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ABSTRACT

In addition to the appropriate equipment and curriculum, a necessary ingredient of an effective preschool program is the quality of the interpersonal climate within the classroom. This interpersonal aspect of the preschool program is the focus of this paper. It begins by discussing the role of the early childhood educator in establishing the classroom climate, noting that the teacher's responsibilities in this respect are: (1) developing teacher-child relationships; (2) designing effective home-school relationships; and (3) building relationships with the support resource staff. It also notes that the personal qualities considered important in early childhood teachers are awareness of the uniqueness of each child, flexibility, and a wide range of interests. Checklists of characteristics and skills of good early childhood teachers are included. The developmental stages of teachers are examined to assess the different kinds of learning opportunities that would benefit each stage and strengthen professional commitment. The paper suggests workshops, conferences, inservice training, and periodicals as ways to enhance professional growth. It also notes that an additional way to grow professionally is through self-assessment of teaching performance in the classroom setting, and of interactions in the non-classroom setting. Of the several models for staff evaluation, the paper recommends the "enabler model," because it supports developmentally appropriate early childhood education. Contains 13 references. (BAC)

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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PAPER NUMBER 7

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KENTUCKY PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS

**Professional Development:
Growing And Interacting As A Teacher**



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Introduction

It has been said that the people who work with young children determine the quality of the program. No matter how extensive the equipment or lavish the facilities, no matter how comprehensive the curriculum, the essence of any successful program is the quality of the interpersonal climate within the individual classroom.

The Role Of The Early Childhood Educator

Teaching in preschool programs offers each professional a lifelong learning challenge. The teacher's role can be demanding and be physically and emotionally taxing as well as being highly satisfying and rewarding (Machado and Meyer, 1984). Preschool teachers perform a variety of functions as they work with children, families, and other staff members. Although the

roles of teachers will vary, usually they will include the following responsibilities: (1) establishing the classroom climate; (2) developing teacher-child relationships; (3) designing effective home-school relationships; and (4) building relationships with the aide, volunteers and other support resource staff.



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A quality program is staffed by adults who understand child development and provide developmentally appropriate experiences. This understanding can be enhanced by becoming involved in conferences, workshops, in-service training and additional educational courses.

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Classroom Climate and Preparation

A growth-producing climate is formed by the staff: administrators, teachers, aides, volunteers and support personnel working in cooperation to help children discover the wonderful world around them. These people must work in harmony, and have faith and trust that both children and adults want to learn and that such learning can be fostered in a comprehensive developmentally appropriate fashion.

Early childhood teachers are responsible for developing classrooms where children feel secure and comfortable with themselves and their surroundings. The furnishings and equipment in these classrooms are chosen with the characteristics of children in mind. The colors are pleasing, and the floors easy to keep clean. Teachers organize the room so that materials are accessible and can be easily replaced by the children themselves. For more information refer to "Planning the Environment", Technical Assistance Paper #4.

Teacher-Child Involvement

The early childhood teacher has a vital role in the young child's development. The role is that of guide, facilitator, preparer of the environment, rather than simply impartor of information, although that too is necessary. Teacher like and respect their young charges, making sure that they listen to the children as well as talk to them. For specific techniques and strategies, refer to "Guiding Children's Behavior," Technical Assistance Paper #5.

Teacher-Parent Involvement

Parents can be valuable resources in the early childhood class although it is important that there is a clear understanding of their roles. Some parents, or even grandparents, might want to prepare flannel board figures or other instructional aids at home. Parents often like to accompany the class on field trips or volunteer for some specific event even though they might not be able to come in to the classroom on a regular basis. Teachers and parents maintain close contact through frequent notes, phone calls and home visits. Other suggestions for strengthening the home-school linkages can be found in "Family/School Involvement", Technical Assistance Paper #6.

Teacher Aides and Volunteers

The individual needs of children can be met most effectively when there is a low staff/child ratio and small groups of children (Day, 1988). This necessitates auxil-

iary personnel such as aides and volunteers. Planning for the best use of these helpers is an important aspect of the teacher's job. In order to work well with aides and volunteers, teachers should learn something about them, their strengths and interests. Aides and volunteers will need to learn the particular styles of classroom management and methods of instruction used by the teachers with whom they work. It is important that adults have similar requirements for children since consistency helps children feel secure.

Aides and volunteers can be good sources of information about particular children since even the best teacher cannot see everything that goes on in the classroom at all times. Teachers should listen to their helpers and use their suggestions whenever feasible.

Resource Staff

Early childhood teachers in the public schools are not isolated in their jobs. They have the advantages of support staff as well as aides and volunteers. Special education teachers, speech, occupational and physical therapists, school nurses and social workers and the principal of the school are all available as part of the team when a particular problem is encountered. Depending on the circumstances one or all of these people can be of assistance. Although all preschool teachers should develop basic skills in working with children with a variety of abilities and needs, the teacher is not expected to be an expert in all of these areas and should not hesitate to ask for help when it is needed.

In many cases, preschool teachers may also have access to additional resource staff at the elementary school, such as the art, music or physical education teachers. These persons may offer suggestions for activities, provide resource materials and team teach with the preschool teacher. However, they should not be viewed as a relief instructor, providing a time when the preschool teacher can take a break. As described in "Classroom Environment Paper", Technical Assistance Paper #4, such areas as art, music and gross motor development are integrated by the preschool teacher into a total curriculum, not fragmented as separate "courses". Therefore, the preschool teacher and aide should generally provide instruction in these areas and should accompany the children to participate in any special activities which are directed by the resource staff. Staff-child ratios are important to maintain in all instructional settings.

Personal Qualities Of Early Childhood Teachers

Teachers of young children need to interact with all kinds of people. Friendly, flexible men and women with many different interests, who are aware of their environments will often be successful in the early childhood profession (See Figure 1 and 2). This is as true of aides and volunteers as it is of teachers.

Awareness

From an early age children have different experiences, abilities and interests. The need to discover these idiosyncrasies and build upon them which requires a high degree of observation and awareness on the part of the teacher. Although each child is unique, there are many similarities among children and a basic knowledge of child development is essential for those who work with youngsters. When an adult understands that a particular child is acting the way many children of the same age would act in similar circumstances, out-of-bounds behavior may not seem so troubling.

Flexibility

If the early childhood teacher is flexible and the curriculum is based on the children's stages of development, a child with special needs can be mainstreamed into the early childhood classroom with little difficulty. In a typical family, each individual family member has his or her own interests, needs and abilities. Because children are used to such variations within the family, they are not likely to expect everyone to be alike.

Teacher Interests

Children learn from activities that are personally meaningful to them, so the early childhood curriculum follows the interests and needs of the children. Thus the early childhood teacher must have a wide range of interests from which to draw appropriate materials. For example, if a beetle is found in the classroom, the early childhood teacher uses this opportunity to gently capture it and examine its attributes, later releasing it outside. In this way the teacher demonstrates reverence for life and responds to children's natural fascination with the environment. Meanwhile children learn some of the properties of all living things. A unit on insects could be a logical outcome of such an unexpected encounter with nature.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS

A good early childhood teacher:

- is warm and caring
- is patient and flexible
- has a good sense of humor
- respects and understands parents as children's first teachers
- welcomes diversity among children
- builds upon children's interests
- models desired behaviors
- redirects inappropriate behaviors
- is sensitive to children's individual needs
- is aware of each child and the total group
- likes children and enjoys working with them
- has many interests and shares them with children
- is creative and encourages creativity
- listens to children and converses with them
- praises appropriately and genuinely
- is reliable and responsible
- listens to children and converses with them
- strives to become more knowledgeable
- is interested in ideas and possibilities
- contributes to the profession
- has energy and stamina
- has self-understanding

Figure 1. Characteristics of Effective Childhood Teachers. (Adapted from Feeney and Chun, 1985; and Gross, 1972)

SKILLS OF THE GOOD EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER

A good early childhood teacher:

- responds to the developmental needs of young children
- provides support for children to work out their problems
- plans appropriate activities for individuals and groups
- communicates well with other staff and parents
- provides meaningful activities for aides and volunteers
- works effectively with other personnel
- chooses books, posters, puzzles and other learning materials with nonsexist and multicultural awareness
- uses his or her voice effectively
- maintains an orderly classroom.

Figure 2. Skills for Effective Early Childhood Teachers (Adapted from Feeney and Chun, 1985; and Gross, 1972.)

Effective early childhood teachers are interested in the world of ideas and love learning (Feeney and Chun, 1985). Such teachers understand themselves and their own needs and make sure that these needs do not intrude on their work with children. Good teachers are able to invent curriculum which satisfies children's needs while keeping the aims of the school in mind. Since the early childhood classroom is seldom static, teachers must be comfortable with open-endedness and able to adapt to changing circumstances. Teachers of young children enjoy people and are able to work effectively with families, aides, volunteers, and other staff.

Professional Growth

As defined by Betty Sawyers, (cited in Machado & Meyers, 1984), professionalism, entails understanding children and oneself plus "plain old hard work" (1971). Sawyers has identified some of the demands that professional early childhood teachers make on themselves:

Effective teachers can relate comfortably to children on a one-to-one basis, or as a group.



