Warning: Child Care Work May Be Hazardous to Your Health

by Marcy Whitebook and Gerri Ginsburg

As most child care staff are painfully aware, working conditions in the field leave much room for improvement. Low wages, minimal benefits and unpaid overtime contribute to staff burnout and rapid turnover. What’s more, as serious as these conditions are, they do not represent the whole story.

In a 1978 study of working conditions conducted by the Child Care Employee Project, two thirds of the child care workers responding reported that their health was adversely affected by their jobs. In 1982, the Project pursued this finding by conducting a nationwide survey of child care health and safety working conditions (Child Care Employee Project Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1983.) The results indicate that, indeed, there are serious health and safety hazards present for staff in many child care environments. Workers suffer from illness, emotional distress, physical disabilities and exposure to harmful chemicals.

Very often, staff will ignore the ill health effects caused by their jobs, concerned that children’s needs should always be considered first. While it is our job to respond to children’s needs, what child will benefit from a burned-out, ill caregiver? Placing value on our own health and safety will help both us and the children, by preserving our physical and mental health and by insuring that we will be vital and healthy people and child care workers for a long, long time.

What Staff Can Do

After identifying hazardous health and safety working conditions, staff can bring their findings and concerns to the attention of their administration, or the administration can initiate the discussion with staff. Staff should request training and materials to learn more about improving working conditions and avoiding their negative consequences. Listed here are some basic suggestions and resources.
Illness/Infection

Be sure you are following the most up-to-date procedures for preventing illness and infection (your's and the children's) in the center. Check out the suggestions in two recent articles:

• “Preventing Illness in Infant/Toddler Day Care”, Ruth Highberger and Mary Boynton, Young Children, March 1983.
• “Health Update: Infection in Day Care”, Susan Aronson, M.D., Child Care Information Exchange, March/April 1983.

Body Strains

Most child care-related injuries occur in the lower back. Such injuries can be reoccurring. Ask your director to have a physical therapist come in and demonstrate preventative back care. (Many physical therapists will do this for low or no cost.) Until then, follow these tips:

• To lift, use your legs, not your back.
• Bend your knees and lift from a partial squat position.
• Face what you’re lifting; don’t bend and twist.
• Hold things as close to your center of gravity as possible, not on your hips.
• Bend your knees when you reach for something.
• Push more than pull.
• Change your position often.
• Keep your knees and hips at the same level. (When sitting in a small chair, sit on a telephone book.)
• Clear a space on the floor so you can do periodic back stretching exercises.
• Don’t use child-sized furniture when you can avoid it. Use regular, comfortable adult-sized furniture for breaks and staff meetings. Make an adult-sized table or counter available for eating and doing desk work.
• Ask for help when you need it.

Hazardous Chemicals and Art Materials

Many items used in day care, even some of those listed as “non-toxic,” can have harmful effects on adults and children. Substances may irritate skin and eyes, vapors can harm respiratory systems, and chemicals can enter the bloodstream through cuts and infections. Always maintain good ventilation and circulating air in the center, and use gloves when working with dangerous or irritating substances. Some other hints to avoid trouble are:

Cleaning Solutions

• Avoid known dangerous substances.
• Read labels carefully to find out ingredients, to learn how to use solutions safely, and what to do when problems occur.
• Learn the signs of distress from inhalation, ingestion and skin contact.
• Don’t mix chemical cleaners such as ammonia and chlorine bleach.
• Teach new staff members about the safe use of chemical and art materials.

Art materials

• Learn about the art materials you use. For information on non-toxic art materials write to:
  The Arts and Crafts Institute
  715 Boylton St.
  Boston, MA 02116

  or address your concerns and questions to:
  Art Hazards Information Center
  5 Beekman St.
  New York, NY 10038

• Use water-based colored markers and other art materials.
• Use wet clay and liquid paint. (Dry clay contains silica, which can be toxic when inhaled. Other dry materials to avoid are instant paper mache, pastels, aerosol sprays, and powdered tempera.)
• Use poster paints instead of glazes on clay.
• Keep the art area well ventilated.
• Clean the area well so that toxic dusts do not accumulate.
• Keep food or drinks out of the art area.

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