

CREATING A NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS

KAREN MILLER



Motivating Adults to Learn

“I pay for them to go to all kinds of training, but getting them to implement what they’ve learned is a real challenge.”

One of our e-mail network members expressed difficulty in motivating some experienced infant teachers to keep on learning. They were resistant to new ideas and the concept of *curriculum* for infants, in spite of several meetings and the advice of consultants. Of course, this is not an isolated situation. It doesn’t matter if the new idea is a handwashing technique, a way to interact with parents, a method for observing and recording, or curriculum practices, staff sometimes resist change. Our network members shared many ideas for making learning a *norm* in your program.

Causes of Resistance

Understanding the basis of the reluctance to learn new things helps us think of ways to overcome it.

- **Failure to see the need.** Many centers and state regulations require ongoing education. Linda Gillespie says staff may wonder why they need to learn something and how it applies to their work and life. When we can’t make that connection, it’s hard to motivate others. Adult learners have to feel it’s worth their while. This is where you can talk about research studies, show them other programs, or have people experienced in the method talk to them. Lynn Manfredi/Petitt speculates that their thinking may be linked to the idea that mothers (supposedly) know intuitively what to do with their children. *“They don’t get trained, so why should we?”* Of course, something that works perfectly well with one or two children may simply not be reasonable in a group setting. It is the job of the trainer to point that out. The first message of training is to communicate how children will benefit from the practice or why it is necessary.
- **Risk of Failure or of Judgment.** There might be genuine doubt that the new concept will *work*, or the person may fear they may not be able to *pull it off*. It helps to set things up in an experimental mode. *“Next time A happens, try X. If that doesn’t help, we can go back to the drawing board.”* *“Try it for a week,”* is another good suggestion. Then, be there to support the person’s efforts and encourage them. *“You might try . . .”* is another good phrase, or *“Here is what some other people have done that worked well . . .”* Most importantly, let them know you don’t expect perfection right away.
- **Guilt.** A person may feel criticized for doing something *the wrong way* for so long. Lynn Manfredi/Petitt shares this story: *“One co-worker finally admitted to me that she was concerned that she had done it wrong with her children — who were at that moment challenging teens. We have to get our own fears and insecurities out of the way in order to learn new things.”*
- **Time/Money.** Peggy Yackel states, *“One of the problems in our profession is that it pays so poorly that many of our unmarried staff have to work at evening and week-end jobs to make ends meet so they have little energy to grow professionally.”* Naturally, offering as much time and support during working hours is helpful.
- **Feeling Overwhelmed.** Mike Casey suggests, do a little bit at a time. It can be overwhelming to think you have to totally change the way you’ve been working for a number of years. Break the topic down. If it’s an outside workshop over a broad topic, help them identify a piece of it to work on first.

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Strategies

- Locate quality conferences in your area that have an infant track and request that the staff attend. Hearing what other centers are doing, especially if it is innovative, usually motivates staff. They develop a sense of collegiality and realize they are not the only ones asked to practice in a certain way. They can gain insights and conviction.
- It's great if you can close your program and send the entire staff to conferences. This is one way of supporting them with time and money and shows you value them. Plus, the break from their ordinary routine can give people new energy.
- Put one staff person in charge of keeping track of in-service training. Peggy Yackel does this for her program and is forever bringing in announcements of classes, conferences, and reading — urging others to take advantage of them.
- Ask staff for input as to what kind of training they'd like brought in to the center.
- Arrange a visit to another center, perhaps where people could see others using a new method or implementing interesting ideas.
- Provide articles from professional magazines for people to read. One director has subscriptions to many early childhood professional publications. She glances through them and notes the pertinent articles. Then, she attaches a note on the cover listing good articles to read and puts them in staff mailboxes with a note to read, initial, and pass on.
- Provide staff with the newest books on infant and toddler care.
- Use teaching videos and view them. Arrange for everyone to view the video separately or call a staff meeting and have everyone view it at once and discuss it.
- Identify one or two staff who may be the least resistant and ask them to do a little research/reading on the issue. They will help the others to understand what you are trying to do.
- Build on what is known and commonly done by the group and use long-time teachers as class mentors. Ask people to share ideas and questions in writing on group charts. This helps people feel valued and *heard*.
- Encourage membership in a professional association. Suggest to parents of ECE students to give them the membership as a gift. Or you might provide this membership to teachers who have *proved* themselves.
- Hold a team building workshop at your center. It is a good way to ensure that new people on staff feel supported and included.
- Appeal to staff self-interest. Show them how the new practice will make their jobs easier or more effective.

Coming to "Ah-ha"

As a trainer, I can share that it is a delightful experience when you sense that people are *getting it* in a presentation. You can see the *light bulbs* go on over their heads. There is usually a sense of excitement and eagerness to apply new understandings. You hear

people say things like, "I can't wait to get back to my children and try this." In order to reach this point, you must get people past the *Yes-buts*. Some people resist change, perhaps because of defensiveness. They might understand the principles of what you are saying and agree with you, but fear a lack of support from their administration or co-workers.

Back at the center, make sure staff are supported in their growth. Be a cheerleader. Ask them what they need from you. Notice their efforts and express appreciation for successes. Help them notice the change in the children as well.

Motivation Comes From Within

Cathy Jo Banas points out that you really can't *motivate* someone. Motivation has to come from the heart and a sincere desire to bond with children and do what's best for them. You can, however, facilitate and encourage others.

I have found an irony in training people — the ones who need it the most don't show up or are the most resistant! It's the *old pros* who are already wonderful teachers, who are the most eager learners. Peggy Yackel is quick to point out that age is not a determiner. In fact, it is often older staff who have the perspective and flexibility to be the best learners. The ones who are less interested in trying new teaching methods, she says, are often less educated or have previously taught in a completely different type of program and are reluctant to take all the time required outside the classroom to read.

Don't give up. When people are offered good learning experiences, they feel supported and valued. Everyone, especially those who work with young children,

should keep stretching — physically and mentally! It gives vitality to their program and to their lives. Human development never stops.

If you would like to join the informal e-mail network for this column, make a comment, or suggest future topics, just send a message to:

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Thanks to the following members of our e-mail network who contributed significantly to this article: Cathy Banas, lead infant teacher at Intergenerational Learning Center in Apple Valley, MN; Mike Casey, owner and executive director of Shrewsbury Children's Center in Shrewsbury, MA; Annie Diehl, director of the KidsUnlimited Children's Center in Riverside, CA; Linda Gillespie, of the Early Care and Education Resource Development Department of the Community Coordinated Child Care of Union County, NJ; Lynn Manfredi/Petitt, consultant and infant/toddler specialist in the Atlanta area; Phyllis Porter, lead infant teacher and staff trainer at Mount Olivet Day Services in Bloomington, MN; and Peggy Yackel, lead infant teacher at the Westwood Early Childhood Center in St. Louis Park, MN.