

# Nurturing the Future

## Implementing internships in child care programs

by Lisa Peterangelo

When students graduate with Early Childhood degrees, they enter the field with a great deal of knowledge. What

they lack many times is practical experience. Too often, enthusiastic newcomers are disillusioned by their first experiences due to unrealistic expectations of child care or their own abilities.

Knowing child theory is a wonderful thing but having the skill of handling an irate parent is essential!

colleges to strengthen the field with qualified professionals.

Directors should be aware that taking on an intern is a responsibility that requires effort. A program should never start thinking about the internship on the day the student arrives. Preparations are necessary to ensure a quality experience for the student and to eliminate potential problems that may arise.

### Planning

The difference between a successful internship and an ineffective one is the amount of planning that goes on before the intern arrives. There are several components of the internship that need to be addressed by both administration and staff.

Program readiness is the first aspect to be considered. If a program is experiencing heavy turnover, doing major renovations, or getting ready for NAEYC accreditation, it is not the best time to bring in a student who will need a lot of attention from the staff. If there is a particular room that is going through major difficulties (chronic illness, turnover, staff disputes, etc.), placing an intern in

it would not be wise. You want to place a student in the room or area where they will come away with the richest experience. The intern should be placed in a classroom where the staff is thoroughly trained and knowledgeable of the children. Staff who are able to answer most questions and whom the director feels will offer the best modeling of appropriate practices are the best choice. Another factor to consider is how many interns the program can handle. Most programs can benefit from extra help, but too many bodies in a classroom can be overwhelming for the staff, children, and parents. Interns should be limited to one per room to maintain the room's stability.

### Types of internships

Once a program decides that it can successfully manage an internship, it must determine what types it will offer. When people think of internships, they automatically think of a student in the classroom, but there are several other options to consider.

An administrative internship would benefit a student who is interested in the management of child care. Working

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One way that child care programs can help prepare future professionals in the field is to offer opportunities for the student to gain real life experience in a program. This is where internships are indispensable. An internship will help a novice develop their skills under the watchful eye of a more seasoned mentor. With internships, not only is the program getting an extra pair of hands, but it is also collaborating with area

closely with the director or assistant director will allow the student to see the many sides of child care programming such as working with a budget, staff scheduling, parent relations, and ordering food and materials. Sitting in on staff meetings or board meetings will assist the student in understanding the complexities of running a program.

Students who want to enter the training field could act as an in-house training intern, offering the staff fresh new ideas in the form of (free!) workshops or seminars. This intern could also develop a resource area for the program or update an existing one.

Due to the increasing number of children with disabilities entering programs today, internships for special education majors are essential. Too often, special education students lack knowledge of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, and spending time in a program that stresses best practices will be an important addition to their education.

Since child care centers usually offer two meals and a snack daily, food service is a major contributor to the program. An internship would offer a future cook a fun way to develop their skills for feeding a large group and developing new recipes for finicky little eaters.

Of course, since the heart and soul of a program is in the classrooms, specialty internships should be offered only to those who have already spent considerable time working with children directly.

### Developing an intern job description

Before any type of internship can begin, it is wise to create a job description for the intern. This will offer the student clear expectations for the time that they will be spending at the program. The job

description might include elements such as the length of the internship (e.g. six weeks or a complete college semester), the days and times that the student is expected to be there (in accordance to the student's schedule, of course), and specific duties that the intern will be expected to perform.

Individual programs should check with their state agencies regarding background checks, TB test requirements, and other staff related regulations. In some states, the interns are not allowed to do diaper changes or to be alone with the children. These types of limitations will determine the duties that will be performed. The job description should be as specific as possible to prevent any misunderstandings along the way.

When programs develop this piece, they need to keep in mind that the internship is supposed to be a learning experience for the student as well as an extra set of hands for the program. Interns are usually expected to complete assignments for their instructors that reflect their experiences within the program. Keeping this in mind, programs should take care not to overwhelm the student with duties and allow time for student observation and reflection.

### The interview

Once the program has determined what it can offer the intern and what the expectations are, care must be taken in choosing individuals. Taking any student that asks for a placement is a common mistake. Accepting students over the phone or the first time they walk in the door should be avoided no matter how tempting it seems. Interviewing for interns just as you would perspective employees is crucial. Keep in mind that this intern will be interacting with children, and it is the program's responsibility to the children and families to act as a gatekeeper. If possible, include the teacher or other staff

member who will be working directly with this intern in the interview process. Staff input and involvement will only add to the success of the experience.

During the interview ask about the student's class requirements so that they can be incorporated into the job description. A tour of the facility should be part of this interview, especially to the room that the intern will be working in. Just because the program is interviewing a student does not mean that they should not present themselves in the most professional way possible. Once the intern has been chosen, they or their instructor should be called to confirm the placement. Set up a date and time for the intern to start. The program should plan to have someone available to greet the intern when they arrive and guide them through a formal orientation. Too often, interns walk into a program and are left to their own devices, feeling unwelcome and in the way.

### Welcoming the intern

The orientation doesn't have to take a lot of time, but it is an essential part of the internship. It makes the intern feel like a member of the staff and lets him or her know that this is a professional organization. It is during the orientation that the job description can be reviewed. The program handbook can serve as a tool for explaining the everyday activities and guidelines of the program. Make sure the intern understands the dress code, emergency procedures, whom to contact if they can't make it in, and by whom they will be supervised. Don't assume that the student knows everything that they need to know. Young students are sometimes shy or embarrassed to ask questions.

