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## *Ideas for facing the toughest training challenge*

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# Nurturing Green Staff from Day One

### Ideas from directors

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*“Of all the obstacles I’ve faced on the job — and there have been many — the task of converting green staff into successful caregivers is the toughest.”*

The center director who made this statement is not alone. Developing green staff — new employees with little or no training or experience in early childhood education — is a challenge for most center directors today. To come up with some solutions to this problem, we conducted a brainstorming session at a conference on staff development that **Exchange** sponsored in Philadelphia. The seven directors listed at the end of this article shared the following ideas on how to nurture green staff.

#### **Day One**

The green employee’s first day on the job is a bellwether event. She comes to your center excited about her new job. At no point in her career will she be more motivated to succeed.

Kindle this enthusiasm. Welcome her wholeheartedly. Let her know you are happy to have her on board. You may even want to put up a sign welcoming her and introducing her to the parents. Introduce her to all staff members. Present her with her own official t-shirt or coffee mug with your center’s logo.

Don’t extinguish the flame by making him sit down in the staff

lounge and read the center’s policy manuals. Share with him the soul of your organization, not its 17 year history. Brief him on the center’s key goals. Point out how your center is unique from the others in the area. Then get him into the classroom as an observer.

She will also approach this first day with high anxiety. Being inexperienced, she may not know what to expect or how to behave. Put her at ease by assuring that everyone on staff is committed to helping her succeed.

Give him a list of all the staff members with their positions. Fill him in about the key logistical details — such as who to report to when he

arrives, when breaks are, where he can take them, where the bathrooms are, how lunches are handled, and where supplies are located. Conclude by previewing how the orientation will proceed over the coming weeks.

Some directors have found it effective to insure that a new employee has a positive teaching experience her first day. Find a skill or interest she has that she can put to immediate use. Maybe she likes to sing and can lead the children in a song at the end of the day. Or maybe she enjoys a hobby such as origami and can share this with a few children at some point.

Your goal for the first day is to make the new staff member excited about becoming an integral part of your organization and eager to come in day two and start growing on the job.

#### **Week One**

The balance of the first week should proceed at a comfortable pace. Don’t try to force feed a green employee in his first days on the job with everything he’ll ever need to know about teaching at your center. View this as the time to communicate the center’s

most important policies and to work out an initial orientation plan.

One important piece of business to take care of quickly is reviewing the center's risk management policies. Present to the employee, both verbally and in writing, key points such as . . .

- how discipline is carried out;
- how toileting is handled;
- how children are comforted;
- what forms of contact are encouraged;
- what forms of contact are discouraged;
- what to do when accidents occur; and
- how to release children at the end of the day.

Key personnel policies should also be reviewed during the first week. A new employee will want to know about pay days, benefits, vacation days, sick leave, and pay hikes. You will want to make sure he understands about the importance of punctuality, the details of his job description, and the chain of command.

During the first week you will want to get to know a new employee better so that you can better orient her. Find out what her experiences have been in early childhood education, what level of understanding (or misunderstanding) she possesses regarding children's development, and what her attitudes are about parents leaving their children in the care of others.

You will also want to get some sense of his learning style. Does he learn

best by reading, by seeing, or by doing?

Having learned this, it is time to assign a mentor. Select a senior staff member, taking into account the new employee's knowledge, attitudes, and learning style. The mentor-neophyte relationship will be a key determinant of the success of the orientation. So take the time to find a good fit.

Ideally, the first week should include more time where the green employee is observing than teaching. The budgetary implications of carrying an employee as an observer may be difficult for most centers to bear. However, the positive dividends of breaking a green teacher in slowly will pay off down the line in employee retention and performance.

One last message you will want a new employee to receive early on is that it's OK to have fun on the job. Working with young children should be a joyful experience. You want your teachers to laugh and play with the children, as well as to enjoy each others company.

## Month One

For an experienced, well-trained teacher, a brief orientation on the center's goals and procedures should suffice. Within a week she should be able to operate independently with moderate support. However, for a green teacher-in training the orientation must become a long range training program.

