

# *Momentum*

by Jackie Legg

## “Successful Staff Meetings”

Directors generally acknowledge the necessity of staff meetings, but questions sometimes linger about how to make them meaningful. As with most other aspects of center management, it is helpful to take a planful approach to the development of a staff meeting philosophy. Because each child care program is unique, there is no master formula for successful staff meetings. Examining the five W's (why, when, where, what, who) can assist you in designing your own staff meeting strategy.

### **Why?**

Staff meetings serve many purposes. Some thought should be given to the specific objective of each meeting. Staff should feel they have derived some benefit from the time spent.

In all organizations there is a need to share information and exchange ideas. While staff meetings provide that opportunity, directors should be careful not to let them degenerate into a litany of do's and don'ts or a laundry list of complaints and grievances. Staff should leave feeling enlightened, energized, and eager for the next encounter.

Staff meetings are wonderful opportunities for team building. When staff begin to see one another as interesting, complex, and talented individuals with personalities and interests outside the classroom, cliques and other divisive behaviors disappear. Some part of each meeting might be devoted to a team building activity.

Staff training is another focus for staff meetings. Insightful directors understand that teachers, like children, learn best in an interactive environment

and consequently design training sessions which encourage active participation.

Staff meetings can also be used for problem-solving and organizational planning and evaluation. Building staff consensus and encouraging staff feedback on policy and procedural matters are extremely helpful techniques in developing staff loyalties and commitment.

### **When?**

Decisions need to be made on the time and frequency of meetings. One strategy is to designate a certain date each month (first Monday, etc.) so staff members can anticipate and put the date on their calendars. Some programs are able to coordinate substitutes so that meetings can occur during the day. Others meet in the evening or during the weekend. For evening meetings, it is helpful to start them as soon as the center closes so late afternoon staff don't have to go home and return. Providing dinner (pizza, take-out, pot luck) helps to set a casual mood and encourages socialization.

### **Where?**

The center is the logical location for meetings if the facility has appropriate space. It is important to make the space as comfortable as possible to encourage maximum participation. You might consider purchasing or borrowing some adult size furniture (i.e. folding tables, stackable chairs) to have available for staff and parent meetings.

Occasionally you may want to hold meetings in alternative sites. A seasonal party at someone's

home, a summer Saturday workshop around the pool, or a staff field trip to the local children's museum all offer unique venues for staff development.

### What?

The organization and content of the staff meeting is the greatest challenge. For team building experiences, try some of the ice-breakers and get-acquainted games you've experienced in other settings. Present humorous, handmade awards, give door prizes, or play "Can you top this?" with classroom anecdotes.

To ensure that all pertinent topics are covered, prepare and circulate an agenda. Soliciting agenda items from your staff eliminates surprises and prepares everyone for substantive discussions. Some programs have a lead teacher meeting prior to the staff meeting as a vehicle for producing an agenda.

Training topics can be identified in a number of ways. Recent evaluations and classroom observations should identify some areas for training. Asking teachers for a training *want list* guarantees that training matches the needs. *Make and take* sessions are always a hit with teachers, and they multiply your supply of teacher-made materials as well.

Guest speakers and video tapes vary the tempo of staff meetings. Role playing seminars, where staff members explore solutions to the typical discipline scenarios or practice those delicate parent/teacher interactions, also add interest and variety.

Occasionally it is beneficial to depart from traditional child development topics. Seminars on relaxation techniques, communication styles, or coordinating inexpensive work wardrobes are always welcome subjects.

### Who?

As with many other center responsibilities, staff meetings lend themselves to delegation. Ask a staff member to develop a list of community resources (pediatricians, psychologists, NAEYC accreditation mentors) who are available for staff meeting presen-

tations. A staff meeting committee can be tasked with determining the most convenient times for meetings, coordinating refreshments, and assigning staff for set-up and clean-up activities. Developing a year long plan for staff meetings (with dates, places, and proposed topics) rescues you from those last minute frantic efforts to come up with something meaningful.

Don't overlook the talent in your own center. In addition to outside consultants, use staff members to make presentations or facilitate training sessions. Develop an inventory of staff skills (who does what well) and refer to it when planning staff meetings. Peer training is extremely effective and promotes professionalism within your staff.

Local directors' groups are another source of trainers. For some reason, when someone outside your program tells your staff something (even if you have repeatedly said the same thing), it takes on an aura of credibility. Perhaps you can arrange an exchange where you can become the *experts* for one another's staff.

In addition to the planning and presentation, evaluation should be a critical piece of your staff meeting puzzle. Take some time after each meeting to examine what worked well, what could have been done differently, and what follow-up activities are needed to maximize the session. A written record (minutes) of the meeting would help you keep track of what you've done and will give you a historical overview of training activities. (Be sure to attach your handouts, worksheets, and descriptions of any games, etc. you used.) An attendance sheet can also be attached so you can chronicle who was present for that session.

With thoughtful planning, preparation, and evaluation, staff meetings can be the highlights of your year. They are tangible evidence of the value we place on teacher development. We should treat them as very special events!

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