

Why Do Directors Burn Out?

by Roger Neugebauer

- *"One day I suddenly realized I didn't care if we won the latest battle with the Welfare Department. I was just worn out after five years of fighting and hassling over every penny."*
- *"It's a hopelessly devitalizing job - you're constantly giving of yourself and seldom getting anything in return."*
- *"If someone offered me the greatest salary in the world and tagged it onto a director's job, I wouldn't touch it."*

These remarks of former child care directors highlight a serious problem in the field –director burnout. A survey revealed that the average directors stay on the job less than three years (Abt Associates, A Study in Day Care, 1971). Such a high turnover rate is clearly not an encouraging factor for individuals who hope to build a career in the child care field; nor is it healthy for centers that must continually break in new directors; nor is it helpful to the field, as we are always losing our most experienced advocates.

To determine why the burnout rate among directors is so high, *Exchange* conducted interviews with 15 former child care directors. This article will summarize the factors that caused these

directors to quit.

The six factors outlined below emerged from the interviews as the main reasons the directors left. Those interviewed directed programs in 12 states for an average of seven years. They were all recommended to *Exchange* as having been exceptionally committed and effective as directors.

1. Scarcity of Resources

This emerged as a three-pronged problem for directors. First, insufficient funding required that directors devote considerable time and energy to hustling resources. A director of a financially strapped California center recalled having to survive by recruiting and scheduling 107 volunteers in one week. Another from the Midwest recalled:

"So much of my energy was always being drained off into fundraising. It got to be a real hassle."

Second, the constant "financial constraints, funding worries, and money problems" were emotionally draining. Living with such insecurity and uncertainty year after year became a real psychological strain.

Third, lack of funds caused the directors

to make "endless compromises" which got more and more difficult to bear. The director of a campus child care center in California which received only token financial support from the university finally resigned in protest because she could no longer endure seeing the ill effects the understaffed program was having on the children.

More typically, a New England director recalled:

"The most difficult pressure to me was whenever the lid was put on our funding, and I had to go back to the staff and explain that there wouldn't be any salary increases or new equipment."

2. Scarcity of Benefits

Low salaries and minimal benefits made it unrealistic for most of the directors to build a career in child care. Many found it necessary to leave the field in order to support their families or to provide for their own long-term security. A director in Maryland lamented:

"At age 21, I made only \$5,000 and didn't care because I got my rewards from working with the children. But 10 years later, I was left with no unemployment coverage, no retirement, no medical benefits, and no money in savings."

3. Diversity of Responsibilities

Nearly all interviewed raised serious concerns about the overwhelming range of responsibilities faced by directors. A southern director suggested that the demands placed on directors required them to:

"... combine the skills of a lawyer, a teacher, a nurse, a counselor, an accountant, an advocate, a planner, an entrepreneur, and advertiser, a pediatrician, a supervisor, an evaluator, and a plumber."

The directors had so many responsibilities that it seemed impossible to be effective at all of them at all times. A director from Illinois noted:

"I never seemed able to get on top of things. Just when I'd secured funding for next year and resolved a conflict between two teachers, our bus would break down, the cook would quit, and a teacher would report a potential child abuse case."

4. Scarcity of Support

Most directors commented on the sense of isolation they experienced. They noted that when the pressures of the job were really getting them down, there was often no one to turn to for help or understanding. One director found the only way she could make it was by spending part of her salary for a therapist. Another concluded:

"I was so isolated. There wasn't anyone who understood my job. There were all these people who understood one piece of it, but no one person understood its entire complexity."

5. Limits on Personal Growth

In order to progress personally and professionally, many directors found it was necessary to leave the director's position and, in most cases, the child care field. Typical comments included:

"After six years I had accomplished what I had wanted to with the center. Professionally I was able to advance only by moving out of the field."

"I was no longer being challenged. There was no room for expansion. My skills were no longer needed there."

"With the high 'turnover I was constantly starting over with training. After saying the same things for five years, I was frustrated. I wanted to grow myself. But my whole life was static."

6. Intensity of Relationships

Directors are constantly working with people – teachers, children, parents, board members, bureaucrats, bankers, politicians. Many of the relationships are very intense and can become rewarding and stimulating. Oftentimes, however, these can turn sour. Several directors ended up resigning after disagreements arose with board members or supervisors in sponsoring agencies.

With many intense relationships directors often encountered a number that became emotionally draining. Parents with family problems often turned to directors for support. Staff members with personal problems required considerable attention. As a New York director observed:

"Usually your contacts with adults would be rewarding. But sometimes when you were helping people deal with conflicts, you just wanted to shut your door and work with the budget all day."

IS THE JOB IMPOSSIBLE?

Even with all the pains and pressure being a director, all but one of the former directors believed that the director's job was not impossible. A Maine director concluded:

"At times it did feel overwhelming, but then sometimes it was very exciting and challenging."

On the other hand, all but one believed that it was not possible to make a career out of being a director. Because of the extreme demands on directors and the poor benefits provided for directors, most concluded that we could not expect directors to stay more than five years. Most even argued that it was good for the center to have directors change after four or five years. As a Tennessee director explained:

"There comes a time for a director to move on. After a person has given, their creative burst, there's no way for them to avoid getting in a rut and causing the program to stagnate."

What these former directors recommended is for centers to expect and prepare for director turnover. They should work to provide the director as much support as possible so as to make her time there as productive and rewarding as possible. At the same time, suggests a Midwest director:

"A center should prepare for the director's inevitable departure by grooming a successor, or by having other staff members learn parts of the job to provide continuity while a new director is learning the ropes."