A career in childcare is one that entails rigid and continuous learning. We are committed to bringing you added value through feature articles in this newsletter each month to supplement your learning on our courses and enrich your knowledge by delving into the intricate psyche of children, as they thread the course of childcare. In this article, Nancy Lee-Wong empowers professionals and aspiring childcare professionals as she shares her expertise and insights on infants, toddlers and quality educare.

Towards Quality Educaring
~ Meeting the Needs of Infants & Toddlers ~

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The early years of a child are a critical time of growth and development. Hence infants and toddlers need not just good care, but the best educare possible! Educare (educate while we care and care while we educate) is a word coined by the late Magda Gerber, Infant-Toddler Specialist, who demonstrated respect for young children in her work spanning more than 50 years.

An infant-toddler care centre should understand this and base its programme on both developmental and educaring principles. Fenichel and colleagues (1999), summarising strategies synthesised from discussions at the National Leadership Forum on Quality Care for infants and Toddlers in 1998, identified various aspects of high-quality infant-toddler care. Looking closely at those aspects discussed, one would realise that quality care is all about establishing respectful relationships; providing sensitive and responsive care; and creating an environment which is physically safe, cognitively challenging and emotionally nurturing.

Babies need loving and will thrive if they are well 'mothered' (Honig, 1993). Therefore infant-toddler curricula should be relationship-based as very young children need to be emotionally connected to a caring adult in order to learn and become more autonomous.

“The baby will develop deep bonds with a primary caregiver, and only when secure in this relationship, is there freedom to be independent in play with peers and toys.” (Honig, 1993).

One theme that runs through much of the recent literature on quality infant care is the treatment of infants and toddlers with respect. Instead of doing things "to" babies, involve them in all activities of their care. Offer choices. Let them do for themselves when they can...
and help whenever possible. (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004). This respectful, loving care should begin at birth and will instil a strong sense of personhood in the child.

Caring adults must be sensitive towards the growing needs of infants and toddlers. They must understand that each child has individual biorhythmic patterns for eating, sleeping, and alert and fussy states that need to be respected. When babies’ needs are met consistently, a pattern or routine emerges that develops a sense of trust and security. In order to perceive better the wants and needs of children, caring adults must focus upon observing children as unique individuals, and observing each child’s reaction to the caring adult, to the environment, and to its peers. Sensitive observation is an art that allows us to help children grow up to be independent people with a strong sense of self.

Infants and toddlers are active social beings who are also very curious and inquisitive self-learners! Caring adults need to respect their authenticity and believe in their innate capacity. Allow children to initiate their own activities, choose from available objects and work on their own projects without interruption. Infants and toddlers must be given time for free movement and free play without any adult interference. By allowing children to do what they are capable of, by restraining ourselves from rescuing them too often, by waiting and waiting, by giving minimal help when they need it, we allow children to learn and grow at their own pace and in their own way.

To encourage children’s autonomy, self-initiation, and self-learning and promote independence and participation, the environment must allow the little ones to do what they would do naturally – explore; investigate; experiment; and practise! Play areas should be finished with safe, simple, appropriate, and “open-ended” play objects that provide endless possibilities for manipulation and experimentation. The areas should offer surfaces of different textures and heights to be crawled, climbed and walked on, and rolled over, under, around and through or to be sat on.

According to the principles of Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE™), meeting the needs of infants and toddlers is to attain a balance between adult stimulation and independent exploration by the child. They focus on two areas of the infant’s life: the time spent with the adult who cares for the infant and the time the infant spends alone freely exploring his environment. Only a child who receives undivided attention from his educarer during all routine care-giving activities will be free and interested to explore his environment without needing too much intervention of the educarer. If educarers understand that infants need both concentrated attention while being cared for and time to explore alone, the educarers also gain time for themselves. (Gerber, 2002).

Individual attention to the capabilities and needs of infants and toddlers appears to be a critical element of a high-quality environment. To work towards providing quality educare, every infant care centre must be able to apply a respectful and sensitive approach in working with infants and toddlers.
References:


