



**Pedagogical Exploration of  
Bowdoin College Children's Center**

**Infant and Young Toddler  
Programs**

Guide for Parents and Others

## **Introduction to our Infant and Young Toddler Programs**

The Bowdoin College Children's Center welcomes our new families and their children to the first two years of our three-year continuity of care program. We have written this guide with the interest of Bowdoin interns studying child development, insights from former parents, and the knowledge of our team. This guide is a "deeper dive" into life as a parent in the infant and YT programs so that you can understand these illuminated aspects of our management of the environment and the child's experience with us and you.

### **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/Bottle*

*Morning Play/Nap*

*Lunch/Bottle*

*Play/Nap*

*Afternoon Snack/Bottle*

*Afternoon Play/Nap*

*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 together introduce the caregiver into the situation, easing the bond into fruition. We, the family's primary, visit the family at home to meet and chat in a comfortable and familiar environment. Our conversation is an opportunity to get to know each other, offer guidance to broad questions, and share some thoughts from our practice and transition to the Center. After this initial meeting we will schedule 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.

Establishing attachment with the children:

Before we even begin to build a relationship, we realize where the strongest existing attachment lies – between the parent and child. We grow our attachment with the child by demonstrating the trust their parents have in us.

#### **Transitioning to our group care:**

During the first week or two, we ask parents or other familiar caregivers to plan to spend the time their child is at the Center with their child until the child is comfortable with their primary. Often this looks like:

Day one – having time in the space with the child's primary, the child and the parent,

Day two – having time in the space with the child's primary, the child and the parent, interacting with them and possibly offering a bottle and familiar person offering diaper changes with the primary nearby and a nap.

Day three – having time in the space with the child's primary and the child alone and with a bottle and a diaper change and the familiar person offering the child a nap.

Day four and five – having time with the child's primary do all the care with the familiar person nearby to support them as needed.

This is a suggested transition schedule as it depends on the parents' comfort level with group care, their child's age and sensitivity to being with others for care, and the child's previous experience in other care settings. The goal for this week or two is that the child isn't in alarm with their primary providing care.

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:**

Our day begins outside upon arrival. Because of our staffing patterns and the rhythm of the parents' schedules for drop off we ask parents to plan to

- check their child's diaper upon arrival and offer a clean one if needed,
- offer them bottle or a nurse (in the infant room) if they are ready to be fed in the first 30 minutes of their day, you can also feed them (just a quick snack) as you leave home so that they have a longer window of time before they need food at the Center.
- dress them for outside play (there will be guidance offered in the cubby area for you to reference each day).

This prep can take a brief amount of time if the child lives "around the corner" and can take up to 45 min if the child is commuting a distance so we ask parents to check in with us to design a plan for their family.

### **Entering the program upon arrival:**

We welcome family to come to the Center to visit during the day as often as they like. Family can take children out to visit with them and return or come to visit the child in the program. We want families to feel the program as a comfortable space for their child and them.

Upon arrival we ask adults to:

remove their outside shoes at the door and bring them through to the back door for going outside. This preserves the carpets as clean spaces for the young children who spend time on them.

wash their hands in the adult sink in the room before heading into the room for the drop off routine. It is most convenient to do this as they check their child's diaper.

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 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, or 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.

### **Parents of more than one child:**

When parents have an older child and a younger child to drop off, we recommend working with the younger child's primary to determine a drop off plan that works for you. This could be leaving your younger child with a caregiver until you return to complete the drop off routine while you have time to drop your older child off. In any case, it is safest to have your younger child in their space before entering an older child's space as those rooms may have objects that can be choking hazards.

### **Sharing space at drop off:**

The infant and YT rooms are designed with a limited scope of what is possible in childcare. With one changing table and a small area for dressing for outdoors things can slow down and become frustratingly slow. We have an additional diaper changing mat for each room that can be used on the floor (caregivers will show you) and we invite you to dress your child "outside" of the cubby space. In the infant program this may be in the care or play space and in the YT room this might be in the middle space (we call this middle earth). Please reach out to a staff person if it isn't clear where you should dress or change your child or you have a time constraint and "traffic" in the room is heavy. We will help you.

### **Visiting during the day:**

Parents have access to the building anytime during the day and are welcomed to visit through the day too. When parents visit, they may want time to feed their child and find that there needs to be a diaper change too. If you run out of time, please let the primary know and they will help you with this care. If you come to join a lunch table, you are welcome to sit on a stool at the table next to your 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 your child 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 anything to do with your child's time with you.

