

# *Momentum*

by Kay Albrecht

## “Helping Teachers Grow: Strategies for Diversifying Performance Evaluation and Feedback”

When performance evaluation is mentioned, most of us get a vivid picture of sitting down with a supervisor to discuss job performance. Occurring once or twice a year, such evaluations are designed to help employees see the impact of their behavior on the organization as a whole and to calibrate employee perceptions of job performance with employer perceptions. As is often the case, this model of evaluation is a poor fit with the evaluation and feedback needs of early childhood teachers.

The reason for the poor fit is simple—early childhood programs are not static; they are constantly changing to meet the diverse and developing needs of children. As programs change, so do teachers—adjusting to group composition, teaching team composition, and children’s individual needs. Because this is the case, evaluation and feedback strategies in early childhood settings must be dynamic if they are to have any real impact. Try some of the following suggestions to make sure your evaluation and feedback strategies are varied and effective.

**Dramatically increase the amount of feedback teachers get about their teaching skills, competence, and their contributions to the program’s success.** Everyone needs and wants to know how they are doing in their jobs. Successful directors recognize this need and make sure teachers get the information they need to continue to improve.

Improving the quantity of feedback to teachers requires that programs create and institutionalize systems for getting information both up, down, and across the supervision hierarchy. Some of the systems that help increase the amount of feedback

available to teachers include systematic orientation of new employees, regular classroom and program evaluations (like the self-study required for voluntary accreditation by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs), peer training systems that spread the talents of teachers across classrooms, and quarterly or semi-annual competency evaluations.

**Increase the frequency of formal feedback to individual teachers.** Twice a year feedback does not work in child care. Teaching young children requires constant fine tuning of the way we teach with the response we get from children. Teaching techniques that work in one situation or with one developmental stage often do not work as well at other stages.

One of the best ways to increase the frequency of formal feedback to teachers about teaching competence is to share the job with others. When the director is the only one who provides feedback to teachers about competence, the job becomes too big to be completed as often as is necessary. When program coordinators provide feedback to lead teachers, lead teachers provide feedback to assistant teachers, and so forth, the job of providing feedback on a more frequent basis becomes more manageable.

In order to share the role of competency evaluation, several prerequisites must be in place. First, the evaluation of competence must be separated from the evaluation of compensation (see “Helping Teachers Grow: Separating Competency from Compensation,” *Exchange*, December 1989). Second, a teaching competency evaluation tool that reflects your program’s philosophy must be developed and approved by teachers. Third, teachers

need training on how to give both positive and negative feedback and how to develop and monitor improvement plans that are the outcome of the process. Giving feedback to others does not come naturally for most early childhood educators. In order to make sure it works, training in how to do it must be an integral part of the process.

**Compartmentalize feedback.** There are numerous roles played by each staff member—teacher, colleague, supervisor, team member, mentor, parent educator, etc. Most traditional feedback strategies attempt to give people feedback about each of these roles at the same time. Because of the number of roles required in early childhood programs, teachers need feedback that is specific to each of these roles.

For example, if a teacher is responsible for the smooth operation of a classroom (*a lead teacher*), she has many roles. One role is classroom organizer and pacesetter. Another is teacher of a group of young children. The third is teaching colleague, and another is problem solver with her teaching team. Each of these roles requires a different set of skills and deserves separate consideration in the evaluation process.

When directors make feedback role specific, teachers are not only better able to handle the feedback but also are more likely to be able to understand how to integrate the feedback into their behavior.

**Diversify the strategies used to give feedback to teachers.** There are a variety of evaluation strategies that can be used to diversify the way feedback is given to staff (see chart). The mistake most directors make is putting all of their eggs in one basket—usually the basket of formal, oral feedback. Other techniques, particularly informal ones, may fit the situation better and be more likely to have impact on the staff member.

