

STAFFING YOUR CHILD CARE CENTER:

A THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL APPROACH

An Overview



THE MILITARY FAMILY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY



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Overview

The U.S. military has developed the most sizeable employer-sponsored child care program in the nation. With the implementation of the Military Child Care Act (MCCA) of 1989 leading to significant improvements in quality, availability, and affordability of military child care, the U.S. military earned a reputation as a leader in child care quality. However, even the military has not been immune to the challenges that plague the child care industry in general – recruiting and retaining qualified staff.

Turnover rates in child care centers range from 26% to 45% per year, depending on type of program, and accreditation status. Even in high-quality programs, turnover is extremely high, especially for entry-level teaching assistants.

-Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips, 1998

In an effort to understand why the retention of qualified caregivers remains a challenge, this report, *Staffing Your Child Care Center: A Theoretical and Practical Approach*, examines the multitude of factors that impact the caregiving work environment. Specifically, the report:

- examines the current situation in early childhood care and education;
- reviews recent studies that address the issues surrounding staff turnover in the early childhood care and education profession;
- outlines the specific contributors to turnover;
- aligns the causes of turnover with strategies to prevent future turnover from occurring.

The goal of the report is to provide guidance to center directors and child care workers, and encourage new initiatives in the delivery of high-quality education and care for children. This document represents an overview of the full report, which is available by visiting www.mfri.purdue.edu.

Program Quality and Child Development

Today, more young children are in child care than at any other time in history. The quality of child care has become a national topic of discussion, as findings from rigorous, longitudinal studies have found their way into the news.

These studies ask: Will child care attendance be harmful to children? What benefits do children receive from child care? In summary, the research literature provides support for the link between child care program quality and later child development outcomes.

Enhanced Social and Emotional Development

High-quality child care – in both center and family/home-based child care settings – enhances social and emotional development in children.¹ This is true for children who are at-risk for social and emotional difficulties. The developmental gains associated with high-quality child care often last beyond childhood.

Enhanced Cognitive and Language Development

High-quality child care facilitates the cognitive and language development of children² even when taking into account other factors such as maternal vocabulary, family income, child gender, and quality of home environment. Furthermore, the benefits of high-quality child care persist over time and are especially notable for children at-risk.

The Role of Staff Turnover in Program Quality: Links to Child Development

Attachment theory provides a useful framework for understanding how child care quality impacts child development. As applied to the teacher-child relationship, this theory assumes that if a child feels emotionally secure with his or her teacher, the child can use the teacher as a secure base and a resource for exploring the learning opportunities of the classroom. However, attachment can only occur with caregivers with whom the child has interacted frequently for some time. This can be a challenge because caregivers in some child-care settings often shift from one group of children to another, or they leave the field of child care entirely. Children in centers that regularly lose and change staff have a harder time attaching to new teachers and establishing secure teacher-child

As turnover rates increase, caregivers shift from relationship-based to custodial-based care.

-Rosenfeld, 1979

relationships. High staff turnover has a negative impact on children's development; in centers with high turnover rates, children are less competent in language development and social skills, and less attached to their teachers.³

Stability of care is an important predictor of children's development.⁴ A considerable body of research has linked teacher stability, and in particular, the quality of the teacher-child relationship, to children's social and academic competence. For example, a series of longitudinal studies⁵ have shown that higher levels of teacher-child closeness in preschool predict:

- lower levels of aggression and disruption in second grade;
- to a smaller degree, high levels of prosocial behavior in second grade;
- higher language scores over time regardless of family background;
- higher cognitive/attention scores in second grade;
- higher ratings of sociability through kindergarten.

However, in order to understand the effects of provision of continuity of care on children's social-emotional functioning, it is necessary to consider under what conditions and within what contexts that it does so.⁶

Factors Contributing to Turnover

Wages. A number of influential studies⁷ on child care staffing find that centers that offer higher wages provide higher-quality care. Most important is the fact that higher wages help attract and retain a competent child care workforce.⁸ Although low wages remain the most important factor influencing intent to leave,⁹ the direct associations between wages and turnover have been rather weak. Some research suggests that the relationship between wages and turnover depends on other factors.

