

Eight Interview Questions to Help You Know Who You're Hiring

by Joel Gordon

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The most important element in operating a high quality child development program is the people who implement it on a day-to-day basis: your teaching staff. As a result, of primary importance for an administrator is selecting the right people to join your staff. The questions you ask an applicant should reveal not only who they are professionally and to some degree personally, they will

also tell the candidate something about the way you think. While we're all looking for skilled teachers, we're also looking for the right person. Will this new staff member share our values and philosophy while adding a new dimension to our group strengths? This can be difficult to determine from the brief time most folks set aside for the interview process. Yet the decision you make ultimately can influence the direction of your program for years to come. The questions below are meant to supplement or replace traditional interview questions: What are your strengths and

weaknesses? What are your long term goals? etc. They can help you see if this new person will be a good fit with your program and with their co-workers. They focus less on specific skills, which you should also find out about, and more about how they view themselves as professionals. These questions can tell you about their commitment to the field, to their professional growth, and to the breadth and depth of their understanding of child development issues.

Question 1:

What have been the most formative experiences you've had in your work with young children and families?

Which ones were the most important to you and why?

This question is a variation of the classic "tell us about your previous work experience and education" and I like it better because it should tell you more than you'll find on their resume. When I ask this question I'm listening not just to find out where they've worked and what they've done, I'm asking what they got out of those experiences. Have they grown with each job experience, and how? Hopefully I'll know if their experiences fit with what we do and if there's a solid foundation to build on. If they answer with a recitation of what's

on their resume then I ask them to clarify further what happened at that job that significantly affected how they now work with children and families. Let them tell you which of their previous experiences were important. Finding out which jobs weren't helpful to their growth and why can also be revealing.

Question 2:

If you were to operate your own program, what do you consider key elements in a high quality operation that you would be sure to include?

This is a little like asking "Tell me everything you know" about quality early childhood education. Obviously no one can fully answer this question in the few minutes allotted to each question, but their selection of what they mention and, perhaps even more importantly, what they forget or leave out will tell you a lot about their values and perspectives as a teacher. You, of course, must be clear about your values and priorities in your program in order to determine if the candidate is a good match. I know that I like to hear each candidate include health and safety first and foremost. While we may all like to hear them explore the more exciting areas of curriculum, parent work, diversity, etc., if they don't start the job with an awareness of safety, the rest doesn't matter too much because you may

have hired an accident waiting to happen. I'm also looking for them to talk about more than the children. What do they have to say about their relationship with and the role of the parents in their classroom? What do they mention about supporting the home culture? How do they develop curriculum? Have they talked about positive and healthy relationships with their co-workers? This question can also be a lead-in to more follow-up questions about specific skills. Take good notes as they answer this question so you can review it and compare with your own list later on.

Question 3:

Professionally, in what areas would you most like to develop?
What skills would you like to learn?

If you're tired of the old "tell me your strengths and weaknesses," give this question a try. This will tell you about their interests and their capacity for self-reflection. You might want to weigh how enthusiastically they answer the question. Do you pick up that they're hesitant to try new things or haven't given much thought to their growth at work? A quick answer on their part may mean they've already given some serious thought to their own professional development. Also you can compare their proposed area of growth with the current and future needs of the program. If they received education/training in their desired area, how would that help your program?

Question 4:

What part of being an early childhood teacher gives you the most satisfaction?
What part of doing this work is the most difficult for you?

This question is a good way to get to know the person behind the application. It asks them to talk about how their personality interfaces with their work. Asking them about what provides satisfaction will help you understand what

motivates them to do high quality and help you determine if the applicant is likely to find that satisfaction in your program. By asking them what's difficult for them, you may learn whether or not this candidate will be happy working in your program over a long period of time. You may determine that it's unlikely you could provide those things that give them the greatest satisfaction, or prevent things that are problematic for them. This question will help you determine if it's a good match or a good fit between what it is that you do, and what they need to be a productive and happy employee. This question may require you to press a little bit further. It's not enough for them to respond that they do this work "Because I love children." They need to elaborate on this and be specific about what aspects of their work are the most exciting. It's also interesting to note how much they respond to this question by separating out the child from the family context. How do they feel about working with parents or other family members? Do they find satisfaction in working with children but frustration in working with parents? This isn't an unusual dichotomy, but it will be problematic further down the road.

