



A Manner of Speaking

When I first began visiting child care programs, I arrived with a certain amount of arrogance. I had studied about, worked in, and paid for child care, so I had some ideas about what makes a quality program.

I felt then, as I know now, that children deserve the best we can offer, but over time I've come to realize that *best* can play itself out in many different and unexpected ways.

In the early days, I looked at programs with my eyes — I focused on the environment and the equipment, the setting, I noticed little *things* that were wrong, and appreciated *things* that looked unusual or especially interesting or inviting.

I was often right and just as often wrong in my judgments about the quality of programs based on what I observed. It took me a while to understand that it isn't the things that determine program quality. It's the people.

Now I arrive at a center eager to learn, less interested in sorting observations into right and wrong, and much more focused on listening and observing people than in looking at things.

Children deserve the best. And in a perfect world, they would have it — the best of everything. But in our less than perfect world, what children receive differs radically, based on the resources and choice making of their communities. While in many places a plenitude of selections can be made for children; in others, the choices are reduced to the single question: what do children need most?

Given that basic needs are met, what children most need is the best in people.

I hate to tell the story of the worst program I ever visited. It was impossible not to know in moments that this was a terrible place for children: an open stairwell, tacks falling onto bedding, a Snit Chart to keep track of uncooperative children, frustrated staff, crying children, little activity.

It's harder to tell about a program that might not meet all your hopes and expectations about what children deserve . . . unless in this program you hear:

- adults and children exchanging stories and ideas.
- a multitude of questions and not so many answers.
- children negotiating and cooperating and seldom resorting to arguments and tears.
- adults offering to help each other and giving suggestions, changing course as an activity progresses.
- adults listening to children more than children listening to adults.
- adults and children reading together.
- adults asking children how they feel, rather than telling them what hurts and what isn't significant.
- children talking about their work and projects together.
- adults asking questions of themselves.

Investing first in people, giving children the best in people, means that even in the face of limited resources, you can accomplish great things. Learning about programs in other parts of the world gives me a new appreciation for what dedicated advocates are able to create.

As Roger and I visit centers, we are always learning of new ways that people are able to give children the best because they give their best. Building from a strong foundation of people, we can then work together to garner the additional resources people everywhere want and need in order to do right by all children.

We can use resources to make our programs better, but we cannot use resources to define quality. It is people who determine quality, people who enrich the lives of children.

*If you have other insights about the nature of teacher-child interactions, please share them by writing to me
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