

Selecting the Training that's Right for You

by Kaila Weingarten

The plethora of training options available today is both exciting and confusing. You can now learn anything, anytime, anywhere, for any price. No longer do you have to fall asleep at a boring seminar. Now you can play real-life simulations, listen to webinars, or even attend a Twitter party and learn.

In this ever-changing world, training is the way to go. Need to learn about iPads in your classroom? Your agency is requiring additional certification for teachers? Or maybe you're trying to figure out the best literacy tips for an early childhood class. These are all reasons to get additional training. Whether you must meet additional degree requirements through agencies such as Head Start or states trying to professionalize child care, more options than ever are available to teachers seeking certification. State licensing guidelines are changing, and some are providing alternative degrees, such as the Child Development permit system in California. Jim Greenman summed it up well, "Good enough never is." We want to find the best way to care for and educate young children, and that means we must never stop learning.

As a lifelong learner, I am intoxicated by these choices. However, after years of schooling and training, I know I cannot attend every webinar and read every journal and still do my work. There are steps I must take to ensure that I am benefiting from and implementing what I learn. I urge you to ask yourself the same questions I consistently grapple with:

What motivates you to consider training?

- Does your workplace mandate a certain amount of hours of training per year? Many agencies do.
- Do you need continuing education credits for your degree or professional license (i.e., are you a teacher or therapist)?
- Do you attend work-related training on a voluntary basis?

Kaila Weingarten, MSED is an early childhood educator who has learned a lot through training. However, she gained most from implementing what she learned at work and at home, with her three young children.

Esther is an Early Head Start director with five years of experience. Before her current position, she taught for 15 years in infant and toddler classrooms. She has a master's in early childhood education, and is part of the New York State Early Learning network. She needs 15 hours of training per calendar year. In order to augment her professional development, she reads and collaborates with colleagues. She receives certificates from qualifying trainings. Keeping on top of new regulations and techniques is important to Esther. She is enthusiastic about learning and likes to think of herself as a life-long learner.

Esther mentors a new toddler teacher, Sara, who has an associate's degree. She is working towards a bachelor's degree, and only needs 25 additional units. She plans to take at least two credit-bearing courses this year, and is exploring her options.

- Are you a lifelong learner, always ready to avail yourself of the myriad learning opportunities the world has to offer?

Whatever the reason for attending training, you will want to figure out what your options are and how to choose a training that is most beneficial to you. Professional development can help keep you at the vanguard of your profession, if you are committed to learning. So where do you start to optimize your chance for growth?

Know the Terms

Professional development is the advancement of skills or expertise to succeed in a particular profession, especially through continued education. Development is readying yourself for better work opportunities.

Training is the education, instruction, or discipline of a person who is being trained. Training can be a part of your professional development.

Certificates are one way to show proof of training hours. While most professional trainings offer those, you may want

to double check if you specifically need it. Some online events do not give certificates, or give them only if you attend the live event.

Degrees, a set of required credit-bearing courses that culminate in an educational credential, are sometimes required. There are many options of credit-bearing courses for you. Whether you work well online, or prefer a classroom setting, there are ways to fit these courses into your life. Work with a mentor to see if **credit-bearing courses** can lead to a degree. If you do not need the credits, it will probably be less expensive to take a regular non-credit training.

Selecting the Right Training: A Case Study

■ Set your goal

Are you trying to better your understanding of reflective supervision? Do you want to improve staff morale? Pick two goals to concentrate on for a few months. Don't try to learn everything at once. Choose training that best matches your current goals. Make sure your goal is SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely). Attend trainings that fit your goals, as well as your level of education. You do not need to sit through Child Development 101 again.

With the changing faces of her program, Esther would like to learn how to better meet the needs of this culturally diverse population. She writes a goal: I will attend at least one training on educating a culturally diverse program by January 1. I will also read up on this topic using at least two books and two websites.

Esther guides Sara to set a goal for herself. Sara tells her, "I would like to earn at least six credits by January. I need more guidance on early literacy, so I will look for either an online or on-campus course at our local college. Maybe the college has weekend or night courses that will fit my schedule."

■ Set your budget

Of course, money is a factor in pursuing professional development. Although training does cost, it often pays large dividends. How? It can help you advance your career, and in turn you can earn higher wages and become an expert in specific aspects of the field. People worry about the cost of training, but as my mother says, "You will never be sorry for any education that you have." Some considerations about money:

- Consider free workshop and training opportunities if they match your goal and you are ready to commit.
- Ask your employer if the center or program will help pay or let you take courses or participate in training during work hours.
- Confer with your accountant to determine if work-related training is an allowable expense and can be tax deductible.
- Apply for grants and financial aid to help cover expenses.

Since Esther's program has a training budget, she is lucky not to have to worry about cost. She will check out books and resources from her local library, and then see if there are any she wants to purchase for ongoing reference.

Sara asks Esther if she is aware of any funding to help pay for her courses. Esther tells her, "The program will pay up to \$500 per year and you can seek additional funding. Have you tried the Educational Incentive Program (EIP)? It is a scholarship program that helps providers pay for training to build provider knowledge and improve the quality of child care. I know some teachers who have received funding through this. I will connect you to a staff member who has gone through the process."

■ Determine your favorite training format

Thinking back, what was your favorite learning experience? Did you enjoy a large early childhood conference? Or perhaps a new book by your favorite author fires you up. Figure out what led to that enjoyment and helped you benefit from the experience. Was it the group of learners you were with, the speaker's extensive experience, or the opportunities for hands-on learning that made it worthwhile?

What is your preferred format for learning? Are you very visual and tech savvy and do you enjoy online events? Do you love the social aspect of live trainings? Are you self-motivated and able to work well on your own, or do you prefer to learn with a group of your peers?

