



# *The Little House on Village Avenue*

## *What Makes a Good Child Care Center*

*Ye (children) are better than all the ballads  
That ever were sung or said,  
For ye are living poems  
And all the rest are dead*

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*This is such a happy, encouraging, magical place.*

—Linda Schnitzer, a teacher at  
Rosa Lee Young Childhood Center

In the introduction to this book, we discussed the critical need for a system of affordable child care throughout our country. But there is more to early child care than merely caring for children while parents work. This chapter discusses the basic qualities of a good child care center. Specifically, from practical classroom illustrations in the toddler classroom, it shows

- How a skilled practitioner works with children as young as 18 months to convey the love and warmth they need while beginning the process of education
- How the teacher stimulates toddlers' imaginations and encourages them to communicate their thoughts and feelings
- The physical facilities in a quality child care program that encourage developmental play in children and allow them maximum opportunities to explore as individuals and in groups
- The family support services that such a program should offer

It also discusses the difficulties in maintaining a high-quality professional staff in this field and how a quality program can help to reduce high staff turnover.

**T**he village of Rockville Centre is just a thirty-five-minute ride on the commuter train from the heart of Manhattan. Its neat, one-family homes on tree-lined streets reflect a generally middle-class character, along with the many professionals and business people who commute daily to work from the village.

The Rosa Lee Young Childhood Center is near the center of town, on the quiet corner of North Village and Wilson avenues, just across the street from a building housing professional offices and a block or two down from the town's fairly substantial library. Its irregular shaped yard on one side, which measures about 40-by-15 feet, holds the usual brightly colored slides and climbing apparatus for young children. On the other side of the house, a smaller yard also serves as a play area.

Walk through the front door into its small entrance hallway and you are in narrow off-white painted corridors, cheered by the brightly colored posters and the pictures of children and staff members that adorn its walls. On the ground floor, is the tiny, cramped administrative office, home to the center's director, social worker, and two other administrative workers.

About 10 feet from the main office, the corridor splits into a T-shape, with a classroom on either side. The walls outside each room are lined with hooks for children's coats. The classrooms themselves on the ground level are large; one is the former garage of the house, which now is the room for the prekindergartners. Each classroom is divided into different areas by standing bookshelves and cubbies housing toys. In addition to a central, or common, area where children gather for meals or circle time, there is an art area, an area for blocks and construction toys, a family area with dollhouses and dress-up clothes for children and dolls, and a reading area. Just off the entrance, the house's former living room nurtures the toddler group, the youngest group in the center. A stairway outside the administration office in the main corridor leads upstairs to two more classrooms.

The school could use more space. Lack of space has prevented it from instituting a program for infant care. As we noted in the introduction, a majority of mothers with children *under a year old* are now working. But the youngest group at Rosa Lee Young is the toddler class; the youngest child at the school is 18 months.

“We would like to have an infant program, but we don’t have the space here,” said Jeannine Rey, regretfully.

Jeannine is the school’s recently appointed director, who has been working at the school for more than thirty years.

“Many working parents of the toddlers and prekindergartners have infants that they have to leave somewhere else. It would be so much more desirable for them to be able to have their children in the same school, not only for the convenience but also from the children’s perspective. It’s so much more like a family when the older children also have their baby siblings here.”

## **QUALITY CARE IS NOT JUST DAY CARE: HOW A GOOD EARLY CHILD CARE PROGRAM PREPARES CHILDREN FOR LIFE**

Although the physical plant of a school is important, as most educators will tell you, what makes or breaks any child care program is the staff—teachers, aides, social workers, support staff, administrators—who perform the daily tasks of



**Playdough sculpture is fascinating.**

caring for the children. And that care must entail the daily application of a program based upon the best scientific knowledge of the needs of children and how they grow and develop physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively.

“What do we mean by child care?” asked the authors of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*. “It is not just *day care*. It is also not just *care*” [all emphasis in original]. Citing previous studies, they affirm: “Beneficial outcomes for children in early child care are associated with settings that provide both nurturance and support for early learning and language development . . . and preparation for school.” This is a far cry from the kind of day care in which large numbers of working American women are forced to leave their children with a babysitter or nanny, many of whom only minimally interact with children, often keeping them occupied by sitting them in front of a TV screen for a good part of the day. “Child care,” emphasized one noted authority, “must be understood as a profound influence on the life of children, not as a service to parents like A.T.M. machines.”<sup>26</sup>

Over the years, a number of philosophies have addressed the most beneficial ways to work with young children. One that has had a great deal of influence on Rosa Lee Young is the *Reggio Emilia approach* (see Appendix C, pages 151–154). However, not all the principles of this approach can be duplicated in other places, and Rosa Lee Young, although influenced by the Reggio Emilia method, has adapted it and made use of other educational philosophies as well. Most schools of thought, far from contradicting each other, overlap, stressing settings that provide the maximum opportunities for nurturing and creativity, and allowing children to explore the world around them. In general, they borrow heavily from the works of Lev Vygotsky, who stressed the connections between play and cognitive development in children, and from Jean Piaget, who believed that “a child’s intelligence unfolds through her own interaction with the environment”<sup>27</sup> rather than through formal instruction. These schools of thought stress the developmental approach to early child care, with some advocating more open classrooms and less teacher instruction than others do. The Montessori school in early childhood education, for example, strives to place children in one or two, three-hour uninterrupted work periods each day that are not broken up by larger group activities. Montessori also stresses constant peer interaction, child-to-child teaching, and socialization.<sup>28</sup>

Other advocates of the developmental approach to early child care, such as Zero to Three and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), stress developmentally appropriate programs for children at different stages and the quality of relationships between peers and between adults and children in the program. “Child care,” they maintain, “depends on caregivers who are knowledgeable and skilled, and committed to creating and sustaining these relationships.”<sup>29</sup> Their approach is not the totally open classroom cited earlier, but one with somewhat more structure. The clearest presentation of their philosophy is the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s “Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs” in Appendix B.

Throughout this book, we also draw from the work of prominent child care authorities such as Stanley I. Greenspan, T. Berry Brazelton, Lesley Koplw, and

Alicia Lieberman, who write about early child care as a combination of emotional, social, psychological, and cognitive development.

Rosa Lee Young and many other child care programs like it are heavily influenced by developmental philosophies of Reggio Emilia, NAEYC, and others that stress practices that are developmentally appropriate while not completely unstructured. It is important to emphasize in this connection that children cannot be straitjacketed. Not all children benefit from any one child care program; some benefit from one type of child care, some from another.

At the same time, good child care must not be confused with formal schooling. That's an important point these days. In the recent rush to prepare children academically for school, a major factor has been left out of some child care programs: Reading to them, telling them stories, and asking them questions and then encouraging them to tell you their stories, or playing alphabet games, will prepare them for reading far better than will the drills on letters of the alphabet and phonics.<sup>30</sup> (For a fuller discussion of this question, see Chapter 6.)

For the infant, the toddler, or the preschooler, no learning can take place without love and the warmth of a relationship between the child and the teacher, who is really the child's substitute parent for most of the day. Summing it up, Zero to Three wrote: "Perhaps most important, we have learned to appreciate the role of relationships in every aspect of early development. Infants and toddlers develop expectations about people's behavior and about themselves based on how parents and others treat them. Through daily interactions with responsive affectionate adults, babies experience their first positive love relationships. Trust and emotional security develop when infants learn that their needs will be met predictably and consistently. Self-confidence develops as babies and toddlers learn to communicate their needs and master challenges in their world."<sup>31</sup>

When we use the term *child care*, declared the authors of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* emphatically, we mean "the blend of care, nurturance, and early education that the best child care provides."<sup>32</sup> And that's how this book uses the term *child care*, which is the only meaningful way that the real needs of young children are met.

