

Questions and Answers about the Fort Hill Calendar

Revised January 2008

Why is Fort Hill closed more days than most other full-year early childhood programs?

Fort Hill offers separate academic-year (40 weeks, August – May) and summer (10 weeks, June – August) programs. In determining the annual calendars, we attempt to balance the needs and interests of the children, teachers, parents and College. The calendar is affected by budgetary considerations and the professional needs of early childhood educators, and is designed to support the mission of the program, which is to:

- provide exemplary early education and care for children infancy through preschool
- provide a laboratory for research and fieldwork for college students and faculty
- support the child care needs of Smith College employees

Fort Hill follows the Smith College administrative calendar. The program is closed for the following additional days:

- once a month for a professional day during the academic year (8.25 days) and during the summer (2 days)
- two weeks in August (one week for vacation after the end of the summer program and one week for professional activities before the academic-year begins)
- one week for spring break in March
- the program closes at noon at the end of the academic-year and at the end of the summer program.

Why does Fort Hill follow the Smith administrative calendar?

The teachers and administrative staff at Fort Hill are benefited employees of the college and are classified as either “administrative” or “administrative support” staff members. They are entitled to the holidays and benefit package accorded to those employee groups.

The college closes for approximately 13 holidays during the year (Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, Memorial Day, Fourth of July, Labor Day, Thanksgiving (2.5 days) and Winter Break (7 days).

The time-off benefits of the Fort Hill staff include sick time, family sick time, family medical leave, maternity leave, personal days, vacation time, and time off for jury duty, bereavement and a variety of other leaves. More information is available at www.smith.edu/hr/benefits_leaves.php.

How does the program provide substitutes for time-off for teachers?

The total amount of benefited leave available to the thirty employees at Fort Hill is considerable and the program maintains staffing ratios when teachers are out of the classroom.

There are two rotating assistants who cover for planned time-off. Each of the rotating assistants maintains a “book” with a calendar of the entire year. When a teacher requests time-off, s/he records her time in the book to reserve the substitute. Because we have two rotating assistants, only two people can plan time off for the same period. There is a line item in the budget to fund outside substitutes when teachers are sick and the rotating assistants are “booked.”

Regular rotating assistants, rather than independent substitutes, substitute for planned time-off because:

- young children are often uncomfortable with unfamiliar people and receive better care when they are with familiar adults.
- when regular staff members substitute, all teachers in the classroom meet the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (formerly OCCS) qualifications are trained, and can be left alone with children.
- regular staff members are familiar with the routines of the classroom and the children and the classroom can operate smoothly, making it more comfortable for teachers to be out and for parents to leave their children.
- independent substitutes are less committed to the program and frequently cancel if their plans change, making long-term planning difficult.
- many independent substitutes are doing the work because they are either in transition or working around other commitments. It is difficult to find substitutes who will work until 5:00 p.m. and during the summer.
- the Fort Hill program prioritizes full-time admission and many of the children are away from their primary caregivers for forty-five hours each week. We provide consistent staffing to best support children who have multiple caregivers in their lives.

Are there drawbacks to the rotating substitute model?

It is more expensive to fund rotating assistants than to contract with outside substitutes because the hourly rate is higher and the impact on the benefit line item on the budget is greater for outside substitutes.

There is sometimes less flexibility for teachers - there are thirty employees at the CECE and only two can plan time-off for the same period. Teachers may request time-off and find that a rotating assistant is not available to cover the time and they must find an alternate time to take their planned time-off. The teachers report that this is only problematic during public school/Gill Hall vacation weeks (February and April). The teachers and administration are planning how best to address the issue during those weeks.

Would the teachers prefer outside substitutes so they can plan vacation whenever they want?

There are benefits and drawbacks to both systems. The flexibility of contracting with independent subs is offset by the impact of unfamiliar people on the classroom, the availability and reliability of independent subs and the time involved in coordinating substitutes. The rotating assistant model has worked well at Fort Hill.

If there are rotating substitutes, why does the program need to close for March and August vacations?

The closings allow for building maintenance. For example, there are certain pest extermination procedures that can be performed only when children will not be in the building for an extended period of time. The custodian needs a minimum of a week to perform annual cleaning.

The program relies on student staffing and the times that students are not available result in reduced staffing ratios. March is one of the times that students are not on campus.

