Involving Children in Program Planning

By Angela Owens

Engaging children in programming is about staff and carers assisting children of all ages to express their interests and readiness to engage in experiences. While school age children can actively participate in planning, recording and evaluating the program, staff and carers can also provide opportunities for younger children, including infants, to actively contribute to the program. Involving younger children in program planning requires staff and carers to develop responsive and understanding relationships with each individual child. This is achieved by observing, listening and talking with each child, their families and with professional colleagues.

There are many ways to ensure that children's interests and readiness to engage in activities and experiences are integral to the daily program. The most obvious way for staff and carers to gain genuine understanding of individual children and their interests is by taking frequent opportunities to communicate meaningfully and respectfully with them. It is vital that children are made to feel that their contributions, ideas and interests are valued and appreciated. This occurs when staff and carers take the time to get to know each child and when children are able to participate in a program which genuinely reflects their contribution to it.

Staff and carers can learn much about children's interests simply by observing them in their daily play and interactions with others. Observation must be supported by an informed analysis and interpretation of what is seen and heard. Staff and carers need to evaluate their observations in the context of what they already know about the child and their knowledge of child development.

Adopting a collaborative approach to program planning which involves families, children and staff/carers will ensure that children's interests form the basis of planned experiences and activities. Enlisting meaningful family involvement in the program is of particular advantage for infants or children who are very young, but will impact positively upon all children's programs.

> *"Children may be the recipients of care and education, but planning for learning involves a three-way collaboration. Children can contribute as well as their parents. Parents and families are not just the people the children go home to after the end of the day or session; they are the mainstay of the children's lives"* (Gonzalez-Mena and Stonehouse, 2004: p13)

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principle 3.1
Carers respond to the interests and abilities of all children in ways that support learning in a home environment

OSHCQA Principle 4.2
Programming caters for the needs, interests and abilities of all children

QIAS Principle 5.2
Records of children's learning and well-being are maintained by the centre and are used to plan programs that include experiences appropriate for each child

Families can provide vital information to support staff and carers to plan programs in which children's interests, past experiences and successes play an active role. Some strategies to promote active information exchange and collaboration with families in developing and implementing the program include:

- Actively seeking to engage in regular verbal communication with families that is honest, meaningful and supports information exchanges

- Developing written strategies for keeping families informed and for gaining information from families, for example, notebooks, diaries

- Displaying programs which provide spaces for families to include ideas, comments or suggestions

- Providing regular opportunities for face to face meetings/information sessions/information exchange sessions with families

- Developing a range of strategies that recognise and suit the different needs of families depending on their lifestyle

Empowering Children

Empowering children to make choices and guide their own play is a valuable way for children to actively participate in programming. This depends very much upon communicating and interacting with children in ways that make them feel valued, confident and capable. It also requires staff and carers to carefully plan environments which are safe, flexible and which include opportunities for children to make choices and to use materials and resources in innovative and exploratory ways.

Some questions that staff and carers may consider to support children in making individual choices in the program include:

- How do materials and activities invite children to explore their personal skills and interests?

- How does the environment help children to feel safe, capable and confident in making choices and taking charge of their play and experiences?

- How flexible are the spaces and the materials available to children?

- How accessible are different materials and activities to children, including very young children and infants?

- How flexible is the routine and does it allow for spontaneous interests and activities that are child motivated?

- How can we allow children the freedom to explore and to take risks in their play in a supportive, safe environment?

By clearly demonstrating to all children that their ideas, choices and independence is vital in the program, carers and staff can support children to take an active role in how the program 'plays out' on a daily basis.

Record Keeping

An important element of programming is record keeping. Documentation should generally include information such as:

- records of children's interests, experiences and successes

- records of what was planned, for whom, and when

- records of program evaluation

- records of how past program evaluation has contributed to ensuing programs

Older children can play an active role in record keeping. It is useful for staff and carers to communicate openly with children about the records that are kept in relation to children's programs. Children may contribute to their own portfolios, journals, folders or individual program/child profile information in many ways. These may include:

- photographs - taken either within the service program or outside

- examples of children's writing, drawing or other art/craftwork

- audio and visual recordings

- completed surveys or questionnaires of children's interests or like/dislikes

When children are aware that they can contribute to the documentation of the program, they are often quite proactive in inviting their teacher or carer to make a permanent record of their achievements or experiences. Many children will invite staff or carers to photograph or photocopy their work, and older children may be able to take some independent responsibility for actually taking photographs or documenting in other ways. Encouraging children to tell staff and carers what they feel it is important to record often provides valuable feedback for evaluation purposes.

All children, from infancy to middle childhood, can actively contribute to program evaluation through the actions and interests that they exhibit in response to the program. Older children may also provide verbal or written/drawn feedback to staff and carers.

"Ongoing evaluation happens when there is a culture of critical reflection and methods for recording observations of both children and practice that are used as a basis for future plans and practice"
(Gonzalez-Mena and Stonehouse, 2004: p.169)

Children's responses to the program are the most important source of information when reflecting upon the effectiveness of the program. This is particularly true for programs to which children are the primary instigators of what is planned. As well as observing and listening to children, staff may also find it useful to seek feedback from families about their and their child's perception of the program. Children will often share their thoughts and feelings about what they do and don't like with their family, rather than with staff or carers.

A child focussed program recognises and validates all of the ways that children can contribute to their own learning and development. It is important that staff and carers not only value children's interests and contributions to the program, but that they develop strategies to incorporate these into daily programs for children. Including all children in programming is about maximising the impact that children have on how and what is planned on a daily basis, regardless of their age, language or cognitive ability. It is the role of staff and carers to continually develop, reflect upon and improve strategies for including all children in the programming process.■

Do you have a question for a Child Care Adviser?
The June 2005 Issue of *Putting Children First* will focus on Interactions. If you have questions about staff, carer, child and family interactions please e-mail your query to:
pcf@ncac.gov.au
Responses will be given and common questions may be published in the next issue.

Please note: NCAC does not guarantee that all questions will be published, and questions may be edited for clarity and length.

Practical strategies for inviting children's input into programming include:

- Conducting informal 'meetings' or discussions with children. Ask children what they think

- Providing opportunities for children to provide written feedback about what they would like in the program, for example, butcher's paper for comments or a suggestion box

- One to one discussions between staff and children

- Interest questionnaires

- Relevant sections on children's enrolment forms

- Providing variety of resources and experiences and observe children's preferred choices

- Observing group interests and interactions

Strategies for older children

Older children may be interested in completing simple surveys or questionnaires about their interests and things that are important to them. These may be completed by the child in writing or drawing, or may be completed by an adult, peer or older child who 'interviews' the child. Staff and carers will need to be flexible and understanding of individual children's skills when inviting children's participation in such activities and it is important that an appropriate child focussed approach is

Further reading

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- Curtis, D., and Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments*, Redleaf Press: USA
- Gonzalez-Mena, J., and Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Making Links: A Collaborative Approach to Planning and Practice in Early Childhood*, Pademelon Press: Castle Hill, NSW
- Jones, A., and Tarrant, S. (1996). *Before 9 After 3: A Handbook for Outside School Hours Care*, Pademelon Press: Castle Hill, NSW
- The School of Early Childhood Studies, University of Melbourne. (1992). *The How and Why of Program Planning for Outside School Hours Care Programs*, Lady Gowrie Children Centre (Melbourne) Inc: Vic
- Stonehouse, A. (1989). *Parents and Caregivers in Partnership for Children*, Community Child Care Co-op Ltd, Surry Hills: NSW
- Stonehouse, A. (1988). *Trusting Toddlers*, The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc