

directors online

A new answer to an old problem

by Karen Foster-Jorgensen

“One of our toddler room teachers is out sick, Timmy in the infant room has a temperature of 103, our accreditation visit is next week, payroll is due tomorrow, and I was really hoping to attend a financial training seminar with some colleagues this afternoon. It looks like I won’t get out the door in time.” Sound familiar? Just an average day for a child care center director?



Karen A. Foster-Jorgensen is a consultant, trainer, and author specializing in management and organizational development for early childhood businesses. She founded and directed two child care

centers serving 200 families, served 12 years as a Validator for NAEYC accreditation, leads not-for-profit boards, is a frequent trainer/workshop facilitator at business conferences, and author of the book *Financial Management for the Childcare Executive Officer (CEO)*. Karen holds a BS degree in elementary and early childhood education from the University of Minnesota and has completed coursework for an MBA. After teaching in public and Montessori schools, Karen enjoyed a 10 year management career as an Executive Director in the YMCA. Combining education and management has lead Karen to own child care and retail businesses prior to consulting full time for 18 years as co-owner, with her husband Rolf, of Management Results, Inc. Karen designs and facilitates online management courses for Eager To Learn and for their early childhood directors virtual networking group, Directors Online. Whether consulting, training, or developing new programs, Karen is a strong believer in the consultative process — helping others discover and develop their own gifts and talents through meaningful questions, creative thinking, and innovative solutions.

Too often, when child care center directors turn their attention to enhancing management skills, or connecting with someone who understands the day-to-day demands of the job, they are pulled back to the immediate needs of running their programs. So how and when does a center director continue to develop the important skills needed to lead a quality child care program? Where and when does a center director network and share ideas and concerns with professional colleagues? How does a director with no peer group in her center or provider community avoid feelings of isolation? Directors, often masters of multitasking, are increasingly turning to web-based technology to manage two more critical tasks: professional development and networking. “There are more pressures than ever placed on directors,” notes Debra Trude-Suter with the McCormick Tribune Center for Early Childhood Leadership. “Online networking and professional development offer options for directors. These options are in step with where we are as a society and where we are going as a field.”

Directors are logging on

While opportunities for traditional professional development are found in a

variety of venues, barriers remain for child care center directors. Training topics may not address their specific needs, they may be prohibitively expensive, or simply too far away to attend. They may be offered as short-term workshops without options for earning college credit or in-depth progressive learning.

Along with these general barriers to continuing education, it is important that the learning and networking options child care center directors choose meet their unique needs. These needs include professional development — related to business and management and networking — and resources and feedback from peers and experts. Moreover, directors need a safe space, away from their leadership role and the pressures of local competition to share challenges and collectively devise solutions. Lisa Holstrom, executive director of the College of Education, Criminal Justice, and Human Services at the University of Cincinnati (CECH), explains the difficulty this way, “Center-based teachers have a built-in network of peers, but directors are often the sole leader in their building, with job issues and questions which would be inappropriate to discuss with the teaching staff.”

Online choices

The solution is as close as the office or home computer. Online tools such as e-mail, real time chat rooms, electronic message boards, and online classes are building bridges where none existed, including in the early childhood field. The tools are especially suited to the professional development needs of directors who can remain at their offices and available to their staff while chatting, researching an issue, or attending a training. They are often affordable and many may include linkages to a national or even global peer group.

Colleges, not-for-profit organizations, and private companies offer online professional development and networking opportunities for early childhood directors, as well as for their teaching staff. Child care center directors are discovering that quality online learning and networking can fill an important gap. "I know that other directors go through the same problems as I do. Online learning is an opportunity for me to be at work and still broaden my knowledge by listening and learning from the other directors. The best benefit is this: should a problem arise, I am here in the building," explains Lisa Johnston, a center director from Minnesota.

