Infants & Toddlers

Program Management

Working as a Team

This lesson will highlight the importance of teamwork when managing your infant and toddler classroom. You will learn how collaborating with colleagues and family members creates high-quality practices and better outcomes for the children and families in your care. You will also learn the importance of reflecting on your own experiences in teamwork and practices in classroom management.

FCR 7

Objectives

- Learn about the importance of working togeth[illegible]periences to strengthen the management of your infant and toddler classroom.
- Examine the significance of working collaboratively with families in the day-to-day operation of your classroom.
- Reflect on practices that highlight working as a team to care for infants, toddlers and their families.

Learn

Know

"Unity is strength...when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved." - *Mattie Stepanek*

In the previous lesson, you were asked to reflect on your own strategies when managing the day-to-day experiences and activities in your life. You probably acknowledged that working with others may be part of your daily routine and helps get things done. We are by nature social beings and our relationships with others greatly affect our personal and professional lives. Think about your daily life and how working with others helps you with sharing household responsibilities, taking care of children, taking care of families, and taking care of yourself.

In early childhood, collaboration is a dynamic process in which individuals come together and share their knowledge, experiences, resources, and strengths to promote growth and development. When it comes to caring for infants and toddlers, these individuals are family members, caregivers like yourself, related service providers, administrators, and community partners. Collaboration builds on the expertise, interests, and strengths of everyone involved in the process. By acknowledging that each of these individuals has something meaningful to offer, collaboration creates opportunities to set goals and objectives, make plans for implementing those goals, monitor progress, and solve problems jointly. The goal of collaboration is to ensure progress and growth for each infant and toddler, their family, and ultimately your classroom and program.

The Process of Creating Collaborative Teams

When you work together with colleagues and families, the time spent on collaboration can benefit infants, toddlers, and their families; as well as yourself. Like everything else we do, learning to work with others is a skill that does not develop overnight. It is a process that takes place over time. Just like when you are learning any new skill or experience, you have to invest time and effort in getting to know information and practicing new skills. Being able to work well with others requires ongoing commitment, energy, and work.

Remember that each person you engage with is unique. In your daily interactions with infants, toddlers, families, and colleagues, you always bring with you who you are: your interests, your personality, your temperament, your background experiences, and your special abilities and talents. The way you view yourself as a team member can define your interactions and relationships with infants, toddlers, families, and colleagues.

Building collaborative relationships takes time, effort, and commitment, but often has meaningful outcomes in terms of enhancing the overall quality of your program. As you work with fellow infant-toddler providers, your T&CS, or administrator, you should share with each other your opportunities and successes, as well as your challenges. These experiences are opportunities to make new friends and network with others who have similar interests with you.

Two of the country's leading experts on building collaborative teams, Jacqueline Thousand and Richard Villa, identify five elements as critically important in creating a collaborative process. (Johnson & Johnson, 2017; Thousand & Villa, 2000). As you read these, think about how they reflect your experiences with collaboration in your program:

1. Face-to-face interaction among team members on a frequent basis
2. A mutual "we are all in this together" feeling of positive interdependence
3. A focus on the development of small-group interpersonal skills in trust building, communication, leadership, creative problem solving, decision making, and conflict management
4. Regular assessments and discussion of the team's functioning in setting goals for improving relationships and effectively accomplishing tasks
5. Methods for holding one another accountable for agreed-on responsibilities and commitments

In your daily work, you make conscious and intentional decisions about how to interact in daily encounters with infants and toddlers, family members, and colleagues. Being part of a team requires that you enter partnerships with a positive attitude and commitment to ethical behavior. No matter how experienced you are, being part of a collaborative workplace should be central to your practice as an infant-toddler provider. Child care settings are primarily people-centric workplaces. The biggest resources are people. Collaborative workplaces promote happy and secure infants, toddlers, and their families.

Collaborating with Families

Family-professional partnerships are a central part of your work as an infant-toddler provider. One key feature of a successful family-professional partnership is a sense of equality between family members and professionals (Turnbull et al., 2012). Being equitable means ensuring you consider each child's and family's strengths and needs to provide the opportunities that will support each child in reaching their full potential. As highlighted in the Professionalism course, individuals who deal directly with human welfare have a special obligation to behave in ways that benefit those they serve. Values that are foundational to professions based on human relationships are caring, compassion, empathy, respect for others, and trustworthiness (Feeney, 2011). Effective infant and toddler providers are dedicated to serving the needs of the young children and families they work with. Your program's parent handbook is the ideal place to share with parents your program's vision, philosophy, and offerings. Your program should also have a clearly articulated shared mission and philosophy that is demonstrated by everyone who works in the program and that *all* staff understand. You should familiarize yourself with this mission and philosophy.

When discussing family-professional relationships, Janice Fialka, in her highly regarded *The Dance of Partnership: Why Do My Feet Hurt?* (2001), compares collaboration with dancing. She reflects on her experiences as a social worker, and as a parent of a child with disabilities, as she shares the complexities in the dancing-collaborating experience. At times, she notes, moving across the dance floor with professional partners may seem less than graceful. Their movements can seem awkward, stiff, and uncoordinated, as if each partner is dancing to different music. Sometimes, partners may even step on each other's feet while trying to figure out what to do next. However, she notes how important it is to have each partner's perspectives, hopes, dreams, and expectations be heard, valued, and respected at different times throughout the dance.