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1. Being a professional requires that teachers give full measure of devotion to the job.
2. A professional joins with others in professional organizations.
3. A professional treats children as people with feelings.
4. A professional is an educator who is informed about modern trends in education (1971).

Teachers' awareness of their own stages of development and training needs can lead to a strengthened professional commitment. An examination of a wide range of alternative routes for continual learning such as workshops, conferences, inservices and professional reading can lead to professional growth.

Developmental Stages of Teachers

Just as children go through stages of development it has been hypothesized that teachers also develop from the insecure beginning teacher to the mature teacher with several years' experience (Katz, 1977). Teachers at different stages would benefit from different types of inservice opportunities. When teachers understand the various stages they will realize that their questions and needs for inservice might be expected to differ from those of other teachers.

Stage One. In Stage One, beginning teachers are concerned with survival. The primary need for these teachers is for security. They are learning what young children are like and what one can expect of them. Specific ideas that can be adapted to the individual class might be useful. The need is for technical assistance, support and on-site help from those who are both familiar with the situation and who can be genuinely helpful. If the beginning teachers are interns, this helping role can be performed by their resource teachers, providing that these individuals have both the appropriate skills and personalities.

Stage Two. Stage Two can be expected to occur by the end of the first year of teaching. Teachers at this stage feel secure and are able to focus on the children's needs rather than on their own. Teachers might be interested in learning how to help children in particular circumstances. Specialists, consultants and colleague advice are some of the important ways to provide assistance during Stage Two. These teach-

ers need to have opportunities to exchange ideas with those who are more experienced. The setting for inservice training can now move out of the individual classroom into the larger school or central office.

Stage Three. During Stage Three teachers will probably be interested in furthering their skills. These professionals are tired of doing the same things and want to learn more about the cutting edge of the field. Attending conferences with a variety of workshops from which to choose can be particularly effective. Reading professional journals and discussing topics of interest with other experienced teachers can also be rewarding. Visits to exemplary programs can be beneficial as this teacher learns more about the possibilities in the field of early childhood education.

Stage Four. The final stage of teacher development is maturity, which can be reached in as few as three years according to Katz (1977). During this stage teachers are interested in more philosophical questions such as: Can schools change society? What is the aim of education? Advanced coursework at a university, introspective seminars, or participation in conferences might help to shed light on these questions. Perhaps these teachers would be interested

in pursuing original research to find answers to some of these questions. The inservice opportunities useful to teachers at the first stage of development would probably be of little interest to mature professionals.

At all stages of development it is important for teachers themselves to have some input into the kinds of inservice opportunities they would find most helpful since adults need to have some control over their own learning.

Continual Learning

No matter how well trained a staff member is, periodic refresher courses can be worthwhile. Because adults need to be in charge of their own learning, opportunities should be chosen that are in keeping with the learning style, personality and stage of development of the individual teacher or aide. Once the need is determined by the teacher and supervisor together, the supervisor can recommend resources where the desired training is available.

Training for early childhood staff is conducted by a number of organizations in Kentucky. Depending upon the area, there are local resources which can help and teach-



Teachers can intensify and support imaginative play by asking questions at the right time.

ers should pursue these professional opportunities.

Workshops. Universities, colleges and technical assistance agencies such as the early childhood regional training centers (RTC) for children with special needs often present workshops with particular emphases which would be valuable for early childhood educators. Teachers should familiarize themselves with those agencies in their area which provide workshops that pertain to early childhood.

Conferences. The Kentucky Association for the Education of Young Children (KAEYC), the Kentucky Association on Children Under Six (KACUS), and the Kentucky Head Start Association (KHSA) offer valuable conferences in Kentucky each year. Local affiliate groups as well as regional Preschool/Infant Planning Councils (PIPCs) offer periodic meetings with interesting speakers for various topics. Sometimes national organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or the Council for Exceptional Children, Division of Early Childhood (DEC) hold their annual conferences in Kentucky or a neighboring state. Such conferences can be particularly valuable for teachers at later stages of development.

Inservice. The central office of a school district will offer worthwhile opportunities for further learning as part of their inservice training. Teachers can request particular types of inservice help from those who are responsible for this form of professional development. Schools also have access to professional development consortia, the early childhood regional training centers (RTC) funded to assist in children with special needs, as well as various regional technical assistance staff.

Periodicals. There are many good journals for early childhood professionals. *Young Children*, published by NAEYC, *Dimensions*, published by SACUS, *Kaleidoscope*, published by KACUS, *Childhood Education*, the *Journal of the Association for Childhood Education International*, and the *Journal of Early Intervention* published by DEC are some of the most well known. Articles pertaining to early childhood can also be found in such periodicals as *Teachers' College Record*, the *Harvard Educational Review*, and the *Phi Delta Kappan* as well as journals dedicated to specific curricular areas or special needs.

