Personnel Issues in School-Age Child Care

The Right Stuff

S T A T E O F N E W J E R S E Y

Helping with homework. Fixing snacks. Stopping fights. Guiding children safely through the out-of-school hours. These are only some of the tasks undertaken every day by a professional caregiver.

In most cases these caregivers seem meagerly compensated, with part-time hours, part-time pay, and few benefits. Historically they have had little professional development or career advancement. All too often parents, school principals, and teachers treat them as little more than babysitters.

Given these social and economic conditions, why would anyone want the job of caregiver? Is it that some people can't or don't want to do "real" work? Is this type of job simply a waystation for people on the road to better things? Could a competent, caring, capable person even consider such a job?

It is not exactly comforting to consider these questions when you're getting ready to hire people who will be spending up to twenty-five hours a week with growing, active, complicated children.Fortunately, the fact is that many competent and caring people are dedicated to helping children realize their potential.

From the pages that follow, perhaps you will get a sense of the nature of the work of a caregiver, as well as ideas about how to identify and recruit people in New Jersey whose caregiving reflects real caring. Perhaps you'll also discover the incentive to create a supportive working environment that will keep these people caring for the children in your after-school program.

The Roles of Caregivers

Our American society richly rewards high levels of production. It extends public appreciation to dominant leaders and widely notices financial achievement.

There is also a less-visible aspect of our culture, an aspect that traditionally receives little notice, little appreciation, and little money. It's the caring side of life: the part of us that brings a box of doughnuts to share with our co-workers, the part

photo courtesy of Maria Benavites

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Figure 1

Characteristics of a Dynamic Caregiver

Commitment
"Children are affected by staff changing every six months. Parents want people who are going to stay in the job, and they don't mind paying for it."

Organization Skills
"She is here every day with the comings and goings of the program. She is so involved... I have to trust in her ability, decision making, etc."

Physical and Emotional Well-Being
"No back problems, for example. This is important... to be able to get around with the kids. I would say our most successful [caregivers] have been happy with themselves, haven't had a lot of problems, and can relax."

Communication Skills
"You have to be able to work as a member of a team and be able to get along with others. I look for people with a sense of humor... someone who's willing to learn something from children... I want someone I can talk with."

Cultural Awareness
"In our home, we don't want to get into staring contests, and I don't want someone teaching my kids that this is okay... You have to respect and appreciate differences, not to punish them."

Accent on the Positive
"If people are glad to come to work, then they feel good about themselves, and about a job. You want [children] to trust you when they're feeling good, frightened, hurt."

Flexibility
"You have to understand how children grow and develop, and the meanings of different behaviors. [I want] someone who can let kids be in on decisions... and who knows kids are really going to be able to handle it."

that encourages our friends to read a book we enjoyed, the part that stops to help a stranger with car trouble. It's the caring side that keeps us all connected, no matter how much or how far or how big we get.

In your role as school-age child care administrator, one challenge is to find the middle ground between these two facets of American life. To succeed as a service business operator, you have to observe the demands and restrictions of your budget, your administration, and your available pool of labor. At the same time, you have to deliver the primary service of caring—and that means bringing in people who can play a role in the caring side of life. In Figure 1, the comments of children, parents, and caregivers describe just a few of the characteristics possessed by the people you'll want for your program.

Keep in mind that each of the caring people you select will also play one or more of the following administrative roles. Director – The director has general management duties, bears out full supervisory responsibility, and administers the facilities of the program.

Program Supervisor – The program supervisor plans curriculum, supervises the activities of assistants and aides, supervises children, and assists the director with designated activities.

Teacher – With the program supervisor, teachers plan and take part in activities with children, coordinate daily activities, and supervise aides in the absence of the program supervisor.

Aide – Aides join the program supervisor in daily activities.

Substitute – Although administrative staff may be able to fill in when regular caregivers fall ill, take vacation, or otherwise are absent, it's essential to have an updated list of standby caregivers.

Figure 2 lists people who can potentially fill the role of aide, volunteer, and substitute. For books containing sample job descriptions, personnel policies, and detailed discussion of other related matters, see Further Readings at the end of this paper.

NOTE: Director and Program Supervisor are the only positions with defined responsibilities under New Jersey law.

Finding People Who Care

To hire caring people, you have to find them—or they have to find you. After the program establishes itself as a worthwhile caring environment, word of mouth can work wonders in attracting caregivers. But at the outset, the process of recruiting capable qualified caregivers can present quite a challenge.

