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## *Taking a fresh look at routines and interactions*

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# 28 Fun Ideas to Motivate Your Staff

by Sandy Roberts

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*We hear the usual voices, we use the same words or phrases, we do some things the same way every day, and we so often overlook the obvious. For example, I placed an ugly broom in the corner of my office one day, forgetting to put it away when I was done with it. Throughout my day I didn't have time to get back to the broom. Day after day the broom just stood in the corner — a rather unpleasing sight to visitors, yet eventually it became just a part of the office and I never noticed it. One day a staff member was looking for a broom and I answered her request with, "I have no idea where one is, I haven't seen one around here." There the broom stood, in plain view, yet I didn't see it.*

*The following ideas were developed to be used as motivators to your staff and to enhance their understanding of their role as teachers. The ideas are meant to be helpful in heightening awareness of each staff's personal daily behaviors. Use them to encourage your staff to take a close look at their daily routines and verbal interactions with children and co-workers. They're fun activities that will hopefully make your staff's daily routines not so routine any longer.*

**1. Name Tags.** Place art materials in the middle of the floor and ask staff to make name tags that tell something about themselves without using their names. Give them a chance to explain their tags to the group and have them wear the tags the rest of the day. When children ask about the tag, it gives the teacher a chance to talk about herself and promotes a positive self-image.

**2. Treasure Hunt.** Have staff collect items from around the school that

reveal something about themselves. They need to say where the item came from and how it relates to them. This helps them to pay close attention to their surroundings and aids in observation skills.

**3. Personal Recordings.** Have staff tape record themselves during the day. Ask them to take the tape home and listen to it. They should jot down things that were said in a negative way and write a positive way they could have said it. This

helps teachers to become aware of what they say and how they say it.

**4. Don't Say NO.** For one entire day staff members may not say the word "NO." They are to say it in another way. If "NO" is said, a piece of masking tape is to be put on the "NO" sayer's shirt. People are amazed at how much tape they are wearing by the end of the day!

**5. Observe a Candle.** Give a small unlit candle to each small group. Each group is to write down as many observations about that candle as they can. Then do the same for a burning candle. Ask the groups to discuss their observations. Say to the group, "You have many of the same observations yet many that are different. It is the same way with observing young children. We all see some things that are the same and some things that are different. Study a child in the same way."

**6. Back-to-Back Observations.** About halfway through the meeting, ask each staff member to sit back to back with the person next to them. Have them write the answers to these or other questions.

- What is she wearing?
- What type of shoes is she wearing?
- What is something she said during the meeting?

- What color eyes does she have?
- What is her full name?
- How old is she?
- Write 10 things you observed about her today.

7. **“A Teacher Is . . . .”** Have staff give *one* word adjectives to finish this sentence. This will be silly, fun, and yet very serious. You’ll get an idea of how staff are feeling.

8. **Skills and Talents.** To foster staff awareness of other’s skills and talents, have staff stand in a line according to their feelings about their ability in music (towards the front of the line represents they feel they have a strong ability in the area). Follow the line idea for abilities in art, science, circle time ideas, etc. This allows the staff to know who to go to for support knowledge.

9. **Clarity of Instructions.** Give one group very vague instructions, and give another group too many instructions.

Written instructions to Group 1: You have received inflated balloons. Greet the other group.  
 Instructions to Group 2: You have received thumbtacks, pipe cleaners, and tissues. Move around in a triangular motion, covering the entire area. If someone should come up to you, you are to say “What?” or ignore them. If they keep bothering you and actually touch you in some way, pop their balloon with something. If they still insist on talking to you, give them your tissue, but be sure they take it in their left hand. If they put it in their right hand, wrap the pipe cleaner around their right ring finger. If someone says something to you who has a pipe cleaner on their finger, begin playing patty cake with them. If another person says something to you, just sit down. This is to show, by extreme, how too many directions may

be overwhelming while not enough direction can be frustrating.

