
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

May 2006

MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #11

ELEMENTS OF THE CHANGE PROCESS: THE BASICS

Written by Susan Harper-Whalen

We cannot direct the winds, but we can change the sails. ~ unknown

INTRODUCTION

The early childhood field is well aware of a persistent gap between what caregivers/teachers KNOW about early childhood practice and what they actually DO in their programs. Numerous factors influence an individual's or organization's ability to synthesize new information and translate it into regular practice.

In a discussion of training of almost any type, the issues of impacting growth and promoting change come to the forefront. Meaningful learning involves the rethinking of existing ideas and practices in order to accommodate new information and ideas. Developing and implementing training that aligns with quality practices is only one half of the training equation. The other half involves training that both models and explicitly addresses the process of making changes in current practice.

Whether promoting growth in individual learners or applying program-wide modifications, there are five core elements that stand out in an effective change process. When these five elements are in place, they support program-wide changes that may require participation of an entire staff; they also apply when an individual has established personal goals for enhancing his or her day-to-day teaching/caregiving practices.

These five elements are:

- a clear vision describing the impact of the proposed change to be made.
- essential knowledge and skills to implement the change.
- motivating incentives to encourage and sustain the

hard work change requires.

- the necessary resources needed to capably pursue implementation.
- an action plan that outlines step-by-step how to implement the change.

One of the most powerful tools trainers can use to support early childhood professionals as they apply new ideas to everyday practice is to actively teach the change process. Teachers/caregivers benefit from understanding why it can seem so daunting to make changes (even changes they believe in) and what they can do to make their change efforts more successful.

In addition to teaching this five-step process directly, you can address each of these five elements and support change through modeling during your training sessions. This newsletter describes each element in detail and includes lists of ideas for trainers to use to embed aspects of the change process throughout their training sessions.

A CLEAR VISION

Effective change depends first on having a clear vision. Individuals more readily commit to change when they understand why it is occurring and how it benefits them and their classroom or program. When this change element is missing, teacher/caregivers may feel a sense of confusion, and confusion stalls the change process from the onset.

Early childhood professionals must clearly understand the new policies or practices that will be put in place

and the rationale for adopting the new approach. In developing this understanding, current practices must also be clearly understood so the teacher/caregiver can begin to see exactly what part of their existing practices will be changing. A clear vision of the goal and an understanding of specific changes that need to be made allow the learner to engage in a goal-driven process. A goal-driven process helps in making objectives real so the learner can actively participate in the change process with intentionality and purpose.

Role of the Trainer:

- ~ Clearly define learning outcomes for your sessions.
- ~ Provide evidence for efficacy of the new practice.
- ~ Engage participants in reflection. Ask what do you do now? Why? How is that similar to and/or different from this new way?
- ~ Engage participants in self-assessment. Ask what do you know and already do that will support this change? What will you need to learn more about?
- ~ Provide support and materials for ongoing learning. Change does not happen in a day. Promote commitment to lifelong learning as impetus for the change process.

It's not so much that we're afraid of change, or so in love with the old ways, but it's that place in between that we fear . . . it's like being between trapezes, it's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer . . . for there is nothing to hold on to. ~ Marilyn Ferguson

ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Of course, new knowledge and enthusiasm for an idea are not enough to empower an individual to engage in the process of refining their current practice. Change in practice involves learning new skills. Some essential skills are directly related to using new information in practice. For example, in a training session on early childhood environments, you might introduce guiding principles for room arrangement such as "Arrange toys and play materials to give children a clear message about the types of play encouraged in the area." This "knowledge" seems meaningless without opportunities to see what this principle actually looks like in practice.

The skills needed to use this principle may be taught in a variety of ways: examples, photographs, or the

opportunity to actually change a play area in an early childhood program. These types of activities allow learners to rehearse the skills they will need to use new ideas in practice. Without adequate content knowledge and skills, teachers/caregivers are unable to confidently engage in the change process—instead their primary reaction is heightened anxiety.

In addition to skills that are directly related to using a new practice, you can teach the general skills relevant to the overall process of effectively changing everyday practices. These include:

- a) time-management This is always a concern of practitioners in the early childhood field.
- b) problem-solving Applying new skills is not a black and white process. Teach a process that acknowledges the learning curve. Encourage participants to ask themselves, when applying these new skills in my setting, what can I do if . . . ?
- c) collaboration Early childhood programs are organizations. Even a family child care home operates in collaboration with families, licensing, and neighborhoods. Individual changes in practice influence—and are influenced by—other members of the organization.
- d) reflection It is not enough to merely encourage participants to reflect on a new idea or concept. Teach the steps for reflection so they can use this meaningful skill to think clearly about the change process while they are in it.

By embedding instruction on the "how to's" of these practices and giving participants opportunities to use these skills during the training session, you enhance the likelihood that they will find success in making changes when they return to their programs.

Role of the Trainer:

- ~ Clearly identify the content area skills needed to put a new idea into practice.
- ~ Develop one or two skill-based outcomes for each training session; make sure your training activities give participants the opportunity to learn about and use the skill(s) that will result in achieving your outcomes. For example, suppose you have decided that "at the end of this session, participants will be able to lift and carry young children using appropriate body mechanics." You explain, using visual aids, how to safely lift and carry heavy objects. You would then provide opportunities to

practice right there in the session and get feedback on their “form.” It is the combination of knowledge, practice, and feedback that makes practitioners are more likely to actually perfect their lifting/carrying techniques and use what they learn later.

~ Give participants implementation guides or step-by-step action plans. Doing this guides them through achievable steps toward their goals.

~ Provide clear self-assessment materials for the skills you have taught. Doing this guides learners in evaluating their own change process.

