

# Child Care plus+

## + Taking Charge of Your Own Learning

Quality early care and education is essential for optimal development of young children with and without disabilities. One factor consistently associated with quality is the amount of early childhood education the child care provider or teacher has completed. However, in spite of increasing requirements and incentives for ongoing professional development, there is a persistent gap between what providers/teachers KNOW and LEARN about good early childhood practices and what they actually DO in their programs.

Trainers and instructors have a responsibility to provide meaningful activities in workshops and coursework. It is also expected that it will take focused work on your part for you to consistently USE the knowledge and skills you have acquired. A clear understanding of some of the barriers to learning and change will help you move forward with the implementation process of any new idea. The following is a discussion of five potential barriers and their impact.

Past experiences have a powerful impact on how you relate to children *today*. You have many past experiences that guide your current practices, and you may not always be consciously aware of their influence! You are being influenced—positively and negatively—by what happened to you as a child, at home, child care, public school, and college classrooms. Your experiences as a parent, child care provider, or teacher also have an effect. Continuous reflection on the "fit" between what you believe professionally and what you really do in your program can help you become more aware of, and address, past experiences that are shaping your current behavior.

Your learning style impacts your ability to implement new ideas. Professional development activities tend to rely on reading and "lecture" to transmit ideas. While this is an effective method for a few, many learners need to "see" a new idea in practice or try it out with the opportunity to get feedback in order to really understand the concept. Knowing your own learning style helps you seek learning experiences that match your preferences. When the instructor's teaching style and your learning style match, you are more able to incorporate new ideas into day-to-day practice.

Dispositions have a significant influence on a learner's ability to seek and try out new ideas. (Refer to Child Care plus+ newsletter 11.3 *Knowledge, Skills, AND DISPOSITIONS* for a review of dispositions). Particularly, your willingness to *take risks and make mistakes, seek change and challenge, engage in ongoing reflection and self-evaluation, and seek peer feedback and support* have a significant impact on your willingness to complete the hard work it takes to implement new practices.

Program climate influences your ability to implement new ideas by creating a positive or negative environment for adult learning. If a program director or parent board is extremely critical or if "quiet, smooth" days are valued, you may hesitate to take the risks involved in trying a new strategy. Other climate issues in an early childhood program that can effect change include availability of resources, feedback, and planning time. It is important to advocate for the value of lifelong learning and to request a supportive learning environment.

Support and active involvement in ongoing professional development provides the intensity of the learning experience necessary to facilitate and maintain the use of new and better practices in your program. Identifying a clear goal and seeking many learning opportunities (books, journal articles, courses, workshops, conference sessions, etc.) about a topic over time facilitates deeper understanding and enhances your ability to really change practice. At the same time, active involvement in professional organizations, utilizing peer mentors, and engaging in regular and focused discussion and problem-solving with program staff members support enhanced understanding and ultimately result in permanent change. +

SHW

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+ Try It Out	+ Question
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## + IN FOCUS

Have you ever felt ongoing frustration with a particular child? When this happens, you may find yourself thinking "what is wrong with him?" or "I wish his parents would do more." Many individuals tend to blame the child or his family whenever a child's behavior is frustrating. This is not helpful to positive relationships and may lead to rising frustration and feelings of helplessness.

Reflection and self-evaluation can be particularly meaningful when you apply them to your relationships with children. Instead of simply blaming the child or the family, you can recognize that children are affected by the interconnection of many variables. Some of these you cannot change, such as children's family situations, peers, personality and temperament, and current health condition or disability. Identifying and then accepting these existing characteristics of the situation is critical.

Some variables you can control, however. These include the child's hunger level, need for sleep or to learn social skills, and the availability of materials that are of interest to the child in the environment. You can change your schedule to accommodate sleeping or nutritional needs. And you can modify your program environment. Focusing your energy on these things can have a real and—sometimes immediate—positive impact.

Some of these variables apply to you. Is it a low-energy time of day for YOU? Are YOU tired or hungry? Are YOU coming down with a cold? Do YOU need to learn a new teaching strategy or find out more about the child?

Reflecting on the aspects of the situation you can change, and taking action on these discoveries may result in your having a more positive attitude as well as less frustrating days. + SLM

## + TRY IT OUT

Young children are learners in the realm of self-control in social settings, and some challenging group issues are bound to emerge as children interact with you and with one another in early childhood programs. Even with the best prevention strategies in place, a group waiting to go outside can suddenly become loud and begin pushing one another, or the new brooms added to the housekeeping area can be unexpectedly transformed into guns as dramatic play becomes "war play," or the sounds of children playing instruments in the music area can rise to an ear-splitting level.

How can you use reflection to become an effective observer and quick problem-solver when challenges occur within your group of children? Perhaps the most important point to remember is that behavior in a group setting is related to three interconnected elements:

- the children
- the environment
- yourself and other caregivers

Each of these elements deserves consideration as you reflect on what is happening and look for solutions. If you make the mistake of looking at only one or two of these elements, you will weaken your ability to discover and implement effective solutions. How much easier problem-solving becomes when we are part of the solution.

