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Maintaining Balance in the Early Childhood Setting

Managing life is all about balance. Some of us are “planners”. We have ideas about what we want to accomplish, think it thru, put a plan on paper, decide when we want it accomplished and accomplish it!

Some of us are “spontaneous”...we get an idea and we implement it as soon as possible!

Some of us mull things over for a while before we come up with a plan, carefully considering each option.

Some of us do our best thinking while working alone and some of us are most creative when we brainstorm solutions with others.

Regardless of our style, all of us, in our role as early childhood educators, have to work together with other adults in order to provide high quality care for the children we serve, whether we feel like it or not!

Most of us are here, because we care about making a difference in the life of a child. In order to do this well, there are two key ideas we need to keep in mind about helping children through their day...

- Young children and their families need structure
- Young children and their families need flexibility

Structure makes our environment predictable for children and families. It defines the roles and relationships among staff. It also defines the schedule, the curriculum, the policies and the procedures. Structure is what children count on when they come to school each day, knowing they can relax and participate in the things they enjoy. Structure allows parents to feel comfortable leaving their child with you, knowing who will be caring for their child, and for the most part, knowing what their child will be doing during each part of their day.

Young children do best when the structure of their day remains the same, day after day after day. They know that free play follows breakfast and that group time follows free play and that outside time follows group time. Parents also tend to envision their child doing these things at certain points of the day, and tend to do best when there are no “end of the day” surprises when they come to pick their child. Structure allows children to focus on learning and relationships rather than worries about what will happen next.

Thinking About the Idea of Structure in Early Childhood Settings

The formal definition of “structure” is “something made up of **interdependent** parts in a definite pattern of organization. It is a group of units so combined as to form a whole and which operates in unison”.

Reflect on your work each day. You are part of a system....sometimes the system works well and sometimes, thru no fault of your own, you end up feeling the system is not working at all. The **inter-dependent parts** in a childcare system include:

- Administrator(s)
- Teachers
- Parents
- Children
- Support Personnel
- Governing Body (*ie. funder and board*)

The key idea in thinking about how “structure” relates to the day to day operation of your center is the idea that in order to work well...**the system, and all parts of the system, must function as a whole, all together, all the time!**

That would mean that people are **working together as a team** to share information about what is and what isn't working from their perspective.

When working in a system, when one part of the system is not working....it will affect everyone...to a greater or lesser degree.

Thinking About the Idea of Flexibility In Early Childhood

Flexibility is an important personality trait for anyone who works with people to have, regardless of the age, gender or nationality being served. Flexibility allows us to suspend judgment. Flexibility allows us to suspend our own personal preferences in order to get to know someone else. Flexibility allows us to be a functioning member of a team. It allows us to meet children and families where they are, for whom they are, so we can meet their needs.

It is also crucial to the operation of any organization to understand that flexibility does not mean “bending and accommodating” *...all of the time!*

As with any new decision that affects a group of individuals or a system, there are many variables to consider **in relationship to each part of the system**. Systems that never bend are likely to “crack” under the pressures of change and systems that bend too much are likely to lose sight of their mission.

In order to do this well, we need to be able to provide enough structure to create an environment that is predictable for young children and their families **and** we need to offer enough flexibility in our attitudes and in our systems, in order accommodate the varied needs of the individual children and families we serve.

All of us need to work together as a team..... it is the nature of our business...

...structure...and ...flexibility are key components of our business.

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