At the heart of every good environment for infants and toddlers is the caregiver – YOU! You can have the perfect room design and the best materials, but it is how you and the children interact with each other and the materials that makes the difference between a good environment and a great one. Let’s take a look at how children interact with materials and how you can support their natural learning process.

Infants and toddlers learn through experience, repetition, imitation and manipulation. They use materials in unconventional ways – because their life is all about experimentation and change! Therefore, materials need to be open-ended and versatile in use, rather than having a single purpose. As you have probably observed, children will create their own amazing ways to use materials!

Samuel enjoys interaction with his caregiver. See Harmony Star Floor Quilt on page 130-C of the Pre3child® catalog. 24” Cushy Cushions Set is on page 137-G.
Making Connections

Toddlers busily make connections – with people and places, objects and actions – in their ever-changing world. This is a magical time of exploration and discovery. Because there is no “right” way to use open-ended materials, children are free to naturally “mix them up” and in the process use important observation, prediction, creative thinking, problem-solving and deductive reasoning skills. These process skills are ones used in the scientific method, a topic most schools don’t teach until middle school!

Setting the Stage for Materials Play

Where do you put your manipulative center? Wherever the children are! As you know, one and two-year-olds are often on the move. So children may naturally carry the manipulatives to different parts of the room. This a valued part of their creative explorations, and therefore should not be discouraged. As long as children are safely using the materials, watch with amazement. Their own way will often be the better way.

However, it is best to have a “homebase” area for different categories of materials. Younger toddlers may prefer to conduct their manipulative explorations on a rug or an activity mat area. Older toddlers (from 18 months) may enjoy the floor but may also gravitate to standing at a low table or sitting in a chair at the table. A well-marked shelf or container in the “homebase” area tells children where to find the materials and where to put them away. If space is a problem, some teachers will use manipulative activity boxes they can bring out at play times.

Your Role

Whether children are engaged in self-directed free play or adult-child interactivities, your role is key in assuring that children have a pleasurable and safe discovery experience.

Free Play

“Me do it!” is a common call of toddlers. They are expressing their increasing desire for independence as well as an interest in doing more self-directed exploration. At this stage of development, it is very important for children to make choices about not only what they are playing with, but also how they are playing with it. Essential thinking skills are used as children construct their own learning through open-ended experimentation.

Toddlers move from one thing to another very quickly, so be sure to have a full variety of materials available for child choice. A one-year-old may pick something up, do something with it, then put it down – only to return again to repeat the process. This self-imposed repetition is a core practice toddlers use to learn about the nature of things in their world.

Adult-Child Interactions

Some of children’s most important understandings are learned on somebody’s lap! While we all know that children learn through their free exploratory play, we also know that the process of interacting with an adult is essential to brain development.
The closeness of sharing a manipulative or a puzzle is fundamental to stimulating and developing the pathways of the brain that produce cognitive and social-linguistic knowledge. By demonstrating enthusiasm for a child’s exploration and thinking, and by asking just the right question or following a child’s lead, adults empower a child’s natural learning. Through your use of language to illustrate the collective activity, children gain receptive (and some expressive!) vocabulary words that describe actions and things.

**Open-Ended Questions**
What do you say when you introduce a new toy to a child? Ask a divergent (open-ended) question. These are questions that do not have a right or wrong answer and which invite children to explore in their own way and with their own timing. An open-ended question sets the stage for both you and the child to make discoveries. The child will discover what the toy does and what she can do with it, and you find out by observation and further questioning about the child’s developmental level.

**Questions to Ask**
- What can you do with this toy?
- What can you do to make this toy work?
- Can you try it another way?
- Can you do it faster?
- Can you make it move (go)?
- Can you put something inside?
- Can you take it out?
- Can you put one on top?
- Can you pull this with a string?
- Where did it go?
- Can you find it?
- Can you hold one? Two? Three?

Open-ended questions should be used with respect for children – to engage them as partners in exploration and discussion. The purpose of the questions is to promote critical thinking – not to quiz children.

Be patient and wait for considered answers from the children. Don’t answer for them, but give them time to consider various possibilities before they respond. Encourage children to question. Try not to dominate discussions. Listen and respond to children’s questions.
Activities for Good Language Interactions

You can create language learning games – no matter what materials you are using with infants and toddlers – by using some of these basic techniques.

Be specific and descriptive.
Give names to things, actions, and feelings. Instead of simply naming a block as a child reaches for it, use the word “block” in phrases that involve the child. “You want the block, don’t you? The square block. Can you reach the block?”

Be repetitive.
Repeat a new word in a number of ways using inflection to emphasize the word. “I see you are putting the ball into the tube. Into the tube it goes. The ball went into the tube. See, you put it in.”

Be supportive and comforting.
Use the child’s name frequently during interactions. Help children identify feelings and feel safe to express them. “Tessa, you look angry at Tom for taking your toy. Can you tell Tom you are angry with him, Tessa?”

Be encouraging.
Praise children’s actions and accomplishments with specifics. Idle praise doesn’t work. Use language to reinforce what children are doing well. “I like how you put the rings on the balance. See, they match. Good work!”

Use choice questions.
When directing or redirecting behavior, you can empower a child instead of creating a power play between the child and you. In place of “Do you want to put the toy away now?” you can say: “Which shelf (or box) do you want to put your toy on (in)? This one or this one?” Remember to always make the two choices ones that are acceptable to you!

Use time and space words.
Familiarity with temporal and spatial concepts is difficult for children to learn, so use these concept words frequently. As you model their use in appropriate situations, children will associate the words with the event, time, or place. “Soon (or later) it will be time to change your diaper.” “Now it is time to change your diaper.” “Jerome, you are up at the top of the slide. Whee...! Now, Jerome, you are down at the bottom of the slide.”

Use parallel talk.
Describe what children are doing. “Look, you are putting the stringer through the red bead. Now what color bead will you use?”

Use pretend talk.
Invite children to explore imaginative play with objects. “Can you pretend this is a car? Can you make it go Vroom, Vroom?”

Use humor and make mistakes.
Nothing is more empowering to children than the ability to correct you! Use the wrong word for something you know the child can name. Try to put a shape block in the wrong hole. Use a wooden ring as a hat. Be silly. Toddlers love to laugh.

Use facial expressions. Toddlers read and understand your face and body movements better than some of the words you say. Be sure your facial expressions and posture match what you are saying. Toddlers are watching!