

Accreditation Strategies, Benefits, and Practical Tips

by Eileen Eisenberg

Have you ever tried to assemble a swing set? Your neighbors have the red and white, candy cane version that is the gathering place for the children on the block. It's a rather large structure with swings, ladder and slide, four-seat glider, and acrobat rings. You decide to purchase a similar one for your backyard. It comes unassembled. You methodically lay out all the parts and quickly glance through the instruction booklet. Terms like struts, u-bolts, strap hinges, fish-plates, gussets, and wing nuts flash before your eyes; diagrams illustrating steps A through Z appear overwhelming. What have you gotten yourself into? You will need guidance from a friend with experience, a do-it-yourself primer, appropriate tools, time, and patience.

The comparison of assembling a swing set to working through any accreditation process seems highly unorthodox. Yet, the basic principles are quite similar. You need the appropriate *knowledge base* to form a philosophy enabling you to achieve a consensus of goals for your center. Is your staff familiar with terminology such as anti-bias, cultural diversity, open-ended questioning, portfolio assessment, and individual education

plans? We've heard from directors that to survive an accreditation process you need *support* from mentors, colleagues, consultants, administrators, boards, and parents. You need a *timeline* that creates a structure and focus for the process. Lastly, to ensure that your program is built on a strong foundation, you need to create an *environment of trust and respect* between administration, staff, and families.

I interviewed directors and asked how they kept the enthusiasm of their staff alive during the months of self-evaluation and self-study. They have shared some of their strategies:

■ **Identify the strengths of your program.** A director/teacher of a church-based preschool asked teachers to rate their classrooms assessing four areas of teaching practices — interactions between staff and children; curriculum; health, safety, and nutrition; and the physical environment — using tools from *Blueprint for Action* (Bloom, Sheerer, & Britz, 1991). The results of these observations formed the basis of a rich discussion applauding the positive energies of the staff. Beginning on a positive note eases the way to discuss areas of concern.

■ **Examine areas of weakness.** Believing his staff would benefit more from observing exemplary practices than "just talking about it," the executive

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director of an inner-city agency partnered with an accredited center. His teachers visited the center, observed in classrooms, and talked extensively with the director and her teachers. Mentoring relationships naturally formed. Changes in curriculum, daily scheduling, and interactions with children were made as a direct result of these exchanges.

■ **Form staff committees to create plans for improvement.** The owner/director of a mid-size center reported that her teachers chose to critically examine their existing room arrangements, to assess the safety of the outdoor play space, and to take an inventory of their classroom materials. "It would have been quicker for me to make decisions, but seeing the teachers working together as a team was well worth the extra time."

■ **Observe in the classrooms to refine goals.** A director of a large suburban center put all the teachers' names in a box. Teachers drew names and exchanged places for a day. The next week the assistant teachers also randomly switched rooms. An independent consultant and the director took turns observing in the classrooms. The consultant gathered information from everyone and facilitated conversations with teaching teams about the observations.

■ **Encourage teachers to increase their personal professional development by funding tuition reimbursement for early childhood classes and conference attendance.** The director of a newly opened center in a small town sponsored all her teachers' attendance at the local junior college classes on accreditation and family support. Teachers even received cash bonuses when they completed the courses.

■ **Provide professional resources and create a space available to teachers to**

access these materials. The director of a Head Start program created a staff library/lounge in an unused storage area. A couch, area rug, poster, plants, coffee table, and a lamp provided a cozy feeling to the room. Teachers chose to purchase resource videos, books, and magazines on art, science, music, and literacy.

■ **Document the changes made through pictorial displays including enhancements to the physical environment, changes in room arrangements, and snapshots of parent and staff workshops.** Teachers in a corporate child care center created a picture board to represent their *Ten Components of Quality*. A parent in a non-profit child care center displayed the pictures he captured in a collage resembling the old Victorian home which houses the center.

■ **Celebrate along the way.** Universally, all directors report that they provide food at every staff and parent meeting. Others purchase small gifts of plants, notepads, or t-shirts; sponsor a festive dinner or evening out; distribute gift certificates (donated by local merchants); and write personal notes to show their appreciation for a job well done.

