

No learner left behind: Prioritizing staff's professional development needs

by Rachel Robertson and Staci Hitzke

As early childhood educators, we are in the business of teaching and learning:

- We understand and value the earliest of experiences, the relationships between teachers and learners, and the environments in which time is spent.
- We nurture curiosity, wonder, and engagement.
- We consider individual needs, ensuring the skills practiced and the



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development opportunities offered are meaningful and appropriate.

- We take pride in each step our learners make on their own, supporting their self-reliance and autonomy as they begin to trust their own decisions and make positive choices in the world.
- We expose learners to a variety of materials and experiences, addressing all learning domains.
- Additionally, we foster teamwork and compassion in an effort to develop social and emotional abilities that will serve our learners well throughout life.

Adult learners

As you read the preceding list it is likely that visions of infants, toddlers, or preschoolers danced through your mind. And they should, our dedication to their learning should be paramount. But what about the adults in our programs, the teaching staff who foster compassion, nurture curiosity, and provide developmental experiences; aren't they learners too?

It's true that adults learn differently than children. They have real-life experiences, strong preferences, time constraints, competing priorities, and varied objectives.

But, they also share some similarities. Adults may not throw tantrums while lying on the floor and pounding their fists, but they do express their unhappiness. Their unhappiness affects work performance and participation in work events. Adults don't typically fall asleep in their plates of spaghetti, but they do require their basic needs taken care of before they can learn. Additionally, they crave variety, challenge, and success. This became crystal clear for Courtney, a second year director, while attending a training on teacher development:

"My teacher training prepared me to work with children and families. But when I became a director, I never learned how to teach staff. Now I realize that almost all the techniques I used to assist children in learning — reinforcing desired behaviors, positive feedback, opportunities to practice, hands-on learning — will also work well with my staff."

Courtney's complaint is a familiar one. Many directors have risen to their positions from the ranks of teacher, but have not been taught how to work effectively with their staff by building on their skill in individualizing our approach for each learner and drawing on the power of social connections to reinforce and extend learning. So how do we change that?

After all, most of us are in this profession because we are passionate about children. The responsibility of managing and training adults is secondary. But, if we take a step back and consider the bigger picture, it becomes apparent that training the adults who work directly with children is the best way to make a positive impact on the children.

The center director as learning facilitator

We often hear two comments regarding staff meetings: “How can I spend so much time on professional development, I have too much to tell them?” and, “I try, but they don’t listen to me. They need to hear it from someone else.” While both statements are legitimate concerns, they are not roadblocks. The first step to solving both is to consider yourself as a facilitator of adult learning. If you are not leading a staff meeting as an *adult learning facilitator*, your approach, and ultimately less than desirable results, will reflect this.

Consequently, it is necessary to accept your staff as a group of learners and your responsibility in furthering their learning. Your growth as a facilitator of adult learning will ensure increased learner development.

How adults learn

While in many cases learners need the same things no matter their age, knowing and understanding the fundamentals of adult learning will help differentiate your approach to ensure your staff needs are addressed appropriately. The learner should be the focus of all professional development. Therefore, understanding what makes learners tick is essential. Successful adult educators know:

- Adults learn best in an informal atmosphere.
- Adults learn best when practical application is encouraged.
- Adults see themselves as self-directed and responsible.
- Adults bring a wealth of experience to the learning setting.
- Adults learn best when they can relate learning to what they already know.
- Adults have ideas to contribute. (Biech & West, 2004)

As you plan, offer, or recommend learning experiences for your staff, use these principles as a guide for what will make the most impact.

Staff meetings

Typically, your most accessible opportunity to support staff development is staff meetings. Much can be done to ensure that staff walk away with more than a checklist of dos and don’ts.

- **Set a learning objective for each meeting.** An objective helps define your agenda, your content, and your delivery methods. ‘Introduce staff to new licensing policies and ensure compliance,’ will require a different approach than ‘Improve room arrangement in all classrooms.’ Not every component of each meeting will meet the objective, but a significant amount of time should be dedicated to that goal. When planning, also consider how to measure progress and success. All considerations — why this objective, how to meet the objective, what progress looks like — should be shared at the staff meeting and followed up on as appropriate.
- **Environment considerations.** Just as with children, it is important to consid-

er the environment in which learning will occur. More than learning from their environment, adults are affected by their environment. An uncomfortable chair, the janitorial crew vacuuming in the hallway, and a rumbling stomach will act as a powerful filter, blocking much of the learning.

