



Summer 2010

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Early Childhood Educators

Professionalism in Early Childhood Education

Recently while visiting with some early childhood directors at a roundtable discussion, I heard the comment, **“I want to be treated as a professional.”** Many thoughts and questions began to come to mind. As directors and teachers of early childhood programs, we evaluate our hiring of staff, procedures, marketing, and curriculum development at least annually. One area that is often overlooked, but helps in all of the above areas, is “professionalism.”

Training

One of the first characteristics evaluated in an early childhood professional is their **training**. Yet many directors in this field may have begun as assistants with limited experience or educational training. Others begin in the field with an associate or bachelor's degree. Many times a director or teacher is able to find funding to go to school to complete the necessary or desired degree, but what we typically need is **“passion.”** Passion for working with young children is not something that you can buy or seek. It is truly a gift from God that is evident the first time a candidate is among children.



The expectations for licensing vary from state to state, so it is imperative that the staff of an early childhood program see and understand the **clearly outlined expectations** from that particular state and center where they are employed. As directors we need to ensure that our staff is aware of all the rules, procedures, and continuing education hours required for licensing.

Sometimes in an early childhood setting the **dress code** is overlooked or undefined and this vastly affects the image of professionalism. When you are selecting your apparel, remember that you are working with children. The type of clothing needs to be comfortable, but not revealing. My staff enjoyed wearing apparel with our logo, which in turn was a marketing tool for the public.

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.” 2 TIMOTHY 2:15 NIV

Spiritual Growing

The families of our programs **trust** that we will provide the best service possible to their most valued gift from God. This service includes not only physical, emotional, and social development, but also spiritual development. It is important for the staff to have ample opportunity for spiritual development themselves. This can be overlooked when we are teaching God's Word to others. It is easy to forget that we need to be fed as well. Staff **spiritual growth** may include devotions, Bible study groups, or activities outside of classroom preparation. Include your staff during prayer opportunities, as you may have heard the expression, “a staff that prays together, stays together.” Opening our Bible daily feeds our faith, strengthens our relationship with Christ Jesus, offers a clearer understanding of God's plan for us, and helps us grow in grace and knowledge.

“Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.” 1 TIMOTHY 4:12-13 NIV

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Review, Reflect, Resolve

What are some indicators that you are considered a “professional” at your place of ministry?

What are some indicators that you are not considered a “professional”?

What can you do about it?

What do others need to do?

Links & Resources

[Professionalism for Teachers in Lutheran Schools](#)

[Professionally Speaking March 2004](#)

[LEA Monograph: Professionalism](#)

Mentoring

Mentorship is another characteristic of professionalism. Mentoring builds relationships among your staff to become more unified in the services you can provide. A staff that works well together is one that trusts each other and has built a rapport with each member. If your staff works well together, they can also work well with parents and children. Mentoring is important to allow staff to share ideas and take ownership in the program you offer. This may include outside-the-classroom activities, such as a “dive of the month,” where you meet with your staff and enjoy their fellowship.

In the ever-changing early childhood world it's important to remain flexible with staffing needs and personnel changes. In my first and second year directing a preschool in Lincoln, Nebraska, I had one other teacher assistant. Following the second year, my teacher assistant needed to take a leave of absence to be able to stay home with a newborn baby. My board and I were able to find two other teacher assistants who were phenomenal teachers. When her baby was old enough to attend preschool, the first teacher assistant asked if I could use her assistance again, as she enjoyed her previous experience of working at the preschool. At that point, the preschool had expanded into full-day operation, and we were able to allow her the opportunity to serve again.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. EPHESIANS 4:11-13 NIV

Working Together

A professional has an **understanding of their role**. They know what needs to be done and make decisions to accomplish each task with confidence. This type of professional goes above and beyond expectations not only for themselves, but for their staff as well. The ultimate compliment I received was two years ago when my licensing specialist showed up a week before school was to start. Each staff member had certain tasks they were trying to accomplish, and I was doing some final paperwork. The licensing specialist walked through the facility and did the necessary checking of her paperwork, asked for my signature, then sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. Her next question was: “Now, what would I need to do to enroll my son in your program?” I was taken back for a second, as I remembered asking her how many facilities she served. The answer she gave me at that time was 66. I quickly found an enrollment packet, and she filled out the paperwork onsite that day! Then she shared that she could no longer be my licensing specialist, as that would be a conflict of interest. Yet I knew that she would now be checking up on me on a daily basis instead of biennially. Later, I asked her why she enrolled her son in our program as opposed to the other facilities that she served, and she was very open with her response. She stated that she could feel the “family atmosphere among the staff and had witnessed it with the students previously. I can see that the staff works well together and each member is very professional in the tasks they are trying to accomplish.”

As you **evaluate** the early childhood program offered to your families, be sure to continue to evaluate the level of professionalism you offer. What image of professionalism do you portray to the community? Does the rest of the staff know and see the vision, so they may help you continue to achieve those goals? Look for qualities in your staff to assist them in achieving professionalism in their area of expertise.

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. 1 TIMOTHY 4:15-16 NIV

Dress like a professional. Act like a professional. Be a professional.

Lisa Schmidt teaches fifth and sixth grade at St. Paul Lutheran School in Serbin, Texas. Lisa directed and taught preschool for 15 years. Her previous position was Director of the early childhood program at Redeemer Lutheran Preschool, Lincoln, Nebraska.

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