
Taking a thoughtful approach to scheduling

by Theresa M. Sull

If quality is the goal for early childhood programs, the daily schedule is a critical element. You can find sample schedules appropriate to different age groups in resource books, college textbooks, and online.

But appropriate scheduling—scheduling that meets the needs of individual children as well as children in groups—requires a thoughtful approach that recognizes the limitations of the environment, equipment, and materials. In building a great schedule, consider these issues:

- routine activities versus schedule flexibility,
- individual versus group activity, and
- choice versus compliance.

Start with a recipe

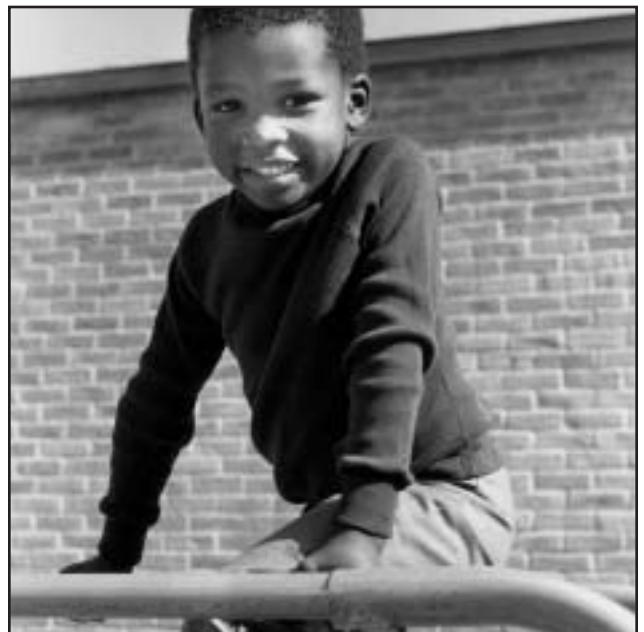
A daily schedule is like a recipe for optimal child development. All the ingredients—children, parents, other caregivers, directors, teachers, volunteers, cooks, maintenance workers, physical space, and materials—can combine to create a product of high quality. But adults, using their knowledge and experience, can adjust the recipe for the sake of the main ingredient: the child.

Evaluate the daily schedule to determine whether all domains of development are included weekly (see the domain chart on page 5). Ask: Are daily schedules posted so all family members and staff can follow the same recipe? Are both small- and gross-motor activities listed? Does the schedule adequately address language and cognitive development?

Let's extend the metaphor. Exactly how does a daily schedule resemble a recipe?

First, you *assemble all the ingredients*, including the right materials and the best people for planned play and learning activities. These ingredients need to be readily available when you plan to use them. If you plan for the children to finger paint, for example, you place smocks near the art table.

Second, you *follow the steps of the recipe in order*. Have you ever tried to bake bread before it rises? A schedule reminds us, for example, to wash our hands before we eat and to eat before we nap.



Third, based on individual needs, you are *flexible* with the amounts and types of ingredients in the recipe. Just as salt can be more or less acceptable to different tastes and for different health needs, different topics and activities can match different children's interests.

Finally, you *enjoy your creation* with family members, friends, and even strangers! You can share children's daily accomplishments in newsletters, art shows, and open houses, just as you would share a favorite dish.

Routine activities versus schedule flexibility

A daily schedule is a recipe for a routine, and a routine is important because children thrive on predictability. Predictability can mean security to children.

Even adults like to know what to expect wherever they are. Grown-ups usually want events at a restaurant, the bank, the doctor's office, and the grocery store to follow a *schema*, or a typical pattern or way of doing things. For instance, the hostess seats us before the waitress gives us menus, and our drinks arrive before the food that we have ordered. Psychologist Jean Piaget pointed out that young children rely on schemata even more than adults.

Children are generally more comfortable when they can follow a regular schedule. A schedule helps lessen behavioral problems by helping children know what comes next. Secure children are less likely to lash out, get involved in inappropriate activities, or show their frustration when free play ends and the block construction is incomplete.

Predictability builds cognitive skills that allow children to recognize patterns (red-black, red-black in a checkerboard, for example) and understand cause-and-effect relationships (turn faucet, water comes out). Most importantly, the security that grows from predictability builds children's self-confidence to take the future risks necessary for lifelong learning.

Eventually, predictability leads to *automaticity*, the ability to perform some tasks without thinking about them consciously. Just as you no longer need to tell yourself to turn the key in the ignition and press down on the brake before you start the car, children will begin to flush the toilet, wash their hands, stand quietly in a line to leave the classroom, and write their names on their papers automatically. Because health and safety routines are so important, we stress these routines until they become automatic.

Definitions

Schedule: A written program of activities and routines; a timeline to guide daily, weekly, or seasonal events. Children's daily snacks and outdoor time, a weekly neighborhood nature walk, and a spring field trip to a farm are planned in advance and included on the schedule.

Activities: Teacher-initiated and child-selected actions that make up the schedule. Dramatic pretend play, block building, painting at the easel, and planting bulbs in the fall are all learning activities for children.

Routines: Regular activities performed in a similar way each time they occur. Routines such as hand washing upon entering the center, before meals, and after toileting are necessary to protect children's health and safety.

Individual versus group activity

Within your schedule, however, allow for flexibility. Flexibility is sometimes necessary to meet individual children's needs that may not match the needs of the group. For example, Anna may need snack earlier in the day if she didn't have breakfast that morning. Or Reid, a child with a vision impairment, may need additional time to complete a puzzle.

Your flexibility can also support group needs under certain circumstances. For instance, you adjust to a series of rainy days by planning specific activities for physical play in the gym.

