

Forced Participation

The purpose of this handout is to provide you with additional information regarding structured group activities and forced participation. If you would like specific information regarding your program's daily schedule and activities, please contact your local Child Care Resource and Referral Center.

What do we know about young children?

- Preschool children enjoy being a part of group activities as they develop social skills from interacting with peers.
- Infants and toddlers often engage in play alongside each other (also known as parallel play) and are only beginning to develop the necessary skills to engage in group activities with others. While they may enjoy participating in group activities, they often work independently within the group and are also eager to play alone.
- All children have varying abilities and attention spans. The length of their attention span while in a group setting often depends on their own interests, their age, and their ability to self-regulate their behavior.
- All children learn best when they can be free to explore and experience their surroundings at their own pace. Caregivers should provide a flexible schedule that provides children with many opportunities to access materials, especially when they show signs of disinterest in group activities.

What does forced participation look like?

When children are required to join an activity, the teacher has an expectation of participation. This may be evidenced by children being physically brought to the activity, requiring children to clean up all other alternate activities and join the group, or not being allowed to leave the group when they lose interest. This may also be seen as children attempt to leave the group and are repeatedly asked to return. Even if learning materials are always open to the children during group time, but verbal or physical barriers prevent children from leaving the group to access these materials, then participation is forced.

When it is NOT forced participation?

It is not forced participation when children are encouraged to join the activity, but there is no expectation that the children must join. For example, the teacher may suggest children come read a story with her. The teacher then begins reading the story and children join and leave as interested. Often times, this positive and accepting environment will get the attention of the children and most will join the group activity because they don't want to miss out on the fun!

What if I have to put my younger toddlers in highchairs? Is that automatically forced participation since they are strapped into the chair?

Highchairs are not always a sign of forced participation, but teachers need to be very responsive to children. For example, the teacher may ask the children, "Who wants to color?" and only those children that are interested are placed in the high chair. This then allows the other children an opportunity to continue playing as they wish. The teacher also watches for cues from the children who begin to show disinterest and is responsive by removing the children from the high chair when they no longer want to color.

When children are strapped into a highchair for an activity AND the teachers are not responsive to the children's needs (example: when children show signs of frustration, wiggling around, throwing the materials onto the floor, etc.), then children are being forced to participate.