

The ABCs of Y2K

by Mav Pardee

Here we are, half way through 1999. Does your center have a Year 2000 (Y2K) compliance plan? Is Y2K planning one more thing on your To Do list, but well below hiring staff, scheduling parent conferences, finishing summer enrollment, or fixing the flat tire on the bus? Or . . . are you bewildered or bored by all the hullabaloo about the Y2K problem?

Y2K needs your attention, if only to reassure yourself that your child care program is not at risk. It's important to understand the scope of Y2K in order to take the necessary measures. It's also important to understand which problems you can fix within your organization, and which require action by others.

Some centers are well on their way to assessing the risks and developing solutions. In a quick telephone survey, we found that larger multi-site child care organizations have Y2K plans in place. Programs with board members, friends, or family in the technology field are working

on the problem as well. But many programs have done nothing. If you are part of that group, please pay attention.

What is the Y2K Problem?

The Y2K problem — sometimes called the Millennium Bug — will be brought on as information systems enter the year 2000. For many years, the dates in automated systems were recorded using only the final two digits (e.g., "89" for "1989"). With the coming millennium change, these systems will be unable to determine the difference between years beginning with "19"

and those beginning with "20" (e.g., 1901 and 2001). As a result, some computer systems may produce erroneous information or fail completely.

You don't need to work or play on computers to be affected by Y2K. At this point in history, computerized systems are integrated into many daily activities — banking, telephone and utilities, hospitals, the pumps at your local gas station, your automobile engine . . . the list is very long. What makes the Y2K problem difficult and potentially serious is its pervasive reach and the immovable deadline for developing solutions.



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Getting Started

If you have put off dealing with Y2K until now, how do you know where to start? First, undertake a quick assessment of the systems in your child care program. Then focus on getting the most critical systems working properly, and prepare contingency plans.

Administration

Organize an assessment and planning group to review various aspects of your program operations. Look for all points where Y2K may affect you. At least one member of the assessment group should be well grounded in Y2K issues. If you do not know anyone with Y2K expertise, you may need to hire a computer consultant to conduct the assessment and implement the necessary changes.

If your computers or software programs are more than a year old, or if you track dates in your administrative software, Y2K may have an impact. You — or someone you hire — will need to test the computers. Check first with your supplier to determine whether your particular model is “Y2K compliant” (already adjusted to solve the Y2K issue) or whether an update is necessary. A number of resources on the Internet explain the process for assessing and fixing hardware and software compliance issues. In addition, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a good online resource called *Y2K Information Guide for Human Services Providers* which includes a sample vendor certification letter. The guide, which contains other good information as well, can be downloaded. Go to <http://y2k.acf.dhhs.gov/> and follow the instructions.

Check the vendor Y2K compliance statements on all commercial software. If you can't locate a compli-

ance statement, contact the software manufacturer; in many instances they have toll-free numbers to answer your Y2K questions. Some companies also offer inexpensive software upgrades for the latest Y2K version. If you have custom-developed software, be sure to contact your vendor.

Depending on the size of your program, there are many other types of business equipment that should be included in your assessment. Decide which equipment is critical to program operations, and then set priorities for testing or replacing non-compliant products. The vendors where you purchased the equipment should be able to provide information on product compliance.

While it's important to check your equipment, it is just as critical to consider important files and records. If you have moved towards a *paperless* office, this is the year to back up your records on paper. Make sure you have paper copies of financial records and bank statements for the current year, and check with your accountant to determine if you need to back up records for several earlier years as well. Track ATM transactions, payroll records, tax forms, receipts, and invoices on paper. If your bank's computers go down, you will want proof of your account status.

If your center participates in state-funded child care reimbursement programs or has automated eligibility determination, check with your state funding agency regarding its Y2K readiness. For a progress report on your state's Y2K efforts, visit the state web page. These are generally found at http://www.state.__.us. Put your state's two-letter abbreviation in the web address provided. (For example, <http://www.state.nm.us> for New Mexico).

Be sure that you have paper copies of all children's records: enrollment forms, progress reports, fees and deposits, health records.

Basic Infrastructure

One of the frustrations of Y2K is that no child care center is an island. Even if you are vigilant in assessing the automated systems within your program and fixing all problems, you still face some risk of disruption next January. Most predictions are that Y2K problems will result in some localized failures of basic services — electricity, telephone, and other services we take for granted.

Check these administrative tools for Y2K compliance:

- Administrative software
- Children's software
- Computer hardware and peripherals
- Credit card readers
- E-mail service
- Fax machines
- Time clocks
- Voice mail systems

In most cases, the utilities companies are well along in their own Y2K planning. Contact each utility company to assess its level of preparedness, and keep asking questions until you reach the person with accurate information.

Remember that in most parts of the United States and Canada January is the coldest and darkest time of year. You may need to make plans within the program to cope with power loss during the program day

while children are present — flashlights, extra blankets, additional warm clothing for children and staff. Develop contingency plans for maintaining program operations if your center loses power for several days or weeks. A campus child care center we interviewed in Wisconsin mentioned that as part of their Y2K planning they are identifying ways they might be able to help smaller centers with fewer resources. Contact other centers, employers, municipal groups to find out what your community has done to prepare for Y2K. There may be resources you can use in your planning.

As you assess the basic infrastructure services and functions you need to keep your program functioning, develop back-up plans as well. Several centers mentioned that they plan to stockpile a two-week supply of nonperishable foods: bottled water, formula, powdered milk, canned juices, and dried and canned foods to keep on hand in case their refrigerator, freezer, or grocery distribution system is disrupted. Others suggested keeping a supply of cash on hand, in case banking services are temporarily disrupted — enough to purchase basic supplies and, if necessary, to meet a partial payroll.

Child Care

The child care industry has special responsibilities because of the nature of the service. As you move forward with your Y2K planning, be sure to consider the elements related to direct care. Most of the centers we interviewed planned to communicate about Y2K with parents a month or two before the end of 1999. Parents can take part in some of the child-specific contingency planning. You may want to create a Y2K preparedness checklist: a list of extra clothing, reminders of medica-

Check the following service providers regarding their Y2K readiness:

- Emergency services
- Fire suppression systems
- Food services
- Heating, cooling, and utilities
- Security or alarm systems
- Smoke detectors
- Suppliers
- Telephone systems
- Transportation services

tion or prescription refills, a flashlight and batteries. You may also want to provide information on how you will prepare children for temporary service disruptions during the day.

Include classroom staff in the Y2K planning group. They will have practical ideas for preparing children and their families. They might also want to plan some activities and appropriate explanations for children in their group. If children are prepared and know that their teachers are prepared and confident about disruptions, it will be less frightening.

Listen to staff concerns about Y2K as well. The American Red Cross has a *Y2K Readiness Checklist* on their website (<http://www.redcross.org>) or you can call your local Red Cross or contact the national headquarters at (703) 248-4222. The checklist could be used to begin the conversation at a staff meeting.

We asked the center directors we surveyed about their concerns regarding Y2K. In addition to the

topics we've already discussed in this article, one director asked, "Are the doomsayers going to be right or are those minimizing the impact of Y2K going to be right?" It's hard to know, and while it's important to prepare, don't overreact. Get started so you are prepared.

Additional Y2K considerations for child care programs:

- Communication with parents
- Checklist for parents
- Children's activities and appropriate explanation
- Staff concerns