

Pedagogy and Practice

OUR WORK AT BOWDOIN COLLEGE CHILDREN'S CENTER

Continuity of care

Continuity of Care refers to the importance of providing children form, predictability, and stability within a childcare setting for at least the first three years of life. Of most importance is the primary care relationship lasting from infancy through age three.

- The benefit of a child having the same primary caregiver in a childcare setting for the first three years of life is that it decreases stress of transitions for the child and the family.
- The decrease of stress allows the child's brain to engage in a continual development process and an opportunity to make greater connections with their experiences in their world.
- Continuity of Care also offers a connection between parents, teachers and children that creates a feeling of safety and security for a child. Because there is not a sense of loss and upheaval through transitions, this time is used for growth and development.
- Our staff focus on their care for individual children, the deepening of these relationships, and the richness of working in partnership with families for three years.

Attachment

Attachment is defined at the Center as a safe, secure and predictable bond that forms between a child and their primary caregiver through caregiving routines.

- When a child is secure and sure of their care and that their needs will be understood and met, they can freely play and learn. In order to build these secure and sure relationships, we practice primary caregiving so that each child has a meaningful and trusting relationship with their caregiver.
- Through the care responsibilities such as feeding, napping, changing and dressing the child, the caregiver builds this primary bond with the child and then the family.
- Additionally, part-time staff consistently work in a specific program at the Center so that there are fewer adults the very young child needs to know and trust.

Primary caregiving and Proximity

- The primary caregiver steps into the role as the child's main focus through the day. Initially, a child who is new to the group is cared for primarily by this person so that they build a connection through repeated routine care interactions. Over time, the connection develops into an understanding and then trust. Once this connection blossoms into a deeper relationship, children may receive care from other caregivers in their cohort.
- After developing strong and solid relationships with the children, we maintain proximity to them, so that they feel our presence and play freely and independently. Being present might mean doing chores, working in the garden, shoveling, or knitting so that attention isn't focused on the playing child but rather on the task at hand while we are visible to them.
- Primary caregivers have deep long-term relationships with the child's parents. They meet throughout the year, check-in daily, and guide them through their child's development as needed. Conferences and portfolios are managed by the primary.

Play-based learning

The Children's Center staff have studied two interwoven paths that lead to children's learning through play. One path is the creation of a rich emotional landscape necessary for a healthy, nurturing world where children can thrive. The other is the engaging world where cognitive growth offers rich, substantive, and deep play.

The understanding that "emotion drives cognition" informs our work with the youngest, most tender minds. We strive to create a haven where children can trust, predict, and experience security. With this solid emotional foundation, they play and so they learn. We protect their play and learning from the circumstances and obstacles of group care.

Background understanding of the importance of play

- Virtually every theory of child development hypothesizes that play is related to healthy cognitive and social development (e.g., Piaget, 1962). When children play, they refine motor skills, explore the physical properties of objects, learn cause and effect, and engage in means – ends problem solving.
- We intentionally and deliberately offer materials that deserve children’s attention, investigation, and exploration. Our outside space and inside rooms are planned for play in the purest, most authentic sense. With this play at hand, we then work to protect it from disruption and interruption; surviving the rhythm of children’s interactions and benefitting from the quiet adult’s presence.
- As children develop cognitively and acquire language, their goals can become more sophisticated leading to longer episodes of focused attention, particularly during play.
- The term “focused attention” has been used to designate activity during which “attention is directed exclusively to one task and not divided or shared between tasks.”
- The environmental design, materials, and the tone of the room build a calm atmosphere in order to set the stage for children’s focused attention. Group care, by definition, can be disruptive and distracting so our goal each day, throughout the day, is to minimize the impact of group care on children’s learning.
- We understand that when children see the familiar repeatedly, may recognize the familiar and find novelty through creative engagement or they may recognize the familiar and respond with disinterest. Adults who are busy alongside the child, engaged in their own work, not reacting to either of these responses, allowing the child to grow.

