

# Creative Staff Training Is Key to Quality

by Karen Stephens

Director to director, let's talk turkey about program quality. No matter how spiffy and chic our child care center building may look, no matter how high techy we're able to equip and supply classrooms, and no matter how much money we can spend for public relations and advertising promotions — a program's quality is determined by staff attitude and performance — first, last, and always.

Staff are the most valuable, and temperamental, of program assets. Whether interacting with children, parents, or each other, how well staff meet their job challenges ultimately makes or breaks a program's image and reputation. Our programs are only as good as the staff we're able to hire, retain, support, and consistently motivate to high performance.

Without the strong underfooting of wise, committed staff who possess professional skills, program quality quickly slips down a slippery slope. Even our newly built, avant-garde child care buildings will be little more than warehouses. Void of energized and talented staff, any building is merely a shell where potential for engaging childhoods evaporates into thin air. In the wake are left hollow memories, not sustaining, life affirming ones. That abysmal picture

shortchanges children and families, and most certainly robs the future of a stable society.

Today's status quo of working conditions, wages, and benefits in child care, means that keeping a good staff is a continual challenge. But we can't let that distract us from investing in the staff we DO have. The best investment programs ensure staff are consistently — and creatively — trained so they'll continue to be fascinated by their work with children.

There are a variety of ways to keep staff in step with skilled professional practice, such as funding conference or workshop attendance. Some programs subsidize costs for continuing formal education, often by obtaining corporate/foundation grants or participating in government quality enhancement initiatives. Some

directors can even build budgets that include an on-site consultant for individualized, ongoing training support.

Considering resources, there are still a lot of directors who have no choice but to provide training themselves. For typical topics, like child abuse reporting procedures, that's fine. But if your training involves asking a staff to change or try new ideas, it's hard to be a prophet in your own land. To enhance training vitality and variety, experienced directors often swap training responsibilities for their respective staff — a bartering system so to speak. If you make the right match, it works.

However you arrange it, training must be a priority for every program, regardless of how programs vary in terms of staff turnover and staff qualifications. Through training you'll help your staff maintain their resilient, good hearts and also develop their keen minds.

With that said, the following are steps to make staff training well-targeted, creative, and useful. When training proves successful, the staff's work life becomes more enriching and satisfying. And to be sure, well trained staff greatly increases the odds that your child care building will be filled with the joy of cherished childhood memories in the making. Bottomline, that's what program quality should be about.

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## 1 Identify Training Needs

- Select training topics based on job descriptions as well as current staff experience and qualifications. Training will impact staff performance most when it is tailored to members' current needs. A new, inexperienced staff require different training than a staff with lots of seniority.
- Review licensing requirements which stipulate mandatory training topics. Plan topics in response to improvement suggestions from recent licensing visits.
- Compare program operation with accreditation criteria for high quality. A formal self-study using NAEYC accreditation criteria is very helpful in spotting staff training needs, even if your program doesn't pursue accreditation.
- To pinpoint training needs, observe staff performance regularly through announced as well as unannounced visits. While observing, note exceptionally skilled staff so they can become resources for mentors or peer trainers.
- Survey staff to find out suggested training topics, preferred methods of training delivery and best times to hold training. Ask staff what they are excited to learn more about!
- During evaluations, ask staff to reflect on skills or knowledge that need bolstering. Cooperatively draft a plan for professional development that responds to those needs.
- Analyze recent parent comments and concerns to reveal training needs. Staff, volunteers, or lab students also make insightful comments that infer training needs.

## 2 Select Training Topic and Define Target Audience

- Select participants based on the work

you did in Step 1. For instance, you might want to offer training on understanding and responding to biting incidents in the toddler room. That would define your target audience as well.

- Formulate a desired training group size. Tough, touchy, or confidential topics call for a smaller group size. Other topics may involve the whole staff. When all staff are in attendance, break into small groups when possible so more people get a chance to speak. And remember, your group size will influence how you deliver training.
- Decide who will be required to attend versus who will be invited to attend. Toddler teachers may be required to attend a training on biting; but other staff may appreciate being included — plus they can provide insight. In the case of biting, infant caregivers could give insight on a specific child's development prior to his enrollment in the toddler room. That sharing leads to peer mentoring and team building between classroom assignments.

## 3 Define Training Goals

- Write down desired performance outcomes that will result from training. Be as specific as you can. A vague, general goal doesn't get you good results. Share your goals with the staff and encourage them to *buy into* training by identifying their own goals as well.
- Identify content knowledge and skills staff need to meet desired outcomes. To increase the chances of successful training, break outcomes down into steps that are realistically achievable.
- Anticipate a timeline for achievement of training goals. Estimate how

many training sessions will be needed to ensure staff competence. If you set a timeline, include staff in the process so they can invest energy and commitment. This also helps prevent overwhelming staff with expectations too high for immediate mastery.

