

Keeping Babies Safe: Active Supervision for Infants & Toddlers

Web Call Operator: Good day, and welcome to the EHS NRC "Keeping Babies Safe" webinar. Today's presentation is being recorded. At this time, I'd like to turn the call over to Laura Annunziata. Please go ahead, ma'am.

Laura Annunziata: Hi, everyone, and welcome to today's webinar, "Keeping Babies Safe." I'm Laura Annunziata, Senior Writer and Training Specialist with the Early Head Start National Resource Center, and I'm very pleased to be joined today by Angie Godfrey, Infant/Toddler Program Specialist with the Office of Head Start. Angie?

Angie Godfrey: Hi, everyone. Oh, sorry. Hi, everyone, and welcome to today's program.

Laura: Today, we have an opportunity to share some terrific information with you on a topic important to Head Start and childcare -- active supervision for infants and toddlers. Keeping the children in our care safe is everyone's first priority, and the Office of Head Start has some wonderful resources to share with you. Angie, could you tell us exactly what we mean when we say "active supervision"?

Angie: Sure, Laura, and thank you very much. Active supervision is a set of strategies designed to build nurturing relationships with children while ensuring a safe environment for their growth and development and exploration and learning. There are strategies that are used anywhere adults are caring for children, like classrooms, family-childcare homes, outdoor/indoor play spaces, socialization spaces and also on buses and other modes of transportation.

Laura: In all EHS and childcare settings, you can be sure that infants and toddlers will be cared for in small groups with a low teacher/child ratio. The low ratio and the characteristics of infant/toddler care and care settings create very different conditions than those that might be typical in a pre-K environment.

Angie: Infant/toddler care is responsive, individualized care. And it's important to think about infants and toddlers that are cared for in small groups with a primary-caregiver system of care and also to think about the flow of the day as being responsive to the individualized needs of the children. Staff work very closely with children throughout the day guiding them through individual or small-group routines and experiences. Staff are providing responsive, individualized care, and they will know each child well. That's an important piece of both individualized care and active and responsive supervision. They have a good sense of how each child gets through the day, what their abilities are, what their temperament is. Even as they grow and change from day to day, they're able to follow each child in their care with an understanding of how it is that they're growing.

In center-based programs or larger family-childcare homes, more than one caregiver is working together in a team. And the other thing that's important to remember is the kind of communication that develops between the two teachers in a classroom or a family-childcare provider and an assistant -- a communication that supports a child's safe movement throughout the day as well as their ability to explore and grow in a nurturing environment.

Adults provide support to each other, particularly at key times of the day, like transitions. All of those important, individualized routines require both adults to work together, such as individual sleeping times, going indoors and outdoors, changing times, feeding and eating times for infants and toddlers, and other times during the day when there may be a particular child that needs individualized care. It's so important that the staff working with them are working together to support continuity of care.

Laura: So, Angie, this reminds us that the environment itself can be a partner in caring for infants and toddlers, particularly when it comes to keeping children safe. We want to create environments that provide places for children to play and be both together and apart but always in full view and within easy reach of a caring and attentive adult. And in a smaller family-childcare home, setting up that environment requires some special thought and care. Can you share a little bit about that with us?

Angie: Sure, I will. And, again, I think that's such an important thought, because the environment is key to how well everyone does during the day, the providers and the staff, as well as the very young children, and how you set up an environment that supports a child's learning and exploring is key, also, to how teachers and staff work in an environment. In a smaller family-childcare home, where there is only one adult, the provider plans carefully to meet children's individualized needs. They pay special attention to the arrangement of the physical environment. And I love to go into family-childcare homes, because you can really tell when you're in the environment where the children are.

They're able to adapt their homes to the spaces where very young children are. They also understand if they're adapting their home that it's important there are sight lines to wherever children are, particularly to and from spaces where the family-childcare provider may be tending to one child, like when diapering and toileting. It's very strategic how you plan for the day and how you interact with children through the day, observing and scanning the environment at all times for safety.

In all settings, there are many ways that teachers and providers can enhance their environments to keep infants and toddlers safe. Two examples -- and I love this one because there are many ways this works, safety being one of them -- but placing a child-safe mirror on the wall behind a changing table. Everyone can have fun with that. And the second is keeping a secure, gated area near a bathroom where one child can wait while another is receiving care. And, again, that's such an important part of understanding that the environment is part of the daily experiences and the safe care and experiences that children need during the day. So, I think that's a good summary, Laura.