Loose Parts

- Nicholson (1971) coined the term loose parts theory to articulate the idea that children benefit from being given open-ended materials. This means that the materials may be used alone or with other materials. They are movable and do not have a defined use; rather children may use them in a variety of ways.
- Loose parts do not have specific instructions of how the product needs to be used. Through exploration and manipulation of the materials, children figure out how they can be combined, redesigned, taken apart and put together in multiple ways.
- When materials do not have a specific purpose, children feel invited to be curious about the items in their environment and then *mess about* with them.

Nature-based play

- When outdoor environments are rich with opportunities for calculated risk-taking, they offer children play with climbing, running, shovels, rakes, hammers, stones, logs, and stumps; and rough-and-tumble play with others.
- In outdoor play, children practice planning and executing ideas. They experience making a guess about something and then trying it out. Children acquire an intuitive understanding of scientific method. Later, when it is taught inside their elementary classroom, children who have these experiences have a head start understanding concepts.
- During outdoor play, curious children may tinker with materials and ideas. Tinkering is an active engagement with materials or experiences that children do to figure out ideas and answers to questions. Tinkering with ideas supports children exploring, experimenting, and engaging with materials in ways that offer new options and learning through trial and error.
- When children are given the time, space, and materials to combine, assemble, take apart, and create with; they become immersed in experimentation and discovery that increases their desire to further explore.
- Because of peer play, the space and options to move, create, and explore occur more spontaneously in outdoor play. This is where children learn to take turns, self-regulate, interact with peers, and begin to recognize social norms.
- Children in outdoor environments have experiences that contribute to the critical thinking and problem-solving skills used later in academic environments.

Quality Environments

- The inside rooms at the Children's Center are places for experiencing learning, developing curiosity and exploring autonomy. Caregivers don't impart knowledge but offer conditions for learning by preparing sufficient space and time for the child.
- The attention and generosity shown by adults towards children are also manifested in the creation of environments which favor their cognitive growth.
- These environments sustain and stimulate the child's imagination as they are arranged for children's eyes, hands and gestures. They offer the child proximity through sight and space to their caregivers in order to reduce tension.
- These environments are predictable, understandable, and meaningful enough to stimulate the children towards organizing their own games, activities, and discoveries. All the areas are conceived of and designed for everyone to enjoy.

Uninterrupted play

- At the Children's Center, we keep a quiet and calm backdrop for the children's play to avoid drawing their attention away from their activity and to support and acknowledge the fragility of the young child's developing abilities.
- A few research studies suggest that brief interruptions when children are playing can end their ongoing activities. With 3-year-olds, they were unable to return to their play after interruptions without adult prompts. If the play resumed, it was less intense. Children younger than 3 years, who are finding play, are very susceptible to interruptions because of poorly developed control over their sustained attention.
- Interruptions are kept at a minimum when young children receive care that is predictable, when form and structure are in balance; and when sensory stimulation is within the child's capacity to manage it.

School- readiness

- We know that brain development is at the core of all aspects of development, and we have read studies show that outdoor play influences a child's neurological development as the neural circuits of the brain become wired.
- Children are steeped in social, cognitive, and language development as they take advantage of the freedom offered to them to collaborate, explore, and orchestrate their experiences in preschool. The materials offered in the play yard appear, on the surface, to be minimal, relatively non-directed, and organic; however, when children manipulate these materials, they are not captured by their novelty but instead by their familiarity and so utilize them in play creatively. Here we see a rich palate for them to use in their inquiry, investigations, and problem solving.
- Rather than learn content: letters, numbers, sounds, colors, children experience the learning process. They experience frustration at not having something go the way they planned either with peers or with a project. They are persistent as they attempt to solve a problem or identify a perspective and often don't stop until there is an outcome that seems to their liking.
- Children collaborate and learn to problem solve with caregivers who model problem solving skills. They learn to read cues, identify sequences, follow routines, observe, predict outcomes, and practice attending to the important features of an opportunity.
- When children enter kindergarten their self-esteem and ability to self-regulate are some of the most important tools, they bring with them. These tools will serve them well, as they experience difficult situations, problem solve, and how to navigate new environments with peers.
- Learning to read, write, and count will follow easily as they build on their solid foundation with play and employ their past strategies for learning to these new experiences.