

Programs for children in child care

by Angela Owens

A child care program provides children with a variety of experiences that are designed to promote and extend their development. A good program is responsive to the specific needs, interests and developmental ranges of all children in the group. To plan programs that cater for individual children, child care professionals need to get to know each child well by observing them and learning about their interests and experiences through conversations with them and their families. All planned experiences should recognise the value of play in children's learning and development, with a strong focus on planning experiences that are based on children's current interests and strengths.

How are programs planned?

Planning a program for children is a process in which child care professionals design experiences and activities that aim to develop and extend each child's skills, interests and abilities. While all child care services are required to plan for children, the way this is done will look different in each service. In some services the program will be a written plan that is based on documented records of observations and interactions with children and/or on written profiles of children's needs, interests and abilities. Other services will plan for children through a constant process of thinking clearly about what experiences are being provided for children and why. Regardless of whether or not they are written, all good quality programs plan for children in ways that build upon each child's previous experiences, interests and successes.

What should a program look like?

There is no set way a program must look. However, all programs should involve planning for all areas of children's development, including their:

- physical skills (large and small muscles)
- language and literacy skills
- personal and interpersonal skills
- creativity and the expressive arts
- problem solving, thinking and mathematical abilities.

While each of these areas should be covered in the program, depending upon the age or stage of each child's development, there may be a different focus for the experiences that are planned for individual children. Some typical examples of the ways that children of different ages may be planned for include:

Babies: Planned experiences for babies frequently revolve around routines such as meal and nappy change times, and sleep and settling routines. These plans will be very individualised, and usually focussed on one to one interactions between the baby and the child care professional. Planning for babies also usually emphasises the provision of

environments and resources that the baby can safely explore and interact with in their own way. When planning for babies, child care professionals need to consult families closely to understand what each child's family sees as being important in assisting their child to settle happily into care while developing their skills.

Toddlers: Planning for toddlers generally has a strong focus on supporting them as they develop their language, independence and social skills. Planned experiences will often focus on supporting toddlers to engage in play experiences where they can practice and extend upon these skills. Planned experiences should either be individualised or planned for very small groups of children, and feature a high level of flexibility to allow children to engage in the experience in ways that best suit their interests and abilities. Child care professionals act primarily as guides and role models, helping children to negotiate with others and to express their emotions appropriately.

Preschool aged children: Programs for preschool aged children often have a stronger focus on the development of early academic skills such as reading, writing and mathematics. However, the programs that are planned for these children should continue to be play based and focussed on children's interests. There can be a mix of individual, small and larger group activities planned, and children should be able to make choices about the experiences in which they participate. Child care professionals will not only learn about children by observing them and talking with their families; they will also get to know children well through their everyday conversations with individuals and groups of children.

School age children: The programs that are planned for school age children are unique in that they need to recognise and be responsive to the fact that children are already attending a formal school program. Child care professionals should ensure that planned experiences accommodate school age children's particular needs for extra curricular recreational and social activity, as well as time to relax before and after the school

day and during school holidays. Older children will have many opportunities to participate in experiences of their own choosing, and children in these service are often encouraged to participate in decision making about the experiences that are planned. While all areas of children's development should be catered for there is often an emphasis on the development of social and life skills.

How can families find out about the service's program?

The best way for families to find out about the program for their child is to speak with child care professionals in the service. Some useful questions that families can ask include:

- What activities and experiences are provided for children in the service?
- Are these written down, and if so, can families see these plans?¹
- How is the daily program displayed for families?
- How do child care professionals in the service decide what activities, materials and experiences are provided for children?
- How do child care professionals find out whether children are benefiting from and enjoying the program being provided?
- How can families be involved in planning and evaluating programs for children?

Many services will explain the program to families during the enrolment and/or orientation process. Other services may share this information with families at a later stage, to avoid overwhelming them with too much information when they start using child care. However, all families have the

right to seek information from the service about the program that is planned for their child, and services should also share information with families about their child's development, achievements and any needs that may be identified.

How can families be involved in planning the program for their child?

A good program will incorporate information from families about their child's interests and experiences outside of the child care service. Some of the ways that services may seek this information include:

- daily conversations with families at the start and/or end of the day
- formal meetings with families
- communication books that are used for families and the service to exchange information about the child at home and in care (these are more commonly used for babies and younger children)
- daily diaries that families can write in
- a space on the written program where families can write down information about their child's current interests or special experiences outside of care.

Conclusion

Program planning for children in child care is not about child care professionals planning 'lessons' or doing formal 'teaching'. Quality programs in child care are developed to support and guide children in all areas of their development in ways that take into account each child's interests, strengths, experiences and needs ■

¹ The Child Care Quality Assurance systems require all long day care centres to keep written records of children's learning and programs. While written plans are not currently a requirement for family day care and outside school hours care services, individual services may choose to keep documented records of their planning and programs for children.

References and further reading

- Bickley, M. (2008). *NCAC Factsheet for Families: Building a partnership with your child care service*. NSW: NCAC.
- Stonehouse, A. (2008). *NCAC Factsheet for Families: Quality care for babies*. NSW: NCAC.
- Stonehouse, A. (2008). *NCAC Factsheet for Families: Quality care for toddlers*. NSW: NCAC.
- Stonehouse, A. (2008). *NCAC Factsheet for Families: Quality care for preschool age children*. NSW: NCAC.
- Stonehouse, A. (2008). *NCAC Factsheet for Families: Quality care for school age children*. NSW: NCAC.



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