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# Strategies for Achieving a Quality Program

by Diane Trister Dodge

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High quality in early childhood programs is a necessity. It is also a luxury. It is a necessity because we know, now, that only quality early childhood programs can make a difference in the lives of young children, particularly children at risk. But it is a luxury because it will require a substantial investment to overcome the barriers to establishing the kind of programs we want for young children.

The barriers to achieving a quality program are well known to every center director. Heading the list is high staff turnover due to the low pay and low status accorded to child care workers. Because teachers leave the profession, there is an ongoing need for staff training. Inadequate funding for staff development and a lack of practical materials work against program quality.

On the surface, the prospects for adequate funding to overcome these barriers look hopeful. The need for quality child care is receiving a lot of attention. Even *Newsweek* recently ran a cover story on "How Kids Learn." But as Jim Greenman points out in his article, "Living in the Real World" (*Exchange*, February 1989), a distinction still is made between

child care and early education. Although politicians understand the need for quality early education, they continue to view child care as little more than a babysitting operation and therefore not worthy of equal funding.

There is only one effective means to achieve and maintain quality child care programs. Legislators and the media must be made aware of the importance of the educational component of child care programs. They must understand **why** these programs need adequate funding, on a par with other early childhood and intervention programs.

## Why We Can't Wait

The children we serve in child care programs can't wait for adequate funding; they need quality programs today. And as early childhood educators, we know too much to ignore this need. The research conducted over the past 15 years reveals that participation in a quality early childhood program can make the difference between success and failure, both in school and in life for many children, especially children from low income homes. Good early

childhood programs enhance a child's ability to learn and to get along with others. Studies following children into elementary school and even into adulthood demonstrate that those who attended quality preschool programs had less need for remedial education and were less likely to drop out of school or become delinquent or unemployed.

If it takes quality programs to make a positive impact on children's lives, then we have a professional obligation to provide children and families with such programs. As we advocate and work for the funds needed to train, support, and retain qualified staff, we must address the factors that are key to quality.

### Where to Start

The good news in early childhood today is that there is a consensus of opinion on what factors are key to a quality program. The Head Start Program Performance Standards were the first set of standards that identified good early childhood practices. The NAEYC Center Accreditation Program sets forth criteria as well as a process of self-evaluation and outside validation to ensure quality. **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth Through Age 8** (Bredenkamp, Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1987) clearly defines appropriate and inappropriate practices, giving programs specific examples to measure themselves against.

A recent publication from NAEYC, **Quality in Child Care: What Does Research Tell Us?** (Phillips, Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1987), summarizes the results of five research studies which identify the key indicators of quality care. Among the factors that are present in quality programs are the following:

- Teachers have specialized training in child development.

- The physical environment is safe, orderly, and contains varied and stimulating toys and materials organized into appropriate activity areas.

- Children are given the freedom to select activities that interest them and to learn from their active interactions with people and materials.

- Teachers talk with children, are responsive and accepting, and regularly read to them.

These are the factors that promote excellence in quality programs. And since these factors conform to standards in the profession, this is a good place for center directors to begin their training. The remainder of this article will provide strategies you can use to train your staff in effective use of the physical environment, allowing children to freely select and engage in meaningful activities. Future articles will address other aspects of quality programs where center directors can make a difference.

### The Value of Starting with the Environment\*

Making the environment safe and orderly, filled with varied materials organized into appropriate activity areas, is a good place to start because it makes life more satisfying for teachers and for children. Ask teachers what frustrates them most and many will identify behavior problems. Typically they will complain that children are:

- constantly running in the classroom;

- wandering around looking for things to do;

- repeating the same activity over and over again;

- uninvolved and unable to stick with a task;

- fighting over materials;

- shouting from one area to the next, creating a high noise level;

- crawling under tables or on shelves;

- consistently depending on adults for the things they need.

Addressing these problems and helping teachers reorganize the room will result in immediate, positive differences in the quality of the program and the level of teacher satisfaction. Talk with teachers about the following strategies. Discuss why they are important before working together to reorganize the physical environment.

