~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

POTENTIAL BARRIERS TO CHANGE

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In a time of rapid change, it is not what students learn in school that will make for excellence in future work; it is how well they are prepared to continue to learn that will make the difference. ~ unknown

INTRODUCTION

The very idea of changing old practices or implementing new ones can bring up personal fears and concerns for many early childhood professionals. You might hear statements like, "I'm not trained to do that" or "My program is good right now—I really don't want to change anything." Resistance to change can also occur at the organizational level when a program as a whole undergoes a change in policies or day-to-day practices.

Let's take a look at very real factors that can influence and inhibit change no matter who is involved. Examining, understanding, and addressing these issues enhance the likelihood that early childhood training will ultimately result in improved practices in programs.

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE BARRIERS

The barriers that may affect individual practitioner's ability to change their practices are many. They include a) the power of past experiences in childhood and as a parent, b) the impact of experience as an early childhood practitioner, c) the role of self-esteem and the esteem of the early childhood field, and d) the challenge of translating early childhood theory into day-to-day practices with young children.

A) The Power of Past Experiences

Learning about how to care for and educate young children begins long before the first required training session. Beginning in childhood, the way a future teacher is parented forms a foundation of knowledge and experience about how adults interact with children.

As these future teachers move into child care and school, these experiences provide them with more information about child/adult roles in care and education settings. Often, the impact of this early learning leads to the development of unspoken beliefs and strong values. When left unexamined, past experiences end up guiding the interactions of early childhood professionals and serving as barriers to new knowledge—especially when the new knowledge does not match with these entrenched values and beliefs.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Introduce the idea that past experiences can have a powerful influence on current practice. Teachers begin learning to teach on the day they are born! Some of that early learning will fit with the new knowledge they are gaining —and some of it may need to be "unlearned" in order to adopt a new practice.

~ Encourage participants to tune in to what they may have learned about adult/child interactions from their parents and/or education experiences. *(It is important to realize that these memories may bring up strong emotional reactions for some participants. Be sure to provide a safe environment and support individuals as needed, including offering the right to pass.)

~ Self-awareness and reflection are important tools to help participants understand and explore the role of values and beliefs acquired through past experiences. Develop an activity that asks participants to list characteristics they value in young children or in teachers. At the end of a session, ask them to review their list and ask themselves, how will this value fit with the new knowledge I have gained?

B) The Impact of Experience as a Practitioner

Early childhood professionals also learn a great deal through on-the-job training. There is no "recipe" for quality early care and education that tells the teacher/caregiver exactly what to do from one moment to the next. Novel situations occur continuously as children grow, learn, and interact in group settings. In responding to the uniqueness of each child and each day, early childhood professionals must be quick, situational decision-makers. Sometimes these quick decisions do not necessarily fit the goals or professional philosophy of the provider, but they seem to work, and so they are remembered and repeated.

On-the-job learning is often strengthened by the isolation that exists for many early childhood professionals. It is difficult for most providers to plan opportunities to observe other programs or peers. Even in child care centers, where numerous professionals work together, a teacher/caregiver faces isolation if new ideas and practices are not embraced and observed.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Opportunities for self-reflection are essential in helping practitioners discover discrepancies between what they believe and what they actually do. Purposeful self-reflection is critical for developing strategies to remedy the differences between the two.

~ Encourage individuals and programs to articulate their early childhood philosophy. As a companion piece, ask them to list the practices they will use in their program that fit with the philosophy and the practices they will not use because they conflict with their philosophy.

~ Teach a range of methods for data collection that will help participants examine their practices with some objectivity. For example, ABC observation records (antecedent, behavior, consequence) can help a teacher/caregiver explore their actual use of positive guidance strategies (as compared to old strategies that do not fit in a positive child guidance approach).

C) The Role of Self-esteem

Just as past experiences play a role in determining how practitioners interact with young children, overall low esteem and economic conditions found in the early childhood profession can play key roles in determining the effectiveness of professional development. Early childhood professionals are often in positions where they do not earn the professional salaries they deserve.

They may feel minimally respected in relation to other professionals. In addition, the media's propensity to focus on examples of inadequate child care can make even the most dedicated professional doubt their abilities at times. When an individual is not confident, the natural tendency is to play it safe and avoid risk-taking—thus inhibiting the desire or ability to change.

As early childhood professionals are encouraged and required to participate in continuing education, it is important to recognize that learning involves some risk-taking. If training is to be effective, both the trainer and the learner must be aware of issues related to self-esteem and learning.

Role of the Trainer:

~ On an immediate level, you can embed reflection on esteem issues in all training sessions to help participants understand the relationship between professional esteem and learning. Trainers can also help participants understand their strengths and learn to view mistakes as opportunities for growth.

~ Facilitate rational discussions of quality child care and misrepresentations in the media to help individuals evaluate their own programs rather than fall prey to global criticism.

~ Make it a practice to see competence in every partici-pant. Your belief provides a powerful mirror for hesitant learners.

~ Nurture participant ownership of the learning pro-cess. Support them in setting realistic goals that allow them to develop their skills and maximize their professional potential.

~ Publicize success stories. Report on the success of other early childhood professionals who have engaged in and benefited from the learning and change process.

