

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## Opening

The *Framework for Infant–Toddler Learning and Development* (IT Framework) presents guidance on planning relationships and interactions, **routines**, and **environment** and **materials** to support the learning and development of **infants and toddlers**. Aligned to the *California Infant–Toddler Learning and Development Foundations* (ITLDF), it describes how young children learn and develop across the domains of Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development, Cognitive Development, and **Perceptual** and **Motor Development**. The primary audience for this document is **caregivers**, particularly **infant–toddler care educators** in home-based and center-based **early learning and care settings**, along with trainers, coaches, program directors, education coordinators, early interventionists, disabilities specialists, mentors, and supervisors. Families with infants and toddlers and early childhood faculty in higher education will also find this resource useful.

### Who are Caregivers and Infant–Toddler Care Educators?

The term *caregiver* refers to the person responsible for the care, well-being, safety, and education of a child. A *caregiver* might be a relative, such as an immediate or extended family member, who takes care of the child in the **child’s home** or the caregiver’s home. A caregiver might also be an *infant–toddler care educator*, a person who provides early learning experiences to support young children’s learning and development in a home-based, center-based, or community-based care environment. The terms *infant–toddler care educator* and *care educator* are mainly used in this document because the primary audience is caregivers who work in home-based and center-based early learning and care settings. The term *caregiver* is used when the text refers to caregiving that is inclusive of families and infant–toddler care educators.

Infants and toddlers have an amazing capacity to engage in learning and to organize and integrate vast amounts of new information. An infant or toddler who is interacting with an adult or other children or exploring how something works reveals an active mind that is discovering and making sense of the surrounding world of people and things. Infants and toddlers experience the world and build knowledge in a **holistic** way during moments of play, exploration, and interaction with other people, objects, and nature. They constantly gather new information and make sense of it. Their minds actively process patterns of movement, sounds, words, and the actions and reactions of people, animals, and objects. They connect new information with what they already know as they build their increasingly complex ways of understanding and knowing.

As infants expand their interactions with people, objects, and nature, they try out emerging skills, discover new actions, and experience feelings in new ways. In moments of play (times when children are free to engage in self-directed play) and everyday routines (such as diapering or feeding), infants observe, experiment, investigate, and invent solutions, trying to figure out how things work. Just about every waking moment, infants and toddlers are busy developing fundamental knowledge and skills. These fundamental competencies are described in the ITLDF (see Appendix B for an overview of the foundations in five domains of learning and development: Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Language Development, Cognitive Development, and Perceptual and Motor Development). During the first years of life, children begin to develop their identity, understand and regulate their emotions, build social knowledge and skills, and develop the ability to move their bodies skillfully to explore and accomplish goals. Concepts at the core of science, mathematics, social studies, language, literature, and the arts have their roots in the foundational knowledge and skills that infants and toddlers develop.

For example, as infants explore how things fill up, fit in, and move in space, they build concepts that relate to **spatial thinking**. As infants put one block into a basket, and then another, they develop **number sense**. As they delight in imitating the expressions and actions of a friend while playing,

they build concepts related to social relationships and **culture**. As they share a book with a care educator, pointing to the photo of a dog and saying “Dah,” followed by another “Dah,” they expand their comprehension and use of language and interest in books, the roots of **literacy**. In relationships with infants and toddlers, care educators can support these kinds of experiences through **responsive** interactions in the moment and thoughtful reflection and planning of next steps in learning. This framework guides educators in planning **possibilities** for learning that connect with children’s development of emerging concepts and skills.

Planning to support early learning and development requires that care educators understand and respect how infants and toddlers learn. Infants and toddlers have an inborn drive to seek and make sense of experience and information. When engaged in play or during everyday routines, they often initiate learning, actively building skills and concepts, wondering and asking questions, and making connections between ideas. For children, their learning often occurs as a whole experience. At any given time, they apply knowledge to new concepts and actions, integrate feelings into a developing **sense of identity**, combine words and phrases to create new thoughts and ideas, and perceive things and move their bodies. As infants actively engage in this holistic learning and development, the care educator’s role is to provide possibilities for them to experience, explore, and investigate.

In the infant and toddler field, the term *curriculum* is often used to describe how educators support early learning and development. However, this resource is not a curriculum. Rather, it is a framework for supporting early learning and development. When we observe infants and toddlers as they explore and make sense of people and things, we start to appreciate that they are actively engaged in what we might call their own curriculum. During the first 3 years, children learn how to communicate using language, move from one place to another, adopt cultural patterns for nonverbal communication, build concepts such as **cause and effect**, and develop perceptual and motor skills. With a focus on being responsive to and connecting with the amazing development of infants and toddlers, this resource invites educators to be reflective and intentional in their relationships and interactions, routines, and environment and materials as they offer developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