"When it comes to child care, there are many aspects to quality, but I really believe that quality comes from those people that are administering the program and working in the program, your professional staff," emphasized Rosa Lee Young Director Jeannine Rey. "The leadership of the staff must be professionals who understand developmentally appropriate theory and practices. You have to have a leader who's really embedded in early childhood education and a staff that is professional and educated and can understand and implement a developmentally appropriate philosophy and curriculum. In the end, you can have the best material, you can have all the money in the world, but if you don't have a staff that's educated and professional, you're not going to have a quality program."

How this plays out at a high-quality child care center like Rosa Lee Young is the subject of this book.

## THE TODDLER CLASSROOM: WHERE A SKILLED CHILD CARE PROFESSIONAL CAN OPEN UP THE WORLD TO CHILDREN

No one ever calls her Paula, the name with which she was born. For the fifteen years she has been at Rosa Lee Young, the staff, the parents, and the children have known her only as Pepper Robinson, the loved and respected teacher whose classroom to many children has been the first step on the road to their education.

A woman with expressive blue eyes that smile easily, she glides around her classroom, moving from one child to another with an easy, flowing rhythm. Everything she does in her class with the children and her coteacher, Jennifer Gordon-Fray, is done with the gentle confidence of a professional who knows exactly what she is doing and is always in charge. Most significantly, there is no question that she enjoys her work with children.

Pepper is the teacher of the toddler group, eight children ages 18 months to 3 years. *In her classroom every day, she provides the practical application of the philosophy developed by modern child care theoreticians over decades of work and research.* And although she is obviously a person of great energy, her pace in the classroom is deliberately slow and controlled.

“Many of these children’s lives are hectic,” she explained, “with parents working and a full-day schedule from early morning until evening. They need a calming atmosphere in their daily activities.”

When I visited her class in early May, a particularly cold winter that had lasted longer than usual was just receding into spring. April had been unusually cold, and the bloom that usually comes in that month was late by several weeks. Trees were just beginning to bud, and spring was fighting to finally come out and be recognized. At eight o’clock in the morning, parents on their way to work arrived one at a time to drop off their children. All the children except for the toddlers are dropped off in one room where there are special toys and materials for the children to play with before the day’s routine actually begins. The toddlers and the 2- and 3-year-olds go directly to their room. It is a familiar place to them, their home for the rest of the day. And, as on all other days, Pepper was there waiting for them as the first two parents arrived with their children, two robust little boys who moved with ease into a familiar classroom. There was Carlos, a 22-month-old Hispanic child with a round face, dark hair, and large black eyes, and Kirk, an African American child of 2-and-a-half years, quick witted with an already large vocabulary for his age. Pepper exchanged warm greetings with the parents and the children, and asked the parents how things were going. They spoke for a minute or two as the children hung their coats on their assigned hooks. The parents left, and within a few minutes, the boys were sitting in her lap near the window. Led by Pepper, whose questions prompted them to observe and describe, they talked about the trees outside and how it was raining.

They sat there and talked for about ten minutes until other children began arriving. One was Robin, a 2-and-a-half year old white child, brought in by her mother. After the teacher and parent again exchanged warm greetings, Robin's mother spoke about a christening she and Robin attended over the weekend. Part of the familiarity that children feel toward their child care classroom is accomplished by establishing an atmosphere that is, in many ways, an extension of the children's homes, with children constantly observing their parents in familiar and cordial relations with their teachers.

Robin is a very active child physically. She moves quickly and has a tendency to dominate the others. She brought a doll with her from home, and Pepper reminded her that she had to put her doll away for now. (Toys brought from home are a necessary comforting factor to a child, but they tend to become a distraction that prevents the child from participating in the group activities.) Robin approached me and gave me the doll to hold for a few minutes before taking it back and placing it on a nearby table. Pepper then put the doll on a shelf, a safe place for it but out of view for the rest of the day. It was a way to avoid problems later on.

At the side of the toddler room is a "water table," a rectangular table with a set-in plastic tub that the teacher fills and the children use. They fill small plastic cups, pails, and other containers and empty them, a repeated process that children at this stage love. During the first 3 years of life, they learn mainly through sensory motor stimulation, perceiving things around them and moving in reaction to them. Water is a soothing substance that can keep children at this age busy for long periods observing and figuring out how it pours, how it looks, and how it feels.

As Carlos poured out a container into the tub, he said, "*Agua.*" Pepper repeated the word. "*Agua, sí.*" She said to him, "Water. *Agua.* Water." At 22 months, Carlos may already be in the first stages, aided by his child care experience, of becoming bilingual.

When the children looked as though they were ready for another activity, the teacher, whose experience had tuned her in to such moments before they became problems, said with animated enthusiasm, "Let's take out the horses." The children agreed. The three horses were brought out from the toy area and the children all rocked on them.

At one point, Robin started to push Carlos off a rocking horse, and Pepper had to gently remind her, "We don't touch his body," a euphemism for "no hitting or pushing." Robin, without protest, went to another horse.

After a few minutes, Pepper walked over to the section where books stood on a shelf and her voice took on a tone of excitement.

"Let's read a book! Which book shall we read?" She pretty well knew the answer.

"*The Three Bears,*" chorused the children. No surprise to Pepper because the book was on the table in front of her, and various objects representing the characters in *The Three Bears* were ready in a box to be used. Although her manner with the children made it look like a spontaneous occurrence, it was obviously well planned. She told me later that this was their favorite book.

They gathered around almost as if on signal. They had done this many times before. They knew what book time and story time meant.

Pepper read the story to them. Her face was animated and alive as her voice changed to represent the different characters in the story. Watching her, I couldn't help being reminded of the words of one of my professors of education back in my college days years earlier. "There are people who are scholars, devoting their lives to acquiring knowledge and dispensing it to others. There are those who are psychologists, getting inside the heads of people to discover what motivates them and gets them to act. There are those who are social workers, taking care of people's problems and needs. And there are actors, artists who know how to connect with their audiences to put across ideas and emotions. Well, a good teacher has to be all of these things."

When the story was over, the children asked Pepper to read it again, which she did. Then when she finished, she went to the box that seemed to be sitting there just waiting to be used. She took out a bunch of drawn and constructed flannel figures, each one representing a character or an object in the story. There was the Mama Bear, the Papa Bear, the Baby Bear, Goldilocks, the house, the cereal bowls ("Someone has been eating my porridge"—remember?), the beds ("Someone has been sleeping in my bed"), and so on. She also had a board to which the flannel figures stuck. She asked, "Where is Goldilocks?" and children pointed her out. She asked one of them to pick up Goldilocks and bring it to her, and she placed it on the board. She did the same with all the other characters and objects, singing about the story in the different voices of the characters as she placed them on the board. I thought for a moment that things would get a bit troublesome when Robin took one of the bowls from Carlos, but Pepper calmly said to Robin, "Carlos is going to work with you on the bowls. Who needs Papa Bear's bowl?" Robin said she did and Carlos handed it to her while he picked up another bowl. After all the objects were placed on the board, Pepper told Kirk to take them down and put them away so they could go on to another activity. But Robin took one of the bowls back. She wanted it. Kirk looked perplexed because he was supposed to put them all away. Pepper told him reassuringly that Robin would give it to him when all the rest were put away. Such moral persuasion Robin found hard to resist. She surrendered her bowl and then said, "Goodbye, I'll go play horsey."

