

Finding More Joy in Teaching Children

How can teachers of young children reduce job stress and truly enjoy such rewarding work? Engage the mind, body, and soul—the same strategies that lead to children’s growth and development!

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Chantel beamed with pride as she looked around her classroom. Everything was ready for the children. With the help of her mentor, Louisa, she had implemented recommendations from several professional journal articles to make a few of her interest centers more enticing to children. Chantel was looking forward to the children’s engagement. She was also looking forward to discussing her ideas with Louisa during their daily walk during their break during naptime. Chantel realized she was so much more relaxed and confident with the children since she began taking time to de-stress and enjoy her work.

Early childhood professionals are familiar with finding and appreciating daily moments of joy. Teachers smile inside and out when toddlers are able to pull up their own pants, preschoolers write their names for the first time, or kindergarteners figure out how to make complicated patterns with blocks.

Working with young children can also be very stressful. Work stress has been described as the *lack of fit* between the needs and demands of the individual and his or her environment (Edwards & Cooper, 1990), which leads to increased levels of stress, burnout, and poor job satisfaction.

Adults are self motivated to reduce their stress. Common recommendations for ways to reduce stress at work, such as going out with colleagues to eat lunch, often are not possible in a teacher’s unique work environment. Teachers and administrators can work together to reduce job stress with strategies that engage the mind, body, and soul, such as those recommended here.

Engage the Mind

Stress often occurs when teachers of young children are not sufficiently prepared to carry out their responsibilities. More experienced teachers make excellent coaches

or mentors for newly hired staff (Leithwood, et al., 2001). While mentor relationships sometimes form naturally, directors are urged to initiate the process to assure that new teachers feel welcome and supported from their first day on the job. Chantel, the relatively new teacher introduced at the beginning of this article, certainly was grateful for Louisa’s leadership and wisdom that led to a more satisfying teaching experience.

Continuing education in the field definitely reduces job stress (Black, 2004; Evans, et al., 2004; Fuming & Jiliang, 2007; Grayson & Alvarez, 2008; Leithwood, et al., 2001; Wu, Wang, Wang, & Li, 2006). Attending classes or professional development workshops on weekends or after hours is an excellent way for teachers to keep up with the profession, meet program requirements, and share their insights about young children. Informal learning and advocacy opportunities, such as belonging to a professional book club or participating in a local early childhood organization, also can increase the quality of care provided, as well as increase job satisfaction.

Every day, directors and experienced teachers are encouraged to model a constructive approach to managing difficult situations: identify the problem first and then seek solutions. This strategy fosters an educational environment that feels less chaotic and more disciplined. By implementing strategies that focus on solving the problem, rather than emotionally reacting to it, early childhood educators are less likely to feel the effects of stress and less likely to leave the profession due to burnout (Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 1997).

Frequent or extended breaks are often recommended to reduce stress for teachers (Black, 2004; Evans, Bryant, Owens, & Koukos, 2004). In early childhood education, such breaks for adults are often not possible. With careful planning, however, administrators can schedule short breaks in the morning and again in the afternoon



Subjects & Predicates

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to ensure that staff remain at their optimal performance. A rotating staff member, perhaps one whose primary job is to assist with lunch or in the office, could give staff regular breaks.

Staffing shortages, handling messy routines, and coping with difficult children's behaviors can certainly cause stress. When teachers are designated as primary caregivers for a small group of children, responsibilities—and joys—are shared among teachers. Another strategy is to rotate less pleasant assignments, such as sanitizing toys or filling the sandbox, to reduce staff stress (Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 2001).

Engage the Body

Foster an environment that is conducive to physical and relaxing activities—for adults and children who share the space. Together, teachers and children make time during the day to stretch, breathe deeply, or

think quietly for a few seconds. Relaxation techniques have long been known to effectively reduce job stress (Beck & Gargiulo, 1983; Carter, 1994; Evans, et al., 2004). Yoga and similar stretching exercises lead to overall well being (Workplace Wellness, 2009). Simply relishing the quiet and a few uninterrupted minutes during naptime often refreshes teachers, too.

Stress can also be reduced with physical activity during the day (Tveito & Eriksen, 2009). Dance, hop, and play active games along with the children, indoors and out. Keep moving during breaks: walk the parking lot, use a treadmill, climb stairs, exercise, or engage in an energizing hobby or activity (Beck & Gargiulo, 1983; Fuming & Jiliang, 2007; Leithwood et al., 2001). In one elementary school, tables in the lunchroom were moved to the side so staff could exercise in the afternoon.

