The Essential Nature of Caregiving Routines

Providing care for infants and toddlers is a profoundly personal and engaging journey. Care teachers must be prepared for those moments of contact that occur throughout the caregiving day, particularly during one-to-one personal care routines. Programs should provide support so teachers can prioritize being available and responsive during routines. Routines are the heart of curriculum in infant and toddler group care. Caregiving routines provide opportunities for care teachers to build a close personal relationship with each child while attending to the child’s individual physical, emotional, and developmental needs. When implemented responsively and unhurriedly, routines create learning opportunities for the child to participate, develop skills, and enjoy the process. This approach helps the child and helps care teachers who will likely find satisfaction in caregiving routines when they pay attention to the child, not just the immediate task.

Because of each child’s need for consistency and predictability, routines should resemble, as closely as possible, the child’s family’s caregiving practices at home. Culture and family play essential roles in each child’s development, especially of the child’s sense of identity and of a positive sense of self. Through ongoing informal conversations with each child’s family, care teachers learn essential characteristics about the family and its cultural caregiving styles. Care teachers can then provide personalized care in accordance with each child’s experience at home. Child care programs must also support their care teachers in understanding and including family practices from the time the child enters care. This vital support involves programs providing their care teachers with information gathered from, for example, enrollment forms and intake interviews, as well as from other opportunities in getting to know family members. Programs and teachers will then be able to personalize each child’s care routine.

(WestEd 2014, 190–191)
While being fed, diapered or bathed the infant is metaphorically, in rehearsal for the dance of life. (Hammond 2009, 27)
Hands constitute the infant’s first connection to the world. ... Hands pick her up, lay her down, wash and dress and maybe even feed her. How different it can be, what a different picture of the world an infant receives when quiet, patient, careful yet secure and resolute hands take care of her—and how different the world seems when these hands are impatient, rough or hasty, unquiet and nervous. (Pikler 1994, 20)
In the same spirit that play spaces are designed to invite infants to explore, investigate, and learn, the rituals of care are designed to invite infants to actively participate and thereby use their emerging skills and concepts. (Maguire-Fong 2015)
Caregiving routines are precious opportunities for one-on-one time between an infant and the primary care teacher. The undivided attention that an infant receives from the primary care teacher during such moments fuels the infant emotionally and builds an enduring bond of affection and trust. (Maguire-Fong 2015)
Routines are incredibly intimate and emotional times when infants and toddlers gain a sense of self-worth, learn about the kindness of others, and develop relationships with those who meet their needs in responsive, kind ways. (Wittmer and Peterson 2009, 299)
For caregiving routines to become curriculum, they can’t be done mechanically. Each time a caregiver interacts in ways that focus fully on the individual child while performing one of these essential tasks of daily living, the time spent furthers connections. When caregivers manipulate the child’s body and put their attention elsewhere, they lose the opportunity for the child to experience an intimate human interaction. It’s the accumulation of intimacy during these numerous interactions that turns ordinary tasks into relationship-based curriculum. (Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer 2009, 51)
Trust and intimacy between carer and infant can best be developed during routine caregiving activities and these most consistently repeated experiences have a cumulative effect on both infant and carer. If the carer gives total, unhurried attention each time she cares for an infant, he gets “refueled” with human contact and individual attention ... These same care activities also offer excellent opportunities for developing cooperation, speech, body image, and mutuality in task oriented experiences. The child is encouraged to be an active participant rather than a passive recipient in these activities. (Gerber and Greenwald 2013, 55)
References