D) The Challenge of Translating Theory to Practice

The difficult translation of ideas into day-to-day practice with young children is another important change issue that must be addressed. A common concern about professional development remains: why is it that early childhood professionals (and other educa-tors) can participate in hours of workshops or complete degrees and still be unable to apply what they have learned in practice? Even when the learner knows the new information well and can clearly state the philoso-phy or strategies for implementation, there is no guarantee that the learner's actual practice will be

altered accordingly. For example, it is much easier to talk about the principles of developmentally appropriate practice than it is to use developmentally appropriate practices—especially if the learner has never observed or participated in a developmentally appropriate program.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Gather information about what participants want to know. Change is much more likely to occur when the content is relevant to what the learner wants to learn.

~ At the beginning of a session, ask participants to list the current methods they use related to your topic. For example, list the times during the day when you currently wash your hands or briefly list the three child guidance strategies you use most frequently in your program. Near the end of the session, the participant can compare their current practice with "best practice"—providing a link for examining the new knowledge in context of existing practices.

~ Provide practice opportunities as the foundation for all presentations. Role-play, complete case studies, play games, discuss, observe, demonstrate the practice, show videos of the practice being used, encourage observations in programs who use the practice, and create concrete action plans during your sessions. When participants have "tried on" a new idea, they are more inclined to understand and utilize the concept.

~ The duration and intensity of learning helps participants work through the process of understanding and implementing new practices. Avoid "one shot" training sessions. Topics need to be revisited over time and learners need to constantly hear how important and serious the new practice is in their work with young children and their families. Provide encouragement and time for providers to use new practices, get feedback, and try again. A site visit by the trainer to model and encourage new behaviors is ideal. Feedback can also be provided by phone or follow-up sessions on the topic.

~ Help participants develop individualized action plans that acknowledge specific learning needs related to knowledge, skill, and attitude. Help them ask the questions: What do I need to learn, value, and practice in order to work toward my goals? What kind of time and support will I need to reach my goals? How will I know when I have reached my goal?

Program Change Barriers

There are also a number of barriers that affect a program's ability to implement change. These barriers include a) comfort with the way things are now, b) sense of community, and c) the role of leadership.

A) Comfort with the Status Quo

For good reasons, organizations develop policies, procedures, and practices that allow all of the members to work together to accomplish their mission. One change in a single area of the program's operation can have a ripple effect requiring changes in multiple facets of the organization including staff practices. Whether this system is working well or not, there is comfort in existing habits and routines that can negatively influence a program's willingness to change.

Role of the Trainer:

~ Encourage teacher/caregivers to identify the "unwritten" rules in their program that might support or get in the way of adopting a new practice. Once program barriers are identified, it will be easier for individuals to address them as part of the change plan.

~ Organizations need powerful reasons to welcome change. Be sure to clearly tie new knowledge to research and best practices that demonstrate how the change will enhance the program. Stay informed about licensing regulations and tiered reimbursement rates to provide additional incentives for change when appropriate. This can support individual staff members in articulating the advantages and disadvantages of a new approach when others seem unwilling to go ahead.

~ Publicize the change efforts and results of programs that successfully adopt new practices. Work to build an early childhood culture that values change and growth in your agency or region.

B) The Sense of Community

The degree to which a program operates as a collaborative unit impacts the ability of individuals to work together to engage in the hard work of change. When the program has a strong identity and all employees are valued for their unique contributions, change efforts can help pull the workers together.

~ Don't overlook the significance of program directors. Work within your professional development system to provide opportunities for directors to learn about leadership and how to make time for team-building and meaningful staff meetings to address important issues.

~ Encourage participants to develop and take pride in the vision and mission of their early childhood program.

~ Support staff in identifying their role as leaders within their programs and in the early childhood field

~ In all that you do, stress the fact that each individual brings unique strengths to any situation. Help participants value their own ways of learning and their individual strengths and opportunities for growth. In turn, promote the value of diversity in learning preferences and strengths when people are working together.

C) The Role of Program Climate

For better or worse, a program's climate influences teacher/caregiver ability to implement new ideas. Learners often return to work in programs where they are evaluated based on performance. A program's existing tolerance for experimentation, trying new ideas, and making mistakes impacts an individual's willingness to engage in making changes. When "quiet, calm" days are valued or the program director or parent board is extremely critical, an individual may hesitate to take the risks involved in trying new strategies.

Other climate issues that effect change include availability of resources, type of feedback, and time for planning. You can help learners leave training prepared to implement the new practice or skill in whatever climate exists in their program.

Role of the Trainer

~ Include resources for and about program directors.

Provide supervision models that encourage and support staff growth and goal-setting.

~ Offer tools to help participants assess and understand the impact of program climate.

~ Stress the importance of goal-setting; help individuals find ways to document and celebrate their own growth.

~ Provide evidence-based resources that support the use of developmentally appropriate practices.

~ Share attractive copies of quotes that support growth, change, and ongoing professional development.

CONCLUSION

Creating safe, nurturing learning environments is one way trainers can address change issues. And remember that knowledge is empowering. Once you understand these potential barriers to learning and change, it is important to "pass it on" and help early childhood professionals actively reflect on and address these issues as well. ~

RESOURCES*

Visit www.ccplus.org for the following resources:

* Child Care plus+ newsletter 12.4 Taking Charge of Your Own Learning

* Child Care plus+ newsletter 6.4 Caregiver, Teacher, AND Learner