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ABSTRACT

                Children today are entering day care at younger ages than
earlier generations, prompting concern at the differences between day care
and home environments. This paper considers the infant classroom in a day
care setting, discussing methods of teaching and learning designed to promote
authentic learning in a natural educational environment. Following a brief
discussion of the statistics of out-of-home care for infants, the paper
discusses strong interpersonal attachments between an infant and caregiver as
the basis for authentic learning. Recent brain research is cited to support
the proposal that authentic infant classrooms could enhance cognitive growth
during infancy. The paper next discusses the quality of day care in the
United States, and describes authentic learning and how classrooms can be
modified and designed to incorporate it. A discussion of appropriate behavior
for infant teachers, asserting that the teacher is the facilitator, playmate,
support, friend, and partner of the infant, concludes the paper. The paper
advises teachers to resist specific classroom schedules, allowing children to
play and sleep when they want to and allowing the classroom to shift with the
development of the children. (Contains 23 references.) (EV)

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Running head: INFANT DAY CARE

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Authentic Learning and Teaching in the Infant Day Care Classroom

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Abstract

As we approach a new century in the United States the schooling of
our children is a critical issue that must be addressed. Children
today are entering formal school situations at a younger age each
year. Consequently, much authentic learning and several
opportunities for natural learning activities typically
experienced in the home environment during the preschool years is
being replaced by strict contextual curriculum and teacher
planning in day care centers. This trend in our educational
system has many early childhood experts watchful. Are we moving
too quickly from the natural, authentic early learning experiences
to a much more nonauthentic approach in the day care during our
children's early years? Many children will experience outside
care as soon as six weeks, can we train our early childhood
teachers to approach each day as mothers and other family members
did in the not to recent past when children were an integral part
of family activities and family life? Can we reverse the trend
moving us toward a day full of objectives to one full of learning
experiences?

In this paper we would like to consider the infant classroom in a
day care setting. Day care teachers can be trained more in the
direction of authentic teaching and learning and steered away from
the tendency to try to teach specific abilities to infants. We
will discuss several methods of teaching and learning and how a
natural environment can be beneficial to the teacher as well as
the children.

Authentic Learning and Teaching in the Infant Day Care Classroom

The issues attached to the huge explosion of outside usage of infant day care are now attracting national attention. Popular magazines are frequently publishing new data being gathered by developmental psychologists all over the United States. The quality of infant experiences in child care must become a national issue as more and more children enter into the care by non-parental adults. The evidence seems clear that the first year of life is very significant, maybe one of the most important years of the entire life span. Technology such as positron emission tomography has allowed researchers to see into the brains of children in the earliest moments of life, and have observed the growth of brain cells during simple activities such as cuddling and rocking (Kantrowitz, 1997).

Each year, however, more and more mothers (the traditional caregivers) are entering the workforce, either by choice or necessity. Fagan (1997) reports that 59.6% of married women are in the work force, and 47.4% of single women are also in the workforce today. Many of these families will require infant care during these beginning years. In the face of so much new information about the ways babies learn and develop, day care in the early years is taking on a new significance. The NAEYC describes classroom arrangement and teacher interactions in terms of being developmentally appropriate. We would like to expand

developmentally appropriate to include authentic teaching and learning within the infant classroom.

Infancy: Ready to Learn

Any parent can report the many magic moments associated with caring for an infant. Educators and Developmental Specialists are also interested in this very special time of life. Bredekcamp and Copple (1997), editors of the new Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, note that today a greater number of infants are in the care of people other that their parents than ever before. Educators are studying the traditional mother-child early interactions and attachment phenomena in hopes of using its essence on infant day care. We see interactions within the classroom, that mirror mother-child relationships, as the basis of authentic teaching with infants.

The research on infants repeatedly returns to strong attachments as the pivotal point in development. The seeds of social and cognitive development begin with early attachment relationships (Shaffer 1996). Bowlby (1969) defines attachment as an emotional bond to a close intimate significant other, usually the mother. Kopp and Krakow (1982) state that babies are born ready to respond to social stimulation. They believe that infants crave contact and stimulation from the very beginning. Kantrowitz (1997) tells us that infants need a great deal of time and

interaction from the special adults in their lives. She sees babies as "learning machines" (p. 8).

The development of the infant's brain is a topic of great interest to many. Sharon Begley (1997) believes as most experts in the area, that the brain of a baby is actively changing and forming long after the child is born. She goes on to say that the brain is not just getting larger, but specifically it is forming millions of tiny connections that will be responsible for further cognitive development. Hetherington and Parke (1993) show in their book that the brain changes more than almost any other organ in the body between birth and adolescents. They also believe that this phenomenal growth and change is directly correlated with the experiences of the individual child. Along this line of thinking, we propose that the authentic infant classroom could enhance this natural cognitive growth during infancy. Hetherington and Parke (1993) also state that as long as there is stimulation the brain will continue to establish synapses and strengthen the connections. Baldwin et al. (1996) found in their research project that the driving source behind learning from infancy seems to be the child's interpersonal relationships with adults. The National Association for the Education of Young Children believes that the quality of day-care interactions is extremely critical in cognitive growth. An authentic classroom would combine stimulation and relationships in an environment centered on the child's personal cognitive and social development.

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The National Association for the Education of Young Children

(1997) remarks on the importance of relationships in the early

development of infants. In their new publication Developmentally

Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, it tells us that

infants anticipate certain activities from adults that help define

themselves in relation to others. Ainsworth (1989) tells us that

infants develop "…expectations of regularities…"(p. 710). Daily

contact that is responsive and positive helps babies form their

first relationships based on love and security. These

relationships give the infants the security needed to explore, and

these early or first explorations can support and propel the

earliest cognitive growth (NAEYC, 1997). We suggest that if day

care is the daily environment the authentic classroom is the most

supportive for development.

Thinking About Day Care

Thirteen million children in the United States participate

each day in some form of outside childcare (Kagan & Newman 1997).

A large number of these children are infants. Burchinal, Roberts,

Nabors, and Bryants (1996) found a large range in center-based

care for infants. They discussed the fact that there appears to

be a number of high quality centers available, but the vast

majority used by the public are only "…minimally adequate…" (p.

606). Burchinal et al. (1996) is very concerned about this. She

believes strongly that infant care is directly related to the

child's later social development. She also suggests in this article that infants in poor quality care do not receive the "…responsive and stimulating interactions that are needed to enhance cognitive and language development in infancy" (p. 607). Belsky, Woodwroth, and Cronic (1996) associate negative development with poor quality care in infants. The research suggests when looking for effective day care centers look for places where the infants receive individualized care, the teachers talk to the children, the classroom is a safe environment, and the teachers coach the children in positive peer relations (Howes and Ritchie, 1997).

Helbrun and Culkin (1995) did give some general guidelines for judging specific day care centers. They define "inadequate" as day care that does not meet children's very basic requirements for health and safety with no apparent encouragement or support for cognitive activities. They define "minimal" as day care that does meet the child's very basic needs but little else. "Good" day care is defined as day care that completely meets basic needs but also provides emotional and cognitive support. Finally, "excellent" day care provides all the qualities of good day care but also goes that extra mile, offering activities and interactions based on personal relationships between the teacher and the children. These descriptive definitions are certainly helpful, but they might still be too abstract for most parents to apply effectively in choosing a center.

The last twenty years have seen three major thrusts in
day care research. Holloway and Reichhart-Erikson (1989)
summarize these three areas as follows: "The first studies were
based on comparisons of children raised away from home and the
home reared children. The second group of studies compared
cognitive and social development of the two groups. The third,
and current wave of research, is interested in the characteristics
of families seeking childcare and their choices" (p.253). We
suggest as a fourth wave a comparison between school oriented day
care and the more natural authentic day care purposed here.

What is authentic learning?

Authentic learning is learning in a real life setting.
Unfortunately much teaching is done in sterile situations, through
specific objectives and goals. We are often missing the learning
experiences that occur would simply occur naturally. Our children
are moving out of the home and into the classroom at younger ages,
and for longer periods of time. We, as teachers, need to remember
that a lot of the early learning takes place by interacting within
the environment. Authentic learning only means that we allow the
natural learning within play to take place and support it.

How can we change/modify classrooms?

We need to organize and design our classrooms so that they
allow natural learning to take place. For example, children learn

about words and conversation by adults talking to them. We need to have small numbers of infants per adult, so that there are multiple opportunities during the day for teacher-infant interaction. Talking with infants teaches meaning and conversational skills that extend into later language development.

