to the flour?” “What is the man in the picture trying to do?”
- Express interest in what children are doing and encourage them to notice each other’s activities.
Confidence, Risk-Taking, and Problem-Solving

Infants and toddlers become willing to try new things and take risks. They become more confident that they can get the results they want.

What to Look For

**Infants may begin to:**
- Try a variety of approaches for getting what they want (make noise, move arms and legs, reach toward things).
- Explore new experiences both indoors and outdoors (toys, foods, people, spaces).
- Enjoy repeating actions to make something happen again.
- Get upset when the expected does not happen.

**Young toddlers may begin to:**
- Use trial and error to get something done, get what they want, or solve problems.
- Be willing to try or explore unfamiliar things and interact with new people.
- Show interest in toys that offer a challenge and try to work them.
- Explore freely without a familiar adult nearby.
- Imitate adult actions and problem-solving (talk on the phone, stir in a pot, get a toy from behind the couch).
- Let a caregiver know that they need help (point, gesture, ask for help).

**Older toddlers may begin to:**
- Try many different ways of doing things to get what they want or solve problems.
- Show confidence in their own abilities (try to lift a heavy object, work for a long time on a difficult puzzle).
- Want to do things their own way. (“Me do!”)
- Express a belief that they can do things for themselves (push adult’s hand away, say “I can do it.”).
- Try new challenges willingly and with enthusiasm.
- Show pride in what they have done.

What to Do

- Develop new interests.
- Seek help from others using words, signs, picture boards, and other forms of communication.
- Be kind, caring, and loving toward infants and toddlers. Your support gives children the confidence to take risks.
- Respond consistently to children’s efforts to communicate. Talk to infants and toddlers!
- Establish a regular yet flexible routine. Model flexibility. (“Oops, that didn’t work! Let’s try something else.”)
- Show pride in what infants and toddlers have done. Respond to children’s expressions of pride. (“You have a big smile on your face! You look proud that you went down the slide all by yourself.”)
- Allow infants and toddlers to do things their own way and take some risks. Intervene when needed to keep children safe.
- Help children take a closer look to increase their understanding. (If a child is interested in leaves, take him outdoors to collect leaves. If a child is interested in a plastic dinosaur, read her a book about dinosaurs.)
- Encourage children to try new experiences and new ways of doing things.
- Ask questions and actively involve children in finding answers. (“I wonder where your teddy bear went.” “I wonder where the ants sleep.” “What do you think?”)
- Seek and accept children’s ideas. Let them know that their thinking and their efforts are valued more than “getting the right answer.”
- Help children deal with mistakes in a positive way. Avoid criticizing or making fun of them.
- Take your own mistakes in stride. Model for children by talking about what you are doing as you remain calm, figuring out what went wrong, and trying again.
- Recognize that some children with disabilities, such as children with autism, have difficulty trying new things, using a toy in a different way, or varying their routines. Work with other professionals to learn strategies that help these children try new things and accept changes. Use pictures to help them understand what will happen next.
Attention, Effort, and Persistence

Infants notice people, events, and things around them. Toddlers are able to focus for longer periods of time. They become more able to stick with an activity even as it becomes more difficult.

What to Look For

**Infants may begin to:**
- Focus and pay attention to people and things around them.
- Try hard to make things happen (bat at a mobile, make sounds to get attention).
- Repeat interesting actions over and over.
- Show interest in the different qualities of an object (notices the sound of a rattle, then be drawn to the “feel” of it, exploring it with mouth or hand).

**Young toddlers may begin to:**
- Focus for longer periods of time when the child has picked the activity.
- Repeat successful experiences (do shape sorter over and over, climb up and down stairs).
- Repeat experiences they enjoy.

**Older toddlers may begin to:**
- Work longer to reach a goal (fill a container completely, try to put on a shoe).
- Keep trying even when things don’t work (try for a long time to zip a jacket, try to engage a busy adult in play).

**What to Look For**

- Stay focused longer on a person or a more complex activity.
- Keep working on an activity even after setbacks.
- Keep working on activities with other things going on around them.
- Enjoy showing and/or telling others what they have done.
- Want to complete activities and do them well.
- Cooperate with others to reach a goal.
Real World Stories

Sylvia sits on the floor with two nine-month-olds in her child-care classroom. There are many toys nearby on very low shelves. Sylvia offers each child a small soft doll with simple facial features. Each doll makes a noise when shaken.

Nathan, who has Down syndrome, brings his doll to his mouth with both hands. Then he drops the toy and grins at Sylvia. She shakes the doll gently on the floor in front of him. He looks down, picks up the doll with both hands, and brings it to his mouth again. “That feels good in your mouth, doesn’t it?” Sylvia comments. Nathan smiles at her and drops the doll again. Sylvia once again calls his attention to the doll, and he repeats the process. Later, Nathan drops the doll and shows no interest in picking it up again. Sylvia chooses two of his favorite toys from the shelf and places them just out of reach in front of him.

Emma grasps her doll with one hand and quickly puts it in her mouth. First she chews on it and rubs it on her face using one hand and then the other. “That’s soft,” says Sylvia. Then Emma holds the doll in front of her and stares at its face. “She has a face,” comments Sylvia. Emma smiles and coos, and Sylvia smiles back. Next, Emma shakes the doll, pauses, and shakes it again. She listens to the sounds it makes and laughs. Sylvia responds, “You like that noise!” In a few minutes, Emma tires of the doll. She crawls over to the shelf to find a new toy.

In this example, Sylvia helps both children focus and use their hands to explore objects. She is more active in her efforts to help Nathan. She still allows him to explore in his own way. She respects his choice when he loses interest in the doll. Nathan has not begun to crawl, so Sylvia places two new toys that he likes nearby. This encourages Nathan to continue playing and to reach for the toys. Leaning and reaching strengthen his muscles and large motor skills.

Emma notices and explores several aspects of her doll. Sylvia does not have to prompt her to do this. Sylvia encourages her by talking about what Emma is seeing and doing. This helps Emma learn words for objects and events. Emma can crawl and find a new toy for herself when she’s ready. Sylvia knows that Emma can move to something new on her own. She allows Emma to choose her next activity.

ATTENTION, EFFORT AND PERSISTENCE

FINE MOTOR, GROSS MOTOR
RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE
CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND MEMORY
Imagination, Creativity, and Invention

Infants and toddlers watch what others do, begin to pretend, and use materials in new and different ways.

What to Look For

**Infants may begin to:**
- Try out a variety of sounds and movements.
- Imitate sounds, movements, and facial expressions.
- Become fascinated with people, objects, or activities.
- Try a familiar action with a new object or person (try to bounce a block, wave bye-bye to a toy, make a sound to get a new adult’s attention).

**Young toddlers may begin to:**
- Do new things with familiar objects or combine them in unusual ways (use a dress-up boa as a snake, pound a drum with a plastic bottle, try to stack bears).
- Move to music in their own ways.
- Explore art and other materials freely.
- Imitate a wide variety of actions of other people, often playfully.

**Older toddlers may begin to:**
- Make believe, pretend, and act out familiar life scenes.
- Use materials in new ways to explore and solve problems (bring a big spoon to the sand table when all of the shovels are in use, use dump truck as “grocery cart”).
- Communicate in creative or silly ways (make up own unique signs, repeat nonsense words and sounds, play with rhyming names).
- Accept and use ideas from others.
- Make up songs, chants, and rhymes.
- Tell stories and pretend to read.
- Be creative when planning and carrying out art work, music, and pretend play (add new colors and shapes, vary tempo and loudness, invent a new character).
What to Do

- Look and plan for children’s differences and their many ways of learning. Use real objects, pictures, music, language, books, the outdoors, active play, quiet activities, and group activities to appeal to children who learn in different ways.
- Make a wide variety of changing experiences available to all infants and toddlers, including children with special needs. Encourage feeling, smelling, looking, hearing, and tasting.
- Read a variety of books and look at pictures with infants and toddlers. Ask them to talk about what they see.
- Provide materials that can be used in more than one way and are not limited to one right answer.
- Encourage children to notice what others are doing. (“See the way Sue is using the block for a race car.” “Look at Luis and Mary. They are pretending to bake a cake.”)
- Include unusual art and music materials when planning creative activities for children (jumping on bubble wrap, painting with feet, using classroom items such as blocks and toy pots to make music or create rhythm).
- Accept getting messy as part of a child’s learning.
- Encourage children to think of different ways to use materials.
- Provide experiences in which there are many different ways to reach the goal. Encourage trial and error.
- Allow and encourage children to solve problems in their own ways.
- Provide materials for toddlers to pretend, use one object to represent another, and take on roles. This includes dress-up clothes for a variety of play themes and toys that can be used for many things, such as blocks, scarves, and clay.
- Encourage toddlers to think about new ideas. (“Have you ever wondered where snow goes?” “Where do birds live?”)
Wonder and Delight

Infants and toddlers first develop likes and dislikes. With a growing sense of playfulness, they begin to see things as “funny” and enjoy surprising others. They are attracted to things that please their senses.

What to Look For

**Infants may begin to:**
- Show delight in pleasurable experiences.
- Smile, giggle, and laugh at things they like (peek-a-boo, fuzzy animal, favorite food).
- Show likes and dislikes for certain objects, people, and experiences and respond to things they consider “pretty” (songs, pictures, toys, colors).
- Show wonder at new activities and discoveries (delight in crawling, finding a ball under a blanket).

Young toddlers may begin to:
- Show surprise at unexpected or unusual events.
- Express likes and dislikes through facial expressions, sounds, and movements.
- Show amazement at things they find attractive (say “aaah” and reach for a brightly colored toy, gaze at fluttering leaves).
- Seek to repeat favorite experiences.
- Enjoy copying sounds, actions, and words.
- Act silly.
Older toddlers may begin to:

- Play, understand, and delight in simple games.
- Purposely do silly things with peers.
- Discover things that interest and amaze them and seek to share them with others.
- Use words, signs, or other means to express emotions (likes, dislikes, joy, pleasure).
- Enjoy beauty and find certain things beautiful.

What to Do

- Smile and laugh with infants and toddlers and show that you enjoy being with them. Find time every day to have fun with children.
- Share children’s delight at pleasurable experiences.
- Play music of all kinds (classical, jazz, folk, etc.), not just children’s songs.
- Expose infants and toddlers to art of all kinds, going beyond typical art for children (great paintings, sculpture, mosaics, etc.).
- Dance and do creative movement with children, using all kinds of music and props both indoors and outdoors. Encourage children to move or respond in their own ways.
- Give infants and toddlers many opportunities to experience beauty through all their senses (touching snow, looking at rainbows, smelling freshly mowed grass, tasting different foods, listening to birds chirp).
- Talk about the things you like and share your enjoyment with infants and toddlers.
- Provide opportunities to share cultural traditions (foods, celebrations, toys, activities, art, etc.). Involve families in sharing things that are enjoyed in their home and culture.
- Ask children to communicate what they like, dislike, and enjoy. Use actions, facial expressions, and/or words to reflect what a child seems to be communicating.
- Be silly and share humor with children. Share jokes and funny stories.

Real World Stories

Carina and Josie are making cakes in the sandbox outside their two-year-old classroom. Cakes and piles of sand surround them. One girl holds the mold while the other fills it with sand and pats it down.

“Mas ... mas ... no mas!” says Carina as Josie works. “More ... more ... no more!” echoes Josie when they change places. Now it is Carina’s turn to hold the cake mold. A mischievous grin appears on her face. “Mas...mas...mas ...,” she says, as the mold begins to overflow. Josie gives Carina a questioning look. Then she grins back. Mas ... mas ... more ... more ...,” she continues, as sand falls to the ground. Soon both girls are giggling joyfully. They take turns overfilling cake molds and buckets on purpose.

The teacher watches their silly play and smiles. She also notices that Tyler, who does not speak, is watching the two girls carefully. Suddenly, he smiles broadly and makes the sign for “more” with his hands. “More!” exclaims the teacher, repeating the sign. “Tyler is signing ‘more.’”

Josie fills her next mold. She looks at Tyler from time to time. When he signs “more,” she piles the sand higher. Tyler jumps up and down with excitement. He throws his arms wide apart before he brings his hands together to sign. The teacher smiles and laughs with the children. She speaks and signs to Tyler when he looks at her.

These older toddlers show their growing sense of humor and delight in silly things. They pretend they don’t understand when a container is full, and their teacher values their developing sense of humor and fun. She does not interrupt or direct them back to more careful cake-making.

She also observes that Tyler seems to understand what is happening and tries to communicate. Her quick response rewards his efforts. She helps the girls include him in their fun. Tyler might not have been able to join their play without the teacher’s help.

The teacher chose not to interrupt the girls to ask questions or make comments about the concepts of volume, fullness, and “more.” She knows that, although their play is silly, they are still learning about these concepts. The children’s language shows what they know. There will be many other chances to ask questions and extend their thinking about concepts.

- WONDER AND DELIGHT
- HEART DEVELOPING A SENSE OF SELF WITH OTHERS
- EXPRESSION LANGUAGE
- CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT AND MEMORY