

# Sustaining High Staff Morale:

## It's an Inside Job

by Ellen Drolette

Caregiver fatigue is prevalent and morale remains low in many early education settings and professionals don't know how to care for themselves in a way that sustains their excitement and energy for the work they do with children and families. When asked in hiring interviews, "What do you do to care for yourself?" the question is met with blank stares, silence, and then attempts at an acceptable answer: "Well, I take long showers when I can"; "I take walks." Most responses retell candidates' daily routines rather than referencing self-care on a higher level.

The pay grade for early educators is low compared with other professions, even within the education field, and this brings with it stress that can carry over into the classroom. And yet we remain

dedicated to our chosen profession, telling people, "We do it because we have a passion for bettering the lives of young children." The number one strategy we can use to lift staff morale in early childhood programs is to communicate that each member of the team is appreciated, respected, and cared about.

### Consider the FISH Philosophy

A colleague recently reminded me of the 'FISH philosophy' as the reason she remains enthusiastic and inspired in her work. Created at Pike Place Fish Market (a market that wanted to become world famous) in Seattle, Washington ([www.pikeplacefish.com](http://www.pikeplacefish.com)), the philosophy is comprised of four simple steps: 1) Play, 2) Make their day, 3) Be there, and 4) Choose your attitude. While it may be hard to see how fishmongers who throw fish around could possibly have anything in common with early educators, their philosophy is based on being connected to your work and clients. You can see videos of their contagious positivity at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxQW5xgX8A8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxQW5xgX8A8).

**Cultivate playfulness.** Playmakers in sports are people who make the plays; they create a plan. This term was not brought to me through sports, but rather through The Life is Good Kids Founda-

tion. As professionals who work with children, we need to be playmakers and have play plans for ourselves. What feeds your soul? For me, it is watching my children play lacrosse; sitting by the lake drinking coffee; dancing; and attending live music performances. We need to make time to do the activities that fill us up and keep us balanced. In the Life is Good training, each of us created a pictorial playful plan. This can be done by creating a collage, drawing a picture, or assembling a collection of images electronically on your computer.

When I created my 'Play Plan,' I wandered along three long tables covered in photos that were of a variety of hobbies, sports, relaxation photos of kayaking, coffee by the lake, children, and so much more. The class was asked to go and find the activities that feed our souls, fill us up, and refuel us. The group I was training with went around the tables and wrote the numbers down on an index card. Some meditative music played as we moved through the photos. The index cards with our names were given back to the leaders. The group was then asked to send the instructors a selfie photo. After our training the play plans were made into pictorial reminders that were sent to us. This is a constant reminder



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of how I need to take care myself. I use mine as the wallpaper on my phone as a reminder of what I need.

**Prioritize relationships.** Never underestimate the power of eye contact or a touch on the arm as you ask, "Hey, how are you doing? Good to see you." Steve Gross, Chief Playmaker at Life is Good Kids Foundation, has created a community through his ability to build relationships and to make people feel special about the work they do. This is who he is; it is not just about the work. He lives the message. He is a role model to directors, leaders, child-life specialists, social workers, early educators and special educators in the field for the value in making connections and building relationships with children and families who have suffered from adverse childhood experiences. His message on the power of optimism that adorns Life is Good t-shirts is one that inspires, ignites, and gives hope when our work seems overwhelming. The point is to never underestimate the power of your positivity and optimism. Check out Steve's speeches:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVWIVziiQIM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVWIVziiQIM) (October 30, 2014) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTVqFDTjc5U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xTVqFDTjc5U) (October 30, 2014). Or check out this one from Bert Jacobs, one of the Life is Good founders: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYGNWIT4eqA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yYGNWIT4eqA) (July 2014).

**Train yourself to be present.** Be present; when you are with a person, be with her fully. If you are a director and a teacher comes to you with a concern, stop and be with her fully, using eye contact and avoiding all distractions including phones, computers, and others in the environment. As our jobs get more complicated with children and families and more technical, it is imperative that as a society we do not lose touch with human contact and the need for acknowledgement from our peers and supervisors. One way that I practice being present at home or in the office while also trying to work is to simply close the laptop and make eye contact with my husband as he tells me a story or I turn off my monitor so that I am not distracted by what is on it. This has helped me to stay focused on the conversation and the person who deserves my attention.

