

17 Secrets To Finding – and Keeping – Great Teachers

By Jennifer Carsen, Daycare In Demand



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Although child care has gained a reputation as a low-paying, high-turnover industry, there are secrets to finding the best talent and retaining it at your program. And these secrets will work for you even if you don't have extremely deep payroll pockets.

Remember: Nobody goes into early childhood education for the money! It's always great if you can pay even a little more than the center down the street, but ultimately money is not going to be the deciding factor in who wants to work for you, and who stays for a long time.

A successful hiring process starts long before that first applicant ever walks through your door. Here are 17 smart hiring and retention-boosting strategies to use at your center. They work best as a unified system, but implementing even a few of them separately will help your staffing efforts immensely:

Pre-Hire

1. Remember that great teachers are attracted to great programs.

This should go without saying, but it's a key point whose importance can't be overstated: If you have problems at your center with staff morale or gossip, or high family turnover, or an ill-maintained facility that is literally falling apart, you will have difficulty attracting the best teacher talent.

It may be your hope that getting a few great teachers on board will turn your program around - but the reality is that you need to address the other problems *first*, in order to become an attractive destination for the teachers you want.

2. Sit down and decide what you're really looking for.

Saying you're looking for "great teachers" isn't much more helpful than saying you're looking for a "great spouse"! What *specific characteristics* are you looking to add to your team?

A teacher who's a wiz at curriculum development? Someone who has experience with autism spectrum disorders? A fantastic communicator who can effectively serve as a staff-parent liaison?

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Alas, no single teacher can bring you the whole package, so it's important to figure out your most pressing needs right now and focus on those.

3. Get the word out.

Now that you've figured out precisely *who* you're looking for, get the word out – to everyone in your network. That means parents and staff (both current and former), personal friends, LinkedIn, Facebook, and so on.

Just because someone isn't directly part of your professional life doesn't mean he or she won't be able to lead you to the person you're looking for. In our increasingly connected world, everyone is just a few virtual steps away from everyone else. You may not even need to post an official job ad at all. But if you do...

Applications & Interviews

4. Write a good job ad.

And by "good," I mean specific, accurate, and above all: Not boring! Run-of-the-mill ads attract run-of-the-mill applicants. So by all means let your personality, and that of your center, shine through in the ad itself.

5. Consider pay-per-click (PPC) advertising.

Most child care centers don't use pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, and those that do tend to use it to bring in new families rather than teachers. But a well-written, geographically targeted ad on either [Google AdWords](#) or [Facebook](#) can be a great way to attract new teachers to your center (particularly younger, web-savvy teachers who are frequently online).

You pay *only* for the times that someone clicks on your ad – and because you'll be focusing on a narrow geographic area, these clicks won't cost you much money.

6. Request a detailed cover letter.

Cover letters are remarkably revealing and often tell you more about a candidate than the resume does – as well as how effectively he or she is able to communicate in writing.

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7. Set up a dedicated email address.

Set up a new email address specifically for the purpose of receiving applications for this particular position. This will reduce the risk of attracting spam to your primary email address. You can also disable the new email address when you are no longer accepting applications.

8. Create some hoops for applicants to jump through.

Make a few specific requests of your applicants. For example:

- “Include the names and email addresses of three professional references.”
- “Describe the best job you ever had, and why you liked it so much.”
- “Email your application to [email address] with ‘teacher job posting’ in the subject line.”
- “Our deadline for receiving applications is 6 pm Eastern time on [date].”

Your requests should be designed to elicit valuable information about the applicant, and/or make your life administratively easier, but their primary purpose is to serve as a screening device to eliminate, right off the bat, applicants who can’t follow directions.

Yes, *eliminate them* – period. Anyone who doesn’t follow your directions to the letter should be eliminated from contention for the job, regardless of how great he or she may seem otherwise. If an applicant can’t or won’t follow the specific directions you set out in a job ad, chances are good that the person will be similarly lax – or more so – on the job itself.

