Benchmarks for Developmentally Appropriate Programming for Babies & Toddlers

The most beneficial, developmentally appropriate programs for children take into account the range of developmental needs of the children in creating the program space, format, content, and staffing structure. These benchmarks may be used as a check for existing programs or as a general framework for creating new ones.

Babies (ages 0-23 months)

Program Space:
- All activity takes place low to the ground
- Items of sensory interest (visual, textural, etc.) are within view and easy grasp
- The space is child-sized
- Structures can support child's weight
- Board books accessible
- Space for both solitary play & interaction
- Out-of-bounds areas are inaccessible

Program Format:
- Length of program is relatively short (30 minutes max, 10-20 minutes better)
- Opportunities for movement throughout the program
- Use of clear & consistent opening rituals, including waving "goodbye"
- Smaller program size for better engagement
- Caregivers present at all times & interacting with children throughout

Program Content:
- Include singing/music in all programs
- Include opportunities for one-on-one book sharing
- Include opportunities for play with developmentally appropriate toys
- Narrate/explain all program activities
- Model modifications for action rhymes & movement songs so children of different developmental stages may all participate

Program Staffing:
- Have a consistent program leader
- Leader actively encourages caregiver participation
- Leader responds positively to movement, vocalizations from children
- Leader will ideally have training specific to serving this age children

Toddlers (ages 24-35 months)

Program Space:
- Includes room for gross motor play
- All props and furniture are child-sized
- Fidget-style objects are accessible throughout the program
- Space is organized for discrete activities
- Picture books reflecting diversity are available
- Play materials can easily be moved and secured

Program Format:
- Opening ritual includes sharing names, with children stating their own names
- Encourage participation regardless of ability
- Ensure time for children to complete activities independently
- Children may make choices between limited options
- Children help clean up
- Smaller program size for better engagement

Program Content:
- Reading is frequent & in close adult contact
- Singing, fingerplays, action rhymes are taught & repeated
- Activities are described aloud with appropriate vocabulary
- Process art/crafts vs. product-based projects
- Opportunities for pretend play
- Follow-the-leader activities

Program Staffing:
- 1-2 program leaders for all toddler programs
- Leader confirms children's vocalizations &/or asks for clarification
- Model & narrate appropriate behaviors
- Engage children in play
- Engage caregivers in order to get to know their children better
- Leader will ideally have training specific to serving this age children