

## Ideas for Effective Supervision of Volunteers

# Keep Volunteers Invested in Your Program

by Dawn Marie Barhyte

**V**olunteers can be an invaluable asset to child care centers. These non-paid employees can assist with many aspects of teaching from providing one-to-one attention to a child who needs it, to setting up activities and reading to small groups. Utilizing volunteer strengths can give your center an overall boost. How do you create partnerships that work for your center and your volunteers?

Managing volunteers is both challenging and rewarding. Directors are in a key in position to involve these non-paid employees in the life of the center, utilize existing strengths and bolstering weaknesses. Directors also need to make sure volunteers are competent, qualified, and committed. You need a screening process to eliminate candidates who do not match your center's needs. Even though there is no direct compensation for working, there are strategies to attract quality volunteers — and these strategies will make it easier to retain good volunteers. Following are some steps to guide you. The results will be worth it. Your reward will be a

staff committed to you and the children of your center.

Pre-interviewing procedures. Be clear about the skills, competencies and abilities you seek.

Identify needs. Before interviewing, clearly establish staffing needs. Ask teachers to fill out volunteer request forms and have them describe specific tasks they need help with. When screening volunteers ask if they are comfortable with these tasks.

Ask open ended questions. These will help you discover how candidates are

likely to respond to situations while working. Descriptive answers are your best indicators of how the candidate is likely to behave once accepted. Questions beginning with "What would you do if . . ." will generate valuable information to help you differentiate between candidates.

Be selective. Because volunteers will be working with children, candidates should be screened carefully. Two recommendations should be required and checked before the individual starts working. Inform candidates that criminal background checks and health checks as part of the screening procedures are necessary to ensure the welfare of the children.

Have volunteers identify interests. Have volunteers complete an information form of personal data, such as interests, hobbies and personal characteristics. Some volunteers may love infants while others prefer older children. Efforts should be made to match the talents, skills and personality with that of the teacher.

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Define your roles. Have a written job description that specifies qualifications and responsibilities. Outline the specific tasks the volunteer is to assist with. Poorly defined expectations can cause anxiety and eventual lack of interest.

The volunteer should be oriented. Say “Welcome” and mean it. Begin your orientation by telling volunteers that you are glad to have them aboard. State that you’re looking forward to a mutually beneficial working relationship. Cover the essentials at first. You don’t want to overwhelm them with too much information at once.

Limit your orientation to the following key points: A description of the work the volunteer will be doing, safety rules and regulations, your center’s philosophy, basic child development information, and emergency procedures. The purpose of orientation is to get volunteers off to a good start. According to the Volunteer Management Report, you can assure volunteer success by making sure they know what they are being asked to do — it makes it easier when you have it in writing. Have each volunteer leave the orientation with a handbook describing what is expected of them and pertinent information presented so they can refer back to it.

Plan together. Determine the volunteer’s availability, set a schedule that works for all of you, and agree on assignments that meet your needs and the volunteer’s preferences. Initially, volunteers should have the opportunity to try several placements to determine which they prefer.

Keep in touch. Give new volunteers a reasonable amount of attention during their first few days of work. Check on their progress. See how well they are adjusting. Find out whether there is anything you can do to ease the transition. Host informal conferences over

lunch so you can share observations and offer encouragement and suggestions.

## Empowering Volunteers

Directors who supervise volunteers need to be creative and offer motivation and inspiration to reward volunteers and make them feel valued. Here are some ways you can maximize the benefits of your volunteer staff:

Provide support. Have regular meetings to review progress. This will help you assess personal satisfaction and identify areas where growth is needed.

Convey how important volunteers are. All of us need recognition. For some, recognition of the impact that they are having is a driving force; for most, it’s the recognition of others.

Take volunteer input seriously. Actively seek out and reward input. Include volunteers in staff meetings with paid employees. This makes the volunteer feel like an integral part of your team and reinforces the message that their input is taken seriously. Teachers and volunteer staff need to have a regular planned time to talk about the children together.

Don’t overlook the talent in your own center. Use volunteers’ talents, they can share these in the classroom.

Give freedom to implement ideas. If a volunteer has a good idea, don’t force the volunteer to go through layers of bureaucracy to implement it, let them run with it.

Provide volunteers with feedback. Place a high priority on objective, timely feedback. Encourage teachers to provide same. Train teachers on how to give positive feedback to volunteers.

Build team spirit. Expect your teachers and volunteers to share ideas, solve problems together, and provide support. An integral part of the team building process is including all staff in problem solving and planning. A successful team flourishes in an atmosphere of open communication where opinions and questions are encouraged.

Include volunteers in in-service training. To be used effectively, volunteers should receive training in basic child development. It’s a good idea to provide them with access to any staff development activity that will enable them to do a better job.

Maintain frequent communication. Don’t take for granted that volunteers will return. Put out a newsletter that keeps volunteers up to date, make phone calls to stay in touch and spend time talking with volunteers. Experts say, Ignore a volunteer and you’ll lose them.

Recognize length of service. Remember anniversaries. Volunteers do not receive pay, so their reward relies solely on self satisfaction and recognition. Any way you can express your appreciation will mean a lot — a pin, a certificate, an annual luncheon, even a simple “thank you.”

## Creating a Positive Climate

The key to volunteer satisfaction is maintaining a positive climate. You can do this by facilitating team spirit. Team spirit has many advantages, among other things it fosters cooperation and communication and improves morale. It also encourages good attendance. To foster team spirit in your center:

- Treat volunteers and paid staff equally.
- Practice an open door policy. Be visible, walk around and speak to volunteers often.

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- Create a climate of trust and open, honest communication.
  - Ask for input. Asking volunteers what they think is one of the highest forms of respect and will go a long way toward making them feel a valuable part of your team.
  - Create an environment in which everyone feels safe to speak.
  - Get team members to cooperate — rather than compete with each other.
  - Establish an environment in which all team members feel responsible for the welfare of the children.
  - When there are differences of opinion or disagreements, help forge a workable compromise between volunteers and teachers.

The most effective ways to engage volunteers in the life of the center and build commitment are:

- The role of volunteers must be a positive, distinct, element of your center's vision.
- Your center needs to view volunteers as valuable human resources who can directly contribute to fulfilling your center's mission.
- Staff at all levels should work in concert to encourage and facilitate meaningful volunteer involvement.
- There should be a conscious effort to reduce the boundaries and increase teamwork between paid and volunteer staff.