Break rooms. A separate space for breaks and relaxation is recommended. Some of the same calming

characteristics important for early childhood classrooms can be incorporated by administrators into the teachers' space:

- soft elements, such as comfortable furniture and pleasing colors
- soothing music that can be turned off
- pleasant background lighting

Staff meetings. A few minutes of relaxation are recommended as a regular feature of staff meetings. Administrators and teachers can then model relaxation techniques in their work with families and children.

**Relish the quiet
and uninterrupted
minutes.**

Engage the Soul

How do teachers deal with the emotional stresses of working with children? Three strategies can help:

- reflect on daily challenges and successes,
- support each other emotionally, and
- use positive coping strategies to avoid burnout.

Write about the day. Writing in a journal is an effective strategy for addressing stress (Evans, et al., 2004). Recording or sharing the positive events of each day, and celebrating successes, can be helpful (Hendrickson, 1979). Of course, confidentiality must be maintained, so any notes that are shared should use imaginary names and leave out other identifying information.

Administrators can encourage the practice of journaling by giving journals to staff members or making computers available. Regularly discuss the values of journaling in teacher meetings and conversations. Devote a space, such as a bulletin board or notebook, in which staff members can record joyful and difficult episodes of the day. These jottings can be used for a variety of purposes, such as to

- jumpstart discussions with staff,
- give direction for topics to consider during professional development, and
- help spot patterns in children's behaviors that need to be addressed.

Laugh together. Humor can also help relieve stress and prevent burn-out (Carter, 1994).

Recognizing and using the elements of humor can make the most serious episode more palatable and less threatening. One of the healthiest types of humor is the ability to laugh at oneself. Most of us know that trauma is resolved when, after a harrowing experience, we can look back at it and find humor in it. (Cedoline, 1982, p. 151)

Program administrators and supervisors are encouraged to incorporate humor into daily interactions with staff. Social events that enable staff to get to know one another outside of work usually promote a more relaxed social atmosphere and increase the likelihood that staff will engage in friendly banter.

Recognize accomplishments. Professional recognition of staff demonstrates appreciation for their efforts (Black, 2004). When skillful teaching strategies are acknowl-



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edged, other staff realize how much professionalism is valued. Specific recognition promotes good work and instills a sense of accomplishment. Directors might send notes to teachers who have demonstrated exceptional competence or who have stepped up to try a new teaching strategy, for example.

Black, 2004; Carter, 1994; Howard & Johnson, 2004). Administrators and/or governing bodies could host events for early childhood professionals and encourage staff to become active in local and state professional organizations. These experiences enrich the professional lives of staff and foster a sense of community.

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Foster a sense of community.

In early childhood programs, professionals are juggling the competing needs of families, children, and staff. Administrators and teachers can work together to increase the quality of their early childhood programs through careful attention to the minds, bodies, and souls of all who participate—sharing their joys and challenges every day.

Build community. In addition to supporting each other within the teaching team, the larger early childhood community can be a wonderful source of emotional sustenance (Beck & Gargiulo, 1983;



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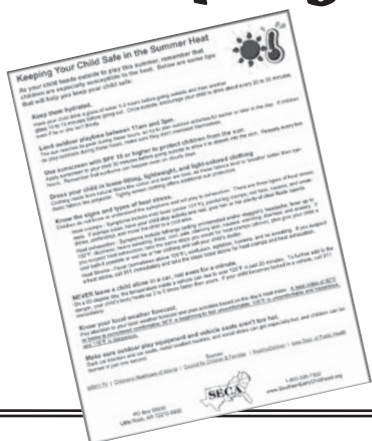
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In the Spotlight: Staying Safe in the Summer Heat



In June, our monthly informational member e-mail focused on keeping children safe during our hot summers. Included with that e-mail was a parent flyer that we now have available in **both English and Spanish**.

If you missed the original e-mail, you can find a link to the flyers on the home page of our website at

<http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/index.php>

under the *In the Spotlight* section. Be sure to keep up with the great resources that SECA is putting at your fingertips!

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Subjects & Predicates

Engage the **Mind**

- *Take short breaks.* Schedule one every morning and afternoon.
- *Learn from mentors.* Experienced teachers support new staff.
- *Solve problems constructively.* Seek solutions.
- *Continue to learn.* Enroll in classes and workshops. Read early childhood journals and books. Join professional organizations.
- *Share responsibilities.* Designate primary caregivers. Rotate less desirable jobs.

Engage the **BODY**

- *Create a break space.* Choose comfortable furniture, pleasant music, soft lights.
- *Practice relaxation.* Engage in a soothing activity during breaks.
- *Get physical!* Walk and run with children. Incorporate yoga.

Engage the **Soul**

- *Write it down!* Reflect in a journal. Look for children's behavior patterns, or responses to them, to address.
- *Keep a sense of humor.* Laugh! Be silly!
- *Encourage others.* Show appreciation to colleagues and families.

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.