

# Staffing at the Child Care Center

by Lori Harris

You are nearing the end of a really promising interview for the lead teacher position in your infant/toddler program and you ask if there are any questions. You hear the dreaded words, “I can’t remember if you said what the hours were, but I really would rather work early and get out in the middle of the afternoon.” (The hours you are looking for are 10 a.m.-6 p.m.) What are you going to do now?

Staffing and scheduling are just one part of a center director’s job. Most of us do not give it the time and attention it needs. It is a task that requires organizational skills and interpersonal skills to put together a staffing pattern that works for the people and the center.



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Many years ago when I was starting a new center I was determined to find a way to get highly qualified staff without spending a fortune. I searched for information and found a couple of articles but nothing that helped me look at patterns from different perspectives. I started to do my own work on patterns, budgets, and qualifications. Over the years I have learned a lot both from personal experience and talking to directors from all over the United States. I have pulled together some of those discoveries below. I am using the term “director” to identify the person who puts together the schedule even though it may be someone other than the director in some situations.

## Scheduling Tips

### Count the children

The director must know how many children are present, when they are present, and where they are in order to schedule staff appropriately. Many programs have parents sign their children in and out — but not all programs require parents to note the time of arrival and departure when signing in and out. If you do require times, your counts are nearly done! If not, you will have to dedicate some time to it. The count should be done whenever there is a substantial change in enrollment. (Appendix B for the count form.) For many programs that

would be September and January and perhaps June or July. It is important to wait a couple of weeks after any enrollment changes to let families “settle in” before you do the count. You do not want to staff up for peak enrollment unless that enrollment is going to continue throughout the year. That way, you will be getting the most accurate times for departure and arrival. Four more points to remember are:

- The count should be done for every group of children throughout the entire day for one week. Make sure to note the earliest arrival time during the week and the earliest times you need a second staff person as well as the earliest you can let a second person go and the latest departure time. The idea is to make sure you are not understaffed for any part of the day and that you are not overstaffed for major parts of the day either.

- Pick a time for the count that does not reflect a temporary peak enrollment. You may have to bring in some extra staff at peak times if they are very different from the expected enrollment for most of the year. That may be preferable to being overstaffed most of the year.

An example of a peak enrollment is a summer camp program. At my program we run a full day kindergarten program during the school year and a summer camp program in the summer. The

summer camp program is larger than the kindergarten program and has different staffing needs.

■ Beginnings and ends of the day are important. Count every 15 minutes for the first and last hour and a half your center is open, every 1/2 hour until all children arrive and when they start to leave, and hourly during the middle of the day when all the children are present. Make note if there are a number of children who come and go in the middle of the day. While counting every 15 minutes during arrival and departure may seem extreme, it can make a difference in the coverage.

■ Infant and toddler nap times should be noted, since staffing needs should be determined based on the times when all children are present and awake. For example, staff breaks should be scheduled for sleeping times, not when all children are awake. This is not to say that staff:child ratios should be out of compliance at any time — even during breaks. If you use a substitute to cover breaks, it is better to rotate that person in during naps than when all children are awake.

## Build the schedule

Once the count of children is established, the schedule can be built. For the purpose of this article we will be using the terms *teacher* and *assistant teacher*. Staff roles at child care centers are identified by different terminology across the country. Some states use the term “lead teacher” to indicate a staff member with higher qualifications than the ones called “teachers,” while others use the term “lead teachers” to mean the primary teacher in every classroom. Others use the term “teacher” for anyone in charge of a classroom.

Some states create three roles: the assistant or aide, the teacher, and a better qualified teacher, (called by a variety of names). In centers in those states, all classrooms have to have a qualified

teacher, as defined in licensing; but larger centers are required to have a certain number or percentage of teachers with still more coursework and/or experience. Not all teachers must meet these higher requirements, usually some number based on the size of the center. Aides are usually employed on a provisional basis, without pre-service qualifications.

For the assisting staff other than aides, some states use “associate teacher,” others use “teacher assistant.” The qualifications for these assisting roles can be quite complex and varied as well. For the purposes of this document, a teacher is someone who is qualified to supervise a group of children and another less qualified adult. That teacher has had some coursework in early childhood education and experience on the job. The assistants are people who may have some knowledge of early childhood but would typically not be permitted to work with a group of children by themselves.

The following 13 points should be noted:

■ **A qualified person should open and close the center.** That person could be the director or other administrator, or a well-qualified teacher. Arrival and departure of the children is very important. Not only can it be a difficult transition time, but also it is the only time some parents are in the center. You want your most experienced and capable staff on hand when the children arrive and depart. There are usually plenty of qualified people in the morning for drop off; care should be taken to ensure qualified people at the end of the day as well. Some centers have a “welcome room” for the first arrivals, and a “goodbye room” for those few who stay later than the others. These centers are careful to assure qualified staffing for these rooms, so that the children are engaged with each other in activities, and are not just waiting.

