# 1

# Theoretical Framework

CHAPTER CONTENTS

Most people agree that the first years of life are significant determinants in a person's development. Also, it's known that the fulfillment of a child's potential is not the fruit of chance. In the domains of physical, psychomotor, intellectual, social, and affective development, children are subjected to numerous influences that can, in large part, be controlled. Several studies emphasize the positive influence of quality early childhood programs, whether those programs are home or family child care settings, child care centers, preschools, or other types of programs. We also know that many children spend a large part of their childhood in such programs, sometimes more than two thousand hours a year. It is essential, therefore, to provide excellent services that offer quality activities. Among these activities, routine and transition activities take up more than half of the schedule.

## 1.1 Childhood: A crucial period of life

It would be inconceivable to write a book on routine and transition activities in early childhood programs without first broaching the topic of childhood. This book does so in simple terms, without focusing on the main early childhood development theories discussed at length in many texts.

Through the centuries, following the evolution of societies, the concepts of *children* and *childhood* have changed often. Children have sometimes been seen as incomplete beings without intelligence or as cheap labor, and at other times they have been thought of as kings and queens, mysterious beings, or the promise of a better future. Regardless of historical period, children have always been treated differently from adults (Papalia, Olds, and Feldman 1998).

Only recently has scientific inquiry shed light on the nature of childhood and its obvious repercussions on the whole life of the individual. As of the beginning of the twenty-first century, childhood is considered to be a time not only to grow physically but also to learn and to prepare for the future. The creation of youth protection laws, the UNESCO adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (November 20, 1989), the establishment of community services supporting families, and the development of educational child care programs and play materials adapted to children bear witness to the intrinsic value of childhood. Even if the cause of children's rights remains an unfinished mission, its goal can be pursued, anchored in a solid foundation of research and values.

It is ideal for children to live their childhoods in confidence, surrounded by responsible, conscientious, and benevolent adults. Subconsciously, every child longs to be considered a person worthy of respect, with his own story and personality. Our knowledge of children's needs and an increased awareness of the importance of early childhood education are considerable influences on the educational methods that contribute to children's development. Early childhood educators will continually learn about children through professional resources, exchanges, and training, as well as through their regular and systematic observations of children.

All children have a need for security, hugs, stimulation, encouragement, and guidance. No matter what their origin, children should have the right to laugh, cry, feel vulnerable, get attached, move, explore, be frustrated, affirm themselves, sing, show pride, love life, and count on adults to defend their needs in order to grow in peace. Children are neither small adults nor defenseless beings. They are human beings in their own right, with incredible potential that we need to nurture as much as possible.

The definition of *childhood* is not limited by development standards or statistics. It is first and foremost a dynamic and continuous process that encompasses an inevitable transformation of the person. It is the job of adults to foster this process in the most positive way possible (Legendre 1993, 453).

## 1.2 The importance of early childhood education

With the social and family changes that have occurred in recent years, early childhood education is not limited to the family but encompasses society as represented by child care centers, preschools, and family or home child care. Early childhood education is fast becoming a specialty distinct from the psychology and education domains. More and more it is discussed in newspapers, radio and television reports, public debates, and conferences and on the Internet. Despite this evolution, the term *education* is too often limited to school learning, as if early childhood education in a child care center were a less serious business. Too many people still believe that education outside of a formal school setting consists of keeping children busy until they are old enough to enter school. Although erroneous, this concept of early childhood education remains deeply anchored in people's minds. Hence, it is important to spread knowledge about activities in early childhood settings, because doing so directly affects the well-being of children and influences early learning, which, in turn, forms the basis of later school success.

> *If parents are experts on their children, then the educator is the specialist of early childhood development within the context of group life.*

Even before children enter the "big school" they are capable of reproducing the essential behaviors of daily life that determine, in large part, the autonomy of a person. They learn to walk, talk, eat, and drink alone, get dressed and undressed, go to the bathroom, and perform appropriate hygiene care such as washing hands and brushing teeth. Children also learn to manage some social situations, such as expressing their needs, making choices, solving problems at their own level, and respecting the rules of group life. These skills are, in many cases, learned through the numerous activities offered in early childhood educational programs. Through such active experiences, children have the opportunity to develop in a comprehensive way as they prepare for the next stage of life.

## 1.3 Frame of reference: Democratic pedagogy

With the advent of psychological research and the development of more humane practices during the twentieth century, education theorists and practitioners have come to oppose the traditional, encyclopedic pedagogy that emphasizes knowledge, technical learning, and direct preparation for school learning. Rather, they promote a child-centered pedagogy focused on the whole development of children. Even though this approach was conceived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century, it was some 150 years before the development in Europe of the "New School" movement associated with Freinet, Montessori, and Decroly. In North America, the effects of this more open pedagogy started to be felt only in the 1960s, becoming more prominent in the 1970s.