Level of Education and Training. Teachers with higher salaries and benefits have stronger qualifications and more formal education and specialized training than teachers with low salaries.¹⁰ Teachers who contribute the most to rapid turnover are those who have little or no college-level experience or specialized early childhood training.

Job Commitment and Satisfaction. The relationship between job satisfaction and turnover is complex. Some

Wages are related to caregiver turnover in both direct and indirect ways.

research suggests that satisfaction with particular aspects of child care work, such as contact with children, enhances commitment¹¹ but findings are mixed.¹² Satisfaction with the intrinsic nature of child care work, including co-worker relations, opportunities for autonomy and challenge, and working conditions, but dissatisfaction with extrinsic aspects, such as compensation, is common.¹³ This suggests that a major reason for high turnover rates is that staff simply cannot afford to remain in the field despite a strong commitment to and enjoyment of their work.

Stress and Burnout. Feeling tired and stressed are common complaints voiced by child care providers. As the day proceeds and the stress levels increase, teachers are less likely to have high-quality interactions with colleagues and/or children. Occupational stress and the "burnout" that follows also influence a caregiver's commitment to remain in the classroom and the child care or teaching profession.¹⁴ There are many sources of stress in the caregiving environment, such as organizational structure, and interactions with colleagues and children, but good communication, such as regular staff meetings, can increase job satisfaction and reduce job stress.¹⁵

The Child Care Labor Market

It is well-known that child care salaries are low compared to salaries in other occupations and industries. A more important consideration for center program managers and directors might be, what occupations and salaries are you competing with in hiring and retaining child care staff? To answer this question, child care positions were compared to benchmark jobs that are similar in content, qualifications, wages, and benefits.¹⁶ In general, the results of these comparisons indicate that child care hourly wages are low compared to those of jobs featuring similar content and educational requirements.

Specifically, child care wages rank:

- 7th out of 10 jobs featuring similar content, such as teachers' aides and nursing aides;
- 10th out of 12 jobs requiring similar educational levels, such as bank tellers and receptionists.

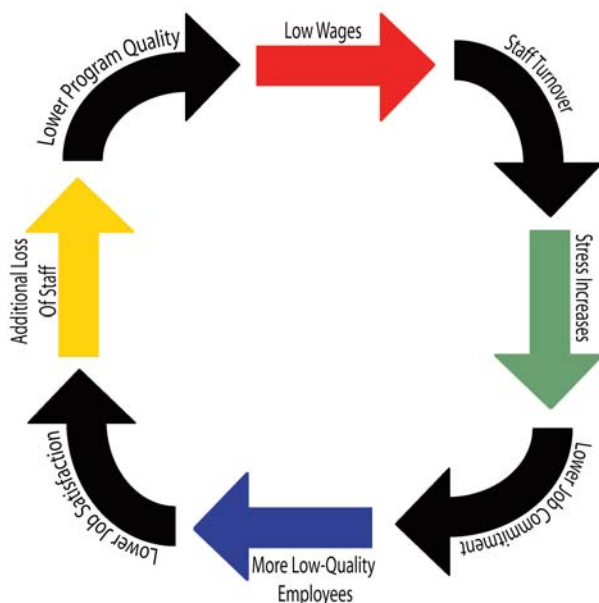
Compared with other employees who earn similar hourly wages, child care workers are less likely to work full-time. Fewer work hours lead to a comparatively low annual income for child care workers. Based on hourly wage and actual work hours, child care workers outside of the military system earn:

- \$0.22 more per hour but \$5,100 less per year than animal caretakers;
- \$1.29 more per hour but \$898 less per year than early childhood teachers' assistants;
- \$1.05 more per hour but \$1,583 less per year than cashiers;
- \$0.63 more per hour but \$4,773 less per year than cooks;
- \$0.74 more per hour but \$3,208 less per year than food service/preparation supervisors.