Question 5:

Would you please do a 10-minute written observation on one of our children?
How would you go about assessing a child and gathering information for a parent conference?

It is a fairly common practice to have a prospective teacher come in and teach for a morning in order to see them at work. However, you should consider also asking them to perform a written observation on a specific child. When they are done you'll not only have a sample of their writing (no, they won't have to time to correct their work) but you'll be able to have a glimpse of what they see when they look at children in the program. Do they catch nuances of emotional displays by the child? Do they notice how a child connects with other caregivers or

children? What have they said about how a child uses a specific toy? Gathering and sharing information about the child with the parent is a critical function of every teacher. As the applicant answers this question try to determine what observation skills and techniques they've used successfully. Find out if, in their previous jobs, was there time to do observations, or will this be a fairly new skill to them that they'll need to develop? What, if any, observation tools have they used? You may use a specific tool in your program and you'll want to try to gauge how much training you'll need to do.

Question 6:

How might you use an individual child's assessment to develop curriculum in your class?

Curriculum design and implementation are the primary aspect of what a teacher does. This question will let you assess what values and priorities they put into their curriculum design. To what degree do they develop individualized curriculum based on the emerging interests of the children in their classroom? What activities would they plan for and what learning tools and toys would they add to the classroom environment? A follow-up question to ask might be to find out how might they balance and incorporate the program needs of individual children with a larger classroom curriculum and themes.

Question 7:

This is a situational question.

In your dramatic play area you have a variety of dress-up costumes that children can try on for their play. You've noticed that one of the boys, whose parents are exchange students from another country, enjoys playing in the dress-up corner. One afternoon his mother arrives to pick up her child and finds him in the dress-up corner wearing high-heel shoes, a flowing dress, and a matching hat. She is upset and tells you that her child is NEVER to wear girls' clothes again. You discuss the situation with her and describe why it's not

harmful and not out of the ordinary for young children. She insists that you not allow him to dress up like that in the dress-up corner. What would you do and why?

This question comes from an actual situation described by June Sale in her *Exchange* article "Why I'm Involved in Parent Involvement" (December 1984, pp. 25-27). It occurred when she was the director of UCLA's child development center. This story is rich in its implications and it requires a candidate to show you how they think about difficult topics. What will they do when two or more values they have come in conflict? In this case it's about the sound child development theory of dramatic play as a way for children to expand their understanding of the world, and the need to support a parent's perspective and values. You may also interpret the parent's dictum not to let their son play in girls' clothing as being homophobic and this could create a conflict for you. So the question requires the candidate to weigh and prioritize these conflicting values. What are the values they hold fast to and which ones can they be more flexible about? This situation also reveals how a potential staff member might talk to the parent about a difficult subject.

Is there a "right" answer to this question? June noted that after staff discussion, "The child development in our souls hurt, but the fact is that we should have been aware that in this family's culture boys dressing as girls was not acceptable. This child is now redirected when he starts to play with feminine dress-up clothes." I agree with June. However, when I'm interviewing candidates, while I'm pleased if they come to this conclusion, I recognize that getting to this conclusion is not always easy. But it does give me insight into how the applicant thinks.

Question 8:

Have you ever had a mentor or a hero?

Was there anybody in particular that influenced your work with young children?

What did you learn from them and what were they like?

How did they influence you?

Again, this question will help you know about the person you're hiring and their professional values and skills. In my experience it's actually not all that common for a candidate to have had a formal mentor. But the question allows them to talk about individuals who

influenced their work. Getting them to open up about this person and what they learned from them will help you know about the candidate as a learner and how they function in one kind of a relationship. Ask about what the connection was and why it was meaningful to them. Sometimes folks will reply with an author they read or a figure in our field or someone who led a workshop they attended. Knowing what the candidate was like as a learner will let you know a lot about them as a teacher.