



Beg wings

Helping Teachers Understand Their Role in Supporting Peer Relationships

by Margie Carter

On the surface, providing before- and afterschool child care may seem simple to the untrained eye. But in fact, it is probably one of the more complex jobs in our field. Child care teachers of any age group will tell you that transition routines and group activities are perhaps the hardest aspect of their job. They take an emotional toll on children and adults alike, often bringing out the least pleasant side of everyone.

Multiple transitions are the context of programming for school age child care, but few grasp the significance of this when they enter this work. Rather, they see themselves as teachers or recreational leaders with their own agendas to pursue. They have programs for what they want the children to do and how children need to behave. Only a small number understand the goal of their work as helping children through the many stressful transitions of their day and fostering peer relationships. What kind of training will foster dispositions and skills in teachers to support stress reduction, mental health, and socially meaningful relationships among school age children?

Strategy: Childhood Memories

Childhood memory training strategies are especially effective for school age providers because the youngest memories we have are usually from these early school years. Tapping into these positive memories can be useful in understanding the social and emotional needs of the children they are working with.

Ask teachers to brainstorm a list of the activities they fondly remember from their childhoods. They can first develop their own lists, work in pairs, or call out

memories to the group. Whenever you have the group make a collective list, it's helpful to record responses in columns of categories with similar examples, waiting to actually label them until after the lists are fully developed. Memories typically fall into these categories:

Time with Special People

- Visiting my grandmother and making cookies.
- Helping my neighbor fix things with her tools.
- Sitting on my father's lap, reading a book together.
- Going camping with my whole family.
- Learning how to fish with my uncle.
- Taking care of my baby brother before he could walk or talk.
- Exploring the empty lot next door with my dog.

Outdoor/Sensory Activities

- Playing in the mud, sand, water.
- Looking for and catching bugs.
- Collecting shells, rocks, leaves.
- Lying on the ground and looking up through the trees.
- Creating sidewalk chalk drawings, games, graffiti.

Large Muscle Activities

- Swinging really high and feeling the wind on my face.
- Roller skating very fast.
- Running up and down hills.
- Playing in the waves at the beach.
- Climbing as high as I could on climbers, trees, buildings; looking out over the world.

○ **Independent Projects**

- Building a fort with scrap materials.
- Operating a lemonade stand in my front yard.
- Putting on a neighborhood carnival.

Sneaking, Being Mischievous

- Climbing over the fences in the neighborhood.
- Trying on my mom’s special dresses when she was out.
- Sneaking into the movie theater without paying.
- Putting a toy spider in my sister’s milk glass.
- Calling strangers on the phone with knock-knock jokes.

These lists become an introductory overview of children’s non-school interests and social-emotional needs. The discussion can spark new reflection on programming for school age child care.

Strategy: Redefining Teacher Roles

○ Will seeing oneself as a tutor or activity director be adequate for fostering peer relationships and healthy social-emotional development in children? If we want school age providers to focus their priorities and planning to meet these goals, they may need help in redefining their roles. Rather than task master, time keeper, shepherd, or disciplinarian, what roles can teachers play to promote friendships, safety with vulnerable feelings, trust, and respect among peers?

Pass out cards with fictitious names made by scrambling the letters in words describing the above roles. For instance, names on cards might be Mark Tasste (task master), Kim Peetere (time keeper), and Riana di Sciplin (disciplinarian). Ask teachers to work in small groups to decode the names, uncovering a typical role a teacher plays in school age programs.

This activity is initially puzzling to some, but as the first discoveries are called out, it becomes lively and involving for most. Teachers are able to laugh as they face descriptions of common behaviors they have with children. This sets the stage for consideration of new roles that support children’s real needs at this age.

○ To discover new ideas, skills, and behaviors needed for their work with children, ask teachers to playfully consider new roles for themselves, some perhaps less obvious than others: counselor, coach, weather

forecaster, interpreter, Dear Abby columnist, reconnaissance pilot. Provide reference materials such as a dictionary, encyclopedia, occupations resource guide, or job announcements from newspapers or employers. Ask teachers to research the above jobs, developing a list of the knowledge, skills, and tasks the role entails. Follow with a discussion of how aspects of this role might enhance their work with the children in their care.

Training school age caregivers to redefine their roles can include practice with specific activities and interactions. An open-ended discussion can wrestle with questions such as, “How might the room or activity schedule be set up so that teachers can be effective weather forecasters — understanding the cloud formations, noticing high pressure zones or storms that are brewing?” School age peer scenarios can be presented, asking teachers to describe specific behaviors and responses they might make as an interpreter, coach, or Dear Abby columnist.

Helping teachers support children’s peer relationships involves examining program goals, environment, activities, and routines. It implies self-reflection as well. Though their jobs are part time and often viewed as incidental, before- and afterschool providers are in a pivotal position to ease the constant herding, transitions, and pressures that school age children are subjected to each day. Rather than duplicate what elementary school teachers provide, child care providers can offer their supportive friendship and create an environment in which children can develop meaningful relationships and healthy peer group identity.

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