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# Giving Your Staff the Care They Deserve

by Leatha Ritchie

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Much research has been done and many papers have been written about how to retain child care workers in an industry that historically has consistently high staff turnover. Specific qualities of a working environment can cultivate and maintain long term relationships between management and staff. Recommendations discussed in this article are based on conversations with and surveys of center directors and their staff where turnover is either extremely low or very high.

Of course, the first area of concern to all professionals taking care of and educating young children is pay. Whatever the reasons for low pay to these workers, it is unanimous among all advocates for the child care industry that higher pay would certainly help attract and retain long term employees. Admittedly this is true, but it will take many years to correct the low pay issue, so we must look for ways to keep staff with the salaries we can offer at this time.

The characteristics of a child care center where most, if not all, of the employees choose to stay and provide a high quality learning environment for young children are ones where:

**1. Care for employees as people, not just employees, exists.**

Each time I interview a center director or staff member of a center that has a majority of long term employees, the words "cares about me" or "really knows me" come up in one form or another. The directors of these centers can share information about all staff members that most supervisors would not want or need to know. This seems to be very important in the child care center. The types of loving, caring people that are so successful with children need to be cared for themselves. There is a family feeling in centers with low staff turnover.

**2. Communication is abundant, clear, and positive on all levels.**

Everyone is informed and asked their opinion in any matter that affects their job. There are numerous times during the week that management talks with employees about their jobs, their frustrations, and their successes. Regular staff meetings and impromptu mini-meetings are held when new decisions need to be made that affect the center or an individual classroom. In these

centers there is little gossiping because everyone gets the same messages clearly from the correct source.

An important point to note is that not only is the communication free flowing from management down, but also from staff to management. In those centers where turnover is a problem, communication tends to be erratic or not clear. When employees do not feel they are getting the "straight answer," they will go elsewhere to find it. Sometimes rumor or speculation fills the need for communication, or employees go outside in search of good communication.

**3. Training for new skills and personal development is continuous.**

There are many opportunities to acquire new skills or brush up on old ones. Employees keep mentioning how much they have learned since they began this job and how much more they want to learn. The excitement for their work shines when they speak about trying a new technique or activity with the children, or their co-workers, that was successful.

The newest employees feel they are allowed to try their own ideas, but are coached when things do not work or need fine tuning. In centers that experience high staff turnover, the employees feel there is little or no coaching or training except when things are really a problem. Most new employees at those centers feel they are learning new skills mainly through trial and error.

Training needs continuous follow-up. No workshop is valuable if the attendee is not using the information on a daily basis to further succeed. Long term employees know that their center directors and assistant center directors will come back frequently to see how they are using the new information. Training in centers with low turnover comes from several sources: center management, corporate support, outside resources, and peers.

#### **4. Values and goals are clear and everyone knows their importance.**

When asked if they understand the center's mission, employees in centers with low turnover explain at length what their center wants to accomplish for the children, parents, community, and the company.

In high turnover centers, the employees generally say they are there to "take care of kids." The low turnover centers say that "taking care of kids" is a very small part of their work. They speak about their center being different than most. They talk about the people that educate children, not the curriculum used or the supplies provided. The employees at the low turnover centers know that the center is successful at reaching its goals because they are there and they believe in the center's purpose.

A striking difference in those centers with high turnover is that each

teacher, classroom, or position works independently. Not only do they not feel a common mission for the building, but sometimes there are not common goals in a classroom. Often employees mention their positions as being less than or better than others. A frequent comment heard is that there is too much "interference" from other classrooms, their co-workers in their classroom, or even management.

People that work in professions that serve society need to see they are working towards clear goals that will result in making the world a little better. If the mission is not there, or if it is misunderstood, they will become frustrated.

#### **5. Consistently high standards are expected and upheld.**

Centers with a majority of long term employees seem to "have their act together." They clearly provide high quality care for the children, and the employees feel that anyone not willing to uphold that quality is quickly, but fairly, reminded of the goals. Most of the teachers I talk with believe they have autonomy in their work as long as they keep to the philosophy for nurturing and educating children.

#### **6. Recognition and praise for success is continuous and public, while reprimand is quiet.**

Each staff member has a realistic idea of their strengths and weaknesses. When asked how often they feel successful in their job, these people say, "many times a day!" In centers with tremendous turnover, the employees answer the same question with a resounding, "rarely!" When probing further to find out what makes them feel successful, it is clear that the supervisors are primarily responsible. Although they understand that their

managers do not make them successful, the employees are sure their managers remind them of their abilities. Episodes of public praise are recounted, but staff also mention that they often get quiet suggestions for areas of improvement.

In centers where longevity is a problem, many employees mention not knowing whether they are doing a good job or not. Still others in those centers say they know they are not good enough. A major concern of all people in these centers is getting no positive or negative feedback from their supervisors. When talking with staff members in these centers, their view of professional strengths and weaknesses is not realistic.

#### **7. Close and consistent supervision by management takes place.**

The staff feel support from their center director and assistant director continuously and consistently. These managers typically practice MBWA (management by walking around). The directors are always in and out of rooms, frequently there as problems arise, and available for parents at any time. There are few surprises. If one of the staff members is not performing up to standard, the director and assistant director are always monitoring the situation, constantly coaching. The newest employees feel that the director is there to help them join the team as soon as possible. These centers also have regular staff meetings and frequent formal and informal training sessions for all employees.

In high turnover centers, the staff often speak of inconsistencies in the management team. One comment summarizes these feelings well, "some weeks she is on me about everything and then I can go for months and hear nothing." Often

one staff member feels she gets more attention than others, both positive and negative. Employees are not sure what any one day will be like or what the mood of their supervisors will be.

**8. Extra “pay” is given for extraordinary work.**

In every child care center, there are days or weeks when everyone must give 110%. In those centers with low turnover, the employees willingly put forth the extra effort because they know it is appreciated, temporary, and not something anyone in the center would not do as well. The extra pay does not come in the form of dollars but in:

- hours off when needed and those needs can be accommodated;
- a surprise lunch out with or without the boss;
- an extra special gift that shows the boss knows them well;
- a break during a hectic day; or
- a chance to share knowledge or hard work with peers.

Special privileges in small or large doses are frequent after an especially hectic week or two.

In centers where turnover is high, there is a lot of conversation about long hours, menial tasks, “not my job” kind of statements, or “why don’t we get paid for staff meetings.” Again, the feelings of not being appreciated are all too frequent.

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