

Writing From the Heart: Keeping a Director's Journal

by Carolyn Wilkerson Duncan

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Absent staff, personality clashes, blood-letting boo-boos, a call from the nurse at your son's school, and all before lunch; this is a typical morning in the life of the multi-stressed center director. Then come audit trails, backed-up toilets, and late pick-ups.

Thank goodness for naptime when you rest two

hours, with feet propped up on the desk. Right? Wrong. Naptime is for children. For you it's time to talk to staff, vendors, or the cook about the new soup recipe she tried for lunch but should never use again. Next you interview a replacement for the teacher who did not come back from break yesterday, then rush to a meeting across town where a regulator or grantor gives you a whole new set of rules that generates reams of paper in compliance.

Whew! I'll say it for those who don't want to voice the words. Some days the stress of administering a child care program outweighs the joys, unless you have good coping mechanisms.

Without them, the awesome challenge of being a center director tethers you to the needs of the facility, staff, and parents, and estranges you from a personal life at home.

Unfortunately, many talented and creative directors experience far too many extended stress episodes before developing coping mechanisms, and they quit.

Yet, there are other directors who survive the long haul, their enthusiasm for providing quality child care never dampening, regardless of the hullabaloo around them.

How do directors survive the long haul?

Different directors devise different coping mechanisms based on their particular personalities. During my 30 years as a center director, I kept a child care journal (although I didn't know to call it that at the time). Journaling helped me purge the day's stress, go home, relax, and come back the next day ready to renew my commitment to work for and on behalf of children.

Journaling empowered me to take what life gave in stride.

What is a journal?

A **journal** is a recorded account of the writer's experiences, a record of observations, reflections, hopes, goals, questions, and doubts. It is a record of dreams and fantasies, nightmares and woes, a register of unspoken complaints and condolences.

Why keep a journal?

"Journals have become the equivalent of a trusted confidant," writes Dr. Laurie Rozakis, "and can help just about anyone confront issues in their lives" (2002).

Psychologists use journals to help clients rediscover themselves through the reflective process of analyzing thoughts and behavior. And classroom teachers use journals to help students learn new skills, abilities, and attitudes. "Career counselors," Rozakis adds, "often suggest job seekers write in journals to work out anger and despair over job loss and anxiety about career changes."

The **reasons for keeping a journal** are as varied as the people who keep them vary. But basically writing in a journal is an inexpensive way to speak your mind, clarify your thoughts, and listen to your heart.

What should be written in a journal?

When I was a director, I always wrote details of important conversations and meetings, including my gut reactions to them. I also recorded significant comments made by children, and revealing behaviors they exhibited. I included names, dates, and times in entries, sometimes even the weather, or where we stood, if it clarified an incident. I wrote the confidences of others to keep them off my conscious, coding names and cloaking identities. From time to time I referred to the journals when I needed a memory boost, or I needed background information to reason through a complicated issue. Now I read them to recapture the moment when some amazing thing leapt out of a child's mouth — Andrea asking, "Why are you rubbing your jowls?" (A male teacher stroked his chin.) Or the boy on a validation visit I did with a Mrs. Hines. He named her "the Duncan Hines Lady."

Other times I wrote frustrations and disappointments, apprehensions and despair. I wrote on single sheets of paper until something that I wrote or thought made me smile or laugh. Then I stopped because I knew my heart and mind were purged, at least temporarily, of what had been the matter.

Basically what you write in your journal is governed by your need for keeping a journal. In one journal I recorded happy moments, memorable events, or incidents about children that needed to be remembered verbatim. And in another journal I vented emotions it was unprofessional to display. I never yelled at a client or incompetent staff member in person. But I surely did it once or twice on paper.

And it felt good!

I recorded goals (get my doctorate, write a book, publish in *Exchange*), and

worked on them until they were realized. Classroom and staff evaluation entries became to do, supply, and priority lists for program improvement and staff development.

My **child care journal** allowed me to put things in perspective and restore my patience to work through situations. It provided a safe place to consider issues and ideas before developing a plan of action or implementing change.