### **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. We want families to feel comfortable with each other and familiar with the parents of the children their child spends the day with. We balance this desire with the practice of 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. We know that families will greet each other, share a quick conversation, and often because they know each other well want to chat more deeply. We invite you to do this with sensitivity to the presence of the children and the group. If a group of children are gathered and playing independently, we prefer that you hold your conversation until you leave that area. If there are no children gathered and everyone is making their way outside, we see that as a time for light and joyful interactions with each other.

### **Outdoor Nature-based Play Curriculum**

#### **Nature-based play occurs in all seasons**

We take full advantage of the range of Maine weather, celebrating what the children can learn in our 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 our care progress with the equinoxes as well, such as seasonal snacks and rotating books and songs that align with nature outside. We ensure that all the children are well equipped with weather appropriate clothes and take regular breaks to cool down or heat up based on the temperatures.

#### **How children learn in nature**

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; we offer a safe environment with resources that allow 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 what they see with their caregivers, inviting us into the original wonder they experience. The outside world is unmarked territory for these children. Although a familiar space, they actively decide every day who they will be in the play yard, slowly forming an authentic identity. The environment allows limitless freedom for creativity, as they are simply surrounded by nature.

Being outside encourages engagement with the richness of nature. These children find information by dropping, moving stick and rocks as well as walking or crawling through sand and mud. The natural world is full of richness, and these children know that to truly soak it in they must ditch any sense of passivity. Often, bliss comes during the simplest moments, but they must be aware enough to look for it.

#### **Play outside**

Following child-led 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, we begin with a neutral response and of course immediately assess to see if they were physically hurt. However, our children seem to have impressive control over their bodies because of their frequency of outside play and freedom to explore their limits. They know their bodies well and will problem solve to avoid tricky situations.

#### **How do children learn through play?**

Young children have a limitless curiosity rooted in intrinsic motivation to learn and live. The BCCC encourages child-led 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, our play yards and rooms are open to the children's creativity; we provide 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 through the play yard, you can observe their brain tackling problem solving and innovation, as they slowly develop a plan of what is working and what does 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 class. Play shapes all aspects of neurological development, so yes, we do just let the children play.

### **Uninterrupted play**

We do engage in playful and intentional ways to connect with children during care time, meals, and dressing for outside. The infant program is the first step in their years at the Center to learn about their interests and observations. We scaffold this by offering varied opportunities for positioning outside (in the grass, under trees, in the stick house, near the sand). But these moments are crucial for development and are not to be interrupted with our offerings, questions or speculations. Our curiosities not only distract the children from the valuable moments of play, but our opinions also 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 us pointing out the world to them. Instead, caregivers engage in projects nearby, showing the children, we are here if they need us while demonstrating a priority in interacting with nature.

### **Play with “loose parts”**

The materials in our play yards and classrooms 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” (like sticks and stones) and open-ended textiles allow the child to dictate creativity. Grounded in nature, they have limitless access to organic materials, such as sand, dirt, water, and plants that connect them to the environment. The rest of play is up to the minds of the children 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.

### **Specifics of our Group Care**

#### **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, is that most of their caregivers move with them each year. 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. Sometimes because of staffing, the whole team can't remain together and so we plan for this by introducing new faces as soon as we can to familiarize the children to them. This means that the transition from the infant program to the YT program, while emotional, is with familiar faces.

#### **Maintaining individual care in a group setting:**

We ensure a very high caregiver to child ratio at the BCCC, as we know how influential close relationships are for young children in caregiving outside of the home. Using primary caregivers allows children to have a person who they are most connected to in emotionally vulnerable moments, such as toileting, feeding, dressing, and resting. The other staff are considered secondary in their relationship to the child, and each child has a secondary staff and tertiary staff person assigned to them. This structure ensures the child feels secure and thoughtfully cared for within each program.

## **Napping**

Naps can feel incredibly intimidating when children are adjusting to the center. We take great care in ensuring they feel comfortable, cared for, and secure in the environment. Parents bring their child's sleep sacks, and pacifier (if using one) and their primary or secondary caregiver support them through their naptime routine.

We have a consistent schedule before the child's individual rest to establish a healthy routine for the children to count on, such as a story and song before their nap. Infants sleep in cribs and then on mats in the same spot each day. They are rocked in a rocking chair as needed, held in arms by a mat, and finally learn to fall asleep with someone near them singing, rubbing their back (if preferred), and offering them consistent messages about sleep. Wake ups are slow and gentle, to ease the transition back into the rest of their days at the Center.

## **What is the purpose of songs?**

A major part of our practice that eases the chaos of a transition is the consistency of our songs. In almost every part of the day you can hear caregivers singing the children to their next steps. These melodies allow the children to know exactly what their plan is without having to remind them of the transition. We use the same songs in every room as a way for children to have a constant marker to let them know what to do even as they progress through the center. We also sing to let them know we are there, an audible reminder that they are cared for. At naptime many caregivers sing children to sleep so that they know we are with them as they close their eyes.

