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# ~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

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## SEEING COMPETENCE IN EVERY LEARNER

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**COMPETENCE** (noun) - the ability to do something well, measured against a standard, especially ability acquired through experience or training.

### INTRODUCTION

Early childhood trainers and instructors face numerous challenges. Many hold positions where they are expected to facilitate learning about a wide range of topics in a variety of formats—workshops, classes, distance-based courses, etc.—with varying numbers of participants at differing levels of ability! Most of these challenges seem to be diminished, however, when trainers view themselves as both teachers and learners.

When you face a room full of early childhood professionals, how do you define your role? Your answer to this question affects your expectations for the learner. Trainers who consider themselves partners in the teaching and learning process expect—and actively seek—individual and collective expertise from the individuals attending. Trainers who believe that every individual has strengths are more effective because they design activities to help people discover and build upon their strengths.

What you honestly believe about teachers and caregivers affects your ability to see them as partners in learning. The most effective trainers believe that while participants may be unfamiliar with the particulars of a specific topic, most—if not all—have the aptitude to be capable and competent learners. They are certain that even people who display less aptitude benefit over time from being approached from this perspective!

This mind set is comparable to the expectation in the early childhood field that teachers see children as competent, eager learners. Seeing learners—whether children or adults—as competent comes naturally to only a few people. Most trainers have to make an effort to adopt this approach. Why? Most likely it is because they have seldom experienced this kind of nurturing teaching in their own lives. Once adopted, however, this approach is easily maintained because it is so nourishing to everyone involved!

The idea of “seeing competence” has been touched upon in several past Training Solutions Newsletters, most obviously in *Effective Professional Development: What Does It Take? Part Two (#3)*. It’s time now to look at this approach in more detail.

In training teachers, we must continually remind ourselves to model what we’re inclined to preach. For instance, if we want teachers to focus more on the children than the curriculum projects or academic lessons of their classrooms, we too must keep the emphasis on our students rather than the curriculum to be covered. If we want teachers to provide opportunities for children to explore and make their own discoveries, these possibilities must be provided for them as adults. ~ Carter and Curtis

## THINK AND TALK COMPETENCE

The way you talk and act reflect what you think about participants' competence. The first step to overcoming negative thinking is to become aware that it exists. The second step is to become aware that negative thinking is often reflected in what you say.

Changing your language and your expectations can positively affect your thinking. The excuse that teachers and caregivers sometimes talk this way themselves does not justify disparaging comments from their trainers.

You are not "seeing competence" when you:

~ use words that identify teachers or caregivers as "incompetent" and dwell on their weaknesses.

~ make comments such as "they keep coming to training but never change what they do in their program!"

~ use statements such as "all they want is their training hours."

~ expect participants to change their practice simply as a result of learning new skills.

~ view learning from the perspective of "they either get it or they don't."

~ consider some participants annoying and impossible to reach, to the point of wishing they would stay home.

~ ignore the complexity of the teaching/learning process with comments such as "they've been to 100 sessions on this topic and still do the same things."

~ ask yourself "why do they come to training, if they never use it?"

If you patronize your participants or distance yourself from them by flaunting your credentials, you will undermine your goal of empowering them to become lifelong learners.  
Paula J Bloom

You are "seeing competence" when you:

~ use words that identify people as "learners" and dwell on the positive aspects of their participation.

~ make comments such as "they are beginning to

understand how this practice could help the children in their program."

~ use statements that reflect competence, such as "they took time from their already busy lives to be here."

~ view learning on a continuum from "not yet" to "accomplished."

~ recognize each participant as a valued, productive member of your session whose competence is somewhere on the continuum of learning about the topic at hand.

~ acknowledge the complexity of the teaching/learning process by saying "I know change in practice is difficult."

~ ask yourself "how can I enhance my training so it is more likely to start participants on the road toward growth and change?"

Under optimal conditions of safety and challenge, human beings are inherently curious, intrinsically motivated, self-directed learners.  
Elizabeth Jones

## BUILD COMPETENCE

Building competence is deliberate. To be good at it, trainers must accept teachers/caregivers' knowledge and skills wherever they are now, without judgment. Trainers are more effective when they acknowledge and employ whatever level of skill and experience participants bring in activities during the training session. By recognizing—and helping participants celebrate—the change and accomplishments that grow out of the training, you build participants' confidence in their competence.

You build competence when you:

~ design sessions to promote growth and change. This means you use multiple strategies that allow learners to track their growth and accomplishment both during and after the session. Strategies include pre/post self-assessments, contrasting/comparing current practice with what they have just learned, and certificates of completion.

~ provide opportunities for participants to share resources, personal experiences, etc. You can do this both formally (ask them to bring parent handbooks or recipes for nutritious snacks) or informally (provide opportunities to demonstrate favorite finger-plays or describe learning center ideas).

~ use clarifying questions to deepen contributions. "Tell me more" is a simple way to invite participants to give more details about most comments or responses to questions.

~ provide opportunities for participants to engage in problem-solving about relevant ideas. Purposefully considering case studies of real children and providers fosters implementation of the skills and knowledge you are presenting. It is helpful to teach or at least agree upon a mutual problem-solving process to use during these activities.

~ use examples of quality practice to brainstorm how to use the skills being learned to realistically achieve this level of practice. It is questionable whether providing examples of poor practice is all that helpful. The time taken to explain the story of poor practice could better be used for dwelling on worthy examples of quality practice and what takes.

P-1.3 We shall give learners a fair chance to succeed and diverse ways to demonstrate their competence. ~ NAEYC

of early care and education, it is important to establish, nurture, and sustain trusting relationships — not as a way to manipulate people, but as the most effective way of working with others and getting results."