The insert in this newsletter is designed to help you reflect on these three aspects by asking yourself key questions and offering ideas for solutions. You will find this process most helpful if you first identify a challenging situation and use that experience to form the basis for your reflection and problem-solving. + SHW

■ *Reflection + Experience = Growth* ■

## + CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

When you are facing a challenging situation with a child in your program or have questions about a child's strengths and needs, it is important to involve the family as you reflect on the situation. After you have completed observations of a child, reflected on your own experiences with the child, and examined the environment in the classroom for potential solutions, schedule a meeting with the parents.

Come to the meeting with an open mind and a blank piece of paper ready to solicit their input. It is important to be ready to present your ideas but creating a plan of action should be done together with the parents. Explain what you are seeing in the classroom and then ask parents what they are seeing with their child at home. Try to get them to paint a very thorough picture of what goes on at home in terms of schedules, routines, behaviors, and interactions that might apply to the current issue. Coming together with the family as a team to create a plan for addressing their child's needs is critical to your providing the best possible care and education for their child. + KM

## + PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

You may be uncertain about what engaging in ongoing reflection and self-evaluation really looks like. You may be wondering whether this is something you already do, or wish you knew more about it so you could use this valuable learning tool to meet your personal needs and interests.

### REFLECTION

Reflection is the conscious and intentional review of behavior, ideas, and feelings generated by a learning experience. The purpose of reflection is to increase the experience's usefulness for you. Reflection involves thinking back or mentally reviewing the experience.

As you reflect, you process and learn from your experiences. Regular reflection provides the opportunity for you to contemplate what has occurred, consider what might work better, try out an alternative, assess its effectiveness, and repeat this cycle again and again. Consistently applied, reflection (self-evaluation) is a critical skill that drives continued professional growth and self-directed learning.

Participating in reflection is one method of helping yourself refine what you do. While it is often assumed that reflection takes place automatically, it usually does not. Because reflection is so valuable, it is important for you to understand what it is and how you might engage in it. It is critical for trainers and instructors to promote it! Whether you make a conscious effort to reflect or this effort is facilitated by someone else, the process has three distinct features. The three features which form the foundation for reflection are:

### REVISIT THE EXPERIENCE

Think about a discussion with a parent, an interaction with a child, or a group activity you have just completed. To revisit the experience, ask yourself:

- What happened during the activity?
- What ideas did the experience generate for me?
- What personal reactions did I have?

### IDENTIFY FEELINGS

Identify emotions, both positive and negative, connected with the experience. To identify your feelings, ask yourself:

How did I feel during the experience?

How do I feel about the experience now?

How would I describe the feelings I have about the ideas it generated?

Does this experience match how I see myself as a caregiver/teacher?

### ANALYZE THE EXPERIENCE

Evaluate the usefulness of the experience in relationship to your individual situation. To analyze the experience, ask yourself:

What did I learn?

How does this experience compare with what I have learned in the past?

What part of the experience do I want to repeat?

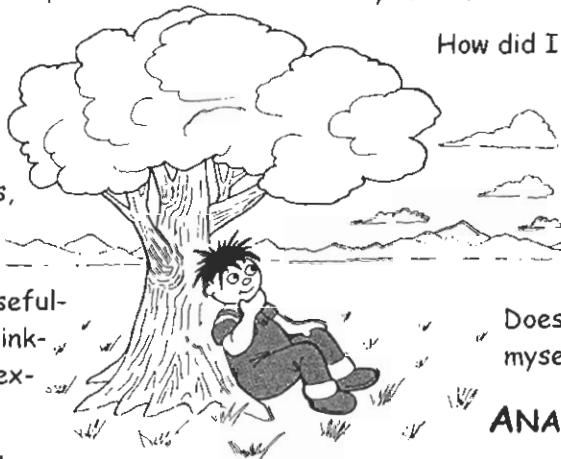
What would I change?

What would I like to try now?

How does this change relate to my philosophy, values, and beliefs?

Reflection is another tool for maintaining ownership of the learning process. Reflection involves the learner in examining new ideas from the perspective of his or her current practice, value systems, and knowledge base. Not only does this practice help you develop a greater sense of self-awareness, it also leads to self-identification of gaps between belief and actual program practices.

The efforts you make to participate in self-evaluation and reflection will serve to increase the likelihood that new ideas will be integrated into your existing practices. This is what lifelong learning is all about. + SHW/SLM



## + QUESTION

**QUESTION:** I applied for a higher rating in our state child care licensing system and just got evaluated. Even though my program "passed," I'm upset about the whole process. Their watching—and writing down everything I did—was really intimidating. When I got the report, I was embarrassed about some of the things I should be doing that I didn't even know about, and angry too because some of the low scores just aren't true. How is this supposed to help me? All this did is make me feel bad!

**ANSWER:** Many states use a tiered child care licensing/registration system to promote and enhance quality—usually based on early childhood rating scale scores or achievement of national accreditation. You are to be commended for participating in this quality enhancement effort and for reflecting on the emotional impact of the feedback you received. Here are a few tips to help you take charge and use evaluation as a learning opportunity.