The wages, benefits, and immediate environment that many after-school programs can afford offer little in the way of material incentives for potential caregivers. More subtle inducements— such as training, extended educational opportunities, community involvement, and even personal advancement—have proven effective in attracting qualified caring people. Featuring these types of offerings in your recruitment efforts can make all the difference in the types of people you attract.

PHASE 1
Defining the Opportunity

Applicants for a job will want to know the starting date, duration of employment hours, salary, and benefits. To attract caring people to your staff, however, you'll have to establish what else you have to offer them. If you are able to create a meaningful employment opportunity, you'll attract people with the right skills and interests, and a sense of self-esteem

The process of creating your staff handbook often does more to define the opportunity than anything else. Here's loose outline for an effective handbook:
A. Statement of Intent of Mission
B. Show Personnel Policies are Established and Amended
C. Job Descriptions
D. Basic Conditions of Employment
E. Salaries, Wages, and Benefits
F. Medical and Personal Leave– Authorizations and Procedures
G. Employee Evaluation Procedures
H. Policy Regarding Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect
I. Conflict Resolution – Causes for and Alternatives to Dismissal

As you develop this document, you'll make important decisions about how applicants for positions as program director, caregiver, and support staff will view you as a potential employer. Among other issues, you'll decide precisely which tasks and responsibilities to associate with each position, how much or how little personal authority to delegate, how much value to place on academic and experimental qualifications, and how to encourage and reward the caring staffer for continuous service. Written down in the form of a concise document, these decisions set the stage for recruitment.

PHASE 2
Recruitment

With a clear picture of whom you want and what you have to offer, you can begin tapping into the pool of potential caregivers. Using the job descriptions you've developed for the staff handbook, announce the employment opportunity in ways and places that will reach the people you're looking for. Be certain to include methods and deadlines for application in your announcements. The following list describes avenues used successfully over the past fifteen years by school-age program administrators and directors.

- college and university placement offices
- child care resource and referral networks
- cultural, community, and senior networks
- general-circulation newspapers
- PTA/PTO and community meetings and newsletters
- child care professional magazines
- human services agency communication channels
- store windows and bulletin boards

To attract people with specialized skills, strengths, and backgrounds, a more target-specific outreach effort becomes essential. For example, a program seeking caregivers who speak both English and Spanish might spend some of its recruitment budget advertising through Spanish language newspapers.

Finally, no other method reaches out as cost-effectively as word of mouth. People with a strong interest in helping to build the best school-age child care services probably will gladly spread the news of your program's opportunity. Best of all, the word-of-mouth method frequently reaches people whom printed notices won't reach, thereby increasing your chances of meeting a more diverse group of candidates.

PHASE 3

> Academic degrees that can indicate a person's specific interest in school-age care include: Arts education, physical education, special education, early childhood education, elementary education, human services, social work, recreation.

Pre-screening

A successful recruitment effort could yield a stack of applications and resumes. As you sort and separate them, consider your earlier decisions about the relative importance of academic education and experiential learning. Suppose you have one applicant who spent the past six years as a camp counselor and another applicant who spent those same six years earning a master's degree in counseling and child development. In school-age child care, inservice training often compares quite favorably with a college degree, so comparing the suitability of these two applicants means looking at other factors. Each may make a worthy addition to your staff.

Some program administrators design prescreening methods that go beyond paper comparisons. A case in point is the YMCA Kid's Club in Vero Beach, Florida. In order to screen specifically for school-age care aptitude, the Kid's Club program director invites applicants to participate in a set of role-playing games and exercises. The applicants who exhibit the greatest degree of comfort and spontaneity are the ones who earn the interviews.

PHASE 4
Interviewing

When you're ready to sit down with an applicant, you're embarking on a process of discovering more about that person. Generally speaking, it's up to the interviewer to create the proper environment for this discovery to take place. In your advance preparations, take steps to:
- standardize your interview location, format, length, and evaluation methods
- formulate a list of both fixed-response and open-ended questions (see Figure 3)
- plan equal time for candidates to learn about the program and talk about themselves

With these elements in place, everyone can concentrate on the most important aspects of the interview: looking, listening, and intuiting.

PHASE 5
Selection

Finally, the moment to make the hiring decision arrives. The amount of time spent during Phase 1 to define the opportunity can make all the difference. If you've set your standards too broadly, you won't have a clear picture of who's best. If you've been overly idealistic,

photo by Sarah E. Round

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When no academic or vocational institution offers specific degrees in school-age childhood care, the recruitment process requires both creativity and flexibility. Excellent caregivers may have no formal educational preparation; their life experiences may be their only credentials. More frequently, however, people qualified to work with school-age children have gained relevant experience in service settings similar to that of an after-school program: summer camps, recreation centers, preschool child care settings, family day care homes, or social service agencies.

you may not want to hire any of your candidates. If you've focused too heavily on a single qualification, you may end up with someone who has no aptitude for school-age care.