## 4 Select Methods of Presentation and Activities

- Plan and implement training that is as hands-on and interactive as possible. For long-lasting learning, experiential training is absolutely the way to go. Everyone learns best by doing.
- Whenever possible, interject training with humor. Allow the time and freedom needed for imagination and brainstorming to work its magic. For instance, if you want training to boost staff's creativity quotient, engage them in activities that will require them to practice resourcefulness — whether it is using blocks, art supplies, makeshift music instruments, dramatic play materials, or whatever.
- Vary training activities based on the time you'll have in each session and how many training sessions the topic needs for thorough coverage. Marathon training sessions can overwhelm and fatigue staff. Processing time is needed for training content to sink in and make sense. If you offer a two hour session, break it up in the middle with a relevant video or engaging music during which members can snack on refreshments and move around.
- Plan activities that appeal to a variety of learning styles. Don't limit yourself to lecture or half your staff will tune out — especially if you train after a long day of work. Following are examples of alternatives to a lecture format training:
  - ▶ Stage a mock magazine news show

(like *20/20* or *Dateline*) so staff can *interview* each other on the pros and cons of topics, like use of computers with young children.

► To explore all angles of a topic, include role-play when possible, such as staff acting out the scenario of a parent arriving after closing time.

► Read to the staff a relevant children's book and use reactions to guide discussion. *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn or *Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell are both great lead-ins to separation anxiety discussions.

► Prior to a meeting, have staff record answers to *reflection* questions designed to put them in a receptive mindset for training. If training is on nature education, ask staff to reflect on nature adventures they experienced during their childhood and ask them to share them with others.

► Hold a poster session where staff highlight *before and after* photos that relate to the training topic, such as room arrangement, learning center development, or curriculum documentation.

► Post mural paper on the training room walls. Have staff *web out* or list ideas to discuss that relate to the training topic. For instance, toilet training requires staff to consider child development, parent expectations, personal biases, communication with parents, changing table particulars, family cultural beliefs, pros and cons of Pull-ups, and so on. Allow the staff to decide where discussions should begin. They can also identify resource materials and local *experts* to help them explore the topic.

## Provide Good Training Resources for Future Use

■ No one remembers everything they

experience during training. Provide a meeting agenda and outline to refresh memories after training. Folders of resource references also help staff revisit training ideas or explore them more deeply. Provide a video on the training topic that staff can check out when questions arise. Web sites to refer to are becoming increasingly popular. And don't forget to identify skilled team mentors whose expertise can be tapped for support.

## Evaluate Training

■ Evaluation of training is critical. Both the director and staff should decide if training was worthwhile or a waste of time. Evaluation helps you plan future training events that will be well received and influential on staff performance. Ask staff to give written feedback on training strengths and weaknesses as well as organization and delivery. Ask them to cite a few concepts, tips, or ideas they picked up that could immediately be put into practice.

■ Evaluate training success by observing classrooms to see if practice has changed. Also interview parents and team staff to determine if training made an impact. Don't forget, go right to children and ask them their opinions. Children are incredibly honored to be a *focus group*.

## Finishing Touches: Infuse Training With Meaning

In today's hurried schedules, everyone's time is so precious. Time spent in training inevitably means staff are losing time with their own families. Recognition of that personal sacrifice, and appreciation for the dedication it confirms, should motivate directors to infuse staff training with as much meaning as possible. Show staff respect by making sure training is worthwhile

and valuable. Disrespect is shown if we treat professional development as merely *putting in time* to meet minimum licensing standards for inservice hours.

■ Arrange the training room in anticipation of staff. Have adequate materials set out and ready to use on time.

■ Create comfort for a relaxed sense of community and camaraderie. Seating should be comfy and scaled for an adult's body. Room temperature should be cozy — not too cool or too hot. Natural lighting or even *mood* lighting lifts spirits. Candles add warmth and ambiance, as can simple windchimes or background music. Fresh flowers or a bubbling table top fountain contribute beauty and harmony. Such small things are easy to overlook, but they really do show respect — and they make a big difference. Quality is in the details, even ones we often take for granted.

■ Nourish the body as well as the mind — provide your staff with food! Refreshments should be tasty and even fun, and always encourage socializing.

■ Provide participants with a focus object they can hold and manipulate. The best focus objects symbolize something about the training and its intent. Here's one of my favorites focus object strategies:

When training participants arrive, there's a small selection of mirrored pebbles at each seat. As the group gathers, I encourage them to make designs with their pebbles and to show them off to each other. They can keep the pebbles during the training in case they get fidgety.

I begin the training session by sharing my personal philosophy of teaching — whether with children or adults. I envision myself as a pebble — a pebble with

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some knowledge about kids and some experience with them. Whenever I share my insights, I envision my pebbly-self dropped into a pond. I make a ripple that hopefully circles out widely to make a positive impact on all it touches — the training participants and the children in their care in particular.

At the end of the training, just before participants leave, I hand each one a mirrored pebble to keep — a talisman if you will, to remind them of what they learned and of our shared commitment to children and families. I tell each person they're a pebble, too, able to share their knowledge with others so life is better for us all.

Yep, I'm a sucker for symbolism and sentiment. Luckily, there are many simple items that can symbolize useful metaphors for our field. Choose symbols that relate well to your specific training topics. Here are some suggestions:

- A packet of garden seeds or a simple daisy reminds staff to bloom with confidence.
- A tiny container of playdough reminds them to be flexible during times of change; silly putty suggests that humor is a great way to maintain perspective.
- A bottle of bubbles reminds staff to manage stress by taking time to play on

their own. (Or if staff are in the habit of complaining, bubbles can remind them to lighten up!)

- A lucky penny reminds staff an optimistic attitude can help change take place easier.
- A candle sheds light on new opportunities.

You get my meaning. Use your imagination. Trust it to inspire you and you'll come up with a wonderful symbolic token to infuse your training with meaning.

Now, I don't know about you, but I'm going to the hobby store to buy some more mirrored pebbles!