Self Evaluation

Self-assessment is an additional way to grow professionally. Each individual program can develop its own criteria for evaluating teaching performance (Decker and Decker, 1988). The following characteristics are frequently evaluated:

- 1) **physical characteristics** - the physical health and vitality conducive to effective performance;
- 2) **mental ability** - ability to conceptualize the philosophy of the program, needs of children and adults involved;
- 3) **professional qualifications** - knowledge of methods and materials used in one's performing role; and
- 4) **personal attributes** - enthusiasm, poise, ability to adjust to frustrations, ability to cooperate with colleagues, and ability to accept constructive criticism (Decker and Decker, 1988, p. 231).

Evaluation procedures may include observations, video taping, checklists, questionnaires, interview-discussions or other locally devised procedures. Self-evaluation includes examining both classroom and non-classroom settings.

Classroom Setting

Periodic self-evaluation should be a part of every early childhood program. The effective teacher thinks through the events of each day to see where new insights can be discovered that will help in planning for the future. Besides daily and weekly reflection, more formal assessment should be a part of the evaluation process. The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, 1980), is helpful in bringing to mind various areas where teachers might want to examine their work in their classrooms. The National Association for the Education of Young Children Accreditation Criteria (1984) can be used as a resource to examine all aspects of one's class. Various checklists such as the Hartman Assessment Tool (1985) can be used to help teachers examine their own performance. Such instruments help educators realize the strengths of their own programs as well as those areas where they sense a need for improvement. Less formal means would be open-ended questions that might be posed by a supervisor, such as "What would you

like to see changed about your job?" or "What aspects of your job do you like best?"

Non-Classroom Setting

It is helpful for teachers also to think about their interactions with other school personnel and with parents. They might ask themselves whether they are using the available support staff effectively and whether or not there is a problem in conducting home visits. Often just brainstorming with another professional can help to see a problem in a fresh way, perhaps leading to a solution.

Staff Evaluation

Public schools are mandated to conduct periodic staff evaluations but the evaluation process itself can be helpful for all early childhood personnel if they consider it an opportunity to develop more fully as professionals. There are many models for staff evaluation but the "enabler model" (Hegland, 1984) is congruent with the philosophy which supports developmentally appropriate early childhood education. In this model the first step is for the teacher and supervisor to come to agreement on the goals and philosophy of the program. The climate of the school must be such that supervisor and teacher have mutual trust and respect. The supervisor helps the teacher to realize her/his strengths while the teacher identifies the areas for desire improvement. The supervisor provides the opportunities and resources to enable the teacher to meet these specified goals for improvement.

The process then continues in circular fashion with new goals for improvement identified once the original goals are met. This model has the advantage of being nonthreatening and growth-producing with both participants acting as professionals. A written evaluation in narrative form can be entered into the personnel file for each staff member with appropriate comments on the improvement that has taken place. There should be provision for comments from the teacher as well as the supervisor.

A Final Note

Teaching young children requires many skills and abilities. Early childhood educators interact with many different individuals and this interaction is crucial to their success. Because of this, the early childhood teacher's job is perhaps more demanding than many other professions, but it is also very rewarding. By continually developing and improving their skills year by year, teachers of young children will find their profession even more satisfying.

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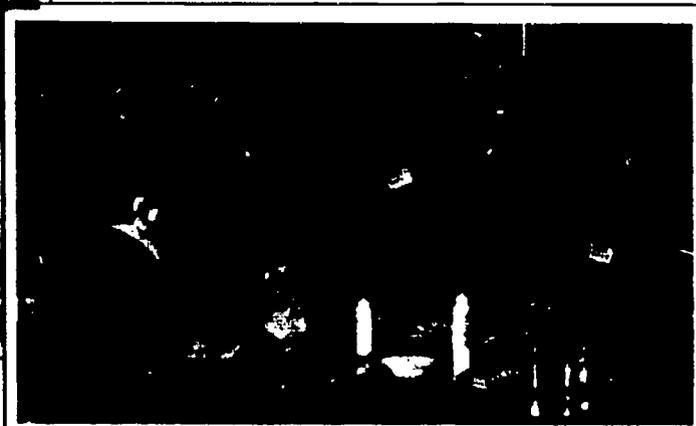


Many teachers have found that communication with parents through home visits, conferences, meetings, and telephone calls are well worth the time involved.



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Teachers can increase their skills and knowledge through coursework, in-service and other professional development.