All the classrooms at Rosa Lee Young have a main section where children participate in group activities and class projects, and smaller sections around the room to which children go to play alone or in small groups. Essential to this approach is a classroom that allows children the fullest freedom of expression, a balance of space that takes into account the physical, psychological, and cognitive needs of the children. Classrooms are divided into many different areas: a central area where children can gather with their teachers in one class activity and individual areas around the room where children can engage in their own creative pursuits. These areas can differ from school to school and class to class. There should be an art area where children can express themselves with crayons, colored markers, paints and brushes, paper, glue, scissors, yarns, ribbons, and anything else that supports their ability to express their thoughts and

emotions creatively. Other areas could be, but are not limited to, a dress-up area where children can act out their ideas through dramatic play; a reading area where children can take books off shelves and look through them or where a teacher can read to a child individually or in a small subgroup; a computer area where children can engage in games and gain computer skills; a construction area where children can work on building projects with blocks, Legos®, and other construction toys; and so on. (For a more comprehensive view on the implementation of this setup, see Chapter 4 on the Rosa Lee Young curriculum.)

It was to one of these areas Robin went now to be by herself, diverting her aggression by rocking vigorously on a horse.

Pepper recaptured the situation to me later. “You have to always understand: these are toddlers. They’re not developmentally there yet. You can’t be generous unless you’re full. You can’t understand the concept of sharing unless you have grown and developed into someone who feels satisfied with himself. Some are beginning to acquire it; some take a little longer. That’s why patience is an absolute necessity at these tricky moments.”

## **TRANSLATING PRINCIPLES INTO PRACTICE IN A GOOD CHILD CARE PROGRAM**

To a casual observer, Pepper’s handling of the children here was nothing extraordinary, just a natural sequence of events in the classroom. That’s what really makes it so exceptional. Like a natural athlete who makes a great play look easy, Pepper’s actions in her class follow the theories and philosophies developed by modern child care advocates and practitioners, and she puts them into natural use in virtually every operation of her classroom.

### **Daily Separation: The Preschool Classroom as an Extension of Home**

From the moment Pepper greeted the first children and their parents, it was obvious that both parents and children were very much at ease in her classroom. These, after all, are only toddlers who would have problems separating from parents if they were not completely at home. But they immediately went to their coat hooks to hang their coats and did not hesitate to sit on her lap and talk about trees a few minutes later. It was an established routine they knew well, and, judging from the ease of the children, it was not something that was imposed by fear but by a mutual love and respect. The parents, too, obviously felt welcome right from the beginning as they all exchanged greetings and spoke for a few minutes. When the children said goodbye to their parents, it was an easy parting. The children knew a familiar day was coming and were not frightened by it. “The key to quality care is the quality of relationships—relationships between the infant and her family, between child and caregiver, between caregiver and family, and among adults in the child care setting,” wrote one prominent authority.<sup>33</sup>

Elaborating on this theme, Alicia Lieberman wrote: “Child care is first and foremost about relationships. It is about how to separate from the parents with trust that they will come back. It is also about forming new relationships with the caregiver and with other children that will be enriching and sustaining in the course of the day.” Infants and toddlers, she continues, can be expected “to do well when they can learn over time that separations are predictable and lead equally predictably to reunions, that caregivers are emotionally available, and that parents and caregivers are accepting of the child’s ambivalence about separations.”<sup>34</sup>

When the toddlers at Rosa Lee Young separate easily from their parents each morning, it is because their experience tells them that their caregiver, very much like their parent, is there for them and will satisfy their needs and that the center is another home to them. This isn’t the kind of atmosphere that comes overnight or by accident. It is built up through much work and skill over the course of the school year by a practitioner who knows how to do it and whose heart really believes in it.

### **The Emotional Connection Between Caregiver and Child**

When the children sat in Pepper’s lap and they talked about the trees and the rain outside, they were learning about the world the only way a toddler can learn, through an emotional connection with the caregiver, whether that care-



**Measuring flour—skilled bakers at work.**

giver is a parent or a teacher. “No colorful pop-up toy or computerized light-and-sound gadget can come close to matching the companionable lessons in problem solving that you offer your child as you play and engage in gestural dialogues together,” said the renowned child psychiatrist Stanley I. Greenspan. “At each succeeding stage of development, we have found that emotional interactions like a baby’s smile leading to a hug enable the child to understand how the world works, and eventually to think, solve problems, and master academic challenges. Emotions are actually the internal architects, conductors, or organizers of our minds. They tell us how and what to think, what to say and when to say it, and what to do. We ‘know’ things through our emotional interactions and then apply that knowledge to the cognitive world.”<sup>35</sup> The process of establishing and maintaining this emotional link between caregiver and child is the subject of Chapter 2.

This pattern of learning and discipline through trust and love continued throughout the day. It was the essential glue that held Pepper’s class together. When she reminded Robin in a gentle but routine way about the doll the child had brought from home, there was no fuss. The child gave me the doll and then appeared quite satisfied when it was placed on a shelf, in a safe place. Responses like this one are not easily established with toddlers; it takes a lot of hard work, patience, and a thorough understanding of what their needs are.

## Reading Children’s Cues

In all of the other activities in that initial half hour that began the day and, indeed, throughout the day, the teacher was constantly tuned into cues that children are always giving. She could read the children. She knew when they were interested and when they were ready for another activity. And she knew when some were ready and some were not and how to distract those who were not. Just a bit later, when Jennifer, her coteacher came in, it was easier for Jennifer to take one or more of the children who did not want to participate in the activity of the others and supervise them at something else while Pepper conducted the activity with the rest of the class. In all cases, it was the cues detected by an experienced teacher that were important in telling her when to move from one project to another.

*This is a fundamental principle in a child care classroom—being alert and responsive to children’s cues.* They must know when to follow the initiative of the child, and when to let the child follow his own lead, “when to guide, when to teach, and when to intervene. Responsive caregivers are alert to signs of stress in each child’s behavior and respond with appropriate stress-reducing activities and techniques. The responsive caregiver continuously facilitates the development of self-esteem by respecting and accepting children, regardless of their behavior.”<sup>36</sup>

Pepper and Jennifer were constantly tuned in to the children and alert to act before problems arose. They knew when toddlers with a very short span of attention needed to change an activity and when they did not, when to continue to play at the water table, when to take out the horses, and when to read their favorite book and play games about the book. They knew the children who

played well together and subtly paired them off, always making it appear as the child's choice. We saw this very clearly later when the children moved about to different activities: "Would Steven and Carlos like to play at the water table?" To Kirk and Margaret: "Let's play three bears with the flannel board." To Robin: "Aren't the dolls (in the family corner section of the room) nice? Let's see what they're doing in their house." Jennifer also knew when Robin's attention was flagging and when to ask, "Do you want me to play with you?" She knew when to spend time one-on-one with Robin and when to switch to the two boys at the water table. Pepper and Jennifer knew these things because they were sensitive to the children's needs, a sensitivity they had acquired through their training and their love of the children in their care.