Putting It All Together: The Turnover Cycle

Findings from a major child care staffing study¹⁷ suggest that once started, turnover in child care centers is difficult to control. In this sense turnover might be said to operate in a circular manner where:

- low wages lead to turnover in qualified employees;
- turnover of colleagues leads to job stress for remaining employees;
- job stress leads to lower job satisfaction;
- the hiring of lower-qualified employees further decreases job satisfaction;
- low job satisfaction leads to turnover in remaining qualified employees.



The Turnover Cycle

Strategies for Retaining Qualified Caregivers

The following examples culled from the literature illustrate how insights gained from research translate into successful efforts for employee retention.

Compensation Incentives

Provide competitive compensation. Compensation incentives leading to immediate financial gain for child care workers remain the most important vehicle for stabilizing the workforce and reducing turnover. Centers that pay better wages experience less teaching staff turnover.¹⁸ Creating wages that are competitive enough to attract and retain highly skilled teachers and directors reduces turnover rates and the costs associated with turnover, such as advertising, recruiting, and screening job candidates.¹⁹

Offer flexible benefits. Personalized benefit packages, benefits for part-time staff on a pro-rated basis, discretionary annual benefit funds and other benefit incentives are crucial components of compensation.²⁰

Utilize Retention Allowances, Recruitment Bonuses and Relocation Bonuses to augment compensation. These allowances and bonuses can be an effective means to temporarily increase compensation when wage rates and/or job levels and position classifications cannot be changed.

Establish financial awards and programs to reflect the unique culture and mission of your center. Performance and productivity-based awards such as cash awards, honorific awards, time-off awards, within-grade promotions, and other recognition devices can be a powerful motivating tool, contributing immeasurably to improving employee performance, strengthening morale, increasing productivity, and promoting creativity.

Quality Improvement Incentives

The quality of work life for the adult caregiving staff is a critical component of any successful program because wages alone do not function to predict job satisfaction, turnover, or the quality of care provided for children.²¹ Factors designed to improve the quality of the work environment influence child care workers' emotional reactions to different aspects of their jobs, as well as their degree of commitment to the organization.



The Organizational Climate

Prioritize professional development. Investing in professional development provides two important benefits: it improves the skill and qualifications of employees and it increases caregiver satisfaction with the work itself.²²

Link compensation with career development. To retain your investment in caregiver training and reduce turnover, link training and career development funds to salary enhancement and career development.²³

Create a positive work environment. Healthy interpersonal relationships among staff, open lines of communication, and a participatory management style are associated with more satisfying workplaces and lower child care turnover.²⁴ Practices that enhance co-worker and supervisor relations, have little financial impact yet have enormous impact in achieving quality work environments that are personally and professionally satisfying.

Foster a sense of affiliation, involvement, and investment. A decreased sense of affiliation and belonging is among the most common reasons child care professionals leave the profession.²⁵ Practices like communicating center goals are designed to increase professional affiliation, involvement, and investment, and can be powerful tools against turnover.

Make meaning for caregivers. Interacting with children and witnessing positive child outcomes provide caregivers with their strongest source of satisfaction.²⁶ Practices that increase intrinsic enjoyment and fulfill a caregiver's needs for recognition, creativity and skill building can be powerful retention incentives in lieu of direct increases to compensation.

Minimize stress. While stress cannot be completely avoided, it is potentially manageable. Provide the caregiving staff with opportunities to recognize stressful situations and train them to generate appropriate adaptive responses. Training in stress reduction techniques, maintaining a healthy lifestyle, managing multiple roles in professional and personal life, and other coping skills encourages retention.

Use part-time positions appropriately. While some part-time labor is intrinsic to the child care industry, reliance on part-time staff encourages higher turnover and contributes to a high rate of daily caregiver instability for children.²⁷

Establish a substitute caregiving system. Teachers suggest that a better substitute system would reduce turnover.²⁸ A stable pool of regular substitute staff is essential for reducing staff stress, creating smoother transitions when turnover occurs, covering staff breaks, and scheduling vacation, sick leave, and professional development days.

