

Toward Competency in Child Care

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SOUND child development and early childhood education are assuming increasing importance in the United States. The significance of the early years is well established, and the value of good programs for preschool children is agreed upon by representatives of many disciplines.

With the advent of such programs as Head Start and Title I, and the rising demand for preschool nursery and day care services, both the availability and the quality of such services have become matters of growing national concern.

The question of whether or not we should have preschool and day care programs seems to have been largely answered by the increase in such programs all over the country. Since 1960, the number of licensed day care facilities has tripled and the number of children in other preschool programs has doubled. It is anticipated that by 1980 the number of preschool children in the United States will increase by three million, to reach an all-time high of 28 million. Kindergarten and nursery school enrollment is likely to reach 6.3 million by that date.

The issue this nation must face is how to provide quality programs for our children. Quality programs must facilitate and support the child's potential for growth and development and meet the wide range of emotional, intellectual, social, and physical needs of preschool children. The nation must find an

answer to Edward Zigler's question in the fall of 1971, when he headed HEW's Office of Child Development: "Are we going to provide the children of this nation with developmental child care, or are we merely going to provide them with babysitting?"

Those who work with children know that the key element in any program for young children is the staff—the adults who teach, supervise, and relate to the children both individually and in groups. This is true of early childhood programs in day care centers, Head Start centers, or public school settings. The best facilities, materials, and curricula, and the best intentions of program sponsors, cannot guarantee quality child care or educational programs unless those who deal directly with the children are competent, knowledgeable, and dedicated.

However, up to now, large numbers of individuals who bear primary responsibility for the development and education of children in child care programs have had insufficient preparation for the vital and complex task that they have undertaken.

Responding to the personnel needs for child care programs, the Office of Child Development began in 1970 to plan for a new program. The plan was based on the assump-

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tion that numbers alone would offer no solution.

Thus responding positively to the dual challenges of increasing the supply of competent staff members for early childhood programs and at the same time enhancing the quality of child care services, the Office of Child Development created a new concept for training professional staff in the field of child care—that of the Child Development Associate (CDA).

It is hoped that the CDA program will provide this nation with a cadre of well-trained, competent, professional men and women who will be responsible for the daily activities of groups of preschool children in center-based programs. It is assumed that CDA's will not work in isolation, but will work in settings with differentiated staffing patterns, in close contact with more trained and experienced staff members. CDA's will be child care specialists working with and responsible for groups of children. They will

not have direct responsibility for the extended activities of the total program, but they should have the assistance of a paraprofessional aide or staff helper. Eventually each CDA should hold a nationally recognized credential certifying professional competency.

The basic purpose of the program is to promote a system of training and credentialing for individuals working with preschool children and for those planning to enter the field.

The specific goals of the program are to:

1. Upgrade the quality of programs for children and provide them with maximum opportunity for growth and development
2. Increase the supply of competent child care personnel
3. Develop innovative and flexible competency-based training programs with heavy emphasis on center-based field training
4. Establish the Child Development As-

sociate as a recognized and vital resource within the field of human service occupations

5. Encourage and provide opportunities for training for staff members (including para-professionals) seeking to become CDA's

6. Establish a competency-based assessment and credentialing system to grant professional recognition to the CDA.

The key feature of the project is that, unlike the traditional approach to professional training, the credential of the CDA will not be based solely on courses taken, academic credits earned, or degrees awarded (although credits and degrees will have their place in the training programs). Credentials for the CDA will be based upon careful evaluation of each candidate's demonstrated competency to assume primary responsibility for the education and development of a group of young children.

The CDA project is made up of several components or parts. First, the CDA competencies, which basically describe what a CDA should be and do, will be the foundation for the development of training and assessment techniques. Second, training programs will develop innovative training methods to help trainees in the acquisition of the competencies. Third, an assessment system will assure that CDA's are indeed competent child care staff members. Fourth, a credentialing system will assure that CDA's present a recognized and accepted professional group holding a credential that is nationally negotiable.

Competencies

Competencies were developed by a task force of educators and child development specialists, in cooperation with the Office of Child Development.¹ These competencies are presently being reviewed by the CDA Consortium, a nonprofit corporation composed of organizations and individuals concerned with quality care for preschool children. (The Consortium was funded by OCD and is responsible for developing a prototype system for assessing and credentialing of the CDA.)

