A Powerful Need for Connection

When Families and Infants Begin Group Care

Marjorie Goldsmith and Rachel Theilheimer

After a four-month maternity leave, Bonnie's mother, Martha, is returning to her high-powered job. She has enrolled Bonnie in the Astor Center, which is on the campus where her husband works. Martha is anxious about leaving Bonnie but looks forward to Bonnie's interacting with other infants and toddlers in group care.

Wasif was born with multiple life-threatening allergies. His grandmother has been caring for him. However, she is not always careful about his diet, and this has resulted in intermittent hospitalizations. The family is familiar with the Astor Center because Wasif's older sister attended the program. Wasif's mother is eager to enroll him in a professional early childhood environment now that he is 10 months old.

Luke's mother, Leah, teaches in the preschool room at the Dewey Center and has a long commute to work on public transportation. Now that Leah's maternity leave is over, 6-week-old Luke will be coming on that long ride, too.

Linda's mother, Rosa, has a work schedule that allowed her to be Linda's primary caregiver for the first six months. Now Linda will begin attending the Dewey Center program. Rosa hadn't planned to start Linda in out-of-home care this young, but she doesn't want to pass up a space in a renowned infant and toddler program.

These children and their families participated in *phase-in*—a gradual process during which parents and children come to know the teachers, the other children, and the room—at their infant and toddler programs at Astor and Dewey Centers. Phase-in provides teachers with resources they need to help children with separation (and other events) because it gives parents time to tell the teachers about the ways they support their child at home.

In this article, we show how phase-in enables children, families, and teachers to establish relationships that sup-

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port infants' positive experiences in a program. We discuss four infants' early days of care at the two centers. We also share the families' points of view, relate some teachers' perspectives, and present programmatic factors for infant and toddler programs to consider.

Phase-in

Phase-in can take place at any point in the year, whenever a child and family are ready to enter a program. Often, a number of children enter the program at the start of the school year and participate in phase-in simultaneously. Programs implement phase-in for children of all ages, but here we focus on infants phasing into group care.

Once a family has enrolled their child (but before the child actually attends), phase-in begins. The teacher who will be the child's primary caregiver calls the family to set up either a home visit or an intake interview at the center. By arranging the meeting personally, rather than by email or letter or a call from other center staff, the teacher lays the groundwork for a closer relationship with the child and family. With arrangements made, one or two teachers, including the teacher who will be the child's primary caregiver, meet with the family.

During the home visit, family and teachers learn about each other in ways that go beyond what the director has told the family about the school and what the family has shared about themselves. The family talks about their child and shares their hopes and concerns about what may be the child's first experience away from them. As they listen, the teachers learn about the child and the family. They see the infant's place in the home and in the family's life. Phase-in continues during the child's first week at the program.

On the first day, the teachers orient the family to the space the children use and the places to store their child's belongings. There may be other families there whose children are transitioning at the same time. The parents remain in the infant room with their child, the other children, and the teachers. As the teachers interact with the child, the parents are nearby, eventually pulling back a bit to give the teachers room to begin developing their relationships with the child.

Families begin learning about the rhythms of the classroom, the schedule, the materials, and the language the teachers use with children. Over the course of the day, teachers explain what they do and why, and they ask parents questions about their children and themselves, all in an informal setting. New families and children stay only a short time on that first day—about two hours.

Parents gradually spend less time in the infant room over the course of the next few days, according to their child's adjustment. Because staying in the classroom with their child may not be possible for all working parents, often another family member or someone the child knows can stay with the child instead. As the week progresses, parents start to leave the room on breaks and the amount of time the child spends at the center increases. When parents leave the room, they are on call nearby in case the child needs them. Some centers provide refreshments and a special place where families can be comfortable while their children remain with the other children and the teachers.

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Eventually the child phases into a full day without family members present. At that point, the parents and teachers have started to establish relationships with each other, and the child has begun establishing relationships with the teachers as well.

