

## Ideas for Training Staff



# What Should We Be Emphasizing?

by Margie Carter

Recently a seasoned director and I were discussing a new teacher he had hired. An older woman with an early childhood degree from 20 years ago had interviewed well and seemed to respond thoughtfully to the children as he observed her with them. Now, after only a month on the job, she was saying she wasn't sure she wanted to stay. The job wasn't quite what she expected and she didn't know if she had the energy for it. This led us to an interesting dialogue about the assumptions and expectations both teachers and parents tend to have when they come to our early childhood programs.

Michael said, "We make a lot of room for childhood here in our center. I think sometimes people expect education to look quiet and orderly." Our discussion went on to bemoan how adults often want to control kids, to get them to pay attention to our ideas about what they should be doing. Adults often think children are bad when they do something different. We don't see what children are capable of when we are so focused on who we want them to be, rather than who they are. We want children to show respect for us, but we basically don't show them respect.

That conversation with Michael, along with others discussing the ever growing pressure on children to be achievers, sent me once more to the writings of Jim Greenman and Lilian Katz for reassurance. Jim continually reminds us to make our programs places for childhood and Lilian contends that overall, we are likely to overestimate children academically and underestimate them intellectually. I concur with both of these sentiments, along with Michael's, and this has me reconsidering our approaches to talking with prospective staff and families and our overall advocacy strategies.

What should program directors be emphasizing in our conversations with teachers and parents? Are we effectively communicating our values and what our work is about? Have we inquired and listened carefully to what they are wanting and expecting and responded thoughtfully to that? How can we redirect this runaway school reform train which values assessments and tests more than the children themselves? What will remove the blinders that equate school success with more pressure to perform and conform and re-focus practices around our knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice, cultural relevancy, multiple intelligences, and brain development?

## Communicating With Teachers

In our initial interviews and ongoing staff development efforts with teachers, we need to center our discussions on how we view children and the value we place on childhood. It isn't adequate to just focus our teacher interviews, orientation and in-service training on health and safety, licensing and accreditation standards, or our discipline policies and expectations for curriculum. Without further guidance and reflection, teachers are likely to just put in their time meeting requirements. If we are to entice our teachers to stay and have them work in more meaningful ways with children and families, our communications should be steadily emphasizing the deeper values and larger vision of our programs.

### STRATEGY:

#### **Focus recruitment and interviews on childhood**

Typically, the pool of qualified applicants for our job openings is not what we need. This suggests we focus on qualifications other than an ECE degree or experience to broaden our search for desirable teachers. Where might you likely find people who see children as precious gems to be treasured? How

can you uncover their potential to form strong bonds and see the world from different perspectives? Revamping interview questions to explore how people view childhood and the role for adults can be a good starting place. With an approach of dialogue, rather than interrogation, question applicants about the personal or professional experiences which influence how they think about children. Share an example of your own.

Inquire about books or people who have influenced their lives, and ask what skills and attitudes they deem most important in building a relationship with children. Offer anonymous stories about specific things teachers and children have learned in your center. Promote your program as a place for meaningful relationships, harnessing hope, and shaping experiences for the next generation. Ask applicants for their thoughts about the role of children in re-humanizing our culture and dreams for the future.

### **STRATEGY:**

#### ***Reclaim the concept of "indicators"***

In our professional efforts to carefully define and promote quality child care, the early childhood profession has amassed a number of valuable assessment tools with quality indicators. But if we were to step outside of this framework and look again at our programs from the point of view of a child, or parent untrained in the early childhood profession, what indicators might we be emphasizing? Read an excerpt from *Before the Basics* by Bev Bos, "Children were not born to . . ." and then try inventing a new set of indicators for an assessment tool to discover how the elements of childhood are allowed to thrive in your classrooms.

### **STRATEGY:**

#### ***Set expectations for joy in learning***

A simple, yet striking phrase hangs over the door of one of the schools of Reggio Emilia — "Nothing Without Joy." In what specific ways do you cultivate this expectation in your program? Make a list of how this could be woven into your interview and orientation process and infused into learning activities planned for the children and teachers.

### **Communicating With Parents**

All families want the best for their children, but sometimes the wool gets pulled over their eyes. Economic and time pressures, along with commercial and political messages pursuing their own interests, leave parents frazzled, and often confused about what kind of early childhood education their children need. Some lose sight of the value of childhood, wanting their child to get ahead, with special lessons and programs. Other parents complain about the amount of meaningless homework burdening their young children as they enter school. What kind of learning does this contribute to? Parents want to be reassured that their children are going to be successful, but they are often uncertain as to what that involves.

When they are focused on preparing children for school, parents may not understand the value of children messing about, creating dramas, and expressing raw feelings as they strive to form friendships and a confident identity. How can we best communicate to parents that our programs are centered around enabling children to be their real selves, known and loved for who they are? What do they need to see

to be reassured that their child is intellectually and socially engaged in important matters?

### **STRATEGY:**

#### ***Clarify the foundations and steps in learning***

With all the public discourse on success in school, parents may be looking for academic lessons or drills focused on facts, numbers or phonics to stimulate their child's learning and readiness for school. It might be hard for them to recognize children's intellectual pursuits as they explore theories of balance, design, and numeric equations in the block area; recreate centrifugal force as they play with balls and ramps on the playground; investigate aspects of physics and science while mixing a batch of blubber; discover the principles of sinking and floating at the water table; or the development of character and perspective as they dress up or do role plays with Lego people or animal figures.

An increasingly significant part of our work as early childhood educators is translating what we are doing into a verbal and visible account of how we are partnering with families to give their children a solid foundation for love of life and learning. Parents need the lay person's account of how our programs draw on the latest brain research, as well as years of child development study. They need clarity on Katz's distinction between academic and intellectual capacities. The dictionary defines academic as "very learned, but inexperienced in practical matters; conforming to the tradition or rules of a school; a body of established opinion widely accepted as authoritative in a particular field." Intellectual is defined as "given to study, reflection, and speculation; engaged activity requiring the creative use of the intellect."

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**STRATEGY:*****Promise their child will be respected and visible***

Parents will say that they want their child to be safe and engaged in learning in our programs, but we must promise them more than that. In very concrete and specific ways we must show them all the ways we respect children and value their childhoods. We can help them see how this is reflected in our arrangement of the environment, in our conversations and engagement with their curiosity, and in our efforts to make learning a joyful experience. Pointing out the capabilities we see in their individual children and the on-going ways we value what they are doing will reassure parents that their children are in the right place.

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