

EXCHANGE

LOOKING AT THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

BY LILIAN G. KATZ

A Top-Down View of the Quality of a Program

When we enter an early childhood setting as adults and attempt to assess its quality, we look at such characteristics as:

- The quality and quantity of space per child;
- The quality and type of equipment and materials;
- The adult/child ratio;
- The number of toilets, fire safety provisions, etc.

In addition, we should also consider the quality of teacher-parent relations and ask such questions as: Are they usually respectful? Supportive? Open? Inclusive? Tolerant?

These positive attributes are relatively easy when teacher and parents like each other; come from the same background; share culture, values, language, and goals for children. Almost anyone can do that. But to build such positive respectful and

supportive relations with parents who are different from us in these ways requires professionalism, which requires training and experience.

To be professional means to respond gracefully rather than defensively in moments of disagreement. It means also to develop relationships not on the basis of personal preferences and impulses, but on the basis of professional knowledge and judgment, and to make them problem-centered, rather than personal.

Furthermore, the top-down view should include an examination of staff relationships. We could ask:

- Are they supportive rather than contentious?
- Are they cooperative rather than competitive?
- Are they accepting rather than antagonistic or even hostile?
- Are they trusting rather than suspicious?

There are many ways to assess the quality of a program for young children. One is to look at it from the top down; another is from the bottom up. Both views are important.

Taking Stock

- Are they respectful rather than bossy?

Dissension among the staff of the program can drain energy away from the main focus on children, their families, and their needs.

Again, to relate well to colleagues we like — with whom we agree — who share the same goals, background, culture, language, and values is relatively easy. But to be respectful of those with whom we disagree or from whom we are different requires professionalism, and that usually requires knowledge, judgment, and training.

A Bottom-Up View of the Quality of a Program

The characteristics of a program that really predict its outcome are the answers to the bottom-up question, which is: What does it feel like to be a child in this environment?

Obtaining answers to this question

is not easy! It requires making the very best guess one can about how each individual child in this group experiences the program. We can proceed by asking about the environment on behalf of each child:

- Is it welcoming rather than merely captivating?
- Do I belong in the group rather than merely have a good time?
- Am I usually accepted by adults rather than scolded?
- Am I taken seriously rather than just precious or cute?
- Am I usually accepted by some peers rather than isolated, neglected, or rejected?
- Is this environment usually involving rather than entertaining?
- Are the activities meaningful rather than mindless?

- Are the activities engaging rather than amusing?
- Are the activities interesting rather than boring?
- Do I usually come here willingly rather than reluctantly?

It seems to me that only when answers to most of these questions are positive can we assume that the quality of the program is worthy of our children.

Based on the address given at the Annual Conference of the Washington Association for the Education of Young Children, Bellevue, Washington, October 1991.

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