Laura: Thanks, Angie. So, the Office of Head Start has recently released some terrific new resources available to people that'll allow them to dig deeper into these topics. Can you tell us a little bit about the Active Supervision Toolkit?

Angie: Sure. I would be glad to. One of the first things that I think is exciting about this is: This is a Birth to 5 toolkit, which all children and staff, working with all children birth to 5 can benefit from; so, I think that's wonderful. The toolkit provides information and links related to active supervision. It includes a special section on active supervision for infants and toddlers, which, of course, is important to all of you joining us today, and I think to all of us, 'cause we think about what birth-to-5 environments look like for children, as they're growing and transitioning into new stages.

You'll also find links here on the toolkit to resources that are specifically designed for people concerned about active supervision for the youngest children in our care. And we know that it is a little different. We're talking about babies, and we're also talking about very small ratios; so, it's nice to talk about those.

Laura: Thanks, Angie. So, let me tell you a little bit about those infant/toddler resources. The first infant/toddler resource mentioned in the toolkit is EHS TA Paper No. 16, which is "Individualizing for Infants and Toddlers," Parts I and II.

As we touched upon earlier, individualization is fundamental to the responsive care we provide to infants and toddlers in EHS and childcare. We know that responsive care fosters strong connections, between teachers and children, which helps staff build awareness of each child's development and their individualized needs. This relationship is what keeps staff more in tune to children's needs and then their whereabouts.

In "Individualizing Care for Infants and Toddlers" Part I, the focus is on the why and what of individualization, the importance of individualization, some considerations for individualizing care, and program structures and practices that support staff in doing this important work. Part II describes the how of individualizing care -- the process through which staff responds thoughtfully to each child and family's interests, abilities, and needs, with a particular focus on observing, reflecting, interpreting, and planning, all of which are crucial for planning and maintaining safe environments for our infants and toddlers.

The next resource I'd like to share with you is "News You Can Use: Environment as Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers." "News You Can Use" is a digest written specifically for staff in direct service with infants and young children. This particular piece speaks to designing appropriate environments that will support your efforts in active supervision. It provides scenarios for staff to read for all of the program options, family childcare, home-visiting socializations, and center-based programs and includes reflective questions for staff to consider. "News You Can Use: Environment as Curriculum" encourages us to create an environment of "yes" for infants and toddlers, with strategies on positioning and positive redirection.

Another resource -- EHS Tip Sheet Number 9 -- also speaks to infant/toddler environments, addressing the question: "How do programs plan and implement developmentally appropriate environments that meet the intent of Head Start Program Performance Standards for infants and toddlers?" It provides guidance for grantees and program administrators on planning, designing, and implementing a developmentally appropriate environment for infants and toddlers in center-based and home-visiting socialization settings, with references to relevant Head Start Program Performance Standards. It's a concise resource that can help staff think about active supervision strategies in early and migrant and seasonal Head Start environments.

And there's another: EHS TA Paper No. 14, "Supporting Outdoor Play and Exploration for Infants and Toddlers." EHS TA Paper number 14 outlines the benefits of outdoor time and particular issues to consider when taking infants and toddlers outdoors. It focuses on planning and creating outdoor play spaces and learning opportunities as well as program policies and procedures. It includes scenarios relevant to all the program options. Thinking closely about outdoor environments is a critical component in any plan to keep infants and toddlers safe throughout the day.

And last, the toolkit refers to "News You Can Use: Transitions." Thoughtful, planned transitions are another important part of effective child supervision. This resource offers ways to support children through the many transitions in Early Head Start and childcare programs by providing strategies for individualizing transitions for each child and group. Things like limiting waiting time or preparing children for upcoming transitions, providing extra support to children who find transitioning difficult, the importance of predictable routines in helping children to say goodbye.

"News You Can Use: Transitions" was written with all program options in mind. So, all of these resources can be found as part of the Active Supervision Toolkit. The Active Supervision Toolkit is available on Head Start's portal for information on the web, the ECLKC, or e-click, as some people call it. The individual resources related to infant and toddler care can be found in both the toolkit and also on the ECLKC under "Early Head Start," with many other resources related to the care, growth, and development of infants and toddlers.

