



Webinar A1 – Reflective Curriculum Planning for Infants and Toddlers

Question and Answer

Question 1 - How do EHS program staff work with parents who refer to their child as a child who is already accomplishing everything?

Answer: Parents like to be validated for the work they do with their children. If they refer to their child as “already accomplishing everything,” it sounds like they want the teacher’s acknowledgement, and acknowledging another person’s point of view is an excellent way to begin a productive conversation. Acknowledging the parent’s perspective is an excellent first step towards building a relationship. Then, the next step is to discover more about the parent’s thinking. They might reveal what they have noticed about the child’s interests, feelings, needs, or current development. This brings them into the conversation with you, beginning the partnership of planning what kinds of things to do next to further their child’s development and learning.

Question 2 - How do caregivers balance time throughout the day when taking care of special needs children and the other children in their care?

Answer: Setting up the environment and following a daily routine so toddlers can do things independently frees the caregiver to give more one-on-one time when children need it. Also, teachers can balance the interests of a group of children by recognizing the power of subtle nonverbal relational cues, like a smile, a nod, an encouraging look, or just a few words. These simple gestures are messages that can go a long way towards responding to a child emotionally, without dropping everything to focus specifically on that child. A child being the sole focus of the teacher’s attention is what happens when we regard the daily care routines as times for engagement and learning. As Magda Gerber pointed out, during care routines like diapering and meals, a primary care teacher fuels the child with attention. This gives the child a feeling of goodness that prepares them to explore on their own, making their own discoveries with the play materials set up in the environment. Giving full attention during the caregiving routines helps children cope when the caregiver needs to attend to someone else. Additionally, helping children work through conflicts and make friends goes a long way towards balancing the caregiving workload. Children, who have learned, with the support of an adult

what to say or do in the moment of conflict, when feelings run high, are not reliant on the adult to resolve conflicts. They have things they can say or do to work through conflicts with peers and will tend to have more positive than negative interactions during play as a result. The upside of this for the teacher is that when children are happily engaged with each other, they require less intervention from the caregiver.

Question 3 - When having toddlers engaged in an activity, is it better to have more or less materials available for experimentation?

Answer: This is really an “it depends” answer. Of course, begin by observing how children are using the materials and how they reveal their thoughts or ideas. The materials made available within the play context are the raw materials they will use for their exploration and investigation. So to know what materials work or how much is enough and how much would be too much, one needs to ask what supplies these infant-toddler investigators need in order to pursue their investigations. Just like a scientist, there will be points during the play when novel materials may need to be added to the play or duplicates might be nice, or when a large collection of one type of object, like jar lids, is what they need. Observant teachers keep in mind their role as “stage manager” to the play, (Jones and Reynolds, 2011), supporting infants and toddlers as they make meaning. Observing to discover what materials add just the right amount of complexity is important -- just enough, but not so much that it overwhelms.

Question 4 - How do EHS program staff encourage parents to participate when they are not responsive to parent meetings and other things the program offers?

Answer: Below are some strategies teachers can facilitate family engagement. Asking for their ideas through a poll is a way for parents to give input on what times are best for them to meet. Posting questions that elicit their ideas on tablets near the entry is one way to capture families’ ideas as they arrive and leave the program. Alternating afternoon meetings with evening meetings might be tried to encourage a broader segment of participation. Sometimes doing a little research to find out what kinds of things would help the parents feel welcome, is worth the time, like translating some of the notices into a home language used by a number of the families, or learning a few words in families’ native languages to use as cordial greeting or in an invitation to participate in a gathering. Proposing a variety of different kinds of activities parents can participate in, such as a list inviting families to bring in specific types of recyclable materials that could be repurposed for play, or having a video player near the school entry playing a looped clip of some videos of children engaged in play and learning, or showing these clips of their children at a movie night! Parents love to see their children in photos and film, and this can provoke lots of conversation around the kinds of learning they are doing in the play. Another option is to have a scrapbook day and take pictures of the children and let the parents make a book to take home. Some programs have engaged parents in planning a garden together, which can involve many different tasks throughout the whole year. Of course, asking parents what special interests, skills, or talents they might be able to share is a respectful way to discover what hidden sources of expertise lie within the community of families. Parent gatherings provide a good

way to invite participation through food, having a nutritious snack, accompanied by recipes that can be tried at home.

Question 5 - How can EHS workers share with parents that infants are learning through play in their everyday activities during home visits emphasizing their valuable role as their child's first teachers?

Answer: Loris Malaguzzi, the founding director of the world-renowned schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, stated "Stand aside for awhile and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before". Observing the infant's play alongside the parent is the first step in teaching, and it is not really teaching at this point, but learning, that is, learning from watching the child. And then, when we see a moment of play that we think is significant, we give it value by writing a note that records it or taking a photo of it. As we do so, we help the parent name the learning going on in the play. Having done this during a home visit, the parent is more inclined to want to observe and watch with a bit more intention and interest, on their own, after the home visit is over. We find that key questions help us as we observe infants at play, and using these with parents during home visits is a good idea. As you watch a moment of play together, ask parents, "What do you notice?" And to get them thinking about learning, a question like, "I wonder what he was thinking when he did that." It is very important to keep open a sense of wonder when doing a home visit. These kinds of questions help the parent see that even babies form hypotheses and investigate ideas, like, "If I do this, I think that will happen."

