
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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EARLY CHILDHOOD DISPOSITIONS FOR TEACHERS AND TRAINERS

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Widespread enthusiasm for performance-based teacher education, and for competency-based education in general, seems to be associated with the risk of under-emphasizing the development of desirable dispositions in what [the teacher] learns. We suggest that when deciding what responses to make to teachers, it is reasonable to choose those which are likely to strengthen enduring dispositions thought to be related to effective teaching. Similarly, responses to teachers should focus on weakening those dispositions which might undermine effective teaching. ~ Lilian Katz

INTRODUCTION

Currently, one of the most exciting developments in the early childhood field is enhanced recognition and support for ongoing education of practitioners (teachers, caregivers, child care providers, early childhood professionals, etc). Nationally, professional organizations have established standards in core knowledge areas. Individual states have articulated these standards, established career frameworks, and offer financial support for continuing education. This movement is particularly meaningful because the link between teacher education and the quality of experiences provided for young children is clearly established.

As early childhood teachers pursue professional development, they discover knowledge and acquire skills that can enhance the quality of their programs and their interactions with children and families. However, there is a third critical component of effective practice that deserves attention as teachers continue to grow and learn. Dispositions—the way an individual feels about and responds to daily events—also have a strong impact on the effectiveness of an early childhood teacher and his or her practice.

Lillian Katz originally described dispositions as "rela-

tively stable habits of mind" that influence teacher attitudes about—and reaction to—day-to-day interactions in the early childhood setting (ERIC, 1979). Marge Carter and Deb Curtis elaborated on this formative idea; they identified seven core dispositions many consider essential to the success of early childhood practitioners (Redleaf Press, 1994). These core dispositions are listed below:

- ~ Delight in and be curious about fostering children's development, establishing a focus on individual children.
- ~ Learn to truly value play and its role in the teaching/learning process.
- ~ Expect change and challenge as a member of the early childhood profession.
- ~ Be willing to take risks and make mistakes; this is the foundation for learning.
- ~ Build in frequent and regular time for reflection and self-examination.
- ~ Look for opportunities for collaboration and peer support.
- ~ Become a confident and active advocate for children and for appropriate teaching practices.

A CLOSER LOOK

What do dispositions have to do with becoming an effective early childhood teacher? Is it important for trainers and educators to offer opportunities to develop these core dispositions during early childhood professional development? Does having these dispositions really make that much difference?

Let's imagine the experience of someone who has not fully developed these dispositions as she begins her career in early childhood.

Carman began working in a child care center two years ago, fresh from completing her early childhood degree at the local community college. Her initial enthusiasm for working with young children has declined steadily ever since.

Carmen dreads Mondays and feels like she just marks time when she is with the children—not really connecting with any of them. While she has good days, any kind of change in the children's behavior or the typical routine can ruin her day.

Carman has started reusing old activity plans rather than trying new ideas that match children's interests, and she is frustrated when children do not respond favorably. She dropped membership in the local early childhood group, and she finds a lot of reasons to avoid attending professional development activities.

Carman's story illustrates that knowledge and skills alone do not offset the demands of working with young children. Dynamic, fulfilled teachers possess certain identifiable traits—dispositions that help them successfully put their knowledge and skills into practice and continue growing and learning.

Most early childhood professional development effectively promotes knowledge and practical skills. There is less evidence of support for the development of dispositions. At the very least, trainers can promote these dispositions through such activities as ongoing reflection, examples of individuals who seem to naturally display these dispositions, and opportunities to learn more about these "habits of mind."

Other possible ways you could model and strengthen dispositions in training are extensive and deserve serious attention in the planning and presentation of

professional development experiences. More importantly, you can develop early childhood dispositions in yourself and model them during your training sessions!

As we thought about our observations of teachers, the differences we noticed seemed based on "habits of mind" rather than knowledge or skills. Some who could describe aspects of child development could still not apply this to their work. They lacked the disposition of being curious about children Instead, they were focused on trying to apply the rules and techniques they learned in training, perhaps akin to trying to change a tire without noticing which car had the flat. ~ Marge Carter and Deb Curtis

DISPOSITIONS ONE BY ONE

To give you a picture of what each disposition might look like in early childhood practice, the following descriptions were developed. For each disposition, there is first, a brief description of what it looks like when teachers have it, and second, a brief description of what it might look like when they don't have it.

Further, to give you a picture of what each disposition might look like in early childhood training practice, additional descriptions were developed. These descriptions can help you see what each disposition looks like when trainers model these dispositions in their approach to each training session and the participants. There are also examples of how trainers can actively support the development of each disposition in individuals who participate in their training sessions.

~ **Delight in—and be curious about—children's development**

When teachers have acquired this disposition, they exhibit a mindset that includes curiosity about children, and they delight in getting to know each child in their care.