10. **Back-to-Back Drawings.** Two people sit back to back. One person is given a blank paper and a box of crayons. This person is the *receiver* and may only say the words “go on” or “repeat.” The other person is given a piece of paper with a picture drawn on it. This person is the *giver* and must give verbal directions to the receiver to enable the receiver to draw the same picture. The giver may not say what the picture is, such as “draw a cat.” The giver must give verbal directions such as “draw a circle in the center of the paper” or “draw a triangle on the upper left part of circle.” He must not say “draw an ear on the head.” If the receiver does not understand, she may say “repeat” — nothing else. When the receiver has drawn the

giver’s direction, she must say “go on.” You’ll find, when all is done, that the pictures are not the same. It is impossible to place blame on who made a mistake. Both people feel they did the best they could — listening and speaking; but communication is difficult and inexact.

11. **I Am Unique.** To help staff discover each person’s individuality, answer the following questions:

- What kind of car do you drive?
- Where is your dream vacation destination?
- What are your two favorite pizza toppings?
- What is something that really bothers you?
- What is something you enjoy?

12. **Black Box.** Set a box in the middle of the floor as you begin a

### Watch what you say:

“I’ve told you a hundred times not to do that, now look what has happened.”

“How many times do I have to tell you . . . ?” (Do you really expect the child to answer that one?)

“I don’t know why you act like that.”

“Why did you spill your milk?”

“If you do that again, you’ll have to sit out for the rest of the day!”

“I know how you feel.” (Do you really?)

“Don’t you ever listen?”

“Do you do that at home?”

“When are you ever going to learn?”

“Why do you do that?”

“Can’t you ever sit still?”

“Do you want me to pinch you?”

“Just a minute, OK?”

“Don’t you ever do that again, or else. Do you understand?”

staff meeting. At some point in the meeting, ask if anybody has anything to add or any questions. You can bet they'll ask about the box. This creates an opportunity to remind staff to "teach for the moment." Kids want to know "what's that?" — don't ignore their wonderment. Until they know what that new thing is, they won't be able to concentrate on you. The contents of that box is a wonderment to the teachers. Place a box of M&Ms or a coupon for a lunch inside the box for whoever asks about the box first.

**13. Follow Directions Test.** Write a 30 question test or survey about anything. Tell the teachers to read over the test, answer the questions, and hand it in before the meeting is over. On question 19, write: "Do only question 27." On question 27, write: "Please write your name on the top lefthand corner of this page and give it to the director." See how many people actually follow the direction about reading over the test first.

**14. Staff Survey.** Some questions might be:

- The people in my job who make me feel the best are those who . . .
- The most important factor affecting morale on my job is . . .
- The greatest satisfaction I get from my job is . . .
- If I could make one change in my work, it would be . . .
- The most irritating part of my job is . . .
- When something at work really aggravates me, I usually . . .
- When I can't get help with problems at work, I usually turn to . . .

**15. Inventing Games.** Ask staff to develop a few *games* to help get a point across. Staff will discover that the best way to work on problems or concerns is to ask those they work with every day. If a teacher is concerned that she gets easily

frustrated and raises her voice too much, ask co-workers to develop a positive game that the whole group can work on together. This will show support for co-workers and the concerned person will know he is not alone. A game is also a good way to help with a problem in a fun, relaxed atmosphere with peers.

**16. Marble Jar.** Place a glass jar and a box of marbles in the staff room. Each time a staff member has had a good day or she handles a problem effectively, she is to put a marble in the jar and tell why. All the other staff can clap or cheer. When the jar is full, the staff can have a party! (Then start all over again!)

**17. We All Need Space.** To find your personal comfort space, try this. Have two staff members stand facing each other. One is not to move; the other begins saying the alphabet and, with each letter, moves closer and closer. See how far you get through the ABCs.

**18. Look Ma, No Hands!** Ask staff members to try telling a story while sitting on their hands.

**19. Explain Yourself.** Ask staff members to share their feelings and tell why. Say "I (feeling) when (behavior) because (concrete effect on you)." Example: I get excited when you share your feelings with me because it makes me feel like your friend, or, I get upset when you yell because it bothers my ears when we're inside. Language use is very important and this idea should be practiced frequently.