Build schedules to meet the developmental needs and ages of the group. Schedules for school-age children differ from schedules for infants or preschoolers. Naptime is longer for toddlers than 4-year-olds, for example. But snack time might be similar for these two age groups because toddlers need small and frequent meals and 4-year-olds burn up lots of energy in play.

Build in regular opportunities for free-choice play, allowing for individual as well as small- and large-group activity. If children need guidance in selecting an activity, make a job chart posting a child's name next to a specific activity like setting the table with placemats and napkins for lunch. Other meaningful tasks include watering the plants, feeding the fish, checking the outdoor temperature, recording attendance, replacing building blocks on shelves, gathering

Sample flexible schedule for 4-year-olds

Time	Typical schedule	Flexible schedule
7:30	Children begin to arrive. Materials are set in three "quiet" centers for children to choose.	Children arrive and are invited to go to any learning center.
8:30	All children are present and have been greeted. Teacher gathers children in a circle to take attendance, review the calendar, and assign jobs for the day. Teacher opens all centers for free play.	Teacher greets and visits with children as they arrive. Children check their names on the attendance chart and enter play.
9:30	Teacher gathers children for large-group music activity. Centers are closed. Teacher dismisses children from the group one by one to wash their hands and sit while waiting for snack.	Teacher gathers children for large-group music activity (10 minutes). Teacher dismisses children to return to play or to wash their hands and prepare a snack for themselves.
10:15	Outdoor free play	Pre-planned activity choices include puzzles, books, sidewalk chalk, and making ice cream.
11:30	Children go indoors to wash their hands and sit while waiting for lunch. After lunch, children scrape their plates and return to the table to wait for others. Teacher calls children one by one to brush their teeth and get on nap mat.	Teacher moves children indoors with a transition activity. Children leave the activity to wash their hands and set their places at the table. After lunch, individual children scrape their plates, move to the bathroom to brush their teeth, and get on the nap mat.
12:15	Teachers rub backs, sing lullabies, and tell children to stay quiet for sleeping.	Teachers soothe children and provide books and puzzles for those who don't sleep.
2:00	Children awaken from nap and read books until all children are awake.	As children awaken, they put away their mats and move to free play.
2:30	Teacher dismisses children from their mats to wash their hands and wait for snack. After eating, children can choose one of three "quiet and neat" areas for play.	As they are ready, children serve themselves snack, clear their eating area, and return to free play.
3:15	Outdoor free play.	Teacher invites children to join a pre-planned ball activity.
4:30	Children go indoors to work on puzzles or practice writing until parents arrive.	Children go indoors for large-group evaluation of the day and planning for tomorrow. Assigned children complete classroom chores. All learning centers are available until parents arrive.
5:30	Last child leaves.	Last child leaves.

library books in a basket, sorting crayons, and testing markers. Rotate the tasks regularly as interests and skills develop.

To meet both individual and group needs, many activities happen simultaneously. Here are some examples of flexible scheduling: You feed two infants sitting in highchairs while two others play on the floor. You provide self-serve snack food for preschoolers who prepare and eat snack anytime. You read to a small group while other children use manipulatives on the rug. You ask a volunteer to supervise an art activity with three children while you make observation notes of children engaged dramatic play.

Consider setting up some centers (like the discovery table or the computer corner) so they are available throughout the day. Invite two children to use them together.

Choice versus compliance

Although you plan a schedule that allows children to choose their own activities for much of the day, some activities are mandatory. For example:

- When the fire bell rings, all children must participate in the fire drill.
- When lunch is served, all children must come to the table with hands washed.
- When the whole class steps outside to enjoy the playground, an adult counts heads to make sure that no child is left alone in the classroom.
- During naptime, all children must be quiet with puzzles or books on their mats so a few tired children can sleep.

Schedules are not the same as road maps. If you turn off the road, you may not reach your destination, and if you take an alternate route, you may not arrive on time. But a daily schedule, like a recipe, leaves room for thoughtful improvisation. Try honey instead of sugar. Use yellow wax beans instead of green pole beans. Try garbanzos instead of kidney beans. The recipe just might work!

About the author

Theresa M. Sull, Ph.D., is an author, trainer, and early childhood educator. During her 25-year career, she has taught young children both with and without special needs, taught college students and teachers, published articles, and coordinated public school, university, and nonprofit programs.

Plan for all developmental domains

Does your weekly schedule address all areas of development?

Sensory perception refers to the information taken in by the senses. Children attach meaning to what they see, hear, smell, taste, and touch.

Gross-motor skills use the large muscles. The most obvious skill is strengthening the trunk, legs, and arms. More subtle skills are enhancing bilateral coordination—that is, on both sides of the body—and the ability to cross the body's midline. Gross-motor skills include developing control in the hands and feet and improving balance and agility. Gross-motor skills help children move about with ease to gain information and learn.

Fine-motor skills use the small muscles of the lips, tongue, eyes, and fingers. Fine-motor strength, dexterity, and coordination will aid in speech and, eventually, in manuscript writing and keyboarding.

Language skills include listening, speaking, singing, and signing. Other skills are articulation, intonation, rhyming, and rhythm for fluency. This domain also encompasses vocabulary and concept development.

Cognition or intellectual skills refer to thinking and reasoning. These skills involve memory, problem solving, learning through imitation, following directions, creativity, patterning, sequencing, and symbolic representation. These skills will be useful later for math and logic as well as for speaking, reading, and writing.

Social skills involve interacting with people. These include respecting other people, taking turns, sharing space, enjoying peer interaction, learning courtesy, cooperating in groups, and identifying with a group.

Emotional skills refer to recognizing and expressing feelings. These include experiencing joy, empathizing with the emotions of others, and tolerating frustration.