"The tools for encouragement or correction are the same: reading and responding to a child's cues," wrote Kyle D. Pruett, child and family psychiatrist and professor at the Yale Child Study Center. "These cues are all emotional—the flicker of interest in the shy child, the wrinkled forehead in the bored child, the delight in the child who's just mastered a new skill, and the pout of a child whose exploration is suddenly curtailed." This doesn't mean, Pruett hastened to add, that every whim of a child must be catered to. But it does mean that all children, even very young ones, have a broad range of interests and emotions that should be understood and worked with. "Your child's emotional cues at this age let you know what's happening, and they give you the keys to unlock the best possibilities."<sup>37</sup>

From the water table to the reading of *The Three Bears* to the flannel board, the teacher consistently took her cues and direction from her reading of the children. Her skill provided the perfect example of methodology for all teachers of very young children; the children gave her the direction, but it was she who was always in charge.

### Encouraging Children to Communicate Thoughts

Jennifer Gordon-Fray, Pepper's coteacher, is young and relatively new to Rosa Lee Young, having started there only a few months before. She arrived at nine o'clock bringing breakfast to the three children already there. Two more, Steven, a boy of 22 months, and Margaret, a 3-year-old girl, came in during breakfast and joined the group at the table. (Three of the toddlers were absent that day.) The breakfast of cereal, milk, and fruit is eaten at a table in one section of the classroom. The children moved their own chairs to a round table where the food was set up, although the younger children in the group needed a bit of help with the chairs. The teachers eat breakfast with the children. When you really get down to it, Pepper and Jennifer, in effect, are coparents, rather than teachers, to the children in their care.

"We are a family here," Pepper said to me later. "These children spend more of their waking time with us than they do with their own families."

The atmosphere at the breakfast table was relaxed as the teachers talked to the children and encouraged them to talk about almost anything as they ate.

When the children spoke, Pepper and Jennifer asked them questions. Sometimes they answered, and sometimes they paused, either searching for an answer or groping for the right words to say it. Sometimes, when they couldn't find an answer, they just went on to another subject. No matter what they said, the teachers encouraged them to talk—and to think.

"At the end of the second year of life," said Greenspan, "as communication for communication's sake begins to overtake communication merely to meet a need, the child embarks on a course he will continue throughout life. His love for his caregivers and the pleasure they bring him leads him to enjoy communicating in its own right. . . . The caring adult encourages the child to translate his immediate, concrete aims into words and images. . . . A child's first ideas emerge as discrete islands of thought with little relation between them. . . . As caregivers respond to symbolic expressions in both pretend play and the interchanges of daily life, in the third and fourth years the child begins to form bridges among his ideas and between his own thoughts and those of others."<sup>38</sup> Greenspan's advice: "Try to set aside time each day for reality-based, logical conversations with your toddler. If his attention flags and his thoughts seem to drift, gently bring him back to the theme of your conversation while empathizing with his desire not to talk, or to talk about something else. . . . Help your child learn to think by holding long conversations with her in which you seek her opinions rather than simply trade pieces of information."<sup>39</sup>

The principle is basic: *Caregivers should understand the connections between interacting with children and developing language and literary skills.* If a caregiver consistently interacts with infants, toddlers, and young children, she is constantly building the child's vocabulary, giving the child words to express ideas and emotions. As the child grows, by listening and talking to her and using simple words and sentences, songs, rhymes, and games, the caregiver is getting the child to understand that words have meanings. By reading stories to her, the caregiver is getting the child to associate the words and ideas with the pictures on a page and the pictures with the printed words. This transition from verbal interaction to vocabulary building to expression of ideas and emotions through spoken words and then through printed words creates a learning environment that is essential to encouraging the child to enjoy books and want to read. Sharing stories and books should be a natural part of every day's activities in a child care center.

Ideally, developing language and literary skills should begin even earlier than the toddler stage, almost from the time the baby is born. "Talking early to your baby helps your baby to learn about language," stressed two leading child care authorities. "How you talk with your baby makes a difference in how well he uses language even years later! Scientists who study children tell us that most children who use language well and do well in school have mamas and daddies [and, by extension, child care teachers, —N.B.] who talked a lot to them when the children were babies.

"Your baby learns how to make the sounds of language by listening to the sounds you make. He also begins to learn the names of things, people, and

actions. Babies learn what different words mean as they listen to their special adults talk about an experience. Your child learns how to put words together to make sentences by listening to you talk in sentences. If you do not talk much to your baby, he will not learn much language. You are the most important language *teacher* [emphasis in original] for your baby."<sup>40</sup>

It goes without saying that what applies to the parent here also applies to the child care teacher, who is, after all, the child's substitute parent for most of the day. It also goes without saying that the process begun in infancy must be carried over into toddlerhood and beyond, into the school years. If a parent has not done this with an infant, the child care teacher has an even greater obligation to use her interaction with the child to build language and literacy skills to compensate for what the child has missed earlier, a task that is more difficult but that can be accomplished.

In the toddler class at Rosa Lee Young, Pepper and Jennifer engaged the children in conversations throughout the day. They answered their questions in sentences and language the children could understand. When a child became involved in a particular activity with a teacher or another child, the teachers either reflected on what they were doing or asked questions about it. They gave the children opportunities to think and express ideas. They worked together with the children and encouraged the children to work with each other to solve the problem at hand. The environment stimulated the children to feel comfortable enough to explore and express themselves.

As they sat at the breakfast table, the process continued. The children's conversation at that table, if put on the stage, could have resembled a Harold Pinter play in which the characters often talk past each other on different levels. But among toddlers, it's a perfectly logical sequence of expression. The conversation at breakfast went like this:

**Carlos** (spotting the milk): *Leche*.

**Jennifer:** *Leche*, that's right. Milk. *Leche*. Milk. (At this point, Margaret arrives, dropped off by her father. She moves in with ease, joining the group at the breakfast table, and he leaves.)

**Margaret:** My daddy gave me donut and chocolate milk.

**Pepper:** Daddy took you out for breakfast? (Margaret nods.)

**Carlos** (points to the milk): *Leche*.

**Jennifer:** You want milk for your cereal? (Carlos nods.)

**Kirk** (counting out his Cheerios): One, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

**Pepper:** Can I have a turn? One, two, three, four, five, six. (Pepper turns to the others and invokes the experience of the story she had read and played out with them earlier.)

**Pepper:** Who is the Mama Bear eating porridge?

**Several children:** Me!

**Pepper:** Who is the Papa Bear?

**Several children** (including some who had volunteered themselves as the Mama Bear): Me!

**Pepper:** And who is the Baby Bear?

**Several children again:** Me!

**Pepper:** And who is Goldilocks?

**Same children:** Me!

**Margaret:** It's raining outside.

**Pepper:** It's raining, it's pouring, the old man is snoring.

**Robin:** Julia was christened yesterday. My aunt Joyce is Julia's mommy.

**Pepper:** Is Julia your new baby cousin? (Robin nods.)

**Pepper** (cuts some apples into small pieces and distributes them to the children): What shall we do today on this rainy day? Maybe we should take out dress-up clothes? Good idea or not a good idea?

