THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

If you think of yourself as a spontaneous and flexible person, you may wonder whether you really need to plan. Nevertheless, when you work with children, looking ahead is absolutely essential. Without it, a day can lead to chaos, unhappy children, and irritable adults.

Planning ensures that you can provide a variety of play opportunities that will attract and stimulate children and enhance their development. Curriculum is a plan of activities that accomplishes the goals of a program. Caregivers should provide a balance between old and new activities. Some should be familiar things children like to do over and over again. Others should be new things to spark their interest.

Planning ahead allows you to gather the materials needed to carry out an activity. Knowing a day or week in advance what you will need allows you time to find, purchase, or prepare whatever you will require. When children have to wait while you collect supplies, they get restless. Then, when you are ready, they may no longer be receptive.

Planning lessens the number of conflicts between children. A group of children can engage in free play for periods of time, but eventually differences arise. During the three hours or so that children are in after-school care, some free play along with planned activities, keeps children busy and involved. Petty arguments and irritability will decrease.

Plans allow staff members to divide responsibilities. Everyone should know specifically what they will be required to do during a period of time.

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Some may have responsibility for playground supervision and others for setting up activities in the classrooms. Every step of the day—including transitions, activities, snacks, and free play—should be planned ahead of time.

The most important function of program planning is to ensure that both the short- and long-term goals of the program are met. Short-term goals are those that can be achieved during a single day, a week, or even, perhaps, a month. Long-term goals are those that will not be achieved until a fairly long period of time has passed. This span may cover several months or even a school year. Children need to feel successful through the completion of short projects or at the end of a single activity. But they also should be learning to carry through activities that will not bring rewards until a considerable period of time has passed.

Planning also helps staff members apply the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices and incorporate goals of anti-bias education. As each day's activities are decided, they can be measured against the guidelines. Will they allow children to develop their physical skills? Are there opportunities for creative expression? Is there a balance between staff-initiated activities and time for child-initiated ones? Are there activities at different levels of difficulty so children at diverse developmental levels can participate and feel successful?

Plans allow you to keep parents and the school administration informed of program activities. Make written plans so this information is readily accessible. Post your plans on a bulletin board for parents. Provide copies for the administrative person at your school or center.

PLANNING THE INTEGRATED CURRICULUM

Planning an integrated curriculum is one approach to meeting the goals of school-age child care program. An integrated curriculum is the linking of two or more subject areas such as literacy and math, or linking an academic subject to the community or vocations. This is accomplished by providing meaningful experiences that allow children to develop a variety of skills and knowledge that lead to the understanding of relationships and how things fit together. A school-age program is an ideal place to provide children with such meaningful experiences because it can allow for the necessary time for integration. An integrated curriculum activity has two or more primary goals. For example, an art activity could have the goal of teaching children painting techniques. Another goal would be to link the activity with someone in the community who paints pictures. The artist could visit the classroom and paint alongside the children. This activity could be further integrated with a literacy goal of doing research about the techniques of a specific artist, such as Jackson Pollock, Diego Rivera, or Vincent van Gogh. Often it requires more than one child care leader to implement an integrated curriculum. In this example, one caregiver might be responsible for the art activity and inviting an artist, while a second caregiver could plan the artist research activity. One resource for research would be http://www.gettingtoknow.com.
A key component to integrated curriculum is that children make connections between one subject and another. In this example, literacy, art, and the community are connected. Children can experience the connections between research, personal techniques and creativity, and local and historical artists.

**THE PROJECT APPROACH TO PLANNING**

Another way of meeting the goals of the program is through the use of the project approach. Lilian Katz (1994) defines project as an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning about. The investigation is undertaken by a small group of children, the entire class or an individual child. It is a research-based project focused on finding answers about a topic posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children. Projects provide sustained involvement of children, can engage parents, and are an opportunity to integrate the curriculum components of science, math, social studies, and literacy while challenging children. They evolve as a result of child care leaders reflecting on what they know about the interests, capabilities, and cultural context of the children in a group. The implementation of a project undergoes three phases: beginning the project, investigation, and concluding the project (Helm & Beneke, 2003).

