

**Pedagogical Exploration of Bowdoin College Children's
Center
Guide for Older Toddler and Preschool Program Parents**

Overview of Curriculum

What does a typical day look like for my child?

Although it depends a bit on each room, this is the basic structure of the day:

Arrival and Drop Off

Early Morning Outside Play

Morning Snack

Morning Play

Lunch

Rest

Afternoon Snack

Afternoon Play

Departure & Pick Up

Find the specific routine for your child on our website: <https://www.bowdoin.edu/childrens-center/programs/index.html>

Some initial thoughts as we look at the Programs

Meeting us:

Home visits and trips to the Center play yard together introduce the caregiver into the relationship with a child, easing the bond into fruition. The family's primary caregiver visits the family at home to meet and chat in a comfortable and familiar environment. This conversation is an opportunity for the primary to get to know the child and share an experience that will help bridge home to the Center. After this initial meeting with the child and caregiver, the primary will have a chance on a zoom call with you to follow up on concerns you may have about your child's care or transition to the program and offer further guidance on questions that arise. This allows you to discuss without the child present, keeping the home visit focused solely on building positive connections and familiarity.

Establishing attachment with the children:

Before caregivers begin to build a relationship with the child, we realize where the strongest existing attachment lies – between the parent and child. The caregivers' grow their attachment with the child by demonstrating the trust their parents have in them.

Transitioning to our group care:

For new families entering the Older Toddler program and the Preschool Program, during the first week or two, parents or other familiar caregivers plan to spend time with their child at the Center until the child is comfortable with their primary. This may mean that for the first three mornings of the first week, the parent is in the room/play yard or on-site to be close. After the third day, the primary and parent can discern if staying for lunch and then nap is a good plan for the child so that the major aspects of the transition are covered. Parents may plan to pick their child up a bit earlier during the second week so the day doesn't feel too long for the child, and helps to avoid future resistance to coming to care at all. Usually a 3:30-4:00 pick up is welcomed. Overtime, each caregiver learns about your child as an individual, understanding their unique needs and personality. This feeling of being known gradually encourages children to feel trust in our care.

Preparing for the day in an Outdoor Nature Based Program:

The day begins outside upon arrival. Because of staffing patterns and the rhythm of the parents' schedules for drop off, parents should plan to

- check their child's diaper and offer a clean one if needed or toilet them upon arrival, and wash their hands
- dress their child for outside play (there will be guidance offered in the cubby area or on the room door for you to reference each day).
- Apply sunscreen and insect repellent if desired

This prep can take a brief amount of time if the child lives “around the corner” and comes dressed and toileted for the morning or it can take up to 20 min to prepare for the day if the child is commuting a distance and needs to diaper/toilet and get dressed in gear. Parents can check with us to design a plan for their family’s drop off if it seems too difficult.

The next step can be to bring their child outside to say good-bye and return to unpack food, extra clothes, leave the daily note, and check in with the parent’s primary. Parents may also choose to do the routine of delivering things with their child in the room and to their child’s cubby and chatting with the primary before heading outside. Either way is fine.

Whenever you are ready to say goodbye to your child, you may signal one of the caregivers outside, bring your child to their primary caregiver, and say goodbye to your child and leave. You are welcome to plan with the caregivers, so you are comfortable with your goodbyes and feel secure in their care as you leave.

Visiting during the day:

Families (relatives, parents) are welcomed to come to the Center to visit during the day whenever they like. Families should feel comfortable in the Center coming to see their children and their program or to take them out to visit outside of the program. When parents come to join a lunch table, they are welcome to sit on a stool at the table next to their child and participate in the conversation. Parents are also welcome to join circle, read a book with their child, or find their way to sitting in the play space or outside spending time. There are no rules on how to interact with children and yet, it may seem that some things are harder to navigate in a group situation than others. Please ask us if you are wondering about what you can do when you come to visit.

Getting to know other parents:

As parents enter a group care program, they are often interested in who the other parents are and want to get to know them. There is a delicate balance between chatting with other parents and creating and maintaining a calm and secure space for the children. When children are arriving during the drop off time, they are in transition and spending their last few minutes for the hours until pick-up with their parent. They want their attention and focus, the safety of their arms, and their predictable responses. Parents will greet each other, share a quick conversation, and often because they know each other well want to chat more deeply. If a group of children are gathered and playing independently, parents may wait to have their conversation until they leave that area. If there are no children gathered and everyone is making their way outside, that is a time for light and joyful interactions with each other in the room.

Nature-based Pedagogy

How do children learn through play?