**Margaret:** My mommy has a baby in her tummy.

**Kirk:** I have a baby in my tummy.

**Pepper** (to Kirk): You have a baby in your tummy?

**Margaret:** No, only my mommy has a baby in her tummy.

**Robin** (getting up): I have to go to the bathroom. (She leaves for the bathroom, which is just a few feet away. Each of the classrooms has its own children's bathroom complete with a small toilet low enough to be accessible to small children.) (At this point, Steven comes in with his mother. After saying goodbye to his mother, he sits down next to Margaret, who is 14 months older than he.)

**Margaret:** I don't like him. I want to go home to my mommy.

**Pepper** (to Margaret): Babies can sometimes be annoying. How will you deal with it?

**Margaret:** I will keep my baby in a crib.

**Pepper:** What are you going to do if she bothers you?

**Margaret:** She won't do it. (At this point, it is worth noting that Pepper could have also said gently to Margaret: "I don't think Steven feels good when you tell him you don't like him." This gentle reminder could get Margaret to think about the feelings of another child, helping to build in her the quality of empathy toward others. As Greenspan reminded us: "Empathy is the hallmark of a great kid, but it's one of the hardest traits for a child to acquire. Although all children are born with an innate need

to relate to others, they need examples and encouragement to be able to feel themselves in another person's shoes. This is a complicated cognitive and emotional task that grows and develops over time, with your help."<sup>41</sup>)

**Kirk:** I want to be a doctor.

**Carlos:** I want to be a doctor, too. (Steven sits closer to Margaret. She looks annoyed with him.)

**Pepper** (to Margaret): He doesn't know how you feel. You will just have to talk to him. (Then, looking around for a moment) I wonder what Robin is doing in the bathroom. (Jennifer, who has been helping the children put their food into bowls, gets up to check on Robin.)

**Pepper:** Let's sing some nursery rhymes. Kirk, what would you like to sing?

**Kirk:** "I've Been Working on the Railroad."

**Pepper** (with a big smile): I knew it. It's your favorite song, isn't it, Kirk? (Kirk nods.)

**Pepper** (proceeding to sing while strumming on an imaginary banjo. The children, having been encouraged and knowing the cues, imitate her gestures on the banjo, say some of the words, and come in with an appropriate "toot, toot" on signal):

*I've been working on the railroad*

*All the livelong day.*

*I've been working on the railroad*

*Just to pass the time away.*

*Can't you hear the whistle blowing?*

**Children** (on Pepper's hand and facial signal): Toot! Toot!

**Pepper:** *Early in the morn.*

*Can't you hear the captain shouting*

*Dinah, won't you blow your horn.*

**Children** (again, on signal): Toot! Toot! (Led by Pepper, they all applaud.)

**Pepper:** What is the captain shouting?

**Children** (responding together, as it is obviously a familiar question to them): Blow your horn!

**Kirk:** Let's sing it again.

**Pepper:** OK.

They went through the song again. As this scene unfolded, my thoughts couldn't help but go back to another experience I had at a child care center several years earlier. It was a center that was part of a program for homeless mothers and their young children, where I served for eighteen months as a part-time consultant and staff trainer. The children were taken care of at the child care center while their mothers sought and found employment until they were able to find a place to live for themselves and their children. The child care program, like the shelter program itself, was run by a well-known national charity.

Both that facility and Rosa Lee Young were early child care centers for children, but here all similarities ended. At the former, most of the staff knew very little about the psychology or the developmental needs of children, and some of them couldn't have cared less. The children there also ate breakfast, but what a different scene it was. There was no talking at the table, except to ask for some food. No social conversation. No teacher encouragement of interaction or of the children's relating to each other. Basically, the rule that was enforced was the old-fashioned puritanical one that the table was for eating, not talking or other frivolities. Sit down and eat. That was it. A joyless place, and that atmosphere carried over into the rest of the child care program there. I tried to do what I could to change the situation but ran into a barrier of entrenched bureaucratic stonewalling. "That's the way we do things here. We know how to take care of these children." What a difference, I thought, as I watched the children at the breakfast table now.

Here, aided by the teachers, the children were encouraged to engage in pleasant mealtime conversation, and each expressed something important to him or her. The teachers listened to them and sustained a conversation with them. Pepper asked questions relating to the three bears story she had just read to them. When Margaret said, "My mommy has a baby in her tummy," and Kirk responded that he, too, had a baby in his tummy, Pepper understood how difficult it is for a child at this age to understand what this means. She kept the conversation going with a question but without any hint of laughter or sarcasm or disbelief that would stifle the thoughts of the children.

Earlier, when Pepper read the story of Goldilocks and the three bears, she gave the characters meaning by modulating her voice to simulate them. She asked the children questions about the role of the characters in the story. She answered their questions. She elaborated on the objects and characters in the story by using a board on which she stuck replicas of them. The children had a chance to describe what the objects in the story represented and what role each character played. Each of these actions is a vital step in the development of the process of connecting language to thinking and later to literacy.

### **Each Child Is Different and Provision Must Be Made for These Differences**

After breakfast, the children, guided by the teachers, cleared the tables, emptied the remnants of their bowls in the garbage can and brought them to the

sink in the bathroom to be picked up later by the kitchen staff and washed. The remainder of the day's activities began. Pepper and Jennifer directed the children from their knowledge of them and from their understanding of one of the most fundamental principles of education: Each child is different, and in every classroom, particularly in the early years, provision must be made for these individual differences.

This phrase has become a cliché in most education circles. Most of us know it. However, despite the repetition of the principle, a common failing of most class situations is to attempt to mold all the children into one common pattern or activity. This is particularly counterproductive with very young children who cannot yet understand the need or the mechanics of group activities and are consistently distracted by different things. A caregiver must "understand the temperaments, moods, and preferences of each child" and "adapt sleeping, eating, and play activities to meet individual needs."<sup>42</sup> Caregivers should continually assess the children in their care for individual special abilities and disabilities. *The curriculum in the child care center should provide for these differences by providing an environment for a variety of activities, materials, and schedules to accommodate the developing needs of each child.*

Pepper and Jennifer understood the temperaments of each of the children in their class. They knew that Kirk could handle conflict without becoming too upset and that Robin had a temper that could flare up easily and needed more nurturing and understanding. They respected Carlos's need to speak Spanish, a language in which he felt more secure because it was the language spoken in his home. They made him comfortable when they repeated the words in Spanish and then translated them into English so that the child felt at home in both languages in the classroom. They understood the necessity of dealing with situations that a particular child is not developmentally ready to handle. Robin, for example, was not yet ready to negotiate and solve a problem with Kirk over possession of one of the flannel-board bowls in the three bears story, and Pepper stepped in to solve the problem in a way that both children accepted. Such a positive solution is not always possible, as every parent and teacher knows, but with a staff member that is both well trained and caring, it is more likely to occur than with someone who isn't as well trained. Knowing that Kirk and Margaret interact well together, Pepper said to them, "Let's play three bears," and led them to the flannel board to play with the figures in the story. She then did the same with the two younger children, Carlos and Steven, directing them to the water table where she stayed with them. Jennifer went to a part of the room called the family corner with Robin, where she set up a dollhouse with people inside. Jennifer then rotated between working with the girl in the family corner and the two little boys at the water table. After a while, Jennifer noticed that Robin's attention was drawn to her playing with Margaret and Kirk and that she could no longer concentrate on the dollhouse. "Do you want me to play with you?" she asked the girl. Robin indicated that she did, so Jennifer went over and played again with Robin and the dollhouse.

