

# Burn the rosters and free the teachers

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(peer reviewed)

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*This article discusses  
the issues surrounding  
the use of rosters  
within early childhood  
settings, particularly  
infant and toddler  
environments.  
We highlight the  
importance of  
refocusing on children's  
rhythms and bringing  
teachers' attention  
back to what is most  
important ... the child.*



## Introduction

At Massey Child Care Centre we believe infants and toddlers are powerful, inquisitive, intelligent, competent and capable. Each child is a unique, complex individual with an identity that we value, respect and celebrate. It is because we believe and value these things about children that we constantly question and critically reflect on practices. As part of the ongoing process of professional and programme development, a mismatch between the philosophy and practice was revealed. *Burn the rosters and free the teachers* is about our journey to deepen understanding around attachment, relationships and centre practices. This journey has highlighted to us the complexities of a successful infant and toddler programme and has shown clear links between infants' and toddlers' positive sense of self, their positive relationships with the teachers, and how centre rosters and duties impact on these.

There are a number of different terms used throughout this article including *rosters*, *responsibilities* and *routines*. Rosters originated in the 1700s, created by the military to bring order among troops.

Their purpose was to regulate soldiers and their duties. The Encarta World Thesaurus defines a roster as a list detailing a person's duties and the time in which they are to be carried out. Responsibilities on the other hand are seen as being accountable to someone or something, yet having the authority to make independent decisions. Routines are different again, with the Thesaurus stating routines as being the usual way activities are arranged, a typical pattern of behaviour.

## Background

Massey Child Care Centre is a large community based centre located on the Turitea campus at Massey University, Palmerston North. The Centre operates on a community of practice foundation and consists of four interlinked sections: two sections for over-two year olds and two sections for under-two year olds. The Hoiho section, the focus of this discussion, is licensed for 20 children under two and has a staff team of seven full-time teachers.

Massey Child Care Centre Hoiho Section was selected to be a part of the Centre of Innovation (COI) programme in 2005.

The aim of the COI research initiative is for selected centres to undertake action research, with the help of experienced research associates, to investigate the effects the centre's innovative approaches have on both learning and teaching. The COI programme is funded by the Ministry of Education and lasts for three years.

The focus for Massey Child Care Centre's action research was:

*In what ways does educational leadership, within a community of practice, impact on infants' and toddlers' dispositions to enquire?*

Reciprocal, respectful and responsive relationships underpin the Hoiho section's curriculum and philosophy. Our Attachment Based Learning (ABL) programme supports a key teacher system where it is the teacher's primary focus and responsibility to build and maintain these types of relationships with children and their families. Building relationships takes time and energy; teachers need time and space to be able to sensitively and consistently respond to infants and toddlers.

### **The ABL programme**

The ABL programme was designed and developed around *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996). It evolved and changed shape and direction over the period of seven years before the Centre entered the Centre of Innovation programme, and in the subsequent three years.

Our learning and teaching also focuses on each child in relation to other children, families, teachers and our community. Children's relationships, which are all inter-connected and reciprocal, are activated and supported by teachers who believe relationships are at the core of what we do. We believe that all children are ready and have the potential, curiosity, and interest to construct their own learning through experiences, which include routine times.

The essence of the ABL programme is the promotion of what Claxton and Carr (2004) describe as a 'potentiating, powerful and inviting' learning environment for infants and toddlers – as a supporting framework for them to become disposed to learning. The aim of the programme is to foster relationships in order to establish secure attachments for infants and toddlers.

Research has clearly identified that ongoing strong, caring relationships can provide the context for all aspects of healthy growth, learning and development (Edwards & Raikes, 2002; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004; Rolfe, 2004). This continually confirms the teachers' belief in the importance of attachment theory: of consistent, secure relationships in the children's lives.

Over the years before they became a Centre of Innovation, and subsequently, teachers constantly revisited theory relating to teaching and learning and in particular attachment theory in relation to infants and toddlers in group care. This research has clearly identified that ongoing strong, caring relationships can provide the context for all aspects of healthy growth, learning and development (Edwards & Raikes, 2002; Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2004; Rolfe, 2004). This has continually confirmed the teachers' belief in the importance of consistent, secure relationships in the children's lives.

Massey Child Care Centre operates a key teachersystem where children and families/whānau are allocated to specific teachers. This system supports the development of critical attachment relationships, and facilitates the development of a child's positive sense of self. Key teachers are recognised as the people who have the most knowledge about all individual children and their family/whānau. It is their responsibility to share this knowledge and make decisions regarding the child's learning and development, teaching and learning strategies, and teacher practices in collaboration with the rest of the team.