Consider the situation in which a child care leader observes that children have an interest in motorcycles. The leader begins the project, phase I, by providing a variety of books, magazines, and pictures on the subject for children to explore. If their interest persists, he may decide to continue the project. He asks the children, “What do you know about motorcycles?” and “What do you want to find out about motorcycles?” The children’s ideas are written on a large piece of paper and posted in the classroom. Then in phase II, children investigate motorcycles. The leader plans to have a parent bring his motorcycle to the center and the children study the motorcycle, noting the details of its design. They create observational drawings for later use. The leader invites the parent to talk about the motorcycle. Video and digital cameras are used to document the investigation. The topic can be further investigated by going on a field trip to a motorcycle shop, or parents can be encouraged to take their children to visit one. The field trip will result in more observational drawings and pictures by the children. Later the children’s observation drawings, video footage, and digital pictures will be used to continue discussion about motorcycles. From these discussions, children can begin making and playing with a pretend motorcycle shop. Children refer to their drawings and the pictures of the motorcycle and replicate its components out of materials such as paper plates, toilet paper rolls, tape, and boxes. (Note: In one such investigation, the caregiver provided a sawhorse to be the frame of the motorcycle.) In phase III, the leader concludes the project by asking the children, “What did you learn about motorcycles?” Pictures and the caregiver’s written observations of children’s conversations and work acquired throughout the project document the learning experience. These can be organized to create a class book or poster presentation of the project.
GUIDELINES FOR PLANNING: WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A CHILD CARE PROGRAM?

Start with the Routine Things You and the Children Do Every Day

Plan who will pick up children at their schools, and know what the children will do when they first arrive at their after-school setting. Decide who will take roll, who will have the snack, who will supervise the playground, and what activities will be ready. These activities may seem trivial, but they are not. Children enjoy a predictable environment, and predictable environments support children's development of self-regulation. Carefully planning your schedule makes the day run more smoothly for both adults and children.

Capitalizing on Children’s Interests

Some children may want to continue themes they are working on at school, whereas others may have some current interests unrelated to school.

Holidays, too, create excitement that can generate ideas. Television or movies may also pique interests you can use. Sometimes one child has a special interest that can be shared with others. Use this child's interest to generate enthusiasm in others as they work together on projects.

Increase Children’s Awareness of and Respect for Cultural Diversity

Plan activities to help children embrace that they live in a society that includes peoples of many races, colors, and religions. This philosophy can be conveyed through books, holiday celebrations, art activities, toys, building projects, games, and festivals. Make these topics an integral part of your program, not just something you do on special occasions. Ask parents for help. Use the children as resources for customs that are representative of their culture.

Include opportunities for language-minority children to share their language with others. An example might be to have one child read or tell a story with another child translating as the tale progresses. Learn and use words from the minority language during the day's activities.

Foster Children’s Desire to Become Competent

Provide choices for children by creating space for a wide variety of activities for individual children or small and large groups with more self-selected activities than staff-selected activities. Let children help with daily routine tasks that allow them to use real tools. Teach them to cut up fruit
for snack time. Let them answer the telephone and take messages. Include them in the maintenance of their environment.

Plan projects that use tools and technology. Show them how to use a saw, hammer, and drill for woodworking projects. Let them measure with a T square, a tape measure, or a yardstick. Work with children to use digital cameras, CD players, video cameras, and computers.

**Encourage Children's Natural Play Interests**

Keep a store of props that inspire music, drama, and dancing. Help children also to be more competent with the fads that sweep through groups of children. Yo-yos, roller skates, and skateboards are not just “time wasters” but allow children to develop their skills. Use these interests to foster their physical development and greater self-esteem.

**Plan a Balance of Activities with Enough Choices for Children**

Include both group and individual activities. Provide quiet times interspersed with active play. Allow time for activities the children themselves initiate and conduct as well as those you choose and direct. Provide a variety of choices to allow for different interests and levels of capability and give children something to do.

