

36 Ideas That Work

You Say Staff Deserve Respect? Energize Your Words with Action!

by Karen Stephens

Whether they represent folks in rural areas or big cities, political leaders in the spotlight routinely pronounce children as our nation's greatest resource. And now with hard-core brain research echoing their claim, the "pols" pronounce even louder how vital quality early childhood programs are to our country's welfare. They couch their support in terms of investing in our future workforce, our future bevy of taxpayers. Rarely is it frankly said it's simply the right thing to do.

And so leaders (?) continue to skirt comprehensive measures that would put money behind their rhetoric, behind our children and programs that serve them. You know the economic culture in the United States as well as I do. If one truly believes in something, they back it with greenback. So far, our nation has been mighty measly. We've yet to muster collective commitment to children.

And, by extension, our country has been measly with its child care

providers. Oh sure, people of note now proclaim child care is a noble calling, not merely babysitting. (How long did it take us to get THAT idea across?!) And they publicly commend child care folks for the lasting contribution we make to society. Astute leaders even cite studies that reveal the best path to quality child care is to maintain a well educated and trained staff.

But coming through with the resources to compensate quality caregivers — well that idea seems to

cool as fast as news camera's spotlights dim. Perhaps positive steps have been made in your program; but on a national scale, the necessity of taking a vow of poverty to work in child care still reigns.

So while you and I and our fellow child care directors wait for voters to hold leaders accountable for their rhetoric, we're left shouldering the task of maintaining a stable child care workforce for American families. You may say I'm being overly dramatic, even pessimistic. I say I'm being realistic.

So how do directors motivate professionals who are usually under-compensated (I'm talking minimum wage even with a four year degree); their skills typically underestimated (Oh, you're so lucky to sit around and play with kids all day); and their commitment often discounted



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(So when are you getting a real job?)?

I certainly don't have all the answers. In my 20+ years in child care, I've participated in innumerable salary surveys and equity wage initiatives. Some have even come through with meaningful results. But I still rarely see professionally trained child care providers paid as well as their public school counterparts.

I'm not naive. Even when better pay becomes a reality, it still takes more than money to motivate and retain well qualified staff. In fact, all things being equal (if that ever happens), intrinsic motivation is far more influential on staff performance and longevity. And the proof is visible in child care programs everywhere. Considering the average child care provider makes less than \$15,000 annually, I'm not amazed 40% of us leave the child care field annually; I'm amazed 60% of us stay in it! Intrinsic motivation is the key.

So, over the years, I've tried to come up with a plethora of tangible ways to help staff feel great about the job they're doing. To feel great in their hearts and minds. I've tried to show respect for their knowledge and to appreciate their talent. And I don't take for granted their dedication to children and families. Some strategies have been simple to carry out; others require more effort. And I must warn you, some may be hokey, but they've all been effective.

I'll share my ideas below. Hopefully, they'll trigger your own imagination. Despite the miles that distance us, together we can work to keep our nation's child care infrastructure — our staff — stable, experienced, motivated, and proud. Until child care professionals receive proper monetary compensation, the least we can do is feed

their generous spirits with respect and appreciation.

Tangible Ways to Show Staff Respect and Appreciation

- 1 Post staff photos near entrance. Include position title, length of service, credentials, and brief biography.
- 2 Include staff profiles in program newsletters. Distribute newsletters not only to parents and your board but also to program funders and supporters.
- 3 Include staff in community meetings whenever possible. Introduce them, with title, to *movers and shakers* in attendance. Recognize staff at appropriate events, such as program dedication ceremonies or other public functions.
- 4 Supply each staff member with a professional business card for networking purposes.
- 5 Post announcements for parents whenever staff acquire in-service training or renew certificates such as in first aid training.
- 6 Recommend qualified staff as workshop presenters and training consultants.
- 7 Send staff's *parents* clippings of program news coverage. (Yes, I'm serious. No matter what your staff's age, they always like to make their parents proud.)
- 8 Send staff's hometown newspapers press releases, such as announcements of your program's accreditation.
- 9 Publicly (as well as in evaluations) give staff credit for program improvements. If someone comes up with a creative idea or solution, they should bask in the glory!
- 10 Organize *regular* events for *team bonding*. Team spirit and camaraderie solidified when we instituted monthly staff dinners. It's a great tradition.
- 11 Recognize and utilize each staff member's unique talents. I have a teacher with a strong background in physical education. I turn to her for recommendations on new gross motor equipment; she knows I count on her expertise. Another teacher is a wizard with children's computer programs. She's our leader when purchasing decisions are made. AND she gets a subscription to a newsletter on children's software so her input can be well informed. (Meaning, I try — even in small ways — to help her be successful in her job.)
- 12 Take time to regularly observe in classrooms. At least yearly, *write up* your observations for the room's staff to read within a few days. The speedy feedback is always appreciated. The process is time consuming, but it allows you to document for personnel files as well as to congratulate staff

on skillful child guidance or inventive curriculum.

