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Establishing Schedules and Routines

Routines are patterns of care that, when done repeatedly, become expected....When routines are predictable, babies know what to expect and are able to trust their world and that their needs will be met. Routines assure a stable environment.

— Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles (2008, p. 64)

Consistent routines and dependable adult behavior contribute to children's sense of ease and comfort in their care setting. Child care patterns and routines are emotion regulators. When infants and toddlers can anticipate what is going to happen next, they learn to choose behaviors that fit with the upcoming activities, thus, their "learned behaviors contribute to systems of self-control" (Butterfield, 2002, p. 30). Such predictable patterns enable infants and toddlers to avert their anxiety about being fed or changed and focus their energy instead on exploring materials and interacting with people in the safety and security of their caregiving environment.

In an active learning program, the infants' and toddlers' day includes certain *regular daily events*: arrival and departure, one or more choice times, outside time, and (for older infants and toddlers) one or more group times. Interspersed among these daily events are *individual caregiving routines*: the supportive, child-focused adult-child interactions that occur during eating, napping, and bodily care (including diapering, using the toilet, washing, and dressing).

Organizing the Day for Active Learning

Providing a predictable daily schedule and unhurried caregiving routines in an infant-toddler care setting helps young children build trust in their own abilities to predict, anticipate, and influence what will happen next. They learn there will be many

opportunities to try out their actions and ideas in interesting and safe surroundings. The following scenarios illustrate the dynamics in a center with an organized day:

Three older infants — Jacob, Roberto, and Eva — play on the floor at mid-morning choice time. Shannon, their primary caregiver, sits on the floor with them. Roberto crawls up and down a slightly inclined ramp. Eva, sitting in a large carton tipped on its side, explores a collection of tins and oatmeal boxes. Jacob explores two big rubber balls, several tennis balls, and a Wiffle ball. He holds them, mouths them, drops them into a hole at the top of a large plastic cube, takes them out through a hole in the side of the cube, and crawls after them as they roll across the floor. At one point, Jacob crawls to Shannon, puts his head in her lap, and rubs his eyes. "Jacob," she says while stroking his head, "you look sleepy. I'm going to pick you up." When she picks him up, Jacob nestles close, lays his head on her shoulder, and closes his eyes. "It looks like it's time for your nap," she says, gently rubbing his back. She carries Jacob to his crib, lays him down, checks to make sure he doesn't need a diaper change, and covers him with his favorite bunny blanket. "Have a nice sleep," she says as Jacob at first fights to keep his eyes open and then quickly falls asleep. Shannon returns to Roberto and Eva, who continue with their play.



Six toddlers sit at a low table, eating lunch. Their caregivers, Rudy and Ann, sit with them at the table and converse with them about what happened during the morning. As the children finish, they put their cups and plates into a dish tub, leave the table, and return to the riding toys they were playing with before lunchtime. Rudy stays at the table with the children who are still eating, while Ann sits on the floor near the children who are using riding toys.

When all the children have finished eating, Rudy removes the dish tub and wipes the table. Ann then takes the children, individually or by twos, into the bathroom for the caregiving routines that precede naptime. After that, she returns them to play with the riding toys until naps. Until each child has been to the bathroom and it is time for stories and naps, Rudy takes Ann's place on the floor with the children who are using riding toys.

These scenarios typify the daily occurrences in a HighScope active learning infant-toddler program. In the first scenario, the three infants have selected materials of particular interest to play with during choice time. When Jacob shows signs of sleepiness, his caregiver responds to his cues by putting him into his crib for a nap. Eva and Roberto continue to play and, like Jacob, will nap when they are ready. The six toddlers in the second scenario are engaged in a sequence of activities — lunch, riding toys, bodily care



A consistent overall daily schedule gives children a sense of continuity and control.

routines, riding toys, stories, and naps. They move with assurance from one part of their day to the next. Using the riding toys serves as an enjoyable transition from lunch and bodily care to stories and naps. The children also experience certain predictable elements within each activity. For example, every day as they finish lunch, the toddlers put their dishes into the dish tub.

