5.8: Temporal Environment - The Daily Schedule

One feature of a well-organized classroom is the use of a schedule and established routines. Schedules and established routines are important because they influence a child’s social and emotional development. While referred to as the daily schedule, it is important to recognize that the flow, or the predictable order of the day, should be the focus (rather than abiding by rigid timelines for the different parts of the day). While there may be parts of the day that are at fixed times (for example meals or using a shared outdoor space), teachers should use flexibility to make the schedule meet the needs of the children. If an activity seems to be coming to a natural conclusion earlier, consider transitioning to the next part of the day. If children are really engaged in an activity, consider giving them additional time to wrap up their exploration. Flexibility also comes in handy when there are changes that affect the schedule that are beyond your control, such as bad weather preventing outdoor play.[1]

Why Have a Daily Schedule?

Schedules are important because they

- Help children know what to expect:
  - Schedules and routines help children understand the expectations of the classroom environment—which may be very different than in other settings.
  - Knowing expectations may lower behavior problems.

- Enhance feelings of security:
  - Predictable and consistent schedules in preschool classrooms help children feel secure and comfortable.
  - Those children who have difficulty with change especially need to feel secure.
  - Children who do not yet speak and understand English well also benefit from predictable and consistent classroom schedules and routines.

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• Influence a child’s cognitive and social development:
  ◦ When periods of play are longer, children engage in more complex social and cognitive play.

• Increase child engagement rates:
  ◦ Child engagement is defined as the amount of time a child spends interacting with his or her environment (adults, peers, or materials) in a developmentally and contextually appropriate manner, at different levels of competence.
  ◦ Schedules that give children choices, balanced activities, planned activities, and individual activities result in a higher level of engagement.

Several factors influence child engagement.

• Attention span of children:
  ◦ Plan activities to maximize children’s engagement:
    ▪ § Use other adults to assist.
    ▪ § Use novel materials.
  ◦ Limit duration to ensure children stay engaged throughout the activity.

• Alertness level:
  ◦ Plan activities that require more child attention and listening skills during times when children are more alert.
  ◦ Plan calming activities after active activities.
  ◦ Note if some children may be tired or sick.

• Adult availability:
  ◦ For a more active part of your day, you may want to have more adults to support the children’s learning and the management of the classroom.

• Time for children’s needs—allow enough time for children to fully engage and benefit from an activity. When children engage in longer periods of play they:
  ◦ Show higher levels of exploration, experimentation, and persistence.
  ◦ Utilize materials in more creative ways.
  ◦ Develop social relationships.[2]

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Creating the Daily Schedule

The first component is “blocks of time,” the big chunks of time set aside for classroom activities. Preschool schedules typically include:

• Large group or circle time
• Child-initiated play time
• Snack time and meals
• Outdoor time
• Rest time

The next component is the sequence. Sequencing the blocks of time requires taking into consideration multiple factors
including:

- Method of arrival/departure (bus or transportation provided by families)
- Schedules of other classrooms (e.g., which classroom goes outdoors at what times?)

Schedules include some of the daily routines such as meal times, but may not include others such as bathroom breaks or clean up routines.

Figure 5.11: This is a visual schedule that shows children images of the different parts of their day. [3]

Figure 5.12: Here is a schedule that combines visual cues, written times, and text descriptions. [4]

Finding Balance in the Schedule

When planning the schedule you want to provide balance. This includes:

- Alternating active with quiet activities to help children with self-control.
- Having a mix of small group and large group activities.
- Having activities that differ in noise level, pace, person leading (child vs. adult), and location (indoor vs. outdoor).
- Having a mix of teacher-guided and child-initiated activities. [5]

https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Bookshelves/Early_Childhood_Education/Book%3A_Introduction_to_Curriculum_for_Early_Chil…
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Child-Initiated Play and Teacher-Guided Activities

The daily schedule balances child-initiated play and teacher-guided activities. The latter involves teachers planning, introducing, and guiding specific activities to enhance children’s learning during small- and large-group times. In contrast, child-initiated play refers to children’s responses to ideas and materials introduced by teachers that the children are free to explore without teacher guidance. Child-initiated play also includes those times when children create, organize, and engage in activities completely on their own.

A daily schedule that ensures ample time for children to initiate their own play in well-developed interest areas is critical to the teaching and learning. Young children need ample time to engage in play, in the company of peers, in order to build their ideas, to pose problems, to try out solutions, and to negotiate and exchange ideas. When children initiate, organize, and develop their own play in the interest areas, it is called child-initiated learning. At times, children choose to play alone, but frequently, child-initiated play takes place in small groups of their own choosing.