¹ Major credit should go to Dr. Barbara Biber, Bank Street College, New York.

The competencies fall into six broad areas and require that the CDA have the knowledge and skill to:

1. Set up and maintain a safe and healthy learning environment

2. Advance physical and intellectual competence

3. Build positive self-concept and individual strength

4. Organize and sustain the positive functioning of children and adults in a group in a learning environment

5. Bring about optimal coordination of home and center child-rearing practices and expectations

6. Carry out supplementary responsibilities related to the children's programs.

Within each of these categories there are numerous specific skills or competencies which each CDA must acquire. The competencies are stated broadly so that they can be used by local programs as a framework for training and program development reflecting particular local needs and preferences. These competencies are based on the assumption that broad guidelines can be formulated without violating the divergent educational views or cultural and ethnic backgrounds of various child care groups.

Training

In the spring of 1973, the Office of Child Development funded 13 pilot training programs to prepare trainees to acquire the competencies mentioned and, hopefully, to become CDA's. Each program is somewhat unique in its organizational pattern and approach to training. However, all training programs provide:

- Training geared toward acquisition of the CDA competencies

- Academic and field work as a set of coordinated experiences

- A minimum of 50 percent field training

- Individualized training geared to the strength and weakness of each trainee

- Flexible scheduling which will allow each trainee to complete the training within a

range of time necessary for his acquisition of competencies

- Willingness to work closely with the CDA Consortium.

Thus, training is based on innovative approaches to teaching and learning and differs from traditional teacher training.

Central to CDA training is a careful integration of theoretical preparation in child development and early childhood education with practical, on-the-job experience. At least half of each trainee's time will be spent working with young children in situations in which appropriate staff models and regular feedback promote acquisition of CDA competencies. These settings may be in Head Start programs, nursery schools, day care centers, university laboratory schools, other child development programs, or a combination of several programs—settings in which the CDA candidate is currently employed or may be employed when training is completed.

The integration of field and academic training varies among institutions. Some programs provide some academic work every day, while others have set aside specific days of the week or several one-week "minimesters" for theoretical work. Some programs introduce competencies through academic experience and expect acquisition through field experience. Others reverse or combine the process.

Training programs include both urban and rural communities, and different ethnic, racial, and bilingual programs. Training institutions comprise a broad mix of organizations such as universities, junior and/or community colleges, Head Start programs, private training organizations, and consortia. In most instances several groups are cooperating to provide CDA training.

It is expected that the CDA project will legitimize field training for child care staff, and will provide whatever additional training is necessary to bring many experienced workers up to a level of competency that warrants the CDA credential. By emphasizing demonstrated competencies rather than length of training or accumulation of course credits, the CDA program will give recognition to

workers in the field who are fully or partially qualified but may not have formal preparation.²

Assessment and Credentialing

Assessment and credentialing techniques will be developed by the CDA Consortium. The Consortium is made up of national organizations which are directly involved in or have primary interest in early education and child care. It was formed in June 1972, and received a grant from the Office of Child Development to initiate its activities. At present, over 30 organizations have joined the Consortium. A 16-member board of directors has policy-making responsibility, and a full-time professional staff carries out the complex task of this newly formed organization.

With the help of consultants and subcontractors, the Consortium will develop assessment and credentialing systems. Training programs and the Consortium will work cooperatively to ensure that training and assessment are part of a unified system for the preparation and credentialing of CDA's. It is also expected that both trainers and the Consortium will cooperate in facilitating acceptance of the Child Development Associate as a qualified professional in the field.³

The CDA project is an all-out effort to provide the nation with an adequate number of professional workers competent to guide the growth and development of preschool children in a variety of settings. Hopefully, it will also facilitate the improvement and expansion of child care services throughout the country. The task to be done is difficult, but can be accomplished by the cooperation of all those concerned with the education and care of young children. □

² For additional information on the training aspect of the Child Development Associate project, write to: Dr. Jenny W. Klein, Director of Education Services, Program Improvement and Innovation, Office of Child Development, P.O. Box 1182, Washington, D.C. 20013.

³ For additional information on assessment and credentialing of the CDA, write to: Dr. C. Ray Williams, Executive Director, CDA Consortium, 7315 Wisconsin Avenue, N.W., Suite 601E, Washington, D.C. 20014.

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