

# Do Sweat the Small Stuff!

by Julie Wassom

**“W**hat made you enroll in this center versus the others you considered?” I asked a parent who had recently enrolled in a center in California. I was curious because this center was an older building in an established neighborhood while the nearby competition was a newer facility and a bit less expensive.

Her answer? “Because when we came to visit this center, the director immediately leaned down and talked directly to my child. All through the tour, she talked to him as if he were already here. She made us feel so welcome.” Greeting the child at his level and genuine personalization are small things. But they are the kind of things that matter in securing and retaining enrollment.

“Little things are not little things, little things are everything,” said Harvey Mackay in his book *Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive*. This couldn’t be more true

than when a parent is considering the emotional purchase of child care services. Your prospects make their enrollment decisions based as much on the little things you do to make them feel good as on all the information you give them about your center and its services. So when you’re establishing practices for how you’re going to win more enrollments, DO sweat the small stuff. It matters.

There are three parts of the enrollment building process where little things can help you be more successful at securing enrollment. These are during the prospect

inquiry call, the center visit, and in the follow up you do with enrollment prospects.

## Inquiry Call

**Enhance your greeting.** When a prospect calls your center to inquire about your child care services, you make a first — yet lasting — impression within the first minute of the call. Does your greeting sound professional, friendly, and fresh? Or does it sound like a rote response blurted into the receiver on a busy day? The words you say, the speed you say them, and the tone of your voice all matter in that first impression that sets up an image of your center in the mind of the caller.

**Ask as much as you tell during the inquiry call.** It’s easy to just get the basics from the caller, then go into your “spiel” about your center.



*Julie Wassom is president of The Julian Group, Inc., a training and consulting firm with a specialty in child care marketing and enrollment building. She is the author of **The Enrollment Building Success Library of print and audiotope learning programs**. She can be reached at (303) 693-2306.*

When you do that, you risk losing your prospect's interest by telling, not selling. Your prospect doesn't realize or care that you have taken dozens of inquiry calls from prospects wanting to get similar information about your center. To an inquiring mother, hers is the only call you've had all day, and her child care needs are of utmost importance. The personal interest you show in those needs will impact her decision on whether or not to schedule a visit to your center.

So ask, not just the questions all centers ask about the child's name and age and whether or not full-time care is needed. Throughout the telephone conversation, ask questions such as: "What's most important in the child care services you select for your child?" "What are your child's favorite activities?" "What has been your family's prior experience with child care?" Then listen, really listen, to your prospect's responses, and adjust your conversation to address the caller's needs with the benefits she can see during a center visit that will meet those needs. Don't tell the whole story on the phone. Remember, your goal in the inquiry call is not to secure the enrollment but to schedule a center visit. So your last question should be something like: "When would it be convenient for you and Jimmy to come in for a center visit?"

**Use prospect profiles.** Whether you use index cards, a notebook, or a contact management software program, take notes on your inquiry callers' child care needs and desires. It seems like such a small thing to jot a note about what a prospect said when you asked what she is looking for in child care services. And besides, you can probably remember, right? NOT! If you make note of personal considerations discussed during the inquiry call, it

makes it easy for you to refer back to the profile before your prospect comes in for a visit. Then when you mention these items in the first few moments of your prospect's center visit, you immediately set yourself ahead of your competition for the enrollment. Prospect profiles are a little thing that can give you a big advantage if you use them well.

## Center Visit

**Treat center visitors like welcome guests** versus potential customers interrupting your day. A few times I have walked into a center at a scheduled time, and there was no one to be found in or near the front desk or office. It is an empty, disconcerting, unwelcome feeling. If you have scheduled a visit, know when your prospects are coming and be there to greet them. Use their names, smile, shake the parent's hand, greet the visiting child at his or her eye level, and express your genuine pleasure at their presence in your center. A little good feeling on the front end can set the stage for a big decision in your favor.

**Meet privately first.** Before you whisk your visitors off to the classrooms and playground of your center, invite them into your office or another private area for a brief introductory conversation. This eases anxiety and gives you a few priceless moments to personalize the visit even more. This is also your opportunity to connect the inquiry call information you received to the center benefits you will show your prospect as you walk through the center.