Children also learn from each other (Vygotsky, 1978), so we must allow time for the infants to be playing near each other in the areas. Infants learn through observations, and by trying to do various activities themselves (NAEYC, 1998). There should be times during the day when the infants are allowed to explore their surroundings. Infants also learn from older peers (Vygotsky, 1978). A recent day care trend is to separate very young children into specific age groups. We believe this trend may be limiting the natural learning that occurs in multi-age groups.

It is critical that young children have opportunities to experience and explore their environment as they connect knowledge. Adults must provide opportunities and a framework in order to assist children in facilitating their inquiries, while allowing children to learn through their own discoveries within the authentic classroom (Vygotsky, 1978).

Classroom design

According to the NAEYC (Developmentally Appropriate Practice, 1997), the classroom needs to be designed at the infant's eye level. There should be interesting pictures and objects to

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stimulate the infant visually and tactically. Caregivers must be cautious in the use of too much visual stimulation because it is possible for the infant to become overwhelmed. Keep it simple. Each day infants need exposure to a variety of sensory and motor experiences. The environment should be well-organized, and designed in an inviting fashion.

We are learning more and more about out-of-home caregiving and how it affects children's development. As teachers and researchers we must recognize that infants have specific socioemotional needs that older children do not have (Elicker & Fortner-Wood, 1995; Lally, 1995). These socioemotional needs are facilitated by authentic learning in the classroom through play. We are defining play as inwardly motivated, child-directed, child-controlled, with a component of joy (Callas, S., Mellinger, J. B., and Taylor, M. K, 1998). In most situations, the infant should be the leader during play and exploration. A part of the teacher's job is to be sensitive to the child's cues. Here lies a very important key to effective infant teaching.

Infant Teachers

Infant teaching, until recently, has received little or no training. For example, in the state of Alabama, all that is needed to be an infant day care teacher is a high school degree or equivalent and be 18 years of age. Often these teachers' prior knowledge about infants lead them to react primarily to the

physical needs of their charges. Currently, the number of infants

per classroom does not allow for much else. However, meeting the

physical needs of the infants is only a small portion of what

should be done. Regulations within the classroom are a topic for

another paper.

Infant teachers need to think in terms of real life

situations and experiences that occur in the classroom. No canned

curriculum or lists of objectives are necessary with the authentic

classroom. The teachers' thinking in terms of a child-centered

atmosphere is the key. The more we shift with the children or

allow the children to lead, the better. The infant classroom

teacher, more than any other theater, needs to be flexible in

moving along the developmental continuum of infants. **The

teacher is the facilitator, the playmate, the support,

the friend and the partner.** The child equally as

important a part of each of those roles. The

relationship must be reciprocal. To foster this type of

relationship, we suggest resisting specific schedules.

Whenever possible, when the child wants to play, allow

him to play, when the child wants to sleep, let him

sleep. Be flexible. It is important that the classroom

shift with the development of the children. A specific

infant curriculum is not necessary, or even ideal.

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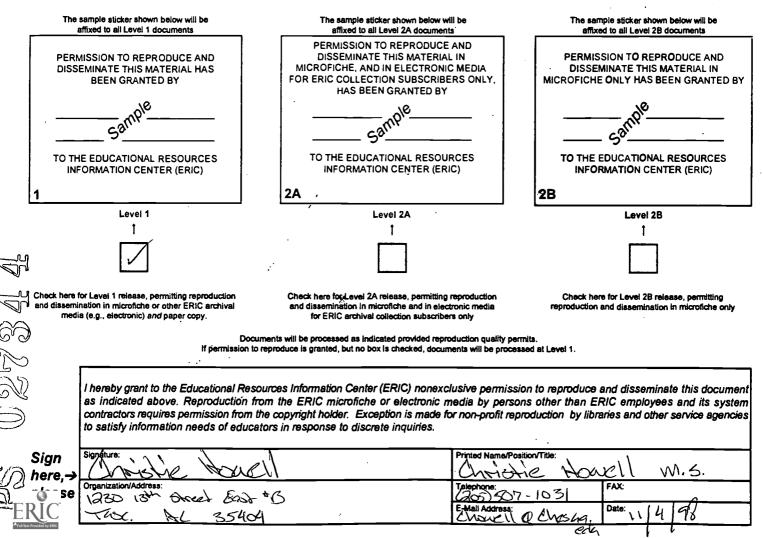
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