## Attitude Defines Your Journey

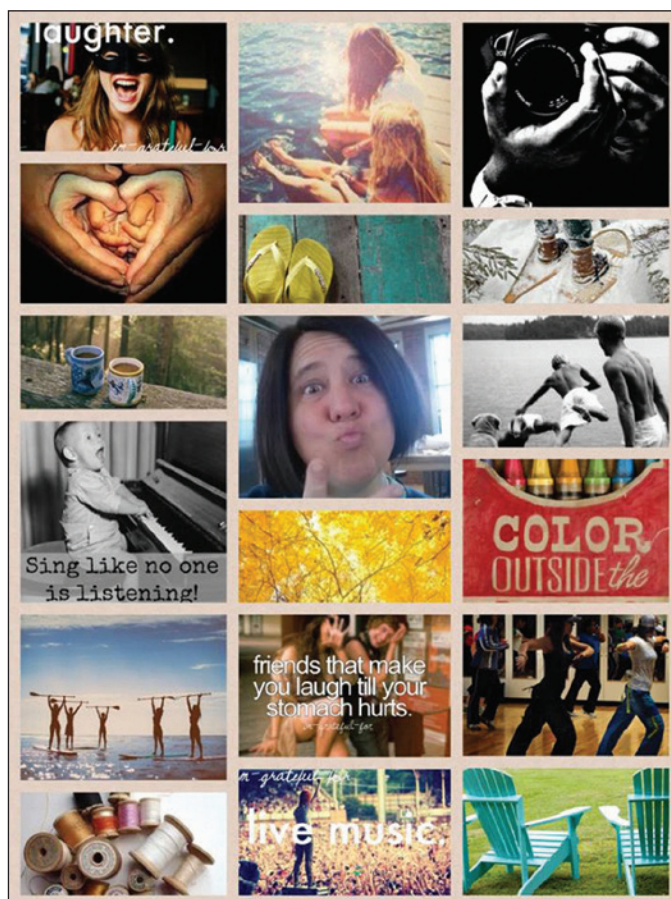
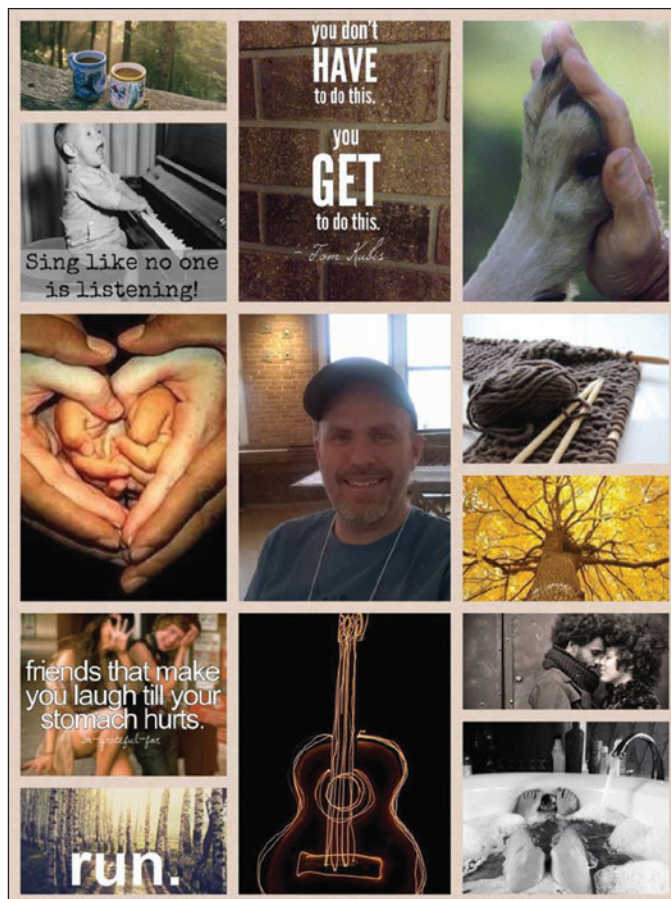
About four years ago a group of people from Life is Good Kids Foundation entered my life and changed my thinking, not just about my work, but about my entire life. Working with them has made me into an optimistic thinker; they have taught me a great deal about happiness, living in the present, and appreciating

Top image:

My friend Aaron's play plan. Aaron is a music teacher at an elementary school in Massachusetts and a fellow playmaker.