The program closes in August, December and March, allowing a break every few months. This structure is similar to that of other educational institutions, although unlike teachers at other levels, many early childhood educators teach all summer. These breaks provide an opportunity to affect the social dynamics of the classroom and for teachers to have respite. Teaching young children is similar to teaching at other levels and there is a qualitative difference in respite when a teacher is absent and the classroom operates with a substitute and when the classroom is closed.

The closings cover two weeks of employees' leave benefits and allow for substantial cost savings. There are approximately twenty-five employees entitled to leave, for a total of fifty weeks. The two rotating subs just cover the time needed for the days exclusive of these two weeks. Two additional rotating assistants would be needed to provide adequate time-off options.

If the college is busy in August, why not move the closing to between sessions, or to July? Why have two weeks in a row?

The preschool program financially supports the CECE and the program competes with other community programs to enroll preschoolers. Approximately fifty percent of the Fort Hill families are not affiliated with Smith and we currently open more than a week before Sunnyside, Nonotuck, Montessori, Gill Hall and most public schools. If we were to open earlier, we would close earlier in May (in order to keep a forty-week academic-year and a ten-week summer program).

Teachers at all educational levels need time for professional reflection, respite, planning, professional development, and communication. Teachers at all other levels of education have much longer and more frequent breaks. Most of the early childhood educators at Fort Hill work full-year and a two-week break from children and classroom responsibilities allows for some "distance" to allow for reflection and respite.

Why do teachers need professional days?

Early childhood educators need the same supports as educators at other levels. These include time for reflection, opportunities for dialogue and collaboration, and time for professional activities.

In many ways, teachers of young children need more opportunities for dialogue and reflection than other educators because they work in teams, rather than individually; they are unable to have time away from the children because the age of the children necessitates continuity of caregivers; and, because we are open full-day, full-year and work in shifts. The program is open for children

to attend approximately two thousand hours per year. The current professional day schedule allows for approximately five percent of that time to be dedicated to teachers working together without responsibilities to children.

Many early childhood professionals recognize that the popular distinction between “childcare” and “school” is a false dichotomy – children need both high quality care *and* education to develop to their greatest potential. Teachers of young children work as educators, and need the support system for that profession; they also, in the traditional sense, parent the children for nine hours a day, and need adequate support to fulfill that role. Professional days allow teachers to gain perspective on their work, to garner the support inherent in collegial and collaborative work, and to have the opportunity to continue to develop their understanding of child development.

The professional needs of educators, from kindergarten through higher education, are acknowledged in educational systems, private and public, yet are disregarded in some settings for early educators. Recent understandings about the impact of the environment on learning and the development of young children may alter the common perception that teachers of young children have different needs than other educators.

At Fort Hill, we work to balance the needs of the educators, the families and the children and to offer the greatest extent of full-time coverage while also meeting the organizational and professional needs of the program. The professional days are one aspect of the program that allows Fort Hill to recruit and retain high quality teachers (many of our assistant teachers hold master’s degrees) and we recognize these days as an acknowledgement of the professional level of the work. The Fort Hill staff agree that monthly meetings are minimal to accomplish the goals of the program.

Many of the children at Fort Hill are spending most of their waking hours, developing and learning, in an institutional setting. We want to provide the most supportive environment for them and this includes adults who are themselves nurtured and supported and who have the time to reflect, communicate and learn together.

How are the days for professional days selected?

When we develop the calendar, we look at the Smith College calendar, the Gill Hall calendar and a calendar of religious holidays. We begin by selecting days that there are no classes at Smith College. Many of these days correspond with closings at other schools, for example Columbus Day, February and December vacations. These days account for most of days, excepting September, March, and April (the November closing is scheduled for the day that public schools close in recognition of Veteran’s Day).

We plan the April professional day to correspond with the April vacation at elementary schools because many children have older siblings who will be out of school. Public schools close for a week in April and the Campus School close for two of those days. Therefore, in April we close on one of the two days in April that both the Campus School and public schools are closed. Approximately half of the Fort Hill families each year have siblings in elementary school.

We select a quarter-day in March on the Friday before March break because our enrollment is lower on Fridays and typically attendance is low on days before long breaks. This year we have changed the closing from 11:45 to 2:45 to better meet the needs of families.

