

Caring for the Well-being of ECE Professionals

by Mary Benson McMullen, Kate I. McCormick, and Melissa S. C. Lee

Anyone who has flown has heard a flight attendant say some version of this caution: *In case it becomes necessary to use oxygen masks and you are traveling with a small child, put on your own mask first, and then put on your child's.* Think about that for a moment. As parents or caregivers, our natural instinct in a crisis is to immediately protect the children we are with. But losing oxygen, even briefly, can impact our physical responses and ability to think clearly. If we cannot function at full capacity, we actually put those in our care at higher risk! We must be at our best to respond fully and appropriately to the needs of those around us.

Readers of *Exchange* know how important early childhood care and education professionals are to young children and their families. In particular, they impact the quality of the environments, relationships, and experiences of young children each and every day, and contribute to the healthy growth, development, and learning that impacts them well into the future (Lally & Mangione, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Tronick, 2007; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, Vandergrift, & NICHD, 2010). Key to the role of the ECE professional is to



respond quickly, reliably, predictably, and appropriately to young children; but can they do this if they are distracted by, for example, physical discomfort, feelings of disrespect, or worries about

keeping their positions? Can they do their best if they are constantly stressed?

Consider again the pre-flight warning that adults should attend to their own



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needs first. As authors, we believe that the well-being of children in child care depends upon your well-being as the professional in the ECE setting. What does well-being mean to you in your setting? We invite you to reflect upon this and other questions throughout the remainder of this article.

What is Professional Well-being?

Well-being for ECE professionals arises from having a sense of feeling well physically and mentally in the child care setting. In other words, you experience well-being when you feel healthy, safe, and emotionally stable, and when you find satisfaction with your activities and relationships at work. We present nine elements that we believe, together, create an overall sense of well-being, and we argue all nine are necessary for you to be at your best in your role as an ECE professional. The elements include: comfort, security, affinity, self-respect, engagement, communication, contribution, efficacy, and agency (McMullen & McCormick, 2016; McMullen, Buzzelli, & Yun, 2015; Seligman, 2012). Just like the

nine-piece puzzle shown in Figure 1, all elements of well-being must be present to experience overall well-being. Thus, if any one piece is missing, well-being is incomplete. Each piece or element is described below and summarized in Figure 1. With each element, we offer a question for reflection about how it impacts you in your child care setting.

Comfort

A sense of contentment results from feeling at ease, physically and emotionally; it occurs when the child care setting is organized, thoughtfully arranged, and visually appealing. There is a certain amount of messiness that comes with playful learning, and to many outsiders, even the most organized early childhood settings can look chaotic! And, certainly, different people have different levels of tolerance for disorder. But, we urge you to be aware of the comfort level of those around you in your daily environment. In addition to avoiding excess clutter in and knowing when it is time to “pick up and put things away,” there are other things that help you feel comfortable.

For instance: windows for natural light; adjustable room temperature; plenty of storage space; comfortable furniture in good repair; and the absence of unpleasant odors. In addition, the visual appeal of the space in general (e.g. wall art, framed photographs, a variety of hard and soft surfaces) supports a sense of contentment.

Do you experience a sense of comfort in your child care setting?

Security

A sense of security results from feeling safe and secure in the child care setting, as well as feeling generally free from worry; it occurs when health and safety regulations are ensured and when stable and predictable employment procedures are in practice. Your personal safety and the safety of others in your setting are necessary to feeling safe and secure. Feeling physically safe comes from, for instance: having locked and monitored entrances to the setting; knowing and practicing safety procedures; and knowing your child care setting is free of

Figure 1 — Nine Elements of Professional Well-being

Sense of...	Results from...	Occurs when...
Comfort	feeling “at ease” physically and emotionally.	space is organized, thoughtfully arranged, and visually appealing.
Security	feeling free from worry.	safety and health are ensured, and employment procedures and practices are stable and predictable.
Affinity	feeling connected to a community or group.	friendly work environments with supportive relationships are fostered.
Self-respect	feeling positive about yourself.	personal values, worth, culture, and beliefs are supported and respected by those around you.
Communication	feeling you understand and are understood.	others actively listen and respond appropriately to you.
Engagement	feeling fulfillment and enjoyment in work.	work activities are intellectually challenging, satisfying.
Contribution	feeling trusted and valued.	difficult and important tasks are assigned to you, that recognize your strengths, capabilities, talents and potential.
Efficacy	feeling confident and in control of your work.	accomplishments are recognized and you take responsibility for actions and outcomes.
Agency	feeling free to make choices.	democratic values are upheld and you are empowered to participate in planning and decision-making.

pests, dangerous chemicals, and pollutants. A sense of security also comes from knowing your job is stable and you are not at risk of losing it without notice or good reason. In addition, knowing when and how often you will be paid, having clearly defined expectations and duties, and being able to take leave when needed, support your sense of security.

Do you experience a sense of security in your child care setting?

Affinity

A sense of affinity results from feeling connected to others and that you belong to your professional community or group; it occurs when a friendly work environment and supportive relationships are fostered in your child care setting. ECE settings are places where families, children, professionals, and colleagues come together to form a community. Feeling connected and supported by others is important to you feeling that, not only do you belong, but that you are a critical member of the community. Respectful, warm relationships with others help build a positive emotional climate that contributes to your sense of affinity in your child care setting.