In a schedule with ample time for children to initiate play in well-stocked interest areas, there are times when teachers organize and guide specific activities for children. Such teacher-guided curriculum activities are clearly distinct from child-initiated curriculum activities. Teacher-guided activities occur in two contexts—small groups and large groups. A small group would consist of one teacher working with a group of four to eight children. A large group is typically a gathering of all the children in an early childhood setting. Each context serves a different purpose and requires different preparation and different teaching strategies.

For some aspects of the curriculum, teachers may choose to organize an activity with a small group of children. Although initiated and guided by the teacher, an effective small-group encounter of this nature should still be rich in possibilities for children to contribute and negotiate ideas with each other. Teacher-guided activities in small groups work best in quiet spaces away from distractions of the full group and provide a manageable context for children to discuss and explore ideas and experiences. The teacher listens to children’s ideas, helps orchestrate the give-and-take of ideas among children, and poses ideas or problems for children to wonder about, explore together, or even solve. Away from the distractions of a large group, teachers can easily observe, listen, and converse with children in a small group, as well as note how individual children think, express ideas, relate with others, and use their emerging skills.

Such teacher-guided conversations can enrich children’s learning in all domains, particularly the children’s language and vocabulary development. In addition, teachers can intentionally guide the development of specific skills by planning small-group activities (e.g., songs, games, shared reading) for short periods of time that playfully engage children in using specific emerging skills.

Small-group activities have several advantages over large-group activities. With small groups of children, teachers can readily observe, listen, and document children’s developmental progress. Teachers can also individualize the curriculum and use questions or prompts to scaffold each child’s thinking in more complex ways.

Whether the activities are child-initiated or teacher-guided, children’s use of materials in interest areas provide teachers with excellent opportunities to observe how they build concepts and skills and how they negotiate ideas with others. Moments of observed play and interactions also provide teachers with ideas on how to extend children’s exploration and learning through future encounters with related materials that add novelty, challenge, and complexity in each domain.
Large groups provide another context for teacher-guided activities. The large group—typically a gathering of the entire class—works well for singing, acting out songs and stories, playing games, sharing experiences with each other, telling stories, building a sense of community, and organizing the daily schedule and activities. Storytelling is one of the more popular large-group experiences, one that has rich potential for adding to children’s understanding about the world around them. Storytelling allows teachers, children, family members, as well as storytellers from the community to tap into and build children’s knowledge and experiences in meaningful ways. Large-group time is also when teachers let the whole group of children know what new experiences will be available in the interest areas or what will happen in small groups that day. Large-group gatherings that occur at the end of the day provide opportunities to review noteworthy happenings and to anticipate what will be available the next day.[6]

Here are some examples of daily schedules for preschool classrooms.

Table 5.1: Half-Day Program Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Day</th>
<th>Routine/Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Arrival/Greetings</td>
<td>Wash Hands, Sign-in, Get Name tags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:05-8:20</td>
<td>Group Time</td>
<td>Welcome, Songs, Stories, Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:20-9:30</td>
<td>Open Choice Time Outdoors</td>
<td>Explore classroom areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td>Wash Hands, transition to indoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:35-10:45</td>
<td>Snack/Open Choice Indoors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:45</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:50-11</td>
<td>Closing Circle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.2: Full Day Program Sample Daily Schedule[7]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Day</th>
<th>Routine/Activity</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td>Arrival/Greetings</td>
<td>Wash Hands, Sign-in, Get Name tags</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:05-8:20</td>
<td>Group Time</td>
<td>Welcome, Songs, Stories, Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time of Day</td>
<td>Routine/Activity</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:20-9:30</td>
<td>Open Choice Time Outdoors</td>
<td>Explore classroom areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:30</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td>Wash Hands, transition to indoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9:35-11:00</td>
<td>Snack/Open Choice Indoors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:00</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:10-11:25</td>
<td>Story Time</td>
<td>Transition to wash hands for lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30-11:50</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:50</td>
<td>Explore books on rest Mats</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:10-2:00</td>
<td>Rest Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00-3:15</td>
<td>Indoor Choice Time/Snack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:15</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:20</td>
<td>Large Group Circle</td>
<td>Games, Songs, Stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:40</td>
<td>Explore Outdoors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:00</td>
<td>Clean-up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:05</td>
<td>Indoor Small Group/Choice Centers</td>
<td>Fewer areas open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Routines and Rituals

Schedules define the whole day, whereas routines are more specific sets of regularly occurring behaviors. Routines
provide some security and a sense of what comes next; children are able to anticipate what will happen, and thus feel more secure.

