
What really determines program quality?

Quality Begins with Us

by Pauline Davey Zeece

These are exciting times for us and for the profession of early childhood education and care. Not too many years ago, it would be difficult to find people who did not use the term babysitter to describe the care and teaching of young children in a group setting. Not too long ago, we could not even agree among ourselves what quality looked like or meant in the work we do.

But now, quality is part of our contemporary professional jargon. It is discussed at meetings and schools and other agencies which serve children and families. It has been defined, dissected, and deliberated upon in a variety of ways.

When we talk of quality today, we speak of ratios, group sizes, and configurations and room arrangements. We ponder qualifications of personnel and characteristics of curriculum. We correlate quality with professional and collaborative and wonderfully personalized programs for children with a wide variety of needs.

But for all of this activity, one thing remains constant. The single, most important determinant of quality in any and every child care setting is the adult with whom children interact on a day-to-day basis. More simply stated, that means WE are the basis for quality. Quality begins with each of us and all of us.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- We are the keepers of the codes and the actions which hold children protected and safe.

As such, we look to understand rules and regulations and to support and implement them when they make sense and to advocate for change when they do not. Many of us have immediate opportunities as regulations and legislation relating to children and child care

issues arise in our towns and states.

We are also keepers of the ethical codes which form the core of our professional organizations and help us to deal with the temptations inherent in the complex work of early childhood care and education (Feeney and Kipnis, 1992). Through these codes we have delineated practices which are right, rather than merely expedient, and actions which are good, rather than simply practical (Craig, 1991; Kitchener, 1986). This is often no easy task, as we struggle in the real world to balance resources and needs of all kinds.

And despite the setting or the exact nature of the early childhood work we do, we share a common covenant that, above all, WE WILL DO NO HARM TO CHILDREN (Feeney and Kipnis, 1992). This is the strongest and most important bond we share — for ourselves, for families, and for all the children we serve.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- We are the constructors of the creative curricula which fosters children's learning and becoming.

As constructors, we work to offer learning experiences which meet individual and group needs. Under the rubric of developmentally appropriate practice, we utilize knowledge of typical development within various age spans to build a basis for planning appropriate activities for young children (Bredekamp, 1992).

And while the jargon is new, the basic premise is not. In fact, good teachers and caregivers and administrators have known and acted upon for years that twos and fives have both similar and different needs in a group setting. Ask anyone who has ever tried to fingerprint with these ages together to verify this. Listen to their speech to children.

Likewise, we have also known for years that children bring the treasure of their uniqueness and the richness of their family culture to every program — a wealth and opportunity to be tapped and shared.

Using information about individual children's growth patterns, strengths, interests, personalities, and family background, we construct a quality, personalized curricular environment which says to a child, "You are valued because you are one of a kind — because you are you!" In this way, both the curriculum and the teacher or caregiver is responsive to individual differences.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- **We are the architects or designers of the built environment inside and out which encourages children to blossom.**

We respect the fact that the spaces children occupy while they are in our care have both direct and symbolic meaning for them. Weinstein and

David (1987) remind us that these spaces at their best foster personal identity, encourage the development of competence, provide a wealth of opportunities for growth, allow for both social interaction and privacy, and promote a sense of security and trust for young children.

As designers of quality physical spaces, we strive to create places which reflect the presence of children, optimize chances for self-control, and foster children's development in all areas of growth.

As designers of places and spaces in our programs, we give the message of collaboration and camaraderie to families, to colleagues, and to the community which says, "We are all in this together!"

Quality begins with us because . . .

- **We are the makers of meaningful interactions and communication with and among children, parents, and ourselves.**

Quality programs are replete with rich interactions between adults and children. At a recent workshop, professionals were invited to share how they had made magic with children — how they had created treasured moments and memories. Their stories and ideas were touching.

One teacher remembered helping to change a brand new, excited kindergarten who had wet his pants on the very first day of school. She reported washing his clothes and returning them to him so he could go home dry and proud. And although she wasn't his assigned teacher, from that day on he gave her a quick, gentle, and reassuring pat on the arm and a knowing smile every time he passed her.

Another caregiver reported being presented a small slip of paper from a child — for no special reason and for 1001 special reasons. On the paper were two small squiggly lines and a wavy circle. When asked to talk about the paper, the child explained: "Well, it says, for my Nancy — because I love you very much!"

I have had a child in the lab school tell me about a favorite teacher and say: "You know, the one with the golden hair. The one who smells so wonderful." Although I did share that with the teacher, I neglected to mention to her that when I asked the child WHAT his special teacher smelled like, his response was "Oh, she smells just like Chicken McNuggets."

In quality programs, interactions among children can be equally poignant. All who have worked with young children have seen compassion and caring and kindness from the youngest of children.

All who have shared time with children in a group setting have heard that special kind of collective laughter which only erupts when children grow in a nurturing place together. Such child-to-child contact also provides an abundant source of information and misinformation for little ones — even in a quality environment.

I recall the first time I ever heard children discussing the concept of zits in a group setting. Two little girls, ages three and four, were sitting at the lunch table with me. The older (and of course much wiser) child asked her friend with a great amount of seriousness, "Do you know what zits are?"

