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The Core of Early Childhood Education Today

In the previous section, we addressed the environment and supplies needed for children's learning. In this section, we address the core of ECE: play, interactions, and building relationships with families. These concepts are introduced here and elaborated on in Chapters 5–9, especially as they relate to learning centers that address the whole child—including approaches to learning, social, emotional, cognitive, language, and physical development, as well as preschool content areas of creative arts, social studies, numeracy, science, and literacy. Treasuring every interaction with the child and building relationships with families serve as the foundations of education in all early childhood programs.

Play

Research has demonstrated evidence of the strong connections between quality of play during the preschool years and children's readiness for school instruction (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000). Supportive, well-supplied classrooms are essential for development to take place. Stimulation from the environment changes the very physiology of the brain, interlocking nature and nurture (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Further, research has directly linked play to children's ability to master academic content, such as literacy and numeracy (Hyson, 2008; Rogers & Sawyers, 1998).

In constructive play, materials are set up in a manner that promotes a specific goal or problem to explore through the play. Multiple types of materials should be available with which children can explore (e.g., sorting, classifying, looking at part/whole relationships, equivalences, experimenting with real-life number problems, making predictions and comparisons, seeing the impact of gravity, cause and effect). In a similar manner, materials and environments can focus on socioemotional development by having children act out scary concepts, frightening experiences, or something troubling they have seen on the news. Problem solving and different approaches to learning can be developed, as well as specific skills and concepts across all developmental areas.

Play promotes grounding of socially shared meaning for both physical and social worlds (Bruner & Olsen, 1977). Sociodramatic play is a type of play in which language plays the central role; extensive language use is often viewed as a key

feature of mature play (Bodrova & Leong, 2008; Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). In sociodramatic play, children develop a scenario that they want to play out. This might be one chosen from a book that had been recently read in class or from events in the children's lives (e.g., going to the grocery store). The scenarios are often played out in the block center or sociodramatic play center with a number of children. Pretending is a central concept: Children pretend to be in certain roles and use pretend objects and situations. Bodrova and Leong (2003) also pointed out how such sociodramatic play can be encouraged with fewer children or even with a child playing alone (e.g., in the sand table or art center). In these cases, toy people can be included in all learning centers so that a child can assign roles to figures and proceed to act out different play scenarios. Bodrova and Leong (2008) suggested that this type of play should be highly encouraged in all classroom learning centers. Teachers are intentional in promoting play: They

Purposefully plan and provide learning opportunities designed to meet the individual needs and interests of the various children in instructional settings. They use knowledge of effective practices and strategies when interacting with children in order to promote children's learning and development. (Burns et al., 2010, p. 6)

For children with disabilities, teachers might say part of the dialogue for a child and encourage the child to imitate it or provide assistive technology devices to help the child communicate. To encourage learning of new words, teachers name objects, actions, and events.

Peers also should be encouraged to get everyone involved to play their part. Teachers can help to negotiate the cultural differences present within the playgroup so that all children's diverse perspectives are taken into account. For children who are deaf or hard of hearing and children who are new to learning English, teachers should include enough visual and tactile cues or assistive technology devices so that these children can take part in the conversation. Play can provide an excellent opportunity for prosocial behavior because it allows children to choose their own level of social participation. Children can play near each other, in solitary or parallel fashion, or in a group situation that allows for interpersonal interaction. Blocks, for example, allow children to work in real situations where other children need help—or even sympathy because a building fell down (Rogers & Ross, 1986). All these experiences will enhance children's interpersonal skills. To engage in quality play, children need time. To construct with materials and to explore their properties requires sufficient and supported time with the objects. Developing and acting out high-quality play scenarios requires at least 45 minutes. A long period of time allows the children to complete their play without worrying about cleaning up or rushing.

Interactions

In addition to multiple interactions with peers in play, similar interactions with adults and more advanced peers is a source for learning and development. The ways in which teachers interact with young children in classroom settings have important implications for children's developmental outcomes (Bowman et al., 2000). These interactions happen as adults integrate into play and also throughout the day, such as at mealtimes, when adults can model more sophisticated thoughts and actions. Adults can describe ongoing actions taking place in the child's world. They can create opportunities for communication, making sure that children have time to talk and to get feedback from teachers. It is important that communication extends interactions. In extended interactions, all participants tend to interact in the conversation, and it is very important that the child have ample opportunity to talk during these conversations. In many situations, the children should have more time to talk. The adult should match the child's pace and style of talk, with the adult making sure that the child has the time and the ability to contribute to the interaction. The topic should stay close to the child's topic. Adults should ask questions that expand on that topic and confine these questions to ones that are real, illustrating that they are truly interested in the child's response.

This process of supporting children's development and learning is a major part of what is referred to as *scaffolding* in teaching. A main point in scaffolding is to provide instruction that helps the child learn the activity but also requires that the child have as much responsibility for learning as possible. Children should not be shown how to complete activities that they are able to complete on their own. Even when teaching a difficult task, the adult should transfer the responsibility for completion to the learner as much as is possible.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) can be used to conceptualize this approach (Vygotsky, 1978). Adults can provide a scaffold for children's learning that is within their ZPD, or the zone in which a difficult task can be completed with the help of a more competent peer or adult. When taught in this manner, children learn the activity or knowledge at hand and also increase their ZPD, thereby becoming receptive to more difficult challenges. As illustrated in Figure 4.1, scaffolding is a central process in children's learning through interactions.

Intentional teaching does not happen by chance. Epstein (2007) identified strategies for interacting intentionally with children. Teachers using intentional teaching plan and provide learning opportunities designed to meet the individual needs of the various children in instructional settings. Teachers should use children's abilities and prior knowledge, including their understanding of their students' cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to be responsive to their students' knowledge, feelings, and circumstances. Espinosa discussed teachers' intent in terms of curriculum: "Teachers have explicit instructional goals for children that guide all aspects of their interactions

and classroom planning. Intentional teachers know their children, understand how to promote learning through individualized learning experiences, and reach out to families" (2009, p. 53). In the construct of intentional teaching, both children and teachers play active, deliberate roles in the processes that lead to children's learning and development (Burns, 2009). In many ways, this new construct reflects earlier work on effective teaching strategies proposed by those studying scaffolded teaching (Wood, 1980, 1998), mediated teaching (Feuerstein, Klein, & Tannenbaum, 1991; Karpov & Haywood, 1998), and content area teaching (Espinosa, 2009; Gelman & Brenneman, 2004; Ginsburg & Amit, 2008).

Finally, intentional teaching and scaffolding cannot effectively take place unless the interactions with children are positive, authentic, heart-felt, and meant to build important relationships between children and adults. The interactions should begin with basic needs and socializing children into both the finer and larger world(s), being attentive and tuned into children's developmental levels, providing comfort and encouragement when and where needed, encouraging children to interact with the environment and the many aspects of those diverse settings, and promoting the fruition of children's broad social and emotional development (Morrison, 2009).

Building Relationships with Families

A wealth of historic research has illustrated the important relationship between the level of parental involvement and children's school success. Parents who are more involved with their children and their schooling are more likely to have children who are successful in school, from preschool through secondary education. Morrison spoke to this when he noted, "Education starts in the home and what happens there profoundly affects the trajectory of children's development and learning" (2009, p. 188).

The family is of primary importance in ECE. They are the source of your students' prior knowledge, cultural knowledge, and family stories. A significant quality factor in ECE is continuous interactions with the families served (Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center, 1999). As a teacher, knowing and tapping into the prior knowledge, cultural knowledge, and family strengths is extremely important. Having a concrete knowledge of these elements helps the teacher bridge the divide between home and school, plus provides a starting point for instruction that connects with the child. This connection allows children to see the knowledge they already have as valuable and to then to build on it. This knowledge of the family and the child's prior knowledge often serves as the first rung of the scaffolding structure.

