

# *Momentum*

by Lynne D. Meservey

## “Handle with Care: Strategies for Retaining Children in Your Program”

The first few weeks of enrollment in a child care program are psychologically and physically demanding for everyone involved—the parent, the child, the teachers, and the director. How new enrollments are handled has an impact on how long children remain in your program. And most directors would agree that it's a far, far better thing to keep an enrollment than to recruit a replacement and repeat the process.

Chances are, most parents won't make a change in their child care arrangements during the first fragile weeks of enrollment, even if things happen that concern them. Withdrawing immediately means parents are admitting they chose the wrong child care program, and that's not easy for them to do. As long as nothing *drastic* happens, most families will remain in the program rather than admit their mistake and upset the family routine once more. Or will they?

Surprisingly, they don't always stay. A market study I conducted in over 100 child care centers in 1985 found that a startling number of families left programs in the **fourth to sixth week of enrollment**. Obviously, all of these parents weren't suddenly transferred across the country for new jobs. Something must have gone wrong. Although some parents gave a reason for the change, not all of them did; and some reasons were doubtful. The distressing thing was that directors weren't sure **why** some families left. It proved that parents don't always say what troubles them, and that the absence of complaints is not an indicator of satisfaction. The only thing we did know was that something had to be done to improve retention rates.

Our answer to the early withdrawal problem was to create an approach I called “Handle with CARE.”

### Retention Ideas

#### *Phase I*

- Before the child begins, give the family a picture of the child's new teacher along with a bio of the teacher or a welcoming note from her.
- Give the parents a blank cassette tape and ask them to record themselves reading, singing, or talking to their child. You'll play the tape to the child during the day.
- Ask parents to provide family pictures or portraits. Either display them behind acrylic panels mounted low on the walls or laminate the photos for children to carry.
- Label the child's personal space so it's all ready for him on his first day.
- Assign a buddy for the new child. Tell the buddy about his new friend and when to expect him. Give the buddy some ideas of things to do to make the new child feel welcome.
- Arrange for the child to discuss pick-up procedures, see the van, and meet the bus driver before the first day you pick him up. If that is not possible, you may wish to have some photos of the van available to give the child. At the beginning of the school year, a “Dry Run” day is a good idea.

The acronym stood for “customer attention retains enrollment.” An increased focus on parents was designed to establish a relationship with parents that could overcome any obstacles. Directors implemented the plan and soon found retention rates improving.

There were three phases to the plan: I – Getting to Know You (pre-enrollment), II – Handle with Care (the first eight weeks), and III – The CARE Package (maintenance). Since its implementation, these components and their activities have been fine tuned to meet individual program needs. We found that the particular activities each program utilized were not as important as the development and implementation of a **formal retention plan**.

Self-made millionaire Harvey Mackay, author of the bestseller, **Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive**, shares his tips for success in business. He says, “Knowing your customer means knowing what your customer wants. Maybe it’s your product (service), but maybe there’s something else too: recognition, respect, reliability, concern, service, a feeling of self-importance, friendship, help—things all of us care more about as human beings. . . .” Our entire plan was based on increased sensitivity to the parent’s needs.

### Getting to Know You

Look at the typical enrollment process. Making the child care decision is not an easy task for a parent. If they are lucky, it’s something a parent has to do only one or two times. Unfortunately, most parents don’t know how to go about it. So they approach the process with trepidation, clutching the inevitable *child care checklist*, motivated by a strong desire to do the best they can. The other player in this scene is the director. Anxious to fill empty child care slots, she shares all that is great and good about the program. Both parties make a valiant effort to play their roles to perfection. The parent marches through the checklist with insertions of *uh-uh’s* and *mmm’s* in appropriate places as the director cheerily sings out the *appropriate* answers. Then it’s the director’s turn to showcase a myriad of program features right down to the size of the potties in the toddler room and the temperature of the luncheon fare. Astonishingly, at least half of the time, the parent enrolls the child in the program.

The problem with this process is that neither the parent nor the director emerges with the informa-

## Retention Ideas

### Phase II

- Give parents a second business card to take to the workplace. You may wish to attach it to a Roladex card for their convenience.
- Check children’s clothing, bedding, shoes, books, bags, etc. for name labels. If the items are not labeled, do this immediately. A surefire way to upset parents is to lose the children’s belongings.
- Take a picture of the child happily involved in an activity as soon as possible. Mount the photo on a note card and give it to the parent.
- Send home a daily report for the first two weeks of enrollment.
- Send the parents a handwritten note thanking them for choosing your program.
- Make an effort to observe the child and note his skill development. At the end of a couple of weeks, a short conference with the parent can be arranged to discuss your observations and to get feedback from the parent.
- Display an art project or other activity product that the child has made in a prominent place in the center.
- Once a month, host a “new parent orientation night” (breakfast or lunch if you prefer). By setting a regular date for this, new parents will probably go no longer than six weeks without receiving an invitation.
- Mail a photo or small art project to Dad at his workplace.
- At the end of six weeks, help the child put together a book containing photos and drawings of things he likes. My favorite . . . learning center, friends, teachers, toys, meals, things to do, etc.

tion they need to establish a good relationship. The parent, intent on the process and nervous about the decision, hasn't heard most of what the director has said. The director, in her enthusiasm to extol the virtues of the program, hasn't learned what the parent *really* needs, so she can't take steps to insure that the program meets those expectations.

The process must be changed in order to work. It's important that the parent's needs are identified so that the director can demonstrate how the program can meet those particular needs. This will enable parents to make informed decisions. Later, when the child is attending, and the enrollment process anxieties are over, the director can establish the other benefits of enrollment.

To accomplish this, the program staff must open the lines of communication with the family. Everyone must develop communication skills. By asking open-ended questions to elicit information about the family's needs and expectations, the director can start this process. Questions like "If we could accomplish only one thing with your child, what would it be?" or "How do you see your child in three months, one year, five years?" will give you valuable insight into parent expectations.

Parent interviews conducted by teachers will give them important information to help them meet the child's individual needs, as well as information about what matters to the parents (work, hobbies, sports, etc.). Give teachers interview questions appropriate to the age of the child to help them conduct intake interviews.

Classroom observations are another part of the enrollment process that insures that the parent sees how children and teachers spend time during the day. Provide parents with observation guidelines that direct them to important program components.

A gradual enrollment period, when the parent and child play and work in the classroom together for several hours or days, is the final major step in the *getting to know you* process. Sprinkle these activities generously with personal touches that make the family feel important.

### **Handle with Care**

The next phase begins when the child starts coming to the program. It only takes a minute, and it's the one thing we always do when a parent selects our

program. A handwritten, hand-stamped thank you note is sent the same day the family enrolls. It's not only a courtesy, but it also recognizes the parent as an important addition to the program. Plan to be there to greet the family on their first day. After the child is settled in the classroom, tell the parent about your orientation program. Also tell the parent you will call later in the day to report on how the child is doing. Inform the parent about the program's communication systems. These systems might include a family communication notebook, bulletin board, and daily reports. Mention the program newsletter, how and when you distribute it, and note how they will receive memos or notification of activities. Make yourself available to the parent and express your desire to make the transition a smooth one.

Over the next few weeks, follow up with a series of prescribed activities that you and your teachers follow faithfully. One way to accomplish this is to develop one checklist for yourself and one for the teacher. A director's list might include scheduling a brief meeting at the end of the second week, inviting the parent to a monthly orientation night, sending out a *how are we doing?* survey the fourth or fifth week, and including a write up about the family in the next program newsletter.

The teacher's list might contain items like labeling the child's cubby, taking a photo of the child happily involved in an activity, writing daily notes, observing the child and giving the parents feedback, sending home a special booklet of the child's "favorite things" about the program, and assigning a buddy. Make it easy for the teacher to do this. When a child enrolls, give the teacher an envelope or file folder containing the checklist and the materials (note cards, photo holders, etc.) she needs to complete them. Atlanta's Prodigy Child Development Center provides the teacher with a unique holder for a picture of the child during his first day. It reads, "My first day at Prodigy" and it has blanks for the teacher to fill in her name, a new friend's name, and the child's favorite activity. This attractive magnetized memento will be proudly displayed on family refrigerators to remind everyone of the center's thoughtfulness and program benefits.

### **The CARE Package**

The third phase is the ongoing retention stage that the program cultivates with established families. While this period is not as intense, it does not

## Retention Ideas

### *Phase III*

- Establish systems and stick to them. Don't expect parents to keep adjusting.
- Give your staff copies of everything you distribute to the parents.
- Put a sample of the current newsletter on the bulletin board the day it is published with big, bold letters proclaiming it's ready.
- Change the bulletin board regularly so parents look at it.
- Create a parent library.
- Tell parents at least a month before fee increases occur. Hand out the information personally. Prepare them ahead of time and they won't fuss (as much).
- Write thank you notes to parents when they help you out.
- Video tape activities during the day to show to parents at pick-up time.
- Find several ways to communicate rather than depending on one method.
- Have a parent appreciation day.
- Form a parent advisory committee.

diminish in importance. Outline the activities that will happen during this phase. Be specific about what you're going to do. For instance, newsletters are a good retention tool. Establish deadline dates, columns to be included, and topics you want to address. Include articles and information that support the parent's decision to choose your program. Other ongoing activities for this phase might include family nights, parent meetings, parent surveys, parent advisory committees, parent bulletin board ideas, and photos or videos of children's activities. Think about how to celebrate holidays as well as how to handle fee increases. Plan special events to keep things from becoming monotonous. One of these events we look forward to each year is "Octobearfest"—a week-long celebration of the teddy bear. Create your own special event.

Personalized parent care can't be overdone and doesn't need to be expensive. Learn all you can about parents and show that you are interested in them as people. Share in the joy of watching their children grow and learn. Show that you care. You can make it happen with a plan. Make your plan fit the needs of the families in your program, and they'll be with you a long time.

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