13 Provide one-on-one mentoring when possible. If not, try to find a mentor to fit a staff member's needs. Is a teacher having trouble arranging his environment? Help him with new arrangements or ask for another staff member's expertise.

14 Encourage staff's hobbies and interests. Is a teacher into bunnies big time? Go ahead and buy a bunny wind sock for her play yard. The kids will learn about wind and she'll appreciate the individualized attention.

15 Make copies of complimentary letters from parents for staff keepsakes.

16 Solicit staff input on decisions that affect them. For instance, they can identify best times to hold parent-teacher conferences.

17 Before preparing supplies and equipment budgets, ask staff to submit a list of recommended purchases.

18 Provide staff with articles, videotapes, or conference information that address topics of special interest. Are teachers interested in learning about the Project Approach? If so, secure funds to send them to a workshop. (My personal dream is to find travel funds so our teachers can visit the Reggio Emilia programs in Italy!)

19 Encourage staff to serve on professional boards and committees. Recognize their

efforts when talking to staff, parents, and board members.

20 Compliment staff when they participate in wellness and stress management programs. Literally, they deserve a pat on the back for staying healthy!

21 Recognize staff talent in simple and spontaneous ways. When I go to a conference, I bring something back from the exhibitor's venue. One year, my treasures included a white rabbit puppet that popped out of a magician's black hat. I left the puppet as a surprise on the teachers' desk. An attached note said I marveled at the magic they do with kids. Yes, it's sappy and sentimental, but the teachers appreciated the thought all the same — and who doesn't need another puppet for the classroom?

22 Provide staff with as much personal space for organization and planning as possible. In days of old, our teachers had lockers, not an office. We've made a bit of progress since then, but not lots. Now four head teachers share a cramped office with one desk, a file cabinet, and a computer. Their office has a love seat for comfort, but also stores our children's library, two refrigerators, and its walls are stacked — literally to the ceiling — with *junk* supplies creative teachers love to squirrel away. They don't have the separate work stations, staff lounge, or make-it-take-it resource room of their dreams, but

they know I'd jump for space that would give it to them.

23 Provide staff time to observe other programs. Mutually decide with staff where they'll observe, why, and when. Arrange for substitutes so staff can leave without burdening those left with the kids.

24 Once a year, take a *fun and interesting* retreat or staff trip together. Visit an outstanding children's museum or go hear a famous children's author speak. Staff will appreciate the time you take to facilitate and organize their enjoyment.

25 Committed caregivers get a lot of enjoyment out of being partners with parents as they nurture children's development. To provide time for the communication the partner requires, bring in extra staff or volunteers at the beginning and ending of the day (that's when parents are most likely to be in the classroom).

26 Bring in a bouquet of wildflowers or a new compact disc to classrooms *just because*. Employees and children respond to aesthetics.

27 Involve staff in any changes in their work environment. We recently renovated one of our site's play yard. I can't tell you how many times I volleyed construction ideas between architects and teaching staff. I continually asked if a proposed design would help or hinder our teachers' job performance. And boy did

it pay off! Our program ended up with a much better play yard because the people who used it day in and day out provided guidance. And the staff were pleased to be included in making decisions with other professionals. (In truth, they prevented the committee from making numerous design mistakes!)

28 Serve on committees that organize a community-wide child care provider recognition day. If there isn't one already, start one yourself. Staff will note your efforts to celebrate the important work they do.

29 Teachers love books. Make it a program practice to treat them with birthday or holiday gift certificates to a bookstore. Whether they purchase a book for relaxation or for reading to the children, your program will win either way.

30 Occasionally surprise teachers with helpful supplies that are *tools of the trade*. This could be a big-ticket item, like a laminating machine. But most likely your budget will better afford something simple, like notepads with motivational sayings. "To teach is to touch the future" is a perennial favorite.

31 Encourage and facilitate your program staff and parents' involvement with Worthy Wage Day!

32 Buy each program site a subscription to the newsletter *Rights, Raises and Respect* — the biannual publication

of the National Center for Early Childhood Workforce, \$30/year. Send fee to: NCECW, 733 15th Street NW, Suite 1037, Washington, DC 20005-2112.

33 Nominate deserving staff for awards bestowed by the community or profession.

34 Ask staff for recommendations of curriculum books to add to their resource library. (And if they don't have an on-site resource library, create one. Our staff's is located in my office.)

35 Reimburse staff for part or all of their professional dues to organizations, such as local affiliates of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (to identify your local, call 1-800-424-2460).

36 Reimburse staff for part or all of continued education costs, whether they be through conferences or college classes. Be sure to recognize staff each time they complete a course that improves their job skills.

So there you are, 36 tangible and specific ways to value your staff and the life affirming work they perform. As you put these ideas into practice, you'll put action behind your hopes and dreams for children. It's the ethical thing to do — the right thing to do. And may the rest of the world follow your lead.