

A Note to Parents:



Primary Caregiving

Children each have a primary caregiver who develops a special relationship of mutual trust and respect with them and their parents. The primary caregiver works with other program staff to ensure a positive child care experience for children and their parents.

The primary caregiver system ensures that every child has a special person, and that each parent has a primary contact. How is the primary caregiver special? She becomes an expert on each child, an advocate, and a coordinator of children's and parents' experiences. **Note:** *The primary caregiver-parent relationship is as important as the teacher-child relationship.*

A primary caregiver's relationship with children and parents usually begins during intake. (While children are adjusting to being in care, it is easier for them to get to know one new person than to get to know several.)

What Does Primary Caregiving Mean?

Caregiving is primary in two senses. First, much but not all of the care and nurturing and parent communication is provided by the teacher who is the primary caregiver. Second, teaching is primary because the prime times—those most intimate and personal moments of care and teaching—are the major responsibility of the primary caregiver.

Primary Does Not Mean Exclusive

We don't want children to become totally dependent on the presence of one person in order to have a good day. Primary caregiving is not the same as a small-group structure, and children do not spend the day at their teacher's side, like chicks with a mother hen. Other staff develop a warm relationship with the children and have caring and learning interactions with them while they explore the learning environment.

Primary Caregiver Does Not Mean Exclusive Caregiver

The teacher who is the primary caregiver is not the all-powerful influence over children's and parents' experiences. The primary care system is just one system that promotes quality care and education. A primary caregiver does not determine children's learning experiences. The educational experience of all the children, the caregiving practices and systems, and the other elements of quality care are planned and developed by leadership staff who have the training and experience in program planning. When children are divided into small groups for activities—for example, for walks—there is no assumption that grouping will be on the basis of the primary caregiver. The role of primary caregiver can be played by staff at all teaching levels.

Qualifications of a Good Primary Caregiver

The important qualifications are those that we expect from all our teachers: sensitivity to children and parents, caregiving skills, and understanding of the program's philosophy and practices.

The Responsibilities of Primary Caregivers

- **To Communicate.** A primary caregiver is the essential link in the communication chain between parents and program, and children and program. Primary caregivers ensure that every day, each child's experience is communicated to parents—not just what the teacher personally witnessed but what others observed or enacted. Also, a primary caregiver relays parents' concerns and suggestions to other staff.
- **To Advocate.** A primary caregiver empowers parents and children by translating their individual concerns and needs into action through the efforts of all program staff. The primary caregiver ensures the program wraps around children and their parents, rather than insisting that children and parents fit the program.
- **To Nurture.** A teacher who is the primary caregiver tunes in to each child and develops a special bond while ensuring all needs are met and all caring times are carried out in ways that empower the child and establish a sense of security and basic trust.
- **To Teach.** A primary caregiver is a teacher who cares for children in ways that maximize language experiences and learning potential in all interactions, and who ensures that the learning environment works for all children.
- **To Observe, Monitor, and Evaluate.** A primary caregiver makes sure children's experiences in the program are positive and that parents' concerns are addressed by continually assessing each child's and parent's experience. Observation, discussions with other staff and parents, and analysis of the actual experience of the child and family are regularly made and noted.

Assigning Teachers as Primary Caregivers

Children are assigned to a primary caregiver by the lead teacher based on compatibility with parent's schedules and the need to maintain a roughly equal number of children per teacher. The compatibility of parents and staff may also be considered.

Once assigned, children are not reassigned while they are in the homebase unless staff changes or other pressing reasons make it absolutely necessary. The intent of the system is to promote security through continuity; reassignment results in the opposite.

Teachers Aren't Perfect

Many of us have an image of the ideal teacher. She may look like a grandmother, a sister, or an idealized figure. This image may not include a man, someone who speaks with an accent, or someone who is nineteen or sixty-two years old. But if we look beyond idealized images, we realize that high-quality teachers come in all shapes and sizes, speak different languages, and have the usual assortment of human imperfections. It is our job as a program to help parents and staff recognize and value the qualities in each teacher that led to their presence in the program.