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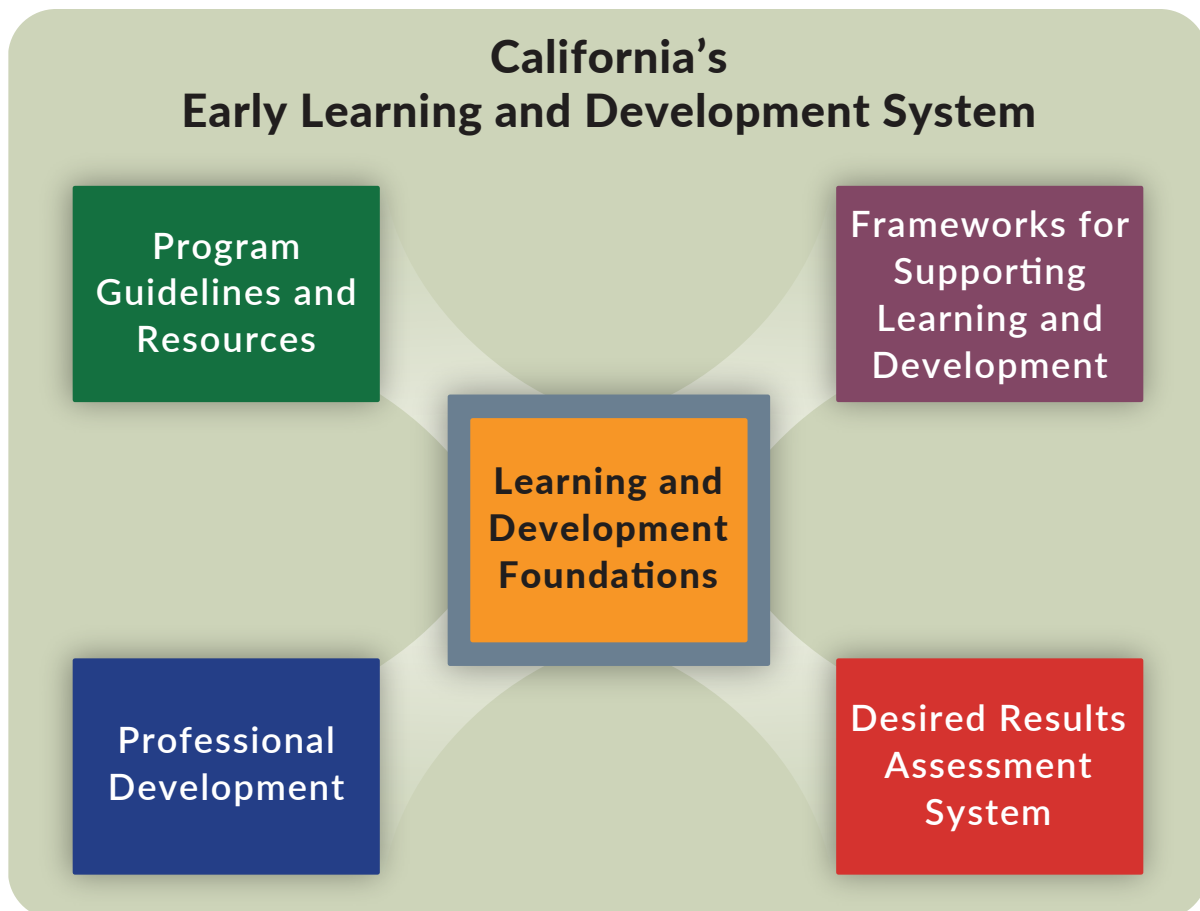
*In the infant and toddler field, the term curriculum is often used to describe how educators support early learning and development. However, this resource is not a curriculum. Rather, it is a framework for supporting early learning and development.*

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The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) brought together leading experts both in developmental theory and research and in early learning and care practice and sought input from early childhood professionals throughout California to ensure that this resource adequately reflects current research, theory, and widely recommended practices in the infant–toddler field.

# Organization of the *Framework for Infant–Toddler Learning and Development*

Overall, the *Framework for Infant–Toddler Learning and Development* describes the types of interactions and experiences, routines, and environment and materials that engage young children in learning and development. This IT Framework is an important part of California's efforts to promote early learning and development aligned to the Infant Toddler Learning and Development Foundations. The IT Framework complements other resources aligned to the IT Foundations such as guidelines for center- and home-based care and the Desired Results assessment system. Along with the other resources, the IT Framework provides core content for the professional development of infant and toddler care educators.



## Introductory Chapter

This introductory chapter provides overarching framing and guidance, addressing

- the broader context for early learning and development,
- program features that support infant–toddler learning and development,
- important considerations for how infants and toddlers learn, and
- guiding principles that address how to plan possibilities for early learning and development.

The remaining chapters provide guidance on how to support the learning and development of infants and toddlers. Throughout the IT Framework, short sections spotlight key considerations and research-to-practice considerations, using icons as illustrated in the key below.

### Icons to Spotlight Content



**Research to Practice**



**Key Consideration**

## Chapter on Planning

The “Planning to Support Infant–Toddler Learning and Development” chapter (planning chapter) discusses how care educators plan to support infant and toddler development by engaging in the planning cycle of observing and documenting; studying and interpreting, individually and with others; planning with others; and implementing a plan. By incorporating reflection at every step of the cycle, care educators continually adapt to support children’s learning and development. The planning chapter introduces and discusses how care educators plan to support infant and toddler development in three learning contexts: relationships and interactions, routines, and environment and materials. Discussion and examples illustrate the planning cycle in each of the three learning contexts.

## Chapters on Learning Contexts

The remaining chapters, “Relationships and Interactions,” “Routines,” and “Environment and Materials,” each focus on one learning context. Each of these chapters opens with key considerations for supporting children’s learning and development in a focal learning context and connects planning to that context. After the opening, each learning context–focused chapter is organized into several areas of practice to inform how care educators support infants and toddlers. Each chapter includes an area of practice about partnering with families and an area of practice about individualizing the learning context for each child. The remaining areas of practice address topics important for the focal learning context of that chapter. Each area of practice is further organized into specific

practices, with accompanying explanations and short examples that illustrate the specific practices. Although most of the speech of the children and adults is represented in English in the short examples, the communication during actual interactions in an early learning and care setting may occur in any language. Care educators who share the child’s home language—and use it to communicate with the child—support the child’s language development. Communicating in the home language also strengthens the child’s connections to their family’s cultural beliefs, values, and practices. Overall, while the areas of practice and practices illustrate important ways that care educators support infants’ and toddlers’ learning and development, they may not cover every aspect comprehensively.



Throughout each learning context–focused chapter, short sections describe connections to all five domains of the *ITLDF*, using the relevant icon for each domain as illustrated in the graphic below.

## Connections With the *Infant–Toddler Learning and Development Foundations*



**Connections With Social and Emotional Development**



**Connections With Approaches to Learning**



**Connections With Language Development**



**Connections With Cognitive Development**



**Connections With Perceptual and Motor Development**

## Spotlight on Care Educator Practice

Throughout the IT Framework, In-Practice Examples and Learning Stories spotlight care educators’ practices that support children’s learning and development in early learning and care settings. In-Practice Examples offer descriptions of moments of care and invite the reader to reflect on the meaning and application of the illustrated practices. The In-Practice Examples show how care educators support infants and toddlers across home-based and center-based early learning and care settings. They include settings where care educators communicate with multilingual children in their home languages as well as settings where multilingual children primarily experience English. Adjustments and supports that help children with disabilities fully participate in learning experiences are described in various In-Practice Examples. In addition to illustrating different aspects of best practice, the In-Practice Examples highlight how care educators intentionally observe and document; study and interpret, individually and with others; plan with others; and implement a plan to support children’s learning and development. Many of the examples show how care educators reflect together with families to plan ways to help children deepen their relationships and connect their experiences in the community with their play and exploration in the early learning and care setting.

Learning Stories offer one way that care educators might observe, document, and then share their reflections with a child and their family. Learning Stories are often written to the child and include an observation and

often photos of what a care educator or family member has seen a child or children doing in an early learning and care setting or at home. In a Learning Story, the adult adds their interpretation of the child’s competencies and dispositions toward learning. The adult highlights what the child can do and is doing rather than what they cannot do. In writing Learning Stories, care educators may reflect with colleagues, children, and children’s families to consider culture, context, and child development. A Learning Story is part of an authentic, strengths-based, holistic assessment of children. “Learning Stories provide a way to document children’s strengths and improve instruction based on the interests, talents, and expertise of children and their families” (Carr & Lee, 2012, 2019, as cited in Escamilla, 2021). Learning Stories were developed by educators in New Zealand and are integral to Te Whāriki, New Zealand’s Early Childhood Curriculum (Te Tāhuhu o te Mātauraanga Ministry of Education, New Zealand, 2017).