Now my **personal journal** helps me redefine my life and career goals. In my present work as Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education, I keep a journal of contacts, standards, and professional development as I write the Request for Approval Proposal and design the curriculum for the institution's new Department of Early Childhood/Exceptional Children Education, which will offer a BS/Birth through Kindergarten plan of study.

When should you write in your journal?

Most journal keepers use memory joggers during the day to assist in private journal writing later, when there is time for complete entries. I jot topic sentences, key words, phrases, or names as prompts for expanded entries. Entries are then put in the appropriate file folder or loose-leaf binder.

While there are no hard and fast rules about when, where, and how often to write in a journal, here are general suggestions:

- Write daily, or at least three or four times a week
- Write to solve problems or make decisions
- Write to think through an idea

- Write to clarify information or remember it

- Write to chronicle a child's behavior then analyze it to develop a remediation solution

How one writes in a journal is a matter of preference. A friend going through menopause keeps a "Today is the Day I Run Away" journal on computer. Others write at a desk, in a comfortable chair, on the bus to and from work, or curled up in bed at night. However you write, be comfortable, write freely. Write often.

What should be done with old journals?

What is done with a full or outdated journal is dictated by why the journal was written. I destroy entries that might violate a confidence. Other entries I destroy when they are no longer needed. Journal entries made to vent anger, or think through confidential problems, are shredded into tiny bits, then I watch them float into the trash bin knowing, symbolically at least, they are in a "black hole" (trash bag) and off my mind.

I keep my writer's journal in a file folder until the project is written. Then the entries are filed with a hard copy of the final draft.

Directors who keep **sanitation** or **nutrition** journals to track progress toward correcting a problem, introducing new procedures, foods, or inventorying supplies can file these journals for future reference. A **staff** or **parent conference journal** may contain confidential information and should be destroyed or put in a secure place. Journals that are destroyed should be **shredded or burned** and not just thrown in the trash.

How do I keep my journal private?

If people around you don't respect privacy, lock the journal or keep it with you at all times. Journals kept on computer should be password protected; if it is not your computer remember that the legal owner has a right to read the journal — in which case you might choose saving it to disk and locking it away.

How do I begin keeping a journal?

Begin keeping a journal by recording real events, thoughts, or dreams. Here are three:

Instead of seething in response to unprofessional, unprovoked client behavior, record the event, including date, time, and all persons involved. Note verbal and non-verbal reactions. Record emotions displayed and felt, comments, thoughts, counter-arguments, etc., until you can breathe calmly and think clearly. Next analyze the incident, start with what **you** could have done differently; try to take the perspective of the other person to help you better understand their behavior. Finally, write appropriate responses. Should you follow through with your written response? You decide, after written consideration of the pros and cons.

The next time you have an idea for program improvement, think it through in writing, include everything needed to make the idea work, as well as answers to common sense questions that will surely be asked. Then organize your thoughts into a mini proposal and present it to the appropriate person.

When two or more adults are working to improve a child's behavior, speech, or adjustment to the class environment, start a **case journal** in which all parties, including parents, make daily entries,

recording the child's experiences for at least several weeks. Analyze the information for triggering patterns, motivators, or clues for correction. Develop a plan of action and implement it. Continue the journal until improvements are realized, or it becomes evident that a different plan should be devised. Review the data. Keep devising new plans until something works.

In conclusion

Keeping a child care journal didn't make the challenges of being a director go away. But it did, as Mayo clinic doctors write, help me "organize and sort through problems and emotions and get them off (my) chest like a good heart-to-heart visit with a friend or family member does." And that gave me an edge — the opportunity to think through situations logically. Then I could develop administratively appropriate actions.

Doctors at the Mayo clinic tell patients managing pain that journaling "your thoughts and feelings helps you track your goals and progress toward achieving them." Will journaling do that for you? Or, will it do something else, but equally as important? You won't know until you try.

For more information:

Rozakis, L. (2002). *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Writing Well*. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books.

"How to Keep a Journal" — eHow.com.

<http://WritingtheJournal.com/exercises/reasons.htm>

Keep a Journal — www.Mayoclinic.com

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