First, become familiar with the evaluations that are being used in your state. These tools focus on key policies and practices and use a rating scale with clear examples of inadequate through exemplary practices to determine scores. Use these tools to a) learn more about good early childhood practices; b) reflect on and take the lead in enhancing your current program policies and practices; c) understand evaluation criteria so there are "no surprises"; and d) develop a collegial mind set and getting "on the same page" with state licensors and program evaluators.

Second, practice taking charge of the learning part of evaluation. Invite a friend, program director, or colleague to observe periodically to increase your comfort level. Give them specific things to observe—"I am working on having positive contact with each child during arrival time. Will you please watch to see how I do?" Then, practice receiving their feedback by taking notes, asking for clarification and information, and with appreciation—no "yeah, buts." Take time to reflect on the feedback you

receive. How does the feedback fit with your program philosophy? What parts of the feedback do you agree with? If you disagree, is another perspective needed (video tape self-evaluation, another observer, etc.)? What feedback made you feel competent? Defensive? Why? Use the results of your thoughtful examination of the feedback to guide your next steps.

Third, develop a realistic mind set for yourself as well as for upcoming program evaluations. You probably use the words "nobody's perfect"—now use the message behind those words. The outcome of your next visit will not be perfection. Accept this fact and set your sights on learning and growth. With this mind set, you would be disappointed if an evaluation did not help you discover opportunities for learning and growth! + SHW

## + RESOURCE REVIEW

*The Montana Early Care and Education Knowledge Base* (July 1998) describes knowledge, skills, and attributes desirable for early care and education practitioners working with children birth through age eight and their families. The checklist applies to practitioners in a variety of settings and provides a basis for self-assessment and reflection in ten early childhood content areas. To receive a booklet, contact the Montana Early Childhood Project at 1-800-213-6310.

*CHILD CARE plus+* is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

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## Try It Out Insert

You will find this process most helpful if you first identify a challenging situation and use that experience to form the basis for your reflection and problem-solving.

<b>A. THINK ABOUT THE CHILDREN</b>	
<b>ASK YOURSELF</b>	<b>TRY</b>
Is this typical behavior for children in this age group?	Accept the reason for the group's behavior. Restate clear guidelines and move on to the next experience. Plan an activity like a puppet play or story-telling for later in the day to help children learn the appropriate behaviors.
How is the group's physical well-being? Could they be tired or hungry?	Try to meet perceived physical needs right away—perhaps moving up snack time or choosing a calming story to read.
How is the group's emotional well-being? Is it possible that a busy day, a change in routine, or a staffing change has created stress?	Eliminate some planned activities to slow the pace or return to a routine activity to enhance the feeling of familiarity.
Is the temperament or strong need of an individual child guiding the group reaction?	Tune in to the individual child. Make some quick changes like giving the child a job or helping the child get some personal space that will help him or her cope in a group setting.

<b>B. THINK ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT</b>	
<b>ASK YOURSELF</b>	<b>TRY</b>
Is the space for the activity or the group gathering too crowded?	Move the group to another space or move portable shelves/dividers to make the space bigger.
Have you provided enough materials to satisfy the needs of the group?	Quickly gather more play materials or suggest other play areas that support the existing play themes, and allow each child to become engaged in the play.
Has today's schedule been too unstructured, too demanding, or required children to sit for too long?	Watch for signs that children are <i>or</i> are not done playing, listening, or eating lunch, and move to the next activity accordingly.
Do the play materials represent or suggest aggressive themes?	Sometimes, even the most innocent materials can suggest aggressive play themes. Provide meaningful uses for the items to redirect play (like using the brooms to sweep under the sand table). Materials like toy weapons or action figures that represent aggressive play themes should be removed.

(over)

C. THINK ABOUT YOURSELF	
ASK YOURSELF	TRY
Are my (or program) expectations for the children in this group reasonable?	Remind yourself about the "age and stage" of each child in the group and adjust your expectations accordingly. Can this kind of play continue because it is safe and appropriate for these children or do you need to redirect?
How am I feeling? Could a cold or hunger be influencing my reactions? Am I less responsive to the children today than I usually am?	Relax the day's schedule or grab a snack to meet your needs for the moment.
How is my emotional well-being?	Family, home, and "on the job" issues can impact how you respond to children. Try to stay in touch with your emotions, take a deep breath, and get through a challenging day as gracefully as possible. If the issue is a recurring one, seek outside support.
Have I been giving inconsistent messages to children by ignoring this behavior one time and reacting to it the next?	Make a clear decision, communicate your expectations to the children, and stick with it.
Has my attention been distracted by an adult conversation or other activities?	Turn your focus back to the group. Get down to their level, make eye contact, and let them know that you are with them again—save the distracting activities for after group time.

Always address safety needs immediately:

- Use a quick change-up activity like a song or clapping rhythm to calm or redirect the group.
- Step in to prevent injury, if necessary.
- Decide what needs to happen next.

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