

Cultivating Hope, Even on Our Toughest Days

BY BARBARA VOLPE

The field of early care and education has no shortage of challenges. Difficulties finding and retaining qualified staff remain at the top of the list for many. But the list also includes low wages and lack of benefits such as paid sick leave, fluctuations in enrollment, adequate funding to support high-quality care, and, of course, the physical and emotional demands of the work. When challenges seem to pile up and the future feels bleak, I suggest we [focus on hope](#).

Having hope in the face of struggles and uncertainty does not mean we ignore our challenges; rather, it means we reframe our perspectives to [focus on the opportunity for things to get better](#). Hope helps leaders cope, and [leaders who cultivate a climate of hope](#) within their program can help staff have a more positive mindset and foster resiliency when faced with difficulties or setbacks.

A central component to hope is the idea of self-efficacy. In [Building on Whole Leadership: Energizing and Strengthening Your Early Childhood Program](#), the authors use the definition from Albert Bandura, who defines self-efficacy as the “belief in one’s personal capability and resources to meet the demands of tasks and to reach defined goals.” Self-efficacy allows us to trust that even in hard times, we have some control over helping things get better.

In her book, [The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are](#), Brené Brown writes of discovering the work of C. R. Snyder (former Professor of Psychology at the University of Kansas and author of [The Psychology of Hope](#)). She learned that “...hope is *not* an emotion; it’s a way of thinking or a cognitive process. Emotions play a supporting role, but hope is really a thought process made up of what Snyder calls a trilogy of goals, pathways, and agency. In very simple terms, hope happens when:

- We have the ability to set realistic goals (*I know where I want to go*).
- We are able to figure out how to achieve those goals, including the ability to stay flexible and develop alternative routes (*I know how to get there, I’m persistent, and I can tolerate disappointment and try again*).
- We believe in ourselves (*I can do this!*).

Essentially, Snyder suggested that hope results from a will (a person feels the desire to make a change) and a way (a person can see a pathway forward).

As a leader, you can use several strategies to cultivate hope and promote self-efficacy, first within yourself and then within your program.

Within yourself:

- Pay attention to your inner voice. Monitor when you start having negative, hopeless thoughts or self-talk, then pause and reflect. Recognize and label the feelings without judgment, then speak to yourself the way you would a dear friend. Thank yourself for noticing those thoughts, and then reflect on what you can be grateful for, look forward to, and change in the future.
- Refocus threats into challenges. The way we perceive a problem has a significant impact on how we respond. When we perceive a problem as a threat completely outside of our control, we feel hopeless and at the mercy of outside forces. But when we view problems as challenges, things we can change, we become empowered.
- Focus on what you can control. What are some things *you* can change for the better? No matter how small, you can take some action to improve program outcomes.
- Remind yourself of times when you have overcome problems. Focusing on your history of successfully coping with challenges will help you feel more confident as you face your current struggles.
- Keep a journal for listing hopes, goals, and gratitude. Looking to the future inspires hope.

Within Your Program:

- Strengthen positivity in the physical environment. Set up a [Positivity Jar](#) or bulletin board where staff or families can write a positive thought, quote, or memory to inspire hope.
- Model and encourage self-efficacy in yourself, your staff, and the children and families you serve. Focusing on self-efficacy will foster an environment of empowerment.
- Find ways to encourage others to become more goal-directed. For example, during the performance appraisal process, ask staff to reflect on their targeted areas identified for improvement and choose their own goals to meet those improvements. Then, work with them to map a plan to meet those goals. This emphasizes goal setting while also building self-confidence.
- Work with staff to break goals down into small, manageable steps. Ask them to consider what obstacles they may face and plan for ways to overcome those obstacles. This helps set the tone for continuous hope, even when faced with challenges that seem overwhelming.
- Provide staff with journals they can use for reflection while working towards goals. Encourage them to reflect on things that went well as well as mistakes they could learn from. Staff who are supported and encouraged to reflect and learn from mistakes will be inspired to be more creative and innovative problem solvers.
- Notice and celebrate staff effort and successes in achieving goals. Celebrating success serves as motivation for persevering in the future.
- Promote self-care as part of your work environment. Intentionally create ways for you and your staff to feel cared for and nurtured. Stretch and take walking breaks, include healthy snacks in the break room, add hand lotion in the bathroom to help prevent dry skin from hand washing, and share resources related to mental and physical health. This reminds us that to best serve children and families, we must also take care of ourselves.

We face no shortage of challenges as a field, and the past two years have been especially difficult in a number of ways. But while we have heard administrators and providers share stories of adversity and challenges, we have also learned about their resilience, adaptability, innovative thinking to meet

unprecedented challenges, and gratitude for their staff. This is why I know that now more than ever, focusing on finding hope, even on our toughest days, is how we will make it through to brighter days.

Barb Volpe, M.Ed., is the Leadership Academy Manager for the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National Louis University (NLU). In this role, she manages and facilitates leadership academies and quality improvement training for early childhood administrators and technical assistance providers. Barb has over 25 years of leadership and management experience. Barb enjoys developing trainings and has made many local, statewide, and national presentations. Barb obtained her M.Ed. from NLU in early childhood administration and her B.S. in child and family development from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale. Prior to her work at the McCormick Center, Barb worked in the early childhood field as an infant/toddler and preschool teacher, site director, and education coordinator for both community-based programs and Head Start. She has written articles on topics in leadership and management of early childhood programs and taught for several years as adjunct faculty at the local community college. Barb's passion is to support center and home-based administrators in making continuous quality improvement for the care and education of young children and their families.