

CHILD CARE

plus +

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Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

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Caregiver, Teacher, AND Learner

What does it mean to be a learner in the early childhood profession? Maybe the essence of learning is described in the accompanying quote--understanding and appreciating talents and labeling weaknesses "opportunities for growth!"

The focus on continued learning has grown in recent years with the finding that staff training is the most important indicator of quality in early childhood programs. As professionals, child care providers and other early childhood educators are being encouraged to participate in training. Attending training is good, but you need to know how to **use** the information presented in course work and workshops in order to improve your knowledge and skills for working with young children.

The following list includes skills that embrace lifelong learning and increase your success as a learner.

Learn to accept mistakes

If you do not feel important, competent or valued as a professional, it is easy to fall into the trap of actively trying to avoid mistakes--like using the same room arrangement year after year because it has "worked" in the past. Mistakes are **vital** to learning. If you accept this, you can accept and welcome a mistake as an opportunity for growth.

Be a self-evaluator

Many interactions with children come, not from training, but from past experiences as a child in your own family and in school. For example, it might be easy to believe that children should be treated as individuals, and at the same time repeat

traditions from your own school experiences, like expecting children to wait in line or finish the same art project within the same time frame. You should clearly understand your own beliefs about the care and education of young children, examine your practice of those beliefs, and be open to opportunities for development.

Learn to network

The isolation that many early childhood professionals face is not a friend to learning. Success in learning also depends on reaching beyond your own resources to learn from others. Find other early childhood professionals, parents, or local, state, and national resources with whom to share ideas and visions. Be creative; share videotapes of your program with another provider or set aside a specific time for a monthly brainstorming phone call. Run as fast as you can from the

narrow perspective that develops when learners try to exist in isolation!

Take the lead in being a lifelong learner

It is difficult to take even the most motivational words at a conference and translate them into the reality of your program. Attending a workshop or taking a semester-long class may have little impact on your day-to-day interactions with young children unless you work to make changes happen. Set one or two learning goals for yourself each year. Post a celebratory note in your program that tells others about your goal and ongoing commitment to learning. Be clear about what you need to know about a specific topic and seek out workshops, articles, classes, and books that meet that need. Set time lines and reward yourself with a positive thought-- "I am an incredible learner!", lunch out, or a favorite music tape when you meet your goals. Then move on to the next goal to repeat the cycle of lifelong learning.

Best wishes as you continue your lifelong learning journey. It is a journey that will serve to support your enthusiasm and sense of competence as well as improve the quality of all that you do with and for young children and their families. + shw

Today I will be grateful for my talents. I will strive to live up to my full potential and put those talents to good use. I will have the courage to walk through the door opportunity leaves open.

(Unknown)

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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Ask And You Shall Receive

Learning from colleagues in special education should be an ongoing and extremely valuable part of continuing education for individuals in early childhood settings. Child care providers and other early childhood professionals are not typically trained to know the technical skills that a motor or speech therapist has spent years learning. Yet some of their skills can definitely be useful in meeting the needs of individual children in your program. The trick is to ask the right questions so that you get the information you need.

There are five things you can do:

1. Spend time with the child; watch him or her play. Use your skills and understanding of young children to find out more about the child **before you ask for input.**

2. Ask for and read recent evaluation reports. These reports may provide valuable background information and answer some of your questions. If you do not understand something that has been written in the report, make a list of very specific questions to ask about it.

3. Tell the therapist/special educator about your program; describe specific activities the child participates in. You get more useful information when you relate the question to a particular part of the routine. If you ask about helping a child be more comfortable at the table or making signs for animals from a favorite song, you gain information that can be used immediately to include the child in these regular routines.

4. Share your observations about what the child does in your program. These professionals may never have the opportunity to see the child participate in group activities; the information you provide will help them do their jobs and respond more accurately to your questions.

5. Plan to visit together regularly so you can ask questions as they arise. Find out if there is a convenient way to reach this individual by phone or if a regular meeting can be set up. +

+ MAKING IT WORK

Building A Personal Resource File

One of the most important things you can do for the children and families in your program is to be aware of resources in your community. A "resource file" is an excellent way to keep on top of the services offered, their costs, contact persons, addresses, and phone numbers. There are many good ways to organize this information, and here's one idea that works.

Step one: find a portable file box. These are available in office supply or discount stores for less than \$10. You may even use a cardboard file storage box.