The September closing is scheduled around religious holidays at a time mid-way between the October professional day and Labor Day. We conduct parent/teacher conversations on the September and January professional days.

What do teachers do on professional days?

Each professional day follows a similar format, with time allocated for:

- teachers to meet as an entire staff, as classroom teams and as “levels” (the infant/toddler and preschool levels discuss issues pertinent to their age group and classrooms). At these meetings, teachers discuss individual children and the classroom dynamics, plan curriculum, prepare and review documentation, plan collaborations with other classrooms and conduct supervision meetings.
- teachers to work together on the classroom environment. We carefully prepare the school environment and consider the classroom environment to be “another teacher.”
- all staff members to engage together in a professional activity. Shared learning is more effective and supports the development of a learning community within the school. Teams are strengthened and collaborations develop. The professional activity may be a whole-school initiative, may be facilitated by a staff member, or may involve outside consultation. The opportunity for extended conversation, where we discuss our work more deeply than we are able to on the busy days with children, provides the foundation for rich curriculum and attentive interactions. We are able to plan a cohesive program, infancy through preschool. The teachers at CECE are required by Massachusetts law to participate in twenty hours of training each year. These days fulfill this requirement. We dedicate our February day to CPR and First Aid training and time in August to training with the Department of Social Services.
- developing a sense of community and team building. We eat and celebrate together, share personal experiences and learn together in order to develop effective teams.

Why do teachers need to meet in September when school just started?

The September professional day is dedicated to parent/teacher conversations and allows all staff members to meet with families. Transitions are an important part of early education and care and this day provides time to support the transition.

Why does the program need to close for teachers to talk? Can't they talk during nap or when the children are there?

We respect and value the time that teachers talk to one another as important as the time they are with children and provide time and space for discussion to strengthen the team approach. Team teaching very young children for forty-five hours a week is in many ways analogous to parenting. Parenting eighteen children with a team of three or four adults requires conversation and respite!

We believe children's naps are important and staff members spend time rubbing backs, and lying with children in order to support them in getting adequate rest and sleep. Because of individual differences, this may mean that staff members are not free during nap time (e.g., one child falls

asleep quickly and wakes at about the same time a child who needed 1:1 attention to sleep falls asleep). Young children attach to caregivers and frequently need specific individuals.

We believe that the conversations are important and deserve dedicated time so teachers are not distracted or rushed.

We believe that children are aware of adults' emotions, and listen and understand language. In order to maintain confidentiality, allow for honest communication and work professionally, we do not engage in conversation when children are present.

What about meeting a half day?

Working with young children is demanding and exhausting, both physically and emotionally. When teachers teach in the morning, they must also complete their "afterschool" responsibilities (discuss the morning, clean up and set up for the next day). By the time they have had a lunch break, there is little time or energy left to accomplish the agenda we set for professional days. If we had a professional morning and children came to school in the afternoon, it would be very hard for children, as they would come to school and go directly to nap. It is very difficult for children to make the transition and settle for nap upon arrival.

Is it possible for half the staff to attend each professional day and keep the school open by staffing classrooms with the remaining staff and students?

The environment is a critical aspect of our approach to early childhood education. Closing the school allows teachers to collaborate and discuss changes to the environment and to work together as a classroom team to create the environment.

It is not possible to hire the number of substitutes necessary to cover half the staff (approximately twelve people). Students are typically available only for short periods of time on any given day because of their class schedules. Additionally, if we were able to find people to cover, it is unlikely that they would meet the Massachusetts requirements for teachers and they would be unfamiliar with the children and the routine, which would mean for a very disruptive day. Very young children depend on consistent caregivers.

The calendar is difficult for parents who work full-time jobs. Do you consider other ways to support families?

Yes, we are continually looking for ways to better serve families and children and to balance the professional needs of early childhood teachers with the needs of parents for coverage.

We are particularly interested in developing models that will support families as they balance their work and family lives and parent their children through the elementary school years. Children continue to need constant adult supervision and interaction into their elementary years and other parenting responsibilities continue into adolescence and beyond. The needs of five- and six-year-olds differ little from those of three- and four-year-olds.

Among the options we are exploring include ways for parents to initiate cooperative programs to share babysitters and ways to offer extended programming during vacations. Each option has

benefits and drawbacks and will involve continued discussion in the future. We welcome your ideas and suggestions.