An important facet of this key teacher system is the buddy pair groupings, where two key teachers work closely together to support their children, families and whānau. This collective responsibility requires each teacher to share knowledge and practice, liaise with families, and take responsibility for the implementation of the programme. Each teacher has the responsibility to enable the programme to run effectively for children, families and staff.

Self-sustaining teams are inherent in the implementation of the community of practice across the centre. Hierarchical leadership structures have been replaced

with a collaborative approach. Self-sustaining teams maximise the skills and talents of all team members, requiring teachers to work cohesively for the best interest of the children, families and each other.

The team manages, and is accountable for, the day-to-day operations of the programme. Teachers instigate reviews on practice and often lead and implement change or improvements. Responsibilities, meal breaks and non-contact times are flexible, negotiated and coordinated by the team. Negotiation of these responsibilities on a daily basis is developed around the needs and requirements of the children and of the programme (Bary, et al, 2008).

### **'Rosters, routines and responsibilities'**

At Massey Child Care Centre, we found rosters to be prescriptive and inhibiting. We believe that the notion of taking responsibility empowers teachers to make independent decisions and actions based on in-depth knowledge of their children. The natural rhythms of the children become the routines that we follow. Rosters were originally to organise thousands of soldiers, hundreds of years ago, and so we asked ourselves ... how do rosters have a place in infant and toddler settings in the 21st century?

It is the view that the teachers hold about their role, and about the infant and toddler, that lays the foundations for practice (Gerber, 2002). This view can either enable or disable individuals and teams to see the value of freeing teachers from roster constraints by 'lighting a match and burning the rosters'.

In the early days of our programme development the teachers did have allocated duties and week long rosters. Rosters were the central focus of teachers' time and attention. If you were on outside 'duty', then that's where you stayed, watching different children come and go. Nappy changing and bedtimes were like factory production lines. The teachers and children, while in the same room together, co-existed but almost orbited one another on their way to their next duty. Bruce (2004) suggests that where rosters exist within early childhood settings teachers spend more time doing household and

domestic duties. It was as though implementing the rosters became the job rather than working with and alongside the infants and toddlers who grew and changed so quickly.

This roster system created an environment where the infants and toddlers were cared for by a multiple random care practice. This is where anyone could do anything with any child at any time. This shared care, where rosters determined teachers' whereabouts at any point of the day, and where the seven staff shared the care of 20 children, albeit done with sensitivity and affection, tended to result in generalised care that was not closely attuned to any one child (Elfer, Goldschmid, & Selleck, 2003).

We realised that this wasn't what we wanted for the children in our care and so the changes started. We began to research, re-think, re-evaluate and re-negotiate. Ultimately the rosters stopped. We changed lenses and started to see children as a group of individuals rather than one group who all needed to be fed, changed, and put to bed when it suited us. Not only were we examining our view of the child but also our views of teachers.

It took courage to take this risk - to look deeper at practices that had been done many times a day, each and every day over and over again. The rosters were literally torn off the walls and the trial and error began. We discovered that there was no quick fix, nor did everyone agree, because this process of change involved a shift in thinking. Rockel and Peal (2008) explain that it can be a challenge to expose yourself to new philosophies and it can feel like your 'safety net' has been taken away. But for us there were too many valid points to completely ignore the notion that rosters were not needed to run our centre if we kept in mind who we are there for ... the children. How could we build the vital relationships necessary between the teachers and the infants and toddlers when we were required to conform to a set of rosters that told us when and where to be? It was the rosters that were shaping children's lives and experiences rather than the teachers. By throwing out the rosters we discovered that we didn't need lists to tell us how to maintain the environment, teach, and be with children.

Rosters, of course, do not stand alone within a centre. They are supported by policy, procedures and the culture that exists in the workplace. However infants and toddlers don't care about any of that. They should be able to trust that the people within their environment can be responsive. Teachers working in infant and toddler settings have a responsibility for ensuring that children in their care develop a sense of basic trust. This means that each child must be of interest to everyone. Unlike older children, infants are unable to put the group's needs before their own (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2007).

Almost anyone can follow a roster; in fact it is easy to follow a roster. They define and direct our movements, but you have to be a sincerely passionate, attached, 'in tune' teacher to hear and see infant and toddler communication. Gerber (2002) states:

Pay full attention. Whenever you care, do it absolutely with full attention. If you pay half attention all the time, that's never full attention. Babies are then always half hungry for attention. But if you pay full attention part of the time, then you go a long way. That's what I would recommend: to be fully with a child and then let them be. (p. 7)

Rosters can restrict your time with children, and interrupt valuable moments in infants' and toddlers' lives. When a teacher's time and presence is scheduled, it makes it hard for you to be with the child and to appreciate each child's individual gift. When a teacher's mind is clouded by thoughts such as "Where to next? What time do I need to do?" or "I have to go on my break now", they lose the ability to truly be with the child - they are only half there.