Young children have a limitless curiosity rooted in intrinsic motivation to learn and live. The BCCC encourages child-directed play, an experience that allows children to explore their imaginations and the intricacies of the world around them. This pedagogy aims to preserve this internal desire to experience the wonder of the ordinary for the rest of their education. When it is time to play, the play yards and rooms are open to the children's creativity; there are varied yet neutral resources that allow their imagination to engage in rich and beautiful play. Educational research has proven that this intrinsic motivation to learn is central to academic prosperity in the future, precisely because the children decide what to discover.

True play is inherently experimentation, as it is a series of trial and error attempts the children use to try to uncover a secret of the natural world. They come up with their own hypotheses about physical properties outside and search for the answer to their own curiosities. Learning also takes place as the children become aware of their bodies and what their growing muscles can do. If you allow a child to navigate climbing to the top of a tall structure, you can observe their brain tackling problem solving and innovation, as they slowly develop a plan of what is working and what is not. As the children age,

socialization becomes involved in play. To form a more collaborative narrative, they must work to compromise and empathize with the various members of their group. Play shapes all aspects of neurological development, so yes, we do just “let the children play”.

How do they learn in nature?

What seems like “just play” is in fact children figuring out the natural laws of the universe. Complicated physics and biology are hidden in the big jumps off tree stumps and detailed insect investigations in the play yards. With a strong root in the regular flow of the environment and seasonal shifts, change becomes quite apparent for these young eyes. A new plant in the garden or expansion of a hole in the sand gives them a refreshed landscape to explore. The everchanging play yard introduces the children to inevitable yet natural variation on Earth.

Play is experimentation – creating a world that matches imagination and communicating plans for peers translates into concrete learning. The BCCC understands that children require no instructions on how to search for possibilities; a safe environment is offered with resources that allows these children to harness their natural capacities for scientific exploration. Children familiarize themselves with this new universe by hyper-fixating on the smallest details – the texture of leaf veins, smell of fresh basil, and taste of a rain drop elates their minds. The true joy comes when they share these observations with peers and caregivers, inviting them into the original wonder they experience. The outside world is unmarked territory for these children. Although a familiar space, children actively decide every day what they will do in the play yard, slowly forming an authentic identity. The environment allows limitless freedom for creativity, as they are simply surrounded by the stillness of nature.

Is nature-based pedagogy in all seasons?

Maine offers a range of weather, and the children learn in the changing environment in every season. Each passing month brings new excitement, as children appreciate the magic of leaves falling from trees and snow sprinkling down. Other areas of curriculum progress with the equinoxes as well, such as seasonal snacks and rotating books and songs that align with nature outside.

Do caregivers play with them outside?

The children at the BCCC engage in some of the most beautiful play that is preserved for them and not interrupted. It can be easy to become curious about the children’s narratives and ask questions about their play. By protecting these moments from interruption and outside considerations play is honored as theirs. Adult curiosities not only distract the children from the valuable moments of play, but comments impact their creativity. If left alone, these children will be able to explore the depths of their minds independently, a skill that will take them further than any questions. Instead, caregivers engage in projects nearby, “teacher work” that offers children proximity and presence while demonstrating engagement in meaningful work.

Won’t they get hurt if they play outside?

Following child-directed play, risky play and small injuries sometimes happen. Often it is simply a trip while running or an unsuccessful climb up a tree stump. The response of the adults around the child will heavily influence their response if it is a minor injury; if the adults immediately look scared, the child will follow with a reaction to match. Instead, a neutral response and an assessment of the injury is followed by comfort. However, children who are offered opportunities to try their skills gain greater control over their bodies because of their frequency of outside play and freedom to explore their limits. They know their bodies and will problem solve in tricky situations.

Why don’t they play with toys?

The materials in our play yards and rooms are minimal; simple vessels for natural resources, tools for digging and working on the land, and colorful play cloths to allow for self-expression. Loose parts and open-ended textiles allow the child to dictate creativity. Grounded in nature, they have limitless access to organic materials, such as sand, earth, water, and plants that connect them to the environment. The rest of play is in their imagination and what the natural world has to offer. Toys generally promote passivity in children, as they are given direct instruction on how to play with them and what they should be used for. As well, toys prompt requests for sharing and turn taking which are skills that are beyond the

developmental level of our children.

Care Practices

Establishing attachment with the children?

The strongest existing attachment – between the parent and child- leads to the initial relationships with primaries. Attachment grows between the caregiver and the child when parents demonstrate their trust in care. Home visits and trips to the Center with parent and child together introduce the caregiver to the child’s close circle of trusted people, easing the bond into fruition. Once the child begins at the Center, parents take time to build familiarity in the new setting, staying with their child for a few hours at the beginning of the transition. Gradually, children grow toward the care relationship as each caregiver learns about the child as an individual, understanding their unique needs and personality. This feeling of being known gradually encourages children to rest in our care.

