

# Right From the Start: Changing Our Approach to Staff Orientation

by Margie Carter



Whenever I watch directors launch a new staff member into a classroom, my heart leaps. I see the feeling of relief and the quiet crossing of fingers, hoping this will turn out to be someone who brings stability and a positive contribution to the quality of the program. Yet, time after time, the relief is short lived and things start unraveling for the director, the new staff person, and the rest of the teachers who are longing for a solid new co-worker.

The search for qualified staff is always time consuming, often tentative, and frequently discouraging. If you are fortunate to have some real choices among job applicants, people with an ECE education or several years experience, consider yourself truly blessed. If you are faced with choosing from a less qualified pool, you are certainly not alone. In either case, once you hire new staff your challenge is to keep them, and then keep them growing into your vision for your program.

Growing and keeping your staff requires simultaneous work on three fronts (even as you work on 20 others):

- budget development to adequately compensate your staff,
- working conditions and an organizational climate that reflect your vision,

- staff development and mentoring systems to support individual growth and overall professionalism.

For the most part, from the assessments teachers give me and what I witness myself, I'd say we are failing in all three of these areas. There are certainly exceptions and some innovations underway, but for the most part, we fail teachers right from the start and continue to reap the consequences.

With our limited resources, budget development is a constant strain requiring painful compromises. But even in better resourced programs such as Head Start and employer-sponsored child care, things are usually lean when it comes to an inspiring organizational climate and/or a meaningful staff development system. There may be regular training or staff meetings, but the emphasis is still shaped by regulations and daily business, rather than a bigger dream of who they hope to become. In most programs there is little evidence of overall self-reflection and an excitement about learning among the staff. Though not on most of our checklists, these are key ingredients to quality, and contributors to staff retention.

## Taking a New Approach

I'd like to suggest a radical alternative to the typical practice of new staff orienta-

tion. If, right from the start, we treat staff with the same caring and learning opportunities that we want them to provide for children, our chances of keeping and growing them into a career will be far greater. This means viewing new staff orientation as significantly different from requiring them to report to work an hour before their shift to fill out paper work and hear the nitty-gritty details of their responsibilities. Instead, all new staff should receive one week of paid orientation without direct responsibility for children so that they can experience our vision in action and begin to practice assuming a role in it.

### Strategy:

**Begin with your vision, values, and assumptions**

Typically, the emphasis in new staff orientation is on the safety and supervision of children. While it is important to communicate to staff that safety is our number one responsibility with children, this message can be part of an initial focus on valuing childhood and respecting children. Orientation should not be limited to lengthy explanations, but include a variety of ways to explore your program's vision, values, and assumptions about children's rights, capabilities, and feelings. Short readings can be offered and discussed along with a relevant, engaging video. (*Children at*

the Center: *Reflective Teachers at Work* is useful for this purpose.) Time can be spent observing in classrooms with the director or a mentor at the new teacher's side to narrate how respect for children looks in action.

This first overview day should also include an introduction to your approach to respecting and collaborating with the children's families. Hopefully, you have some engaging questionnaires for parents to fill out, and these can be reviewed along with documentation of examples of partnerships with parents in your program. A short article that conveys how teachers think about their work with children's families would be useful to discuss here. (The articles "Changing Our Attitudes and Actions in Working With Families" and "Developing Meaningful Relationships With Families" serve this purpose well.) You could also have the teacher try exploring some of the questions offered in my earlier *Child Care Information Exchange* article, "Considering Our Curriculum in Working With Families."

**Strategy:**  
**Provide time for further observation, reading, and self assessment**

Days two and three of your orientation week can be spent with the teacher doing more observation in the classrooms using specific worksheets to guide a first hand study of how the environment, curriculum, and interactions reflect a set of values. The new teacher can be given an attractive binder for keeping these observation worksheets and the readings that are offered, along with blank pages for reflective writing. Ask the teacher for daily writing on how he is responding and thinking, questions that are coming up, and specific strengths and areas for growth he self-identifies. This initial reflective writing can serve several purposes: it can set the tone for an ongoing practice,

help the teacher and director begin to define an initial professional development plan, and lay the ground work for creating a biographical statement as described below.

During these two days, new teachers should study selected documentation, child journals or portfolios, curriculum project books, and notes from important staff meetings. He or she can meet with team members as well as the director or mentor assigned. Time should be spent focusing on what it means to work as a member of a team, how to participate in collaborative discussions and projects, and ways to work through conflicts with respect.

**Strategy:**  
**Practice documentation and gain familiarity with available technology**

If your program wants teachers to be regularly observing and gathering documentation of children's activities, then offer an opportunity to practice this before assigning direct responsibility for a group of children. In the room where she or he will be working, help the new teacher focus on one child or activity to write up, photograph, and analyze in collaboration with the director, mentor, or teammate. Offer useful resources as an initial introduction to this process (such as *Family-Friendly Communications*, *The Power of Observation*, *Spreading the News*) and point to ones that will be useful for further development (*The Art of Awareness*, *Windows on Learning*).

This would also be a good time to familiarize the new staff member with the staff work space, and the use and maintenance of any technology you have, such as computers, printers, scanners, cameras, and video and tape recorders. Help her locate where other professional development resources are kept, as well as basic educational supplies for

the program, first aid, record keeping, and communication systems.

Ask the teacher to go over reflective writing to date and begin to conceptualize a biographical statement as part of a visual display to be created on the last day of orientation. This gives both the teacher practice and will make his thoughts, values, and background visible to others as he joins your staff.

**Strategy:**  
**End, rather than begin, with nitty-gritty details and paper work**

Starting with a focus on values, vision, and the children and their families sets the tone for the way you want teachers to view their work. When you delay introducing a bundle of details about job responsibilities and focus on the heart of your job, you create a different organizational climate that parallels how you want the teachers to be with the children. Ending the orientation process with paperwork and daily details is less overwhelming and fits into a larger context for new staff who have watched the center functioning for almost a week.

It's also important to end the orientation process with some inspiration, a summing up, and projection of next steps. Giving the person time to create a visual biography board to be posted, as well as clarity about the upcoming probationary period and next steps for professional development, is a fitting conclusion to the first week of an exciting new job.

**Calculate the Cost of Turnover**

If you are feeling that you'd never have the time or budget for this approach, I recommend you take a closer look. Staff turnover takes a big toll on our programs. With each coming and going

there is a social-emotional toll on the children and adults involved, as well as a time and financial drain on the administration. Turnover costs can run from several hundred dollars per employee to as high as 1.5 times an employee's annual salary according to the valuable resource, *Taking on Turnover*. You probably know this in your bones, but if you find yourself skeptical or unable to convince others, consult this book for its strategies to calculate the costs of turnover in your program. *Taking on Turnover* also includes other valuable guidelines for looking at your work environment, improving compensation, and substitute policies.

Turnover is rarely the result of teachers not understanding all the regulations and requirements of the job. Quite the opposite. We often lose potentially great members of our staff, not only because of inadequate wages, but because we throw them into a deep, olympic-sized pool without giving them carefully fitted goggles and a clear life support system. How can they become long distance swimmers if our orientation and ongoing staff development is only focused on treading water?

Perhaps the idea of keeping a new teacher out of the classroom for a week's orientation leaves you gasping for air as you consider patching together coverage with no substitutes or slack in your budget. But if you want new teachers to make a long term investment in your program, you have to begin with a significant investment in them. If you offer this time and respect to them, they are more likely to offer it to the children and families in your program.

## Resources

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