

Supporting children's development

Making choices in play

In the fifth article in our series on supporting children's development, Anne Stonehouse discusses the value of providing children with opportunities to make decisions and choices about their daily experiences and play.

The Child Care Quality Assurance systems advocate children's participation in play as a valuable way to support their development and learning. Making decisions and having choices are important elements in the daily experience of all children in child care, whatever their age. Even a young baby makes a choice when she reaches out for one of the two toys an adult holds in front of her. Throughout childhood children are developing a sense of their own identity. Having some control over their experiences both contributes to this process and reflects their growing sense of who they are, what makes them unique, and what connects them with others.

Why are choices important?

Relating to children respectfully involves taking into account what they want and need. Encouraging them to express and act on their preferences also builds and strengthens a sense of responsibility for themselves and the notion that they are active contributors to their own and others' experiences. Giving children choices and involving them in making decisions about what is available for them are the best ways to ensure that children can pursue their interests and satisfy their needs. It is impossible for even the most knowledgeable and sensitive child care professional to know what best suits every child.

Making choices builds children's appreciation of their own authority and agency, or ability to have an impact and influence. A toddler deciding to use a strainer as a helmet, a four year old combining chalk and paint at the easel, or an eight year old experimenting with kicking a soccer ball for the first time are examples of children making choices as they explore themselves, other people and the world around them.

What's special about choices in play?

Through play children practise skills already mastered and take on the challenges of new ones. They communicate and negotiate with others, and try out new roles. Play supports all areas of development and learning.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1 - 3.3 and 4.3

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1 - 1.3, 2.3, 4.2 - 4.4, 5.1 and 5.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 - 1.3, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2, 3.3, 4.1 and 5.1

One of the many reasons that children's play is valued and child care professionals are urged to provide a range of play opportunities for children is that in play children have opportunities to initiate, direct and control their own experiences and to make choices and decisions in doing so. Of course there are many other occasions in child care in which children can and should have choices, such as during routine daily living experiences, but play offers particularly rich and valuable opportunities for children's decision making.

Play affords children opportunities to develop autonomy and independence as well as to learn social and relationship skills as they explore their interdependence and connectedness with others.



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The role of child care professionals

Child care professionals encourage children's decision making through the ways they set up environments, organise the program and interact and communicate with children. Strategies and practical examples for promoting choices and decision making in their play include:

- offering a program in which there are few times when everyone has to do the same thing at the same time

Example: The coordination unit staff plan the play session so that a variety of opportunities are available all the time. Small group activities such as a story time or playing with musical instruments are offered alongside other choices. Children are encouraged but not pressured to try a range of activities during the session.

- providing a range of interesting, open-ended materials and equipment that can be used in a variety of ways and that encourage children to be creative and to use their imaginations

Example: Materials such as large and small cardboard boxes, plastic containers and lids, pieces of plastic pipe, wood off-cuts, pieces of fabric and cotton reels are available for the children indoors and outside every day. Child care professional Lola varies what is offered, but the children know that they can check what's in the supply cupboard any time. Lola has found from experience that if something is safe for children to use, she offers it. She has found that children are much more creative at coming up with interesting uses for materials than she is.

- ensuring that there is a variety of opportunities and experiences available to cater for individual children's different interests and skills
- organising the space to highlight the choices available and to assist children to focus and concentrate

Example: The staff in the after school care program aim to create a home-like environment as well as creating some structure and organisation. The reading corner has been separated from the rest of the space by shelves, the art area has been expanded and moved near the sink, and the music area, which is often noisy, has been put on the opposite side of the room from the reading area.

- talking with children about the choices available to them and, if needed, helping them decide what to do

Example: "I've put some new books on the shelf. One is about the beach. You might like to look at it to see if the beach in the book is like the one where you had your holiday."

- paying attention to the choices children have made and talking with them in ways that validate those choices

Example: "You must really enjoy painting. I've noticed you've painted every day this week. Are there some new colours you'd like to use, or some different sized brushes?"

- interacting with children in ways that build their confidence as learners and decision makers

Example: "I see you decided to make two towers instead of trying to make one as tall as you are. Does that work better?"

- demonstrating making choices and being flexible in real situations to model sensible decision making

Example: A large appliance carton has been placed outside. Big paint brushes and three containers of paint are placed near it on chairs. The plan is that the toddlers will paint the carton. A few toddlers start painting, and inevitably paint spills on the chairs. Child care professional Jonathon brings out a bucket of water and a sponge and starts wiping the chairs. The toddlers are fascinated. He says: "Okay, you're telling me you want to play with water. I'll bring out some more buckets and sponges, and we can clean the table".

Not all choices are sound choices

Children do not always make sound choices. At times their lack of experience and maturity and

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their impulsivity and desire to experiment and explore lead them to make choices that are unsafe for themselves or others or that interfere with the rights of other children, for example by excluding them from play.

At these times child care professionals have to make informed and sensible judgments, based on their professional knowledge of children and their specific knowledge of the child or children involved. Sometimes they may stand back and allow children to work out difficulties or experience the consequences of the choices they have made. Often, however, they will intervene and use the situation to help children learn about relationships and what is fair, respectful and just.

Through their relationships and interactions with others, children can learn about the impact of their choices on others and about their rights and responsibilities as members of the child care community. These lessons will serve them well in their roles as citizens in the broader community.

Choices are not enough

Providing choices for children is essential for their learning. Good quality child care requires child care professionals to go beyond planning activities and experiences from which children can choose, that is, offering 'fixed' choices. Good quality child care requires treating children as respected partners in creating the program and in determining what is available for them to choose from. When children and their families are regularly involved in critiquing and evaluating the program, child care professionals are supported to provide better choices, and therefore more meaningful experiences for children.



Asking the following questions may assist child care professionals to identify how well they support children to make choices in their play:

- Do all children, including the youngest, have meaningful choices?
- Are there too many choices, which may interfere with children 'settling' and focusing on their play?
- What choices are there during routines and daily living experiences?
- How does the organisation of the physical environment support children to make choices?
- What are some examples of occasions when adults decide to intervene to guide children's choices?
- How are children involved in deciding what choices are available in the program?
- How are families involved in determining what choices are available to children?

Any choices are better than no choices. Having a range of interesting and engaging options that allow children to initiate, explore, create and experiment ensures that their experiences are satisfying and meaningful ■

References and further reading

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