

Effectively Supervising Young Children

Properly supervising children is vital to assuring safety in childcare centers and other settings where children gather. For early childhood programs, effectively supervising toddlers and preschoolers can be especially challenging.

The challenges of supervising children include the following: ineffective room arrangement; parents distracting you with long conversations; failing to conduct head counts; and ineffective supervision during activities, mealtimes, or daily routines. By consistently following supervision guidelines, you will be on your way to providing a safer place for the children in your care.

Setting the Environment

The setup of your environment contributes to the safety of children in your care and can facilitate proper supervision. Your environment should be arranged to assure a smooth traffic flow.

A smooth traffic flow enables the children more room to move around without bumping into one another. When children are able to move smoothly through the room, they feel less confined, and the chance of a mishap, such as a fall, is reduced.

To facilitate smooth traffic flow, arrange furnishings where you can easily see the children. Be sure that the furniture is not taller than the children and that it is spaced so that three or four children can play in an area.

Arrange furnishings in a manner that allows for multiple exits from each play area or learning center. Stabilize equipment or furniture so it will not be knocked over by the children.

Watch Children

Continual visual supervision assures that you actually see what is happening while the children are in your care. In some cases, you may prevent an incident that leads to injury.

When sitting or standing, position yourself where you can easily see each child. Frequently change your position by moving around the room and interacting with all of the children.

Be sure the required staff/child ratio is maintained at all times, both indoors and outdoors. Many programs encourage parents and other adults to volunteer, providing extra hands and eyes. However, remember that you are ultimately responsible for the children in your care.

Talking with Parents

It is important to be available to talk with parents and guardians; however, holding long conversations while supervising children could prevent you from effectively ensuring their safety. Conversations with parents at arrival and pick-up time should be brief.

If a parent wants a detailed conversation with you about their child, you can respond, "I would love to talk with you, but I must get back to the children. Is it possible to schedule a conference when I am not supervising the children?" This approach sends the message that caring for the children is your top priority, and that you also are interested in listening to and talking with them.

Frequent Head Counts

Each day, some children may arrive late or leave early. You should know the number of children in your care at all times. This becomes essential in the event of an emergency.

Frequently count the children in your care to help assure that everyone is accounted for and no one has escaped your supervision. Get into a routine of counting heads throughout the day, such as when children arrive, during morning group time, before and after mealtimes, before and after outdoor play, after toileting or diapering, during naptime, and as children are departing for home. To make this more fun, encourage the children to count aloud with you or sing a special song as you conduct your head count.

Some children have a tendency to wander, and if improperly supervised, they may venture off to explore the bathroom, kitchen, or other area of the home or facility. In all facilities, always keep doors to the kitchen, storage areas, and restrooms closed.

Home-based providers may have fewer doors between rooms than those in childcare centers. In this case, block accessibility to the kitchen area or stairway with a secure safety gate.

So what should you do if a child is missing from your group? Remain calm and immediately begin looking for the child. If you need to leave the room, appoint a responsible adult to supervise the children until you return.

Remember, children should never be unsupervised. Be prepared for the situation by thinking through possible scenarios and how you would respond.

Do you have enough staff to watch the children while you look? If you are a solo provider, how will you supervise the other children while you look? Will you take them with you? Is an emergency contact close by and accessible to step in if needed?

Do not hesitate to ask for help, including calling emergency help, if necessary. Emergency personnel would much rather respond to an unnecessary call, than to face the possibility of a lost or injured child.

Supervision during Meals

Mealtime provides opportunity for the caregiver and children to socialize while enjoying a healthy meal. To assure that children are safe at the meal table and are properly supervised, it is vital for the caregiver to sit at the table with the children.

When you are at the table with the children you will be able to quickly detect if a child is choking or prevent choking. You also can quickly redirect inappropriate behavior. Here are a few more mealtime supervision tips:

- Have paper towels available on the table, in the event of a spill.
- Keep wipes nearby to clean the children's faces and hands after mealtime.
- Have clean-up buckets or other garbage items readily available.
- Discuss health and safety rules ahead of time and remind children during meals as needed.

Frequently Scan the Room

Effective scanning involves moving around, making eye contact with each child, and getting involved in children's activities. Frequent scanning not only helps prevent problems, but also will help you notice if a child is aimlessly wandering or not actively involved.

Eye contact is very important in preventing inappropriate behavior, such as climbing on a bookshelf or throwing a toy. Young children often look at the adult just before they participate in inappropriate behavior.

Older children who know the expected behavior may avoid inappropriate actions if they know that you are looking. However, younger children may engage in inappropriate play even when you are looking.

When parents leave their children with you, they expect their children to be safe. Providing effective supervision is essential to high quality care. Improving the way you supervise children will assure a safer environment for them and will make your job easier.

Shiketa Morgan
Childcare Center Owner and Director, Florissant, MO

Internet Resources

Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care, 2nd Edition, nrc.uchsc.edu

Healthy Kids, www.healthykids.us/chapters/supervision_pf.htm

Resources

- **National Resource Center for Health and Safety in Child Care and Early Education**,UCD-CON
Campus Mail Stop F541, Education 2 North, 13120 E. 19th Ave., PO Box 6511, Aurora, CO
80045;800-598-KIDS (5437); nrc.uchsc.edu