

Necessary Investments: Communication, Mentoring, and the Prioritization of Time

BY JANE HUMPHRIES, ED.D.

At the McCormick Center, we know firsthand the struggles program leaders are facing. The pandemic has brought about many changes in the field of early childhood education. One significant result has been increased [staff turnover](#). New people have entered the field, but many have sought out new workplaces. It has become essential for directors to invest in the necessary communication, mentoring, and prioritization of time to support new staff members in order to grow and strengthen the workforce.

Whether individuals are fresh to the field or new to a program, directors have typically been responsible for supporting new early childhood educators as they learn more about the program's expectations. However, how can this be done when a program director is trying to hire multiple staff and juggle daily operational responsibilities? Let's review this scenario:

Ilya and Maria co-taught together in an infant classroom for about five years before the program closed for six months due to the pandemic. When the program gradually re-opened, the infant room they worked in was at capacity within two weeks. Like the rest of the staff, Ilya and Maria were worried about contracting the virus. Maria was especially concerned since her aging parents lived with her. After about a month, during which two coworkers were diagnosed with COVID, Maria decided to resign out of fear that she was putting her family at risk. While saddened by this loss, Ilya supported Maria in her decision to leave.

Over the next six months, Ilya worked with four different co-teachers. Staff changes occurred for a variety of reasons. Some staff were moved to support another area of the program; some didn't feel that working for an early childhood program was a fit for them. These constant changes began to take a toll on Ilya. She made an appointment to talk with the director, Aja, to see if there was something that she was doing wrong or needed to change. She explained that the whole situation was frustrating, and she felt sad for the children and families who were missing Maria. After the meeting, Aja felt like a failure as a program leader because she couldn't find enough time to deal with everything.

Soon after Aja met with Ilya, Trenna interviewed for the open infant teacher position. Aja was encouraged and asked Ilya to come into her office to meet with Trenna to see what they thought of each other. The initial meeting went very well. The two had a lot in common, loved working with infants, and Trenna even shared her previous experiences at another program before her husband's job relocated. Everyone agreed it was a great match, and Trenna officially began in the teaching position the following week.

The first few weeks went well. Aja checked on Ilya and Trenna each day during the first week. Soon, however, she became consumed with day-to-day administrative tasks, which included covering for staff who were out, solving other classroom-related issues, and doing the necessary daily business duties. One afternoon, she overheard Ilya talking to a coworker in the breakroom: "I thought that Trenna and I were on the same page when it came to the care of the babies in our room, but now I'm starting to think

differently. She wants the babies to cry it out rather than holding, rocking, or patting them to sleep. When I tried talking to her, she shrugged her shoulders and told me they did that at her other program and didn't understand the problem. Now, one of the parents saw this happen and was very upset. I don't know if I can do this much longer!"

Aja knew she needed to do something quickly, as she did not want to lose Ilya or Trenna. She needed to prioritize her time to deal with the issue and help Trenna to understand the program's philosophy and expectations better.

As an early childhood program director, what might you do? What strategies are needed to support Ilya and Trenna? Let's investigate a little further by looking closely at communication, mentoring, and the importance of prioritizing time.

COMMUNICATION

[Communication](#) is vital in an early childhood program environment. Concerned when overhearing Ilya's comments in the breakroom and having observed Trenna allowing a child to 'cry it out,' Aja knew she had to invest time in talking with her team. Once both teachers and she were together in her office, Aja began by asking Trenna and Ilya [clarifying questions](#). She also asked [follow-up questions](#) which allowed her to gather additional information about what Trenna understood about the practices expected at their program.

As each person took turns sharing and listening, they were able to consider what was being communicated thoughtfully rather than making assumptions. During their discussion, they learned that Trenna knew that letting children 'cry it out' was not an accepted practice at the program. However, when asked about her experiences putting infants down for naps, Trenna shared that her former coworker firmly believed in not spoiling infants, which she felt holding them during sleep did. Trenna acknowledged that letting infants cry made her uncomfortable, but she had witnessed the same strategies used in the other infant classroom at her previous teaching position. She explained that she tried to do a little of both, holding as long as possible without upsetting her co-teacher while also trying to meet the child's needs. Trenna shared that by the end of the work day, she felt drained by this practice and, until this open conversation had taken place, she had not realized that she had adopted the 'cry it out' practice. Ilya was relieved to hear that this was not something that Trenna wanted to continue doing and that her doubts about their working relationship were unfounded. Aja suggested the time-tested practice of using a [mentor](#) with more time than she had to give due to the many responsibilities on her plate. [Prioritizing her time](#) was important, and she needed help to resolve this issue.

MENTORING

A [mentor](#) is a person who serves as a role model and advisor. Success in any job requires a new staff member to learn more about the routines, personalities, and priorities in a work setting. A mentor assists this person by providing necessary insights and knowledge of how things work in the job setting. [Mentoring](#) supports the success of a new employee.

When reflecting on the conversation with Ilya and Trenna, Aja realized that she had not fully communicated the program's philosophy and expectations to Trenna. During the meeting, they decided to formalize Ilya's role as a mentor to Trenna over the next 30 days. Aja was able to focus her time on

monitoring and evaluating Trenna's abilities as she worked with the children in the classroom and with her coworkers. This oversight included having regular, quality communications with Trenna as she learned more about the program's expectations.

Ilya's role as mentor allowed her to:

- Share more about the program and its history
- Role-model appropriate day-to-day procedures in the classroom and interactions with children and their families
- Review and use the many forms to support important paperwork processes
- Discuss procedures to follow in case of emergencies
- Encourage positive coworker interactions
- Answer any questions without judgment on her part as the mentor

With Ilya and Aja's support, Trenna felt the warm welcome she needed to become successful at her new job and experience success as a co-teacher in the infant classroom.

PRIORITIZING TIME

It is no secret that as we recover from the pandemic, directors remain mired in the many moving parts of program operations. Due to the staffing shortage, managing an already complicated workday has become even more challenging. Now, more than ever, early childhood leaders must create strategies for [prioritizing and organizing time](#). While it took some planning and shifting of staff to arrange the meeting with Ilya and Trenna, the result was time well spent due to the strategies that Aja utilized, including:

- Providing a comfortable place to [talk through issues](#)
- Minimizing the possibility of [harder problem-solving](#), which becomes more time intensive to manage
- Holding [productive conversations](#) that gathered more information and shared perspectives in a safe environment, halting potential conflict between the two teachers
- [Delegating](#) the mentoring task to Ilya as she had the appropriate training and was best resourced to assist with the daily activity taking place in the infant classroom
- A 30-day timeline allowed Aja to quickly share more about the program philosophy and [expectations](#) and adequate time for Ilya to provide quality mentoring opportunities

By avoiding the potential [loss of a teacher](#), the children in the program benefited. As an effective leader, Aja realized the importance of [organizing tasks and obligations](#). The investment of her time to communicate and delegate to a seasoned staff member supported the ability to retain and rebuild staff at the program site.

Join us in spring of 2023 at [Leadership Connections™](#) to learn how experts in our field are navigating these challenges and others. Mark your calendar for April 26-28, 2023 and register now.

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