Connections back to home occur throughout the days, reminding the children that the love their parents have for them remains even when they are away.

What is continuity of care and why do you do this?

A cornerstone of our practice, as children progress throughout the Center and change classrooms, their caregivers follow them. Each child is carefully paired with a primary caregiver, one who will take the lead in their individualized care. This allows for the proper attachment to form, creating a safe and consistent space for the child when they are away from home. Continuity of care also ensures that our care is specifically designed for each child; our caregivers do not have a cookie-cutter curriculum to repeat as the classes move through each year. Each of our children are known for who they are and can feel this sense of familiarity with their caregivers.

Children spend the first three years at the Center the same group of children and staff (barring departures and unforeseen happenings). When they move to the PS program they are given a primary caregiver who they spend the next two years with and a familiar cohort. This deep relationship affords them the careful eye of a primary to guide them through their day and then on their way to kindergarten.

How do you maintain individual care in a group setting?

Primary caregiving is one part of the continuity of care practice. This allows children to have a person who they are most connected to throughout the day as they toilet, eat, dress, and rest. The primary knows how the child likes to be dressed (sleeves rolled down over wrists to go outside in a jacket), how they like to wash their hands (sleeves rolled up), or fall asleep at nap time (which song to sing with a back rub). The other staff are considered secondary in the primary’s relationship to the child. This structure ensures the child feels secure and understood as they move through the day. It is this strong relationship that leaves children free to engage in deep and rich play.

Should parents continue these practices at home?

Although the theories behind our practice are synergistic with group care, we also want parents to know they can adopt them at home or are free to do what they like. Most of our techniques at the Center are what’s best for group care, as we hope to establish a strong attachment with your children and offer them an authentic day, worthy of their time. Parents have a natural connection with their children and find their own style and routines. If you ever have questions about implementing a part of our practice at home, we are happy to help you.

How do young children make friends?

The emotional anchoring in the programs is critical to the child's day and their experiences at the Center. The caregivers and specifically the child’s primary is the sure secure presence in their day. Caregivers are “in the lead” so that the child feels held and cared for emotionally and physically while they are with us. This supports them as they navigate in and out of transitions, play experiences, and care with a steady sense of what is next. Young children are very susceptible to peer-orientation, meaning they will often look to the other children for ideas on how to behave rather than their caregivers. This is important to recognize because children don’t have the skills to lead others and are not the secure anchor to a predictable day. We recognize the importance of comfort with other children and the sense of belonging to a peer group that comes to children as they move into their fourth and fifth years. Caregivers scaffold

children's entry into peer play experiences if they need support to find a common play theme. However, caregivers encourage parents to focus on their child's relationship with their primary and the other caregivers on the team as they talk about their day or as they arrive in the morning rather than on peers. While peers are lovely and exciting to be with, they are also unpredictable, sometimes not interested in playing or joining in, and can have had a difficult moment with the child. For these reasons, in addition to the secure base adults provide, we guide children to focus on the constancy of the caregiver.

How do the children share?

Children are not instructed to "take turns." At this age, their brains are not integrated and so not yet equipped for this level of executive function. They cannot take another's perspective, so turn taking and sharing are not developmental skills they have access to yet. If a child wants to use something another child is using, we respond that the child is using it. We help the child find another item like it, move to do something with the caregiver or do something different with a peer. By allowing them to move on rather than build stress by asking them to experience waiting and walking into a world that they can't yet understand, they adapt to the request to move to the next thing. This management of frustration and not having what they want in the moment and building a relationship with how to move through frustration supports their learning for future frustrations in life.

How do you approach transitions?

Change and new situations are difficult to navigate, especially for young children. Caregivers intentionally plan for every moment of development, whether a child is starting at the Center, changing rooms, leaving for the summer, or heading off to kindergarten. Transitions both big and small present emotional moments. Saying good-bye to parents or caregivers is a challenge for their brains (letting go of one thing for another) and so a technique caregivers use is to "bridge" relationships between parents and caregivers with other caregivers to help them. This bridging sounds like "Saying goodbye is hard today and I am right here to care for you until your parent returns." Sometimes we ask parents to share stories from the morning or plans for after care that we can refer to as a bridge to times when children and parents are reunited. Another form of bridging occurs naturally through the day as we reference the parents care in packing "just the right lunch", making sure there was a cozy sweater, that the favorite stuffy or blanket is available for nap. We weave the parents' presence into the day to nurture strength and love through the separation and move into enjoying the day.