Step two: collect resources. Assemble materials that will help you and the families understand what is available, such as a current brochure, business card, or other materials that describe the program or agency. Some agencies are willing to send you multiple copies of these materials so that you can make them available for families to keep. Use the following ideas to guide you in collecting useful resources:

- Contact agencies you already know and use.
- Look in the telephone book under Community Services for listings of other agencies that serve families and young children.
- Look in the children's files for agencies that are already involved with families in your program.
- Check public service announcements on television, newspaper articles, and brochures in public offices around town.
- Ask colleagues if they know of other resources.
- If an agency maintains a mailing list, have your name added so that you can receive future mailings.

Step three: file the information you gather from all these sources in your portable file box. Then be sure to let families and other staff members know about and use the valuable resource that you have created. +

+ NOTES FROM HOME

Parent and Teacher

I'll be very up front about this--my five-year-old has a "rap sheet." He has been kicked out of four different programs in our small town. By now, I'm sure that every child care program in town has been "warned" about Jess. You know . . . *he's that AD/HD kid!* My husband and I even tried to think of a way that I could quit working in our shop and stay home with Jess, but we both really need to work in the store to make ends meet. We were starting to despair when Jess was enrolled on a "trial basis" at Francisville Discovery Center. They decided on a two-week trial mostly because neither the head teacher nor her assistant had ever worked with a child who has AD/HD. They assured us that the trial was as much for us to decide if we liked Discovery Center as it was for them to get to know Jess and his sometimes puzzling needs.

Two days went by without the dreaded "come-pick-him-up-we-can't-handle-him" phone call. On the third day, the phone rang. My husband whispered to me, "Discovery Center" and rolled his eyes as if to say, "Here we go again . . ." To our surprise, they weren't calling to tell us Jess was too much to take, they were calling to find out if we would be willing to come talk to all of the teachers and teacher's assistants in the center about what AD/HD is and how it affects Jess! Needless to say, we went wholeheartedly and stayed to answer any of the teachers' questions. When I thanked Jess's teacher for inviting us, she smiled and said, "Being a teacher doesn't mean that you stop being a learner!"

Jess has been at Discovery Center for almost a year now. It hasn't always been smooth sailing, but when the rough spots come, the teacher calls us and asks us what we would do, what we have already tried, and what we could do together to make this a workable situation for Jess. That teacher was right. I'm a parent, but I'm also a teacher . . . and a learner. +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Constance Care Child Care Center

In the far northeastern corner of Montana, near the North Dakota border, is the rural community of Plentywood (population 2000). On the south side of Plentywood, near the General Mills elevator, is one of two licensed child care centers in Sheridan County—Constance Care Child Care Center. And at the heart of Constance Care Child Care Center is the owner/director, Connie Nelson.

Connie is active in the community and the child care network. She is on the Northeast Montana Land and Mineral Owner's Association Board and the Mothers' and Children's Health Committee, and presents a yearly infant/toddler training workshop for providers. She surrounds herself with staff members who are also committed to personal and professional development. She not only encourages staff to participate in training—CPR, child development, nutrition, crafts, child abuse prevention, and stress management, she pays training expenses!

Connie jumped at the chance to enroll in the Child Care plus+ Course on Inclusion. She and her toddler teacher, Lureta Nielsen, were thrilled to take the self-study course which allowed assignments and activities to be completed at home on their own time. They made plans to arrive at the Center 30 minutes early each day to go over the materials together. Connie completed learning activities when she was sleepless at 2:30 a.m., while she was bedridden after surgery, and during long waits while her husband was hospitalized.

On the application for enrollment in the course, Connie explained the reasons why she would like to take the course: *I have been in the child care business since October 1989. I am passionately committed to improving child care to all children enrolled at Constance Care. I believe [the course offered by] Child Care + offers a tool to improving our care.*

In spite of harvesting fall crops, foot surgery, blizzards and freezing cold, the birth of a grandson, staff illnesses, her husband's emergency back surgery (in Minot, ND, by the way) and other challenges, Connie completed course work—and more. She called the Child Care plus+ toll-free number and asked to show the inclusion video to other staff members. She requested permission to copy resource materials from the course for teachers at the local elementary school. She called state and national toll-free numbers to get information about young children with disabilities, families, and inclusion; she subscribed to newsletters and bought books. And she used these materials to support her practice of including parent education materials in their monthly statements.

When one of the learning activities was to interview a local therapist, she and Lureta interviewed as many therapists/specialists as they could find. Another learning

activity sent her to the Plentywood library searching for children's books that include children with disabilities. She persuaded the librarian to add more of these books to the children's book collection.