Child psychology is a relatively new science. Piaget, with his cognitive development theory, has had the most influence on childhood education. Bettelheim, Freud, Erikson, and Vygotsky, as well as pediatricians such as Dolto, Brazelton, Dodson, and Gordon, all influenced, in one way or another, the concepts of child-centered education and active learning, upon which many educational programs today are based. Other proven programs include the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) program from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the Bank Street Model (Developmental Interaction Approach), and the High/Scope program. Several components of the New School are inherent to the *Jouer c'est magique* (Play is magical) program created for child care services by the Quebec government.

The framework proposed here focuses on the true needs of children while fostering their whole development. Because children learn better when

their basic needs are met, we make more room for eating, resting, and hygiene times. In this holistic view, children actively participate in their own evolution and in their own life. This contrasts with both the autocratic approach, in which children are forced to meet the expectations of authority figures, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the free pedagogy approach, which leaves children alone to face choices they are not always able to make and to carry through.

*The pedagogical approach of this text uses routine and transition activities to prepare children for life, to stimulate them to learn, and to guide them in developing their capacities and their talents, while respecting their unique styles and their own rhythms. We call this* democratic pedagogy.

Faced with the multiple names used to describe a pedagogy centered on children realizing their potential, this text uses the term *democratic approach*. The reason for favoring this model for planning and organizing routine and transition activities is that it is an excellent method to respond to the needs of today's children—children who will have to build the world of tomorrow. See Box 1.1.

BOX 1.1 **Characteristics of the democratic approach**

- Primacy is given to the whole development of the child.
- Adults respect the physical, psychological, social, and cultural particularities of children, and their true needs.
- The value of play in the process of learning is inestimable.
- Children's active participation in both the big and the small daily tasks is important.
- Partnership with families is a necessity.

In the context of the *democratic approach*, learning is a synergistic process in which one aspect of development—physical and psychomotor, social and affective, or cognitive—stimulates another. For example, a child might get interested in a new food, such as mangos, by observing an educator eating some and listening to a story about the fruit. In this way, language, imagination, understanding, sensory perceptions, affective relationships, and nutritional needs act in synergy to present a new experience for the child.

Play is the natural way children understand the world around them. Routine and transition activities give them many occasions to learn while playing: to play at putting on clothes in the right order with the help of an action song; to play at returning the toys to their "home"; to play at moving without making noise, like a little mouse. It is through play that children learn basic abilities.

Each child is a distinct human being worthy of a thorough and detailed study, without categorizing her according to age, origin, or gender. When we consider a child as a unique being, we respect her individuality and culture while encouraging her to adapt to group life. We encourage her to make choices and foster her self-esteem. We help her to express her needs and we help her try to meet them according to her capabilities. This approach requires a knowledge of child development as well as systematic observation of the child, because children and the world around them are constantly changing.

Despite the importance given to children in the context of democratic pedagogy, parents and early childhood educators also assume a crucial role in promoting children's potential, acting as guides, supports, and mediators. Parental cooperation is essential to the success of this pedagogical approach. Educational settings must develop a means to foster partnerships with families. In relation to routine and transition activities in educational settings, the democratic approach is a set of conscious dynamic actions inspired by the constant probing and reflection of educators. Through appropriate educational choices, educators allow children to learn according to their developmental stage, rhythm, and reality.

## 1.4 Routine and transition activities in early childhood education programs

Life in an early childhood program is packed with activities that promote the development of the

whole child. Several of these activities are repeated day after day and provide a frame of reference for the day's organization. These are *routine and transition activities*. Despite the large amount of time that is spent daily on these activities, they are not always valued at the same level as teacher-initiated curriculum activities, group time, and even free play. Regardless, the educator has to organize and lead several basic life tasks such as snacks, hand and mouth hygiene, nap preparation, and dressing.

Despite being repetitious, routine and transition activities are not trivial. On the contrary, there is much to do and learn during these moments. Early childhood programs offer children many opportunities to develop a wide range of skills necessary to their development: autonomy, verbal expression, self-knowledge, self-esteem, group living, and so forth. In many ways, routine and transition activities are as essential and important as more-recognized educational activities such as language stimulation, logic games, art, hand-eye coordination, and gross-motor games and activities.

Well-informed early childhood educators know how to use routines and transitions to promote the well-being of children in their care and how to teach those children awareness of their own basic needs: eating to care for one's body, resting to reenergize, wearing a hat for sun protection, and so forth. While maintaining physical and emotional safety and even the health of children, these educators maximize the value of routine and transition activities by generating a warm, comfortable atmosphere in which children master basic life skills at their own pace. Such educators are skilled professionals. They are not simply babysitters minding children. Such basic care of children is not just a mechanical function requiring limited knowledge and abilities. It is the main purpose of the day, requiring specific knowledge and skills.