~ Offer support after your session so providers can contact you with implementation questions as they arise.

~ Nurture the general skills the learner can use during growth and change, such as time-management, problem-solving, collaboration, and reflection.

MOTIVATING INCENTIVES

The complexities of the change process must be acknowledged, and the work that goes into changing and improving program practices must be honored. Teachers/caregivers maintain their motivation to complete this hard work of change when they see clear, rational reasons for doing it. When incentives have not been clearly identified, teachers/caregivers are likely to become resistant and may actually work to undermine the change process.

It is important to note that while financial gain is typically the first “universal incentive” that comes to mind, early childhood professionals are in fact motivated by a broad range of factors. One of the most powerful motivators is knowing that children will benefit from the change in practice. Other meaningful incentives include professional recognition, certification, ability to meet licensing and legal standards (such as the Americans with Disabilities Act), and self-satisfaction—measuring and celebrating personal growth and change.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Present research that describes the benefits of using the new approach for children.

~ Initiate discussion about what would happen if we didn't change? What will happen if we do?

~ Use a “Hopes and Fears” activity that allows participants to safely acknowledge what they hope will be an outcome of the change in practice as well as their fears or concerns about the negative impact a change might have on them or their programs.

~ For shorter sessions, provide a certificate of completion or letter of achievement that providers can post in their programs so families and colleagues can recognize their accomplishments.

NECESSARY RESOURCES

When a new practice is introduced, caregivers/teachers typically begin thinking about how it will work in their own programs. During this translation, the issue of scarce resources—such as time or funding—may emerge. While some concerns may indeed be significant, some are the direct result of a lack of clarity in the change process and are actually ungrounded.

Trainers have the responsibility of considering “the real world” of early care and education carefully when planning sessions. You have an obligation to introduce new strategies that are realistic within the typical constraints of child care. For example, do not assume that a teacher/caregiver can stand back for 30 minutes and conduct a child observation. Instead, introduce the idea of recording child observations “on the go.” As the information is being presented, talk about implementation in practical terms. By doing this, you are addressing and preventing the “yeah buts” that may get in the way of implementing a change. Your efforts will help prevent frustration and make change a satisfying and manageable process.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Provide options for implementing change with a range from low to higher cost - to create a balance beam for indoor play, use tape on the floor, a 2x4, or purchase a balance beam from an early childhood supplier.

~ Help programs access funding if needed. Share information about grants and community programs that donate materials to schools.

~ Stay informed about toy lending libraries in your community.

~ Talk openly about a typical and realistic time frame for implementing a new approach.

~ Help providers see how time invested now will “pay off” in the future when the program runs more smoothly.

training session and provide time/support for completion.

~ Offer ongoing reinforcement for implementation.

ACTION PLAN

A significant source of dissatisfaction with the idea of change comes from individuals who have been a part of change efforts that were never carried through. A history of false starts can seriously limit an individual's willingness to once again come on board when a new skill or strategy is introduced. One of the most successful components of training that leads to real change in programs is engaging each participant in creating an action plan. A successful action plan helps each participant break down change into small, manageable steps. For each step, the individual should be able to customize the plan for his or her own program by identifying resources, timelines, and evaluation methods using the following headings: Step (What to do); Materials needed to complete this step; Who will do it?; When will it be completed?; and How will I know the step has been accomplished?

Role of the Trainer:

~ Develop an Action Plan for participants in each

CONCLUSION

We are fortunate to be in the early childhood field at a time when professional development is readily available and valued as a means for enhancing the quality of early care and education for young children and their families. However, the challenge of transferring professional development content to day-to-day practices is real—even a highly motivational presentation that embeds opportunities for the practice of new skills may not be enough to support the change process in early childhood programs.

Understanding, teaching about, and embedding elements of an effective change process is one way you can enhance the likelihood that your efforts as a trainer will result in better outcomes for providers and children. This focus on change will be continued in the next edition of this newsletter which will address personal and program barriers to change. ~

RESOURCES*

*Matrix for Managing Complex Change (Adapted from Leadership Matrix for Managing Complex Change. T. Knosler (1991), TASH Presentations)

VISION		SKILLS		INCENTIVES		RESOURCES		ACTION PLAN		You see:
✘	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	→	Confusion
Vision	+	✘	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	→	Anxiety
Vision	+	Skills	+	✘	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	→	Resistance
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	✘	+	Action Plan	→	Frustration
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	✘	→	False starts, Disorder
Vision	+	Skills	+	Incentives	+	Resources	+	Action Plan	→	CHANGE

TRAINING SOLUTIONS was established by the Early Childhood Project at Montana State University with monies from the federal Child Care and Development Fund administered through the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services Early Childhood Services Bureau. It is designed to support positive and effective training strategies for use in early childhood professional development.

TRAINING SOLUTIONS is published six times a year. Individuals on the Montana Early Childhood Trainer Directory receive the e-newsletter as a benefit through the ECP Trainer Listserv. If you are not currently subscribed to the listserv, or are unsure if you are or not, please check your status by e-mailing ecp@montana.edu. **TRAINING SOLUTIONS** is also available at www.montana.edu/ecp. Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

If you have stories to share about implementing the ideas described in this issue, please address your comments to your training colleagues at trainerdirectoryexchange@listserv.montana.edu. If you have comments about the topic of this newsletter or ideas for topics to address in future issues, please contact:

Sandra Morris, Editor - Training Solutions

Child Care plus+, The University of Montana Rural Institute, 634 Eddy Avenue, Missoula, MT 59812-6696

1-800-235-4122 or (406) 243-2891

sandra.morris@ruralinstitute.umt.edu

EDITORIAL TEAM: Sandra Morris; Susan Harper-Whalen; Libby Hancock; Sara Leishman