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# The Context for Early Learning and Development

## Social and Environmental Factors

Young children’s development is influenced by social and environmental factors, including lived experiences, cultures, racial-ethnic backgrounds, languages, individual strengths, temperaments, and diverse needs. Children’s experiences in the world are often shaped by interconnected **social determinants** (e.g., economic stability, educational access and quality, health care access and quality, neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.; World Health Organization, n.d.). Social determinants can create high-quality learning opportunities and experiences or lead to inequitable ones that are underresourced or do not accommodate children’s unique strengths and needs. For example, racism leads to some groups having higher status, greater power, more privilege, and more educational opportunities, while others have less power and privilege and fewer opportunities and resources. Another example is disability, which leads to inequities when sensory, physical, cognitive, or social learning differences require additional supports that are not provided. Negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination around disability can limit access to equitable learning opportunities.

To provide equitable learning opportunities for all children, early learning and care should actively and intentionally focus on diversity and inclusion and work to rectify inequitable policies, practices, and distribution of resources, such as

exclusionary discipline or discontinuity of care (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022; Cosse et al., 2018). As stated in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) position statement on advancing equity, “All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society” (NAEYC, 2019, p. 1). Unlike equality, which means everyone is treated the same, equity means everyone receives the support they need to develop in a healthy way and participate fully with others.

## Family and Community History

The experiences of children and their families in early learning and care settings are impacted by the historical treatment of their communities. **Systemic oppression** and experiences of injustice have adversely affected communities, families, and their children for generations and have led to **intergenerational trauma** (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.; CDE, 2022). The intergenerational experience of racism has resulted in an opportunity gap and **biased** discipline that leads to disproportionate rates of expulsion and suspension of boys of color (CDE, 2022; Meek et al., 2020). Generation after generation, families of color have been vulnerable to the adversity of racism and work to respond with their strength and **resilience**. For many Black and African American families, building on cultural strengths or core **protective factors** is critically important in understanding and supporting children’s development and well-being (Lloyd et al., 2022).

Tribes and tribal communities have experienced injustice over centuries that continues today. Historically, these communities have been impacted by state and federal family separation policies and practices. Children were removed from their homes and tribal communities and not allowed to speak the **traditional languages** of their homes and communities or engage in meaningful cultural practices. These factors and others have resulted in historical and current adverse conditions that have led to intergenerational and historical trauma (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.). Throughout this experience, Tribes and tribal communities have depended on rich cultural values and practices to strengthen the development and well-being of children and families (Wesner et al., 2022).

Children whose families had to resettle in the United States, such as immigrants or refugees from the Middle East/North Africa, Eastern Europe, Mexico, Central America, and Southeast Asia, experience many threats to their well-being, including poverty, discrimination, **malnutrition**, emotional vulnerability, and personal and family mental health conditions (Bouza et al., 2018; Murray, 2019; Scharf et al., 2021). These disruptive experiences faced by families and communities contribute to **trauma**. For example, immigration enforcement policies that lead to forced family separations have negatively impacted the health, sense of security, and overall well-being of children from immigrant communities (Finno-Velasquez et al., 2018). Like Black and African American communities and Tribes and tribal communities, immigrant families use cultural strengths to promote the development and well-being of children and families (Brown, 2015).

Care educators must “ensure that all children see themselves and ... others within and beyond their community, positively reflected in the design and implementation of pedagogy, curriculum, learning environment, interactions, and materials” (NAEYC, 2019, p. 7). Young children need to see their daily experiences and those of others reflected in their early learning and care settings. It is essential that early development is understood within this perspective. When care educators “celebrate diversity by acknowledging similarities and differences and provide perspectives that recognize beauty and value across differences” (NAEYC, 2019, p. 7), all infants and toddlers can thrive. Embracing the strengths of children and families while providing warm, caring, and responsive interactions is essential for the well-being and healthy development of children, especially those who have experienced stress and trauma, including intergenerational trauma. Supportive, loving environments where children feel appreciated for who they are and feel emotionally and physically safe and secure help them cope with stress and build resilience. To provide this kind of nurturance, care educators need to have their well-being supported. As part of this support, time for self-care and the availability of mental health consultation are

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essential, especially when care educators are caring for children who have experienced trauma (CDE, 2019b).

## The Essential Role of Family and Culture

Relationships with caregivers are crucially important in infants' and toddlers' learning and development, in both the home and the early learning and care setting. The social and environmental contexts where those relationships unfold also have a powerful impact. Cultural values and beliefs inform caregiving practices, which, in turn, influence children's development. For example, research suggests that families' cultural values and home practices can influence the development of their children's approaches to learning skills, including children's **initiative** and how they show curiosity (Bustamante & Hindman, 2020).

The lived experiences of children influence how they engage in social interactions and develop relationships. Families have their own ways of interacting with children and carrying out care routines. The lived experience of each family is unique. Because families differ from each other, including how they understand and practice their culture, each family and child who enters early learning and care settings differs from every other child and family. In other words, two children from the same culture will differ from each other. Only through communicating with each child's family can care educators begin to understand and support each child's unique development (Lang et al., 2016).

Practicing ongoing self-reflection creates the opportunity for care educators to uncover

preferences, biases, beliefs, and expectations that may shape their own views on caregiving practices. Awareness of their own perspectives helps care educators effectively partner with families to learn how to support children on different developmental paths in a way that is responsive to each child's strengths, interests, and needs. Establishing authentic **family partnerships** based on trust, mutual respect, and back-and-forth communication promotes continuity between the home and the early learning and care setting (Cook et al., 2024). These partnerships create a welcoming environment that children can easily connect with, which strengthens their **sense of belonging** and joy of learning.

Creating safe, emotionally secure, and welcoming spaces for children and their families also includes understanding potential sources of stress and trauma that may affect children's development. Sources of stress or trauma may include, but are not limited to, poverty, food and housing insecurity, domestic violence, gender-based violence, neglect, racism, immigration, and forced migration, as well as family separations and death or illness of a parent or family member. Implementing healing practices for children, families, and care educators can act as a buffer against the potential effects of adverse experiences (Bartlett, 2021). Information on these healing practices, which includes mental health consultation and self-care for care educators to help them better support children and families, can be found in *Trauma and Young Children: Teaching Strategies to Support and Empower*, a publication from NAEYC (Erdman et al., 2020).