Bottom image:

My personal play plan; what I need to keep me grounded.





the blessing that I 'get to' do this type of work each day. In addition to Life is Good being a t-shirt company, they donate a percentage of the proceeds of sales to The Life is Good Kids Foundation.

The Life is Good Kids Foundation partners with leading child care organizations to positively impact the quality of care delivered to the most vulnerable children. I was fortunate to be part of the training offered to individuals by this team at the South Boston-based company and became a playmaker — a person on a team who makes good things happen for the team. Here are a few messages that can create enthusiasm, spark some joy in our work, and (with practice) change the culture of a workplace.

#### **Develop an appreciative attitude.**

Playmaker trainer and amazing human being Emily Saul explained the enormity of the task of taking out the garbage from her apartment. It is down a few flights of stairs and a distance to the dumpster. She resolved to take this task that she disliked and make it into a game. "I *get to* take out the trash," she told herself. She started timing herself (and anyone else who cared to challenge her) when she would take out the trash. She would run down the stairs, to the dumpster, and back up the stairs trying to beat her own record. When guests came over and inquired about the times written on a chalkboard in her kitchen, she told them about the creative competition and asked if they would like to challenge her. She asked each of us in the workshop to describe the daily tasks we disliked and invited us to change "I *have to* empty the dishwasher" to "I *get to* unload my dishwasher."

Changing our 'have tos' to 'get tos,' is a game changer: I *get to* come to work today; I *get to* spend my day with amazing children; I *get to* have a roof over my head. It is about appreciating the things we have.

**Joyfulness is important.** Young children need and deserve joyful connections and ongoing relationships with loving adults. They will not receive it when there is negativity in the workplace or low morale. Children who experience adverse childhood experiences like trauma through neglect and abuse, poverty, illness or natural disaster, or are even just experiencing a blip in their development because of another issue at home deserve to come to a safe, joyful, playful, optimistic place to spend their time. It may be the only time that they have this experience.

#### **Workplace spirit is a team effort.**

Improving staff morale is a group effort that requires a focus on relationships. Cultivating and strengthening relationships from a foundational level and continually building upon those meaningful relationships is an ongoing process. During the hiring process, it is critical to keep in mind that both employee and employer are exploring the program's mission and philosophy for common threads and the best matches.

Keeping staff morale high should not be left to one person. (Of course it is easy to see how one person can bring the morale crashing down in a single moment.) Everyone has a bad day. Everyone has an off day. Each day that a person walks in the door, he has the choice to turn it around. It is tough to work side-by-side with someone who is negative every single day. My mom calls those types of people 'vampires' because they suck your energy. Instead, try to surround yourself with positivity. Post motivating quotes, pleasing photos, and model optimism.

Consider creating a Wellness Committee to explore ways of building teamwork. My work at a child care resource and referral agency has taught me to value staff wellness from a health perspective, and as an important component

of productive teams. In changing our perspective on this, we work better together. Now we have themed potluck staff meetings that have included taco lunches, salad day, and sandwich and yogurt bars. Pitchers of fruit-infused water encourage more water consumption and offering a yoga class at the end of the day has boosted morale.

When teachers revisit the same lessons year after year, they become stagnant and less excited about new ideas. Trying new games, new themes, and new ideas keeps everyone excited about their work. Ask staff to remember what they enjoyed playing as children. Is it something that could be introduced to the children? And what do the children want to learn more about?