*The developmental level of each child is a factor that a skilled teacher must be very much aware of. As children grow older, they are capable of engaging in higher*



**Soap and water get things clean.**

and higher forms of symbolic play, that is, using objects to *represent* other things. They may use a dollhouse to represent a real house; a doll or a teddy bear becomes a real person to whom they talk; toy dishes become real dishes in an imaginary kitchen as they pretend to eat, and so on. At a higher stage, they might take a cardboard box and pretend it's a real house, or a spoon could become a person. Symbolic play, particularly as it takes on higher forms, requires a more developed sense of imagination, and children in a classroom situation are not all at the same level of development. Therefore, it requires that the teacher understand this and know which children to subtly combine into subgroups because they play better together. In the toddler class, Carlos and Steven, the two youngest, were encouraged to play together at the water table where they filled and emptied vessels while others in the group with a more developed sense of symbolic play were guided to the flannel board or the doll house. And, of course, the situation was constantly changing as children wanted to move to other areas. The teachers were constantly alert to the differences among each of the children and worked with them at every level. During most of the day, it was not getting the child to fit into one common activity for all but finding activities in which children at different levels of interest and development were comfortable.

Understanding and planning for each child's individuality is a bedrock principle in any good child care program, and no one sums up its importance more than two of the most noted authorities in the child development field,

Brazelton and Greenspan. “The degree to which we can tailor experiences to each child’s unique qualities increases the likelihood of that child’s growing up physically, intellectually, and emotionally healthy and thus able to meet the expectations of family and society.”<sup>43</sup>

Pepper generally directed the scene, placing the children for a game or activity, most of the time by moving them in a particular direction with a firm, soft voice and a gentle touch. Her hands seemed to be constantly moving children or objects. Touch is very important to toddlers, who need the warmth of human contact. Pepper often picked the younger children up to soothe them or place them appropriately. *And she talked to them, always talked. She talked about what the children were doing, what interested them, repeating the words that went with the actions many times.*

Encouraged to communicate, the children also spoke to each other. Kirk and Margaret talked to each other about the flannel figures they were placing on the board, reenacting the story of Goldilocks. Their conversation was limited by their young age, but they were beginning the art of communication, and their child care experience is helping to sharpen this skill that is so necessary for later success in school.

After a while, Kirk grew tired of the flannel board and went over to Robin in the family corner. “I want to play with you,” he said. Visibly disappointed, Margaret called out to Kirk, “Play with me.” She didn’t want to be deserted. Alert to a sign of possible trouble, Jennifer went over to Margaret, pretended surprise, and exclaimed, “Oh, Goldilocks ran away. She must be hiding somewhere. Maybe the three bears want to go to sleep now.” Obliging, the toddler put the three bears to sleep and then joined Jennifer who subtly led her over to the family corner where all three children—Kirk, Robin, and Margaret—now played with the doll house.

And so the day went on. And as it did, it became more apparent that you could not observe the workings of those teachers and children without realizing that virtually all the elements of what the books say a good child care program should be were translated into concrete terms in that classroom. All the abstractions of the researchers and the child care experts suddenly came to life in the ordinary operation of a classroom in which professionals worked with young children every day, week after week, and month after month.

## HIGH-QUALITY CHILD CARE: SOME OTHER BASICS

In this chapter, we have used the toddler class at Rosa Lee Young to touch upon some basic principles by which skilled teachers in a classroom work with very young children. We will use observations in other classes at the school in subsequent chapters to more deeply illustrate these and other principles and techniques in early child care.

But there is more to the story of a successful early child care center than this. To run a successful program and to maintain the kind of skilled teachers that are necessary in such a program, there are other important qualities that a

## The Physical Setup of a Child Care Center

A number of studies, books, and articles on the physical needs of a child care center should always be kept in mind. They are outlined briefly here.

*Provision for the health and safety of the children.* This includes clean and well-planned areas for food preparation and toileting; nutritious breakfasts and lunches; indoor and outdoor equipment that encourage children to climb, crawl, run, and jump. It also includes careful planning to avoid hazards like sharp pointed furniture and electrical outlets.

*A carefully planned physical environment appropriate to the age level of the children.* This includes well-planned play space; soft lighting; plenty of storage space for a wide variety of toys—picture books, clay, blocks, wheel toys, and puzzles that challenge toddlers and preschoolers—of different sizes, shapes, and textures; crib mobiles and hard-paged books for infants; and convenient diapering areas. Also essential is a nearby refrigerator and storage space for the snacks and drinks that young children need frequently in small amounts during the day.

*Small groups, particularly for infants and toddlers, with high ratios of staff to children.* Child care professionals have recommended that no more than six children who are not yet mobile should be in a group, and one caretaker should be responsible for no more than three young infants. No more than nine children who are crawling or walking (up to 18 months) should be in a group, with a caretaker responsible for no more than three mobile infants. For children 18 months to 3 years, group size should be no more than twelve; staff-to-child ratio, 1:4.

*Assignment of a primary caregiver to each child and continuity of care.* It is generally recommended that from the time the child first enters child care, regardless of her age, one primary caregiver should be the professional principally responsible for the care of that child. It is also generally recommended that to the greatest extent possible, there should be continuity of care; that is, the primary caregiver should follow the child from her infancy until at least the age of three. In most American child care centers, the principle of continuity of care is very difficult, if not impossible, to follow because of the high turnover of staff personnel (see pages 23–27).

For a more in-depth discussion of physical criteria for an early child care center, see Lally et al., *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups*, op. cit., pp. 29–43; Nettie Becker, op. cit., Chapter 2, pp. 22–29; Graham, et al., op. cit., pp. 14–16; Lella Gandini, “Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education,” *Young Children*, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Nov. 1993, p. 6.

school must have. They can be roughly divided into three categories: the physical setup of the center itself (see box above), the support services it offers to children and their families, and how a quality staff can be maintained in the face of serious obstacles in the profession.

## The Support Services Offered to Children and Their Families

Rosa Lee Young has a full-time certified social worker, Barbara Andrzejewski, who has worked there for twenty years. She has a multitude of responsibilities, a couple of which are maintaining the record of each child's health history and keeping up-to-date links with community services on children's health and well-being. She also provides crisis counseling for parents and children when the need arises, as it did after the terrorist attack on the United States on September 11, 2001. Many children saw the scene, repeated over and over on TV, of the planes crashing into the twin towers and the buildings collapsing, and reacted with terrible fear that their world would also collapse. She consults, when necessary, with a nurse practitioner on questions affecting the children's health.

### *The Staff Is Aware and Makes Use of Comprehensive Community Support Services for Children and Families*

No child care program can meet all the needs of a child's family. In many cases, a child or his family needs the help that only outside community agencies can give. It is, therefore, essential that a child care program maintain ongoing linkages with those community agencies to provide social services and medical, mental health, and therapeutic interventions when necessary.

Barbara Andrzejewski is responsible for maintaining such linkages. Among those are services provided by the Nassau County Department of Health, the county in which the school is located, and the local school district. They are available on request for private evaluation of the children recommended to them and for early intervention when necessary. The social worker also closely coordinates with a number of county and state agencies that provide specialists to work with children with special needs: special education counselors, speech therapists, physical therapists, and others. All these special services are provided only with the consent of the parent of the particular child. They are completely voluntary, but most parents will take advantage of them if they have confidence in the school that is arranging the services. *A very important feature of this service is that the professionals provided by the agencies will come into Rosa Lee Young so the parent does not have to travel to some remote location.*

It seems so self-evident that linkages to such services must be an absolutely necessary part of every good child care program; yet with such a wide disparity in the quality of child care and so many centers, operating with or without licenses, this vital part of a good child care program often does not exist.

