

What are Effective Preschool Program Models?

Effective programs are programs that have a positive influence on children's development and learning. Preschool programs include kindergarten classrooms, child care centres, nursery schools and parent/caregiver and child settings that offer regular programs to groups of children. There is a deliberate intent to support children's early learning and development. Each program creates a learning environment that includes schedules and routines (time), organization of the physical environment (space), interactions between children and adults that guide learning and behaviour (people) and materials and activities that are the content of the curriculum (things).

Specific Goals and a Planned Learning Environment

Some early childhood settings have coherent learning environments that are organized to support clearly articulated goals. In other settings the goals may be unclear or contradictory. Or daily practices may be inconsistent with the stated goals. A recent review of the literature about early childhood pedagogy reported that many programs seem reluctant to spell out a set of specific goals (National Research Council, 2001).

It is difficult to compare different program models (e.g. Reggio Emilia, High Scope, Schools Cool, Montessori) with each other. Many factors contribute to children's early learning and development so it is difficult for researchers to isolate the impact of the program approach. The effect of an individual teacher, early childhood educator or family worker may overwhelm the effect of a particular learning environment approach. Cultural context, social class and temperament are other important factors. Also how a particular approach is implemented varies from staff to staff and program to program.

What is clear is that having a planned program direction and specific learning goals for children and families is more important than what program model is adopted. Quality early learning environments will incorporate an informed understanding of what children are capable of learning and how they learn effectively. They have specific learning goals for children that support self-regulation (behaviour, emotion and attention), language and thinking skills as well as the foundation knowledge and concepts needed for reading and understanding numbers (Keating 1998; National Research Council, 2001, Shonkoff & Phillips).

Limitations of Ready-made Programs

The implementation of ready-made program models may be easier at first but they are usually less effective (in terms of children's outcomes) than programs that construct their own learning environments (Finn-Stevenson & Zigler, 1999). The putting together of a planned, coherent learning environment seems to create a more effective setting than trying to transplant a particular program model. Ready-made program models may offer materials and activities that complement programs goals and directions.

Researchers have found that staff in effective programs (regardless of curriculum approach) are more likely to be involved in model development than are staff working in less effective programs. They are more likely to be active participants in designing the program components and monitoring the impact of the program on children's learning (Frede, 1998, National Research Council, 2001).

The Value of Play

TORONTO FIRST DUTY

Play is a pedagogical strategy that takes advantage of children's seemingly natural activity. Effective preschool learning environments embed opportunities for learning in the physical environment and play activities. Play, combined with judicious amounts of direct instruction, creates important learning moments that build children's competencies.

Play is more likely to engage children's attention when it offers a challenge that is within the child's capacity to master (McCain & Mustard, 1999; National Research Council, 2001). When adults become involved in children's play, they can help with the difficult spots or sequences activities in a way that's clearer and reinforces learning (Keating, 1998).

References

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