

RECREATION TIPS

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Recreation is an integral part of child and youth care work. Prior to being placed in a group care facility, the children we work with have often had to struggle through life without a sufficient amount of play and relaxation. We try to fill this void by carefully planning and incorporating appropriate activities into a cottage or unit program. Our intent is to help the children have fun, learn new skills, socialize and enrich their daily living experience.

In my experience I have found that recreation periods are more likely to meet the above goals if I follow a few basic tips or procedures. This brief article is a summary of thirteen of these tips which apply to most activities, including: arts and crafts, athletics, table games, music, and free play. Although my experience has been primarily with multihandicapped children, I believe these tips apply to working with most other children as well.

Plan Activities According to Treatment Plans

First and foremost in any discussion of recreation and play is the child's treatment plan. Activities must always be chosen that meet needs as identified by either the treatment team or some other designated person responsible for diagnosing the child's developmental capabilities. While it is impossible to go into developmental dynamics here, it is important to stress that activities must be selected and implemented according to some predetermined assessment of the child's strengths and weaknesses. Concomitantly, the best group activities are those which address as many of the individual and collective needs of group members as pos-

sible. Without this as a foundation, activities become merely exercises in passing time.

Have Alternatives Available

It is always a good idea to have alternatives available in case the original activity must be cancelled. Nothing is more upsetting to a group of children than to have to miss an activity and then deal with a confused or unimaginative worker. Also, part of this process is knowing that there are plenty of materials available for a change in plans.

Be Aware of Your Ability to Maintain Control

In choosing an activity it is wise for the worker to be aware of his or her ability to maintain control or order during the activity. If you are uncertain, then it usually works out better if you choose something you feel more comfortable with. There will always be time to try more stimulating or loosely structured activities once you have more experience and confidence.

Choose and Reserve the Proper Space

Space is often a problem in group care. Activities can fail before they get started if the space is unavailable or inappropriate for the desired interactions. Therefore, it is always a good idea to examine and reserve space ahead of time. Is the room large enough? Is adequate staff support nearby? What are the safety considerations? Is running water available? Can I observe the entire group at once? Is there easy access?

These are just a few of the questions the worker may want to ask about the space.

Know Your Project

The more familiar you are with the game or project, the easier it will be for you to teach it to the children. It is better to discover surprises before the activity starts. Practicing in your spare time is a good way to reduce the probabilities for something unexpected to happen. The surprises can never be totally eliminated, but they can be kept to a minimum.

Use a Step-by-Step Approach

Most activities, whether simple or complex, work better if the leader uses a specific step-by-step approach. Whether you are going over the instructions for a game of kickball or explaining how to make a ceramic cup, most children can only absorb small manageable bits of information at one time. Therefore, in preparing for an activity, think about how you can break it down into a series of progressive steps with plenty of explanation and assistance along the way.

Be Flexible

If another approach comes to mind in the middle of an activity, it may be good to follow your instincts and change directions. A well planned and thought out activity allows room for change. We can all learn as we go.

Take Time to Discuss the Child's Feelings

A child may or may not share your feelings about the activity. Therefore, whenever possible, it is helpful to "check things out." Don't be afraid to ask the child specific questions such as "Does the squishiness of this

clay bother you?"; "Do you like the smell of the paint?"; "Are ten push-ups too many?" Then, if the child has negative or uncertain feelings, be prepared to offer further encouragement.

Pay Attention to Noise Levels and Lighting

Blasting radios, loud shouts from a group in the next room, dead silence, and bright or soft lights can drastically influence the mood and success of an activity. Insensitivity to these environmental factors often leads to unwanted contagion or apathy. On the other hand, if noise levels and lighting are planned, they can have a profound effect on the outcome. For example, if you are working with a loud group of children, dim the lights and note if the noise level rises or falls.

Don't Forget the Kickball

If the proper materials are not available, the activity will surely fail. Is the kickball in the office storage area? Are there enough crayons and paper? Are all the pieces in the Monopoly game? These are simple questions which are all too often overlooked until after the activity starts, and then it's usually too late.

Leave Time to Start and Clean Up

Every activity has a beginning and an ending. At the start, shoes may have to be changed, doors opened, materials and/or tables and chairs set up. At the end, the room may have to be cleaned, clothes changed again, lights turned out, and/or supplies carried back to the storage area. Hence, leave time in your plans to accomplish these tasks.

Foreshadow and Close

Children are often anxious about an upcoming activity, particularly a new one. Some of this can be reduced by foreshadowing, talking about the activity in advance. This will also make the transition from one activity to the next more successful. Activities also need a close. Taking a few minutes at the end to summarize and evaluate the activity together as a group can be extremely beneficial.

Evaluate

After the activity is finished, or at the end of the day, take a few minutes to evaluate the activity. Were your goals accomplished? If something went wrong, why? What might be changed next time? What should be expanded upon next time? These are basic questions that will help improve your overall activity planning. Then, share your successes and failures with your colleagues.

Summary:

These are just a few of the tips that I have found to be useful in my practice. There are many others; however, if workers can master some of these basics, activities can indeed become an integral part of the treatment process.