Ideally, a center will have an organized curriculum for new staff members. This may be nothing more than a checklist of skills and understandings to be mastered. Or, it may consist of an organized set of training materials, either home-grown or purchased pre-packaged off the

shelf, to be studied in sequence by new employees.

An employee should be permitted to proceed through the curriculum at her own pace. Skills that one person can master in a week may take months for another person. As long as the trainee is putting forth a serious effort to improve, there should be no pressure to meet outside timetables.

In planning the training, the following suggestions may be helpful in working with green staff:

- If your center can afford it, a trainee will benefit greatly from a daily consultation with his mentor. It is helpful for a bond of professional friendship to develop in this relationship. In addition, the trainee's sense of security is enhanced if she knows she will have an opportunity every day to receive feedback and ask questions.
- In addition to having a mentor supporting the new staff member, other members of the teaching team should be encouraged to provide feedback and support. This increases the amount of feedback received and provides a variety of perspectives.
- Keeping in mind that people have different styles of learning, your training plan should encompass a wide variety of experiences. In addition to materials to be read, the training could also include directed observations where the trainee is asked to observe for specific practices or behaviors, visits to other centers, attendance at local or state workshops, and conversations with experienced teachers.
- Video training has much to offer green staff. For years many of the training materials for early childhood were either insipid or boring.

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Now you can purchase training videos that are educational as well as entertaining. In addition, many centers are now developing their own video training libraries. To help orient new teachers into the practices and philosophies of the center, a director may videotape some of her best teachers conducting classroom activities, conversations with children, and meetings with parents.

- Since green staff will have little experience in the classroom, the new ideas you are sharing with him may be hard to relate to. One way to drive the message home is to relate the points you are striving to make to the new staff member's own childhood. Talk about her experiences as a child and use this as a springboard to talking about his performance as a teacher.

- To gain the support and understanding of parents, some centers have green employees wear "Teacher in Training" buttons during the orientation period.

During the first month there should be several points at which the director meets with the new staff member to appraise her performance to date. To facilitate this, the director should take many opportunities to observe the new staff person at work during her first weeks.

Unless the trainee is displaying a serious lack of effort or engaging repeatedly in practices she was cautioned against, these sessions should take on a supportive tone. The director should give feedback to the new teacher on positive behaviors she has observed and those that she has yet to observe (not on what she is doing right and what she is doing wrong). The director should ask how she can assist the new staff person in her training, and review where the training is headed in coming weeks.

## Year One

A green employee's entire first year should be viewed as a period of intense training. After the first months the employee's mentor and immediate supervisor will take over the day-to-day supervision and support. However, the director should observe periodic checkpoints to see if the new employee is continuing to progress.

If the new staff member is doing really poorly with little evidence of improvement, the director should act quickly. The employee should be clearly put on notice that her performance is falling below the standards of the center and given a short time frame in which to turn the situation around.

In hiring untrained, inexperienced teachers, you are apt to make more mistakes than when you hire a teacher with a track record you can assess. Don't confound your error by dragging your feet in correcting your mistake.

On the other hand, if it is clear that the new employee has what it takes to succeed, try to find outside training opportunities to supplement in-house training efforts. Encourage the new employee to attend early childhood courses and workshops by paying all or part of the costs.

Throughout the first year a new employee's progress should be observed and celebrated. One early celebration could be the point at which she can take off her "Teacher in Training" button. Make a big deal of little rituals such as this to demonstrate that the center truly cares about the new employee's success. At her anniversary point the new employee should be recognized in a staff meeting for having successfully completed her first year at the center.

The ideas shared in this article require a great deal of effort by the director and teachers. However, if as a result this green employee is nurtured into a solid team member, this investment will be well worth it.

## Contributors

The following attendees at our May 1991 conference, "Color Your Staff Extraordinary: How to Develop Competent and Creative Teachers," in Philadelphia provided the ideas for this article:

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