Finding rest during the day

In group care the day moves along at a pace that doesn't belong to one child, it belongs to the group. While adjustments are made to meet individual needs, each child moves through the day along with others. This is exhausting and while there is attention paid to creating calm moments and slower paces, it can be tiring to maintain at the pace of group care all week.

Nap time and resting are offered each day from 12:45 – 2:30 so that children who sleep for longer amounts of time have that block saved for them and children who sleep for less time have a chance to rest for 1 hour (required by the State), read books independently, and spend quiet time with caregivers who are singing and doing their work close by. Children are woken after an hour at their parents' request or left to sleep until it is time to begin the afternoon routine.

Midday pick-ups and drop offs

Because children are sensitive to the transitions in the day caregivers build an intentional path to rest from lunch, to toileting, to stories, singing and then tucking children in and offering a back rub or closeness as needed. We keep this time as uninterrupted as possible and ask parents to schedule appointments around nap so that children are not picked up after 12:45 and before 2:15. In the event that a morning appointment runs late, we ask that children are not brought in during those hours as well.

Understanding the Role of Emotion in our practice

The research in child development suggests that children who are familiar and comfortable with emotion adapt to new situations and know themselves. We also understand that when emotions are familiar and learning opportunities are offered (play or academics) children succeed most often when they are settled. At the Children's Center, caregivers guide and support children's experiences in naming and understanding how emotion is managed within themselves. During these first five years children find

frustration, perseverance, problem solving, collaboration, and joy throughout their play. We recognize that emotions are overwhelming as they are felt for the first time and so during emotional moments caregivers offer a warm presence to children having an emotion. They may have an increased heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature, all evolutionary signals from their brain trying to change their current situation. When children first feel these emotions, caregivers sit with them and then label the emotions once they have passed through it with “you were so frustrated because you could not have that spoon”. This necessary acknowledgment allows them to begin to adapt and recognize these new feelings.

Like all humans, children are often met with futile wants – a shovel that someone else is using, a parent saying good-bye at drop off, or a specific stool at lunch. When a decision is made that thwarts the child’s desire, the emotion is felt with full force. Because the two hemispheres of the brain are “untempered” the eruption of emotion is strong. From the outside, this may appear like a tantrum because they feel like their world has collapsed. In these moments, we do not redirect or distract them from their reaction. Instead, we acknowledge the emotion they experience. This limitless emotional expression encourages the child to move through tears to adaptation; an experience that culminates once those emotions are left behind. In our practice, the children also realize that their trusted caregivers will not leave them in these moments of emotional release. As a result, a vulnerability that is crucial for their brain development unfolds.

How do children learn self-regulation?

Emotional and cognitive self-regulation are not separate, distinct skills. Children who feel comfortable enough to regulate emotion are thus able to engage in learning and play. Independent emotional regulation is a lofty goal. The Center’s practice emphasizes that children’s emotional turmoil is not theirs to bear alone. In independent emotional situations, children feel the frustration of trying to work out whatever is causing distress. With caregivers’ constant presence, children are supported while they navigate a sensitive situation, allowing them to find their own path to relief. If they need help, caregivers scaffold solutions, offering a hand or an alternative plan. Their bodies need to release these feelings; guiding the methods of emission is key to healthy brains and lets them carry on with play.

Will my child be ready for kindergarten at the end of BCCC preschool?

The Center prides itself on the practice of offering child-directed play. The importance of this innate curiosity is seen in a carefully created safe environment that invites and provokes children to engage in rich play organically. Allowing children to lead their own search into the unknown is central to their brain development, as they gather new information by experiencing life in a child-led, nature-based program.

The continuation of intrinsic desire to learn is the most noticeable variation between the typical instruction-based preschool and the pedagogy of the Center. The children play with enthusiasm, as they internally decide the course of their time in the play yards. This translates into a sustainable love for acquiring knowledge, encouraging them to adventure into life for their own pleasure. Relishing their own creations, these young children have immense freedom in their imaginations. Unprompted and uninterrupted play gives space for their minds to be infinitely open, welcoming thoughts beyond the possibilities of an adult’s influence. In later academic years, they will have greater freedom of thought, trusting their own ability to make relevant inquiries and to pursue the answers.

Intrinsic motivation to learn is an invaluable skill for children as they enter their education in schools. They will bring with them a unique ability for independent problem solving, capacity for dealing with deep emotional dilemmas, tools for frustration, and an empowered self-identity that will elicit them to feel confident in the challenges that lie ahead. They will have the experience of developing strong emotional attachments outside of the home and this will serve them in personal relationships. In all, children are prepared for academic success when they spend the first years playing.