In addition to the program's handbook, a copy of the National Association for the Education of Young Children's *Ethical Code of Conduct* is an excellent

tool to give to the intern. An explanation of professionalism and confidentiality are essential for a newcomer to the field. By addressing these topics with the intern, the program is establishing itself as a quality program with high standards. A copy of state regulations would also be helpful to the student.

### Red flags

In most cases, internships are successful, but there are times the situation does not work out for one or both parties. There are several *red flags* that might signal the need to end the internships prematurely. Some problems might require the supervisor of the intern to speak to the student, such as reminding them to wash their hands often, so that the problem can be corrected. Other, more severe problems should be dealt with quickly and in a pro-active fashion. In these cases, a firm explanation as to why the behavior is inappropriate should be given only once. If the behavior continues, the internship should be terminated immediately. The program should document the incident for its records. As a program that is entrusted with other peoples' children, the staff must err on the side of caution and eliminate any or all possibility of harm to the children. A student's youth or inexperience is no excuse.

### The exit

As the internship comes to a close, the program needs to reflect on the experience. A program might be so impressed by the performance of the intern that a position is offered. In some cases the staff may breathe a sigh of relief that the internship is over. When there has been a difficult internship, it's smart for the program to reevaluate their planning and interviewing techniques. In either case, a professional program should make the student's exit a pleasant one.

A small remembrance of the program and its children such as a photo or scrapbook is always a thoughtful gift. If the intern did an exemplary job, a letter of recommendation will be useful to them as they explore career possibilities.

When directors and staff watch interns leave their program, they can feel proud that they have enriched the student's education with practical experience. They have started the student down the path of professional development, and hopefully, made their first reality-based experience something that they will take with them throughout their early childhood career.

### Red Flags

- Chronically late
- Unprofessional appearance
- Gossiping
- Inactivity in the classroom
- Using inappropriate language
- Constant complaining
- Spending too much time in classrooms they are not assigned to
- Smoking in or near center
- Not following directions of supervisor
- Not showing up!

### Tips for Success

- Let the parents know an intern is coming and make sure to introduce them to the intern on the first day.
- Place the intern with the age group they are most comfortable with, if possible.
- Invite the intern to staff meetings and socials.
- Offer to help the intern with their class assignments.
- Let the intern know you have an open-door policy.

## Spotlight on St. Croix Press

printer of *Exchange* for 14 years

by Len Harbosky and Barb Anderson

Approximately six years ago, St. Croix Press began working with the Wisconsin State Youth Apprenticeship Program. Mike Monette, general manager and Len Harbosky, director of customer service and community relations at St. Croix Press worked with several unions and school administrations to get this program started in the New Richmond, Wisconsin area. Simply described, it is a program where a young adult spends part of the school day learning a trade. Upon successful completion, that student may then be awarded 12 college credits for work experience they receive over the two-year period. We have had five graduating participants thus far. The sixth student will be entering grade 12 and his final year in the program. It's a great way for the young people of our communities to build skills, relationships, and self-esteem.

Two years ago I was asked to be a mentor to the incoming apprentice. That was the start of a great relationship. Workplace mentors work with school instructors and designated trainers to keep things as easy as possible for that student. The support, encouragement, and direction the students receive from the St. Croix Press employees has helped these students in making decisions to further their education. This is something most of them would not have considered prior to getting involved in the program. In fact, there was some indication that several may not have completed high school if it weren't for this program.

Mentoring is more important now than ever before as we all become more stressed from the economic conditions and happenings around the world. The children now seem to grow up so much faster than previous generations. With the tools we have at hand, we are able to see what is happening around the world almost immediately. The old days of having grandpa and grandma next door to spend time with the young people are not as common as they once were. Families may no longer live near relatives or close friends for those long afternoon discussions that opened our minds to the great possibilities. The time spent learning how to bake cookies or gardening may now be spent playing computer games or in chat rooms on the Internet. Of the six different youth apprentices I have worked with the past six years one thing always comes to mind: How much self esteem that comes upon them as they get away from the school place and start to embark on a journey learning and working with adults in an adult environment. Their confidence level starts to soar after the first semester as well as their level of maturity. Watching the students starting to get to know their mentor and build a level of trust is something to see. It is also a great experience for the mentor. Some have raised their own kids to adults and are now trying it again with one not of their own.

Some of our younger workers are trying it just to get a feel for what it will be like when their kids become teenagers. The parents of our apprentices also note the changes that are taking place with their kids. One that comes to mind is Katie. When she started her senior year she came to me and said that her friends and cousins were starting to say, "Why are you so different all of a sudden?" Katie would say, "What do you mean DIFFERENT!?" and they would say, "Well, you are so grown up all of a sudden." Well, I can tell you she was. She started out with bad grades, ended up on the A honor roll and went on to the International School of Art and Design in Minneapolis. She was on the Dean's List for four straight years and graduated with honors. She now has a great career and just got married.

The youth of today have never been brighter or more able to accomplish goals. We all need to spend time with our young people and just listen. We may not always hear what we want to hear, but we can't be too critical or they will just quit sharing ideas with us. How many of us remember those special people in our lives that did make a difference and took the time because they cared? Young people just need someone to voice their feelings and thoughts to. Volunteer in your community to be a mentor to a young person. Be someone special to a child. Give them a reason to look back some day and be the one who made a positive difference in their life. You won't regret it!