**Give just as much attention to positive feedback as to constructive feedback.** No one looks forward to evaluation time. By definition, evaluation means both positive and negative feedback. Unfortunately, we usually report one or two good things and then get right down to the problem areas.

When evaluation focuses on the negative instead of the positive, teachers are demoralized rather than energized. The Child Development Associate credentialing program recognized this reality and conceptualized the whole training process as

focusing on the skills teachers have in their skill repertoire while working on the skills that they don't already have.

Besides, identifying weaknesses is easy and has an immediate nature—when a problem is identified, it usually demands attention. Identifying teaching strengths and communicating about those strengths, however critical, is less immediate to day-to-day program operation—and therefore likely to be put off or forgotten. Reversing this trend is the challenge for directors.

**Individualize feedback.** Teachers have highly individual needs for feedback. New teachers may need more feedback than more experienced ones about teaching competence; more experienced teachers may need feedback to keep them excited and challenged to continually do a great job. Knowing the “feedback fix” needed by each staff member is an important part of individualizing.

**Increase the frequency of informal feedback to individuals.** As important as formal feedback is, informal feedback is more closely tied to the positive self-esteem of teachers. Teachers report that hearing they do a good job is highly motivating. Commenting on a job well done or a creative curriculum idea, handwritten notes expressing appreciation for a job well done, or a telephone call to share a parent's compliments can all give teachers information about how you think they are doing their jobs.

Informal evaluation is more likely to happen in real time while formal evaluation strategies postpone feedback to some point in the future. Informal feedback allows the director to strike while the iron is hot and get feedback to the individual who needs it as the situation emerges.

**Include classroom feedback in the evaluation process.** In other words, focus some of your evaluation strategies on the whole rather than just the parts. This type of evaluation takes a different form and has a different outcome. It looks at the classroom as a unit and evaluates how effectively the unit works together to accomplish shared goals.

The Academy of Early Childhood Program's classroom evaluation is a good example of this type of evaluation. Each teacher and the director looks at the classroom from their own perspective to determine how well the Academy's criteria are met. Then teachers and the director discuss their impressions,

decide on strengths and areas that need improvement, and make plans to accomplish those improvements.

This type of evaluation focuses feedback on the outcomes for children rather than on individual teachers. It allows teachers to identify areas to work on together, which is much different from having the director identify weaknesses and then turn the improvement responsibility over to the teachers.

Focusing on the classroom as a unit also creates opportunities for lots of positive feedback. As the staff looks at the classroom, they identify and recognize the criteria that are already met.

**Include self-evaluation in the feedback process.** Because the goal of evaluation is to calibrate perceptions of performance, self-evaluation should form the foundation of the process. When evaluation begins this way, both confirmation of similar perceptions and comparisons of different perceptions are

possible. Conceptualized like this, evaluation is less threatening and more likely to accomplish the goal of identifying strengths and developing improvement strategies for areas that need work.

Teacher competence is closely tied to program quality. As directors, we need to use all of the performance evaluation strategies available to us to insure that our programs are the best that they can be.

*Kay Albrecht, Ph.D., a senior partner in Child Care Management Associates, Houston and Dallas, specializes in consulting on marketing, facilities design, site selection, new center development, and child care management systems. CCMA manage several child care centers and also own and operate HeartsHome Early Learning Center, Inc., an accredited program for infants and toddlers near the workplace. In 1988, CCMA created Imagination Station, a unique after-school model program where teachers and directors from 26 programs receive training.*

### Types of Evaluation

	Oral	Written
<b>Formal:</b>	Face-to-face conferences	Face-to-face conferences
	Recognition at staff meetings	Peer evaluation
	Revitalization meetings	Individual, classroom, or center self-evaluation
		Notes from parents, colleagues, supervisors, etc.
<b>Informal:</b>	Comments to teachers	Bulletin board messages
	Repeating positive comments from parents or peers	Bathroom message boards
	Telephone calls	Handwritten notes
		Keep-in-touch notebooks
		Testimonials from parents