Infants and toddlers make meaning of their experiences in the context of their families' cultural beliefs, values, and practices as they learn and develop. Care educators can build on children's prior knowledge and experiences. Examples in California's ITLDF (CDSS, 2025) recognize and value the broad range of ways children of diverse racial-ethnic backgrounds, abilities, cultures, and languages might demonstrate their developing skills and knowledge. In addition, some examples identify specific cultural practices and experiences that children draw on to make meaning as they are learning.

The ITLDF inform how care educators can responsively engage with the children, families, and communities they serve. In practice, care educators need to build a shared understanding through relationships with families based on

two-way communication to create culturally responsive and affirming early learning experiences for infants and toddlers. For children and families who have experienced trauma, trauma-informed care can provide additional support for culturally responsive and affirming early learning experiences (Erdman et al., 2020; Nicholson et al., 2023).

### Individual Differences

Different experiences within the family and the community contribute greatly to the uniqueness of each child. Within a family, the timing and intensity of experiences may differ between siblings. In addition, children differ in their **temperament tendencies**, which develop through the interaction between a child's biological makeup and their experience within the family and community. Research shows that the



impact of a responsive relationship varies from child to child (Belsky, 2013). While every child benefits from an emotionally secure, responsive relationship, some benefit more than others. In addition, the absence of an emotionally secure relationship affects all children, some more than others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child [NSCDC], 2015). For all children, a responsive relationship is important for learning and development.

A one-size-fits-all approach to supporting early learning and development will not meet the needs of all children (NSCDC, 2024). Within a responsive relationship, care educators need to adapt to each unique infant or toddler. A general developmental approach to early learning and care must have built-in flexibility to support and engage each child’s individual strengths, interests, and needs.

Every child brings their own distinct perspective into the early learning and care setting, which is a reflection of the amazing diversity of how children experience and express their learning and development. Each child enriches our understanding of human potential. Care educators have the incredible opportunity to nurture every child’s learning and development

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*Within a responsive relationship, care educators need to adapt to each unique infant or toddler.*

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by creating a supportive and inclusive environment that values and encourages each child’s approach to learning and development. In certain situations, some children may have diverse abilities that could benefit from personalized supports as they develop and learn. In supporting the individual strengths and needs of each child, care educators often benefit from working with other professionals such as coaches, consultants, or specialists who may be supporting a child and family. Partnering with these professionals can help care educators understand a child’s strengths, needs, and background through supporting recognition of and reflection on the strengths, needs, and backgrounds that care educators bring to nurturing infants and toddlers.

## Early Experiences With Language

Young children from birth to 3 years old develop and learn foundational language knowledge and skills in the languages and **language varieties** of their homes, communities, and early learning and care settings. The spoken and signed languages and language varieties children experience support their development in other domains, as language is foundational for all learning. In the early learning and care setting, care educators play an essential role in early language development as they communicate and interact with infants and toddlers. Sustained experience with any language, either spoken or signed, is central to children’s language development. Whether a child experiences

language interactions in a spoken language like Spanish or Mandarin or a signed language like American Sign Language (ASL), these interactions establish a strong foundation. In addition, care educators foster the use of the languages and language varieties children are learning at home.

Infants and toddlers who are multilingual are developing two or more languages at the same time. **Multilingual children** are developing

foundational language abilities in the context of their relationships in their homes and communities. In California, approximately 60 percent of young children live in a family where a language other than English is spoken (Giang & Park, 2022). It is important to note that research indicates that multilingualism does not confuse children, nor does it cause or worsen any existing communication- or language-learning delays and disabilities (NASEM, 2017; Paradis et al., 2021).



### Key Consideration Multilingual Children

In this document, the term **multilingual child** refers to a child who is developing two or more languages in the context of their family, community, or early learning and care setting (CDSS, 2025). The term *multilingual children* may overlap or be inclusive of other frequently used terms, such as **dual language learner** or **multilingual learner**. A *dual language learner* is a child learning a second language while continuing to develop their first language. It is often used for children from birth to 5 years old (NASEM, 2017). *Multilingual learner* is a broad term that encompasses multilingualism for children birth through elementary and secondary education (CDE, 2020). Research demonstrates that multilingualism is an asset that affords children linguistic, social, and cognitive developmental strengths and becomes a foundation for lifelong learning (August et al., 2014; Dickinson et al., 2004; Genesee, 2010, 2016; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2017).

Meaningful language and literacy experiences in the earliest years of life establish a strong foundation for learning in school and beyond (Dickinson et al., 2013; NASEM, 2017). Children benefit when they can keep developing their ability to use their home language as they experience other languages in early learning and care settings. The use of a child’s home language in an infant–toddler care setting contributes to continuity of care between the home and the early learning and care setting, which supports a child’s sense of belonging.

In some Tribes and tribal communities, traditional languages are the focus of language revitalization efforts to strengthen ties to cultural knowledge and practices, which are a source of strength and resilience (Grenoble, 2021; Marshall & Antoine, 2023; Whalen et al., 2022). In some communities, traditional languages might be used by families in the home or with elders in the community as part of cultural events. In addition, some Tribes and tribal communities engage in language revitalization efforts and actively use the traditional language in cultural practices within early learning and care settings (Waters et al., 2024).

### **Communicating With Families About Language Goals and Experiences**

The key to supporting all children is to provide learning experiences and environments based on an ongoing understanding of each child’s interests, strengths, needs, ways of communicating, and family priorities and cultural experiences. It is essential that care educators communicate with families to learn about which

languages they use with their children and their goals for their children’s language development.<sup>1</sup> For example, two families may share the long-term goal for their child to be multilingual but make different choices for infant–toddler early learning and care. One family may share that they speak Korean at home and that they have chosen an infant–toddler care center where care educators speak English with the children. Another family may share that they speak Spanish at home with the child and that they have chosen a family child care home where the care educators use Spanish primarily with the children.

As care educators listen to and learn from families, it is important for them to share information about the benefits of multilingualism and the critical role the family plays in their child’s continued development of the home language. When care educators and families share a language, they can partner to provide experiences with the home language in the home and the early learning and care setting, which will strengthen the child’s overall language development. When care educators and families do not share a language, care educators can use various strategies to facilitate communication and understanding. For example, they

- partner with coworkers or family volunteers who speak the child’s home language;
- learn a few words and phrases from the family that can be used with the child;
- use interpreters to communicate with families and gain insights into the family’s goals, priorities, and care practices as well as what a child knows and is able to do

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about how to listen to and learn from families, [Gathering and Using Language Information That Families Share](https://headstart.gov/publication/gathering-using-language-information-families-share) is a helpful resource from Head Start (2020) available at: <https://headstart.gov/publication/gathering-using-language-information-families-share>.