In your daily work, in order to truly get to know an infant or toddler in your care, you have to get to know their family. In this process, you need to be open-minded, flexible, and genuinely interested in order to make a difference. There are several positive outcomes of collaboration between you and family members. During this process, families become active participants, share valuable information, and work with you to promote their infant's or toddler's optimum development. Through collaboration you are better able to get a window into each family's dreams, hopes, and aspirations for their young child. Having a better understanding of families' home life and culture allows you to support the alignment between their vision and furthering their child's development, which leads to better outcomes.

Reflecting on your Own Experiences and Practices

Effective infant- toddler providers value collaboration and acknowledge it is important to work together with families, other staff members, and supervisors to be successful. They know it's important to critically think about their practices with infants, toddlers, and families, and to make changes when needed. Reflection can support many aspects of your work as an infant-toddler provider. Parlakian (2001) shares, "Reflection is a time to slow down, to see what can be learned if we take the time to carefully look at and listen to ourselves, and those with whom we work."

High-quality environments for children cannot be created unless these environments are also good for the adults who work in them. Education professor Lilian Katz, in *Talks with Teachers of Young Children (1995)* urges professionals to ask themselves the questions below. As you read each of these questions, think about how things are in your own work environment.

On the whole, are relationships with my colleagues:

- Supportive rather than contentious?
- Cooperative rather than competitive?
- Accepting rather than adversarial?
- Trusting rather than suspicious?
- Respectful rather than controlling?

They also know it is important to celebrate successes and acknowledge the efforts of others, like family members and colleagues, in their daily work. Your program may plan joyful events that build community at different levels: among children, families, and staff. (e.g., acknowledging individual staff members during staff meetings, celebrating staff birthdays and life events with potluck suppers, attending a professional conference together, organizing family nights, inviting families to participate in classroom and program experiences, inviting families to spend time with children in the classroom).

While working with others can be one of the most rewarding parts of your job, it can also present challenges. It requires dedication, commitment, problem-solving skills, and a willingness to learn, change, and flexibility, in order to address the multiple, and often complex, needs of those in your care. It is your responsibility to maintain professional conduct and seek the advice of your T&CS or administrator when faced with difficult situations you're not sure how to deal with.

See

Do

Take time to review the practices below, which highlight collaborative teamwork in caring for infants, toddlers, and their families:

- Respect each infant or toddler in your care and their families. Acknowledge their diversity and individual differences in growth, background, beliefs, and values. Invite and include each family in planning and decision-making about their child's development and learning. Make sure every family has an opportunity to share their views or ideas with you.
- Meet regularly with colleagues to plan experiences for infants, toddlers, and their families. Regular meetings allow you to discuss children's progress, plan experiences, and make necessary changes.
- Ask clarifying questions when not sure about something. Miscommunication can lead to unnecessary frustrations, delays in getting things done, and a negative work climate.
- As a team member, make sure you have a clear understanding of procedures, rules, or regulations, and always talk to your T&CS or administrator when in doubt.
- Share ongoing observational information on each infant and toddler in your care with colleagues and family members and use that information to plan for individual children and your group.
- Invite families' input when planning.
- Provide a variety of developmentally appropriate choices and experiences for children in your care.
- Have developmentally appropriate expectations about children's behaviors and be proactive when dealing with challenging behaviors.
- Be open-minded and use creative thinking skills, like brainstorming, when planning or problem-solving. Be willing to see others' viewpoints and consider multiple options or solutions when tackling a problem or challenge.
- Most importantly, have a good attitude and demonstrate respect for each individual you collaborate with. Appreciate each member of your team and welcome the knowledge, experience, or expertise that they have to offer.

Explore

In the *Working as a Team* activity, take some time to reflect on the information you read in this lesson. Think about your program and describe how you work with others. Share and discuss your responses with your trainer, coach or administrator.

Working as a Team

Examine how you and your teaching partner share responsibility, feedback, and interpersonal issues.

Required: Complete and review this document with your trainer, supervisor, or administrator

Apply

In the *Collaboration* handout below, read and review the article *Collaborating with Families: Not a Problem!* to learn more about working with parents and family members. Think about new ways to involve families in their children's care and share your ideas with your trainer, coach, or administrator.

Collaboration

Consider new ideas as you brainstorm more ways to connect with families

Demonstrate

Q1 What are some positive outcomes of collaborating with families in your program? *

- ○ You quickly learn which families to avoid interacting with.
- ○ You are able to let families know the policies and expectations of your program.
- ○ Families share valuable information that can help you promote their children's development.
- ○ You can communicate to families what their vision for their child should be.

Q2 Which of the following practices does not encourage infant-toddler professionals to work together as a team? *

- ○ Meet regularly with colleagues to plan experiences and discuss children's progress.
- ○ Share ongoing observations about each infant and toddler in your care.
- ○ Provide a variety of developmentally appropriate experiences for the children in your care.
- ○ Problem solving and decision making on your own based on your own experiences.

Q3 Which of the following practices does not demonstrate collaboration with a team to promote growth and development? *

- ○ Meet regularly with colleagues to plan experiences for infants, toddlers, and their families.
- ○ Power through and trust your personal instincts and experience when you are not sure about something.
- ○ Be willing to see others' viewpoints and considering multiple options or solutions when tackling a problem or challenge.
- ○ Have a good attitude and demonstrate respect for everyone you collaborate with.

References & Resources

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