Child expectations – What is best?

A child’s family and caregivers want the “best” for each child – for all children to grow and learn, to be ready for school, and to be safe. Through national surveys and focus groups, Child Care Aware (formerly National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies/NACCRRA) has found that top considerations for families when choosing child care were positive caregiver-child interactions, a safe environment, and a learning environment and activities that help children learn new things and socialize. These features mirror the goals of early care and education standards for best practices for programs.

When children enroll in your program, it’s important to share expectations with families and children, and to ask families to share their expectations with you. Sometimes it may seem that a family wants something different for their child than your program offers. However, it may be that your program goals do meet the family’s expectations, but that they believe different skills and attributes are needed to meet those goals. It’s not the “what”; it’s the “how”.

Developmentally appropriate expectations

In developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), three knowledge areas should inform your practice:

- child development appropriateness
- individual appropriateness
- social and cultural appropriateness

To establish realistic expectations and goals, consider the child’s own culture, overall child development, and individual development in all aspects of the learning program.

It is generally easier to get information on child development and individual appropriateness than social and cultural appropriateness. By observing and assessing children’s growth and learning using reliable, standardized assessment tools (ex. Work Sampling, the Ounce Scale, Creative Curriculum, Ages & Stages) you get to know each child, including strengths, abilities, interests, needs, and whether a child has reached child development milestones.

To understand social and cultural appropriateness, many providers rely on informal ways of getting information. Information on a child’s social groups and culture may be gathered from brief conversations with families, chatting with children, information shared by others familiar with a culture, the media, and personal inquiry. When using informal methods, the amount and detail of social and cultural information that you collect on families will vary. Some programs may use formal methods so that the same information is collected for all families. Families complete family background questionnaires or are interviewed by teachers as part of the enrollment process. Practitioners do home visits to learn about a child’s culture and social community.
Culture and expectations

Child rearing practices are influenced by cultural traditions. Culture is more than just the family's country of origin. Culture includes religious practices, socio-economic status, education, family system, and life situations. Although ethnic groups and religions have general characteristics and common practices, the strength of cultural influence will vary. The educational background of the child’s family may also determine what they expect for early learning as they may base goals on what they experienced in school. Family size, support systems, stresses, risk factors, and consistency will affect what the family can provide for the child, the child’s role, and family rules. Talk with all families about cultural customs and expectations to help you understand individual families.

When determining social and cultural appropriateness, consider how activities prepare the child for the various cultural situations that the child has to navigate. Following or not following traditional procedures can affect bonds with the family’s and child’s cultural community. The communities that a family lives in and the systems that a family interacts with vary by socio-economic status. The life skills, knowledge, and social roles that a child will need to be successful within her world may be different from the skills and knowledge needed to be successful within your child care program.

Creating common expectations

Get to know families’ dreams, goals, and expectations for their children through open and direct dialogue with families. Talk with families about expectations for planning at formal meetings, such as enrollment meetings or progress conferences, and informally throughout the year. Ask families about themselves through daily conversations. Use surveys to give families more time to think about expectations and to express thoughts, questions, and concerns. Gather information through intake questionnaires and conference planning forms.

Along with identifying what families want, reflect on your own and your program’s philosophy, mission, and vision for children’s growth and learning and for supporting families. Knowing your own beliefs is essential to establishing an open dialogue with families and knowing what expectations can truly be mutually supported and carried out within your program. Identify program resources, staff abilities, and community supports that can be used to meet family expectations.

Work closely with families to review program expectations for children, explore family expectations, and create common expectations. It will take time and effort, but will help you truly provide the “best” for the child and create a full partnership with families.

References:


