

The beauty of the acronym!

“Good management begins with good people”

by Dennis Vicars



Dennis Vicars is presently CEO of Human Services Management Corporation (HSMC) and Executive Director of the Professional Association for Childhood Education

(PACEAPP). Dennis has guided both organizations' growth to where the Professional Association for Childhood Education (PACE) is now the largest early care and education association in California and HSMC has become a significant child care management company. In his career, Dennis Vicars has served as a child care corporate executive, preschool company founder, and advocate on both the public and private side of early childhood education. Dennis has a unique understanding of early childhood education and has experience in every area of the profession. Dennis has been a speaker and workshop host for various organizations including the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Child Care Association (NCCA), PACE, and the World Forum on Early Care and Education. Dennis is presently a featured writer in *Exchange* magazine, which is the most recognized early childhood magazine in the world. Dennis has assisted and been a consultant on numerous early care and education advisory boards including Blue Ribbon Commissions in Maryland, Virginia, Oregon, Washington, and Arizona. Dennis served on California's Master Plan for early childhood education and was recently chosen by Governor Schwarzenegger as his representative on the 13-member Early Learning Quality Improvement System Advisory Committee.

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As many of you know by now, I love acronyms. Not only are acronyms short and catchy, but they help me to quickly hone in on what's important and to set priorities. In a field that seems to bask in process, over-analysis, and repeated discussion, the acronym 'cuts to the chase' and keeps everyone on the same page.

The last Management Maxim column (*Exchange*, March / April 2010) centered around S.C.O.P.E. (Safe, Clean, Organized, Professional, and Educational), which are five quality priorities for any center and are consistent with a parent's priorities. SCOPE helps the entire staff to focus on what's important, regardless of the current crisis. SCOPE can be used as an operational foundation for the center's success, especially if the director uses it as a daily reminder.

Another acronym that is most useful for attaining and, more importantly, retaining enrollment is: CARE (Customer Attention Retains Enrollment). CARE, like most acronyms, was created because of a significant need within our operation. Weekly operations numbers, when viewed in a long-term perspective, tell a story. The story behind the numbers offers you, the leader, a great opportunity to figure out the plot and change the storyline accordingly. In our story, enrollment was coming in the front door and disenrollment, regardless of SCOPE quality, was going out the back door.

Upon examining the numbers, the story became obvious: the children were fine, but the parents were not. Through further research, I came to realize that 50% of disenrollment was taking place in the first 90 days. Additionally, those families who remained after the first 90 days stayed enrolled on average over the next 24 months.

The conclusion was obvious: the parent, especially new parents, need attention as well as reminders that they made a good decision for their child by enrolling in our program. Overcoming the new parent's guilt or the reluctant parent's parting with their child for his or her first early care and education experience can be daunting, but a challenge that can be mitigated through CARE.

CARE, for my operation, is a systematic way to make sure that the director, teacher, and staff are in daily contact with the new parent. The key to starting a CARE program is to make sure you have planned a daily / weekly device for reaching the parent and that your system is simple, easily executed, and performed by a designated person(s) within the organization. Remember, the goal is to reduce parent anxiety within the first 90 days of enrollment so they begin to enjoy and celebrate the quality of the program that their child is experiencing on a daily basis.

Here is a sample of what might be used over the first two weeks of enrollment. Many ideas will work, and should be expanded on a daily basis for 90 days. The key is to make sure you are reaching out to new parents daily.

Sample Week 1

Monday: Email parents a picture of their child having fun, along with a short positive note from the director.

Tuesday: Take a picture ('old school' Polaroid® instamatic works great) of the child with a buddy and mail it to mom or dad's place of work. An inexpensive fold-over card with your center name and logo on the outside, with the picture on the inside with the caption "My buddy and me having fun at the _____ school" will stay on a parent's desk for every co-worker to see.

Wednesday: Make a quick phone call to mom or dad from the director to just 'check in.'

Thursday: Send a piece of artwork home with the child.

Friday: An email from the teacher to parents to share the child's progress is effective, especially with a cute anecdote.

Sample Week 2

Monday: Have your director meet with parent at drop-off or pick-up time for a quick chat over any possible issues.

Tuesday: Send an email to parents about upcoming events, menu, newsletter — anything that is positive and informative.

Wednesday: Send artwork home for parents with a short note from the director thanking them for enrolling in the program.

Thursday: Email parents a picture of a fun classroom activity that shows their child involved and happy.

Friday: An email from the teacher to the parents keeps them informed of their child's positive progress.

This simple two-week schedule of activities can be expanded or changed to fit your center's particular needs and demographics. Again, the key is daily positive outreach to the parent to reinforce the idea that they made the correct decision for their family. The first month of daily parent communication is a must and should continue for the first 90 days. Technology has made daily communication much easier and readily accessible; however, the personal face-to-face encounter is what will cement the relationship with a parent and keep them enrolled.

CARE is a powerful tool to systematically keep a parent connected for all the right reasons. Keeping that connection on a daily basis in the early going is paramount. Thinking out your daily, weekly, and monthly plan in an organized, systematic fashion, with designated staff participation is a strong statement to all that 'customer attention retains enrollment' demonstrates your CARE.