

# smart use of volunteers

by Yvonne Vissing

Volunteers pose a special area of concern for child care centers. On one hand, they are indispensable as they donate countless hours of time, energy, and resources. On the other hand, there are challenges to coordinating the efforts of volunteering parents.

## Benefits

Volunteer parents bring in snacks, do work, drive or chaperone on field trips, coordinate festivals, and help in a variety of ways. Usually the center staff just needs to ask and there will be parents who answer the call. The manpower hours they provide can be significant when added together over the course of a year. If a center had to pay staff members to accomplish the same tasks, it would cost thousands of dollars! Add in the donations of food, toys, clothes, decorations, books, and other resources, and the size of volunteers' contributions skyrockets!



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There are other less-visible benefits of volunteering, for both parents and center staff. When parents volunteer, they:

- Meet the children and acquire more knowledge about their own children's learning environment.
- Learn more about the structure and operations of the center, which helps them to identify organizational rules and constraints. More knowledgeable parents make it easier for center administrators to implement practices and policies when parents understand why they are necessary.
- Feel a sense of ownership over the program. People who volunteer tend to regard the place where they donate their services or goods to be 'theirs.' This emotional bonding with a center increases their dedication to the overall mission of the center and willingness to invest their energy and money, because they regard the center as an extension of themselves or their family. When people feel as though they belong to a group or community of like-minded people, they are willing to go out of their way to help them. This sense of belonging is imperative to their willingness to donate time, money, and service.

## Challenges

Despite the benefits that volunteers provide, centers must be extremely careful if they use them and how they use them. Well-intentioned parents do not necessarily have the competence for the tasks assigned to them. Some challenges include:

**Volunteer competence:** They may have good hearts but lack critical skills. They may not have the training and expertise necessary to develop young minds and bodies.

**Supervision:** Volunteers may receive less scrutiny when appointed, and less supervision, screening, oversight, and monitoring compared with employees when they do their work. Like staff members, volunteers must be carefully supervised to ensure quality and safety.

**Safeguarding children:** Long ago just about anyone could be a volunteer. However, as a result of increased attention to child abuse and preventable accidents, all types of organizations that serve children must now implement safety procedures for the use of volunteers. Organizations like The Nonprofit Risk Management Center provide guidelines for the use of volunteers.

## General guidelines for volunteers

### Develop volunteer application

**procedures.** In order to ensure quality and safety, it is important to know your volunteers. Staff may feel as though they 'know' the parents, but they usually only know them as acquaintances, such as when parents interact during drop off and pick up of their children. Perhaps grandparents or siblings would also like to volunteer at center events; child care centers do not have open-door policies for extended family and non-family members. Anyone wanting to work with young children must complete an application in which they provide their name, contact information, and a list of references. It is then the center's responsibility to check out those references. This gives the center a more professional appearance and increases quality and safety for children.

### Develop questions for applicants and

**references.** It is important to determine key issues of importance that you use as indicators of safety and competence. When the same questions are asked of everyone, a uniform set of responses emerges over time that helps center administrators to more easily identify when someone will be a great volunteer, or when they may not.

**Conduct screening interviews.** While staff may be familiar with parent volunteers, they may not know parents' skill levels in completing various tasks. Through interviews, staff can determine which assignments best match volunteers' skills: construction, crafts, cooking, face-painting, or reading.

The interviews also provide prospective volunteers with a sense of what they will be donating to the center, that they will be valued, and that everyone who works with children must meet a standard of quality.

Interviews are a nice opportunity for staff to socialize with prospective volunteers and communicate expectations of professionalism and quality.

### Establish clear volunteer job

**descriptions.** If you need volunteers for a one-time event, you can post a job description and 'accept applications' for the 'job.' Some things to consider are:

- Being selective about which volunteers to use and how to use them.
- Posting 'volunteer openings' on the bulletin board or as notices in the center newsletter, with a more elaborate job description available in a binder on the desk in the center's office. This empowers staff to select the best person for the job.
- Placing your most reliable volunteers in the positions that require the most competence and sensitivity.
- Matching the volunteers with the jobs that require the appropriate amounts of supervision. It may be possible to use all volunteers over the course of a year, but perhaps some would better serve in ways where there is more oversight and staff involvement.

**Establish Policies.** If you have set forth your Volunteer Policies ahead of time, then it diffuses potential problems later on. Some additional policies that centers may wish to consider are:

- Initiate background checks for all applicants for staff and volunteer positions, especially if those people may be alone with children or if you do not know the applicant well.
- Establish age requirements for volunteers and identify the age below which workers must have an adult present while with children.
- Define appropriate and inappropriate discipline and touch techniques.

■ Clarify what steps volunteers should follow in case of problems.

■ Make it clear that volunteers should expect to be supervised.

■ Indicate that while volunteers are a valued asset in the organization, they must meet the same guidelines as any employee at the center.

**Training.** Many organizations find it useful to have periodic Training Days for volunteers. You can create learning opportunities for volunteers that improve the quality of care for the children. Volunteers may have very creative and great ideas, and these trainings allow them with a venue for doing so.

Workshops can be offered on "Creating Fun and Diverse December Festivals," "Disciplining Without Tears," or "Cooking With Allergy-Sensitive Children In Mind."

### Opportunities for staff-volunteer

**communication.** Staff can communicate expectations to volunteers, encourage networking among volunteers, and invite questions and brainstorm answers.

### Monitor volunteers' performance.

Volunteers need to be monitored and supervised, just as do employees, since they are representatives of the center. Supervision can be done in a friendly, interactive way.

An explanation of "we do it this way here" recognizes volunteers' knowledge and skill, while presenting the center's own set of policies and procedures. Supervision is an important part of the volunteer-staff relationship. Most volunteers do not mind, and may appreciate, supervision. Others may resent supervision, especially when it is given by staff members who are younger than they are, or who are not

parents themselves. If volunteers resent supervision, this may be a red flag that he or she may not be a good fit with the organization or does not prioritize the safety and well being of the children.

**Evaluate.** Let volunteers know how they are doing:

- Give them incentives to continue if they are doing a good job for the center, from compliments to 'leader' designations or small tokens of appreciation, whether a card or decorated t-shirt from the children, or a gift certificate to a local restaurant.
- If they are not doing a good job, they should be told how to improve their performance. After all, it is bad policy to alienate volunteers when transformation is possible.

If the performance of a volunteer is not up to your standards, then it is appropriate to have a private conversation to explain this. Some volunteers may have difficulty accepting negative feedback on their performance. However, it is the center's responsibility to safeguard young children. Just as some employees need to be fired, some volunteers need to be terminated. The list of problematic behaviors could include unsafe driving, use of profanity, use of physical punishment, excessive talking with adults when assigned to supervise children, or breaking rules of confidentiality.

It is helpful to create a volunteer policy that is designed to educate parents that

screening everyone is an essential component of creating a safe environment for children. It is human nature to regard oneself as above scrutiny. However, we may want close investigation of 'other people.' Differential treatment of volunteers — where some receive preferential treatment while others are avoided — may pose problems for the center. Centers operate as families; when there is a disruption in relationships, this inevitably impacts other members of the center community. A policy of equality, in which all potential volunteers get treated the same, is the best way to overcome this obstacle. It is also important that everyone understands that the center's priority is the needs of the children. The use of volunteers has incredible potential for benefit from the center, child, and parent perspectives. The trick is using volunteers well.

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