

Quality of Care

Quality of Care is the basic issue in the field of child care. **Quality** is defined as the degree of excellence which a thing possesses; for our purposes the degree of excellence found in an early childhood environment. It is the goal of this book to guide you on your task to clearly identify whether or not quality exists within an early childhood setting. There are several important issues professionals identify when defining quality in the early childhood setting. They are:

- ✓ Teacher Child Ratios
- ✓ Developmentally Appropriate Practices
- ✓ Providing Proper Nutrition
- ✓ Parent and Community Involvement
- ✓ Professional Development

Each of these qualities is necessary to ensure that an early childhood setting has good quality; if any of these factors is missing then quality is lacking in that program. It is not to say that the center is not good at caring for children. But, it does mean that the center is lacking some aspects that helps it to ensure that the care is at its peak.

These five areas are very in-depth on a professional level. For our purposes this following is a general idea of what each entails so that you have enough knowledge to make a sound decision about which child care center is best for your needs.

Teacher - Child Ratios

A teacher- child ratio refers to the number of teachers that is required to give quality care to the children in their care. This is important because in quality centers it is important for each teacher to give their undivided attention to each child for some time each day. This is especially important because children need time to simply talk, ask questions, and develop a strong and healthy attachment to their teachers.

Teacher-staff ratios are mandated by each state many states are not familiar with the true needs of children in this matter. Because of the expense on child care most facilities will follow state mandates and hire teachers based solely on state mandates. However, some centers know what is recommended by their professional organizations and what is best for the children in their care. One such organization is called the **National Association for the Education of Young Children** or the **NAEYC**. This organization recommends the following Staff-Child ratios for quality child care.

Recommended Teacher-Child Ratios

1 teacher to 3 Infants (children 12 months or younger)
1 teacher 6 toddlers (children 12 to 36 months)
1 teacher to 8 Three year olds
1 teacher to 10 Four year olds
1 teacher to 12 Five year olds

These are ideal ratios however, many state regulations differ. The NAEYC is working to help Early Childhood Professionals lobby state governments to lower staff ratios where they are not viable to the health of young children.

Another issue to keep in mind is adult to adult ratios. Adults need to work in pair's teamwork and partnership is key to maintaining a healthy environment for both the children and adults. Although, the ratios state 1 teacher to 3 infants, it is not in the best interest of the adult or the child to have a teacher alone with three infants on an ongoing basis Teachers need the interaction with another adult throughout the day to maintain equilibrium. As you observe early childhood centers; make sure to pay particular attention to teacher ratios and the quality of interaction with the children.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Quality child care requires that the learning environment be suitable for young children. The needs of children younger than five require that they be allowed to explore their environment freely. Teachers are facilitators and guides through the process. The classroom is set up to teach skills to children as they play and explore. Though teachers in effect do not usually stand at the front of the room and Ateach≅; lesson plans require them to teach through planned experiences. **Developmentally Appropriate Practices** (DAP) are the boundaries the early childhood community has established, in order, to ensure that both the classroom and the learning experiences are suited for children in a particular age group. The areas which are included in the approach are as follows:

- ✓ Child Development
- ✓ Active Learning and Interaction
- ✓ Skills Practice
- ✓ Environment and Community

Child Development

There are four domains of development they are social/emotional, physical, intellectual, and language. Children grow in all of these areas, each domain affects the others.

However, children develop in a variety of ways and have differing strengths and weaknesses. The patterns of development do not change. It has a predictable order going from simple to complex. Knowledge is built on skills already developed and new skills are acquired over time.

Active Learning and Interaction

Young children learn through play and actively practicing what they see and hear. This implies the environment must be supportive of activity and include a variety of materials to support training. It is important that children be allowed to both construct or build their own knowledge base and have adults to interact with to supply explanations and other information. In addition, children learn well from other children, so providing time for conversation and other child to child interaction also establishes an accommodation for children's growth.

Skills Practice

Children learn through repetition. Young children especially like hearing the same stories read, to repeat an activity, or to watch a program over and over. Children are intuitively able to look at the same object from differing vantage points. Each time they repeat an activity they are learning something new.

The important thing to remember in skills practice is that children also need variety. This requires the learning professional to continually (at least monthly) change items within the learning environment. Although the objects will differ the skills the objects teach will remain the same. In addition, children need to learn new skills as well as practice old ones. Therefore, the educator must plan to meet children's needs as they grow. This implies having many materials available to meet individual children's skills as necessary. It was stated earlier; children need time to develop their own base of knowledge. Therefore, much of the day should be spent with children engaging in active learning while the teacher supports through asking questions and supplying explanations.

Curriculum

The type of curriculum a child care center uses is of utmost importance; because it lays the groundwork for Developmentally Appropriate Practice. There are many choices for curriculum the most popular tend to be High Scope; Bank Street, and ***. These curriculums are research-based. The creators of these programs studied children and developed their curriculum based on what they saw. This makes them more acceptable in the eyes of professionals. However, there are other programs that take into account the needs of children on a more practical level. No matter the curriculum the important thing is to ask the provider the right questions about the curriculum; which will be covered later in this book.

Environment and Community

Developmentally Appropriate Practice requires what is called a child centered environment. A **child centered environment** is the setting up of an area where everything is geared toward children. Child development requires that educators focus on the whole child, so the environment must be geared towards this end. There are five areas where this applies: a secure atmosphere, general learning set-up, learning activities, room decoration, and restroom usage.

