

Rethinking Routines

Pushing the boundaries and making changes in our daily practices and 'routines' in Children's Services.

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Introduction

Rethinking routines and making changes in our daily practices and in particular 'routines', allows us to focus on respecting children and making them equal partners in the process of routine planning. The result is often a richness that does not exist when Children's Services staff plan alone.

Our experience of working in Children's Services for many years suggests the clock sometimes dictates when routines occur in the daily program. They are often referred to as 'production schedules' which move items through a series of events in linear, lock-step fashion, organising time to ensure that specific things get done (Wein & Kirby-Smith 1998:8).

Many schedules are inherited from previous Children's Services staff or organisations. They are sometimes described as 'a taken for granted' part of the day which is rarely challenged (Bond University Children's Service Reference Group (2004).

Danby (2002:29) suggests that Children's Services are operating "within the physical boundaries of space, resources and time, all framed and influenced by adults and institutional practice".

Often, the challenge in Children's Services is to design routines with children and the families that offer them a sense of security, predictable event times that are consistent every day, yet remain flexible and responsive to the individual needs and interests of each child.

Reflections on routines

Daily routines provide opportunities for children to learn more about themselves, the world and other people. So ... in the words of a song from Julie Andrews, "Let's start at the very beginning."

A Children's Services environment sends many messages to children and their families. We may ask ourselves – what impression does our own environment send to children as they walk through the front door? Do they see and feel characteristics that make them feel welcome? Are there characteristics that invite and cultivate children's curiosity?

From a child's perspective, everything is interactive. Perhaps, then, children could have a chair and table to 'sign on' themselves each morning and afternoon with their family.

Children's arrivals are the times when families and staff are interacting together to begin the day. Jim Greenman and Anne Stonehouse in their book *Prime Times* state: "Helping children and parents arrive and separate should be prime times," and "the way children start the day may determine the quality of the day".

Here are some examples of thoughtful routines.

Planning for individual children could involve:

- 'phoning home' just like E.T. when you feel a little sad



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- giving children a small backpack for 'my belongings' – to look after their toy from home.

Mid-morning and afternoon tea are times of refreshment – a break in the morning and afternoon to gain a snack and a little sustenance to carry children over to the next meal. The pace, atmosphere and the extent of children's involvement, which may include ideas they have enjoyed or initiated, can be indications of quality practices. These might include:

- self select snacks using tea bag squeezers to select the food
- napkins folded by children in many different ways
- children's choices – a song apron.

Eating lunch together in a group can be such a pleasurable experience – conversation, an attractive table setting and many learning opportunities as well. A few resources that children have suggested are:

- placemat puzzles – orange puzzle
- chef's suggestions
- 'Fabulous Fridays' – when children plan the lunchtime experience and invite staff to join them for lunch. RSVP is essential to ensure event management is 'fabulous'.

Rest time is a time where children learn to relax with others nearby! Sometimes it is difficult to remember when children have requested specific music, such as rainforest music, at rest time! Indeed, we may ask ourselves if rest time and rainforest music really go together. Maybe children would like to plan the rest time with staff.

These reflections on current practices in Children's Services provide an opportunity to reflect and revitalise routines – and also to look at routines from a child's perspective.

Two studies in Australia have clearly demonstrated the benefits of effective services in which (to quote from the first of these studies) "children are seen as competent informants on their own lives". (Alanen, 1992 as cited in Farrell, Taylor,

Tennent (2002:14) "Early Childhood Services: What can Children tell us?")

In the other study, a Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) team completed a twelve-week capacity-building, action learning project with the City of Melbourne Council: "Children's voices and diversity in early childhood curriculum; a collaborative action learning project" (CEIEC 2004:2).

These two projects have reflected the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to highlight and enhance current child-centred practice. Both studies reported the importance of listening to parents and children – the key stakeholders in early childhood.

Conclusion

When children plan routines with you, they are developing communication, literacy skills, social skills, thinking and reasoning and, most importantly, shared planning gives children a message that their ideas are valued and important in the Children's Services environment.

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