**Include Some Activities That Will Recreate Everyday Experiences**

Remember that children who spend after-school hours in child care will miss these kinds of experiences. Take children with you to do the shopping for snacks or for a special art project. Arrange trips to local businesses. Take walks around your community.

**Allow Time to Meet the Special Needs of School-Age Children**

Let the children be alone or give them time to do what they want. Provide opportunities for them to make new friends or spend time with existing friends. Some children may even need time to rest or just do nothing.

**Plan How Transitions Will Be Accomplished**

Transitions are times when all or part of the group change places or activities. The morning arrival and end-of-the-day departure are also transitions. Each of these transitions
should be thoughtfully planned to prevent chaos and help children develop self-control and self-direction. Plan ahead by setting up curriculum areas so the next activity is ready as soon as the children move. For instance, when going from group time to individual activities, tell the children what is available and have them choose what they are going to do before they leave the group area. In that way, they can move directly to an activity. Minimize waiting time or times when children have nothing to do. Provide books, videos, or tapes for those times when children have to wait for others to be ready to move to the next activity or when a parent is late for pickup. Alert the children that a change will be taking place, allowing them time to finish whatever activity or task in which they have been engaged. “You have five minutes to finish up your project, then it will be time for cleanup.”

Involve the children in cleanup. Assign areas of responsibility and give them guidelines for what needs to be done. “Put all the blocks back on the shelf, matching the sizes and shapes.” “The leftover snacks can go into the refrigerator, wipe off the tables, and throw away the paper cups and napkins.”

Suggest an activity to avoid boredom on field trips. Sing songs, play games, or provide a snack. Children will find the time less stressful when they are occupied.

**Additional Guidelines for Planning**

- Be sure that all activities are developmentally appropriate. Know what children are capable of doing. Plan activities that allow success but also offer a challenge.
- Vary the settings for activities. Try painting outdoors or put on a play under a tree.
- Be flexible. If your plans are not working, change them. Or allow children to decide they want to do something different from what you had planned.
- Encourage adult/child and child/child interactions. Set up activities sometimes so you can be involved with children. At other times, encourage children to work together.
- Help children change their attitudes about male/female stereotyping. Beware of falling into the trap of unconsciously planning different activities for boys and for girls. Encourage them instead to try all activities.

**ORGANIZING THE AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM**

There are several approaches to organizing the program for your after-school group. The following are types that have proved successful in different situations. No one is more effective than the other. The appropriateness of each depends on many factors: your goals for children, the
Independent Projects

Many children have abundant ideas about what they want to do. Their own
enthusiasms lead them to be involved in reading, making maps, construct-
ing models, or collecting. These children will work diligently by them-
themselves. Some children want to continue alone on a project they began with
a group. They may follow a group project to grow crystals with a study of
how crystals are used in tools, industrial equipment, or even jewelry.

Often you will initiate an idea for a project based on the interests or
needs of a particular child. A child may talk about a visit to a local plane-
tarium with her grandparents. You can suggest a variety of related activities
about stars and the solar system. Another child may need encouragement
to use language. Begin with making simple puppets, then a puppet theater.
Few children will be able to resist staging their own plays.

It is important to allow as much freedom to pursue individual interests
as possible. Children should feel they can still do the kinds of things they
might do if they were at home. Other children will cherish this opportu-
nity to do things that they cannot do at home. All you have to do is allow
enough time, provide the materials, and offer guidance when needed.

Group Activities

In order to foster group unity, at times you want all the children to engage
in the same activity. A group may work on a single project that has many
parts. Each part will be completed by small groups of children. An example
might be preparing a drama to present at a parent meeting. Some children
can write the script, some make costumes, and others build the scenery.
Then, new groups can be formed to delegate acting parts, rehearse, change
scenes, and arrange lighting. This is a typical example of a long-term pro-
ject that might be many months in the making.