There are different venues for increasing parent involvement: the traditional back-to-school night, soliciting parent volunteers for field trips, or inviting parents to be

involved in assessments (which typically makes parents and children more relaxed and comfortable with a process that can traditionally be highly emotional). Researchers have found that parents tended to feel more comfortable asking questions of the teacher during play-centered assessments and felt that they had a more collaborative role in their child's education during this important overview time (Linder, 2008a). When you effectively and consistently communicate with families, you can strengthen the respective partnerships. To accomplish this, you can also communicate with parents via face-to-face individual and group meetings, written communication, telephone conversations, e-mail and web-site communications, and parent discussion groups (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004).

The preschool years mark the start of formal family relationships with educational systems. How you as a teacher initiate and build on these initial preschool experiences will potentially affect the family's future relationship with their child's educators, as well as the level of parental involvement that future schools will expect from the parents. A family's initial experience with you in preschool can become a model for how, what, and why parent involvement is so important. As a teacher, it is important to not assume that families know how to be involved with the school. Some parents may have had very negative experiences with their older children's education or culturally might not think it is appropriate to question a teacher. Therefore, it is important for you to model the types of relationships parents should have with school staff and teachers.

Section Summary

Play is central to young children's ECE experiences in that it supports their development across approaches to learning and development, including socioemotional, cognitive, language, and physical. Preschool content in areas such as creative arts, social studies, numeracy, science, and literacy are also learned through play. Research supports the view that teachers' strategies for interactions and for instructional purposes, along with their sensitivity to children's social and emotional development, are directly related to children's learning outcomes over the prekindergarten years (Pianta, Belsky, Vandergrift, Houts, & Morrison, 2008). Scaffolding and intentional teaching are two processes integral to young children's learning and development. Scaffolding and intentional teaching take place within positive exchanges between teachers and children, which build relationships between teachers and children. Families provide the primary relationships for children and are a major part of the team working in ECE. Without families, teachers cannot achieve intentional teaching because families provide the insight into the prior knowledge of the children, including information about language and culture and family stories.

The First Weeks of Preschool

How should you get ready for your first weeks of class? First, think of your goals for the first few weeks of school. Research has indicated that key factors to preschool success are building a positive, warm, trusting relationship with the children and their families; providing learning experiences that build upon the children's prior knowledge; having meaningful and interesting activities; and using effective assessment to plan group and individual children's learning opportunities (Bowman et al., 2000; Howes & Ritchie, 2002). In the first weeks of school, all of these goals should be met to varying degrees. First and foremost, the teacher should build a positive, warm, trusting relationship with the children and their families. However, this should not happen exclusive of the other goals. Many quality early childhood programs invest time and energy in these teacher, family, and child relationships. Home visits are encouraged to help form this relationship.

Your classroom will include children with many different characteristics. These children will represent a diverse range of cultural, lingual, ability, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Based on the type of children in your program, you should design an inviting activity agenda that considers the initial and ongoing transition into your school. You want your students to get to know and respect each other, as well as feel like a vital part of the classroom community of children, teachers, and families.

Therefore, during the first week of school, it is very important to establish daily routines and rituals, such as meeting and greeting children and their parents at the door, showing children where they put their backpacks or other gear upon entry into the room, and helping children separate from their caregivers and transition into your classroom.

The learning centers should include many group activities that allow all children to participate equally and collaboratively to get acquainted and establish friendships. During this first week, open a learning center or two so that children gradually and progressively learn about how and why you incorporate center-based practices into your daily routines. Be sure to clearly communicate your expectations of each of the learning centers. Expectations should include the use and purpose of materials and ways to safely use them. During the second week, you can open more of the learning centers. Children should demonstrate that they have a basic understanding of how to individually and collaboratively use the centers, so introduce an effective means by which children choose centers.

By the third week, all basic centers should be functioning effectively, and routines for choosing the centers can be established. A recall time should be added to the schedule and used after learning centers. The flow of the day should move away from strict teacher-guided management to a class-guided collaborative working environment. With this movement toward students' independence, there should be more self-

regulation in their management of a center-based space. For example, the block center may have a sign posted to indicate that only five children are allowed in the center at one time. Therefore, when a student attempts to enter that space, he or she must count first and then move on to another center if no space is available. Some teachers disagree with the number limits on centers, and instead instruct children to assess whether a center is crowded. If there is nowhere to stand, the students should negotiate and make a different choice. However, in both of these processes, children independently regulate their behavior and actions with little feedback from the teacher or peers.