Daily routines and rituals also provide a second context for curriculum. They offer possibilities for children to use their emerging skills and to apply emerging concepts and ideas. Early childhood daily routines include arrivals and departures, mealtimes, nap times, diapering, toileting, dressing, handwashing, tooth-brushing, and transitions between one place and another. They also include rituals such as sign-in sheets, health checks, waiting lists, attendance counts, dictated stories, reminder notes, or voting.

Children sit down for a meal, wash their hands, and put jackets and shoes on hundreds of times in order to provide excellent opportunities for children to use and build emerging skills and concepts. In group care, the care routines during arrivals, departures, meals, naps, diapering, toileting, and dressing provide excellent opportunities for children to use and challenge their emerging skills and concepts. When an infant whose diaper is about to be changed hears her teacher describe what it is she is about to do, the infant experiences a flood of words, which eventually become an anticipated phrase that gives meaning to a familiar experience. When this same infant hears a request to put his arm into the sleeve of a shirt, he is invited to demonstrate that he has understood this phrase and experiences the joy that comes with sharing meaning with the teacher. When a preschool child looks in anticipation each morning at the helper chart to see what job she gets to do that day, they are invited not only to cooperate in the care of the classroom, but also to build their emerging skills in understanding the meaning of print that accompanies the photo or drawing. Care routines are natural opportunities for children to engage in learning. Therefore, teachers plan the routines of care and the daily rituals that pepper the day in ways that invite children to be active participants and to use and build their emerging skills and concepts in meaningful situations.[8]

A vignette featuring toddlers shows the kind of learning that occurs in another routine:

Vignette

Four toddlers are seated at a low table for lunch. Their primary care teacher sits with them at the table. To his right, on a low bench, the primary care teacher has a bin that holds everything he needs for the meal. He pulls out bibs for each toddler and helps each toddler put one on. Each toddler finds a cube chair to sit in. The teacher puts an empty bowl in front of the toddler on his left. He offers this toddler a pair of small plastic tongs, holds a plate of small sandwiches, and asks, “Would you like to take a sandwich?” The toddler grabs the tongs and, after a few trials, manages to pick up one of the sandwiches and drop it onto his plate. Later, after each toddler has taken a sandwich, the teacher pulls from the bin a clear plastic measuring cup, on which a red line is drawn at the one-cup mark. He fills the measuring cup to the red line. He places an empty glass in front of a toddler and, offering the toddler the measuring cup, says, “Would you like to pour?” The toddler wraps his hand around the handle and tips the cup over his glass. He spills a bit at first, but adjusts his hand and manages to empty the measuring cup. He looks up at the teacher and smiles. The teacher smiles in response, saying, “You poured your milk, Stephan! You know how to do it!” The toddler seated next to Stephan reaches for the empty measuring cup. The teacher says, “And now you can pour milk into your glass, Alexi. I’ll put the milk in the measuring cup first.”[9]
Transitions

It is important to focus on creating and managing smooth transitions between activities in the classroom. Reasons to address transitions between activities in early childhood classrooms include:

- Transitions take up a great deal of time in preschool classrooms.
- During transitions, children often spend a lot of time waiting (e.g., waiting until everyone has finished their snack, waiting for everyone to clean up before beginning large group time). All of this time waiting with nothing to do can lead to unrealistic expectations and challenging behaviors.
- Some children (and adults) have stressful and frustrating experiences during transitions between activities (e.g., children arguing over who took out what toys and who should put them away; children not knowing where to put certain toys when they are done with them; children not knowing what to do, children not knowing expectations for the transition).
- Many preschool teachers and other caregivers consider children’s ability to independently make transitions between activities one of the essential skills needed in group contexts such as preschool and kindergarten.[1]

Supporting Successful Transitions

There are numerous strategies that can be used to ensure well-organized transitions between activities. These include strategies you use before the transition, during the transition, and following the transition.

- Before the Transition
  - Plan your daily schedule to include the minimal number of transitions that occur over the course of the day. Minimize the number of transitions in which all children have to do the same thing at the same time (e.g., Do all children have to go to the restroom at the same time? Can some children come over to the rug and sing a song...
or read a book, while other children finish an activity?).

