

Aiming for a Higher Standard of Care

by Stephen Green, Ph.D.

Does the quality of care children receive make a difference in their lives? Most individuals who work with children on a regular basis would respond with a resounding, “Yes!” Those who are fortunate enough to work with the same children over a long span of time realize that what they do with children at a young age can have a very strong influence on their later development. Research over the past several years confirms this observation.



Quality of care does matter! Studies reveal that children who receive high-quality care during their early years are more likely to develop better cognitive, language, and social skills than those who receive poor quality care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997).

What are the Defining Features of High-Quality Care?

Quality, in the context of care-giving environments, can mean many different things. There are structural features of the child care environment that impact the quality of care children receive (e.g., group sizes, child-staff ratios, teacher qualifications, staff training, amount and organization of physical space) as well as more interactive features (e.g., caregiver-child communication, caregiver warmth and responsiveness, level of parental involvement,

and quantity and quality of activities designed to stimulate children’s development) (National Center for Early Development & Learning, 1997).

Over the years, researchers and practitioners have identified key factors that contribute to a higher quality of care (National Center for Early Development & Learning, 1997; ZERO TO THREE, 2004). Some of the factors that are frequently mentioned include:

- small group sizes with high staff-to-child ratios;
- low staff turnover rates;
- a well-educated staff who have received specialized training in child development;
- programs that have undergone a licensing and/or accreditation process;
- warm and responsive caregivers who meet the needs of each child;
- an age appropriate physical environment that provides children opportunities for safe and enjoyable indoor and outdoor play;
- programs that involve children in a wide variety of activities that promote development in multiple domains (i.e., physical, social, emotional, and cognitive);
- a family friendly environment that encourages regular parental involvement; and
- programs that promote the health and safety of children, including proper nutrition and food safety practices.



What Can I Do to Promote a Higher Standard of Care in My Program?

Minimum standards of care are established by states to ensure that children receive an adequate level of care. Meeting minimum standards is very important; however, it is equally important to recognize that the “minimum” standards are the lowest level of acceptable care. There is a big difference (in mindset) between the provider who simply tries to fulfill the minimum requirements and the provider who meets the requirements and voluntarily goes beyond them to establish a higher level of care based on best practices identified in the research.

The following suggestions are intended to encourage you to aim for a higher standard of care, recognizing that even high-quality programs have room for improvement.

Make quality care a personal issue. While there are structural elements that contribute to the quality of a child care program (e.g., size of facility), the people working in the program are its greatest asset. This means that quality begins with you! Aiming for a higher standard of care will challenge you to consider what you can do to improve your knowledge and skills to make you more effective in your position. Some questions to consider include: Would I be more effective if I furthered my education? In what areas do I need more training? In what ways could I influence those around me to become more effective in their roles? What impact could I possibly have on hiring practices, curriculum decisions, meal planning, health and safety practices, and organization of indoor and outdoor space?



Regularly assess the quality of your child care program. It is critical that you regularly assess the quality of your program. This can be done both formally and informally. If you operate a child care facility that is not licensed or accredited, consider going through the process. Assess all areas of your program for strengths and weaknesses. Take satisfaction in knowing you have done a great job in certain areas, and at the same time, seek to improve the areas where you find weaknesses.

Determine where you can make a difference and take action. After you have assessed the quality of your program, determine where you can make a difference. Keep in mind that, depending on your position, some of

the factors mentioned above that are linked to high-quality care may be outside of your control. For example, if you work in a large child care center with multiple staff members, you may have very little say in things such as hiring practices, educational requirements, group sizes, or how the facility is designed. While you might not have much influence on certain aspects of a program, there are other areas where you have greater control. For example, you can choose to be a warm, responsible, and caring adult who seeks to meet the developmental needs of each child in your care.



Never settle for mediocrity. Several studies seem to indicate that the quality of child care on a national level tends to be rather mediocre (Cost, Quality, and Child Outcomes Study Team, 1995). Make a conscious decision to be different. Don't settle for being a mediocre program. Rather, set your sights much higher. If you aim for a higher standard of care, you and the children in your care will notice the difference, and you will experience greater satisfaction in your professional career.

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Dr. Stephen Green is an Assistant Professor and Child Development Specialist with Texas AgriLife Extension Service. His areas of speciality include child development, child care, and father-child relationships.

The Power of Continuing Education: A Recipe for Success

by Denise Miller

Have you ever asked yourself, “Is this the job or career that was meant for me?” Do you consider yourself in a career or just a job? Many people often find that they cannot answer these questions. They often bounce from job to job in search of that one great position that, as they see it, others have found but constantly eludes them.



One of the biggest mistakes that most people make is not taking the time to figure out what they really want to do in life and what is important to them. However, deciding what you really want to be and understanding what is important to you is only part of the challenge. After figuring out what you want to be in life, you should create a plan to help bring that dream to reality.

Even if you consider your current position nothing more than just a “job” or your “dream job” come true, you should use every opportunity to learn and grow within that profession. After all, the skills you learn today can and will enhance your personal and professional effectiveness tomorrow.

