
Building a Support System for the Director

Paralyzed by Personal Stress: A Director's Story

by Suzanne Gellens

As directors of child care centers, we have a very demanding job. Our days and evenings are filled with dealing with teachers, parents, and children. We are expected to fulfill the responsibilities of purchasing, administration, counseling, planning, budgeting, billing, and a myriad of other jobs. Most of us can use the pressure to accomplish our objective. The tension gives us strength which we can turn into a positive force. But when a director meets problems in his or her personal life, the adversity is often overwhelming and result in a breakdown of the systems that we rely on to cope with the daily pressures of our jobs. This collapse is stress.

Stress is an external event that taxes the physiological system and produces a non-functional response. Stress acts on the body's autonomic nervous system and affects each person differently. Stress is a physical reaction to a situation. Just as for other people, directors' lives are disrupted by divorce, financial problems, personal and family illness, and death of a loved one. No one can predict when this will occur, but a readiness plan can help avoid the pitfalls. I did not have that plan three years ago when my husband was extremely ill, so I experienced difficulties that could have been avoided. With a loved one in intensive care for days on end, it affected not only my personal life but the entire school. Dealing with the problem and preparing for its eventual return was a learning experience.

When a teacher faces a family crisis, she can call in sick, and the director arranges a substitute to replace her. The school can continue running smoothly. However, when a director must miss several days, unless a support system has been built, the school will suffer.

Fortunately, when my problem occurred, I had a very stable staff of 13 teachers. We had not had a turnover of teachers in three years, so all were knowledgeable about the policies and did not need daily supervision to continue. The head teacher had been with the school

more than ten years and was used to taking over for short periods of time while I attended conferences or was on vacation. Yet the day-to-day running of the school was not part of her expertise. Previously whenever I left town, I had made certain the supplies were ordered, the billing ready to mail, the flyers printed, etc. So when the crisis occurred, she could answer parent questions and handle teacher absences and minor problems. However, since she was a classroom teacher, the time that she could devote to these extra responsibilities was limited. She was not used to spending hours at night on preschool homework.

I tried to come into school every few days to relate to parents, children, and teachers, yet I found the time at school difficult and non-productive. I could not concentrate, knowing that a loved one was in critical condition. I was alone in this town, so had no family support system. The problems that arose at school upset me in a way that was out of proportion to their importance. My nerves were raw and I was short on patience. The smallest problem seemed magnified beyond my ability to make a decision. I was ineffective and basically not functional. The strain of knowing what I should be

doing and my inability to devote the time and concentration compounded the problem.

The day I recognized my ineptitude I had arrived at school early to prepare for our spring luncheon. The children cooked the entire meal and prepared a musical program. A group of parents had volunteered to complete the cooking and set the tables. After driving up to the school, I sat in the car. Somehow I couldn't face teachers or parents. I didn't want to repeat my difficult story over and over and exhibit my apprehension. I felt totally out of control and exposed. I was the one who spent hours counseling parents; how could I reveal my feelings and keep my composure? How could I fulfill their curiosity, which was well meaning and supportive? I could not get out of the car. I was paralyzed.

I sat in my parking space for over an hour dressed for the program. Children and parents arrived and still I sat. A teacher came to the car and asked if I needed anything or if she could help. I couldn't even answer, I just shook my head. Words hurt; feelings intensified. I couldn't even share my feelings with this compassionate woman who had been a colleague for three years. Finally, I turned my car around and went home. I knew the program would succeed without me and felt my presence would only be negative. I was ashamed. How could I face teachers or parents again?

The health of my husband was deteriorating, and I spent less and less time thinking of school. When I did return to school briefly several days later, I found the empathy and loving atmosphere restorative. I began going into school daily, not to work but to gather strength from the children and faculty. A hug from a child, a request for a favorite book or

song, and the routine of snack time and center time was helpful. Teachers were supportive and reassuring.

During these months, the teachers did a fabulous job. They learned to respond to and handle problems from parents. They purchased supplies and collected tuition checks. They returned phone calls and kept the school running on an even keel. The parents pitched in and picked up where the teachers were unable to devote time. We were fortunate.

Yet with all the pressures on the teachers to help in areas not in their job descriptions and expertise, unknowingly their teaching suffered. It was easier to eliminate the special activities that we added to learning centers each week. The children were content to play in the family living area, so why bring out a prop box to change the atmosphere once a week? Blocks, which were normally opened daily, were often closed so clean-up time wasn't such a task. Collages and play dough were easily set up and became the main art, rather than scurrying for special, innovative open-ended art activities. The easels had crayons rather than messy paints many days. Often the teachers just stayed in their classrooms all day rather than team teaching in the learning center rooms that they normally rotated through. The weather was wonderful, so they extended outdoor play. Once on the playground, the outdoor enrichment activities that took time to organize and set up were eliminated. Even lesson plans went by the wayside.

