

Using Documentation to Build Relationships at Options, a Child Care Program for Young Parents

BY HEATHER KAY AND WENDY READY

Options Child and Family Centre is a daycare for infants and toddlers whose moms, aged 15 to 19 years, attend an onsite alternative education program. Building relationships with the children, their young parents, and our colleagues is the foundation of our program. It is a complex process that occurs on many levels, but we believe good relationships always begin with attachment and that documentation helps to build these important relationships.

Documentation of Staff Relations

At Options, there are 12 infants and toddlers and four early childhood educators who each work closely with three children and their families. There is also a coordinator who oversees the program. We work as a team to provide a caring and responsive environment for the children and to support families in their parenting. One of our earliest forms of documentation was a staff book that we passed back and forth to each other with our thoughts on attachment. Here is one of the excerpts from staff member Heather Kay:

"When we look at the attachment that happens between children and caregivers and moms and caregivers, the attachment between the staff is at the cornerstone of all of this. We flow together; we model caregiving and do the 'dance' that Wendy likes to speak of in the most beauti-

ful way. I've watched the little eye movements between staff that alerts them to a change, the gentle words they have for each other, the delicate way they balance their relationships with their primary group and those of their teammates, the sharing of food, recipes, songs, family stories... I could go on and on. These are the elements that the relationships with the children are based on. Secure in their work together, feeling valued and respected by each other, gives the caregivers the energy and emotional security that is needed to really attach to the babies. We know that attachment can be very deep and joyful but it can also bring on sadness, anxiety, and fear. In our work together and through our connectedness we are able to share these burdens and challenges with each other. That's what

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makes us strong and able to put in the love and energy needed to work with our moms and babies. This forms the basis for attachment at Options."

Heather Kay, May 1992

Documentation as a Visual Account of Activities

When our program began in 1989, we wanted the moms to have a visual account of their child's time in daycare. The caregivers took



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pictures of the children and created scrapbooks and videotapes of their activities.

We have now moved into a new era of digital cameras and computers. This, of course, has added tremendously to our documenting potential and we have been creating many more displays of the children's activities for everyone to see. We have also designed the scrapbooks with more thought to the documentation process by displaying photos with written observations or anecdotal stories about individual children and activities pertinent to the program.

The children gravitate to these scrapbooks and love reliving their experiences through stories and photos. The many fingerprints on our laptop screen reveal the love the children have of seeing slideshows of themselves on the computer. We also create DVDs, books, and posters about activities and outings the children have participated in. These documents open the door for the extension of interests and concepts learned but mostly they provide recognition that the children and their activities are important.

Documentation to Capture Magic Moments

Over the years there have been subtle changes in what we photograph. We want photographs, not

just of the families and staff to hang on our wall, but of the magic moments that convey the spirit of what is going on immediately in front of us and perhaps of what is going on beneath the surface. We want to paint a richer portrait of the lives of children and families.

Some ECE programs follow certain methodologies of documenting, but we usually find documentation is most effective when it is inspired by a sense of wonder we have about a child's style or interests and used as a tool for our learning. Often, children request the documentation themselves. As the children become familiar with the process of documenting, they ask if a picture can be taken of their art creation, block structure, or the caterpillar they are holding. They usually want to see the photo right away from the digital camera and are excited by the response it offers.

Subject matter for photos may be as simple as recording an infant's attempt to reach that bright yellow

ball inches from their grasp. Usually that attempt becomes anything but a simple activity when it is observed, recorded, and broken down into all the skills needed to achieve the goal of reaching the ball. Documentation then becomes a tool for reflecting on and reaffirming the children's many capabilities.

The photo below captures a solitary moment of a child drumming a steady beat from his very being. We respect the importance and the need for him to express his cultural heritage. His passion sparked his caregiver's interest and she began joining his family in their weekly drumming circle. This connection opened the doors for us to receive a tape of their band's traditional songs. The child would point to the tape deck when he wanted his music to be played. This photo reminds us of the importance of each child's cultural practices, their style of expression, and the connections made between family, daycare, and his greater community—a picture says a thousand words indeed!



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Documentation to Preserve Memories

When children leave our program they take their scrapbooks and personal videotapes with them. The documents can be shared with their new centres to provide a connection to the next stage in the child's life. The documents also help to preserve wonderful memories and have proven to be invaluable over the years. We have had families return to our centre years later still talking about these treasured

keepsakes. We've received letters of thanks from grandparents and been told by families how the record of their time in our program has given them lasting strength and support. The documents remind them that we were there for them then and, on some level, continue to be still.

Last year we reunited with some of our first babies who are now 19 years old. These reunions reminded us how important and genuine the relationship between young children, their families, and their caregivers can be. The teens told us about watching their "daycare videos" before coming to visit and how this brought back many memories. There were many different personalities, but we all slipped into a comfort zone quickly — the "old friends" feeling. The bonds of care and close relationships created so many years earlier were not only felt in the heart but also kept alive in the mind, in part, by the documentation created by the daycare.



As caregivers we may carry a set of skills and knowledge about young children and families. The children lead us in that dance. Our role is to extend our hands and offer to join them on the journey, showing the steps we know, understanding the ones they offer, and enjoying the beauty that unfolds.

The ways of presenting media are endless. Documentation in its various forms is priceless and well worth the effort. It is one of the many tangible ways we at Options Child and Family Centre work with families to build authentic meaningful relationships for everyone.

Heather Kay and Wendy Ready have been involved with Options Child and Family Centre in Victoria since its inception and both love the challenge of the ever-changing dynamics of their centre and the field of early childhood education.



At an Options reunion last year, two of the first babies (who are now 19) sit with their moms. (Moms are in the centre.)