■ **There should be a qualified teacher for every group of children.** Early child-

hood training and experience is critical to the quality of the care the children receive. The teacher must be able to plan and coordinate the group activity, so he or she must be able to monitor individual children and the group as a whole. As you recruit staff, use your own standards. The quality of the service you want to bring to children and their families depends on your staff. Licensing standards and accreditation criteria give you some ideas; you need to add your own criteria and standards to find the people who will ensure your quality.

When recruiting teachers it is also important to reflect the diversity of the center and the community in the staff. Reflecting the diversity means very different things across the United States. The questions to ask are the same, however: Can the staff speak the languages of the families? Do they know the various cultures? Can they communicate with families? Do they provide visible role models for the children?

■ **There should be at least two staff in the center at all times.** Some believe there should be two people in every classroom at all times in order to ensure the safety of the children. This goal is not financially realistic for most programs, but it is important that you never leave a person alone with children in the building. In larger programs, the two adults do not have to be together in the same location in the building. It is important, however, that they are able to communicate with one another.

■ **Be careful of numbers of adults and supervision responsibilities.** It is critical to maintain a staff:child ratio that ensures a high quality safe environment for children. While it is important to make sure there are enough adults, it is possible to have too many adults with a group of children as well. This

seems to be especially true in infant and toddler rooms, when adults can seem to outnumber the children even when they don't.

In addition, teachers who are supervising other staff should not be expected to directly supervise more than two other adults while working with the children. Those adults include apprentices, assistants, and volunteers who need to be monitored. Staff who are counted in the ratios are limited in many states to employees who are qualified for their role. In those states, high school students, or others who work limited hours or may have little or no early childhood knowledge, can volunteer or work at the center, but are not counted as staff in the staff:child ratio requirement.

■ **Overlap the staff schedules.** There should be at least a 15-minute overlap of shifts to ease the transition for children and adults. The shifts should not all change at the same time; at least one staff person should be staying through the shift change. The overlap benefits the parents by assuring that the staff have opportunities to share information about the children to pass along to the parent. It benefits the organization by its impact on the dynamics of the team. It is particularly important with any group of children who sleep at will (infants and some toddlers) to be aware of children's schedules and then plan for coverage accordingly.

■ **Think about using split shifts.** A split shift is one that schedules a staff member in the early morning, and also in the late afternoon and evening. In the middle of the day, the employee does not work at the center. Split shifts can be very helpful to parents when they are scheduled to accommodate the beginning and the end of the day in that parents get to talk to the same person about their child. Everyone on staff won't be willing to work a split shift. Capitalize on the ones that are

willing and anxious to do it. If a split shift is used, regular check-in with that employee is essential. You will want to allow them to change their schedule when it becomes a hardship for any reason.

■ **Think about 10-hour shifts.** Some programs schedule staff for four days of 10-hour shifts. This can work particularly well under specialized enrollment situations, for instance when there are many part time families and one day per week has low enough enrollment to warrant a reduction of staff. It has been my experience that while most staff like the idea of 10-hour shifts in theory and can keep them up for a time, they tire of the long days eventually and the quality of care suffers. Effectiveness drops off dramatically during hours 8, 9, and 10. Be careful using this staffing strategy.

■ **Consider a policy regarding continuity of care.** There are many different ways centers implement this concept. For some centers it means that the caregiver stays with the children as they move from one age group to another. Children are not *promoted* to a new group as soon as they reach a certain age. For other centers it means that the caregivers work 10-hour days to minimize the number of staff involved with the children. For yet other centers, it means assigning a primary caregiver who knows their primary children better than any of the other caregivers in the room.

Some centers use a primary caregiver who stays with the child from infancy through preschool. Others have one primary caregiver when the child is an infant and toddler and another when the child is in preschool. *Regardless of the model*, the idea is to minimize the number of times a child has to establish a new primary relationship with an adult outside his or her families.

■ **Schedule breaks between every four hours of work.** Labor laws vary from state to state. Some require that every employee be allowed a 15- to 20-minute break for every four hours of work, while others exempt those who work with young children. A 15- to 20-minute break should be the norm in every center regardless of the labor laws. People need time to shut down and regroup in any job; but it is critically important when working in a child care center — where the children depend on the staff for their positive experiences.

■ **Schedule planning time every day for every staff person.** Classroom staff need time away from children and the classroom to plan. They need a place with adult-sized chairs and tables and resources appropriate to the age groups in the center. While a daily planning time may seem impossible to schedule, it is easier in some ways than trying to give everyone one time per week. (See sample schedules Appendix A.) If planning time is scheduled every day, but a day has to be skipped for whatever reason, it is not as critical as skipping a once a week planning time.

