

The Art and Science of Child Care

J. Ronald Lally observes that good child care for infants and toddlers is a blend of science and art. The science of child care encompasses knowledge of health and safety, developmental stages in the first years of life, and temperament and other individual differences. The art of child care is the ability to respond to the child – and to a group of children – in the moment, in a way that will support development.

Lally has identified seven “gifts” that a good child care program offers babies and very young children. Nurturance, support, security, and predictability let children know that they can count on being loved and cared for in the child care setting. Predictability, focus, encouragement and expansion facilitate the young child’s intellectual development. To provide these gifts, a child care environment requires knowledgeable, responsive caregivers. And in order to use their knowledge and responsiveness fully, caregivers must be supported by policies that establish small groups, primary caregiving assignments, and continuity of caregiving.

Nurturance is giving. Human babies are helpless for a very long time. They depend on adults for warmth, feeding, and protection. Because infants are so different from each other, nurturance means responding to each baby individually. As the baby feels the caregiver’s understanding and availability, and experiences the comfort of connection, a strong attachment forms. Nurturance is important throughout the earliest years, although its form changes as the child grows. The immediate response appropriate to a very young infant (one can’t “spoil” a baby in the first year) may be replaced by the message, “I’m here if you want me”. In the toddler years, individualized, responsive nurturance means allowing a timid child the time and space to move slowly, while making sure that the active child has a place to be exuberant.

Support, in the context of infant/toddler child care, means support to help the child achieve the three important shifts in development that occur in the first three years. The young infant, not yet crawling, needs lots of nurturance to develop basic trust in the world. Mobile infants, from the time they begin to crawl until about 15 months, need a safe and interesting environment, respect for their growing urge to explore, and the knowledge

that the caregiver is available when needed. Toddlers, beginning at 17-19 months, need support in learning about themselves in relation to others. Caregivers offer support by acknowledging young children’s powerful feelings, encouraging curiosity and independence, and, at the same time, teaching and enforcing the rules that allow children and adults to live in harmony.

Security, closely related to nurturance and support, is what makes the child care setting a “safe haven” for infants, toddlers, and adults. The baby or young child feels, “Everything’s ok. Nothing bad will happen here.” Caregivers provide security to infants as they offer reliable nurturance and support. For toddlers, the rules of “no hitting, no destruction of property,” taught and enforced fairly by caregivers, maintain children’s sense of security.

Predictability is a “gift” that is central to a child’s fundamental sense of security as well as critical to intellectual development, but which is often misunderstood in the child care context. Predictability is social (people I know will be there for me) and spatial (I know where to find the puzzles and where I can ride the tricycle). Predictability avoids both chaos and rigidity. For infants and toddlers, predictability involves rituals and rhythms throughout the day that follow sequences (nap, snack, play, then mommy comes) rather than the clock.

Nurturance, support, security, and predictability are gifts that every young child needs, Lally observes. Not surprisingly, nurturance, support, security, and predictability are also basic components in treatment approaches designed for young children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Before young children can explore their environment purposefully and develop their intellectual potential fully, they must feel safe. Once they find security, they can seek challenges.

Focus supports the infant or toddler’s attention in the learning environment. A young child’s attention span will increase if it is not interfered with, but it is hard for an infant or toddler to focus if there are too many children in too little space, too many toys scattered about, too much noise (including “background” music), or too many interruptions of the subtle give-and-take between child and caregiver. The caregiver’s job is to make it easy for young children to focus on meaningful activity by paying attention to what fascinates each child, protecting the child from too much stimulation, and, always, offering the calm, reliable presence that frees the child’s energy for learning.

Presentation Handout

Encouragement from the caregiver says to the infant or toddler, “I have confidence in your growing competence.” The wise caregiver understands the lessons very young children are learning as they figure out the world through imitation, using tools, and experimenting with cause and effect. She knows that at least half of the infant/toddler “curriculum” comes from the child’s own interest and initiation. Encouragement in the child care setting reflects the caregiver’s grounding in the science of care. The knowledgeable caregiver understands how much a baby has accomplished when he has succeeded in pulling a ball out from under a slide or turned a knob that activated a music box. She responds with legitimate, specific enthusiasm rather than general cheerleading or coaching.

Expansion of the young child’s learning involves “bathing the child in language.” As always, the goal is to watch the child’s cues and build on the child’s own interests, commenting on what the child is doing, talking along with the child, and encouraging the child to use words to guide himself through activities (what child development experts call “self-talk”). The caregiver can

also expand the child’s learning through actions – taking on a role in the fantasy play of two-year-olds, turning a puzzle ever so slightly so that a frustrated toddler can see the solution more easily, or adding an unexpected twist to a familiar game to challenge the imagination.

A child care setting that offers these seven gifts – nurturance, support, security, predictability, focus, encouragement, and expansion – to infants and toddlers is a good one, says Lally. But the ability to offer children these gifts rests on the structural elements of quality – small groups, high staff-to-child ratios, primary caregiving, and continuity of care from responsive, knowledgeable adults who are well trained and feel supported by their colleagues and work environments. These elements of quality cost more than most families with infants and toddlers can afford on their own. The quest for quality in infant/toddler child care, Lally and other suggest, is an expedition that must engage the whole society and command significant public investment.