## **Do I have to continue these practices at home too?**

Although we are confident in the theories that inform our practice for group care, it is not necessary for you to do anything we do at home. Our methods at the Center work best for a group care setting, as we hope to establish a strong attachment with children. Parents have a natural connection and may have other methods that work for their routines. If you ever have questions or would like guidance about implementing a part of our curriculum at home, we are here to chat.

## **Our practice focuses on the importance of recognizing emotions**

### **What is the value of emotional-based care?**

Childcare centers with young children are notorious for emotional explosions and intense moments of feelings. It can often feel like a sensitive environment that leads to parents and caregivers tiptoeing around their children to avoid all possible "big" emotions. Seemingly an easy solution to save headaches and tears, this often simply delays emotional moments or limits a child's emotional expression and intelligence, crucial elements for neurological development. Emotions are naturally designed to be felt, expressed, articulated, and eventually regulated.

Emotions are incredibly difficult to sort out now, especially for young children who are possibly feeling these thoughts for the very first time. During emotional moments, children have an innate physical response signaling something does not feel right. An increased heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature are all evolutionary signals from their brain trying to change the situation. When babies first feel these senses, they are unaware of what exactly is happening with their bodies, perhaps leading to confusion or fear. A label for these emotions gives the child autonomy over their own bodies again. The phrase, "I see that you are so frustrated because you could not have that spoon" may sound obvious to onlookers, but for the child, it is the necessary acknowledgment that allows them to settle into these new feelings.

During these moments of frustration, we do not redirect or distract them from their natural reaction. Instead, we acknowledge the sadness they seem to be experiencing, allowing them to fully sit with the emotion. This limitless emotional expression encourages the child to learn that although tears and behavior may not change the situation, it does relieve a deep desire to communicate their wants with their caregivers. The children also realize that their caregivers will not leave them in these moments of emotional release, establishing a deep sense of trust and vulnerability that are crucial for their brain development.

**Tears in our care**

Giving children the space and time to feel these emotions to their fullest extent allows them to feel safe. Bottling up sadness or frustration inhibits brain development and prevents children from settling and playing. At the BCCC, we understand the importance of tears and do not rush a child during these moments of emotional release. The strength of the attachment between a child and their caregiver ensures they are well cared for during these moments of distress.

**How do you reward them for a “good job”?**

After a child completes a difficult action, it feels natural to offer some form of verbal accolade. You will hear the caregivers recognize the “internal” accomplishment as they say, “you worked so hard on that”, “you wanted to roll over and you did”, etc. Our caregivers refrain from using the phrase “Good Job” or other compliments about their play or independent care to avoid their focus on our reactions rather than their satisfaction. Acknowledgment of hard work is always appreciated and ensures the children feel proud of their work for their own satisfaction.

**Thoughts on Sharing**

Children at the BCCC are not asked to “take turns” or “share toys”. In the first five years, their brains are not yet equipped for this level of executive function. They can’t take perspectives, understand another child’s needs, or regulate their behavior consistently to give up a preferred toy because their brain isn’t integrated. We don’t ask children to do what they can’t. They feel freedom and calm because we offer many materials that are similar, nothing that is novel or singular, and so our statements that a child is using that, allows them to move. Asking them to experience waiting and walking into a world that they can’t understand creates stress. If a material is too challenging for a group of children to use successfully, we remove it until they are ready or help them meet their frustration and disappointment.

**How do you help them learn self-regulation?**

Emotional and cognitive self-regulation are not separate, distinct skills. Specifically, those children who feel comfortable enough to regulate anxiety are thus able to engage in learning and play. As we adults know, independent emotional regulation is a lofty goal. At the BCCC we understand the importance of emphasizing to children that their emotional turmoil is not theirs to bear alone, as their brains are not yet prepared for this responsibility. While they practice independent emotional situations, we let them feel the frustration of trying to work out whatever is causing distress. With our constant presence, we support them while they navigate this sensitive situation, allowing them to find their own path to relief. If they need our help, we scaffold solutions, offering a hand or 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.

**Closing thoughts**

Our care is different from others because we have the benefit of accreditation standards, high quality staff to child ratios, intentional and consistent professional development, and an articulated practice that is informed by developmental psychologists and shared through staff orientation, professional development, and weekly meetings with our team. We invite parents to a partnership with us for the first five years of their child’s life to join caregiving practices and the love and enjoyment of their children. We look forward to the years ahead together.

