

School-age care

Joining the Quality Circle: Developmentally Appropriate Practice in School-Age Care

by Kay Albrecht, Ph.D.

In the past, school-age care has been the neglected member of the child care family, getting less attention than programs for younger children. Increasing numbers of school-age children need care while their parents work. As a result, the number and range of school-age care programs is expanding; and schools, child care centers, social service agencies, and churches and synagogues are increasingly interested in providing these services to families. In addition, they are seeking definitions of quality and developmental appropriateness for programs serving school-agers.

High quality school-age care programs, like good programs for younger children, are tailored to the developmental characteristics and needs of the children they serve. Developmentally appropriate programs understand that children change dramatically during the school-age years and that the rate and nature of change vary both among children and youth and across developmental areas within the same child or youth. A school-ager may be of average height for her age, for example, while showing more advanced cognitive skills and less social and emotional maturity than her peers. This variability is seen by quality school-age care programs as an opportunity rather than as a problem.

This basic premise makes it possible to identify key ingredients of high quality school-age care. Seven key

ingredients, or principles, go a long way toward defining quality care for school-age children and youth.

Resourceful, Caring Staff

Quality school-age care programs provide resourceful, caring staff who understand the changing role adults play in school-agers' lives. During the school-age years, children and youth begin to look outside the home for guidance and support. Influential adults become sources of new information, new skills, new points of view, and different approaches to life's challenges and dilemmas.

High quality school-age care programs hire as staff people with knowledge, skills, and abilities that are interesting and engaging to children. School-agers see such

adults as resourceful and worth getting to know.

Staff structure their interactions with children differently in quality school-age care programs than in traditional academic settings. They see their primary role as one of facilitation rather than direction. Instead of instructing school-agers in what to do and when to do it, facilitative adults set the context and then help children and youth develop their own skills and abilities. Staff prepare the environment and provide suggestions for possible activities for younger children, help older children with designing and implementing projects, and assist early adolescents in taking increasing control over their own planning and implementation of activities and experiences while participating as equals rather than as superiors.

Recognition of the Importance of Peers

During the school years, children and youth begin to transfer some of their attachment from home and the family to an ever-widening circle of friends close to their own age. At first, these friendships are situational and fluid. Soon, affiliations are

more lasting. They contribute to self-definition and also incline children and youth toward same-sex groups. Then, early adolescents begin to form close individual relationships that endure over time and develop cross-sex interests. These developmental changes require staff of high quality school-age care programs to find ways to enhance peer relations and help children and youth develop social competence.

Staff do this by letting children and youth select their own activity groups. Further, they plan activities which encourage emerging social skills. Opportunities to initiate interactions with friends, practice in maintaining relationships in peer groups, experiences in affecting group outcomes, and chances to take on a variety of leadership and participation roles are all important for facilitating social competence.

Opportunities for Mixed-Age and Same-Age Grouping

Most children spend a majority of their day in same-age groups. School-agers also benefit from interacting in mixed-age groups — particularly where different developmental stages are represented. Quality school-age care programs encourage children to spend some time with same-stage peers who have similar interests and skills and some time in mixed-stage groups where older children gain meaningful leadership experiences and practice social skills while younger children get new ideas from older “experts.”

Quality school-age care programs plan for both same- and mixed-stage groupings for activities and experiences. These programs create opportunities for children to interact in mixed-stage groups where older children help younger ones learn

skills and younger children realize their innate interest in being with older ones. Staff are alert to opportunities when mixed-stage groups might work, like having older children and youth teach game strategy to younger children or for discussions of topics that are interest- rather than age-related. Staff also recognize that older children and youth sometimes need to practice emerging social skills with younger, less threatening playmates and to exercise leadership skills which are just emerging. These experiences in mixed-stage groups result in a better understanding by children and youth of the give and take in the real, mixed-age world.

Self-Selected Activities and Experiences

High-quality school-age care programs understand the profound change that takes place in the way children seek, acquire, process, and evaluate information. As children move from physically manipulating and observing objects to being able to do so symbolically, their curiosity explodes, as does their excitement about using these skills. Developmentally appropriate programs give school-agers the opportunities to apply skills acquired in school to pursuits of their own choosing. Staff see school-agers’ needs to direct their own activities as a way for children and youth to apply skills in personally satisfying ways.

In promoting self-selection, quality programs provide a balance to the highly structured school day by giving children many experiences at the other end of the control-and-structure continuum. Schedules adapt to school-agers’ responses to activities. Interesting activities are expanded and uninteresting ones are redesigned or shortened. Staff in high quality programs respect

school-agers’ decisions to participate or not, even when a child or youth chooses to do nothing.

Guidance of Social-Emotional Development

School-agers have two tasks in this area — gaining and internalizing self-control and developing their consciences by internalizing society’s rules and norms. In quality programs, staff use positive approaches to help children learn about conflict, social problem solving, and the reasons for rules and limits. They structure and redirect school-agers’ activities to prevent conflict from arising and involve children and youth in setting limits and developing expectations for behavior.

Staff teach discrete skills to help children and youth learn to work cooperatively, and they manage the environment to avoid social conflicts that exceed school-agers’ social skills. Staff help children and youth experiment with different approaches to solving problems and provide a context where social problem-solving skills can mature with practice. Staff in developmentally appropriate school-age care programs help school-agers learn not only that problems can be solved but also that there is usually more than one way to solve most problems.

Environments Encourage a Wide Variety of Activities

What distinguishes quality school-age care environments from traditional elementary school environments is the arrangement and individualization of the space. The arrangement and the furnishings of good environments contribute to programming that provides for the varied ages, stages, interests, and needs of participating children and youth.

Children and youth in developmentally appropriate programs have many opportunities to personalize the environment with products of their work and play. The environment includes soft elements like pillows, carpets, or bean bag chairs. Furniture provides visual isolation of some areas, creating private spaces where school-agers can work or play alone and get away from the larger group.

The environment provides a sufficient variety and quantity of materials which are readily accessible to children and youth. Duplicates of popular materials and equipment are available and parallel activity areas which require different skill levels (like two woodworking areas, one for beginners and one for more advanced woodworkers) are available when needed. Some activity areas are equipped selectively to represent the range and diversity of children's interests and abilities (like two library centers with age- and interest-specific books).

The Whole Child is Addressed

During the school-age years, children and youth struggle to develop and maintain a sense of competence. They feel competent when they have opportunities to practice emerging skills to the point of mastery in all areas of development — physical, cognitive, and social. Such experiences help make children and youth feel good about themselves.

Quality school-age care programs offer a wide range of activities and experiences that allow school-agers to feel industrious and that capture the interest of all program participants. Staff plan activities and experiences that foster positive self-concept and a sense of independence; encourage children to think, reason, question, and experiment;

enhance physical development and promote a healthy view of competition; encourage sound health, safety, and nutritional practices and the wise use of leisure time; and develop an awareness of and involvement in the community at large. When programs focus on this wide range of activities and experiences, children's and youth's school-age child care experiences are enriching and rewarding.

These seven principles of high quality, developmentally appropriate school-age care programs are discussed in a document entitled **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in School-Age Child Care Programs** published by Project Home Safe, a program of the American Home Economics Association funded by Whirlpool Foundation.

Single copies of **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in School-Age Child Care Programs** and a companion document, **Quality Criteria for School-Age Child Care Programs**, are available at no charge from Project Home Safe.

Send your complete mailing address to Project Home Safe, 1555 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314 for your free copy. Please indicate that you saw this offer in **Child Care Information Exchange**.

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