A secure atmosphere requires that children feel safe and valued within the center. Early childhood professionals set the tone for this through establishing positive guidance techniques. **Positive Guidance** is the use of positive words, knowledge of proper behavior for a child's age, and meeting the needs and desires of children under the providers care. Developmentally appropriate practice requires a calm and knowledgeable care giver who is able to help children see beyond their own needs to the thoughts and to the feelings of others; while at the same time protecting the rights of each child to be safe and nurtured.

General learning set-up requires that all materials are available to children without assistance. This includes puzzles, writing utensils, art supplies, blocks, and other materials used for skills practice. While many of these things are kept away from children unless they are in use; the important thing is that children have access to them when they are needed.

Learning activities are to be appropriate for the age of the children. This means each age level needs the benefit of activity suitable for their development. Curriculum which is appropriate for two's is rarely appropriate for fives. Early learning professionals need to know the skills which are being acquired by the children in their care and create activities which support their learning.

Room decoration is often overlooked in a child centered environment. Teachers decorate thinking of the children, but often fail to consider height. The average five year old is between 3.5 and 4 feet tall. All decorations and other items need to be placed at children's eye level.

Restroom usage requires independence. Children need for things to be easily accessible to them. The advent of child size fixtures has helped, however stools and close supervision can also ensure that children develop restroom independence. Overall, a child centered environment is geared to support and emphasize a child size world.

The community of a center is very important to the growth and development of young children. Providing a place where diversity and individuality are supported and emphasized, allows children to explore the world around them. This exploration is again the basis for the knowledge construction, thus a culturally varied environment supports a wide base of understanding. The teacher needs to foster a sense of

community in the classroom. Each child should be able to see how they fit in the environment. It is of the utmost important that children see themselves as a positive member of the community as well as an individual. Watching how a classroom functions over several different occasions is the best way to get an honest picture of the community in a classroom.

Providing Proper Nutrition

Physical growth and development requires that children receive the proper nutrition. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has rules and regulations defining what constitute good nutrition. Based upon the four basic food groups (dairy, fruit/vegetable, meat/meat substitute, grain/breads) and the food pyramid child care providers can supply nutritious meals for children.

According to the Food Buying Guide for Child Nutrition Programs children need the following guide for meals.

Breakfast- a serving each from the milk, fruit/vegetable, and grain/bread group

Lunch - a serving from each of the 4 food groups.

Snack - a serving from 2 of the 4 food groups.

Supper- a serving from each of the food groups

This guide can be very helpful to those doing meal planning. The guide allows for variety there are 61 pages of choices for meat and meat alternatives, 80 pages of choices for fruits and vegetables, 12 pages for bread/grains, and 1 page for milk. In addition it has another section which includes condiments, spices, fats, jellies, and snack foods. The USDA also has a variety of resources for teaching children about nutrition.

The community of early childhood professionals has encouraged providers to serve food family style in centers. The goal of this is to let children make choices of what they do and do not want to eat. In addition, it allows children to determine when they are full thus determining that children learn to recognize the difference between being full, being hungry and when you have eaten enough. The USDA guidelines show the food that must be served in order to present a balanced meal to the children. Serving food family style teaches children about making good food choices. It is important for the center to give parents a way to determine what the child has eaten during the day. So, that you as a parent know what kind of nutrition your child is actually consuming.

Teaching children about nutrition is an important component of early childhood education. Developing a culturally diverse atmosphere means providing a variety of tasting experiences for children. In order, to do this there are several techniques. The

best technique has proven to be to have a nutrition curriculum. Where children learn about the four food groups, how to recognize hungry and full, to know that Mc Donald's is fun but not healthy, and to learn to try a variety of foods.

Cooking experiences are another important part of nutrition training. In addition, to teaching children that food is prepared; it offers a chance to learn math and science concepts in a fun and exciting way for children. This should also be an activity you find being used on at least every other month or so.

Parent and Community Involvement

Parent and community involvement works in several ways. First it starts with the teacher/parent relationship. This is of utmost importance to any center. As a parent you should expect to have a good and professional relationship with your child's teacher. This relationship should include being able to ask questions about development, behavior, and other information. In addition, you should expect teachers to be able to tell you at any given time, what are your child's strengths and weaknesses. This discussion should at times give you suggestions that you can do at home to help your child to grow.

One thing to remember as you search for a center is; in business you can have either a customer or a client. A customer searches place of business to purchase a certain product or service. Sometimes they come into the establishment to ask questions about a project or problem they are having. A client on the other hand is someone who depends on an experts knowledge and expertise to help them to deal with an issue in their lives. A child care center is a unique business because it has both customers and clients. You must be satisfied with both services before you can choose a center that is right for you.

A second area of parent and community involvement is how often parents are invited to become a part of the learning environment. The center should encourage you to be there as much as possible. Quality Centers usually have parents who volunteer to read stories, serve at parties, or be room mothers or fathers . Many centers ask parents who are doctors, letter carriers, or other community helpers come in and talk about what they do. Still other ways to involve parents is asking them to come in and talk about their cultural heritage. Centers have a myriad of ways of encouraging parents to be involved.

The final way a center generally asks parents to be involved is on a parent board or committee. This often asks parents to come in an help the center to make decisions or to participate in a center project such as re-surfacing the playground or painting new colors in a classroom.