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The idea of having a program in family day care for children of any age, especially children under two, was resisted for a long time. People thought it would spoil what was unique and excellent about family day care, that it would result in family day care homes being turned into 'mini-preschools' and be a regrettable move away from the natural environment and experiences offered in a home.

The main reason for these beliefs is a lack of understanding about what a program is. Many people think that having a program means being locked into offering a collection of structured, adult led 'educational' activities at particular times of the day and requiring all children to do them. People often associate having a program with having an inflexible timetable. With this interpretation of what a program is, it makes sense to reject the idea!

However, there is now greater understanding and acceptance of the need for planning and preparation in family day care to ensure that children's experiences are positive and appropriate.

Documenting planning for children helps carers to:

- offer considered and worthwhile experiences
- provide families with information about what is happening
- be accountable to funding, regulating, sponsoring and accrediting bodies by showing that what is offered to children has a purpose and reason

## What is a program?

The term program generally refers to all of the child's experiences, rather than to specific experiences or particular times of the day. Young children don't know the difference between planned experiences and those that happen spontaneously, and they have little understanding of times of the day. Children, particularly those under two, learn from everything and everybody all of the time. The most ordinary object or event, even one that we as adults may see as boring, can be fascinating and engaging for a baby or toddler. Therefore it makes sense to consider the child's whole experience over the day, rather than specific experiences or particular times of the day.

There are five key elements in programming for children under two:

- activities and experiences
- routine tasks or daily living experiences
- interactions and relationships between carers and children
- the environment
- collaboration with families

The experiences that are most interesting and useful for babies and toddlers occur within the context of all of these program elements.

## Activities and experiences

The term activity sometimes carries with it an image of an experience that is structured, inflexible, product or outcome focussed and undertaken by a group of children at a table. In the past people caring for very young children have borrowed from what they knew about traditional activities and materials for older children, simplified them, and then offered them to younger children, often unsuccessfully. However there are many activities that can be planned or occur spontaneously for young children which will be effective and responsive to their need for individuality and flexibility.



One of the inbuilt strengths of family day care is the many natural and worthwhile experiences that children can have as part of the life of a family in a home. It is important, however, to ensure that children are able to engage in experiences according to their individual interests and skills.

Children under two definitely don't need structured group activities. The key to quality in programs for under twos is individualising children's experience wherever possible. Children under two need lots of opportunities to:

- use their emerging 'large body' physical skills. For example, sitting, crawling, walking, running, climbing, stepping up and down, throwing, moving to music
- use their hands and fingers (fine motor skills). For example, reaching out to grasp, holding objects, turning the pages of books, stacking plastic cups, feeding themselves, holding a crayon or texta, picking up small objects, completing simple puzzles
- explore their communication skills. For example, making sounds, using words, using their body to communicate, hearing others use language in 'real' situations, sharing verbal and written stories, singing and being sung to, receiving attention and responses to their communication
- explore a range of objects indoors and outdoors and to investigate the natural world. For example, touching, dropping, squeezing, mixing, throwing, pulling things apart, putting things together
- engage in simple imaginative play. For example, feeding a doll or a teddy, carrying a handbag around, clomping around in a pair of big boots, making and serving a pretend cake
- indulge their senses through touching, tasting, hearing, smelling and seeing. For example, by experimenting with creative and sensory materials such as sand, water, paint and clay

Most importantly, children under two need lots of time, space, materials and support to play in all the ways they can: exploring, investigating, creating, and initiating. Play that children initiate themselves and have some control over provides the best learning experiences.

Experiences such as those discussed above should happen throughout the day. It doesn't make sense to restrict these activities to only one part of the day when we know that children are eager to learn all the time. Some people prefer to use the terms opportunities or experiences instead of activities because they suggest a more natural, flexible and open-ended approach. Whichever term is used, the carer's role is sometimes to initiate and often to respond, to help, to sometimes make suggestions and to always be sensitive to what the child is interested in.

### **Children under two do not need structured 'lessons' or 'activities'. Great experiences for children under two might include:**

- shaking a large plastic bottle containing wooden clothes pegs, rice or pasta
- helping to fold laundry
- trying to touch shadows made by trees outside
- crawling into and out of a cardboard appliance carton
- being held up to push an envelope through the slot of the letterbox
- squishing mud between their fingers
- raking leaves
- setting the table
- pouring juice from a small jug into a cup
- practising running or jumping
- clapping to music
- kicking a ball

### **Routine tasks or daily living experiences**

Routines or daily living experiences take up a lot of time in a family day care home, especially when some of the children are under two. In quality programs experiences such as eating, sleeping and resting, toileting and nappy changing, dressing and undressing, handwashing, arriving and leaving, and transitions from one part of the day to another are wonderful opportunities for children to:

- learn skills, including self-help skills
- gain independence
- learn to help others
- communicate with each other and with adults
- gain feelings of security and comfort
- have new experiences and learn about themselves, others and the world

These outcomes happen when routines are tailored for each child and carers have as few times as possible when children are waiting or when everyone has to do the same thing.