There is a lot more learning for infants and toddlers throughout routine times than perhaps many teachers realise. Children this age spend a lot of time in routines ... with bottles, feeding, nappy changes and bedtimes. So it is vital that teachers respect, understand, value and optimise this time. Fler & Linke (1999) highlight the fact that caring for infants cannot be set down in schedules and lists. We can allow children to drive their own learning and development within their environment. An expectation of managing infants' and toddlers' needs within a certain time frame

and duty list, that fits with adults and teachers, is unrealistic. Infants and toddlers eat when they are hungry, sleep when they are tired, sit when their bodies are able, and drink bottles at their own pace and need changing when they are wet, not when scheduled to do so by a roster.

So how is it different for children now there are no rosters? Outcomes included children learning that the teachers were there for them.

Jane (nine months) crawls to the kitchen door and cries out to her special teacher Sue who is stacking the dishwasher. Sue calls out to Jane, "I am coming Jane," and moves out of the kitchen and gently picks her up giving her a cuddle and moves to the couch. Jane has been somewhat unsettled due to being on holiday for the last week. As Sue sits with Jane on the couch she notices Jane watching intently another baby have a bottle. Sue asks Jane if she would like her bottle and then asks another teacher to prepare this while she sits on the couch with Jane. (The other teacher prepares Jane's bottle and gives it to Sue who sits quietly feeding her). At no time in this interaction was Sue restrained by having to follow a roster (kitchen duties, etc.); she is able at all times to see to the needs of the child. Jane knows that she can indicate to her teacher her wants and needs and these will always take priority.

The infants and toddlers now have a better sense of self and their sense of security is enhanced through having access to their key teachers when they need them. This was made evident in the results of the Centre of Innovation findings. The research showed that when teachers were working together within agreed frameworks such as the ABL programme, that does not have rosters as a component, the teachers were enabled to support the children's sense of security (Bary, et al., 2008).

As a result of removing the rosters the teachers are free to be truly there for the children. They are present; they recognise, respond, and reciprocate. Responsibilities, meal breaks, and non-contact times are now flexible, negotiated and coordinated by the team. Teachers negotiate these





Discovering together.

responsibilities daily and they are based on the needs and requirements of the infants and toddlers and the programme. This freedom allows for the development of secure and trusting relationships between the teachers, infants and toddlers.

Following the removal of the roster system the teachers feel that they know the infants and toddlers better. They are more able to read and respond to cues, implement routines, and extend learning and development. Teachers get to know each child's quirks or ways they like certain things done; they are able to consistently see and respond how and when the child needs them to. This is what teaching in an infant and toddler centre should be about. Continuity of learning for infants and toddlers is now maintained, as experiences are not interrupted due to roster requirements. Infants' and toddlers' emotional requirements are now placed firmly at the forefront of daily organisation with all teachers being informed and involved in the running of the section.

The commitment of the teachers to promote a sense of security for infants and toddlers as a key factor in their positive development led to the development of flexible routines that encourage teachers to organise breaks and other structural transitions around routines in ways that support children's emotional states, enquiry interests and current activity. The use of the "buddy system" to enhance the key teacher system allows teachers to form more intimate relationships with their group of children and families and whānau. Having this understanding has

intensified the teachers' experiences with the children.

The teachers don't wipe tables because it is written on the wall; they wipe tables because they want the environment in which the infants and toddlers learn and play to be clean, tidy and aesthetically pleasing. They wash their sheets because they understand that there is nothing better than climbing into a clean bed. They go outside to spend time with the groups of children who are playing out there not because a roster said so, but because they are responding to the needs and interests of the infants and toddlers. All these responsibilities are carried out for the children, around the children and not in spite of the children.

Theories, practices, rules and routines develop and change, bend and grow. We are faced with increasing paperwork, policy and politics coupled with the expectation of balancing all these things with the child as our number one focus. Therefore it is important that we as teachers can prioritise, and let the unnecessary go – and in this case for us it was teacher rosters. In essence we believe that rosters pull teachers, children and duties apart, forcing the teachers to focus on one or the other. By not having rosters we feel we have created a harmony between teachers, children and responsibilities. It was a revelation to discover how much more time we had in the day to spend engaged with a child instead of wasting time locked into a roster or watching the clock. Everything is for the child.

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