If however, you've successfully balanced your hiring objectives between business and caring concerns, it's likely you'll have at least two or three candidates who appear to be suitable choices. If you seem to have no distinctly superior candidate, you may wish—or may be required administratively —to call back the finalists for a second interview.

You may also choose to invite each of your finalists to spend a supervised day at the program site where they wish to work. Observing a potential caregiver alongside the children can sometimes give everyone an accurate feeling for who may fit the group and who may not.

No matter how strong a feeling you have about the people you select as finalists, take these two important precautions:
• verify education and previous employment data as shown on the application
• obtain at least two recent written character references, and contact referrers.

At the time of this printing, legislation is under consideration in New Jersey to require fingerprinting for criminal history background checks and/or the Department of Youth and Family Services (DYFS) abuse registry checks for all licensed child care programs. The Department of Licensing will advise centers of new requirements if and when they are passed.

PHASE 6
Making the offer

As soon as your top choice emerges from the selection process, offer that candidate the job immediately. At the same time, reconfirm all the terms and conditions of employment with your candidate and make certain to comply with all licensing requirements outlined by the Bureau of Licensing in Trenton (609) 292-1021.

Your first-choice candidate may decline the position or not be able to comply with licensing requirements. If you have carried out Phases 1 through 5 effectively, another desirable caregiver will be awaiting your phone call.

PHASE 7
Orientation

Ideally, you will give members of your team time to absorb all the information in your staff handbook. You will also allow them several days to adapt to the new setting, to ask questions, and to prepare for taking on the full responsibilities of the job. This process can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks.

Unfortunately, the immediate demands of filling a sudden vacancy sometimes rob a new caregiver of that precious adjustment time. Even someone returning from an extended absence may have some catching up to do. At the very least, give new and returning caregivers an opportunity to take in the most critical regulations, procedures, and health and safety codes of your particular program.

Caring About Caregivers

Finding and hiring talented caring people for your program is just one part of the staffing challenge. Keeping them on your team—thereby enriching children's after-school lives with a sense of continuity—presents another challenge.

People who seek a professional role in school-age child care and who enjoy caring for children are rare and valuable assets. For their time and caring effort, they ask a living wage, a work environment in which their contributions are valued, and some degree of personal acknowledgment. Even people who take part-time positions in school-age programs will be looking for some sense of job satisfaction, and it's up to you to help provide it.

To maintain fair, comprehensive, and attractive policies that aid caregiver satisfaction, refer to the following suggestions, adapted from the Child Care Employee Project's brochure, "Special Stresses of School-Age Child Care Work," from (Seligson and Allenson, 1993; Jorde-Bloom, 1991).
• Hire as many caregivers as your budget permits, thereby allowing you to keep group sizes small.
• Ensure that basic personnel policies and fringe benefits meet, and where

The National Child Care Staffing Study (*Child Care Employee Project,* 1991) concluded that observable excellence in care and services provided to children was directly related to the number of years of formal education staffers had attained, and to the number of related child care courses staffers had taken at the university level.

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possible exceed, legal requirements.
• Clearly define roles and responsibilities.
• Offer voluntary benefits, such as health insurance and professional leave; offer part-time staff prorated versions of the same benefits.
• Regularly conduct staff meetings at convenient times, and invite all team members to contribute to the agenda; include staff in setting program goals.
• Give caregivers regular feedback on their performance.
• Make sure time is wisely used and work loads are realistic.
• Create a physical setting conducive to getting the job done.
• Aid and create opportunities for training and professional development (see below).
• Seek ways to aid experienced caregivers in career advancement; make sure the reward system is fair and equitable and promotes job security.
• Join other school-age care providers and advocates in fund-raising efforts.
• Assist volunteers, work-study students, and other supplemental staff in developing specific activity ideas; do not simply expect them to "fit in."
• Occasionally, seek positive media

Figure 2

Potential Aides, Volunteers, and Paid Standbys or Specialists

High school students who are:

- enrolled in child development courses

- enrolled in youth employment programs

College students who are:

- enrolled in work-study programs

- enrolled in related child education courses

- interested in community service

Seniors, such as foster grandparents
Parents and relatives of enrolled children
Local craftspeople and artisans

photo by Lisa Nohren

coverage for your program; this can give your team a sense of public recognition as well as build community acceptance and support.
• Create meaningful opportunities for caregivers to contribute their ideas at all levels of the decision-making process.
• Create or set aside a place where caregivers can have their own "quiet time" away from children.
• Compensate staff for all time spent in program-related activities that take place outside regular working hours.
• Encourage staff collegiality, creativity, and innovation.