Routines are valuable when they are approached flexibly and with the aim of incorporating them as part of each child's learning, rather than getting through them as quickly and efficiently as possible. Routines provide some of the best opportunities for carers to have one-to-one interactions with children and to maintain and strengthen their relationships with children.



Approached this way, routines are some of the most significant times in the day and are a time for learning, not time away from learning. The way routines are handled is a powerful test of the quality of the program.

Family day care has a natural advantage in that children's routines as well as the carer's home routines can be used as good experiences for children in care. Tasks such as hanging out the washing, feeding pets, getting the mail, buying milk at the shop and posting a letter can be fun and worthwhile if approached with a focus on children's interests.

Other routines can also be wonderful experiences. For example, helping to feed a baby, getting a nappy when the carer requests it, or walking a child to preschool are all important routine activities that can help young children to develop many skills, including their ability to empathise and cooperate with others.

When carers slow down to 'child time' and make the most of daily routines children are able to be more relaxed and can engage in the most valuable types of learning experiences – 'real' ones.

## **Interactions and relationships between carers and children**

Most experts agree that the main ingredient of quality in any setting for children is the relationship between children and adults. One of the built-in

advantages of family day care is that there are small groups of children with one carer. This can promote the development of trusting and caring relationships between carers and children where carers have opportunities to get to know each child well.

### **To develop positive relationships carers need to:**

- value young children for their strengths and capabilities rather than for their dependence or 'cuteness'
- make sure they have one to one time with every child each day
- respect children as individuals and demonstrate that respect in their interactions
- show affection in ways that are comfortable for each child and find ways to show each child they are a valued member of the group
- talk readily, comfortably, naturally and appropriately with children about what is happening, what has happened and what is going to happen
- know when to involve themselves in children's play and interactions, when to stand back and when to offer help
- appreciate the challenges babies and toddlers face in understanding acceptable ways of behaving and being in a group
- help children learn to guide their own behaviour in constructive ways

## **The environment**

In many ways the environment is the program rather than being a backdrop to the program. The size and arrangement of the space available to children, the materials and equipment that children have free access to, the way materials are displayed, whether or not children can choose to be outdoors and how the outdoors is used – all of these factors make a major difference in the quality of children's experiences.

### **When planning the environment it is important to:**

- rotate equipment and materials and change things around occasionally, but remember the importance of balancing change and sameness. Younger children in particular rely on sameness to feel secure and even small changes can have a powerful effect
- provide a range of materials to cater for different interests and developmental skills. For example: things to hold, manipulate, take apart, climb over, under or through, put together, sensory materials, balls, blocks, props for imaginative

play, a simple home corner, or creative materials (paper, paint, dough)

- use equipment and materials that can provide some challenges and some certain successes for each child
- have enough resources to keep children interested and engaged, but avoid having too much. Too much can interfere with children's learning and feelings of comfort and can also be overwhelming and distressing
- provide lots of open-ended materials, that can be used in a variety of ways and that allow children to use their creativity and imagination
- be aware of sounds in the environment. For example, are they pleasant or unpleasant? Is there constant background noise?
- arrange space and equipment to help children concentrate and to allow them to safely withdraw for some quiet time if they wish
- set up an environment to allow children independence and the power to choose
- ensure that there is softness, gentleness and beauty in the environment
- reflect the lives of children, their families and their communities in the environment
- balance the need for some order with the inevitable messiness that comes when children engage, play and explore

## Collaboration with Families

When families and carers have open, mutually respectful relationships children have a better family day care experience and families and carers benefit as well. When parents and carers collaborate, the child's experience is the result of discussion and exchanges of information and perspectives.

Some of the practices that support collaboration between families and carers include the following:

- make parents and other family members welcome, and give clear information about rights and responsibilities (yours and theirs)
- make sure families and their lives are clearly reflected in the program
- offer experiences that reflect the ideas, suggestions and values that families have shared with you
- let families know about their child's experiences as well as your philosophy and values and how these affect your daily practices and activities
- encourage families to contribute materials, talents and ideas to the program
- enable families to make suggestions and raise concerns
- make it easy for families to share information about their child and to let you know what they want for their child. Use a variety of strategies to communicate with families about their child's experiences in care
- respect the fact that families are different. Some want to share much more information and want to know much more than others about their child's experience in care. Apparent lack of interest must not be interpreted as lack of interest in their child
- use parents as experts about their child, their community and their culture
- support families in their child-rearing role and to help them enjoy it and have fun with their child
- assist families to see their child as the unique person they are

## References and Further Information

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