Strategies for Recruiting Qualified Caregivers

Hiring practices play an important function in turnover prevention. Recruiting and hiring candidates who are skillful, knowledgeable and philosophically compatible with the organization eliminates some of the major reasons employees leave their jobs.²⁹ Several strategies give child care center directors an edge in recruitment and hiring.

- Have an ongoing strategic recruitment/hiring plan.
- Make a commitment to remunerate commensurate to education and experience.
- Advertise to, and recruit from, the right audience.
- Match the values and needs of the center to the values and needs of prospective employees.
- Screen carefully when hiring part-time staff.
- Articulate the values and goals of the center.
- Enlist teaching staff to assist in the recruitment and hiring process.
- Use training and mentoring programs.
- Do not overlook sources of unpaid labor.

Conduct Successful Interviews

The success of your center depends on hiring the right people. But finding competent caregivers is not always easy, and if you don't have the right interviewing skills, you risk losing a good candidate – or worse – hiring a person who is not qualified for the job.

- Before conducting an interview, prepare carefully.
- Develop a list of desired skills.
- Create a list of interview questions.
- Think about your interviewing strategy.
- Tell the applicant about the interview format.
- Be prepared for questions.
- Take notes.

Taking Stock: Assessment Tools to Measure Performance

Assessment tools such as program evaluations, outcome measurement, performance appraisals, calculation of turnover costs, and exit interviews are an important and integral part of child care administration.

Evaluate Your Program

Program evaluations are a necessary planning tool: they help ascertain where you are now in order to determine where you want to be in the future and how best to get there. With today's focus on accountability, there is a pressing need to deliver high quality care and meet the needs of the caregiving staff. For many, conducting a program evaluation can be a daunting project. But the information gleaned from a successful program evaluation can pay handsome dividends. Learn how to conquer the most common concerns about evaluation and help your staff buy into the evaluation process.

Outcome measurement is a way of determining whether or not a program is making a difference in the lives of the people it serves.

-Associated Early Care & Education, March 2000

Conduct Effective Performance Appraisals

Successful performance appraisals don't just happen – they require preparation, planning and hard work. Done well, they can be a powerful way to develop staff and generate understanding and commitment, which together should result in increased employee productivity. Done poorly, however, they can destroy morale, lead to a breakdown in communications, or even worse lead to staff turnover. The management skills needed to conduct effective performance appraisals can be learned. The full report, available to

download at www.mfri.purdue.edu, covers several key elements of effective performance appraisals:

- problems and pitfalls in appraisal;
- practical appraisal skills;
- planning an appraisal timeline and objectives;
- giving feedback in an appraisal;
- appraisal forms and rating scales.

Calculate the Costs of Turnover

An important part of the evaluation process is knowing how much turnover costs your child care center. Information about the costs of turnover is useful in identifying how current resources are being used and can assist you in determining how those funds can be better spent in turnover prevention.³⁰ However, calculating the costs of turnover can be a challenge, since both direct and indirect costs must be assessed. The full report, available to download at www.mfri.purdue.edu, includes several resources to assist you.

Conduct an Exit Interview

Another useful tool to gain perspective on the turnover process is the exit interview. By capturing the perspectives of the child care workers themselves, you gain first-hand information about why the staff member is leaving, in addition to obtaining suggestions for improvements or changes needed in the workplace. Such insights can be helpful in deciding where best to invest resources to manage and reduce turnover in the center workforce.

Summary

Investing in program staff through good working environments and competitive compensation is essential to achieving and maintaining quality child care services. The information described in the report *Staffing Your Child Care Center: A Theoretical and Practical Approach* is designed to serve multiple purposes. It can be used as an educational resource for articulating what child care providers need in order to deliver high-quality education and care for children; an assessment resource for evaluating your work environment and measuring success; a planning resource for setting goals to improve job conditions; and an advocacy resource for enlisting the support needed to recruit and retain a skilled child care workforce. It is hoped that this overview will encourage providers of early education and care to view the full report, which is available for download at www.mfri.purdue.edu.

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