**20. Job Description.** Post the following in your center:

You —  
**The Excellent Preschool Teacher**

Individual with early education background; loving; caring; outgoing; silly; enjoys playing in mud, wet sand, and shaving cream; loves

crawling around on hands and knees, meowing like a cat, or slithering like a snake; has a calm speaking voice; has eyes in the back of her head; changes wet pants or diapers with a smile; can do plumbing (broken, clogged toilets, etc.); reads endless stories with zest; can do manual labor (shoveling snow, hammering bookcases, fixing broken tables, bike, and so on); creative; imaginative; fun; is able to hug a child who has a slimy runny nose and clean up vomit; artist; scientist; interior decorator; psychologist; mathematician; puts in long hours; enjoys parent contact on a regular basis informally and formally; spends many an evening working on school projects well into the wee hours of the morning; can do ten things at one time (calm a crying child, talk calmly to an upset parent, take a phone call); never tires of giving a hand even when not asked; responsible for lives of young children all day; takes criticism with a smile; accountable for every word and action; does volunteer work; always busy; receives little benefits and annual salary, well let's say that's little too. Your biggest reward — a young child smiles at you.

**21. Testimonial Writing.** Each staff member writes her name on a piece of paper. These are put in a can. A name is picked from the can weekly at the staff meeting. One by one, staff state positive things — attributes and favorites of the chosen one. The statements are written on chart paper which is signed by the group, displayed, and then given to the honoree. The procedure can only enhance a positive self-image.

**22. Back-to-School Headbands.** Have staff play this *get to know you* game. Teachers write their names on construction paper headbands. Collect all headbands in a box. One teacher chooses a headband and puts it on without reading the name. He

**A questionnaire to get staff thinking  
about what they do, how they do it,  
and why they do it:**

- How do I react when I'm rudely interrupted?
- Do I tune into what children are feeling?
- Do my words match my actions?
- Can I admit mistakes and recognize my limitations?
- Can I separate the act from the child?
- Do I teach for the teachable moment?
- Am I tuned into the children's special needs?
- Do I avoid showing favoritism to meet my own needs?
- Am I enthusiastic about teaching?
- If I were a child, would I like me to be my teacher?

positive vocabulary, ask staff to write 100 different ways of saying "Very good."

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sits in front of the class and asks questions answerable by "yes" or "no" until he guesses his headband's identity.

**23. Suggestion Apples.** Give each teacher an *apple sheet* the first day of school. Let them write a letter to you suggesting projects, discipline, meeting suggestions, and any ideas that might make the year interesting. Use the letters to help plan the year!

**24. Expressions.** Explain these to the kids: He's in the doghouse. You're behaving like a fish out of water. She thinks she's hot stuff. He's all steamed up. I'm sitting on pins and needles. I'm all thumbs. She spilled the beans. Keep it under your hat.

**25. Finish the Definitions.** Delight is. . . Relief is. . . Imagination is. . . Loneliness is. . . Discomfort is. . . Appreciation is. . .

**26. Reading Material.** When you want staff to read information in a magazine, place a dollar bill (gift to

finder) in the magazine article. You can bet that the person who does read the article will read other assigned readings, as will others who hear about the dollar.

**27. Special Days.** Find a calendar that has a special event for every day. Example: June 5 is *Doughnut Day* — be sure each staff member is wished a happy Doughnut Day and give them a real doughnut. June 15 is *Hug Holiday*. Show the others you appreciate them and give a free hug away! The staff will catch on quick and start giving hugs to the kids. *National Hat Day* — all wear a special or silly hat. *Birth of the Safety Pin* — use a safety pin to attach a special message to each staff member. *Joygerm Day* — make a tag for each staff member and catch them smiling during the day; give them the tag and let them know they are now a member of the Joygerm Club. (Copicat Magazine has a good calendar of special days and events.)

**28. Positive Words.** To enhance