Eager-to-Learn.org, a program of the Minnesota Child Care Resource and Referral Network, offers one example of learning and networking delivered exclusively online. Management and business classes, an online e-forum, and a new online director's credential bring directors together for learning content targeted specifically to their leadership roles, as well as networking and camaraderie with peers. Patty Nordahl, participant in classes and the e-forum, Directors Online, notes that "I have been able to connect with directors from a variety of child care settings and have found that all of us face similar challenges and all of us have wisdom to

share". Cory Woosley, program coordinator for Eager-to-Learn shares her enthusiasm for the importance of online learning in stating that "directors have real power to make a difference in our field and the strength of online learning makes a real difference for directors."

First Children's Finance, which delivers training and technical assistance in business and financial management, is an example of an institution moving toward an online model. Jerry Cutts, president and chief executive officer of First Children's Finance notes, "We see a need to make these business development opportunities available to directors without the obstacles of distance or time of day. Our online business tools are available anytime, day or night." The First Children's Finance learning modules, many of which have been converted to online interactive courses, cover a range of topics including financial forecasting, financial reporting, business plans, human resources, and marketing child care.

CECH's Holstrom celebrates the universal reach of the online learning model. "What excites me most is the variability that an online community can offer. For example, a director will always be able to find someone who has experienced a similar situation and can help mentor a peer. There will likely be someone online who can bring the perspective of working with migrant families, or rural families, or a special needs child and on and on. It will take a team to address the challenges facing our communities today, and directors can contribute to, and receive help from, various teams across the United States or across the world."

Chip Donohue, a pioneering advocate for the use of technology in the field says, "The leaders of today's early childhood programs have powerful tools at their fingertips that can help improve program management, provide access to

information and resources for staff training, support lifelong learning, and connect them to a worldwide network of early childhood professionals for sharing ideas, exchanging information, collaborating, and advocating. For the global community of early care and education professionals, all the information, resources, and links available online make it a small world after all."

Professional development and networking

With a growing number of Internet-based courses and networking groups available, child care center directors need to become savvy consumers in order to choose resources that will offer them quality experiences. What constitutes quality in an online learning or community forum environment has been a subject of discussion for over a decade. There are numerous research articles, academic books, and online resources devoted to effective practices in educational technology.

A common theme that emerges from this body of literature is the importance of relationship building. Quality Internet-based learning and networking environments not only offer new information and skill building opportunities, but also promote a feeling of camaraderie. Everyone's contributions are acknowledged, appreciated, and supported.

In addition to a clear and intentional emphasis on skills and relationships, important features of effective online forums and courses designed for directors also include:

- support through immediate feedback from a facilitator and peers
- responsive technical support which covers software and hardware

- relevant and timely exchange of information; this creates a powerful recipe for change and professional growth
- opportunities for formal or informal mentoring, which help build a sense of shared professionalism
- a variety of mediums or tools to attract and support different learning styles (message boards for reflective discussion; articles, videos, or slide shows for the visual; live chats for social interaction, etc.)
- input of directors, which will strengthen the program.

The new family of director-focused online learning and networking tools empower and support child care center directors — a wonderful development in and of itself. The far-reaching impact of these developments mirrors the potential reach of directors themselves: to change the beliefs and practice of every member of their team and in turn the experiences of every child in their care. The e-revolution for directors is underway and brings with it an ever-growing list of options for curing the blues of isolation and addressing training needs!

Resources

Director Specific:

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
Approved Director Credentials
www.naeyc.org

National Administrators Credential
<http://secur6.brinkster.com/nccanet/index.asp>

Early Childhood Administration
Program, National Louis University
www.nl.edu

McCormick Tribune Center for Early
Childhood Leadership
<http://cecl.nl.edu>

Online Learning:

Minnesota Guide to Effective Practices
of Online Learning
www.ecsata.org/documents/effective.swf

Ecelearn
<http://www.ecelearn.com/>

Center for the Child Care Workforce
www.ccw.org/pubs/ELearning_Web.pdf

University of Cincinnati
www.eclc.uc.edu

Center for Early Childhood Professional
Development & Leadership, University
of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
<http://sce-earlychildhood.uwm.edu/>