Professional Development
• We are able to hold staff meetings only three times a year because staff schedules are staggered. On occasion, we may hire someone especially to show a film to all of the children so that the staff can have a meeting...
• There are courses at one of our local colleges that our staff would like to take, but the tuition is over $300 per course and with the salaries we make, it just seems out of reach...
• We'd love to have a consultant come

in and work with us on a regular basis, but our project simply doesn't have money in the budget for that sort of thing...

As these three program directors know, time and money for caregiver development and training don't come easy. However, it's essential to plan and organize activities that advance caregivers' abilities, skills, and morale. Components of a well managed approach to professional development include the following.

1. **Peer-Based Supervision**
Individual supervision by directors or site coordinators usually occurs on a weekly or monthly basis. Large programs that have a number of staff members in similar positions sometimes opt to have group supervision meetings. For example, in one program that has four different locations, all site coordinators meet with the director weekly for group supervision.

2. Staff Meetings
Caregivers may gather either in teams or as an entire staff, but regularly scheduled time to meet is imperative for quality programming. Activities for staff meetings include:
• planning the curriculum for the

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upcoming week or month. Staff may want to choose themes on which to base activities and events

• discussing special needs of individual children in the program. This often occurs in consultation with the director or a counselor from the local community mental health center

• presenting workshops on topics of interest, by outside speakers or by members of the staff • discussing and brainstorming, and holding potluck dinners and other social gettogethers

3. Learning Experiences

In the specialized field of school-age child care, written materials and academic training may be hard to find, but a great deal can be learned by sharing resources between programs. As part of its voluntary benefits package, one program center pays caregivers to expand their horizons biannually with "observation days," when they visit other program sites.

4. Local Training Consortia

In some parts of the country, formal and ad hoc groups provide training. Activities may include workshops conducted by various agencies, topical discussions, resource sharing, salary surveys, and caregiver exchange programs. These types of activities help build the information and community base for school-age caregivers and administrative staff. NJSACC and community agencies such as Unified Child Care Agencies provide training for New Jersey programs.

5. Off-Site Training

Many programs conduct full-day or weekend training at periodic intervals. During a school vacation an entire school-age care program team may travel to a pleasant location for workshops, meetings, and team-building experiences. Without the usual distractions, the atmosphere of such retreats can contribute to camaraderie among team members while it supports an intensive learning process. Some regional and national organizations conduct annual conferences. Broadly based day care conferences generally include sessions devoted to school-age care

issues. Field-specific organizations such as the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) devote their entire conference agenda to after school care.

Your options depend largely on local availability, the professional level of your caregivers and staff, and your financial resources. Contact your regional SACC coordinator for further information about how to join or start a school-age coalition as well as about upcoming workshops, courses, conferences, and training-cost subsidies.

Assessment and Evaluation

From a legal standpoint, standardized formal evaluations of the performance of your caregivers and staff, carried out at regularly scheduled intervals, are mandatory. Based on job descriptions, personnel policies, and documented goal statements, these evaluations protect an employee from arbitrary separation and protect you as an employer by establishing a basis for justifiable dismissal. In that sense, they are an insurance policy for both parties.

Formal evaluations take place two or three times a year. More often than not, evaluation forms contain a list of job characteristics and skills as defined in the staff handbook. The evaluator assigns numerical ratings—between 1 (insufficient) and 5 (excellent)—to the employee's activities and behavior over the course of a specified period. After-

school activity planning, group leadership, floor space usage and arrangements, management tasks, and the ability to get along with others are just a few of the possible skills to which an evaluator might assign a rating. In some programs, caregivers also complete a self-evaluation which becomes part of their permanent file.

An employee evaluation procedure can arouse all kinds of anxieties. Best behavior for a critical administrative review is not much fun. That's why an ongoing performance assessment can make all the difference. In a sense, all supervisory roles involve a certain degree of ongoing assessment. There's no sense waiting until the eleventh hour to share your congratulations and concerns with someone on your team.

When made part of an ongoing performance assessment, the formal evaluation becomes more like a home-video highlight than a frozen snapshot of a caregiver's development. Areas for improvement and goal setting flow more evenly from mutual observations that have been discussed over a period of weeks or months. Talking points for the formal evaluation can be examined and explored beforehand. In this way, the evaluation can meaningfully measure your team member's performance and progress. It can also give you an indication of the strengths and weaknesses that constitute your hiring policies and practices.

Further Readings

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