#### **The Environment Matters**

Many educators are collectors and I can see how this happens. Many of us see the value of items in thrift stores or a friend's 'trash' for loose parts play. And before you know it our spaces are cluttered with stuff. If we feel this way, children will feel the same. A space for children needs to be pleasing to the eye, organized, and contain the right amount of stimulation. Consider the following questions:

- Has your environment been the same for months or years?
- Does it need a facelift?
- How does it make you feel?
- Does the space where you spend your day make you happy?
- Does your space meet the needs of the children?
- Does it meet the needs of the teachers?

If you feel overwhelmed by clutter and piles, your enthusiasm for your job could be suffering. If the space does not meet your needs or the needs of the children, what changes can be made to

allow this to happen? Consider creating a wish list of desired changes and posting it by the classroom door.

## Find Your Motivation

Networking with peers at conferences, local meetings, and becoming involved in volunteer board work through an association can bring the added spark a person needs. Meeting with like-minded people, sharing challenges and celebrations, and offering support is important! We all need people who understand us in ways others may not. One of my favorite things to do is to connect and reconnect with those I have created relationships with from all over the world who are in early education.

Having a mentor from either within or outside your program is helpful in keeping your goals within sight, being accountable, and having the support of a professional 'cheerleader.' Early on in my career I had a mentor who recognized my leadership potential and coached me to be the best director I could be by keeping me focused on creating a high-quality program. Someone in the field who has vast knowledge of the profession, an open mind, and is a good listener are just a few of the characteristics needed in a mentor.

## Prioritize Professional Development

Professional development should be a regular occurrence for staff. Seize opportunities to meet your individual goals, and also those program goals that address your organization's overall philosophy.

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*"The best morale exists when you never hear the word mentioned. When you hear a lot of talk about it, it's usually lousy."*

Dwight D. Eisenhower

There are numerous children's books that carry great messages for staff and can be integrated into staff meetings and other professional development events as a discussion topic:

### **The Day the Crayons Quit** by Drew Daywalt

This book is great for illustrating team work. All colors are needed; if one is missing, the work cannot get done. At a leadership training I led for the National Association for Family Child Care, we acted the story out. Cheesy, but we laughed and had fun while hammering home a perfect message.

### **Miss Tizzy** by Libba Moore Gray

There are so many pieces I love about this story. I love it because it is a multi-age group of children and emulates family child care. Miss Tizzy spends each day of the week doing something fun with the neighborhood children. She teaches the children valuable lessons through play and when Miss Tizzy becomes too sick to play, the children model each day by doing something for her that she has taught them. This story is powerful in reminding teachers the importance of their work and the ripple effect they create with all of their goodness.

### **Miss Rumphius** by Barbara Cooney

Miss Rumphius is a beautifully illustrated story that reminds readers that our purpose in life goes beyond what we do each day and we are seeking out what IS that important thing we will do to make our world a more beautiful place.

### **Swimmy** by Leo Leonni

Swimmy is a short story that simply illustrates the importance of a team.

### **The Crown on your Head** by Nancy Tillman

This is another beauty. Recognizing individual strengths and celebrating them; we all are different and need each other.

### **Beautiful Oops** by Barney Salzberg

Mistakes happen all the time, milk gets spilled, paint falls on the floor, and we reassure the children it is not a big deal. However, when we make a mistake we beat ourselves up for days. Mistakes are opportunities to learn.

### **The Three Questions** by Jon J. Muth

Simply put: at any given time we need to make choices and when faced with these three questions, the answer may be clear.

Books that focus on positivity and optimism are also wonderful to share and discuss with staff. Two books that I especially like can infuse the feelings you want to see in your program: **Life is Good: The Book** by Bert and John Jacobs and **The Power of Positive Thinking** by Norman Vincent Peale.

## Conclusion:

As a profession, we continue to navigate more and more responsibilities. We deal with more pressures, more deadlines, higher expectations, stagnant wages and generally, really, really hard work. However, we do this hard work because it is a passion we have in making a difference for young children.

They deserve strong foundations built by caring, nurturing, playful adults. It needs to become a priority as leaders, directors, and change makers in the field to understand that burnout, low morale, and fatigue are the leading reason for turnover. We **MUST** take care of our own so that they can continue to do this wonderful work.