Inserimento individuale

With 5 million infants and toddlers in out-of-home settings (WestEd 2014), many programs are implementing what Reggio Emilia preschools refer to as *inserimento individuale* (individual introduction)—the best possible way to bring children and families into the community of the center and infant care room (Bove 2001). Programs seek multiple methods, as no single method works for all infants and families. Bove describes *inserimento* as the "initial process of the child's adjustment into the new community" (110). *Inserimento* also refers to the "strategy of beginning relationships and communication among adults and children" (110–11).

Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the early education philosophy of Reggio Emilia, Italy, calls relationships the "primary connecting dimension" (Gandini 2012, 45) that provides the "warm, protective envelope" (45) in a program. Relationships are the "dynamic conjunction" (45) of parents' and teachers' ideas, hopes, and desires as they work toward goals that they cocreate for the infant. Relationships between

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the family and the infant room teachers and program administrators help everyone communicate more clearly about their expectations and the choices they make. As inevitable challenges arise, families and teachers are able to address them together more easily. Relationships can create "harmony on the part of the adults (parents and educators) who have different responsibilities, emotions, feelings, knowledge, and attitudes toward the children" (Galardini & Giovannini 2001, 99). Positive relationships between families and teachers and between families and other families form a base from which children create relationships with caring adults and other infants.

Phase-in is designed to develop a triad of relationships between families, teachers, and infants. During this period—optimally a week when a parent or another important person in the infant's life is available to spend time in the infant room—the teachers learn more about the child and begin building relationships with the child and family.

The infant's experience

After a month in the program, 5-month-old Bonnie shows excitement when she sees her primary caregiver; but it took more than three weeks for that bond to form.

Wasif takes even longer, having been ill and absent periodically during his first months at the center. At 12 months old, he too becomes attached to his primary caregiver, but only after two months.

When Luke is 3 months old, after a month and a half at the program, he smiles when his mom carries him into the infant room.

Infants form attachments, or bonds, with the important people in their lives when they learn to trust a predictable environment that meets their needs (Bergen, Reid, & Torelli 2009). The attachment relationship then becomes a safe place from which a baby can venture out and explore the world (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer 2011). Secure attachments with caregivers enable infants to flourish in group care; however, developing those attachments takes time. Moreover, the initial separation when an infant begins early care can be difficult for some children. The stress children may feel might appear as sadness, withdrawal, or anger.

In addition, a child's age seems to make a difference (Bergen, Reid, & Torelli 2009). At 3 to 4 months or younger, infants are less likely than older children to react to a separation. When a baby has a reliable and warm relationship with a loving family member and has had thoughtful separations from that person, the stage is set for a close relationship with a caregiver and manageable separations when the infant enters early care.

Infants' reactions to separation at the start of out-of-home care take different forms. When Bonnie started coming to the center at 4 months, she stopped sleeping through the night for a few weeks. In addition, she was fussy and unwilling to eat as she transitioned from breastfeeding at home to breast milk from a bottle at the center. The initial separation and the long commute to the center and back so exhausted 6-week-old Luke that when he got home, all he could do was eat and sleep. Luke's mother observed, however, that after three months in the program he had become very lively, continuing to play when she said goodbye, apparently excited about seeing the teachers and the other children. Linda, who was 6 months old when she began in the program, separated easily from her mother in the morning but occasionally cried in the afternoon when her mother picked her up. Sometimes she was so involved in her play that she didn't seem to know her mother had arrived. After one month, on arrival at the center in the morning she reached out to other children with a big smile.

The family's perspective

Martha and Gary, Bonnie's parents, think that the phase-in "might be more for us" than for Bonnie. Gary thinks that if the program had not provided a phase-in time, Martha "would have been doing her own version" because *she* needed time to acclimate.

While infants cannot tell us how they feel about separations when they start care, the adults in their lives can. Parents say that starting their infant in group care is stressful

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(Goldsmith 2005). Worn out from lack of sleep and the effort to get their child to the center and themselves to work, families grapple with the sadness of being away from their child. Parents may feel stressed about the separation, which can affect their workday by making them less productive.

