

In the past many people believed that although it was important for children over three, you couldn't – and shouldn't – try to implement set or defined programs for babies and toddlers. It was considered adequate to have caring adults, a safe and healthy environment and some toys to play with. This was partly due to a lack of appreciation of the considerable learning capacity of very young children as well as a lack of recognition of the importance of the first three years of life, when the foundations a child's learning and development are laid. It was also due to misunderstandings about what a program is. Many people believed that a program consisted of specifically planned activities, often adult directed, offered at set times of the day which focused on specific areas of children's development and on achieving goals.

However, there is now a greater acceptance of the need for planning and preparation for children under two to ensure that their experiences are positive and appropriate. Documenting planning for children is important as it:

- assists staff to have a common plan to work from;
- forms part of the communication that occurs between families and staff;
- demonstrates that what is offered to children is purposeful; and
- supports the service's accountability to funding, regulating, sponsoring and accrediting bodies.

Actively engaging in planning for young children and keeping written records also assists staff to get to know and understand individual children. However, while the process of planning for children is important, the purpose of this *Factsheet* is to focus on the experiences that are important for children under two years of age.

## What is a program?

The term program commonly refers to the child's entire experience in care, not just to specifically planned activities or particular segments of the day. Young children don't know the difference between planned activities and those that happen spontaneously, and they have little understanding of the different times of the day. Children, particularly those under two, learn from everything and everybody. The most common objects or daily events, even those that we as adults may see as boring, can be fascinating and engaging for a baby or toddler. Therefore when planning for young children it makes sense to consider the child's whole experience over the entire day, rather than focussing on specific experiences or times.

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

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

The experiences that are most interesting and valuable 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.



Experiences that are thought of more conventionally as 'activities' such as puzzles, play dough, painting or drawing with crayons can also be valuable experiences for young children. However, the implementation of these activities needs to be tailored to recognise the importance of engaging children in activities according to their interests and skills.

Children under two definitely don't need structured group activities, and they don't need an emphasis on products. The key to providing quality programs for children under two is to adopt a focus on process rather than product and to encourage children to explore, investigate and play in their own way.

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 communication and emerging language 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 and experiment with a range of objects located indoors and outdoors and 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
- stimulate their thinking and problem solving skills. For example, by experimenting with simple puzzles and posting boxes, using 'cause and effect' toys, solving simple problems such as finding objects or toys in a simple 'hide and seek' game

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.

### **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
- trying to touch shadows made by objects outside
- crawling into and out of cardboard boxes
- squishing mud between their fingers
- raking leaves
- setting the table
- pouring juice from a small jug into a cup
- running or jumping
- moving to music
- kicking a ball
- stacking items
- playing 'peek a boo'

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, it is the role of staff to sometimes initiate and often to respond, to help, to sometimes make suggestions and to always be sensitive to what the child is interested in.

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

Routines or daily living experiences take up a lot of time in planning for children under two years. 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 valuable 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 the themselves, others and the world

These outcomes occur when routines are tailored for each child, with staff minimising the occasions when children are required to wait or to do the same thing at the same time. Routines should be flexible and focussed not on getting through them as quickly and efficiently as possible but on incorporating them into

each child's learning. Routines can provide some important opportunities for adults to have one-to-one interactions with 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 in a service are conducted is usually a strong indicator of the quality of the program.

Sometimes staff who feel they are running out of ideas for things to do with young children are rushing through routine experiences rather than recognising their potential significance to a child's learning and development. It is helpful to slow down, and make the most of routine experiences as these provide many opportunities to enhance children's understanding of their world, to extend their self-help skills and to strengthen relationships.

## **Interactions and relationships between staff and children**

Most experts agree that the key to high quality in any child care setting is the relationship between children and adults.

Positive staff-child relationships are supported by appropriate staff-child ratios and by a staffing roster and room structure that allows children to develop trusting relationships and to get to know a few adults well. Ideally each child should have at least one staff member who is an 'expert' on them.

Positive, meaningful staff-child relationships happen when adults:

- value young children for their strengths and capabilities rather than for their dependence or 'cuteness'
- ensure they have one to one interactions with each child each day
- respect children as individuals and demonstrate that respect in their interactions
- show affection in ways that are comfortable for each child
- 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 offer help and when to stand back
- appreciate the challenges babies and toddlers face in understanding acceptable ways of behaving and being in a group of peers
- 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 planned experiences for children under two. The size and arrangement of space, the materials and equipment children have free access to, the way materials are displayed, whether children can choose to be outdoors and how the outdoor setting is used are all factors that make a major difference in the quality of children's experiences. Several key things to keep in mind when planning the environment include the following:

- 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, to manipulate, to take apart, to climb over, under or through, to put together, sensory materials, balls, blocks, props for imaginative play, a simple home corner, or creative materials (paper, paint, crayons, dough)
- be aware of sounds in the environment. For example, are they pleasant or unpleasant? Is it always noisy? 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 the environment to allow children independence and the power to choose

- create clear pathways through the space
- ensure that equipment and materials provide some challenges and some certain successes for each child
- have enough materials and equipment to keep children interested and engaged, but avoid having too much. Too many materials can be overwhelming and distressing and can interfere with children's learning and feelings of comfort
- reflect the lives of children, their families and their communities in the environment
- ensure that there is softness, gentleness and beauty in the environment
- balance the need for some order with the inevitable messiness that comes when children engage, play and explore
- avoid the tendency to give the youngest children in the centre materials or toys that have been discarded by older children's rooms. For example, torn books, or puzzles with pieces missing,
- 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
- let families know about their child's experiences as well as your philosophy and values and how these affect your daily practices and activities
- display the program for families
- encourage families to contribute materials, talents and ideas to the program
- make it easy for families to share their child's home experiences so that you can use these to support planning in the service. For example, by having a noticeboard that they can easily write on or using communication books. Develop a variety of ways to let families know about their child's experiences and interactions while in care
- use the centre's newsletter to provide information about favourite foods, books, experiences, music, and interesting events occurring in the centre and the local community
- 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 the 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

## 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 staff include the following:

- encourage and welcome parents and other family members to visit or participate in service activities, but avoid pressuring them to do so
- 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

## References and Further Information

- Greenman, J. and Stonehouse, A. (1997). *Prime Times, a Handbook for Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs*. Melbourne: Pearson
- Stonehouse, A. and Gonzalez Mena, J. G. (2004). *Making Links: a Collaborative Approach to Planning and Practice in Early Childhood Services*. Sydney: Pademelon Press



**For more information on QIAS please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.**

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900  
 E-mail: [qualitycare@ncac.gov.au](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)  
 Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St  
 Surry Hills NSW 2010

[www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)