Sometimes limitations on space or equipment may dictate your deci-
sion to have all children doing the same thing at the same time. If you
have limited space indoors for extensive projects, you may have to divide
your group with some children on the playground while others work in the
classroom. Some child care facilities have one room set aside for a specific
activity such as arts and crafts. In this case, children may have to sign up to
use the special room, or groups might be scheduled for designated times.

Groups may have a variety of configurations. Some may consist of chil-
dren who are close to one another in age or ability. Others may have a mi-
ture of ages and proficiencies. When there are wide differences in ages such
as from five- to 12-year-olds in a class, plan some things for the younger
children and others for those approaching adolescence. Each age level has
different developmental abilities and interests. At other times, a mixed
group allows opportunities for the older children to help the younger ones.
This can add to the older children’s self-esteem and to the competence of the younger ones.

Whatever the reason for grouping children together for an activity, make sure these activities build on previous skills or interests. Also ensure that these experiences further the goals of your program.

**Interest Centers**

An interest center is a space carefully arranged to accommodate the activity for which it will be used. A variety of interest centers throughout the room allows children to move freely from one to another. This encourages exploration in different areas of the curriculum. Typical interest centers found in child care environments are block building, science, art, reading, music, cooking, computers, dramatic play, and games. Within each of these areas, basic materials are always available to the children. Some materials are changed from time to time to add new interest and stimulation. A block area might contain a selection of standard wooden blocks, animals, cars, or signs. At times, you might add people, trees, boats, airplanes, or colored blocks. Styrofoam sheets, flat wood pieces, or metal forms also invite new kinds of play. Stock an art area with paper, crayons, marking pens, scissors, and paste. For variety, add different colors, sizes, or shapes of paper. Consider using paper punches, staplers, various kinds of tape, rulers, calculators, and templates.

**Field Trips**

Field trips can consist of a simple walk around the block or an all-day trip to the beach. Both should be planned carefully, although obviously a walk takes less planning than an all-day excursion. Start by deciding on the purpose of the trip. A walk can reinforce a project to map your neighborhood or collect material for a nature collage. A trip to the beach can include collecting shells or studying wave patterns as the tide changes. As with all other activities, fit this into the overall pattern of activities.

Plan each detail so both you and the children know what to expect. Obtain permission slips from parents for car or bus trips. Arrange for lunch and transportation. Make sure there are enough adults to properly supervise the children. Discuss the arrangements with your administrator and other staff members. Tell the children where they are going, what they will do, and what the rules will be. (Make sure you visit the site ahead of time so you will know what to expect and can plan appropriately.) Have the children wear recognizable clothing such as a special T-shirt or a large name tag that includes the program’s information.

Plan further with the children so they will get maximum benefit from the trip. For instance, if they are going to the beach to gather shells for a collection, prepare ahead. Read books, look at pictures, and talk about different kinds of shells they might find. If you are fortunate to have a video or digital camera, take it along to record interesting finds and to document where the shells were found or what the children saw in tide pools.
Do a follow-up when you return to the center at the end of the day or when they come back to the center on the following day. Ask children to share what they collected and tell about what they saw. They should also be encouraged to relate what they learned from the trip, what they liked best, and perhaps even how would they change the trip if they went again. You can then create a book documenting the field trip by having each child draw a picture and briefly write about the trip.

**Clubs**

Clubs are ongoing groups organized around common interests of the participants. When they belong to a club, children have the opportunity to pursue a topic or an interest in depth. They learn to set goals for themselves, solve problems, and cooperate with others on common goals. Some club activities may require them to do extensive research and then to communicate their findings to others, thus developing skills that are part of scientific endeavors. Typical club topics are photography, calligraphy, cooking, magic, collecting (shells, rocks, or stamps), stitchery, space, drama, or sports. Within any group of children, there are likely to be other ideas as well. Appoint a leader for the group, either a staff member or an outside volunteer. Sometimes a parent, community resident, or senior citizen will have a special interest and be willing to share information with the club. Many high school students need to participate in service learning as part of their curriculum. They would make good leaders for a group. Decide how many members the group can accommodate, and ask interested children to sign up.

