

# A Typical Day Through the Eyes of Children

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*This article and learning tool relates to the Environment Rating Scales subscale on Program Structure.*

## Sean's Experience

It is 8:00 a.m. and Sean lies in the cozy corner of the toddler room. He is wearing his winter coat and a knit cap covers his face. His arms are tightly folded around his body. He is a large, burly mass of four-year-old boy. A substitute teacher enters the room. She approaches Sean and lifts up the knit cap. A wary eye stares back at her as if to say, "Don't mess with me lady." The classroom assistant calls from across the room, "Just leave him alone. He is like this every morning." Sean pulls the cap back over his face. His message seems to be, "I know this room does not belong to me. This is not my place." He lies in the cozy corner of the toddler room completely disengaged for one hour. At 9:00 a.m. Sean's teacher arrives to take her children to their preschool classroom. Sean jumps to life. He quickly removes his coat and hat. Entering his classroom, he eagerly begins to play in the block area.

Too often young children are placed in early morning and late afternoon "holding tanks." Of course, no one refers to them in such harsh terms but truth be told that is what many children experience in full-day programs. Many full-day programs find it too costly, especially during these tough economic times, to have every classroom open and staffed given that children's arrival and departure times are staggered. The result is children from several classrooms are combined together at the beginning and end of each day.

Often when I ask a teacher to describe the daily schedule for children in the classroom, her perspective is limited. She is only able to offer insight into what happens during her work shift. As director, you have

the "big picture" perspective of what is going on within and between classrooms. This broader awareness helps you understand the potential impact of staffing and grouping patterns on children's experiences. Why not take the opportunity to help your teachers also broaden their perspective. You can do this by assisting your teaching teams in collecting information about a typical day through the eyes of the children.

## Grouping and Staffing Patterns Impact Quality

If you are the director of a full-day program, chances are you don't realize how many daily transitions are experienced by some children in your program. A recent study conducted by Le, Setodji, and Schaack (2009) looked at the frequency of movement of preschool children between classrooms and found that children move on average one hour every other day and experienced an average of eight different teachers over a ten-day period. The frequency of movement was attributed solely to the length of time children spend in the program and the length of the day teachers worked. Similarly, research focusing on infant-toddler environments found that in center-based care, infants and toddlers moved frequently between classrooms to maintain required state teacher-child ratios (Cryer, et al. 2005).

Let's consider what it means for children like Sean who experience transitions from one room to another and a variety of different teachers throughout the day. These children may have greater difficulty separating from their parents, forming a trusting relationship with their teacher, and developing positive social skills with their peers. The impact of frequent transitions on social-emotional development may be a contributing factor to the challenging behaviors increasingly demonstrated by young children.

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Branagh Information Group (BIG) builds data systems with an emphasis on early childhood. BIG is the creator of the ERS Data System, a leading-edge Tablet PC implementation of the Environment Rating Scales® (ECERS-3™, ECERS-R™, ITERS-R™, FCCERS-R™, and SACERS-Updated™) and the Program Administration Scales (PAS, BAS).

There is also a concern about the type and balance of activities available to children when they are placed in temporary settings, different than their assigned age-appropriate classrooms. This is the other disturbing feature of the “holding tank” classroom in the early morning and late afternoon. While waiting for their “real” teacher to arrive or for their parents to take them home, children are offered limited choices of materials and equipment for fear they might make too much of a mess in the transitioning classroom. Consequently, some children spend large portions of their day being expected to sit quietly, working with fine motor toys, or looking at books.

### **Collecting Data**

The schedule posted in the classroom rarely conveys what children are actually experiencing. It takes some digging to gather the information which paints the picture of a child’s full day. Often it requires talking to two or three different teachers covering various work shifts and classrooms to capture what transpires during the full day. In one program I visited children were only given the choice of looking at books or working on puzzles for four and a half hours each day.

Frequent transitioning takes its toll on parents as well as children. One mother I encountered when I was observing a program opened the door to her child’s classroom and was informed he was in the room down the hall. Tears welled in her eyes and she asked, “Will it be like this every day? Each time I arrive I don’t know where to find my son.”

How many different teachers and children does an individual child interact with on any given day in your program? If the child transitions to different rooms, what materials and equipment are actually accessible during that time? At your next staff meeting, see if you and your team can develop a true schedule of one child’s day. Pick a child who gets dropped off early in the morning and picked up late in the day. Collect the following information: how many rooms is the child in during the day? How many teachers does the child interact with during the day? How many circle times does he participate in daily? What activities are available and which interest areas are open to this child at various parts of the day? Finally, what is the total amount of time this child has access to blocks,

dramatic play, sand/water, and gross motor play daily? The answers just might surprise you.

Teachers are busy, hard working people. They juggle a multitude of challenges on any given day. For legitimate reasons their focus is on the demands of their regular work shift. The problem is someone needs to shine the spotlight on the situation of children who spend ten or eleven hours in their child care programs. Are those the children exhibiting difficult behaviors in the classroom? Perhaps stepping back and looking at a typical day through the eyes of such a child might suggest solutions to improve the situation.

### **Sammy’s Experience**

There is another program across town from the one Sean attends. In this program a great deal of attention has been devoted to minimizing transitions for children and having each classroom set up and ready for children to engage in active free play throughout the day. When Sammy enters the classroom his teacher recognizes immediately that he is having a difficult morning and needs her support. Sammy’s mother gives him a quick kiss on the cheek and dashes out the door to work. Sammy bursts into tears. His teacher bends down and says “I know you are missing your mama but I am going to take good care of you while she is at work.” His teacher opens up her arms and Sammy snuggles into her warm embrace. She rocks him back and forth and gives him time to grieve. Then she suggests that they go over to the play-dough table and make some cookies, recalling the time Sammy’s mom brought special cookies for his birthday. Sammy brushes the tears from his face and hand in hand with his beloved teacher heads off to start his day.

The continuity of care and nurturing support that Sammy receives is quite different than the daily reality faced by the children like Sean in our early childhood programs. It is hard to place a price tag on that type of quality, but it is a goal worthy of pursuing.

Here is a simple exercise for the teacher to complete prior to meeting with the support staff. The purpose is to assist in getting the conversation started and to focus on strengths as well as additional areas for needed support.

## References

- Cryer, Debby. (2005). *From one class to another: How transitions may affect infants and toddlers*. (FPG Snapshot No. 25). Chapel Hill, NC: FPG Child Development Institute.
- Le, V., Setodji, C.M., Schaack, D. (2009, April). *Examining the relationship between temporary classroom transitions and children's social outcomes*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Diego, CA.