Make a comment or two that shows your prospect that you remember her as a person, and that your center can, in fact, meet her needs. You might say: "I recall from our telephone conversation that you were concerned about the ratio of

teachers to children since Jimmy was previously with a nanny. In a moment, I'll show you how many adults are in his classroom and how they interact with the children so each one gets plenty of attention and love." Where did you get this information? From the prospect profile you reviewed before this visit.

Have a few toys in a basket in your office so the visiting child will be occupied while you talk to the parent. Ask additional questions to personalize this experience for your prospect. During this brief meeting, you may also want to show the visiting prospect your center scrapbook or customer testimonials or evidence of your center's credentials, such as accreditation certificates, etc.

**Ask before you educate.** The center visit is another time when it is easy to get into a spiel that can sound canned and impersonal to the visiting prospect. Though it is important to educate each visitor about the benefits of your center, a little thing that can significantly enhance that process — and your chances to get the enrollment — is to ask before you educate. Rather than just telling your guest about your center, periodically ask her a question. For instance, as you're walking toward the Parent Board, ask: "Is communication about your child's day here at the center important to you?" Then explain the posted communications. As you head for the playground, ask: "What outdoor activities are Jimmy's favorites?" Then show her those first.

And don't forget to ask several questions to determine your visitor's satisfaction with what she's seen. I call these "trial closing questions." One small trial closing question such as "Does this look like a good environment for your child?" can have a big effect on how you conduct the rest of the center visit.

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What matters most in achieving your center visit goal of securing the enrollment is asking the prospect to enroll. When you sense that the prospect has seen enough or is otherwise ready to make a decision, stop educating and ask a closing question! There are lots of comfortable ways to ask for the enrollment. The important thing is that you ask. It's one small part of the center visit that really matters.

### Prospect Follow Up

**Do it!!!** I have a friend who says "The fortune is in the follow up." And I agree. Follow up takes a little time, and a little extra effort, but it pays big dividends. So few center directors regularly follow up with potential enrollment prospects. If you practice good follow-up techniques, you will without a doubt secure more enrollments than if you don't.

**Set up a follow-up schedule.** Tell prospects who call that you will send them information and place a follow-up call to answer their questions. Be timely. Send the information right away. Include your business card. It's a small marketing tool that communicates a big message about your level of professionalism. Then call when you said you would. It's a little thing, but it instills the trust and credibility that helps prospects make an enrollment decision.

Place a follow-up call to parents who have visited your center but not yet enrolled. Send them invitations to events at the center. Persevere until they are no longer prospects. There's an old adage in sales and marketing that says 10% of the people make 80% of the sales because that 10% were willing to make at least five contacts with each prospect. Are you in that 10%? Use a tickler system and staff assistance

to help you schedule timely follow up.

**Ask for referrals.** In your follow-up conversations with prospects, and also with your existing customers, ask for referrals. It's a small way you can express the confidence you have in the quality of your center's programs and services. It's also an extremely cost-effective marketing technique because it can generate lots of prospects with very little extra effort. For example, in a follow-up call to a center visitor, you could say: "Miss Sharon and I will look forward to seeing you and Jimmy next Monday. She'll have Jimmy's special first-day buddy and his own cubby all ready. By the way, who else do you know who might be interested in our child care services? I'd be happy to give them a call and send information like I did for you."

Let parents know if you have a referral program that offers recognition or rewards for enrolling referrals. Word of mouth is your most cost-effective advertising. If your center is doing a good job, you have parents who are telling other prospects how happy they are with you. By asking for those referrals, you are mining for gold in enrollments.

Whether it's in the inquiry call, the center visit, or your follow-up efforts, little things count in your ability to help parents feel yours is the center in which to enroll the little thing that matters most in their lives — their child. Do the marketing that matters, and you'll get more enrollments. No sweat.

### Reference

Mackay, H. (1988). *Swim with the sharks without being eaten alive*. New York: Morrow.