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What Makes a Quality Early Childhood Program?

by Jean Rosenberg, Chelsea Day School

What Makes a Quality Early Childhood Program?

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When we think of early childhood care, we are considering the development and needs of children who are very young, often separating from one-to-one care for the first time. They are small beings in a big world, and their care must be taken very seriously.

So what should we look for in an early childhood program?

Safety First

Early childhood programs in New York City are licensed by the Department of Health, Bureau of Day Care. The standards for licensing are thorough and rigid, insuring that children are safe. They include staffing requirements, guidelines for the physical space, budget reviews, health requirements for staff and students, even program guidance – to mention a few. All staff members are fingerprinted and checked by the state for any record of child abuse and criminal activity. Educational records are validated and three references are required for employment.

A quality program makes sure that physical safety is a priority. The rooms are organized so that the children are easily supervised. Materials are safe, age-appropriate and accessible to the children who use them. Staffing is sufficient to insure that needs are met. The program provides space for both active and quiet play. Outdoor play areas allow for gross motor development and include a soft surface to catch the inevitable fall. Rules of safety are clear, direct and easily understood: We sit down when eating or drinking. We do not leave without our grown-up. We do not hurt anyone else's body.

Emotional safety is also critical. Understanding the plan for separation helps to ease the inherent anxiety for both parent and child. Once the

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children are settled into the program, consistent schedules, clear expectations of staff and an age-appropriate environment help a child to feel safe. Discipline is used as a teaching tool. It is not used to control, demean or punish the child.

Who's in Charge?

The core of any program is its staff. Teachers trained in developmentally appropriate practice and

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child development as articulated by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) offer a high level of excellence and professionalism in their work. A good program supports its staff with opportunities to continue to study and grow in their field. Staff development has been cited as one of the essentials in building excellence in schools.

On to Learning

A physically and emotionally safe child is a happy child, one who is ready to learn. What kind of learning should we be looking for?

Consider the variety of activities offered. For instance, a balance between child-centered and teacher-directed activities acknowledges the development of small children who vacillate between dependence and independence. A balance of activities that develop small and large motor skills addresses the physical needs of the child.

Further, a good early childhood program understands the difference between academic and intellectual growth. While an academic program will focus more on symbolic information such as letters and numbers, young children are more interested in the "ball" or the "baby" – not the letter "b."

Children in the preschool years are very sense-oriented. They learn when touching, looking, being actively involved in the topic at hand. Natural curiosity is stimulated through activities that require observation,

organization and categorization. Intellectual growth thrives in a process of questioning, exploring, creating and sometimes being wrong.

In fact, the process is most often more meaningful than the product. Children have been known to spend an entire activity time deciding on the rules for the game without ever playing the game.

Music, movement and art are also the language of small children. Daily exploration in these areas enriches the child's ability to communicate in a variety of ways. They play and use their senses to make sense of their world. To us a painting may appear to be a blend of abstract colors, but to a child it may be the wind or his favorite song.

The Importance of Socialization

Socialization is at the core of the early childhood experience. Children learn to take turns, to use materials independently, to have a friend. They develop language through play, learn to articulate their ideas and needs, and gain skills as members of a group. Projects can include children with different ability levels, thereby supporting cooperation and respect within the group.

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A Haven for Children and Their Families

A good program understands that small children are learning all the time. It doesn't start when they arrive at school or stop when they go home. It is a continuous experience: it is social, emotional, physical and intellectual.

Communication between home and school helps to support this learning. Parent conferences encourage a dialogue between teachers and parents in a more formal way. Other avenues for more spontaneous communication are also necessary when caring for little ones.

For many families, especially those living in large cities, their child's first school experience offers a sense of community. A quality program nurtures this – through lecture evenings, community projects, potluck suppers.

There is comfort and support for parents as they share a common vision for their child.

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In short, an excellent early childhood facility is clean, bright and organized. Its staff is accessible, competent and professional. The children are busy, happy – not too clean, not too quiet. Their parents are welcome, supported and encouraged to participate. It is a commu-

nity inclusive of many, built around its youngest members.

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