

Let's Talk about... NAC Accreditation Standard: *The planned daily schedule includes a balance of activities that respect children's needs and interests.* By Reshmi Johnson & Shelley Scheel, NAC Accreditation Specialists

The daily schedule provides a predictable routine that is responsive to children...

Schedules and routines in an early childhood setting influence children's emotional, cognitive and social development. A predictable and consistent schedule that is responsive to children's developmental needs helps children feel secure and comfortable. It also helps children understand expectations of the environment and reduces the frequency of behavior problems.

Infants

Caregivers in an infant classroom need to follow a self-demand schedule instead of a predetermined schedule or a by-the-clock sequence of events. This is a rhythmic response that involves communicating with parents to assess what the infant's current needs might be, then observing the infant's reactions and responding appropriately to their unique individual responses. Caregivers are relaxed and responsive and plan their day around routine care and interactions.

Toddlers

In their constant explorations toddlers demonstrate a need for physical movement, endless curiosity, short attention span, a sense of autonomy and personal will. However, they are still developing self-expression and self-control and depend on predictability in their daily routine as a basis for security.

In addition to a predictable order to the day, toddlers need flexibility to accommodate individual physical requirements for food and rest. Toddlers are unable to sustain attention for much formal activity; therefore, group time should be limited to singing, listening to a brief story, dancing, and similar activities that do not require sitting for prolonged periods.

Toddlers need ample free choice/center time to manipulate and explore independently. Allow for long periods of uninterrupted, child-initiated, autonomous play and learning so they can investigate, maneuver and gain mastery with everything around them. Toddlers are practicing new self-help skills through repetition. The schedule must allow children to participate as fully as they can by providing plenty of time during routines such as eating, dressing, and toileting.

Toddlers do not like interruptions and transitions go more smoothly when they are given plenty of warning that change is coming. It is important for teachers to give ample time and preparation to give up their activity. Because toddlers are rather impatient, they should not be put in situations where waiting is expected. Teachers can eliminate wait time for toddlers by moving them individually to new activities and encouraging conversation during transitions.

Preschoolers

Preschoolers spend most their time in active play. They need an environment that encourages independent choices and materials during center time and child-initiated free play time, both indoors and outdoors. Provide large blocks of uninterrupted time within a routine schedule to give children the security of knowing what comes next. In order to prevent fatigue, boredom and disinterest, it is important to balance active and quiet times with indoor and outdoor activities to maximize children's involvement and engagement within the learning environment.

Activities such as classroom clean up, meal times, small and large group projects and story times are important time for teaching children a wide array of learning skills and responsibilities, but often they are teacher-initiated rather than child-initiated. Circle Time, another teacher-initiated activity, is used to set the stage for the day, teach important learning concepts and emphasize each child's role in the social group. If large group activities are included in the schedule, they need to be limited in length, provide children with choices, and include materials for children to handle such as small, identical copies of Big Books or puppets that correspond to the story read by the teacher. This will keep the activities engaging and fun.

When planning large group activities, consider the following: Are the children engaged during these activities? Do they have choices about participation? Are there materials to hold and manipulate? Are children willing, engaged participants or do they require frequent redirection?

School-Age

Self-directed activities are essential in school-age programs. Large blocks of free-choice time are needed to encourage self-sufficiency, successful development of friendships, sound decision-making, problem solving, and mastery of skills. The classroom environment should invite self-selection of activities, experiences, and materials in both indoor and outdoor settings. School-age children need time, space and opportunities to pursue their personal interests, share their ideas in an accepting environment and help others in a group to develop friendships and a sense of personal value.

Many school-age children have limited outdoor time during the school day and arrive at the child care center with energy to burn. Opportunities to run, do sports, and play outside are important to meeting the overall developmental needs of children in this age group. Scheduling active times and a healthy snack before asking children to do homework and other “quiet” activities will help curb inappropriate and rambunctious behavior.

Transitions

Transitions can be the most challenging and chaotic times in the day. Reflect upon the daily schedule with the goal to limit or eliminate transitions as much as possible. Remember, children need advance notice to gradually prepare for the upcoming change and to complete their play. Give a five-minute warning before expecting children to clean up or put away their activities. Develop predictable transition routines children will recognize and associate with teacher expectations. For example, sing a “clean up” song or have children echo a clapping sequence at the beginning of a transition to reinforce desired behaviors and focus children’s attention on the task at hand.

Chaos is minimized when children move purposefully from one activity to the next. Teachers should plan for successful transitions just as thoroughly as they plan art or science activities. Co-teachers should work together to develop consistent routines and identify which adult will take responsibility for the children who are ready to move on to the next activity and which one will stay behind to help the remaining children conclude their projects. Teamwork and planning are essential to smooth transitions.

In summary:

All children need:

- Indoor and outdoor play;
- Balance of active and quiet times;
- Limited number of transitions;
- Thoughtful transitions, activities, and routines to avoid unnecessary waiting; and
- Opportunities to move individually from one activity to another instead of expecting whole groups of children to transition at the same time.

Additionally,

Infants need:

- Scheduling that occurs around each infant’s individual rhythms and routines; and
- Caregivers who are relaxed and responsive to infant’s needs.

Toddlers and Two’s need:

- A flexible schedule to accommodate their changing needs; and
- Voluntary participation in group and teacher-directed activities.

Preschoolers need:

- A flexible schedule to accommodate their individual developmental needs;
- A schedule with sufficient blocks of time for sustained child-initiated play; and
- Teacher-directed group activities of limited duration and based on children's interests.

School-Age children need:

- Mostly self-directed and self-selected activities; and
- Opportunities for active play and a healthy snack before settling down to do homework.

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