(additionally, translation technology tools can be helpful); and

- partner with the child and family’s community to learn more about the community, culture, and traditions.

## Language and Communication in the Early Learning and Care Setting

Young children develop their multilingual capabilities by using their home languages and traditional languages in their learning and daily interactions with their families, community members, peers, care educators, and other caregivers. Through rich, sustained experiences with language over time, young children develop early foundations in one or more languages. The ways that children and care educators use language in early learning and care settings to support strong child outcomes may include one or more of the following:

- Children communicate entirely in their home language while in the early learning and care setting. When a care educator does not share the same home language with the child, they respond and communicate interest, attention, and warmth nonverbally.
- Children **code-switch**, combining their home language and the language of their early learning and care setting to communicate with caregivers and peers. Code-switching is one example of how children **translanguage**. Children translanguage when they use resources from all the languages they are developing to learn and communicate.
- Children and care educators use traditional languages from Tribes and tribal

communities, making connections with cultural beliefs and practices.

- Care educators communicate in the child’s home language when they are proficient in that language and comfortable using that language with infants and toddlers. In addition to using language in two-way communication with children, care educators can provide a variety of experiences in the child’s home language, such as reading books, telling stories, singing songs, and doing finger plays.
- Care educators provide rich language interactions in a language the child is still developing. Care educators use key words and phrases in a child’s home language that are associated with interactions, routines, or environment and materials they have identified in partnership with families, even when the care educators do not speak the home language fluently.
- Care educators invite families to provide written and recorded spoken examples of a child’s significant words in their home language and to add to this list as their child continues to develop language.

Using language when communicating with children requires focused attention on each child’s experiences with languages and an understanding of how to support their language development. The progress that infants and toddlers make as they learn one or more languages varies greatly from child to child. For example, some children enter early learning and care settings before they use language to communicate and rely primarily on nonverbal communication, while others may enter with

a strong base in their home language. Care educators need to be intentional in **scaffolding** communication and using nonverbal means as they support multilingual children in integrated learning experiences. In all cases, when care educators are developing a safe, nurturing relationship with children, children have

the security to develop their language and communication. Overall, children’s continued language development in one or more languages supports their development across the social and emotional development, approaches to learning, cognitive development, and perceptual and motor development domains.



### **Key Consideration** **How Infants and Toddlers Communicate**

Infants and toddlers communicate verbally and nonverbally in varied ways, including through spoken language, sign language, **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices**, vocalizations, gestures, gaze, and facial expressions.

An important consideration in communicating with children is that care educators strengthen their relational experiences with infants and toddlers by using language that affirms each child’s identity. To accommodate different family preferences, care educators use both person-first language (e.g., a child with a visual impairment) and identity-first language (e.g., a Deaf child). Communication with a child’s family to learn about their preferred way of representing their infant’s or toddler’s identity is essential.

## Inclusivity and Universal Design for Learning

**Universal Design for Learning** is critically important for promoting inclusivity when planning to support early learning. Universal Design for Learning is an approach that offers guidelines for supporting all children through using multiple means for engagement, representation, action, and expression (Gordon, 2024). For example, terms such as *communicates*, *responds*, *shares*, and *replies* convey respect for the diverse ways infants and toddlers communicate, make sense of things, and learn. These terms also ensure the inclusion of any language and any form of communication, such as spoken or signed language, finger

spelling, pictures, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, gesturing, or eye gaze. The terms *identifies* and *indicates* or *points to* are used to represent multiple ways of referring to objects, people, or events in the environment. Actions such as scribbling, modeling with different materials, pretend play, and movement are used to describe how children might demonstrate their understanding and skills in ways other than using verbal language. This inclusive approach honors and validates every child’s way of engaging with people and the physical environment to learn.



### Key Consideration

#### Children With Disabilities or Developmental Delays

The term *children with disabilities* or *developmental delays* is used to maintain people-first language rather than identify children solely based on their disability. At the same time, the term is not meant to identify a homogenous or monolithic group (National Center on Disability and Journalism, 2021) but rather to refer to a group of children with individual disabilities and diverse strengths and needs. *Children with developmental delays* describes infants and toddlers under 3 years of age who may not have been identified as having a disability but are experiencing a developmental delay in areas such as cognitive, physical, communication, social and emotional, or adaptive development and need early intervention services to support their learning and development (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Care educators should always engage with families to discuss their preferences for talking about their children’s **individual differences** and needs.

As each child’s capabilities and needs are unique, some children may benefit from additional supports or adjustments, such as accommodations, adaptations, or modifications to learn and demonstrate skills:

- accommodations (e.g., limiting background noise and other distractions, using seating that is flexible, using visual cues, or providing additional learning supports by **modeling** or prompting);
- adaptations to materials (e.g., using eating utensils that are shorter in length with wider handles); or
- modifications to ways care educators and children interact (e.g., using a tablet with an app to communicate with a child and support their language learning).

When a child has an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), care educators should consult and collaborate with the family and the rest of the IFSP team. This collaboration will support the outcomes included in the IFSP as part of inclusive learning experiences. Care educators can implement accommodations, adaptations, and modifications as specified in a child’s IFSP.<sup>2</sup>



<sup>2</sup> For more information on early intervention for infants and toddlers with disabilities in California, visit the [Early Start program site](https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/early-start/) (https://www.dds.ca.gov/services/early-start/).

## Program Features That Support Infant–Toddler Learning and Development

The impact of planning to support learning is either enhanced or limited by how care and learning experiences are organized in an early learning and care setting. Creating a strong foundation for planning and implementation is essential. Program policies that support effective planning and implementation include the following:

- Primary care—assigning a **primary care educator** to each child and family
- Small groups—creating small groups of children and care educators
- Continuity—maintaining consistent care educator assignments and groups over time
- Individualized care—responding to individual needs, abilities, and schedules
- Culturally and linguistically responsive care—maintaining cultural and linguistic continuity between home and program through authentic, meaningful back-and-forth communication and collaboration with families
- Inclusion of children with disabilities—nurturing a sense of belonging and providing appropriate additional supports or adjustments for children with disabilities

While centers for infants and toddlers need to be intentional in organizing care according to the policies of primary care and continuity of care, some smaller home-based care settings often already provide primary relationships that develop over time. Both home-based settings with a large group and centers usually have to organize their environment and routines to offer infants and toddlers care experiences in small groups. In addition, both home-based settings and centers need to be thoughtful about how they ensure children’s care is individualized, responsive to culture and language, and inclusive.

More comprehensive descriptions of the six recommended program policies can be found in the *Infant/Toddler Learning and Development Program Guidelines* (CDE, 2019a), a companion document to the ITLDF and this document.

## The Infant–Toddler Learning Process: The Starting Point

Research has uncovered a vast amount of information about how young children learn and how that learning is best facilitated. It has shown that infants are ready to learn from birth. They absorb information from the sights, sounds, and scents around them to store the information, sort it out, and use it. This information helps infants understand the world and the people around them. Research has also shown that infants and toddlers are quite dependent on primary relationships for their emotional and physical needs to be met. Aware of infants' and toddlers' needs, care educators plan their interactions with them to address both the vulnerability and competence of infants and toddlers. They simultaneously attend to the children's need for close, consistent relationships with nurturing adults and to the children's active curiosity and motivation to learn.

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*Aware of infants' and toddlers' needs, care educators plan their interactions with them to address both the vulnerability and competence of infants and toddlers.*

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## Infant and Toddler Development and Its Facilitation

Because everything is new to infants and toddlers, and their brains are developing rapidly, infancy is a unique period of life that calls for unique responses from caregivers. The ways infants and toddlers think, feel, and function differ somewhat from the ways children in the developmental periods of preschool, middle childhood, and adolescence think, feel, and function. **Synapse formation** in different developmental areas peaks at different times from birth to age 3. The NSCDC (2007) characterizes brain development during infancy in the following way:

Because low-level circuits [connections in the brain] mature early and high-level circuits mature later, different kinds of experiences are critical at different ages for optimal brain development, a concept called *age-appropriate experience*. Soon after birth, basic sensory, social, and emotional experiences are essential for optimizing the architecture of low-level circuits. At later ages, more sophisticated kinds of experiences are critical for shaping higher-level circuits. When adults or communities expect young children to master skills for which the necessary brain circuits have not yet been formed, they waste time and resources, and may even impair healthy brain development by inducing excessive stress in the child. (p. 4)

## Four Aspects of Infant–Toddler Development

Four major aspects of infant–toddler development illuminate the kinds of sensory-motor, social, emotional, and language and communication experiences that are essential for optimizing the brain’s developing architecture. The following four aspects of infant–toddler development call for a special approach to planning for and supporting their learning:

- Infants and toddlers follow their own development and learning agenda.
- Infants and toddlers learn **holistically**.
- Infants and toddlers experience major developmental transitions in their first 3 years.
- Infants and toddlers are in the process of developing their first **sense of self**.

The following overview describes these distinct aspects of infant–toddler learning and development.

### Infants and Toddlers Follow Their Own Learning and Development Agendas

All humans are internally driven to learn and develop. This internal drive functions in slightly different ways and degrees at different points in life. The infant’s or toddler’s learning agenda is much more focused on fundamental knowledge and skills than an older child’s agenda is. The foundations for later learning in all domains are set during the first 3 years. For example, infants and toddlers are primed to

- seek and form relationships with people who will nurture and protect them;
- develop their capacity to regulate their emotions;
- focus their attention on exploring and making sense of people and things;
- develop language to communicate and share meaning with others;
- construct knowledge of basic concepts, such as the relationship between cause and effect and how things move and fit in space;
- master emerging small-muscle and large-muscle skills; and
- use their bodies and senses to take in information about their environment, other people, and themselves to play, explore, and learn.

Infants and toddlers actively engage in developing these competencies in more or less the same general sequence. The common path of learning and development that children are on, however, depends on ongoing interaction with adults. Without adults, infants and toddlers are unable to pursue their learning and development agenda. In fact, at the core of their agenda is interacting with adults to have essential relationship

experiences. An understanding of the importance of relationships for infants and toddlers is the starting point in supporting their early learning and development.

The ITLDF reflect the birth-to-3 learning and development agenda. From the beginning of life, infants and toddlers seek out relationships and develop the skills that will help them survive and prosper in their early months and years. In addition to responsive relationship experiences, caregivers create the environments and routines to nurture and support infants and toddlers as they learn and develop. Infants and toddlers are internally driven to communicate with others, to move, to explore and manipulate objects, and to solve problems. They focus on the topics of greatest importance without prompting from adults. What infants and toddlers need are relationships and interactions, experiences, environments, and routines that closely match their learning and development agenda.

The learning agenda of infants and toddlers makes up much of the learning and development they engage in during the first 3 years of life. In addition, a portion of their learning centers around experiences introduced by adults. These experiences are often culturally based. For example, a child may learn how to use utensils at mealtime or understand rules about when and how to communicate with adults. A child may also learn a particular skill from a family member, such as how to greet someone or how to interact with a pet. A child learns culturally based ways of using books through observing and imitating adults as well as through specific guidance from adults. These kinds of learning experiences are meaningful and important in the context in which the child is developing. Their effectiveness often depends on the knowledge and skills infants and toddlers develop through the self-initiated

and self-directed play and exploration of the environment, spontaneous interactions with their caregivers, and everyday routines.

### Infants and Toddlers Learn Holistically

Infants and toddlers take in information continuously, naturally, and fluidly. Although they often focus on one thing at a time, that focus can change quickly. From their interactions, observations, and actions, they pick up all kinds of information that they use to build knowledge and skills. A single interaction can lead to learning about many things in several areas. Although a child may start an experience by focusing on something of interest in one domain, the physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and language components of that experience are processed almost simultaneously. The infant or toddler explores and takes in different kinds of information from each interaction with people and things.

Because infants and toddlers learn in a holistic way, they may not always focus on the concept or idea that an adult may wish to emphasize. If adults structure interaction with the purpose of creating specific outcomes in a particular content area—for example, language or shapes—they will often miss the child’s larger learning experience. Rather, plans to help with infant or toddler learning are best created in ways that reflect the child’s openness to all aspects of an experience. For example, a care educator may think that crafting a learning experience on colors for a child around 24 months old will result in specific learning about color, but the child may not separate the information about colors from other information gained from the experience. Narrowing the focus of learning may not match with how a 2-year-old learns at that moment. The child’s focus may switch to the

part of the interaction that is personally more important, such as the texture of the materials used to display color, the movement of the wrist to transfer the color from brush to paper, the emotional tone used in the interaction, or the social style the adult uses to introduce the activity. From the perspective of the child, the experience may end up having little to do with colors. Adults can better facilitate learning by attending to the many learning possibilities that each experience may hold for an infant or toddler.

### Development in the First Three Years

During the first 3 years of life, much of a child’s life is organized around the tasks of developing security, exploration, and identity. While children attend to all three of these tasks throughout infancy, each generally takes center stage at different points in development. A developmental task becomes more or less prominent as developmental transitions occur. The child’s behavior starts to change and reflects a new way of organizing experiences. Through understanding these developmental changes, care educators can adapt to how children approach play, exploration, and learning.

**Security.** From birth until the age of about 8 months, most infants organize their attention and behavior around developing a sense of security. During the first months of life, infants concentrate on seeking security, nurturance, and protection. They explore their immediate environment through using their senses and their ever-expanding ability to move. With the growing awareness that they are dependent on adults for care, they begin to appreciate that they are individuals with separate identities.

Adults who provide care for young infants need to be especially attentive to the children’s need

to feel secure. Physical comfort and responsive care that help young infants regulate themselves will build their confidence in self and in the care provided by others.

**Exploration.** Infants’ focus on security during the first months of life leads to organized relationship behavior. During the months that follow, infants increasingly use close relationships as secure bases as they try out their growing mental and physical capacities for exploration. Captivated by the exciting world in front of them, they explore through moving, inspecting, and manipulating things.

Children from about 8 to 18 months of age often use their developing perceptual and motor skills to move out and explore the environment around them—on their own for brief periods of time and no longer physically bound to the adult. Those who develop a secure attachment or attachments have a secure base for active exploration. Still needing security, children in this age period check in with their caregiver as they explore. They also seem to be practicing independence, motivated by a powerful urge to explore, but still quite dependent on the trusted adult to be there when needed. At this age, children look to their caregivers to validate their explorative bursts and to show confidence in their developing competence.

As children actively explore during this age period, adults need to adjust the ways in which they care for the infant, provide security, and relate to the child’s growing sense of self. Children of this age prosper when they have a safe, secure environment and are allowed to use the caregiver as a base of security from which they can journey back and forth for emotional refueling and maintain a connection with the

caregiver through eye contact, facial expressions, or vocal or verbal communication.

**Identity.** Children from about 18 to 36 months of age change their main focus to identity. They concentrate on issues of *me* and *mine*, notions of *good* and *not so good*, and concepts of *self* and *other*. Interactions with others lead to learning about themselves as independent, dependent, and interdependent beings in a group. They interpret their sense of security and their explorations in these different ways. Infants now explore not only the environment around them but also their power to change it. Frequently, they say “no” or “stop” to resist those who have been providing them emotional security to see how far they can go on their own and be separate. At other moments they seek connection and a feeling of belonging. They are consumed with exploring and making choices, and they start to learn about the consequences that result from their choices.

To assist children’s growth toward a sense of self and belonging, the adult needs to switch to supporting children’s exploration of identity. Care educators help children in this age period with security and exploration by setting boundaries that guide children in learning rules of social behavior and by letting each child know that a trusted adult will be emotionally available when needed, especially during stressful moments.

These developmental transitions can be challenging for a care educator because the type of care shifts as children go through rapid changes during the first 3 years of life. The care educator can be mindful of the children’s major focus during each developmental period (security, exploration, or identity) while planning to support learning and development in areas such as

**empathy**, impulse control, communication, early literacy, number sense, and large motor skills.

### **Infants Are in the Process of Developing Their First Sense of Self**

During the first 3 years of life, children develop a sense of who they are. One way infants and toddlers build their first sense of self is through experiences of how others treat them. They receive important messages from others: “I am a person who is liked, encouraged, given choices, protected, listened to, or I am not.” Through their responses, care educators profoundly influence a child’s first sense of self. They contribute to shaping the way infants and toddlers see themselves. Children at the beginning of life are completely trusting and open, eagerly taking in messages from the adults who provide care for them. Children do not judge as appropriate or inappropriate the ways in which adults treat them or what adults allow and expect them to do but rather use adults’ responses to them to build a first “opinion” of self.

The distinction between the infant or toddler developing a first sense of self and the older child continuing to define a sense of self first established during infancy is an important consideration when providing care. Although adults still have a profound influence on 4-year-old children’s sense of self, older children already have some sense of themselves as individuals and can assert themselves and express how they see things. For example, they may resist eating food they do not like and judge someone who tries to make them eat such food as mean or unfair. In contrast, even when infants resist eating certain foods, they do not consciously judge the person trying to feed them. Instead, they take in the ways they are treated as examples of how things are and then expect these behaviors:

“This is the way people feed me,” “This is the way people express emotions,” “These are things that cause people to be upset with me,” “These are the ways to approach people,” and “This is how my curiosity is accepted or not.” Thus, creating a warm, caring, personal relationship with the infant is more than a nice thing to do. It significantly contributes to a child’s developing sense of self.

### **What the Four Aspects of Development Mean for Supporting Early Learning**

The four aspects of infant and toddler development call for support that is individually adapted to who infants and toddlers are and who they are becoming. Because children move so rapidly through distinct developmental periods during the first 3 years, adults need to respect, observe, and be responsive to each child’s learning agenda. Because early learning is holistic, plans to facilitate infants’ and toddlers’ learning should reflect consideration of all the domains of development that may be part of an experience. Because infants and toddlers relate to security, exploration, and identity formation differently at different times during development, adults can be most effective when their responses to each child fit with the child’s developmental level. Finally, because infants and toddlers are in the early stages of becoming aware of themselves as individuals and do not yet judge the appropriateness of messages they receive from others, adults need to be particularly sensitive to their role in shaping each infant’s or toddler’s sense of self. An understanding of these different factors that make infancy unique leads to a fundamental question: How can planning to support early learning and development optimally meet the children’s emerging knowledge, skills, competencies, interests, and needs?

# Principles Underlying the Support of Early Learning and Development

To address how to plan possibilities for early learning, we start with a set of principles. The following principles stem from what is known about early learning and development and the relationships and environments in which it happens.