Some parents feel guilty about leaving their child in group care when they return to work. Aware that they are parenting differently than their mothers, who may have stayed home to raise them, parents can feel an added layer of stress. Some of them wish they could be home with their children but cannot afford to do so. To help reduce workplace stress for parents, some programs encourage using the last week of maternity leave for phase-in.

Many families use the phase-in time to develop relationships with their children's teachers. Some parents are relieved to have a professional caregiver they can count on and with whom they can discuss raising their children. Wasif's mother, Saima, used phase-in to develop relationships with people outside of her family—people who are "perfectly aware of Wasif's situation and his needs." Saima wants to share childrearing responsibilities with other adults who can "normalize" Wasif's experience as a baby while understanding his special needs.

While teachers tend to maintain their professional relationships (Casper & Theilheimer 2009, 430), Leah, a preschool teacher at the Dewey Center, seeks friendships with Luke's teachers. She wants to know about his primary caregiver as an individual, outside of her professional role. Phase-in would have been more comfortable for Leah if she had known all the infant teachers before Luke started at the program. But because she works in the preschool room, she does not know them.

Most parents who experience phase-in find that the open communication they establish during that period is important for their developing relationships with the teachers. Families are reassured knowing that they can call the center at any time and can talk to the teachers at the beginning or end of the day. Parents feel part of the center when the staff welcome them to the children's rooms for a visit.

Families may not be sure of what to do and where to be, so guidance from teachers can be helpful.

Some parents may find phase-in confusing once it begins, even if they have heard about it in advance—for example, at an informational meeting for center applicants, at a tour of the center, during a home visit, or when they read the parent handbook or the center's welcome letter. Perhaps the thought of leaving one's baby with strangers is impossible to envision. Families may not be sure of what to do and where to be, so guidance from teachers can be helpful. Indeed, most parents who participate in phase-in are happy to see how teachers interact with them and their children, appreciate getting to know the staff personally, and most of all, love telling teachers about their children.

The teacher's point of view

Cara's mental image of Wasif begins to change during the home visit and changes again when Wasif phases in and starts full-time at the program. Before meeting him, the image she had was influenced by the talk with his mother about his health issues. But when Cara spends time with Wasif and observes him playing, first at home and later in the infant room, she sees beyond those concerns and appreciates him for the vibrant child he is.

Angelina, Bonnie's teacher, has learned to "absorb every inch" of the home visit. She notices photos, how families use their space, and what they have changed to accommodate the baby. She looks for what it means to a family to have a child. When Wasif's teacher, Cara, goes on home visits, she carries a clipboard with questions and records parents' answers. Not everyone is comfortable writing while talking; some, like Angelina, prefer making notes after leaving the home. Whatever the approach, home visits provide useful information and allow the teacher and family to begin establishing a rapport.

Angelina appreciates home visits because when the children and their parents start at the center, they are not strangers. What she calls a *continuous conversation* between family and teacher has already begun. Angelina sometimes finds it challenging to go into other people's homes in a professional capacity. Making the phone calls and visiting homes of people she doesn't know is stressful for her. Yet as the mother of a young child, who experienced phase-in as a parent herself, she believes in its value.

Photo courtesy of the authors

Teachers may find phase-in emotionally complex and physically challenging. During this time, in addition to their regular work with children, teachers are juggling at least one child's evolving schedule as the child adapts to spending more time at the center. They are negotiating when parents will leave the room and where they will be, and they are doing the hard work of getting to know a new baby. The transition to out-of-home care goes more smoothly when teachers meet the babies and families and learn about the infants from the people who know them best. With that knowledge, they can provide high-quality care, help children feel more content, and feel that they are doing a good job.

The elements of the phase-in process increase the number of details with which teachers contend, such as learning a new baby's feeding preferences and sleep schedule, her temperament, her play interests, and her parents' concerns. In addition, the infant room is full of extra adults—family members who are not normally in the room, who are observing the teachers. As the teachers help parents learn about the program and learn from the parents about the children, they negotiate interactions with both family members and children. On top of all this, established relationships teachers have had with many infants and families for months or even years are ending as new ones begin.