- **Learning styles.** When planning content and determining delivery methods, ask yourself if all three primary learning styles — visual, auditory, kinesthetic (hands-on) — are being addressed. If new content or ideas are only delivered through lecture, your visual and kinesthetic learners will not learn as well. For example, when Gloria, a new teacher and kinesthetic learner, first read the evacuation procedures she didn’t quite understand them. But, when the director demonstrated and had Gloria practice the procedures, it flipped the switch for Gloria and she “got it.” Adding charts, pictures, videos, and opportunities to practice increases learning and guarantees everyone’s learning style has been addressed.
 - **Provide variety.** Fresh faces and ideas stimulate new thinking, so occasionally invite a guest speaker. There are many free resources for this: parents, school districts, community education resources, resource and referral agencies, etc. Bringing someone in is not a sign of defeat, but rather a sign of respect toward your staff and how they learn.
- Additionally, consider asking staff to lead a training session. Perhaps preschool teacher Mike recently attended a local workshop on effective block play and would like to share his new learning. Or, the toddler teaching team can share their insights from implementing an innovative new clean-up strategy. Allowing peers to teach each other encourages accountability and helps augment the new

concepts in the learners' and trainers' minds.

- **Honor the process of learning.** One typical mistake is simply informing adults and expecting changed behavior as a result. That thinking is contrary to all we know about the learning process. Granted, "Label your spray bottles" is a bit easier to learn than "Encourage emotional development in infants." However, the more you honor the process, the better the results will be.

- *Introduce the topic or concept in various formats:* discussion, observation, hands-on practice, pictures, video clips, or guided reading. Each of these serves a purpose and provides information for all types of learners.
- *Allow time to practice:* Whether simulated or in the classroom, practice is integral to the success of any new learning.
- *Expect a time of trial and error:* If staff are worried about 'getting it right' more than learning, they will change for the wrong reasons and not internalize the information. For example, if you provide learning on process art, expect to see varying levels of progression at first rather than dramatic center-wide change. Don't lower your expectations or give up; act as a guide — mentoring, coaching, and providing feedback.
- *Achievement:* When new learning is internalized, it is demonstrated naturally. This stage will not occur during the staff meeting, but can be acknowledged and discussed at the following meeting. Ask follow-up questions regarding successful progress and areas of opportunity. Each learner might have a different insight to share, further cementing the concepts in your adult learners' minds.

- **Follow-up.** Once the meeting is over, the objective doesn't disappear and

learning isn't guaranteed. Pre-plan follow-up methods to continue supporting the application of new skills. Discuss expectations and follow-up methods at the meeting so all staff understand what to expect: a checklist, classroom observations, evidence of learning in the classroom, an audit of the environment, or one-on-one meetings are all examples of good follow-up methods. Experiment to find what works best for you, your staff, and each topic.

Other training opportunities

Staff meetings aren't your only opportunity to train staff. Consider ways your staff training "to-do" list can be addressed outside of staff meetings:

- Could a routine memo work that staff are required to sign?
- Can you create an engaging notice board in the staff lounge?
- How about a positive reinforcement activity that rewards staff for reading and completing activities? (For example, remembering to take garbage out mid-day, following the new parking lot policy, or turning their supplies lists in on time.) Monopoly® money could be awarded and redeemed in a snack/prize basket. Or a group marble jar could earn staff a free-lunch Friday.

Additional training opportunities exist as well:

- Some of the best training occurs on-the-spot. Whenever you see a teacher in need of guidance and support, help them 'in the moment' rather than waiting for a staff meeting. Be mindful of appearing condescending, instead use phrases like "try this" or "what about?" Better yet, become a role model yourself. Jump in and lead a preschool story time, or facilitate

a smooth transition from indoor to outdoor play.

- Many people like checklists; they help define expectations. Yet it may be more fun to creatively develop a blackout bingo board or a three question classroom quick check form. Items on either tool might include covering outlets, meet-n-greet a parent, washing hands upon arrival; basic quick points of observation that are essential to quality care. Attach incentives to these activities and they will get done much faster.
- Create a hot spot. Sometimes center directors go on information overload creating memos, newsletters, bulletin boards, and more. No one knows where to look or how to prioritize what to read.
 - Deem one bulletin board the 'spot' where all information is important and a must read / do.
 - Occasionally add a memo that includes an incentive inspiring staff to read the information regularly. For example, post a memo closing with "When you finish reading, see me for a sweet treat."
 - Provide articles, videos, web sites, books, and more in a staff area, encouraging staff to seek out needed and reliable information.
 - Empower staff to seek out local conferences, workshops, etc. and provide recognition for attendance.

Becoming a skilled facilitator for your staff's learning is an investment with long-term pay offs. As staff learn and develop, the children will reap the benefits. The opportunities provided for your adult learners will impact everyone; whether by enhancing staff's skills, motivating them to try new approaches, or providing a fresh perspective, these small moments have the potential for long-lasting and large impact.

Reference

Biech, E., & West, E. (2004). ASTD Training Certificate Program. American Society for Training and Development.