
~ TRAINING SOLUTIONS ~

An e-newsletter supporting effective adult learning practices

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MONTANA EARLY CHILDHOOD PROJECT

Issue #3

EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

PART TWO

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You must be the change you wish to see. ~ Gandhi

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood training is a dynamic process that is most effective when it responds to the unique needs of both the trainer and the participants in the training. Effective trainers create sessions that reflect their individual styles, participant strengths and needs, community demographics, and state mandates. Within these parameters, there are, however, common elements that apply to the overall effectiveness and positive impact of any training event.

In 1993, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) published a position statement entitled *Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development*. This document describes nine principles of effective professional development that provide a research-based framework for evaluating and improving the effectiveness of early childhood training and professional development experiences.

This is the second newsletter of a two-part series that examines these principles in detail. The first issue introduced four of the nine principles; this newsletter introduces the last five principles, describes their significance, and provides multiple suggestions for implementing each principle in training. To benefit from this research, consider these principles from your own unique perspective—comparing and contrasting any new information with your current training practices to identify strengths as well as opportunities for growth.

PRINCIPLE FIVE

Effective trainers have a solid knowledge and experi-

ence base in the topics offered.

Description: Professional development is most effective when the trainer is both knowledgeable in the content of the training and experienced in applying the practices and skills being taught. "In addition to helping ensure the accuracy and quality of the material presented, meeting this principle is important for establishing credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of participants" (NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ continue seeking your own "hands-on" learning. Actively seek out opportunities to work and learn in early care and education settings.

~ stay current with the field. Include reading and professional journal review in your weekly schedule. Seek out learning opportunities around topics you are presenting; look for conference sessions or college courses that will expand your knowledge. Ask a college/university faculty member to help you design an independent study around a topic of personal interest. They can help select relevant literature, identify learning activities, and meet to discuss your learning. Start a book discussion group in your professional community to explore professional resources that interest you. Join relevant early childhood listservs.

~ seek outside expertise and resources when needed. You do not have to be an "expert" in all things to be an effective trainer, but you do need access to "experts." Develop a resource file that includes specialists who can present on topics that are outside your experience. Network with other early childhood trainers so you have a peer group to call upon when your questions

relate to training preparation and delivery issues.

PRINCIPLE SIX

Effective training uses hands-on, interactive strategies to explore new concepts and encourage students to learn from one another.

Description: Active, hands-on learning opportunities are essential because a) they provide the mechanism for translating research to everyday practical skills and b) interaction with materials and peers allows the learner to explore, discover, and construct their own meaning. In fact, experts suggest that training most often fails to improve practice when it does not include active learning opportunities.

"In addition to reflecting what is known about effective strategies for teaching adults, meeting this principle has the added benefit of modeling the same type of teaching practices that are effective when working with young children" (NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ plan hands-on activities with clear learning outcomes in mind. To develop learning goals, finish the following statement: Upon completion of this session, participants will be able to When learning goals are developed this way, you are already planning what participants will be able to to do after the session and you can readily communicate these action outcomes to participants.

~ ensure that activities are meaningful to the learner. Appropriate activities are directly related to the learning goals you set for the session. Once an activity is designed with a clear goal in mind, take the next step by telling participants the learning goal and describing how participation in the activity will help them use the skill when they return to their programs.

~ plan individual, small group, and large group activities that allow participants to learn from one another. Each participant has something valuable to offer. Use a range of activities to encourage idea sharing. For example, ask each participant to describe a "favorite transition activity" on index cards, rather than just asking for responses from volunteers. This taps into the expertise of reluctant public speakers.

Teaching does not make learning; learners make learning.
~John Holt

PRINCIPLE SEVEN

Effective training enhances the positive self-esteem of the learner by recognizing skills and resources brought to the learning process as opposed to creating feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy by calling into question an individual's current practices.

Description: Early childhood professionals often do not earn the professional salary they deserve and may feel minimally respected in relation to other professionals. The media's tendency to focus on examples of inadequate child care can result in even the most dedicated professionals doubting their abilities. Learning new skills and practices involves risk-taking. When individuals lack confidence, the natural tendency is to play it safe and avoid risk-taking, which may inhibit the desire or ability to try new ideas or change existing practices.

If training is to be effective, both trainer and learner must be aware of the relationship between professional esteem and learning. Reflecting on these issues during training sessions helps participants understand their strengths and learn to view their mistakes as opportunities for growth. Rational discussions of quality child care and misrepresentation in the media can help individuals evaluate their own programs rather than fall prey to global criticism.

"The low pay and status of many individuals working with young children already works to undermine practitioners' self-esteem, which in turn can have negative effects on their interactions with young children. Additionally, building upon existing strengths makes it more likely that the new information will be incorporated into the individual's repertoire, and the opposite approach is likely to result in the rejection of new information ('you don't know my kids; that would never work with them')" (NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ see competence. 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. Replace negative statements when describing teachers/providers, such as "all they want is their credit hours," with statements that reflect competence, such as "they took time from their already busy lives to be here." Avoid identifying some providers as "incompetent" and saying things like "they keep coming to training but never change what they do

in their program!" Acknowledge the complexity of the teaching/learning process by saying "I know change in practice is difficult" and ask yourself "how can I enhance my training so it is more likely to start them on the road toward growth and change?"