Today’s caregiver has many challenges and issues to face and overcome. Some of these challenges may include working long hours, uncooperative parents, sick and unhappy children, and low pay. With all that to deal with, professional development is probably not at the top of your priority list, which can be a serious detriment to career development. If people learn and then are able to apply a few key principles, they can achieve tremendous results.

The key to continuing education (formal or informal) is concentration of priorities. The listing and prioritizing of personal and career goals provides a structured visual motivator for people, as well as a means to gauge a person’s progress toward achieving stated goals. Many learning theories are theories of behavior, with the term “learning” limiting the range of behavior. Gange (1985) supported this with his conditions of learning, saying that learning is some sort of change in behavior or capability. Gange went on to say that human activities are learned and can be externally controlled. Permanent changes are brought about in learning situations, such as training. Learners respond to the potential use of the information presented to them during the learning process.

Knowles, Holton and Swanson (1998) believed much as Gange that the learner’s motivation—want and desire—will help determine whether the learning will be purposeful or not. To a learner, if there is no apparent reason as to why they should take note of the information being presented, then they will not be motivated to learn. But if a learner has a “plan” and understands how some, part, or all of the information presented fits into his or her plan, the learning will contribute to that person’s personal and/or professional effectiveness.

Rothwell and Kazanas (1992, 1996) recognize that not all learners learn alike and that each learner is unique. Learners’ differences should be considered when deciding what really matters to them and how best to plan the educational path. If an adult learner thinks that the learning experience and that the adventure of change are as much a part of life as their family roles, they are more likely to enter learning and achieve a higher level of intellectual performance (Wlodkowski, 1990). Brain research also supports that you are never too old to learn; therefore, learning should be an ongoing process (C.H.E.F., 2003). By taking the time to discover what is really important to you and then creating your “plan,” you will increase your personal and professional effectiveness.

The assumption of this writer is that the reader has decided that he or she wants to be an early childhood education or elementary education professional. Whether this is a conscience decision or a situation brought about by circumstances, you fill an important role in the life of young children. Research shows that the optimal time for brain growth and development is between the ages of 0–3. Therefore, it is important that the caregiver is skilled and competent enough to create a stimulating environment full of opportunities that will increase the brain cell activity of the child, creating a positive learning environment (C.H.E.F., 2003). If the caregiver is not willing to grow and learn, how can the children they care for be expected to grow and learn?



Adults enter the education environment with an outlook much different from that of a young child. However, just as the adult must develop a positive learning environment for the child, that same adult must also remove his or her own levels of fear and nervousness regarding learning (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991).

Continuing education is beneficial in many ways to both organizations and their staff. Successful education programs demonstrate the skills to decrease stress and increase a person's ability to be a positive, rather than a negative, member of a team. It is important for a person to have a positive work ethic, be reliable, willing to learn, communicate effectively, and have the ability to work productively with others. By making a commitment to pursue and receive quality education—both formal and informal—a person is making a major step toward a successful life and career.



The first step in achieving quality training is a well thought out training plan. Even though a plan has been developed and put down on paper, it is important to note that a training plan is, and should be, a dynamic tool. Items on the plan may change due to circumstances and life events. Even though your plan is not a static script for future education, it is essential to realize that a plan is necessary for a person's personal success.

Quick Tips

- Take time to evaluate what is really important in your life—items such as personal values, wants, needs, and your definition of success.
- Take the time to look at the professions that provide those values, wants, and needs. This is also important when looking at a specific place of employment.
- Identify what it is that you want to do.
- Identify what things need to happen for you to be successful—by your definition.
- Begin to identify the types of education that will be important to you and your success.
- Be realistic with your time frame and resources.
- Identify the barriers to your success.
- Identify how you will overcome those barriers.
- Determine your true level of commitment (e.g., What are you really willing to sacrifice in the name of your personal success?).
- You do not have to do it alone—there are many resources that can help you. A personal coach is often a great resource.
- Your success path is really up to you—it is not up to your employer, though when they are there to offer assistance it makes your commitment that much easier.

“You cannot discover new oceans unless you have the courage to lose sight of the shore” Andre Glide.

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Denise Miller has a bachelor's degree in Workforce Education and Training and a master's degree in Education with a Human Resource Specialty. She and her husband have been married for 10 years and have two children, ages 3 and 6.

Quality Child Care Web Resources

Child Care Quality: Does it Matter and Does it Need to be Improved? By Deborah Lowe Vandell and Barbara Wolfe
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/ccquality00/ccqual.htm#1>

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) <http://www.naeyc.org/>

National Network for Child Care (NNCC)
<http://www.nncc.org>

Quality Child Care: What Does it Really Mean? By Karen DeBord, Ph.D.
http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/fcs/human/pubs/quality_care.html

ZERO TO THREE
<http://www.zerotothree.org/>

Family Child Care Connections Editorial Staff Texas AgriLife Extension Service

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