

Child Care Teachers: Good Training Equals Quality



by Karen Stephens

“The best thing about that day care was going home” — the words of a nine year old, who, through years of personal experience, has become an expert on child care. From the age of three, Kelly has attended several different child care centers. By her own estimation, a couple of centers were great and then one was . . . well, not so great. At the not-so-great child care, the classroom staff were called “supervisors.” The centers she “really liked” referred to their staff as “teachers.”

What’s in a name, you ask. It may sound like semantics, but according to Kelly, better care is provided by child care staff expected to be teachers. By Kelly’s report, centers with teachers had books available, and teachers would actually read them to children. More art projects and group games were planned. A variety of snack items were offered, not the same crackers and juice day in and day out. In contrast, the center staffed by “supervisors” relied on the kind of guidance Kelly described as, “Go find something to do and don’t break anything.”

That’s what Kelly heard every day in an after-school program she attended. One supervisor was assigned to group of more than 25 children. The supervisor sat in a folding chair at the end of the room and tossed the kids a basketball. Each day she warned them they “better not hit a window.” Though the game of catch was welcome after a long day of study, more creative activities were beyond the supervisor’s reach. What a monotonous way to spend a fleeting childhood.

So how do you transform passive supervisors who simply monitor behavior into interactive teachers who guide, nurture, stimulate, and educate? It takes much more than calling them “teacher.”

Researchers, such as Dr. Laura Berk, formerly of Illinois State University’s Psychology Department, give us valuable clues. Her research reveals that child care staff become skilled professionals when first-hand experience with children is augmented through training and education. What type of training? Well, the basics of child development are a good place to start. All teachers, regardless of age group assignment, should be well versed in typical, as well as atypical, child development. They must know overall development—physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and moral. Knowing developmental milestones helps teachers detect when kids require prevention or intervention services, such as hearing, vision, or language assistance.

Based on their knowledge of child development, staff must also learn developmentally appropriate ways to nurture and guide diverse areas of growth. Childhood is fertile ground for development for all kinds of skills and abilities. It’s a shame to let it go to waste by not providing children with the most skilled caregivers and teachers possible.

There are many training opportunities available to child care staff, and most are affordable through local colleges, universities, or local child care resource and referral agencies. Child care staff can also pursue professional development through organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children. While a soft heart for kids goes a long way in child care, a well-developed and educated mind is vitally important, too. Children need to be well cared for, nurtured, and protected. This is too important to be

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left up to chance; it should be achieved by design. Before-the-job as well as on-the-job staff training translates into better child care.

If you are using, or plan to use, child care services, I urge you to shop around to find a program that best suits your child and family. Interview the director about the staff's qualifications in terms of training and education. Ask staff how they were prepared to work with kids. Ask them how they manage to keep up their job skills and motivation. Find out how often the staff is trained on relevant child care topics and by whom.

Child care professionals' dedication to pursuit of excellence will build their competence. In turn it will help improve your child's experiences. Enrolling your child in a program with well-trained staff can also promote your peace of mind. You'll know you're sharing your child with the best hands and hearts possible.

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I hope your child's days are spent with teachers, not mere supervisors. If so, they'll bask in the glow of interested and motivated staff who are knowledgeable in the following critical areas:

- Basic child development, from infancy through school-age, including early brain development
- Caring for children with special needs, such as allergies or disabilities
- Health and nutrition, especially how to limit spread of contagious disease
- Safety and accident prevention
- Dealing with emergencies, including first aid and CPR training
- Identifying and reporting suspected child abuse or neglect
- Positive discipline methods
- Non-biased practice regarding gender, race, culture, income, or abilities
- How children learn and how play fosters development
- Sensitive handling of daily routines such as meal service, naps, and toilet training
- Developmentally appropriate practices and curriculum including: language and literacy, art, music, table games, block building, dress up play, science and sensory experiences, large-motor play
- Communication skills with children, especially expression of feelings and desires
- How to promote children's self esteem and emotional stability
- Social skills children need, such as sharing, negotiation, conflict resolution and using proper public manners.
- Safe and developmentally appropriate toys, learning materials and play equipment.
- Developing partnerships with parents to enhance children's experiences

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.