Given the opportunity to choose one learning activity out of a list of possible activities (or make up one of her own), Connie completed the reading and activities expected for all choices or created an activity that applied to her program and interests. She wrote to the self-study facilitator saying that she *"chose to do all because [she] didn't want to miss learning anything in this valuable course."* She also commented that *"even though it has been time-consuming to complete, I have enjoyed the course and am grateful for all I have learned that allows me to improve the quality of care offered to children at Constance Care."*

In journal pages and on worksheets, Connie reflected on the ideas and information she received through participation in the course. She often came up with ways to implement discoveries in the program. As she and Lureta looked at the space for toddlers, they realized that a significant amount of time was spent keeping the toddlers out of an open supply closet and doing what Lureta described as "crowd control." Lureta made a few changes: *I moved the couch and love seat away from their respective walls and arranged them—one by the book and puzzle shelf at an angle to make a barrier for privacy and the other at an angle by the dramatic play area so they can use the area behind. They use that area to build forts and also for puppet shows. I rearranged the closet, putting all nap blankets and pillows up on the top shelves. The bottom shelves and the floor of the closet now house the legos, pegs and peg boards, tupperware puzzles and*



Connie and kids exploring her grain truck.

toys with many pieces. They no longer hide in the closet [they get objects of their choice from the closet shelves and go to the table to do their own activity]. I noticed immediate change for the better. They love the private little nooks. They also separate into areas better so there is less congestion and less open space for big crowds.

Constance Care Center employs six people and provides care and education for 30 - 40 children. Connie's comment about participation in the course indicates her enthusiasm for learning: *What a mind-stretching, challenging, encouraging, informative, multi-topic, time-consuming, beneficial, well-organized, professional course! + sim*

If you would like to learn more, contact:

Constance Care Child Care Center
213 Dodge Street
Plentywood, MT 59254
(406) 765-1434



+ WHAT DO I DO WHEN

QUESTION: *As a program director, I value training for my staff. However, sending them to workshops and classes is expensive for me and time-consuming for them. How can I help my staff make the most of educational opportunities?*

ANSWER: One of the most important steps a program director can take to promote staff training is to set clear goals. As a team, staff members can brainstorm ideas for one program or group goal to pursue during the year, such as understanding the ADA or developing stronger partnerships with families. Staff members can also be encouraged to establish personal learning goals based on their own particular needs. This focus helps individuals feel a sense of purpose in attending training sessions.

It is also important to encourage staff members to be good consumers of training opportunities. Funding sources—like the block grant program—can be identified to offset training costs. Make sure you have training calendars from several sources available so staff members are informed about training opportunities on the local, state, and national level. Once you select an educational opportunity, take time to contact presenters to find out more about the content and presentation format to make sure the session meets the needs of your staff. Contact your local resource and referral agency, community college, or other training agencies to make requests for specific topics that are important to you and your staff.

Ideally, once a training selection is made, you can help staff prepare. Locate books or articles on the selected topic. Ask staff members to review these materials and discuss them at a staff meeting. Model the development of a training notebook and encourage staff to do the same. Include in this notebook:

* space to record comments and questions **before** attending a session, such as *what do I know about this topic already?* and *what do I need to know?*

* space for note-taking. Divide the paper horizontally into columns marked *New Information* and *Action I Can Take*.

* pocket dividers for hand-outs. Be sure to note the name of the presenter and the date received for future reference.

Near the end of a training session, review the initial questions. If they have not been answered, find a way to get the information needed: ask a question during the session, visit

with the speaker afterwards, contact the presenter at a later date (be sure to get a phone number), or ask the presenter to suggest other relevant resources.

Finally, your job as director is to offer a safe environment for staff members to try out new ideas, practice developing skills, and reflect on the outcomes. Allowing individuals to take risks means mistakes will be made. You will want to be available and ready to listen during this time—both to celebrations and frustrations. Make sure you provide encouragement, support, and resources, when needed. You may even need to revise program policies to promote this type of learning environment; and your efforts will be worth it! + shw

(If you have a question about children with disabilities in child care settings, please send your question to CHILD CARE plus+.)

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

A number of individuals have become known for their ability to inspire child care providers and other early childhood professionals who are striving to take advantage of opportunities for personal and professional growth. While they often speak at conferences, many have also written books which are a valuable addition to any early childhood library. Here are the names of a few of the best: Bev Bos, Marian Wright Edelman, Robert Fulghum, Lella Gandini, Magda Gerber, Jim Greenman, Lillian Katz, Loris Malaguzzi, and Rebecca New. +

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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