Infants and preschool children may spend up to 55 hours a week in an early childhood program, or 2,640 hours annually, for a total of more than 13,200 hours through the preschool years. During this time, children learn basic skills they will use throughout their lives—skills necessary to half of the daily life of adults (eating, sleeping, walking, getting dressed, communicating, and so forth). "The key is to think through each part of the routine from a developmental perspective" (Brickman and Taylor 1991, 43).

On top of the official "program" of activities (sensory activities, motor activities, thematic activities, language stimulation, educational outings, free play, outdoor play), basic activities and routines benefit children's development. Likely more than 50 percent of the time in early childhood educational settings is dedicated to routine and transition activities (80 percent with children 0–2 years), about 1,320 hours or more per year. This means that during their preschool years (0–5 years), a child in a child care setting spends 6,600 hours performing routine and transition activities outside of the home. These numbers speak for themselves: they reveal the important role played by these moments in the life of a child and the necessity to devote attention to these routines and transitions.

For the educator, routine and transition activities constitute a special opportunity for personal contact with each and every child. Upon children's arrival or departure or during nap or snack time, an educator devotes attention to the children as she communicates with them through words and smiles. (However, at these times, children may oppose the adult because of fatigue or difficulty in changing activities.) Transitions also provide the opportunity to practice language skills and encourage children to communicate with their peers. There is a lot of time for chatting during snacks, dressing, or undressing. These activities also provide opportunities to solve conflicts or to develop greater physical autonomy.

## A. WHAT IS A ROUTINE ACTIVITY?

A *routine activity* within an educational setting is a predictable basic activity that has to be performed daily. Such activities are generally scheduled at a fixed time and form the core of the day. A large number of routine activities are aimed at meeting basic needs such as eating, drinking, eliminating, resting, breathing calmly, maintaining good hygiene, keeping warm, and so forth. The younger the child, the longer these routine tasks take, and the more frequently they occur. These tasks also require greater attention from an adult. The best-known routine activities with young children include:

- Hygiene: hand washing, toothbrushing, toilet routines, and nose wiping
- Snacks and meals

- Nap or relaxation time
- Dressing and undressing

Beyond meeting physiological needs, routine activities contribute to the emotional well-being of children. They help children acquire time awareness by making them anticipate what will come next. They foster a feeling of security essential to trust building.

### B. WHAT IS A TRANSITION ACTIVITY?

*Transition activities* are usually simple and brief. They are meant to connect two longer activities. They serve to regulate and punctuate the day. These moments announce a change, either of activities, of area, of play partners, or of educators. They include:

- Tidying and cleaning up
- Gathering in a group
- Group movement
- Arrivals and departures
- Unavoidable waiting periods

A good transition makes a connection between activities. Transitions respect the rhythm of children as much as possible and encourage children's participation and autonomy according to their stage of development. They are easy to set up and require little or no materials.

Transitions require particular attention from educators to organize the sequence of activities in a harmonious way. Careful planning of the sequence of activities and creative use of the time between activities limit the tensions and upheavals within a group of children.

## 1.5 Summary of the democratic approach applied to routine and transition activities

Learning specific behaviors such as eating neatly, buttoning up a coat, putting toys away, moving around calmly, or waiting patiently in the entryway depends upon the quality of the interventions made by the educator. Safety, access to educators, reassuring guidance, self-control, and adequate organization are essential for children to get through routines and transitions in the most positive way possible. These times often try the patience and the creativity of early childhood educators. Just think of getting children dressed in winter in cold climates, when children have to be coaxed into putting on snowsuits, mittens, boots, and hats, all in a limited time to avoid traffic jams in the entryway and children getting impatient. How many times do educators repeat the same instructions? "Hurry up—the others are ready to go out." "Hurry up—I already asked you three times to get dressed." How many stressful events can take place when helping two-year-olds get dressed? One cries and asks the educator to take her into her arms, another has a runny nose, and two dash out of the entryway. These transitions are demanding and stressful for both educators and children.

The following set of educational strategies—human environment, physical environment, time management, children's needs, and educational values—helps to ensure harmonious routine and transition activities while respecting the needs of each child. (See Figure 1.1 at the end of this chapter.)

### A. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT STRATEGIES

- Ensure the stability of the educators.
- Foster continuity between home and the child care setting to minimize adaptation difficulties. Initiate a partnership between the family and the educational staff to foster continuity between both environments.
- Create situations where children can act on their own as much as possible. For instance, teach children how to wash their hands effectively at the sink instead of wiping the