

Helping Teachers Love Their Work

by Lynn T. Hill

When teachers love their work, it is easier for them to be innovative, nurturing, and responsive to the needs of the children in their classrooms. But when teachers are dissatisfied with their work, they can be dull, distracted, and self-absorbed. Even though they feel dissatisfied, many teachers remain in their jobs, spreading the gloom of burnout. However, over 40% of child care teachers do leave their jobs each year (Whitebook et al., 1990).

When child care teachers leave their jobs, they leave behind a chaotic stream of events. The children who were once in their care not only lose a teacher but often lose a sense of security and trust. Risk taking and learning may become difficult until another attachment and bond can be formed with a new teacher.

For the staff left behind, the work load intensifies until new staff can be trained. They become the "port in the storm" for children and parents who are struggling with the transition. This responsibility is often a draining one. And for the administration, the process of interviewing, hiring, and training yet another new staff member can be overwhelming, as can be the explanations and reassurances to anxious parents.

With turnover in the child care profession at epidemic proportions, enormous care must be taken by directors and administrators to

attempt to alleviate some of the most common reasons for leaving the profession.

Reason #1 No Sense of Achievement

"I don't feel challenged by this job. I'm bored by the day-to-day routine."

"I don't feel that my job is respected by the parents or by the administration."

"I don't feel that I'm being paid fairly."

Strategies for helping teachers love their work by promoting a sense of achievement:

- Teachers need to be celebrated for the jobs that they do. They need to know that their work has not gone unnoticed. Center newsletters can be a good vehicle for acclaiming the work of an individual teacher. Publishing an account of a successful classroom activity is a simple yet

powerful strategy for saying "GREAT JOB" in a public way.

- Use a prominent bulletin board to spotlight an innovative teacher. Documentation of the teacher's ideas from inception to implementation can make an exciting display. These bulletin boards are of interest to parents and an inspiration to other teachers, and are most appreciated by the spotlighted teacher.

- Assist teachers to participate in their own action research (Elliot, 1985). Enabling teachers to pursue their notions by researching their own classrooms can promote a strong sense of worth and self-esteem. Teachers will need support during their research period. Providing substitutes so teachers are free to observe, furnishing data analysis assistance, supplying a forum for talking through the conclusions, and promoting an arena for sharing results will all contribute to the teacher's feeling of achievement.

- Give a seminar on presentation skills to teachers who have achieved a high level of classroom skill and who may be ready to share ideas with others. Teachers will know that their good work has been noticed and will enjoy being chal-

lenged to learn a new way to showcase their talents.

- Have each teacher keep a professional portfolio. Portfolio assessment can be a powerful tool for adult learners as well as for children. Teachers who set personal and professional goals and receive support for sticking with timelines are teachers who have a strong sense of achievement.
- Ask an experienced teacher to mentor a novice teacher. Mentoring relationships have been shown to be extremely empowering experiences for both mentor and protege (Bey, 1990). The mentor feels validated and affirmed as a professional, she becomes more skillful in articulating her philosophies, her own classroom will be improved in quality, and the overall sense of satisfaction increases.
- Become an advocate for Worthy Wage. Explore all avenues toward the enhancement of wages and benefits for the child care employee. Adequate compensation and strong training will bring about a stable work force. Teachers need to know that their directors and administrators care about their financial predicaments. Meet with parents in an annual "State of the Center" meeting where you take a hard look at the financial issues. Help families to understand their direct link to teacher salaries. The present child care system is based on high parent costs and on poverty-level wages. Parents will have to get just as angry about the predicament as we in child care are in order for a solution to be forced. A solution must be forthcoming in order to ensure a system where child care employees can afford to work in their field.

Reason #2 No Sense of Affiliation

"My director doesn't understand who I am. She doesn't seem to care about my personal life at all."

"I don't feel that I can trust my co-workers. They're competitive, critical, and hard to get to know."

"I feel like I'm drowning and no one will throw me a life line."

Teachers need to be with friends and colleagues who are caring, supportive, and appreciative.