The younger peer thought awhile, obviously struggling with the concept. She retorted in almost a whisper, "I do not know what those zits are!" Her friend pressed her and chided en-thusiastically, "Oh yes you do know."

Zits, zits, zits. Those round, puffy things — that your dad squeezes for your mom.” With this information, the younger child’s face lit up and she broke into a smile and shouted, “I got it — you mean breasts!”

Quality also means caring and sharing and laughing and understanding about life with young children — doing all these things together under the veil of a collective sense that there are people who really do understand about the nature of early childhood education and care.

We have come to understand individually and together what it means to hold a child who is afraid or comfort a parent who is upset, to offer advice to a colleague who is overextended or a family who doesn’t know where to turn to survive just one more day. It is through such quality, meaningful interactions that we are able to validate the work we do.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- *We are the builders of bridges which link us to schools, to communities, and to all systems dedicated to the work of caring for and about young children.*

For many families, quality programs are the touchstones which keep families sane and children safe. In fact, one of the best kept secrets about child care and early education is that it is a business which nurtures families and communities, as well as children.

When parents and professionals link together, the voice for children becomes strong and powerful. Children’s struggles are less overwhelming and children’s dilemmas more solvable. In fact, there is

nothing like the sense of accomplishment that is felt when we work with others to solve a problem and meet a family need or solve a community child crisis.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- *We are the guardians of the traditions being formed each day in our programs, of the rules and rituals of accepted professional practice, and of the eccentricities which make each of our places unique and special and personal to children.*

When children live and learn with us throughout their young years, we make memories and form part of the traditions of their childhoods. In the years to come, they will hear a phrase, or smell a smell, or do a task and it will be comfortable and familiar and tied to the quality work we had done so many years earlier. And when they hold a baby gently, or wait a bit more patiently with their own children, or take a second to explain just one more time to a small child who does not understand, that too is in some way a part of the traditions they have learned — a part of us and what we do.

Recently I talked to a friend who has been doing family child care for over two decades. She talked with great pride and feeling about the recent visit from a “20 year alum” from her program who brought her fiancée to see where she had grown up. And as the couple walked through the house, the young woman talked about the toys and the times and the treasured moments she had spent there. She identified marks on the woodwork as “Remember when we . . .” and nicks on the big oak tree in the backyard. The family child care home was part of her tradition —

and her sense of self.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- *We are the keepers of the commitment to and the passion for the work we do. For no one can understand as completely as do we about the importance of building the future by nurturing the present.*

And as our profession has developed and grown, we have learned to couple our passion with our pride and to support and accept one another. We have learned to hope for and look to a future where everyone who teaches and cares for young children is valued and respected and compensated in a fair and equitable way. We have learned that caring for children — ALL CHILDREN — is a collective responsibility which we all share and that when we do not stand together in this work, we are apart or alone. And this kind of separateness hurts children.

Quality begins with us because . . .

- *We are the stewards of a special and undefeatable spirit.*

This is the energy which drives us when we are tired and hungry and maybe even a bit discouraged after a long day.

This is the force that delivers us to a saner place when the quiet finally comes and bids us to return to work again after we have rested and renewed ourselves.

This is the spirit that determines for us that there is actually not enough money anywhere to pay us what we are actually worth — for the impor-

tant work we do and for the contributions we make to the whole society.

• **But how, oh how, we would like to see society try anyway!**

Take a moment to reflect on who we are. Here we are — the caregivers, the teachers, the administrators, the people who form the profession of early childhood education and care. We come to our professional roles and responsibilities in many shapes and sizes, many ages and colors, many dispositions and backgrounds.

We have studied for a long time in formal settings or learned as we worked long hours on the job. We have worked for short times and long times with children and families, in homes and centers and schools — for ourselves and for others.

We have contributed to and have felt quality.

And when I am asked how quality feels, I recount the time several years ago when I was a head teacher in a large program where a little boy's father died suddenly of a massive heart attack. It was a good program — a program where one could feel quality all around. Everyone was concerned about the child and his family. And like so many four year olds, the child did not show adult signs of grief immediately after the death or during the funeral. In fact, he was waiting for his father to "get undead" and to return home.

After three weeks when his father did not return, he began to resist naptime at our center. So we decided to spend extra time with him and took turns sitting close to him in the naproom. We had agreed to wait for him to show us the way to help him best.

Shortly after this time, he began to sob during naptime one afternoon. He climbed on his teacher's lap with his huge, blue blanket and he buried his head in her shoulder, sobbing bitterly and quietly. "My daddy's dead, my daddy's dead," he whispered over and over again. And the teacher held him tightly and safely and rocked him gently and cried with him.

Suddenly he looked up and saw her tears and asked, "Why are YOU crying?" And she explained that she too was sad. Without missing a beat, the small child lifted his hand and stroked her on the cheek and asked compassionately, "Oh, did your daddy die too?"

That is how quality feels.

And each of us and all of us who have worked in this profession have experienced in some way or another those special, precious, reaffirming moments that renew our faith in the idea that quality does indeed begin and end with us.

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- This article was excerpted from a keynote speech delivered in October 1993 to the Western Nebraska Early Childhood Conference.
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