It is important to allow every staff person from lead teachers to assistant teachers some time to plan. The assistant teachers add a perspective of their own which can be of great value. I believe the buy-in gained by including assistant teachers results in longer retention and higher job satisfaction, and a greater willingness to pursue further training. Make sure to give the same time and access to the infant and toddler staff — it requires just as much planning and preparation for that age group of children as it requires for older children.

■ **Remain objective when assigning coverage to groups of children.** Nothing wreaks havoc in a schedule like personal relationships. A director who feels obligated to give staff the

schedules they favor can create a disaster if those preferences do not match the children's schedules. Once the count is done, the director knows when and where staff are needed. The schedule should be determined by children's needs, not adult needs.

Do you schedule with no names, but then add the names to the shifts based on staff preferences? For example, if you have a teacher who wants to work 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., you give her/him a morning shift, not necessarily 7 - 3 if that doesn't work for the classroom. While employee needs outside the center must be considered, they must always be within the context of what is best for the program. The center is in much better shape if employees understand the fundamental purpose of the center is to support the families needing care. Staff hours are determined by those needs. There are other ways to accommodate staff needs.

■ **Know how staff relate to each other.**

It is important to have a healthy dynamic between the adults working together. It is not necessary for staff people to be best friends or to even be friends outside the center, but they must be able to maintain a professional relationship with the other people on their team. It is important to facilitate, encourage, and expect staff to work out the personal issues that may come up. A staff change is not automatic if people don't want to work together anymore. However, there are times when a change has to be made. A teacher may leave to have a baby and a teacher aide may be promoted into the position from another room, leaving a hole to fill with someone new. Staff transitions — even when they are within the center — can be very difficult for some children and families. It is important to be able to articulate why the change is happening for anyone who wants to know.

■ **Ask two questions.** When all is said and done, directors should ask themselves the following two questions:

- If I were working this shift could my professional needs be met? Would it be okay for me? If my child was in this classroom could her/his needs be met with this staffing pattern? Would it be okay for her/him?
- The time and attention we spend on staff is enormous, and scheduling is just one of the tasks involved. The schedule does affect the emotional state of the people who work the shifts. Attention to the needs of the adults as well as the children is key. And you'll know what to say when that great candidate asks that not-so-dreaded-anymore question at the end of the interview.

## Final thoughts

Scheduling people is not easy. There are many perspectives to consider. Understand that it won't work out perfectly every time and that your best laid plans could go completely awry. However, if time is spent gathering basic information and implementing a staff schedule that takes this basic information into account, the ongoing time spent in scheduling is minimized. And if staff understand that the schedules and needs of the families and children are what ultimately determine the center's operation, partnerships form between staff and families that can only enrich a child's life.

Appendix A and Appendix B forms may be downloaded from our web site: [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com) go to "Free Resources"

# Appendix A

The attachments include a sheet with examples of staff scheduling patterns and a sheet with the budget needed to use those patterns.

Some notes:

The staffing patterns are each a little different. Take note of the planning and break times included in the day. B = break and P = planning time.

**Example 1** - The lead teacher and teacher work an 8 hour shift with a half hour planning time and 1/2 hour break. The assistant teachers both work a 4 hour shift with no planning or break time.

**Example 2** - The lead teacher and teacher work an 8 hour shift with a half hour planning time and a half hour break. The assistant teachers work a 5 hour shift with a half hour planning time and a half hour break.

**Example 3** - The lead teacher and teacher work an 8.5 hour shift with a 1 hour break ( a half hour is unpaid) and a half hour planning time. The assistant teachers work a 5 hour shift with a half hour planning time and a half hour break (all paid).

**Example 4** - The lead teacher and teacher work an 8.5 hour shift with a 1 hour break (a half hour unpaid) and a half hour planning time. One assistant teacher works a 5 hour shift and the other a 5.5 hour shift with a half hour planning time and a half hour break (all paid). In example 4, all staff would only be able to leave if there were substitutes available. Otherwise, two could go together while the other two remained with the children.

Years 2 and 3 assume a 7% pay increase each year and no turnover. A 7% pay increase is more than what you would typically see in a child care program. It is also not typical for a center to experience no turnover in any of the groups, so the costs for years 2 and 3 are inflated from what will be the likely reality.

Take note of the differences in costs compared to the schedules. There is a small difference in cost for a noticeable and dramatic difference in coverage.

# Appendix B - Group count form

The times are inserted for a program open from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday - Friday

| Time  | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|-------|--------|---------|-----------|----------|--------|
| 6:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:15  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:45  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7:15  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 8:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 8:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 9:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 9:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 10:00 |        |         |           |          |        |
| 11:00 |        |         |           |          |        |
| 12:00 |        |         |           |          |        |
| 12:30 |        |         |           |          |        |
| 1:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 2:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 3:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 4:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 4:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 5:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 5:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 5:45  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:00  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:15  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:30  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 6:45  |        |         |           |          |        |
| 7:00  |        |         |           |          |        |