BRIEF REPORT

Turnover among Child Care Workers

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Review of the Literature

In a 1960 nationwide survey of twenty-one residential treatment centers, Hylton (1964) found that four out of ten child care workers employed at the start of the year had terminated employment by the end. Of the 204 child care workers who terminated, 63% were employed for less than one year and only 7% had remained for three years or more. The Menninger Foundation (1976), indicated that from September 1, 1975, to September 30, 1976, the children’s division employed 74 child care workers and hired 26 to fill vacancies.

Myer (1975) conducted a survey of 50 child care workers who attended a child care workshop in Rochester, New York, and found the median and modal length of employment was 1.5 and 1 year, respectively. This was similar to Plotsky’s (1975) finding that the mean length of stay of group home teaching-parents was approximately 1.5 years, reflecting the constant turnover in the field.

Method

Hiring and termination dates of child care staff employed during the July 1, 1975, to June 30, 1976, fiscal year were obtained from six of the eight

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largest Sacramento County children's residential facilities. The two facilities that chose not to participate were rumored by child care workers to have had the highest turnover rate. Therefore, the sample may have been biased toward revealing a more stable child care population than actually existed in the county.

Results

The participating institutions employed 279 child care workers to fill 146 positions. Length of employment data for each institution had in common (a) a small group of very long-term “Experienced Employees,” (b) a closely clustered group consisting of most of the “General Staff,” and (c) a large gap between these groups.

It appeared that “Experienced Employees” accounted for 15% of the child care workers hired and that they remained employed for a mean of 5.5 years. The “General Staff” accounted for 85% of child care workers hired and were employed for a mean of 12.5 months. Although there was great variation among institutions, it was estimated that any particular point in time they employed about three “Experienced Staff” to seven “General Staff.”

Discussion

When first employed, child care workers were generally inexperienced or had only book learning to guide them in controlling and dealing therapeutically with youth who range from being neglected/abused, and abandoned to being multiply handicapped and severely emotionally disturbed. It would be reasonable to view the first year of employment as primarily on-the-job training, during which the child care worker may be developing his therapeutic skills. Therefore, it is particularly distressing to find that the mean length of employment for 85% of the child care workers hired was about one year.

Analysis of questionnaires received from 93 of the 279 child care workers suggested that most of their training and ongoing emotional support came from fellow child care workers. Thus, the number and abilities of “Experienced Staff” might greatly influence the quality of care offered by the institutions.

The lack of turnover data in the literature and the tendency for institutions not to keep records of their staff turnover may be symptomatic of a very serious problem in the care of institutionalized youth: an assumption that the child care worker's job is inherently a high-stress, low-status, poorly paid, dead-end position