- Plan for what adults will do during transition times (e.g., Which adult is responsible for greeting the children? Who will begin looking at books on the carpet with children?).
- Teach children the expectations for the transition routine. Teaching children how to clean up and how to line up will reduce the length of transition times. By reducing transition times, more time is available for children to spend in other learning activities. As children become familiar with the expectations, problem behaviors are less likely to occur.
- Provide verbal and nonverbal cues before transitions (e.g., “Five minutes ‘til snack. It’s almost time for clean-up,” show pictures of the next activity, beat a drum). Once a transition cue has been established, the cue should be used consistently to signal the transition.

- **During the Transition**
  
  - Engage children in transition activities (sing songs, play word or guessing games, recite rhymes, organize finger plays). Transition activities provide children with an activity to complete while other children are still transitioning. These activities also encourage children to finish their previous task, so that they can play the game or sing the song. During these activities, skills related to the transition can also be taught (e.g., setting the table for snack or lunch, sorting toys during clean-up time).
  
  - Allow children adequate time to finish projects or activities so they do not become frustrated by activities ending too soon. Give them a warning that it is about time to change activities.
  
  - Plan something to engage those children who finish an activity quickly, so they are not waiting without anything to do (e.g., if some children finish cleaning up and getting to large group quickly, they might look at books while waiting for other children to finish cleaning up).

- **Individualize support to accommodate individual children’s needs.**
  
  - § Photos to help anticipate what activity is next.
  - § Directions given in a child’s home language or sign language.
  - § An individual warning to a child that it will soon be time to clean up and begin a new activity.
  
- **Support may need to be individualized (i.e., one child may need an adult to provide a five-minute, three-minute, and one-minute warning before clean up while the rest of the class might need only a three-minute warning).**

- **After transitions**
  
  - Provide positive attention and feedback to children following transitions.
  
    - § When children pick up toys without much prompting, share with them how this shows how well they take care of the classroom materials.
  
    - § When children are working together to accomplish the task more quickly, let them know how much you appreciate their teamwork (e.g., “Nicholas and Jorge did a great job cleaning together and moving to the carpet”).

You can also work to promote independence during transitions by

- Allowing children to move individually from one area to another area when they complete an activity (e.g., as children finish snack, they are encouraged to go to the carpet and choose a book; as children finish putting away their coats and backpacks, they are encouraged to get a puzzle).

- Teaching children to help others (e.g., have children move as partners from one activity to another, or ask one child to help another child gather his/her backpack).

- Helping children self-monitor during transitions (e.g., children can be asked to think about how quietly or quickly they moved from one activity to another).

The following vignette offers an opportunity to watch and listen for the learning that occurs during a transition routine and
to reflect on the planning that had to occur in order for this experience to play out as it did.

Vignette

Ms. Cone had used the children’s name tags in transition activities for quite some time, at first pointing out and naming the first letter in each name as she called children to go wash hands or to get their jackets before going outside. Somewhat later, she held up each of the nametags and pointed to the first letter as she asked the child to name it. Today, she is using the first sounds in names to send a few children at a time from the circle time area to wash hands for lunch: “If your name starts with /k/, you may go wash your hands. Yes, Connie and Carolina, you may go to the sink. Both of your names start with the /k/ sound.” Cindy sees Connie and Carolina stand up, and she stands up too. Ms. Cone explains that Cindy begins with the /s/, not /k/ sound, and that she’ll get a turn soon. Cindy says, “I’m a C too!” Ms. Cone says, “Oh, you are right. Your name begins with the letter c like Connie and Carolina, but it starts with a different sound. We hear /k/ at the beginning of Connie and Carolina—/k/ Connie, /k/ Carolina. We hear /s/ at the beginning of your name—/s/—Cindy. I’m going to say that sound next: ‘If your name starts with /s/, you may go wash your hands.’” Sabrina stood up, joined hands with Cindy, and they walked to the sink together.[12]

Built into this large-group gathering is a dismissal ritual that takes full advantage of young children’s interest in their names and the names of their friends. As part of this dismissal ritual, the teacher invites children to use their emerging skills in distinguishing the distinct sounds of language, described in the language and literacy foundations as phonological awareness. She embeds this learning in the context of a game, one that inspires children to listen carefully to the sounds spoken in instructions for inviting small groups of children to wash hands. The transition from large group to the sink area goes much more smoothly as a result, and in the process, children get to use an important emerging skill.

References

[1] Guide to Managing the Classrooms: Schedules and Routines by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is in the public domain;

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[3] Image by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is in the public domain

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[7] Based on the College of the Canyons Early Childhood Education Sample schedule
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