

Talking to Staff about Developmentally Appropriate Materials

Staff members enter your program with a range of knowledge and skills involving working with children. Read the following scenarios and decide how you would respond to each staff member.

Claire

Claire was hired last month as an assistant toddler teacher in your program. You have noticed how much she enjoys being around the children, and she gets along well with all the staff. Although this is her first experience in early care and education, you think she has a lot of potential as a teacher. You have noticed, however, that she seems to have unrealistic expectations for the children in her care. Her own 16-month-old daughter, Sadie, attends the other toddler classroom and nearly always has inappropriate objects in her backpack. She brings toys with small pieces from fast-food meals, magnets from the kitchen refrigerator, Legos, and Matchbox cars. The teachers have talked to Claire about it, but the problem hasn't stopped. Last week you noticed Claire letting several of the children draw with her ink pen; one child took the cap off and put it in his mouth. On this week's activity plan, Claire suggested letting the young toddlers explore breaking and using pieces of chalkboard chalk as an art activity.

What guidance or experiences do you plan for Claire? What conversations do you have?

Make sure Claire is aware of safety policies in your program. Provide a choke tube tester, sit together and test small items to see if they pass, and only permit materials in the classroom that are deemed safe for children under 3. Continue to monitor and observe. Step in when you have a concern. Also be sure to help Claire build her knowledge about child development. Provide information about typical developmental milestones and the materials that promote development at each stage. Check activity plans regularly and provide feedback on the materials Claire chooses.

Desmond

Desmond worked in your school-age summer program this year. He recently started as a lead staff member in the year-round after-school program. During the summer program, he worked with the kindergarten through third-grade children. Now, he is running the program for 10- to 12-year-old children. He seems a bit lost about what to plan. He came to you this afternoon because he was really disappointed in his first activity plans. He feels like he can keep the children entertained, but he's not sure how to keep them active and learning during their time with him.

What guidance do you give Desmond about planning for older elementary school children?

Talk to Desmond about the developmental characteristics of 10- to 12-year-old children. As he builds knowledge, he will feel more comfortable with that age group. Ask what he has noticed about the children, their interests, their preferences, and their reactions to materials. Help him identify current interests in the group, and help him build connections with the local schools, if appropriate. Encourage him to think about working with the children to develop long-term projects that offer a challenge for children of a variety of ages.

Alivia

Alivia provides family childcare in her home. She serves children from 3 months to 5 years all day and also has two 8-year-olds who come to her home after school. During site visits, Alivia's home is always tidy and meets safety regulations. The children do not always seem engaged, though. The 3-month-old is nearly always in a swing or infant carrier when you visit. You have always seen the toddlers and preschoolers playing with the same toys each time you visit (a Sit 'n Spin, a plastic kitchen set with only a few play accessories, and large Duplo blocks). Often, the children are chasing each other around the room or sitting with Alivia on the couch. You are concerned that there are not enough stimulating materials for the children.

What do you suggest to Alivia? How do you start the conversation?

You might begin by asking Alivia to describe how a typical day goes. You might ask which parts of her day feel like they're working really well and which ones are sometimes struggles. Encourage her to tell you about each child and her goals for each child. Discuss each child's development. Review activity plans and discuss how to help each child reach learning goals. Focus on helping Alivia set achievable goals for increasing the engagement of the children. Help her find resources she might need.

Lex

Lex is a licensed elementary school teacher. She recently moved to the area when her husband's job was relocated, and she was hired as a lead teacher in your program's preschool classroom. As you review Lex's activity plans, you see that she has planned a unit on school buses for September. The children in your child development program don't ride school buses, and your administration discourages packaged themes. As you talk to Lex and read her plans, you see that she has included a variety of "cut and paste" activities and worksheet-style tracing tasks for all the children in the class. Your program offers worksheet-style tasks as free-choice activities for children who are about to enter kindergarten, but you know these activities aren't consistent with best practices for the younger preschoolers.

How do you talk to Lex about her plans?

Acknowledge Lex's experience and expertise. As you discuss the planned bus theme, help her reflect on whether there is a topic the children are interested in that might become a valuable investigation. Buses might be completely appropriate if children are interested in buses because older siblings are going back to school. Ask Lex to explain her goals for the activities she has developed. Ask her to talk about which children she thinks will benefit from the activities. Help her plan activities and materials that are appropriate for a range of children.