I'd also like, quickly, to share another exciting resource that's coming soon: That's "Webisode 7" of the Early Head Start National Resource Center's very popular "Early Essentials" series -- available on the ECLKC, and designed to orient staff new to EHS, migrant, and seasonal Head Start and childcare to foundational topics in the care of infants and young children. Webisode 7, coming in April, focuses on environments for infants and toddlers. It features a number of expert guests, including Louis Torelli, Calvin Moore, Janna Wagner, Brenda Jones Harden, Cleo Rodriguez, and others. We invite you to watch and share it on or after the April air date. You'll find this and other "Early Essential" webisodes on the ECLKC under "Early Essentials."

So, as we continue today, we wanted to have a chance to answer the many questions that have come forward to us and any that you may have today from the field. Please feel free to send any you have forward. We're going to try to answer as many as we can. And if your question can't be answered today, you can look for a response to be posted on the ECLKC, alongside the archived version of this webisode. So, we hope you won't hesitate to send us your questions.

Let's see what we've got. Okay. Here's a question that concerns positioning staff. Let me read it. Angie, here's the question: "I've read about zoning as a part of active supervision, and I can definitely see how that works for older children. I'm not sure I understand how to apply that strategy to our infant/toddler settings."

Angie: Thanks, Laura. I was thinking about that, because I understand where the question's coming from. A lot of times, we know there are activities that we have with older children, and I think the important thing to think about, as you're thinking about zoning is what an environment looks like with infants and toddlers. It is very different. And, as I mentioned earlier, one of the key differences is that we're working with small numbers. So, you're still going to follow the process of zoning, but you're going to follow it in the context of working with very young infants and toddlers. And the nature of care for infants and toddlers means that the flow of the day is guided by the needs of individual children who are cared for in small groups with low ratios.

So, the staff has to work very closely together. You know, when I walk into an infant/toddler classroom, I really want to see staff down on the floor and engaged with children. But at the same time, you also want to see that they're aware of everything that's going on in the classroom. What are the pieces of the environment or the areas that I'm really focused on, and what is the other teacher focused on? And it changes during the day.

It's a dance of the staff and the children, as they're moving through routines. But they're always alert; they're always actively engaged, and they're always scanning the environment and the children, as they may be on the floor with two or three little children crawling all over them. They're very engaged and interactive with the children, but they're also just as engaged with what's going on with every child in that group setting. And the same is true that we want staff at all times to be with the children but also to be aware in ways that allow them access to all the children in their care and using all of their senses, which I think is important for all children, you know, birth to 5, birth to 8 -- that really, using your senses throughout the day.

I always remember when I was in the classroom, how exhausted I was at the end of the day, and part of it is because you're always tuned in to what is going on, and it's key in terms of active supervision, because you need to work closely with the children at their level with their interests; but, at the same time, you're scanning areas of the classroom that you've learned through your observation and previous work with this particular group of children that you need to focus and work closely with.

So, I hope that explains it. I think, again, the importance is that we're supporting, you know, both the safety of the children and the safe environment, and we're supporting communication with each other. I think this is so important that it's called active supervision, because the other thing we know is that supervision requires a lot of coordination with the adults in the room as well as with the children, and if the adults can be coordinated, then the experience will be more successful for everyone during the day.

And, again, I think that the close communication, attention, and coordination that adults are engaged in extends to all the experience in the day, whether they're transitions -- going in and out of the room -- whether they're in outdoor areas or indoor areas, whether they're going for walks with the children, or whether they're having small groups of children on a bus or on transportation. I think it's understanding that it's all related and that the work has to be communicated and coordinated throughout the day, so that the children have a very, ongoing throughout the day, safe experience throughout their routines and throughout their exploration that they're doing through the day and throughout the work that they're doing through the day with each other and with the staff.

Laura: Thanks, Angie. Sounds like we have a number of people calling in with questions, so I'm gonna keep you busy this afternoon. Here's another one for you: "In a small family-childcare home; there's often only one caregiver present. How can that provider ensure that all children are safe, when he or she must attend to their own personal needs, for instance?"

Angie: You know, this question comes up a lot. I've been asked many times: Well, why is it that you have to have two adults in an Early Head Start classroom but not in a family-childcare home?" And, again, I think family-childcare home provides a wonderful experience for infants and toddlers, but often, they're mixed age, a scenario where, really, the ages that are served can very easily be birth to 5 in family-childcare homes. So, it is a different environment.

I also think that one of the areas of family childcare that's supported through professional associations and the other work that they do is what it means to be a provider in a home with children, and you may often be alone. And I think that one of the things that I hear often in training, is specialized strategies. What are specialized strategies? It's really understanding the environment you're providing in your home that is very homelike and nurturing but that also has an element of safety and an element of observation and working with the children that requires strategy throughout the day.