### *The Family and Cultural Background of the Children Must Be Understood, Respected, and Carried Over as Much as Possible Into the Classroom*

A good child care program reflects the cultures and values of the children's families in its curriculum. Efforts are made to link the child's home language and cultural norms into the class's daily routines, with the teacher exhibiting

pride in the diverse cultures of the children in her care. The school “should communicate each day with families, welcome parents into their child’s classroom, and organize special events that include the child’s family members.”<sup>44</sup> As mentioned earlier, the child should be able to feel that his class is an extension of his family.

We will be going into this in much greater detail in Chapters 2 and 5.

### **Maintaining a High-Quality Staff in the Face of Serious Obstacles in the Profession**

It is axiomatic that teachers and administrators should be well trained in the field of early child development. In theory, this is so universally recognized that it should not be necessary to elaborate the point. Zero to Three puts particular emphasis on it, declaring, “The strongest indicators for long-term success . . . are related to the caregivers education and level of participation in ongoing training in the field of early child development and care. Staff competence is the most important contributing factor to a social environment that facilitates early learning. Caregivers should apply their knowledge of early childhood development and use curriculum and materials to plan appropriate activities and provide responsive caregiving.”<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, despite its universal recognition as the core element in the success or failure of a child care center, professional development is one of the major problems in the profession. Training in a field such as this one must involve higher education, which is expensive and becoming even more so in recent years. Most college graduates these days leave academia with heavy student loans to repay. Few choose a profession with a salary level that hardly enables them to pay for rent, expenses, and a used car to get to and from work, let alone having to figure out how to pay back those loans.

Added to this is the fact that there are no uniform national standards for teachers of very young children. In addition to regular inspections by state authorities, Rosa Lee Young undergoes examination to gain accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a nationwide professional organization. It is strictly a voluntary procedure on the part of the school and is obtained after observers from the NAEYC visit the school, observe the teachers, examine how the school is run, and approve the program. But professional requirements for staff vary from state to state and even within states. Many early child care centers require a two-year associate’s degree, but there are some in which only a high school diploma is necessary to obtain a job.

In New York State, the minimum requirements for an early child care teacher is either an associate’s degree in child development, recreation, or a related field with no additional experience or a high school diploma or its equivalent and two years of experience working with children under 13 years of age. It goes without saying that two years of working with 11- and 12-year-olds is hardly preparation for working with preschool age children. For a teacher’s aide, New York State requires only a high school diploma or its equivalent and “substantial experience”

## Bringing a Story to Life

The children in the prekindergarten class of Barbara Quintero and Quinnale Drayton gathered around for circle time. Barbara sat on the floor with the children and gave a familiar signal for them to cross their legs. She had a book on the floor in front of her.

**Barbara:** Turn to your friend next to you. Shake his hand and say, "Hello. How are you?"

(After the children do this, she picks her arms up high over her head, gradually lowering them as her fingers flutter.)

**Barbara:** Let our fingers be leaves falling down. (The children imitated her.)

**First child:** I like pink.

**Second child:** I'm a little teapot.

(Barbara picks up a book about a scarecrow and talks to the children about scarecrows to introduce the book: what a scarecrow is, what it is used for, how it is made.)

**Third child:** (impatiently): Aren't you going to read the story?

**Barbara** (complying): It's time to listen. Now, I'm going to need your help. We're all going to be scarecrows and frighten away the birds so they don't eat the food the farmer is growing. Let's make scary faces to frighten away those birds.

(The children begin to make faces. Barbara then gives each child a number. As she reads the story, she signals them, using the children's assigned numbers, from time to time at an appropriate point in the story, to make scary faces to frighten the crows away. The children try to outdo each other in putting on scary faces, and the teacher joins them in the exercise as they practice being as silly as they can be.)

**Barbara:** Face Number 2 can even be meaner.

(Child Number 2 makes another scary face.)

**Barbara:** Oh, I think Face Number 3 didn't work. The birds are still there.

(Child Number 3 makes another face.)

(Barbara reads the point in the story where the birds are coming back to the field.)

**Barbara:** Let's also stamp our feet and make noise to scare the birds away.

(Children stamp feet and yell out as they make more scary faces.)

**Barbara** (after the story is finished): All right, the birds are gone. I don't see any. Let's put away our scary faces for a while. Shall we make our own scarecrows?

The children then followed up the story by making their own scarecrows with construction materials: paper, scissors, crayons, magic markers, and so on. They acted out the story, playing the roles of birds and scarecrows. Their art and construction work was then hung on the wall along with the highlights of the story itself so that, in effect, every child became a part of the story.

in working with children under 13. How substantial experience is interpreted apparently depends on the individual child care center. Some child care centers require college degrees and specific course training in early child care, but people willing to complete such requirements for a field with such small remuneration are hard to find. And even among those who enter the child care field, a large number leave it after only a few years seeking jobs in higher paying careers, leading to high staff turnovers. It is one of the more unfortunate aspects of the present administration of child care in this country. A study done a few years ago among 158 centers, for example, revealed that during the year 1997 alone, 27 percent of child care teachers and 39 percent of assistant teachers left their jobs, and 20 percent reported losing half or more of their teaching staff.<sup>46</sup>

Rosa Lee Young also has its problems in keeping staff salaries at a level commensurate with the education, training, and importance of the job. Although the school has made an effort to keep compensation at the highest level possible in the field, like nearly all other child care programs, it cannot escape the fact that it is run on a tight budget and that salaries are still admittedly very low when measured against other professions. "I would like to take care of our teachers better in terms of compensation," Director Rey lamented. She has discussed with the school's board of trustees the problem of attracting and keeping quality staff members. "The money hasn't kept up with the times in compensation and benefits," she admitted.

Nevertheless, in contrast to many child care center staffs, the Rosa Lee Young staff has, for the most part, been both educationally qualified and relatively stable. Several years ago, when I first began gathering material for this book, a survey of the staff revealed that five of the eight teachers had bachelor's degrees; three of them (including Pepper Robinson) had master's degrees in early childhood education. The other three had associate's degrees from community colleges. And rather than a high turnover, the teaching staff averaged nearly ten years at the school. One of them had taught there for twenty-three years, another for sixteen years. Three more had been teaching there for twelve, eleven, and ten years. Sadly, over the past couple of years, the rising cost of living and the inability of child care centers to keep up with the salary needs of its professional staffs have had their toll on Rosa Lee Young, as it has had on so many others. Several of its long-term staff members have left, usually for positions in public elementary schools. Pepper Robinson has received well-deserved recognition as an educator and now occupies the position of director at an early child care center in a town not far from Rockville Centre. So, even with a history of relative staff stability, the Rosa Lee Young program has also suffered from the problem that will remain chronic to the profession until it is accorded its proper place, with its proper remuneration, in our society.

How did the school manage to retain, at least by comparison with other early child care centers, a generally stable staff? When prekindergarten teacher Linda Schnitzer answered that question she could not contain her vibrancy.