The greatest stumbling block for directors working to improve the quality of their programs is staff turnover. Some directors become so discouraged that they stop the accreditation process altogether. Others refuse to give up: "How I kept my sanity with constant staff turnover is a miracle. Once, four people left in one month. We had to begin the retraining process all over again. I was just too stubborn to quit!"

Benefits of the Process

Directors share their reflections on the long-term benefits of working through an accreditation process:

■ **Promote team building.** A consultant/trainer directed us to write a mission statement. As a group, we debated our philosophy and desired outcomes for children and families.

■ **Refocus curriculum.** Teachers were presented with options for choosing a particular philosophical approach to the design of their curriculum. The results produced a critical look at how children scaffold their learning, how teachers set up the environment, and how to approach the evaluation of children's progress.

■ **Establish health and safety training.** Every teacher has attended CPR instruction, has learned how to use a fire extinguisher, and now implements proper hand-washing procedures.

■ **Formalize the parent organization.** With the assistance of a mini-grant, we created a series of parent workshops that enabled parents to come together on a regular basis — including a theme *soup* evening, *goop* activity night, and an introduction to *Second Step Training*.

■ **Strengthen communication with parents.** Parent surveys indicated we needed to better inform parents when their children were ready to be transitioned (from infant to toddler rooms). We now have formalized opportunities for parents to spend time with the new caregivers before the children change rooms.

■ **Strengthen teacher/parent relationships.** Teachers complained that parents never came into the classroom to see their children's work. They felt unappreciated and that their efforts were going unnoticed. A double row of cubbies divided the two classrooms. In order to draw the parents into the classrooms, the sign-in/sign-out sheets were relocated to the top of the cubbies next to an inviting bowl of apples or a

platter of cookies. Amazingly, parents began to take notice of the activities and make encouraging comments to the teachers.

■ **Promote cultural sensitivity.** Recognizing that our center serves a diverse community, our parent handbook, policies, procedures, and newsletters have been translated into Mandarin and Spanish as well as English. We also provide simultaneous translation at all parent meetings.

■ **Renovate an existing space.** The process provided us with the incentive to *clean house*. We created teachers' storage lockers in a once cluttered attic and a teachers' resource room in an old kitchen, resurfaced the outdoor play space, repainted and recarpeted the entryway and stairs, and washed windows throughout the center.

■ **Change furnishings and materials.** We recognized the need to add age-appropriate toys for the infant room, recognized the lightweight chairs in the toddler room had fostered accidents and needed to be replaced, and purchased additional riding toys to reduce the waiting time for preschoolers.

Practical Advice

Lastly, directors share practical bits of wisdom:

■ **Learn how to delegate and get everyone involved.** The more staff and parents become part of the process, the more invested in its success they will become.

■ **Listen carefully to your staff and your families before making decisions.**

■ **Find time and space away from children for staff meetings.** Make every effort to find coverage during nap times or provide incentives for staff to meet

when the center is closed. The larger the center, the harder it will be to schedule meetings. In this situation, create teams of teachers (for example, put all the infant/toddler teachers on one team). Let the teams choose their own leaders and convene their own meetings. Provide these new leaders with appropriate management training. Monitor their progress and help them stay focused.

■ **Look into the mirror before you criticize others.** Do you want your teachers to clean up their classrooms? Examine your office. Do you want your teachers to extend their education and attend conferences? Look at your training schedule. Do you require teachers to communicate often and appropriately with parents? Refer to your last staff memo or staff meeting agenda. Remember to welcome staff and thank them for a good day.

■ **Learn to make tough decisions.** Sometimes it is necessary to terminate a staff person who has not proven to be suitable to work with children. Sometimes it is necessary to release a family from your program if you cannot provide them with the appropriate services. Most situations only worsen. Don't procrastinate. Document your observations and act on your decisions.

■ **Be prepared for the on-site validation or verification visit.** Organize your documents and feel comfortable with the materials. Spruce up your center by doing necessary maintenance and removing clutter. Present yourself as confident. Welcome the review team as you would guests in your home.

■ **Above all, have patience and maintain a sense of humor.**

As director of an early childhood program, you cannot be expected to assemble a swing set all by yourself nor

should you be expected to independently guide your program through a self-evaluation process that results in lasting change. Reflect on the ideas offered by your fellow directors; they are worth trying.

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