After the fourth week, most daily routines should move away from the large group to a more holistic small-group setting. In this environment, each of the centers will be occupied by small groups of children; these children control, with the teacher's assistance, the interactions within this environment. Many of the children may previously have needed detailed assistance from you because they have little experience regulating their own behavior, especially during their first school experience in a group of unfamiliar children. By the fourth week, they have witnessed the flow of the day and how readily you and their peers assist them. Therefore, by this point they should be growing continuously more comfortable in this setting, in which they will spend most of the academic year.

Section Summary

Launching the beginning of a 1-year or longer relationship with a new group of children and their families is a special time, and the steps in this section provide support for a gradual process for success. After the first few weeks of school, the children should be familiar and comfortable with the established routines. Children should be learning when they can share and speak in large-group meetings, as well as when and why they need to provide silence when their peers and teachers are talking.

Key Concepts

- The ECE classroom is central to providing a high-quality program for young children. The classroom learning environment includes public spaces (e.g., circle area, learning centers) and private spaces (e.g., cubbies, nap area).
- Furniture and decorations in ECE classrooms should be child oriented in terms of size, location, and content.
- There are a variety of learning centers and they should include an abundance of organized materials based on the learning goals of the center.
- A daily schedule helps to organize the ECE day.
- Play is central to young children's ECE experiences in that it supports their development across developmental areas—that is, approaches to learning and

development, including socioemotional, cognitive, language, and physical, and content areas (e.g., creative arts, social studies, numeracy, science, and literacy) are also learned through play.

- Scaffolding and intentional teaching are two processes integral to young children's learning and development. Scaffolding and intentional teaching take place within positive exchanges between teachers and children, which build relationships between them.
- Families provide the primary relationships for children and are a major part of the team working in ECE. Without families, teachers cannot achieve intentional teaching because families provide the insight into the prior knowledge of the children, including information about language, culture, and family stories.
- When a new class is starting, this constitutes a special time for children. There are special steps needed to support a gradual transition for children to learn to know each other, the teachers, and the classroom activities and routines.

Self-Reflective Guide

This self-reflective guide will help you assess whether you learned the information in this chapter. It also provides an opportunity to identify areas in which you want or need more information. Are there some new ideas learned that will affect your immediate practice with children?

1. A variety of materials (as well as duplicates of many) are needed within learning centers. Are there certain learning centers that have particular appeal to you? Name one center and why it appeals to you. Are there learning centers that you think should be opened at the beginning of the year and others that should be opened later in the year? Why?
2. Reflect on the types of daily schedules. What periods of time are needed for young children in learning centers so that play and constructive activities can take place? Why is this amount of time needed? How do these times flow with the needs of the children in the class? Make a few notes. How long should large group be? Why?
3. Recognize the role of play in young children's learning and development. What do you think is most important about play given the information provided? Why?
4. Identify the nature of high-quality interactions between adults and children. List some key features.
5. Know the reasons for and basics of forming partnerships with families. Note two reasons.
6. Understand how to get started with a new group of children. What is a main point to understand about the first day? What is a main point to understand about the first week? What is a main point to understand about the first month?

Helpful Web Sites

Cooperative Children's Book Center

www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc

The Cooperative Children's Book Center through the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison provides resources and booklists for children's books covering various topics.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

www.naeyc.org/DAP

This site provides information on the basics of setting up a quality early childhood education classroom within the DAP framework.

Florida Parental Information and Resource Center

www.floridapartnership.usf.edu/programs_services/earlychild/tip.htm

The Parental Information and Resource Center at the University of South Florida provides many early childhood tips sheets (in English or Spanish) for teachers and for teachers to share with parents.

HighScope

www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=264

This preschool section of the HighScope site provides information on activities that are both specific to the HighScope program and can be used in other programs.

Teaching for Change

www.teachingforchange.org

This site provides multicultural book lists and resources.