

OFF TO A GOOD START

RESPONSIVE CAREGIVING AND OFFERING CHOICES DURING PLAY CAN BOOST INFANT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT.



Ms Mungmai uses storytelling to boost a baby's focus and language development

BABY STEPS

Ms Mungmai makes a list of the developmental areas for each child under her care, based on her observations and discussions with fellow educators. She also researches ways to support infants — something she was trained to do while undergoing the three-year Professional Development Programme (Educators).

The emphasis on empowering infants also comes through in the choices she gives to infants during playtime. "When infants are allowed to choose, it acknowledges their worth, empowers them and builds their confidence," explains Ms Mungmai. "For example, if a child does not like messy play, I offer an alternative and let the child explore that first before introducing messy activities."

Patience and a calibrated approach — undergirded by respectful, responsive and reciprocal relationships — are key. With one child who was afraid of grass, Ms Mungmai took small steps over a few weeks to help him overcome his fear. First, to fuel his curiosity, she made a simple peek-a-boo toy using a flip-top lid and fake grass. Next, she encouraged him to feel the texture of a patch of fake grass set up inside the preschool. Finally, she brought him outdoors to touch the grass. It was a rewarding feeling when he eventually stepped on the grass.



Leading toddlers in hands-on activities like pretend play

Based at Little Footprints Preschool @ Sengkang 205, Senior Infant Educator Ms Natsuda Mungmai does more than just diapering and feeding her little charges.

"Everyday routines are full of learning opportunities," says the 2023 Outstanding Infant Educator Award winner. "When an infant babbles and coos, I pay attention and encourage 'conversations' by saying things like, 'Oh, are you feeling hungry? Perhaps you would like to have your milk soon!'. Such responses make children feel important and loved. They also learn new words and expressions through these daily interactions."

Besides integrating learning experiences into caregiving routines, Ms Mungmai carries out play activities with an eye to supporting and facilitating infants' developmental milestones. Examples include messy or sensory play (e.g., playing with sand or rainbow spaghetti), physical exercise (through games like 'Catch My Shadow' or blowing bubbles), and storytelling that incorporates songs and puppets. "These activities allow infants to explore, strengthen their physical and cognitive abilities, and develop their confidence," she says.

“As first-time parents, we didn't know when or how to wean Enzo onto solids. Teacher Nat suggested meals we could prepare. As Enzo makes the next step to playgroup, she has also shared with us what to expect.”

MR NEO JIA JUN, father of Enzo Neo, 16 months

PARENTS ARE LEARNING TOO

Being sensitive to parents' concerns and expectations is part and parcel of Ms Mungmai's job. She works closely with parents to address issues, be it showing them articles on how babies learn or recommending fun activities to do as a family.

Mr Neo Jia Jun, whose son Enzo is in infant care, believes Ms Mungmai has made a difference. "We've seen significant improvement in Enzo's social behaviour and willingness to try different things. He learns things quickly because of the exposure to different learning opportunities that Teacher Nat provides." ●



Sensory play with paints and sponges strengthens infants' physical and cognitive skills

Listen to Ms Natsuda Mungmai's chat with a parent!
go.gov.sg/2023-ecda-awards-outstanding-infant-educator-natsuda-mungmai

