

Involving children in decision making

By Angela Owens

To genuinely engage children in making choices it is essential that adults are prepared to share their power with children, and trust that children are competent decision makers.

Involving children in decision making entails child care professionals recognising that all children, including babies and toddlers, have the right and ability to make choices about their daily experiences and activities. To effectively facilitate children's decision making, the activities, routines and physical environment need to be arranged so that children have many real opportunities to make choices about what they will do and how they will do it.

The importance of involving children in decision making

Children learn to see themselves as capable and competent when they are viewed this way by others. When child care professionals allow children to experiment, explore and make choices, children develop the confidence to take risks and to extend their investigations of the world. This in turn promotes the growth of children's skills across all areas of their development. Importantly, the ability to independently make decisions is also an integral part of the development of a child's life skills.

What decisions are children able to make?

Children can make decisions about things such as:

- the experiences or activities they would like to do
- the materials and resources they would like to use and how they would like to use them
- where they would like to play, for example, in a particular area or indoors or outdoors
- who they want to play with or whether they want to play alone
- the adults with whom they feel most comfortable and secure
- when and what they would like to eat
- how they prefer to sleep or rest
- whether they need to use the toilet or require a nappy change.

Older children may also be able to engage in making decisions about broader issues such as the daily program and routines, and some behaviour rules and limits.

Offering children genuine decision making opportunities

It is important to provide children with the opportunity to make choices in circumstances where their decisions will be able to be accepted. For example, it is not helpful to ask a child if they are ready to come inside for lunch if it is actually a requirement that they do so.

Environments that support children's decision making

Supportive environments for children's decision making are set up in ways that allow children to make choices independently of adults. Examples of this include:

- having equipment shelving at child height and encouraging children to choose the materials or activities they want to use
- setting up play spaces with areas that allow children to choose between quiet and busier areas, indoor or outdoor play, as well as between large groups, small groups or solitary play
- providing space where children can store and independently access their own belongings
- having areas where children can store works in progress to return to over a period of time
- ensuring that bathroom facilities are easily accessible to children and encourage them to develop independent personal hygiene skills.

Activities and resources that support children's decision making

To encourage children's decision making in their daily play, it is important that child care professionals carefully consider the materials and resources that are provided in the program. When choosing resources it is helpful for child care professionals to reflect upon the following questions:

- Are the resources provided for children open ended, with the potential to be used in a number of ways as opposed to having only one use or function?
- Can children access and use the resources provided for them independently of adults?
- Are there a range of resources available that can be used by a child on their own, as well as by a group of children playing collaboratively?

- Is there a variety of resources available for children to choose from, including both manufactured and natural items?

It is also important that, where appropriate, children have opportunities to be involved in making decisions about what resources are purchased for the service, how the room is set up, the experiences that are provided and the daily routine. Children might be consulted on an individual basis, or child care professionals might choose to include children or groups of children in planning meetings.

Giving children a voice when making decisions about the educational program will help to ensure that it remains relevant and interesting to them. Younger children and babies can also have input into planning decisions when child care professionals seek to find out about children's interests and ideas by observing their play and explorations and talking with families about their child.

Interactions that support children to develop decision making skills

Talking respectfully with children, and having conversations where children's ideas and thoughts are genuinely sought and valued is the key to engaging children in decision making processes. As children develop, they will be able to participate in increasingly complex decision making.

When asking younger children for their ideas or opinions, it is helpful to provide them with a list of options from which to choose rather than giving them too broad a choice. For example, asking "what should we do this afternoon" may be a difficult question for a three year old to answer, whereas asking "would you like to do painting or have playdough this afternoon" may help them to make a decision. This will also provide young children with practice in thinking about choices,

which will assist them to develop the ability to make more complex decisions in the future.

As children mature, child care professionals can begin to involve them in making decisions in relation to resolving conflicts and setting boundaries and expectations for behaviour in the service. Talking with children about what they think and responding to what matters to them will give children a sense of ownership over the decisions that they have contributed to. This in turn often leads children to be more inclined to adhere to rules or boundaries, and to remind other children to do the same.

While it is important that child care professionals trust and respect children's abilities to participate in decision making, it is also vital that this occurs in ways that recognise the abilities of each child and are responsive to particular circumstances. Child care professionals may need to provide children with additional support from time to time, or there may be situations in which it is not appropriate or realistic to expect a child to make a decision. For example, a five year old child who is normally very adept at self-regulation may need support to negotiate and take turns with other children when a favourite toy or activity is involved.

Conclusion

Child care professionals may sometimes find it challenging to share the power of decision making with children. However, when children are trusted and recognised as capable decision makers, and are frequently given a voice in what happens to them, the daily experiences and routines will become much more reflective of children's interests and abilities. Having real opportunities to participate in decision making fosters children's ability to think and make independent decisions confidently, which is an important aspect of the development of their future life skills ■

Quality Improvement and Accreditation System

Principles: 1.1 - 1.5, 3.2, 3.3 and 4.1

References and further reading

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