"So how do we do this? First, we need to understand the components of trust. Think of trust as comprised of two equally important parts — character and competence. Character relates to a person's integrity, motives, and intent when working with other people. It is an essential ingredient in all trusting relationships."

"The second component of trust, one that is less often mentioned, is competence. Competence is a person's skills, results, and track record of behavior. When making decisions as a [center] director, you usually give important responsibilities to those people whom you feel are most competent because you trust that they will achieve the results you want."

Trust is integral to letting participants own the learning process which is described next. You convey trust in many of the same ways as you do when you support participant ownership.

Never doubt the capacity of the people you lead to accomplish whatever you dream for them. ~ Ben Zander

## TRUST THE LEARNER

A major component of "seeing competence" is trusting the learner. According to Stephen Covey (The Speed of Trust: New York, Free Press, 2006), "... the first job of any leader is to inspire trust. It's to bring out the best in people by entrusting them with meaningful stewardships, and to create an environment in which high trust inspires creativity and possibility." In the Director's Link (Fall 2008), Paula Steffen describes the implications of Covey's observation in the early childhood world:

"Trust is a powerful form of motivation and inspiration. People want to be trusted. They respond and thrive on trust. As leaders in the field

## LET PARTICIPANTS OWN THE LEARNING PROCESS

While teaching and learning is a two-way process, participants are ultimately in charge of how they participate in and use learning opportunities. You cannot force learning. In fact, there seems to be a natural human resistance to being forced to do anything! The learner ultimately decides how much effort and energy he or she is willing or able to invest at this time. Learners also decide what outcomes they take away. And they may not choose to take away the outcomes you targeted for the session.

A trainer's primary job is not to teach but to provide opportunities for learning. It may take a moment for the meaning of that statement to sink in, so here it is again: a trainer's primary job is not to teach but to

provide opportunities for learning. Hopefully the opportunities provided are meaningful and interesting to everyone, but each learner decides what is important to him or her at the moment. In fact, lifelong learners are often able to find something of meaning in even the poorest quality training session, but that is the exception.

As participants engage in learning opportunities during a session, the trainer's role shifts to observer—carefully watching to see what happens. As a result of watching what happens, the trainer may offer individual support, say a few encouraging private words, clarify instructions, or change an activity in some way to help participants be more successful. Does all this sound familiar? This is exactly what is best practice for children in the environment of an early childhood setting!

Letting participants own the learning process involves a lot of trust on the part of the trainer. It also involves reflection, so that learning opportunities that are not working effectively are changed and improved to meet the learners' needs.

You support participant ownership and convey trust when you:

~ provide training that meets professional standards. You do not have to apologize for professional development that reflects evidence-based practice and expects active involvement from participants. You do have to correlate theory and practice so participants are not expected to just "take your word for it."

~ use pre/post self-assessments. Self-assessments allow introspection and encourage people's thinking about the topic. This happens even when they are not ready to write down their responses.

~ offer multiple learning centers or stations that reflect the continuum of learning as well as different aspects of the topic. You want to be able to honestly say "I trust you to know what you need to learn during this time, and I have done everything I can to offer you a meaningful learning experience." When you set up multiple learning centers, be sure they also address different learning preferences.

~ let participants set goals for their own learning. While writing goals may have more impact on learning

than just verbally reporting them, they do not always have to be written or generated from scratch. You could present a list of goals you have for the session and ask participants to choose one for themselves. You can ask participants why they have chosen this session and make a collective list. Goals can be easily generated from a self-assessment by just noting the items that are marked "need improvement."

~ embed opportunities for reflection within the training. Make time for participants privately or in pairs to consider: What have I learned? How do I feel about this information? How does it fit/not fit with my current practices? What next step will I take?

~ use session evaluation criteria that directly relate to participant learning as stated in the session learning goals. Not only does this practice give you real feedback about the effectiveness of the learning opportunities you chose to use but it also serves as a brief, written summary of the key points presented.

~ gather participant feedback that allows you to reflect on and enhance your training on an ongoing basis. As your knowledge and skills grow, it is likely that participant learning and program improvement as a result of your training will grow, too.

P—1.1 We shall provide learning experiences that are consistent with the best practices for adult learners and that match the needs, learning styles, cultures, and stages of development of adult learners. NAEYC
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## CONCLUSION

If you have been discouraged by your lack of effectiveness lately, it could be that you have neglected to see competence in the participants in your training sessions. Embrace the fact that your effectiveness is proportional to your ability to form a partnership with participants in the teaching/learning process. Take responsibility for providing purposeful learning experiences and activities that build on the experience and wisdom of the group. Then let go of what happens next.

Feeling responsible for other people's acquisition, development, and implementation of knowledge and

skills is a heavy burden. It is freeing to trust the learner and let them take responsibility for their own growth and development in the midst of the rich learning environment you provide. Not only does this approach relieve your stress, it really is the best way to strengthen individual practice and promote quality.

## RESOURCES\*

\* *Growing Teachers: Partnerships in Staff Development* by Paula Steffen (Fall 2008). The Director's Link is a quarterly newsletter published by the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership (Illinois)

for and about early childhood administrators.

\* *Code of Ethical Conduct: Supplement for Early Childhood Adult Educators* (adopted spring 2004) - NAEYC. The joint position statement may be found at [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org).

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

\* *Workshop Essentials: Planning and Presenting Dynamic Workshops* by Paula Jorde Bloom (2000). New Horizons: Lake Forest, IL.

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