### Giving Children Choices and Freedom to Learn

Teachers sometimes feel they need to direct children and cannot allow them to make choices because they do not trust children to make wise choices and to learn on their own. Sometimes they're right. In order for children to select their own activities and learn from their active interactions, they must be given real and interesting choices. So after creating a safe and orderly environment, organized into activity areas, the next step toward a quality program is to make each of these areas a place where real learning can occur.

Even on a limited budget, it's wise to invest in good quality materials and equipment that will engage children's interests and inspire their creativity and explorations. Whenever possible, use homemade and donated materials to extend the

richness of the environment. Here is one economical approach to equip a classroom that will offer real learning opportunities for young children.

**Furniture:** Invest in child-sized chairs, and make shelves and tables if you can't afford to buy them. Obtain used rugs (in good condition) and pillows to create softness.

**Block corner:** Invest in a full set of hardwood, unit blocks which will last indefinitely; they offer a multitude of learning opportunities. Props such as small cars, people, and animal figures might be purchased at yard sales. Add rug scraps, wooden spools, telephone wires, pulleys and string, shells and pebbles, telephone wires, pieces of rubber hose, popsicle sticks, and other collectible objects to decorate buildings.

**House corner:** Invest in some furniture such as a child-sized sink/stove; small table; and an unbreakable, full length mirror; and in sturdy dolls. Dress-up clothes, pots and pans, cooking utensils, dishes, suitcases and purses, and other props can be collected or bought inexpensively at second-hand stores.

**Table toys:** Invest in some sturdy toys such as wooden puzzles, peg boards and pegs, colored cubes, wooden pattern blocks, wooden beads, and interlocking toys. Add to these with homemade matching games, sewing cards, and collected items to sort (such as buttons, bottle caps, seeds, and keys).

**Art area:** Invest in quality raw materials such as sturdy crayons, water-based markers, scissors (left-handed as well as right-handed), paste, long-handled brushes, powdered tempera paint, and manila and construction paper (as well as inexpensive newsprint). These basic materials can be supplemented with

donated computer paper, collage materials, homemade play dough and utensils, and sewing remnants.

**Sand and water:** Very little investment is needed to provide children with valuable learning opportunities through sand and water play. A baby bathtub indoors or wading pool outdoors will do very well to contain both sand and water. Plastic dishpans make wonderful individual sand boxes complete with miniature props such as plastic coffee scoops, small funnels, sea shells, scoops and cups. Many of the props needed for sand and water play are household items that can be donated.

**Library:** An attractive and inviting book area needs only soft pillows, a rug, a place to display books, and a selection of appropriate children's books. The local library is an excellent source for the best in children's literature. To make this a writing area as well, equip it with tools such as stamps and ink pads, pencils and magic markers, an old typewriter, paper, and tools such as a hole punch and scissors.

**Outdoors:** If you are not near a well-equipped playground, there are still many ways to offer children activity choices outdoors. In nice weather, many indoor activities can be brought outdoors such as painting, dress-up clothes, and water play. Other materials you can collect and bring outdoors include ropes, balls, plastic hoops, containers to collect things, old blankets, large cardboard boxes, tools for digging and water play, large paint brushes, and buckets of water.

After collecting materials that will enrich each interest area, teachers must know how to select and display these materials in ways that maximize their learning potential. Listed on page 47 are strategies you can use

in training your staff and taking another step towards quality.

Following these guidelines in establishing a safe, orderly environment filled with varied and stimulating choices for children will go a long way to make teaching more fun and to achieve the profession's standards for quality. How teachers can facilitate learning in each interest area by talking with children, responding to their good ideas, and asking questions to extend their thinking will be the subject of the second article in this series.

\*Based on the author's publication, **A Guide for Supervisors and Trainers on Implementing the Creative Curriculum** (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc., 1988), pp. 38-46.

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