"This is such a happy, encouraging, magical place," she declared. Seventeen years ago, she just happened to pass by the building and saw kids playing in the two outside play yards. "I didn't know this was a school," she recalled, because the sign outside was so small she missed it. A native of Rockville Centre with an associate's degree in early childhood education, she had lived elsewhere for a number of years but returned home when her father became ill. She was looking for a job in early childhood education, something "temporary until things got settled at home." She walked in, was interviewed by then-director Joan Sheppard, and was hired on the spot to fill the position of a teacher who was leaving because she would soon give birth. "In my mind I had no intention of staying," she recalled. So why did this temporary job turn into what has effectively become a lifetime occupation?

Linda had worked in a number of early child care centers for nine years before she came to Rosa Lee Young, but she "had never seen an early childhood program like this one. This was a place where children learn," she asserted, with a bursting exuberance. "This was a place where adults learn." It was at Rosa Lee Young, she said, where she learned how to teach.

On Linda's first day, Director Sheppard took her upstairs to her classroom where, after warming up to each other, the children wanted her to draw them a picture. As Linda began to draw the picture, Joan walked behind her and said softly, "Linda, why don't you ask Sally to show you how she would make it?"

"She was telling me that their philosophy was you don't draw pictures for children, you sit with them, and you encourage them to bring out their work," Linda said. That was different from where she had taught previously where "there were ditto sheets, there were teacher projects, every one the same," she went on. "When the children went home on Friday, it was important for the parents to see those ditto sheets with the alphabet and so forth. Every holiday was the same. On Halloween every child made a pumpkin. Even if a child didn't want to make a pumpkin, he made a pumpkin. If you told them to draw with the red pencil, they had to pick up the red pencil and draw in the red circle."

When she came to the school, Linda "was ignited. I said, 'Wow, this is teaching.' I saw such a difference in the way children played, and play in young children is very much a tool for learning."

The teachers at Rosa Lee Young create lesson plans, outlining the things that children are learning through specific play activities. If they make play dough, for example, they are learning science by observing the behavior of certain substances, they are learning math by measuring the ingredients, they are developing eye-hand coordination and muscles.

"Our parents know that with our philosophy, even though they may not see the ditto sheets, their children are learning in every area," Linda said.

Of course, as with good teaching on all levels, lesson plans provide a guide, but in practice the teacher is flexible enough to adapt a plan to specific needs and situations as they arise in a classroom. This is particularly true with young children who cannot follow a preset structure as easily as older children can and who are constantly learning through their own processes of experimentation and observation.

And the training at the school is ongoing. “It doesn’t matter whether you have a master’s degree or an associate’s degree, you are continually training,” Linda emphasized. “Staff meetings and team meetings discuss children and their specific needs so that the program is absolutely directed to the individual child.”

Probably the biggest factor at Rosa Lee Young, Linda maintained, is the warm, supportive atmosphere among colleagues and administrators. If a child has a particular problem, whether it be “socializing, being able to problem solve, being able to retrieve words and recall situations, anything, you are encouraged to involve the administration so the child can receive appropriate help. If a teacher goes to the office, the social worker or director will always stop to talk to you, not just for children with special problems but any child or any situation that comes up in a classroom on a day-to-day basis and you need advice on how to handle the situation,” Linda said.

This collegial atmosphere, this overall satisfaction with the work being done with children keeps qualified people at the center, even though they could probably earn much more elsewhere. For Linda Schnitzer, who saw children playing in the yard seventeen years ago as she was walking past the building, it has been what changed a stopgap job into a dedicated life career. And although she admitted, “The salary has been the hardest part of a job in this field,” she said, “I absolutely would do it all over again.” She sums up her years at Rosa Lee Young by stating simply, “I can’t leave here. I just love it. It’s a career that’s definitely my spirit.” Unfortunately, she finally did have to leave, forced out by health problems.



In this introductory chapter, we have outlined the general philosophy and qualities of what makes a good child care center and why this particular center seems to be working so well. We will be examining some other specific areas of a high-quality child care program in the chapters that follow.

We said at the outset that Rosa Lee Young inspired both hope and tragedy at the same time; hope because of the beauty of what good professional child care can do for the children of working parents, tragedy because there are not nearly enough Rosa Lee Youngs in America today. And as we observed the classes at the school, we could not help being consumed by the tragedy and the frustration over the current general state of early child care and what could be done with the proper resources. Frustration that in a nation whose leaders often proclaim that “children are our most precious resource,” many people whose work is of dubious social value become wealthy, but teachers like Pepper Robinson are paid a pittance by comparison. Frustration and tragedy because what transpired in that toddler classroom was something like a work of great art. Though many would probably scoff at the idea, for me, seeing those teachers bringing out the best in those small children and giving them the foundation for a positive start in life was like watching great actors performing Shakespeare or listening to a Beethoven symphony. It was at once breathtaking and emotionally moving. It was great art because it was life; in its essence it showed what human beings were capable of doing when they had the training and the tools—and the heart and soul to do it.

## What Are the Criteria That Make a Good Child Care Center?

1. Does the physical setup at the school conform to the basic standards of good practice for an early child care center as defined by national professional organizations like the National Association for the Education of Young Children or Zero to Three? Is the school fully accredited by the NAEYC?
2. Does each classroom have separate sections where children can go to play alone or in small groups, as well as a central space where the entire class can engage in activities together?
3. Does each class, from the toddler class to the prekindergarten and kindergarten classes, have materials that will engage children, encourage them to play, and stimulate their imaginations? These materials should include but not be limited to construction toys and puzzles, dolls and play furniture, painting supplies, playdough, water toys, housekeeping utensils, dress-up clothes, and musical instruments. Is there a playground with safe equipment for outdoor play?
4. Are toddlers and their parents welcomed at the school each morning in a way that makes daily separation much easier for the children? When they drop off their children, do parents get the chance to acknowledge the toddler's feelings of separation, remind them of where they will be during the day, and let them know when they will be back to pick them up?
5. Is the atmosphere of the child care center one that encourages an ongoing relationship of mutual trust among the children, their families, and the school? From the time the child starts the day, does the teacher establish an emotional connection with the child that leads to an atmosphere of trust and respect in the class?
6. When teachers read to children, do their voices and expressions reflect the tones and mood of the stories: animation, excitement, mirth, hushed tones, suspense, or whatever emotion the passage they are reading calls for? Are they really conveying the emotional content as well as the words to the children?
7. Are the means available for children to act out the stories they hear; for example, flannel boards, dress-up corners, puppets, dolls, toys, props? Are they encouraged to make up dances and body movements to the stories?
8. Is the teacher tuned in to the cues from the children that provide early signals as to how they feel about things such as the activity they're engaged in, their relationships with other children, when they are tired, or when they are overstimulated?
9. When working with toddlers, is the caregiver prepared for the reactions that come from the different emotional levels of the children? Does she allow for variations in personality when she plans her program? Does she anticipate that there will sometimes be inexplicable emotional outbursts from some of the children, and will she adjust her classroom routines to meet these needs?
10. When children express themselves, does the teacher ask questions that get them to think more deeply about what they have said?

11. When working with toddlers, does the teacher constantly interact and speak to them, using words to convey thoughts and emotions, even though she is aware that, unlike older children, the responses will not always be directly connected to the idea she expressed?
12. Are mealtimes at the school times for pleasant conversation around the table as the children eat?
13. Are activities planned and carried out in a manner that takes into account each child's unique personality and developmental level?
14. Is there more than the normal turnover in staff at the school?



**A game at circle time.**