Teachers without this disposition report "liking" children but they are not sure why, and they find themselves approaching children only when correction or direction is needed.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they are curious about the participants in each training session and seek to get to know each one as much as possible.

Trainers support the development of this disposition by presenting children's development as fascinating and exciting and by fostering curiosity about the way children think and act.

~ Value play

When teachers have developed this disposition, they provide materials and arrange the environment to promote children's play. They schedule uninterrupted periods of play and observe children at play closely.

Behaviors of teachers without this disposition include using play times as an opportunity to attend to other chores or cutting play times short to conduct teacher-directed activities.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they purposefully arrange the environment in their training sessions to promote learning. They constantly observe the general dynamics of both groups and individuals, and adjust time and activities accordingly. This means they do not routinely leave the room during group activities or allow themselves to be distracted by "chores."

Trainers support the development of this disposition by being careful to plan for relevant, yet playful, learning activities around the training topic.

~ Expect change and challenge

When teachers have this disposition, they demonstrate flexibility in following children's interests, questions, and needs.

When this disposition is not developed, teachers focus on getting through planned activities "in spite" of children's responses, expressed interests, or needs.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they demonstrate flexibility in following participants' interests, questions, and needs. They do not focus on getting through

all they have planned on the topic no matter what participants' needs or responses might be. They anticipate participants' responses and questions, and plan for them as much as possible.

Trainers support the development of this disposition by explaining the importance of being flexible and engaging the whole group in addressing questions. They also provide optional ways of getting questions answered and needs met such as contact information, resource lists, flip chart for questions, etc.

Use change to your advantage and view temporary setbacks as opportunities to grow in new and better ways. ~ Troy Aikman

~ Be willing to take risks and make mistakes

When teachers have developed this disposition, they are willing to try new strategies or activities; they take risks for the benefit of the children and for their own growth and learning. They see mistakes as important opportunities to learn.

Without this disposition, teachers tend to stay with their own way of doing things. They resist actually using what is learned through participation in professional development.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they try new strategies or activities in training sessions because doing so might benefit participants. They use Power Point, icebreakers, or other training techniques even when the technique is unfamiliar and they might make a mistake.

Trainers support the development of this disposition by letting participants know when they take a risk or make a mistake and describing their effort to develop this disposition.

We don't make mistakes . . . we just have learnings. ~ Unknown

~ Reflect and self-evaluate

When teachers have acquired this disposition, they continuously reflect on their day-to-day experiences

in search of new understanding and learning opportunities.

Individuals without this disposition often fail to see their own role in program dynamics—usually blaming parents, children, other staff members, or even the weather when issues arise!

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they reflect on their day-to-day experiences with training, searching for new understanding. They adjust session format and content as they learn new ways to make it better. They do not blame everyone and everything but themselves when a training is ineffective or unproductive.

Trainers support the development of this disposition when they take every opportunity to describe how their training is different/better than when they started. They may reflect on an activity as it is completed and describe to participants how they already see a better way to do it next time.

~ Seek collaboration and peer support

When teachers have this disposition, they actively look for opportunities to brainstorm and problem-solve with colleagues. They eagerly participate in staff meetings, informal networking, and organized early childhood meetings.

Without this disposition, individuals tend to work alone without seeking or offering collegial support.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they belong to an early childhood professional organization. They seek support even when they are isolated and busy.

Trainers support the development of this disposition when they bring current resources and membership information to training events. They share stories of how their collaboration with colleagues has benefitted them and made them a better early childhood trainer.

~ Advocate for young children and the early childhood profession

When teachers have developed this disposition, they are alert and active in addressing the rights of chil-

dren and appropriate practices in the early childhood field.

Teachers without this disposition tend to be unaware of the rights and needs of children. Or, they hesitate to speak up about children and the early childhood field—fearing confrontation or discomfort.

Application to Trainers

When trainers have this disposition, they speak up for children, families, and appropriate practice.

Trainers support the development of this disposition when they use quotes and real-life stories during training. No matter what the topic, they make a point to remind participants in their sessions that this is about children and what is known as best for them.

If we don't stand up for children, then we don't stand for much. ~ Marian Wright Edelman

CONCLUSION

These dispositions or "habits of mind" offer a base for the lifelong learning of trainers and of the early childhood teachers they educate. Opportunities to learn about and practice these dispositions should be provided during every early childhood professional development experience, whether it is a lengthy course or a short workshop.

You can develop these positive dispositions in yourself by practicing them in your daily work with early childhood teachers. Developing these dispositions makes a career in early childhood rewarding and fulfilling. Not having them makes a career in early childhood something else! ~

RESOURCES*

* *Helping Others Learn to Teach: Some Principles and Techniques for Inservice Educators* by Lilian Katz (ERIC, 1979).

* *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice* by Marge Carter and Deb Curtis (Redleaf Press, 1994)

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