Guiding principles for infant centers

During the period of *inserimento,* infants, parents, and teachers embark on new relationships. Centers that are aware of the importance of establishing these relationships design their programs to nurture rewarding and lasting connections. Five principles that guide the Astor and Dewey Centers can help other infant centers as they consider how the youngest children enter their programs. The centers' teachers respect individual differences, communicate effectively, understand attachment and separation, commit to ongoing professional development, and build strong relationships.

Respect individual differences

Centers can demonstrate their respect for individual differences by thoughtfully planning the beginning experience of group care for infants and their families. If they schedule small groups of children during phase-in, teachers get to know each child better. Staggering entry times during the day so new children begin at different times enables teachers to focus on individuals. Parents who are present throughout their child's acclimation to the center can provide teachers with information about the child—for example, the special way that she falls asleep or how she likes to be held or burped when taking a bottle. Often information like this is so deeply imbedded in a family's interactions with their child that no one thinks to explain it until it arises in the course of a day in care.

Communicate effectively

Particularly during the first weeks of a child's care, effective communication begins laying the foundation for a respectful and trusting relationship between parents and teachers. Staff and families exchange information in a variety of ways. Questionnaires help centers gather specific information, and family meetings provide opportunities for the center to share information about the program.

At the Astor Center, monthly breakfasts with families allow parents to get to know one another. Teachers check with families in person and by phone to see what they know and want to know—not just about the program but also about themselves, offering some personal details to help families get to know the people caring for their children. This helps teachers and families maintain communication. An open-door policy and a welcoming atmosphere that invites parents into the room helps families feel comfortable and lets them know they can communicate readily with the teachers.

Understand attachment and separation

Staff members who understand attachment and separation and the vital role they play in an infant's entry into early care use numerous mechanisms to ease the transition for children and their families. By conducting home visits, teachers enable families to meet them as guests on their

home turf. Children can begin to get acquainted with their new caregivers right there at home, with their families available as a safe base.

When staff members plan for a child to come to the program for shorter days at first, they acknowledge the intensity of the new experience for everyone. Gradual entry alleviates some of the stress of separation for both infants and families—for example, parents leave the room only when everyone agrees the child is ready.

Commit to ongoing professional development

The phase-in process itself—in addition to staff development at the center, professional workshops at conferences and other venues, and credit-bearing coursework—serves as a professional development opportunity. Throughout this time of learning about a new infant, teachers are challenged to grow.

Professional development occurs as teachers exchange information after a home visit, document and reflect on observations as a child begins to play with materials, videotape their own interactions with an infant, or review a developmental conference in which the teachers and director talk to a family about their child's development as the child plays in front of them. Extra staffing and a one-way mirror can help teachers step back and see a child in new ways. Even without those luxuries, teachers can grab a few moments to jot down notes that they discuss later with one another. Centers can adjust teachers' schedules during phase-in so that they all spend time with new infants. This enables teachers to exchange information and impressions from the start.

Build strong relationships

Through respect for individual differences, understanding of attachment and separation, open communication, and a staff that is ever developing its professional capacities, relationships can flourish between infants and their caregivers and between parents and the people caring for their children. These relationships are what sustain infants who are away from those who love them most. These connections give families confidence that their children are well cared for and that their relationships with their children are valued. Society benefits, too, from adults who contribute productively through their labor and from a healthy new generation nurtured in early care. Trusting relationships are critical to high-quality early childhood programs for infants, and a thoughtfully designed phase-in process lays the groundwork for them to develop.

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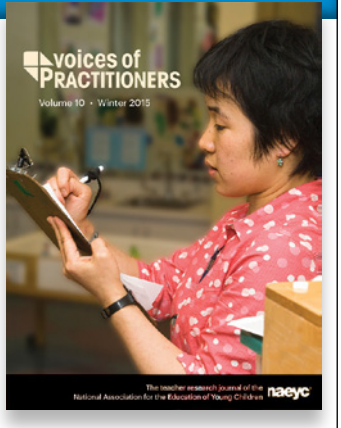

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