

What to look for in a child-centered program: A helpful checklist

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A child-centred program places the child at the centre of the learning process. The child is an active participant in their own learning. The program is play-based, the child has choices of learning activities, the families are seen as knowledgeable and important, and the educator acts as a facilitator of learning.

THE ENVIRONMENT: the physical space and arrangement, the materials, the décor

- play and learning materials are accessible and available to children
- materials are well organized, labeled and easy to find and put away
- children's artwork, creations, projects are on display and within the children's view
- each child has their own space in the playroom (ex. cubbie) to build a sense of belonging
- each child sees evidence of themselves and their family in the environment (representations, real images, photos and albums, storybooks, artwork, and pretend play props that are similar to things from home)
- the room is arranged with play-based learning centres that are clearly distinguished and labelled
- there is a place for families to sit and interact with their children and the educator
- the room is arranged to encourage children to self regulate with clear boundaries, traffic patterns and self-contained experiences
- children can see the educator and use them as a resource if needed
- the room has areas for active play, for focused play and for quiet activities

THE CURRICULUM: planned and spontaneous play-based learning experiences

- activities are planned based on observations of children, their interests and emerging skills
- focus is on children learning through play
- planned for the group and for individual children
- children and families are involved and influence the planning
- takes into account the children's need to pursue their own interests and play experiences
- values the cultural and social contexts of children and their families
- provides opportunity for learning and development in all developmental domains
- children see themselves and their family represented in play materials, images in the room and storybooks
- the materials include loose parts and open-ended materials
- includes literacy and numeracy
- presents ongoing opportunities for children to represent and share what they are learning
- based on children's needs, interests, strengths, understandings and capacity.
- designed to build on the unique needs, interests, disposition and strengths of each child
- incorporates child's social and cultural knowledge, home language and family
- is open-ended

THE INTERACTIONS:

Roles, responsibilities, relationships and dynamics of the people in the program

Children have opportunity to:

- use their bodies and their senses, explore, have fun
- make choices and decisions
- initiate and direct their own play
- play at various learning centres
- work independently
- work alongside others in developmentally appropriate ways
- problem solve independently
- create, imagine, be messy, go outside, build, pretend, and represent their thinking in multiple forms
- see themselves represented in play materials, books and images in the room
- play at a level that is developmentally appropriate but also try out achievable challenges
- express their emotions and share their thinking

Families:

- are welcome in the program – they are greeted, there are places for them to sit
- are valued and have a voice in the program and influence curriculum
- have conversations with educators who know and use their names
- are greeted in their home language and/or with a familiar greeting
- see the things their children make, create and play with
- receive regular verbal and written communication from educators about what their children are learning and doing
- are able to ask questions and learn more about play based learning and their children's development

Educators:

- know children's names and call them by their names during interactions
- interact with children through conversation, shared exploration, genuine praise, songs and stories
- are on the children's level
- respond to children's questions and needs - even when they don't have a shared language
- plan activities that support children's learning
- follow through on planned learning experiences that were designed based on observations of children's interests and needs
- are responsive in the moment and follow children's lead to create spontaneous curriculum
- assess, anticipate and extend children's learning
- engage in play and ask open ended questions
- provide a balance between child led, child initiated and educator supported learning
- create opportunity for children to be spontaneous and to direct their own play experiences and then sometimes joining them, but on their terms (not taking over and directing)
- help children to establish and maintain limits during play
- document children's learning and share it with children and their families in ways that they can understand