What does it look like when you do need to change a child? Where will all the other children be, and how do you plan for that? And how do you plan for times when you might need to -- you know, there's a spill or a child needs to go somewhere? You need to go through that planning each day and think about what the sight lines are in your home and in the environment you've set up, what the placement of equipment is.

Again, child-safe mirrors would serve many wonderful purposes. And then, just the use of the environment to support safety. And looking at it that way -- I mean, that really integrates well with a successful family-childcare curriculum, and I think it's important to look at it as a piece of the professional planning. And I mentioned there's other support. And many family-childcare providers have National Association of Family Child Care accreditation. They have standards that state children under the age of 3 are in the provider's line of sight at all times, except when she attends to personal needs, and the provider assures the safety of all children while attending her personal needs.

So, again, what is it that you have in place, so that the children are safe, and you know when there's resting or other activities going on, so that you can take a few minutes to do something for yourself, such as go to the bathroom -- I guess I can say that on a webinar -- and then get right back to the children 'cause you know where they are. And it is -- You know, it's something we will always have conversations about, but you can engage in active supervision in a family-childcare environment.

Laura: I was just thinking the same thing, Angie -- that active-supervision strategies are strategies that should work everywhere. They're not limited to just one setting that we might be in. Well, here we are. We have another one for you. "We know that effective supervision means getting all of our staff involved -- not just the people that are in the classroom, but everyone who shares spaces with children, like bus drivers and supportive staff. Can you suggest some strategies to help us with that?"

Angie: Well, I think it's like anything else that you're going to do in an early-care and -education environment. The first thing you need to do is plan. Who needs to be engaged in it? How do you plan with them? And how do you train everyone to ensure that they understand what their role is? Whatever your role is -- You know, if you provide transportation -- you're a bus driver or a bus monitor, that's as important a safety environment, as a classroom or an outdoor space.

So, it's ensuring that everyone understands what active supervision is, what it means to support children and staff in nurturing and responsive learning environments that have a foundation in health and safety. So, that's where everyone has to start, regardless of where they are.

And then I think that it fits right in very closely with the importance of individualizing for children. If you know me really well, Laura, and you know that I may want to wander somewhere, then that's part of your plan. Because you know I may zone out sometimes and just wander off if I'm, like, an 18- or 20-month-old. And so, that becomes part of what we talked about earlier -- observation, assessment, and planning for the children in your care, and making sure that everyone knows that I may have tendencies to sometimes go off and enjoy the flowers.

So, I think that that's important for very young children. Babies are not gonna wander as much as older children, but some of them, they find themselves in different places. And then I think that, again --it's paying attention to details throughout the day every day in all settings. It just becomes a part of your work all day long. So, I do think that that's important to think about.

And I guess I just want to say this to everyone, as I'm thinking about planning. This is a wonderful week. I know all the national centers are going to be talking about active supervision from different perspectives. And I just hope that as everyone is listening and learning and seeing the resources -- I love the resources that you talked about, Laura. They were really terrific, and I think there's going to be a whole week of resources that may be different, short or long, but that every person who works in a center should be aware of and should understand and should really be a part of what active supervision is and that all of the staff should be in on these calls. I know that we have lots of lines open every day, and everyone should be in on the calls and then sharing the information and talking about what each person's individual role is. So -- long answer. Sorry.

Laura: Thanks, Angie. And I'd like to remind everyone, because we know logistically that it is hard to get everyone on the calls, that they will be -- this webinar will be archived, and you'll have access to it on the ECLKC. And our time is getting close to close and we've had a lot more questions than we can really address today; so, when you do access that archived version, you'll also find our answers to the questions that we weren't able to fit in for you today. So, I think that seems like a good place for us to pause, Angie. We hope that all the resources we've shared will be useful and that you'll use them now and later to keep staff and others focused on child safety. If you have further questions related to active supervision for infants and toddlers, please feel free to contact us at the Early Head Start National Resource Center.

Our contact information is up on the screen. It's ehsnrcinfo@zerotothree.org or 1-877-4EHS-NRC. If you want to reach us by e-mail, it would be great if you could put "Active Supervision" in the subject line, so we can direct your question to where it needs to go. So, thank you, Angie, for joining us today and sharing your expertise.

Angie: Thank you, Laura. I loved being here today. I hope this was useful for everyone. And remember, safety first.

Laura: Thanks and goodbye.

Web Call Operator: Again, that does conclude today's presentation. Thank you for everyone participating.