Clubs can provide children with the experience of making a long-term commitment. When they sign up for a club, they state they are willing to spend a specified period of time with the group. This may be as short as one month or as long as four to six months.

Clubs also give children the opportunity to be a part of a small unit within the larger child care group. This can foster friendships built on a mutual interest. In addition, club participation helps children learn to govern themselves as they set rules and elect officers for their organization. This is particularly important to the older children, the 12- to 14-year-olds.

At the end of the period, encourage children to share what they have learned with others. This can be in the form of an exhibit, a presentation, or a demonstration. Whenever possible, invite parents to participate in these events. Schedule a presentation for a parent meeting. Draw parents’ attention to a display when they come to pick up their children. The children can also write about the club’s activities for your center’s newsletter.

**Spontaneous Activities**

You should have a store of activities ready for unexpected situations. One of your aids calls in sick, the weather turns cold and rainy, another group stays too long on the playground, or the CD player breaks down. All of
these and many other emergencies will happen, so it helps to be well prepared.

Know some games you can use to keep a group occupied. “Twenty Questions” is an old standby that everyone enjoys. Learn some others as well. Every caregiver should have a store of songs children like to sing. They often want the same ones over and over, but occasionally introduce a new one. You might consider learning some stories or making up your own, and telling these with appropriate dramatics.

Have some materials you can bring out for rainy or snowy days when you have to be indoors. These materials should be a selection of things you do not put out every day. A new game, special books, or unusual art materials are some of the possibilities. Indoor days could also allow children to spontaneously organize activities such as dramatizing a familiar story or dancing to music.

Some spontaneous activities will be child-initiated. In order for child-initiated activities to occur, adults must be willing to follow children’s lead, and the environment must have a variety of easily accessible materials. This kind of play is most often seen in the dramatic play center, where children engage in elaborate imaginary or real-life scenarios.

A wide selection of costumes and accessories affords children the opportunity to work through troublesome feelings, learn social skills, and increase their ability to communicate clearly. Dramatic play also takes place with blocks and additions such as animals, human figures, cars, airplanes, and rockets. Children also engage in spontaneous activities outdoors, but here too, they need time and materials to allow them to fully
explore their fantasies. The adventure playgrounds seen in some public parks capitalize on this idea by providing boards, boxes, hammers and nails, and pipes. Children can use these to construct objects they need for their play.

**Community Involvement**

You can use community resources to provide children with a wider range of activities. Instead of duplicating classes or facilities that are available elsewhere, use these to enrich your program. This kind of reaching out also gives children less of a feeling of isolation from the kinds of experiences their school friends might be having.

Some of the possible situations are the following:

- A Girl or Boy Scout troop could meet at your site so your children could attend.
- A local swimming pool might offer reduced rates for children when they are supervised by their own teachers or caregivers.
- A nearby volunteer nature center might offer to sponsor activities your children could attend.
- Have resources come to the center. For example, organizations that train dogs for the blind could come for a talk and bring a dog.
- Your children could attend community classes sponsored by the local school district or recreation department in return for having an extra adult to supervise.

Join other sites within your child care organization for some activities.

**Service Learning Projects**

Involvement in the community may include service learning projects. For instance, your children could get involved in beautifying their neighborhood. They can grow plants from seeds, make them available to residents, and even offer to plant them if needed. Environmental issues have become extremely important. Children can plan to clean up beach debris and then try to find the source of the debris. They might meet with local organizations to explain why the community should become involved and keep the area clean in the future. As part of their science curriculum they can take water samples from a nearby stream and analyze the pollutants it contains. They might follow up by writing to their local government agencies to inform them of the problem. Recycling is also a popular cause. Children can set up bins to receive materials and then take them to a redemption center. Do not forget the possibility of children lobbying their governmental representatives over issues affecting children. They can write letters, make posters, distribute flyers, or appear at hearings. Service learning is a valuable participation experience for children and should not be missed just because they are in child care. Check the website [http://childreninc.org/service-learning.html](http://childreninc.org/service-learning.html) for more ideas.