Child Care Crises and the Role of the Supervisor

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ABSTRACT: In a survey of the crisis experiences of 30 child care workers in a variety of settings, three general types of child care crisis emerged: life and death, control, and role crises. Supervisory reactions to each of these were analyzed, and it was found that during both the period of actual crisis and in the period that immediately followed it, five effective supervisory behaviors and five ineffective supervisory behaviors became evident.

Within the confines of all child caring institutions exists the potential for crises of varying intensity. The consequences of such crises may also vary from minimal to potentially catastrophic, as in the death of a child. Certain crises also have the potential to alter the normal everyday patterns of interaction, in a negative or destructive way, between the child care worker(s) and the child or children in their care.

Since child care workers usually are the dominant figures in the life of an institutionalized child, they are the ones who become involved in the majority of crisis situations. Logically, the problem of and the responsibility for these crisis situations falls to the child care supervisor (Whittaker, 1970). It should be his or her duty to structure a planned program to deal effectively with the staff, as well as with the crisis situation, through the application of sound supervisory techniques. In order to help facilitate this goal it is vital that the needs of the child care workers, both during and after the crisis, be known and understood.

This article is based on a research study completed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, Department of Child Development and Child Care, School of Health Related Professions, University of Pittsburgh (Nelson, 1975). Requests for reprints should be sent to James E. Nelson, 79 Mohawk Road, Greensburg, Pennsylvania 15601.
Method

Objectives

The objectives of this study were:

1. to describe the perceptions of a sample of child care workers concerning the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of supervisory behaviors they have experienced;

2. to clarify and categorize these effective supervisory behaviors for potential application to the overall field of child care;

3. to clarify the types of crises experienced by the child care worker and differentiate viable approaches to their resolution.

Subjects

Thirty child care workers working in eight different child care settings served as subjects for this study. Sex, age, and race were not considered as selective factors in choosing these subjects. The primary criterion used in choosing subjects was that the worker had to have had at least one year of experience working with children aged 6-12 or adolescents aged 12-18, in a residential treatment, psychiatric, or group-home setting.

The Questionnaire

A written questionnaire, based on Flanagan's (1954) Critical Incident Technique, was given to the subjects. This questionnaire, composed of nine (9) questions, concerned the description of a crisis situation; the behaviors exhibited by both the supervisor and the worker during the crisis; what the child care worker felt the role of the supervisor should have been; and what supervisory behaviors, both effective and ineffective, they saw as taking place both during and after the crisis situation. The definition of a crisis situation, as well as the types of crisis situations chosen by these workers, was left completely to their own judgement. The workers were given an opportunity to further clarify any points they wished or add more information as they felt was needed.

Results

The trends which became evident from the collected data reflected the thinking, needs, and the experiences of a sample of child care workers as to what constitutes effective and ineffective child care supervision in times of crisis.

Despite the large number of different crises which were described in this study there were three (3) basic types under which all of