Initiative

Position paper: Active and Responsive Caregiving to Support Children’s Development

The active and responsive caregiver takes cues from each child in order to know when to expand on the child’s initiative, when to guide, when to teach and when to intervene.

The caregiver’s skill as a sensitive and sophisticated observer is an essential component of her effectiveness with children under three. Because babies and toddlers are not yet fluent in language, their caregivers must be able to interpret subtle cues from children’s expressions and be able to “read” body language. They must know, for example, that a scream from one baby indicates delight in a new toy but from another child may indicate fear of the same toy. In addition to observing carefully, caregivers should document their observations in writing, in order to share with families the progress of a child’s development, which is often subtle and may be missed if it is not carefully recorded.

In order to do this well she must be in close communication with the child’s family and know about happenings at home that may create stress, both unpleasant and joyful, for the child. She must understand the temperament of each child; one baby may become over-stimulated if there is too much noise or excitement in the room, while another may exhibit signs of boredom and irritability if things are too quiet. Providing for both children will

10 Components of high quality child care
1: Child Care Programs Follow Appropriate Health and Safety Practices
2: Staff Well Trained in Early Childhood Development (0-3)
3: Age Appropriate Environments
4: Small Groups with Optimal Ratios
5: Primary Caregiving and Continuity of Care
6: Active and Responsive Caregiving to Support Children’s Development
7: Curriculum, Observation and Individualized Programming
8: Emerging Language and Literacy
9: Family Involvement and Cultural Continuity
10: Comprehensive Support Services
require sensitivity and skill in arranging a physical environment and atmosphere that are appropriate for both. Relieving stress involves recognizing fatigue and physical discomfort, providing appropriate amounts of stimulation for each child, establishing predictable but flexible routines and maintaining a rich and orderly play environment filled with interesting toys and materials. Caregivers enjoy playing, talking and sharing books and music with the children, in addition to providing close and loving attention to their physical needs. They understand that very young children learn from every experience, from a diaper change to sharing a book with another child and a caregiver.

The responsive process has been described as having three steps:

1. Watch: The caregiver begins by watching for both verbal and non-verbal clues.

2. Ask: The caregiver asks herself, “What message is the child sending? What does the child want from me?”

3. Adapt: The caregiver adapts her actions to meet what she believes to be the child's needs. She watches the child and continues to modify her actions until the child's response lets her know that his or her needs have been met.

“Caregivers enjoy playing, talking and sharing books and music with the children”
Anne Stonehouse and Jim Greenman describe individualized, personalized and responsive care as: “The essential sense of trust and security for children and parents is built on care that is responsive, nurturing and appropriate to each child when the child needs it. Each child is viewed in the context of family and culture, and all caring practices and interactions are designed to empower the child and to promote a positive sense of self.”

Small group sizes and low adult/child ratios make it possible for caregivers who have primary responsibility for four babies or five toddlers to provide responsive care and keep written records of children’s development, interests, moods and well being. Using these written records in consultation with the child’s family, caregivers can provide individualized routines and play experiences for each child.

References


Practices that sustain personalized care include:
- Flexible, individualized schedules and routines.
- Personal rituals between child and caregiver.
- Caregiving practices tailored to the characteristics of each child.
- Continuity of caregivers.
- Consistency of care practices between home and care.
- Primary caregivers that act as quality monitors, advocates for children and parents, and as vehicles for parental influence.

In addition to requiring careful observation skills and skill in establishing a rich and appropriate environment, responsive care requires knowledge of child development and an understanding of temperament and individual differences among children.

From greeting the child and family as the child enters the program in the morning, to giving a brief report of the kind of day he or she had at departure time, responsive caregivers can establish a smooth and respectful connection between home and child care for each child.

When caregivers provide active and responsive care for babies and toddlers, bonds of attachment are formed. Children feel secure, safe and loved. Caregivers gain feelings of satisfaction and pleasure in their work and families relax in the knowledge that their children are receiving high quality care.

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