~ build competence. Design sessions to promote growth and change. Use multiple strategies that allow learners to mark and celebrate their growth and accomplishments, such as pre/post self-assessments and certificates of completion.

~ let participants own the learning process. While teaching and learning is a two-way process, participants ultimately are in charge of how they participate in and use learning opportunities. Your role is to provide training that meets professional standards and gather 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. You support participant ownership when participants set goals for their own learning; opportunities for reflection are embedded in the training (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?); pre/post self-assessments are used; and when session evaluation criteria relate to participant learning as stated in session learning goals.

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

PRINCIPLE EIGHT

Effective training provides opportunities for application and reflection and allows for individuals to be observed and receive feedback upon what has been learned.

Description: "On-the-job" experiences are important learning tools in two ways. First, training becomes meaningful when learners begin thinking about application of the topic at hand within the context of their own programs. Adult learners need opportunities to reflect upon their practice, relate new ideas to past experiences, and share experiences and stories among their colleagues. Second, when new ideas or skills are implemented "on the job," the potential for learning and change skyrockets—particularly when someone is available to answer questions and provide meaningful

feedback. "Learning is most clearly integrated into an individual's professional repertoire when there are frequent opportunities to utilize the new information, to reflect upon its meaning and applications, and to receive feedback on how the new knowledge or skill is incorporated into one's practice. Isolated, one-shot training experiences do not provide for such integration and reflection, nor do formal preparation programs that teach theoretical foundations early on without any practicum experiences until much later"(NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ build in time and teach steps for meaningful reflection. Guide participants to integrate new ideas within the context of their own programs through reflection. Reflection is a process for thinking deeply about new knowledge from the "real world" perspective—the learner's current teaching practices, attitudes, and beliefs. Effective reflection includes the opportunity to **recall** (List 2-3 ideas presented today that are the most important for you.); **react** (How do these ideas fit with what currently happens in your program? How are they different? Given these similarities and differences, what will you do now?); **describe feelings** (What strong feelings or emotions came up for you during this session, such as excitement, frustration, confusion, joy, anticipation, sadness, anger? Can you trace the source of these feelings?); and **take action** (Based on your reflection, what will you do next?). Teaching the reflection process and providing practice in reflection during training helps providers value and use reflection as a learning tool in their daily work with children.

~ provide on-the-job feedback whenever possible. In reality, very few early childhood professionals have the opportunity to receive ongoing mentoring and constructive feedback on their performance. While this is an important issue the field must address, current limitations enhance the importance of promoting self-evaluation and reflection. (See Issue #2, Principle Four for ideas for making on-the-job feedback more available to providers.)

PRINCIPLE NINE

Effective training involves students and professionals in planning and designing the training.

Description: Adult learners have specific learning goals in mind when they pursue training opportunities. Based

on previous experiences, self-perceptions of strengths and needs, and perhaps evaluation feedback from supervisors, early childhood professionals come to training sessions with clear expectations in mind. Trainers can use multiple methods to learn about and be responsive to the requests and needs of the learner. "Meeting this principle helps to ensure that the professional development experiences are tailored to meet individual needs. It also encourages individuals to develop a stronger sense of ownership for their learning and reinforces the notion that professional development is an ongoing professional responsibility"(NAEYC, 1993).

In Practice:

~ gather information about what participants want to know. Growth that leads to improved outcomes for young children and their families is more likely to occur when teachers/providers are motivated and want to learn. To discover providers' genuine interests and needs, interact with and listen to providers before and after your sessions, add an "I want to learn more about . . ." item to your session evaluation, ask a few practitioners in your area to be your "sounding board" when you need input before planning a new session, and visit programs in action whenever you can.

Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. ~ Loris Malaguzzi

CONCLUSION

Together, Training Solutions #2 and #3 describe NAEYC's nine principles of effective professional development (NAEYC, 1993). In addition, a significant number of ideas for putting these principles into practice have been described to clarify what is meant by each principle and help you translate the principles into the real world of training. These ideas do not constitute an exhaustive list, but may be a springboard for discussion and reflection for ideas of your own .

"NAEYC believes that efforts to promote a high-quality system for early childhood professional development can be a catalyst to successfully address barriers to high quality for all young children and their families (NAEYC, 1993)." Your current work and the steps you take to build your effectiveness as a trainer are valued and directly linked to Montana's goal to provide quality care and education experiences for all children and their families. As you target areas for personal growth, go easy on yourself and be sure to celebrate your accomplishments along the way. ~

RESOURCES*

* Conceptual Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development: A Position Statement (1993). NAEYC: Washington, DC, found at www.naeyc.org.

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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:

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