Do you experience a sense of affinity in your child care setting?

Self-respect

A sense of self-respect results from feeling positive about yourself; it occurs when your values, worth, culture, and beliefs are supported and respected by those around you. It is hard to feel positive about yourself if you are afraid of being judged or dismissed by others in the child care setting. You want to be able to share your ideas freely without feeling overly self-conscious or feeling that your identity — *who you are as a person* — is at risk. How you feel about yourself results largely from how others treat you; if the words and actions of others show they respect

and value you, you feel a strongly positive sense of self-respect.

Do you experience a sense of self-respect in your child care setting?

Engagement

A sense of engagement results from feeling fulfillment and enjoyment in your work; it occurs when you are immersed in intellectually challenging and satisfying work activities. As an ECE professional, you are often given different roles and responsibilities over the course of a day. Being engaged means that you find your work interesting and invigorating, and that in the morning, as you start your day, you find yourself looking forward to, rather than dreading, the tasks that lie ahead. Overall enjoyment in what you do can give you a sense of engagement.

Do you experience a sense of engagement in your child care setting?

Communication

A sense of communication results from feeling that you understand and are understood by others, both verbally and nonverbally; it occurs when you and your communication partners actively listen to one another and respond appropriately. Think about all the ways you use communication every day and its importance in everything you do. From gestures and facial expressions, to conversations and exclamations of joy, the give-and-take of communication connects you to others in your environment. It allows you to exchange ideas freely with colleagues; it connects you to the multiple ways children express themselves; and it helps you partner with families in goal setting and planning. It is through a sense of communication that you understand and feel understood.

Do you experience a sense of communication in your ECCE setting?

Contribution

A sense of contribution results from feeling trusted and valued for what you give of yourself; it occurs when you are having challenging and important tasks to do in your setting — tasks that recognize your strengths, capabilities, talents, and potential. You know how important the work you do is to the lives of young children and families everyday. But keep in mind, the contributions you make are long-lasting and far-reaching — indeed they impact society as a whole. Too often, the contributions of ECE professionals are overlooked and undervalued. Within your own setting, you need to feel trusted and responsible, not only to do your job well, but to take on important tasks. You also need to feel that others outside the profession value what you do to have a sense of contribution.

Do you experience a sense of contribution in your child care setting?

Efficacy

A sense of efficacy results from feeling confident and in control of what happens; it occurs when you feel you do things well and that you are personally responsible for both your successes and shortcomings. It is important for you to feel that you do a “good” job in the tasks you do at work. When you perform well, you build confidence in your abilities. But, it is also important for you to be able to reflect honestly on your role in how things turn out — even when the end result is less than stellar. When good things happen, you may ask yourself questions such as, “Why did that work?” “What did I do to make that work so well?” You also need to take responsibility when you fall short of success, not blaming other people and circumstances around you, but instead asking questions like, “Why didn’t that work; what can I do to make it better next time?” Being a confi-

dent and reflective professional builds a sense of efficacy.

Do you experience a sense of efficacy in your child care setting?

Agency

A sense of agency results from feeling free to make choices and empowered to participate in group planning and decision-making; it occurs when democratic values are upheld in your work setting. Every moment of every day, you are called upon to make decisions, big and small. You need to feel you can act independently without constant oversight and second-guessing by others around you. At the same time, part of being in a democratic setting means it is your responsibility to base your decisions and actions upon what you and others in your community have agreed together is the common vision for what is appropriate in your setting. Thus, you need to feel your beliefs and opinions are respected and you have had input in group decisions to have a sense of agency, and you have a responsibility to act according to what has been decided by the majority of your group's members.

Do you experience a sense of agency in your child care setting?

Concluding Thoughts

Let's return to the nine-piece puzzle image of well-being in Figure 1. The reflection questions were designed to help you think about how each of the nine elements of professional well-being are, or are not, present for you in your role in the ECE setting. Are you missing any pieces? Is your puzzle incomplete? To participate in this research study, please see the adjacent invitation box.

We ask you to think about the lives you touch and are touched by every day, including children and families, colleagues and other professionals,

and members of the community, near and far. Your professional well-being is connected to the well-being of all of these people; to *be well*, you must be supported by others and, in turn, you must support them. Not only are you influenced by the people around you, your well-being is also impacted by the practices and policies in the place where you work.

Fitting all the pieces of your well-being puzzle together is complex, indeed; but remember how important it is for you to be healthy and well in order to ensure health and wellness in the young children with whom you work. The young children in your life are depending on you.

An Invitation

The Early Childhood Professional Well-being Questionnaire (ECPW-Q)

How do early childhood professionals – teachers, caregivers, and administrators – experience well-being in the child care workplace? Is it different based on the type of program you are in? How does it relate to your overall job satisfaction? What does it tell us about who is most likely to leave their positions or the field of early childhood altogether?

Please go to this link:
<https://goo.gl/Z2iCkm>

Complete the survey and help provide answers to these important questions. Look for the results in an upcoming issue of *Exchange*.

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