These are all issues to keep in mind when choosing a training. Although you may want to have an open mind and try new types of training, remember what works for you so you can reap the greatest benefit. If a training or course is not offered in a way you enjoy, you may have a hard time completing it.

Esther is a social person and prefers attending trainings where she can meet people and benefit from networking. She likes to attend the training with some prior knowledge, so she can ask educated questions. Therefore, she'll read up on the topic before going to the live event.

Sara comes to Esther one day after work and says, "I found a great early literacy course at our local college. They offer it online and in person. I'm thinking about it. I don't know if I'll be up to running out one night a week. I am out each day and need my quiet evenings."

"Sounds like the online option may be your pick. Are you okay with the computer?" Esther asks.

"Definitely," says Sara.

Work with your challenges

- Do you have time for this now?
- Will you fall behind without specific deadlines?
- Can you clear your mind to concentrate on training or coursework while you work?
- Do you have the necessary equipment, software programs, and know-how for an online training or course should you choose to enroll in one?
- Do you have the ability and support needed to follow through on your commitment?
- Consider what stops you from meeting your goals. Does the program offer what you need to get past your common challenges?

■ Do your research

Find others who attended the training you're interested in. Check out websites, blogs, and social media sites. I like to Google books and training opportunities before purchasing them or investing my time. Check for legitimate names of organizations and speakers:

Since Esther is also a single mother of two school-aged children, she only attends trainings held in her area during the day.

Esther checks in with Sara. "Did you check out the online course yet?"

"Yes, and you know what I love about it? The assignments are weekly, with no big end-of-the-semester project. I have some trouble scheduling huge homework assignments, so I am happy it's worked out for me. I also love how accessible the instructor is. She holds an online chat once a week, and will answer emails within two days. I really need the guidance and feedback."

- Is this author knowledgeable?
- Is the book still relevant and up to date?
- What background knowledge do I need?
- Does it match my learning goals?
- Is the training organization a reliable source?
- Will the training or coursework be substantive and helpful enough to meet my needs?

Esther sets aside two hours to research training options. She Googles training opportunities, websites, and books that are up-to-date and pique her interest. She also sends an email to some fellow directors to find out if they have attended any trainings recently on this topic.

Sara mentions to Esther, "I am so glad you connected me with Jane about the funding. She told me she's taken this course and gave me some useful pointers. It was great to talk with someone who's been there."

■ Schedule time

Plan in advance the time you're going to invest in the training. Schedule the appointment on your calendar, clear it with your family and friends, and don't change it! You owe it to yourself. No matter how good the training, you need to put in the time and effort to see results. The best training won't help you if you don't make the commitment. If you need an accountability partner, find one. And if the program doesn't mean enough to you to take these steps, don't sign up for it in the first place.

■ Know your options

Here are some of the many training resources available to you. Which have you tried?

■ Massive open online course (MOOC)

A MOOC is a model for delivering learning content online to any person who wants to take a course, with no limit on attendance.

There are three education platforms (Coursera, Udacity, edX) that partner with universities and organizations worldwide to offer free courses online. The basic format for the courses is: watch short video lectures, take interactive quizzes, complete assessments (sometimes peer graded), and connect with fellow learners and instructors in an online forum. Finish your course and receive formal recognition for your accomplishment with an optional Verified Certificate (for which there is a small charge).

A MOOC allows for collaboration with colleagues worldwide. However, there is less of a commitment to finishing the course, because you are not paying. Additionally, expect little or no contact with the teacher because of the large class size. Effectiveness and dropout rates are still being studied.

■ Webinars

Many organizations offer free webinars. These can be a great way to learn about organizations, products, curriculum, and screening tools, as well as professional development on any topic. One advantage is that your participation is convenient; you don't have to travel because the training is offered online. I recently checked out some CLASS webinars and then purchased additional web training. This allowed me to easily determine for myself if the tool would be beneficial to our program. Or, they can offer quick and convenient training in an area you choose. Additionally, if you attend live webinars, you can typically ask questions.

Other sites specifically designed for the early childhood audience:

- The website ecwebinars.com offers webinars geared towards early childhood professionals. They are free, and run for 1.5 hours. You receive a certificate at the end. You can also view recordings and slides on the website.
- Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc>) has webinars, as well as 15-minute inservice suites.

Don't Discount the Library

Some schools are lucky enough to have a large staff library. However, most people can benefit from the ample resources of their local public library.

In my local public library I've used countless professional development resources including:

- books for college, including guides to help me prepare for state teaching exams.
- educational magazines such as *Young Children*, *Educational Digest*, and *Exchange*.
- educational books.
- computers and printers (if you lack these resources at home).
- free training on a variety of topics.
- free online articles database.
- meeting space to hold your own training.

A big fan of her local library, Esther devotes an evening there to choose some books. She also enjoys using the complimentary computers without her children's interruptions. After she attends the training and feels ready, she plans to train her staff on reaching out to culturally diverse children and families. She reserves the meeting room at the library, which can hold her entire staff.

Esther encourages Sara to make use of the resources in the library. "See if they have any books required for your course. If you need to do research, definitely avail yourself of the online databases. And did you know you can find the latest issues of popular early childhood journals there?"

Hearing Esther's enthusiasm, Sara looks forward to checking out how the library can meet her needs.

Training and ongoing education are an integral part of a professional career.

- Establish a goal.
- Research, then commit.
- Learn and do.

All trainings are really collaborations. Just like anything in life, you'll only get out of it what you put into it. I recently saw this great quote: "It's not learning what to do that's so hard, it's doing what you learn!"