

**Definition:** Natural learning environments are more than places where children live, learn, and play. Natural learning environment practices start with looking at the activities children participate in during their everyday life at home and in the community. These everyday activities provide learning opportunities which, in turn, can lead to increased participation and skill development for the child. Research shows that children learn best when they are participating in these naturally occurring learning opportunities that are a part of everyday routines and activities within the real life of the child and family. Natural Learning environment practices also focus on child interests in order to increase participation, as well as parent responsiveness to the child through use of strategies that support child learning and development.

## Child Interests:

- Learning should be fun, exciting, enjoyable, and motivating for the child
- Activities should promote the child's interest and participation in everyday family life
- Use child interest-based tools with the family to further explore a child's interest
- Increased participation is the goal!

## Activity Settings and Family Routines:

- Activity should occur naturally during the family's and child's daily life
- Family is supported during everyday activities to use strategies with their child that encompass a VARIETY of learning opportunities. Use of strategies during a child's participation in these learning opportunities, in turn, leads to skill development and behavior change. Focus on the activity rather than on one skill or area of development, allows greater growth and development.
- Promotes learning in all areas of development, including addressing family's priorities for their child
- It is essential to pre-plan an activity that the parent or caregiver chooses for the next visit (Refer to Joint Plan Fact Sheet)

## Caregiver (Parent) Responsiveness:

- Critical component of maximizing the child's engagement in order for learning to happen
- Child should be actively engaged with family/caregiver during the activity
- Parent takes the lead in the activity, both during the visit and between visits
- Interventionist's role is to foster the parent's confidence and competence to be able to support their own child's development during their everyday activities

## A Few "light bulb" ideas about Natural Learning Opportunities:

- Start with an activity that the parent chooses. Support parent in DOING the activity during the visit. Go DEEP into a variety of learning opportunities present within the activity. Look at a variety of areas for learning, rather than one domain or one skill/strategy. Develop strategies with parent for the many areas of development that can be targeted during that one activity.
- This is NOT the same as embedding a specific skill throughout the day into daily activities and routines
- We want to start with the activity. Not with the skill.
- When developing the Joint Plan for what the family will do between visits: it should include the entire activity with strategies developed for a variety of learning opportunities that are present in the activity.

For more information: Rush D. D., Shelden, M. L. (2013) *The Early Intervention Teaming Handbook: The Primary Service Provider Approach*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Co. or Connecticut Birth to Three Website <http://www.birth23.org/aboutb23/looklike/>

## NATURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT PRACTICES

Some Ideas for Activity Settings in the Home & Community - Infants

Activity	Some Learning Opportunities	Some Skill Development/Behavior Changes
Diaper Change	Being carried to changing table, laying for diaper change, interactions with caregiver	Tone adjustment or strengthening when carried, head control; midline, strength reaching to toes, looking at faces, holding a toy; smiling, babbling, repeating sounds
Bottle/ Breastfeeding	Being held; taking bottle/breast; interacting with mom	Positioning, tone/strength/midline control, 2 hands on bottle; open mouth, oral motor control, sensory handling of liquid; smiling, eye contact, tracking, imitation, making sounds, anticipation of bottle
Waking up in the morning	Interactions between child & parent or with siblings, playing with toys in crib, getting out of crib	Greeting, ways to pick up, child communicates by reaching up, looking at parent, motor skills to stand up in crib, listen to parent talk, use of words to get out, imitating sibling...
Sibling sings Itsy Bitsy Spider	Fun interactions, singing, sitting for song	Laughing, waiting, reaching for sibling, clapping, trying to imitate some movements, language development, motor control sitting..
Fun with musical toy with Daddy	Interactions with daddy, playing with toy, position while playing	Looking at toy, listening, smiling & laughing with daddy, "dancing together", holding head up when being moved around, on belly to play with toy, attention, cause & effect to activate toy, hearing words about toy...
Visiting grandma and grandpa	Going in car, car seat, going into house, playing with grandparents	Ways to carry and position in car seat, hearing doorbell, greeting grandparents, crawling over to them, waving, position for playing on floor, how using toys, learning with toys...
Looking at flowers in garden	Getting outside, looking & touching flowers, interacting with parent	Crawling downstairs or in backyard, carrying infant for midline control, strength, two hand reach, imitating, words, smiles
Some other activities: tickle time/snuggle time with family, Peek-A-Boo game with sibling, looking in mirrors together, bath time, going for walk with parent/sibling, swinging in outdoor swing, going grocery shopping, riding in wagon, picking up siblings at school...		

Some Ideas for Activity Settings in Home and Community – Toddlers:

Activity	Some Learning Opportunities	Some Skill Development/Behavior Changes
Mealtime	Setting table, helping with food, getting into chair, eating, interactions	Motor-positioning, making choices, , utensil use, smiling, making choices, talking about food, walking to set table, oral-motor...
Bath time	Walking to bathroom, undressing, getting in, bathing	Use of language, drying, turn taking, motor skills for walking, balancing, adaptive, sensory, cause-effect with toys....
Brushing teeth	Getting stool & stepping up, brushing teeth, having fun with sibling	Labeling, following directions, imitating sibling brushing, sensory, hand use, motor-balance, stepping, carrying...
Reading a book	Choosing book, interactions with caregiver, going to "reading" spot	Talk about book, tactile input with feely books, turning pages, turn taking, climb into caregiver lap , attention, word use...
Being sprayed with a water sprinkler	Going outside, getting changed, running around in sprinkler, interactions with friends	Labeling, using descriptors (cold, wet, more), take turns, done, dry off, actions (run, jump, on, off, up, down), following directions, tactile, adaptive, safety on stairs...
Watching T.V.	snuggle on couch, singing TV songs together, fun interactions, having snack	Colors, using hands on remote, choosing snack, eating, position, climbing on couch, talking about show, imitating movements...
Looking at photos with grandpa	Ways to hold or position, going to get box of photos, interactions	Talking about picture, holding pictures, eye contact, increasing attention, words about pictures, identifying people in picture, walking, motor control in positions, pointing...
Swinging in outdoor swing	Putting coat & sneakers on, going out, getting in swing, swinging, interacting, transition indoors	Behavioral – transitions, hand use for coat, zipper, running, sitting/trunk and head control, words use for initiating, continuing, stopping, sensory swing, stairs, looking at parent...
Going grocery shopping	Getting ready, going in car or bus, getting out/parking lot, in cart, shopping, check-out, car trip, bringing food in house	Coat, shoes on, making transitions, climbing, buckling, attention, naming things, pointing, music, safety skills, sitting in cart, talking, making choices, grasping, labeling, holding object, trunk rotation, sensory, social skills, walking, wait, following directions
Some other activities: Baking blueberry muffins, getting mail with parent, taking dog for a walk, going to playgroup, going to doctors, going to church, going to brother's soccer game, tending to garden, going fishing, going to sister's dance class...		