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SUPPORTING COOPERATION AND CARING THROUGH LARGE GROUP EXPERIENCES

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Cooperation and caring are best taught within a group as it promotes connectedness, collaborative effort, and relationship building.

Working with a large group of children is an integral part of everyday early childhood practice. Well planned, group experiences not only allow children to engage and learn together, but also provide an effective means of fostering language, cognition, and social and emotional development.

Group experiences can therefore be problematic for young children who have difficulty cooperating with and caring for others, as children require these core skills to successfully interact within a group.

In the long term, skills of cooperation and caring are crucial to becoming a social individual as they are inherently linked to social-emotional competence, well-being, behavioural adjustment, and overall development.

For young children to develop skills in caring and cooperation, they need to have a good understanding of their sense of self, a positive self-esteem, and a sense of belonging.

A sense of self and positive self-esteem allows children to have the confidence to tackle new tasks and situations and feel competent as learners.

A sense of belonging and community allows children to acknowledge the needs, ideas, and feelings of others.

Moreover, in order to build skills in these areas, young children need to understand and acquire a wide range of social skills, including turn-taking, obedience, and acceptance of the ideas of others.

Egocentricity and poor communication skills often contribute to young children having difficulty in learning to be cooperative and show care and concern for others.

However, opportunities for developing these skills can be naturally embedded into everyday classroom routines and activities as children interact and play, share toys and spaces, and work together on structured activities.

Examples include:

- Ensuring that book nooks have comfortable couches that can seat 3-4 children comfortably side-by-side
- Structuring tidy-up times so that pairs of children are required to complete tasks
- Providing structured, whole group projects that allow a small number of carefully selected children to be assigned a special task to complete

Staff role-modeling of appropriate language is also a key strategy for fostering skills in caring and cooperation.

Examples of staff using this role-modeling strategy include; being considerate and using “please” and “thank you”, being positive and complimenting pro-social behaviour, and mindful about use of reprimands and limiting the frequency of the word “no”.

Moreover, a sustained focus by staff on what is acceptable rather than what is unacceptable when working with children creates a supportive environment for social-emotional learning and promotes caring and cooperation as a focus.

Cooperation and caring are pivotal skills for participating in today’s social world.

Developing these skills before school paves the way for academic achievement, school adjustment, making friends, and influencing others. Their early acquisition helps set the child on a positive path for learning and life.