These teachers were not being lazy. They were under stress, too, and were merely coping with a bad situation. Their energies were spent keeping parents happy and making certain children were occupied. They picked up the pieces of my job and ran the school in the best manner they knew. Most did not

realize anything was different as the changes occurred gradually. It was only when my personal crisis had ended and I was once again a full time director that I saw the difference in the quality of our school. Our once outstanding program had become ordinary in a period of three months.

My return did not solve the problem and, although I could see the contrast and variance, the teaching staff seemed unaware of it. During my prolonged absence, the teachers had united and bonded. Friendships broadened. The result was a more cohesive teaching staff. The teachers were proud of what they had done in my absence and resented my suggestions that they had let the program slide in any way. They felt empowered by the responsibility they had assumed and were reluctant to give it up. They felt my taking back the reins was usurping their autonomy. The tension plus my still infringing home demands made me back away and let the program ride as it had been operating. I felt time would help solve much of the problem. Summer was only a month away and most staff would not return until September. I would revisit the problem then.

During the ensuing weeks, I examined the issue very closely. I had, in reality, two problems to solve — one was to regain the excellence of our school; the second was to set up a plan for the eventual reappearance of a crisis.

In order to be prepared for my prolonged absences, I decided we needed an assistant director. This was easy to propose, but would require additional money to cover the extra expense. I examined many options and felt that adding children to our program was the solution. I felt that the person selected must be free to run the school, so it meant

hiring two additional staff members — one for the new classroom and one to replace my head teacher so she could become a real administrative assistant. Our preschool committee and the board of directors were supportive. I knew some parents would not like an expansion; they liked the moderate size and loving atmosphere. I decided that we must, therefore, give the families something in return. I pulled one space out of each classroom, reducing the teacher/child ratio and proposed adding two classrooms. In reality, I was only adding ten children to the program. I could predict a percentage of these children would opt for additional programming such as afternoon enrichment, which were profitable enterprises. I also planned to add a large fund raiser.

In promoting my head teacher to this new position, I had a knowledgeable person who understood the work-ings of the school. I shared my second problem with her. Because of her relationship with the others as a fellow teacher, she could share their feelings, objections, and positions with me. I knew that the task of bringing the school back up to the quality it had been would be difficult. I also knew I had to incorporate the teachers' newfound autonomy into the plan.

As I consulted each teacher, I found that some of the responsibilities the teachers had assumed should remain. I really didn't have to attend the team meetings each week as they wrote group lesson plans. They preferred rotating the writing of the plan and then meeting to review and revise the weekly lessons. Then they could submit it to the assistant director for approval and reproduction.

We had a two hour staff meeting the last week of school before the summer hiatus where the teachers aired their feelings. Some parts of the meeting I felt attacked and wanted to retreat; but, in retrospect, they were correct. Examination of a program like that hurts, but in the end the results can be positive. I didn't act to make changes right away, but spent the next months examining the changes and trying to incorporate their ideas. I tried their suggestions — some worked and others resulted in their recognizing the need to return to the way policies had been handled. The teachers wanted more responsibility and less intervention. This strengthened their skills and made them more loyal to the program. I included them in problem solving and sought their input and solutions. I formed parent/teacher committees to develop new policies. We were working as a team.

My final solution to solving the problem of reclaiming our quality

had from me. I immediately saw the change I desired occurring. She also prodded me to complete the enormous amount of paperwork required and finally we were ready to apply for accreditation, which we received. Our quality preschool was restored.

There was another positive outcome to this experience. I learned to listen better to teachers' personal problems and to understand and empathize in a more realistic way. I could better appreciate the distractibility of a newlywed, the lack of *togetherness* of the teacher whose husband had separated, or the lack of patience by a teacher with a sick child. Allowing teachers extra personal time without penalty at a time of crisis is the outgrowth. I can sit and listen and understand the anguish and heart-ache that affect the job which I never really did before. I let teachers go to the bank when they are worried that a check has bounced or leave to accompany a relative to the doctor or to look for a nursing home for an aging parent. I realized that al-

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was to complete the self-study for the accreditation process of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. I had purchased the materials and had just begun rewriting policies and documenting our developmentally appropriate program when the illness occurred. The whole process had been abandoned. I set a deadline for completion and plunged headlong into compliance. I found a small amount of money to hire a retired preschool director to come into each classroom and evaluate the room and teacher. The teachers took criticism from her better than they

though this is a business we must recognize the human side. Unless we allow people to grieve, cope, and tend to their families, we cannot insure competent teachers.

The feared return of my health crisis tested out our newly developed support system. This time I could put all my energies into my husband and myself, knowing that the school would run without change. The strain was missing. I kept the teachers informed of my status and completely turned the school over to the assistant director. Everyone agreed that the plan worked. The

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school activities remained at the
same level and the school ran
unaffected.

Stress is an outside force that can
affect every aspect of a child care
center. The anxiety affects the
director physically and that affects
the daily administration of the
school. No person is automatically
immune to these pressures. There-
fore, to avoid future problems, a plan
should be devised for the director's
prolonged absence. Not only will the
recorded plan help the school to
retain continuity, but the knowledge
of its existence will help the director
cope better in the event of a personal
crisis.

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