Strategies for helping teachers love their work by promoting a sense of affiliation:

- All people need to feel a sense of belonging. There are several simple ways to enhance this sense for teachers within the center environment: Make sure that the teacher's identity is displayed in important places. Make an "Up Close and Personal" display in the center lobby. Include a picture of each teacher with biographical data and classroom assignment. This display promotes a sense of teamship. Make sure that every teacher has her own in-center mailbox where paychecks and messages can be delivered. This promotes open communication within the center and enhances the sense of belonging.
 - Supervisory styles should be matched to the individual teacher's needs. Developmentally appropriate staff development should consider each teacher's stage of career development, life stage, personality type, concomitant roles in life, personal history, and learning styles (Jorde-Bloom et al., 1991). To assume that all of the teachers in a center would benefit from the same series of in-service trainings is to set yourself up for disappointment and complaints. Instead, try to get to know each teacher as an individual.
- Make a pact to be honest, direct, and caring with one another. Promise each other that you will be accountable to one another for the good of the center. Use the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct as a guide to problem solving. Have everyone sign an agreement as they are hired, acknowledging that they have read the Code and that they will uphold it. Set up hypothetical situations at staff meetings, and practice confronting a colleague in a direct but caring way about a breach of agreement.
 - Promote a sense of humor and nurture a sense of creativity within the center. The language of laughter binds us together in strong and lasting ways. Make sure that there is lots of time given to this important activity. End your staff meetings with "Our funniest moments," a chance for each teacher to tell of a hilarious event in their classroom. Reward creative problem solving and diverse expressions of ideas. Make sure that teachers feel safe when they offer disparate comments. Be open to new ideas.
 - For the teacher who feels like she's drowning, supply a mentor. This is especially important for teachers who are trying to survive their first years of teaching. This important relationship allows an avenue for venting frustrations, brainstorming solutions to problem areas, assisting the development of new strategy and technique, and connection building on both personal and professional levels.
 - Create a sense of tradition and history within the center. The feeling of belonging to an establishment with a past can promote a strong sense of loyalty and membership. Be consistent about center rituals —

Assist them with the crafting of a personal development plan.

talk about them and plan for them. Look forward to them.

We always have a staff happy hour after parent conference week is over.

The Red Room always plants the tomatoes in the center vegetable garden.

We have a major fund raiser each year to earn enough money to attend the state conference.

We always have homemade bread on Thursdays.

Reason #3 No Sense of Control

"The teachers don't have an opportunity to make decisions about things that affect us."

"I don't agree with the center's policies and procedures."

"Every time I have a good idea, it gets shot down."

Strategies for helping teachers love their work by promoting a sense of control:

- Plan an annual staff retreat during which the entire staff participates in the yearly goal setting. Use a nominal group process where every member's voice can be heard. Commitment to change and growth are outcomes of a democratic goal setting process. And when our voices have been heard, it is easier to pledge our loyalties to an organization.
- Once your annual goals are established, develop committees to manage the attainment of each goal. When teachers are responsible for researching solutions to problems and for handling the conflicts that come with debating the issues, they become energized by the idea of the

process. Set up an in-center system of checks and balances for policy setting. Once the committee has hammered out the details of a new policy, they should be responsible for presenting it to the entire staff.

Always allow for plenty of discussion time during this phase. The committee members who have a commitment to the new policy proposal will be empowered by the opportunity to manage the discussion period. Then once a vote has been taken from the staff assembly, the bill goes to the executive branch (the director or board) for either approval, return to committee, or veto. This system allows the director to give teachers a strong voice in center management.

- Another strategy that will allow teachers to feel a sense of power is to delegate. When directors are willing to give up some control and to trust their teachers to make thoughtful decisions, everyone wins. Teachers experience a much needed perception of authority, and directors can reduce their workloads!

Delegation should be handled with care. A match between skill and challenge is essential for the teacher to have a positive experience. You wouldn't, for instance, assign the editing of the center's newsletter to someone who has difficulty with writing and deadlines. Rather, talk with the individual and understand the types of duties that would be most inspirational to her. Then keep a running list of chores that need to be accomplished. Whenever you've got a teacher who has reached that boredom phase and needs a shot of pizzazz, be ready to hand over a job.

- When teachers don't feel they are being heard, it is often a sign that the director is not doing enough lis-

tening. Active listening takes practice. Make time to carefully attend to what is being said. Make sure that you have created an environment where teachers feel that they can safely disagree with you. Ask them to help you to understand their perspectives. Even if you don't arrive at a consensus, a frank and honest discussion of the issues can lead to a meeting of the minds that can go a long way toward enhancing job satisfaction.

Helping teachers to love their work is a complex and time consuming aspect of the director's job. But it may be the key to a quality program. When teachers are happy, they are more productive and more anxious to try new ideas. Ambitious feelings will carry over, and children will definitely enjoy the benefits of having an innovative and nurturing teacher.

The director holds the key. While other duties may seem more pressing — bills to pay, substitutes to call — can there be any more important job than that of helping teachers to love their work? For when teachers feel challenged, in control of their lives, and a sense of belonging, their basic needs have been met; they can then become the adult attachment figure that children must have in order to have their own needs satisfied (Maslow, 1954).

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