Question 6 - Many teachers feel like they are not doing their job well if they are not actively *teaching* infants and toddlers. How can we help staff understand that setting up experiences is more important than direct teaching?

Answer: Most of us have to transform old ways of thinking about teaching in order to effectively teach when working with very young children. Documentation, such as photos, notes, and videos that capture children figuring something out in play is the most powerful way to get teachers re-thinking their image of teaching and learning. There are many DVD's that show infants engaged in constructing a concept or idea as they freely play with materials, so this is a good way to start such reflective discussions. The key questions to use when reflecting together on documentation were described in the vBTT webinar, A1: Reflective Curriculum Planning for Infants and Toddlers, and these are important to helping teachers begin to name what it is they are seeing in the play. Once they see that concepts like spatial relations, number, or causality are indeed happening through children's free exploration of the materials in play, they start to re-think their role as "teacher," and begin to reframe it as the person who sets up those contexts for play, with engaging materials. Documentation of children's exploration during play is a powerful way to demonstrate learning.

Question 7 - What are some simple tips that staff can begin to use to capture information about infants and toddlers?

Answer: There are many different ways to capture information about children’s learning. The first tip is to appreciate the value of simply watching, with intention, as children play. When something occurs that you want to remember in order to share it later with others, write it down and if relevant, take a photo. Taking photos has become so much easier than it used to be, but having an agreed upon system for taking, storing, and sharing photos is important. Every teacher and home visitor should have ready access to a camera both indoors and outdoors. There should also be an easy way to share photos with others during reflective discussions, so a computer or a digital tablet with a screen large enough to be viewed by a small group during the discussion is important. Cameras should have capacity to take digital video. A system for storing written notes, so that they can be accessed later and used in multiple ways for planning, child assessment, and family engagement is also important.

Question 8 – How can programs train staff to translate their observations into understanding what interests infants?

Answer: This requires regular times to meet to review the documentation, with the intent of reflecting together on how children reveal their concepts and ideas within the documented play. This is different from regular staff meeting times, which tend to relate to the general operation of the program. Reflective dialogue around documentation is specific to the teaching and learning that occurs with the children. The teaching team can discuss what they noticed as they observed the play and interactions and then reflect together on what the children might be revealing in the documented play, with respect to emerging concepts and ideas. This then opens possibilities for what will be offered next to facilitate ongoing learning and discovery.

Question 9 - What are some strategies for obtaining information from families that could help support curriculum development?

Answer: Carlina Rinaldi, of the Reggio Emilia schools, says that in our early childhood programs, we construct a sense of “we,” an expectation that we are participating in this together, children, families, home visitors and teachers. With this image in mind, we think about the furnishings and layout of the space where we meet with families, trying to make the space feel inviting, one that puts parents at ease and reflects their hopes and values for their children. Such spaces are most commonly set up for in-person gatherings, but increasingly, teachers are starting to create digital spaces and use digital methods where information can be shared with families. Once parents are gathered or a shared online site is established, the question is less about “obtaining information from parents,” and more about “engaging in shared reflection on how to support their children’s learning.” When the focus of the meeting or the communication is sharing documentation of children’s experiences with the intention of adding the parent’s perspective to the work, parent involvement takes on a whole new look. Again, returning to Rinaldi’s perspective of building a sense of “we,” families, teachers and children co-construct the curriculum.

Question 10 - How can EHS programs get all staff, even those not involved in direct teaching (i.e. cook, janitor, bus driver, admin staff), involved in promoting curriculum in a center based setting?

Answer: The EHS program is a community of people, and that community is a rich source of curriculum. First, it is important that programs not assume that "the curriculum" is what gets purchased as a set of activities that get delivered in isolation of all that goes on in an infant center, school, family home, or family child care home. The daily routines and the relationships that get established within those routines are a rich (and no-cost) context for curriculum. Therefore, the cook is important, as is the custodian, as is the person who delivers the mail. From the children's perspective, each of these people is doing something they want to know about it, because these people are driving trucks, pushing carts, cooking food, all of which engage children's interest and thinking. As children are invited to "pitch in" and participate with the full range of staff in a program, they use their emerging concepts that build a foundation for science, math, language arts, and fine and visual arts. When we consider the staff from this perspective, support staff have an important role to play in the curriculum, which they do by simply narrating to the children what they are doing as they do it. Magda Gerber describes this kind of conversation as a type of sports casting, giving play-by-play description of what is happening. This provides a context for the child of what the person does and facilitates vocabulary development. It really is a mindset that we have to change, to begin to invite participation of all the staff in the conversation around co-constructing the curriculum. We can begin by creating simple contexts as part of our curriculum planning, contexts that relate to the everyday routines, for example, a small group of toddlers walk the mail from the front desk to the classroom, a toddler is invited to push the meal cart down the hall to the meal area, or a toddler has his name on the helper chart as the one who gets to carry the list of passenger children to the bus driver. Each invites learning for the toddlers and gives each staff person value with respect to the relationship they form with children. Learning happens within all relationships with all those who work in a program.