

'It-Tajra' - University Child Care Facility

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Introduction

It-Tajra (The Kite) University Child Care Facility started operating in April 1996. The day care centre was set up to help parents/guardians of pre-school age children to engage in tertiary studies; provide academic and non-academic staff, particularly women, with the possibility of continuing with their work on campus; provide a centre for research in child development and early childhood education.

Through an open-plan set up, *It-Tajra* provides a high quality early childhood programme within a safe and nurturing environment. The programme is designed to meet the individual developmental needs (social, physical, intellectual, creative, emotional and self-concept) of over thirty children aged 2-4 years. Children are challenged and stimulated through a variety of developmentally appropriate activities organised within a daily routine.

In specific terms, the objectives of *It-Tajra* are:

- The social and emotional (affective) development of the child
- The formation of good health habits
- The physical (gross and fine motor) development of the child
- The development of creative skills
- The stimulation of curiosity and love for learning
- The development of cognitive processes, with particular emphasis on communication skills.

The curriculum is run by a team of four early childhood educators and two child care aides. The Principal oversees the smooth running of the whole operation. *It-Tajra* has one of the best teacher-pupil ratios in Malta - 2-2.5yrs. (ratio: 1-8), 2.6-2.11 (ratio: 1-14 + 1 child care aide), and 3-3.5yrs (ratio: 1-10).

The Curriculum - Catering for Social and Emotional needs

At *It-Tajra* children are given many opportunities to interact with peers and adults. The physical environment of the centre is arranged to provide ample opportunities for dramatic play indoors and outdoors: housekeeping corner; play house and several props and dress-up clothes. The centre also provides for a variety of basic visual art media. Such media often provide the context for interaction and communication based on the integration of sensory experiences.

Emotionally, educators in charge of *It-Tajra* are committed to creating an environment marked by trust, pleasurable involvement and support for autonomy. Children are respected as individual and unique beings and are encouraged to develop independence, to take initiative and to express their emotions in a caring and affectionate environment. The centre also adopts an open-door policy in the area of parental involvement.

Addressing Physical Needs

At *It-Tajra* children are given supervised opportunities to develop their fine and gross motor skills. For fine motor development, the centre is equipped with a large selection of material that ranges from puzzles to beads for stringing to button frames. The large motor equipment aimed at developing large-muscle coordination, is mostly found outdoors.

Some of the physical skills developed through the curriculum include: visual perception, auditory discrimination, tactile-touch, kinesthetics, sensory integration (*e.g.* balance, eye-hand coordination), endurance, flexibility and motor mobility. In addition, movement activities are coordinated with other areas of the curriculum. Through such integration, children's bodies become a medium for expression and communication. Rest periods form an integral part of the physical curriculum. This particular feature of the programme is especially important for children staying at the centre for a period of more than five hours.

Attention to Intellectual and Creative needs

The centre provides opportunities for children to explore, observe, know and understand objects and events within their environment. Various activities (*e.g.* stories and nursery rhymes) are aimed at developing language and listening skills. The range of materials that the centre provides for intellectual and communicative growth is extensive in both quantity and quality. They include a corner for computer-related activities, manipulative materials, games, blocks, puzzles and other materials that allow children to reflect on, act on, and learn from.

The centre is also very well equipped to cater for children's creative needs. Children are provided with ample situations where they may engage in creative expression, problem solving, invention, discovery and experimentation.

The Physical Environment

The centre is provided with an adequate supply of equipment and materials to support the curriculum in all its aspects of development. The open space is designed to support a flexible educational programme. Care is taken to provide space for the movement of traffic, for large-group activities, for large-muscle activities, and for special projects. The environment is also designed to maximise supervision. Aesthetically, the interior is designed to facilitate children's educational experiences. The indoor space is organised into activity centres, with materials related to their purposes. Most of the supplies and equipment are readily accessible. Areas are clearly defined and are designed to be easily supervised and to support independent learning.

The furniture is movable, durable and scaled to the children's size. Various cabinets, shelf units and racks provide for storing supplies, equipment and books. In most cases, particularly where open shelving is available, children can help themselves to materials they need. In addition to providing storage, cabinets and shelves are arranged to screen different areas from one another.

Health, Safety and Hygiene

Hygiene standards maintained are extremely high. In terms of health and safety, materials are initially and thereafter continuously being screened for sharp edges, size, toxicity, condition, sharpness and other hazards. In case of injuries, all educators working at *It-Tajra* are trained to deal with emergency situations.

The Summer School

Between July and September, *It-Tajra* opens its doors to hundreds of children aged 3-8yrs. The summer school runs for eight weeks, five days a week. In general, the programme consists of: sports and games; swimming; art and craft, Edward de Bono's thinking skills and Philosophy for Children; I.T., drama and dance and excursions.

Future Projections

Work is already underway to enhance the outdoor area so as to provide spaces for gardening and for water and sand play. New policies, curricula and assessment procedures are on top of the centre's agenda. These new developments will be complemented by a programme of continuous professional development.

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