Routines are not only about *what* is done to care for infants and toddlers but

Why Caregiving Routines Are Important

- **Children learn.** Caregiving routines provide regular daily opportunities for adults to interact with infants and toddlers in a patient, alert manner so children can participate in and learn through routines.
- **Children and adults strengthen their bonds.** Building strong relationships with children and looking for ways to support their experiential learning is the driving force behind caregiving routines; efficiency is *not*!
- **Adults watch and listen to children.** Caregiving routines provide intimate, one-on-one opportunities for adults to see what infants and toddlers do and say and to scaffold (support and extend) their learning across the developmental spectrum.
- **Adults learn.** During caregiving routines, adults slow themselves down to the child's pace, look for KDIs (the knowledge and skills that infants and toddlers learn), and begin to see the experience from the child's perspective.

also about *how* these routines — eating, bathing, sleeping — are carried out (Evans & Ilfeld, 1982b). When routines are carried out in an unhurried manner with tenderness, patience, and forethought about what children experience and learn during these times of day, both adults and children benefit. Teachers see their actions as meaningful rather than laborious, and they enjoy the day more because children are happier and less irritable. Infants and toddlers enjoy the intimacy of the contact and the things they see, hear, and do at such times. (See “Why Caregiving Routines Are Important” above.)

Because caregiving routines are so important in the early years, caregivers learn and respond to each infant's or toddler's *personalized* daily schedule and, at the same time, develop an *overall* daily schedule that accommodates as closely as possible all children in the group. For

ideas on how to establish daily schedules that meet children's individual needs while accommodating the group as a whole, see “Ideas for Creating Daily Schedules” on page 285.

Coordinating multiple infants' and toddlers' schedules can be a challenge. This is one reason that infant-toddler care groups are small, and there is one caregiver for every two to four children. The complexity of dealing with multiple schedules also makes it critically important for the caregiver teams to spend time each day discussing their observations of children and planning around them. They also need to solicit input from parents to help them develop (and periodically revise) daily plans for individual children and the group as a whole.

Though it is challenging to organize a program around a number of children, the benefits to them are great. When daily

Ideas for Creating Daily Schedules

1. Gather information about each child's day.

Have primary caregivers ask parents what their child's schedule is at home (what time they eat, sleep, are awake, etc.). Ask each primary caregiver to share her information about each child.

2. Enter each child's information on a grid.

Enter all the information by times on a grid, (see p. 286 for a sample), using the elements of the day (e.g., arrival, departure, feeding or mealtime, naptime, choice time).

3. Look for activities among children that occur around the same time. Look across the filled-out schedules of all the children. Based on this information, consider the following:

- What patterns do you see emerging across all schedules?
- When might it make sense to have choice time? Outside time?
- When might it make sense to have a group time for the older children?
- How might you work out feeding and mealtimes when children end up eating at the same time?

4. Create an overall sequence of events.

Write down what an overall daily schedule for these children might look like including arrival, departure, choice time, outside time, group time, feeding and mealtime, and naptime (see p. 287 for a sample).

schedules and caregiving routines are predictable and well coordinated rather than frequently in flux, infants and toddlers are more likely to feel safe and secure. Knowing what will happen next when they wake up from a nap, for example, helps children become attuned to the rhythm of their own body and the rhythm of the day. When the day moves along on a known course, children can signal their individual needs to eat, sleep, wash, change into dry clothes, or use the toilet, and after participating in these care routines, they can rejoin the ongoing flow of events. At the beginning of the day, if children know what they will be doing after their parents leave, separating from parents and joining

caregivers and peers is easier for them. As they experience the rituals and repetitions of a consistent daily schedule, infants and toddlers gain a sense of continuity and control.

Consistent routines, thus, help children develop both emotional and behavioral self-regulation. Behaviors that are repeated each day become internalized into habits. These habits, in turn, provide a sense of control and comfort. For children, just as for adults, habitual “patterns organize our behavior, organize our thinking, and help us fit in successfully with others” (Butterfield, 2002, p. 30). Moreover, carrying out caregiving routines contributes to young children's sensory and intellectual