Implementing a Curriculum in Child Care Programs

Curriculum Matters recognizes that classroom staff need to be supported in their roles as professionals. The job of an early childhood teacher is crucial. We know that the early years in children's lives provide the foundation for all that will follow. Children's very early experiences influence their ability to learn to read and write, their success in school, how long they remain in school and their overall feelings about learning. Classroom staff who know their important role and who are supported in their professional development are empowered by using a curriculum that assists their efforts in the classroom.

The benefits of implementing a curriculum in child care programs have been well documented. Research indicates that quality is enhanced when a curriculum is thoughtfully and purposefully incorporated into the child care setting. Choosing to implement a curriculum will help your staff plan meaningful activities, enhance classroom interactions, and increase teachers' understanding of child development, what is typical child behavior and how they can best support each child's development and learning.

Important steps to consider when choosing to implement a curriculum are:

- Involve your staff in the decision making process. A sense of ownership is crucial to any change that is planned.
- Research and explore the variety of curricula that are available before making your selection.

Some questions to ask about a curriculum might include:

- Is the curriculum based on sound child development principles?
- Has the curriculum been proven to be successful for many children over a period of many years?
- Is the curriculum research based?
- Is the curriculum based on the knowledge that children are active learners?
- Does the curriculum support individual learning styles and developmental stages?
- Does the curriculum focus on the whole child? Are the social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains equally emphasized?

An article in Taking Care (Spring 2002) discussed other important factors to consider in choosing a curriculum:

- Provide guidance to classroom staff in their understanding of the principles of the curriculum and its implementation process.
- Provide initial training and ongoing training on the curriculum.
Implementing a Curriculum in Child Care Programs - con’t

• Identify your program’s strengths and areas of growth.
• Use the resources and materials provided by the curriculum’s authors to assist you in developing a comprehensive staff training plan.

In order to know what areas to focus on, it is important to know as much about your classrooms as possible. Even though running a child care program is very time consuming, develop a system so that the center director can have some uninterrupted time in the classroom each week. Only through regular classroom observation time, are you really able to know what the classrooms are all about.

With the participation, help and support of your entire program staff, complete a self-evaluation of the classrooms. This will identify the areas where you can best guide staff to make improvements and changes. Be honest in your evaluation! Are there room arrangement issues, are some classrooms lacking in materials and equipment while other classrooms seem to have adequate supplies, are children engaged in play or are they wandering aimlessly and crying? Do the children frequently have to wait for long periods of time for toys, for meals, to go outside or to use the bathroom?

Some tools that you might use to assist you with this process are:

• The Creative Curriculum Implementation Checklist
• Caring for Infants and Toddlers – The Trainer’s Guide
• Caring for Preschool Children – The Trainer’s Guide
• The What, Why and How of High Quality Early Education: A Guide for On-Site Supervision

Develop a plan for each classroom based on your observations.

Involve the classroom staff in deciding which areas they will focus on first. Decide together what the immediate tasks will be, who will work on the tasks and when they will be accomplished. For instance, room arrangement might need to be a focus. If you observe that the busy areas and quiet areas are too close together, that the children do not have enough space for block-building, or that the book area is not used by the children, use the suggestions in your curriculum guide and other quality early childhood resources to develop a plan for changing to a room arrangement that will allow more active engagement in play.

Establish a time frame for implementation.

Remember that growth takes time! Change is sometimes very difficult for everyone. The children and staff will need time to transition to a new curriculum. Once you are familiar with the materials, develop a training and implementation timeline that works for your center and your staff.

Provide ongoing and regular support.

Center directors and family child care providers have very full and busy days. However, classroom staff are often working in isolation from their peers and from their center director. The level of quality is usually enhanced in child care settings where directors devote a part of their time to being in the classroom, observing staff and providing regular coaching and feedback. Teamwork and the sense of center “spirit” that can develop may reduce your level of staff turnover.

Involve your parents.

Remember that parents are their child’s first and foremost educator. Parents need to be involved in a meaningful manner in their child’s education to help lay the foundation for involvement in their child’s education throughout the school years and to ensure the programs and services offered by your program are valued and responsive to parents . . . your customers.

Discuss the program’s curriculum at enrollment, at parent meetings, parent conferences, and throughout the school year. Your parents will become as excited as you are about what is happening in the child care setting.

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