- **Infants and toddlers develop best in the context of supportive, affirming, and nurturing relationships and environments.** Infants and toddlers are competent, yet vulnerable, at every stage of development. Supportive, responsive, and consistent relationships with caregivers provide infants and toddlers with a secure base from which to explore, engage with others, and seek support when needed. In emotionally safe and secure relationships, infants and toddlers have many opportunities to follow their interests, learn how to engage and communicate effectively, make meaning, express their emotions, solve problems, and build relationships with caregivers and other children. Responsive relationships and environments help children feel emotionally and physically safe and experience security and a sense of belonging.
- **Families, their cultures, and home languages are fundamental to early learning and development.** Every child is unique, with many strengths rooted in their relationships with their families and in their communities, cultures, languages, practices, and experiences. Infants and toddlers come from a wide variety of racial-ethnic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds and life experiences. Relationship-based, responsive, and inclusive infant–toddler early learning and care settings value, respect, and build on the backgrounds and experiences of each child. Learning experiences that authentically connect with children’s cultural, racial-ethnic, and linguistic experiences in their families and



communities strengthen the children’s **sense of identity and belonging.**

- **Family and community partnerships create meaningful connections and support children’s and families’ sense of belonging.** Meaningful, authentic collaborations with families grow from authentic, respectful, reciprocal relationships in which families and care educators share responsibility for the well-being, learning, and development of children. Care educators engage families through culturally and linguistically affirming interactions. They seek to learn with and from families about each family’s goals, values, and aspirations for their child. Reciprocal relationships between care educators and families build meaningful two-way collaboration and foster connections between the home and early learning and care setting that support children’s learning and promote a sense of belonging for children and their families.
- **Infancy is a unique stage of life that is important in its own right.** Infants and toddlers are developing their first relationships; they are making sense of the world, people, and things that are completely new to them through active exploration and discovery; their brains are developing more rapidly than at any other time in life; and they are developing the amazing ability to communicate with language and balance and move their bodies. Infants and toddlers also develop a sense of security and safety when provided a healthy first relationship. All of this new, foundational learning and development makes infancy the unique period of life that it is.
- **Responsiveness to children’s self-initiated exploration fosters learning and development.** Research shows that responsive care and nurturance not only promote the development of emotional security in children but also their learning and development in general. For example, when compared with young infants who receive nonresponsive care, young infants who receive consistent, appropriate, and prompt responses cry less often when they are older. Being responsive to **nondistress cues** from children, such as their interest in being playful, may have an impact. For example, children who experienced a high level of responsiveness to their nondistress signals at 4 months of age were more advanced in their language development and play at 13 months of age than children who experienced less responsiveness (Bornstein, 2012).
- **Early learning and development are integrated.** Infants and toddlers learn in a holistic way rather than one domain at a time. They are active, curious learners who are internally motivated to use all of their abilities to explore and interact with their social and physical environments. Their motivation to learn is enhanced when their interactions with caregivers are responsive and emotionally supportive.
- **Children’s home languages are an asset and establish a strong foundation for learning and development in all domains.** Learning more than one language is a strength, with broad benefits that encompass linguistic, social, and cognitive growth, including when children have an underlying intellectual or language learning delay or disability. Nurturing the home language (including in

multilingual homes) builds connections with family and community, supports children’s social and identity development, and sets a foundation for future success.

- **Children demonstrate varying strengths and needs in their learning and development across domains.** Each child develops in their own unique way and at their own pace. Some children may develop a particular skill early, while others may need more time to develop that skill. How children go about learning also varies from child to child. A child’s individual learning path is influenced by many factors, including their temperament; racial-ethnic, cultural, and linguistic experiences; living conditions; personal strengths, interests, abilities, and dispositions; and whether they are experiencing, or have experienced, toxic stress or trauma. Responsive care educators offer learning experiences that build on each child’s strengths; are meaningful; and connect with each child’s diverse strengths, interests, and needs.
- **Infants and toddlers have different ways of knowing and may express their knowledge and skills across domains through various means.** Infants and toddlers may express their understanding and communicate in various ways, including vocalizations, facial expressions, and nonverbal gestures. As infants and toddlers develop, they may use their home languages or a combination of all the languages they are learning to express themselves and share meaning with others. Infants and toddlers may also use different communication modalities, such as nonverbal gestures, a picture exchange system, or an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device.
- **Play offers engaging, joyful opportunities for learning and development in every domain.** Through supporting infants’ and toddlers’ self-initiated and self-directed play and exploration, early learning and care settings provide a powerful context for engaging social interactions, **meaning making**, discovery, self-expression, problem-solving, creativity, and learning. Infant–toddler learning and care settings support children’s play by providing uninterrupted time in high-quality early learning environments with a variety of choices or possibilities for child-directed play, exploration, and discovery.
- **Intentional planning enhances children’s development through learning opportunities designed to be responsive to individual children’s strengths, interests, experiences, and needs.** Care educators intentionally communicate with families and use observation, documentation, and reflection to build their knowledge of individual children’s strengths, interests, questions, experiences, and needs. With a growing understanding of each child, care educators plan supportive approaches to interactions, predictable routines, and diverse learning and care environments that promote children’s play, exploration, discovery, and meaning making.

- **Time for reflection and planning enhances educators’ supportive role.** Infant–toddler care educators are professionals who serve an important role in society. In nurturing the development of infants and toddlers, care educators engage in an ongoing process of observing and documenting; studying and interpreting, individually and with others; planning with others; and implementing a plan to provide individualized and small group learning experiences. As increasing numbers of children with diverse backgrounds and learning support needs, including children with disabilities, participate in early learning and care settings, collaboration and communication are essential to extend the benefits of high-

quality, equitable, and inclusive care to all children. Planning to support learning and development requires time for educators to reflect on observations and documentation and plan strategies that foster children’s progress in building knowledge and developing skills. Early learning and care settings that effectively support intentional planning allocate time in care educators’ schedules for both individual and team reflection and planning. With appropriate support, educators can grow professionally through a continuous process of learning together and exploring ways to be responsive to young children’s learning interests and needs.

These principles have guided the development of this document and provided the foundation for the planning process and practices described in the next chapter, “Planning to Support Infant–Toddler Learning and Development.”

## Closing

In their interactions, play, and exploration, infants and toddlers actively engage in learning and discovery. When interacting with infants and toddlers, care educators experience firsthand how young children make meaning in their relationships with others. In their play, infants and toddlers are also constantly exploring to make sense of how things in their world work. Their engagement in play and learning is influenced by their family; social and environmental factors, including their lived experience, cultures, racial-ethnic backgrounds, and languages; individual strengths; temperament; and varied needs. In developing a responsive relationship with an infant or toddler and supporting each one’s

learning and development, the care educator understands the child as an individual. A partnership with the family is key in building a complete picture of each child’s learning and development. As the care educator develops their relationship with each child, they appreciate and love the child for who they are. The care educator shares in the joy each child experiences when feeling emotionally connected, making a discovery, testing an idea, or taking on a new challenge. The chapters that follow illuminate how the care educator continually plans for and supports each child’s next step in their amazing journey of learning and development.