Strategies For Preventing Child Care Center Director Stress and Burnout

by Syretha O. Storey

In 2014, CNN identified child care center director as one of the most stressful and underpaid jobs in America (CNN, 2014). An informal poll of directors validated CNN’s claim. One hundred twenty-four directors were asked to complete the Workplace Stress Scale (The Marlin Company, 2009). Of those who answered the eight-question survey, 77 percent said they experienced stress at work; some 44 percent said it was moderate, 31 percent said it was severe and 3 percent rated it as dangerous.

What makes managing a child care program so stressful? The work of a child care center director is wide-ranging and, at times, complicated. It is no wonder that the respondents of the survey reported varied sources of stress—each reflecting a different aspect of a director’s job. The most commonly reported causes of stress were:

- Recruiting, hiring and retaining qualified staff;
- Unreasonable parent demands;
- Time constraints (getting everything done each day);
- Meeting regulatory requirements;
- Scarcity (e.g., lack of funding, resources, staffing, and so on);
- Maintaining a healthy work-life balance;
- Compensation;
- Increases in children’s challenging behavior;
- Maintaining program quality; and,
- Administrivia, or the tiresome but essential details that must be performed in running an organization.

Giving the current staffing crisis in early childhood education (Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L., 2016), it is no wonder that recruiting, hiring and retaining qualified staff was the most often reported source of stress for directors. Without adequate, skilled teachers, early childhood programs cannot meet licensing requirements, achieve higher standards of care, or meet parent needs.

Left unchecked, chronically stressful work conditions typically lead to burnout. According to the World Health Organization (2019), burnout is more than just stress, but results from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. The WHO further defined burnout as feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s career, or reduced professional efficacy.

While 77 percent of the directors reported that they routinely experi-
ence moderate to high levels of work stress, only 36 percent indicated that they have and regularly engage in a self-care routine that is used to reduce work-related stress. Given that work-related stress is often unavoidable, it is imperative that directors find ways to manage it. If not, unmanaged stress may lead to burnout. Here are ten ways that directors can manage their work-related stress.

1. **Embrace Self-Care.**
The first step in reducing stress and avoiding burnout is to prioritize yourself and make time for a self-care routine that nurtures your physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs. Identify your known stressors and meaningful strategies for mitigating them. Putting your own well-being first ensures that you have the emotional resources necessary to care for others and manage your early childhood program (Drolette, 2019).

2. **Complete the Stress Cycle.**
Not all stress can be avoided. How we respond to stressors is just as important as working to prevent them. In the book, “Burnout: The Secrets to Unlocking The Stress Cycle” (Nagoski and Nagoski, 2019), the authors explain the importance of completing the stress cycle to avoid burnout. Completing the stress cycle requires dealing with both the stressor (the source of your stress) and the feeling of stress (your body’s natural reaction to the stressor). Stress can manifest itself in many ways (e.g., crying, yelling, nervousness, upset stomach, insomnia, etc.). Let’s say four teachers call-out on the same day. Because of this unexpected staffing crisis, you are naturally feeling stressed, worried, and overwhelmed. You manage to find a way to cover every classroom. Feeling accomplished, you immediately go back to your office and begin working on another task. According to Nagoski and Nagoski, you have dealt with the stressor (the source of your stress) but have not adequately dealt with your body’s stress reaction. When we focus on dealing with the origins of our stress and never dealing with our body’s response to that stress, we can become stuck in a stress cycle. The authors suggest several different ways to complete the stress cycle. One way is to move. Taking the time to go for a short walk may seem like a waste of time, but it may be just what you need to complete the stress cycle.

3. **Engage with Your Professional Community.**
Early childhood directors often work in isolation from other directors. The day-to-day work of managing an early childhood program leaves little time and opportunity for directors to network and support each other. Further, the competitive nature of childcare often ensures that this isolation is even more solidified. To avoid burnout, directors must find ways to engage with other directors. These interactions may take place in face-to-face encounters or virtual interactions.

When we focus on dealing with the origins of our stress and never dealing with our body’s response to that stress, we can become stuck in a stress cycle.

The more we interact with each other, the more we come to realize that the struggles we have are not so unique but are common and easily solved with support. A good place to start is to reach out to your state’s Child Care Association to learn how to become engaged with other directors in your state or local community.

4. **Erase the Stigma.**
Create an organizational structure that makes conversations about stress, burnout and mental health a safe topic. When we feel that stress and burnout are taboo, we are less likely to engage in conversation with others about coping strategies. Share and discuss strategies for dealing with stress with your staff. Encourage your staff to engage in self-care. If your staff has a strong and healthy well-being, you are less likely to experience compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress.

5. **Avoid Workism.**
Workism is the mindset that work is not only necessary for economic production, but also the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose. (Thompson 2019). Workism makes it challenging to achieve a good work-life balance. In their responses to the survey, many directors complained of the long hours required to manage a childcare program effectively. Respondents further reported that they not only work long hours but they also take work home. The demands of managing child care, coupled with technology that makes it easy to be continually connected to work, builds the perfect scenario for the workism trap. To avoid burnout, directors must set boundaries for time worked and make time for a full life outside of the work of childcare.
6. **View Employee Complaints as Feedback.**

Not all employee complaints are bad. They should be viewed as a tool to shine a light on easily managed problems in the early childhood program (Swindling, 2013). Employee complaints can help directors better understand issues from the employee’s perspective and how they view their quality of work life (Bella 2015). Becoming more mindful of the types of employee complaints and how to respond to them will help to eliminate unnecessary stress.

7. **Learn to Delegate.**

Through delegation, directors can train, develop, coach, and mentor employees beyond their current capacities and help them to become self-sufficient (LeeKeenan & Ponte, 2018). The delegation also frees the director to focus on other higher-level tasks.

8. **Participate in Assertiveness Training.**

Assertiveness empowers you to express your thoughts, opinion and perspective without negativity attaching itself to your choices (King, 2018). Assertiveness comes more easily to some people than others. If you find that you struggle with saying no, articulating how you feel, avoiding difficult conversations or unable to set boundaries, assertiveness training may be of value to you in your efforts to develop your overall stress reduction and well-being plan. Assertiveness training may include reading books on the subject, attending face-to-face workshops, seeking the services of a coach or finding a mentor.

9. **Prioritize Tasks.**

Paula Jorde Bloom’s timeless (1994) book “Avoiding Burnout: Strategies for Managing Time, Space, and People in Early Childhood Education” offers a lot to this conversation about director stress and burnout. In this text, Bloom highlights the importance of prioritizing tasks and planning for our time. Specifically, we must plan for both contact time and concentration time. Because of the intense interpersonal nature of managing a childcare program, a director’s day can quickly become consumed with contact time (e.g., dealing with the day-to-day interactions with parents, staff, children, stakeholders, community members, etc). Knowing that these contact times are inevitable, invasive and indispensable, we must plan for concentrating time (e.g., planning, thinking, visioning, and strategizing). To prevent burnout, prepare for, and make sacred, time to engage at a higher mental state.

10. **Seek Professional Help When Necessary.**

If your stress level is systemically high, talk to your health care professional. Long term stress can have significant health consequences (e.g. obesity, digestive problems, heart disease, headaches, depression, etc.). Anyone experiencing persistent stress should seek medical attention.

Quality child care programs require the presence of a competent director who is emotionally and physically present. It is normal for the directors to experience some level of stress. However, given child care center directors’ propensity to experience higher levels of stress, it essential that directors recognize stress and prevent burnout.

**References**