9. Listen both to what the applicant says - and *doesn’t* say.

The best applicants are those who focus on what they can bring to you and your center, rather than why the job would be a good thing for them. They will also have done some research on your center and will have good questions for you.

Also, if the applicant has gaps on her resume that she can’t satisfactorily explain, or is unable to provide references upon request, these are generally very bad signs.



10. Ask probing questions.

I'm a big fan of, "Where do you see yourself in five years?" There is no single right or wrong answer to this one, but the answer is always highly revealing.

11. Check references.

Always, always, always check references. Even if a former employer isn't willing to tell you much of anything, you can (and should) still confirm that an applicant is telling the truth about his or her employment history.

Also, it's a good idea to ask whether or not the reference would be willing to re-hire the applicant. Even if the answer is "yes," any kind of hesitation or delay before answering is very telling.

Post-Hire

12. Plan an orientation.

"Employee orientation" can be an intimidating phrase, but all it means is having a specific plan in place to help new hires feel welcome, and not completely clueless, as they start work.

This can be as simple as having the person come in 30-60 minutes early on the first day for a cup of coffee, a center tour, and a chance to hammer out details like keys, break times, paycheck procedures, and so on.

The very worst thing you can do for a teacher's first day? Nothing.

13. Have a handbook.

A staff handbook clearly spells out the "3 Ps" at your center: Philosophy, Policies, and Procedures. It's an essential part of making sure that all of your employees are on the same page, so to speak, with how your center conducts its business.

It's also a great one-stop resource for questions new employees have about things like sick days, dress codes, emergency procedures, and so on.

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14. Assign a mentor.

Depending on the size and ethos of your center, one or more mentoring relationships may develop naturally over time. However, it's a good idea to help the process along by specifically assigning a willing teacher to look out for the newbie and answer any questions he or she may have. Make a point of introducing them bright and early on the new teacher's first day.

Mentors don't have to be long-time employees at your center, but they should be knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and eager to help the new hire get acclimated and feel welcome.

15. Conduct performance appraisals at least twice a year.

It would be a stretch to say that anyone eagerly looks forward to performance appraisals (whether on the giving or receiving end), but they are an important part of any employee's career growth and development – as well as an opportunity to formally discuss goals and objectives for the upcoming six months.

16. Make employee appreciation an integral part of your job.

In the day-to-day crush of child care, it's easy to overlook the efforts, both big and small, of your dedicated teachers. Find a system for expressing appreciation that works for you – whether it's a quick chat in the hallway or a short note on an employee's paycheck – and deploy your thanks often.

17. Loop teachers in on your big vision.

Your employees were attracted to ECE because they wanted to make a difference – and people absolutely love being part of something bigger than themselves.

So keep your staff looped in on your big vision for your center: the programs you hope to launch, the increasing numbers of children you hope to serve, the new improvements you're planning, and so on. The more you can excite and inspire your teachers, the more they'll want to stay an integral part of what you're doing.

The great thing about employee retention in this field is that it's a "virtuous cycle" - the better you become at keeping great teachers around and engaged, the more great teachers your program will attract.

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I hope you've found these tips useful! Please do stay tuned at the website for more ideas and strategies to implement at your child care center. I'd love to hear your ideas and feedback, too.

All best,

Jen Carsen

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About Jennifer Carsen

Jennifer Carsen is a mom, child care communications specialist, writer, and recovering employment law attorney.

At Daycare In Demand, we help child care centers with their communications – both internal (current parents and staff) and external (prospective parents and staff). This can include:

- Helping you get found online through well-targeted **social media** efforts
- Polishing up the copy on your **website**, and in your ads
- Implementing **legally compliant best practices** that keep your center productive and lawsuit-resistant
- Writing **blogs and newsletters** for parents and/or staff
- Drawing up both a **staff handbook** and a **parent handbook**
- Working with you to figure out what makes your center **truly unique and special**, and helping you spread the word
- Enhancing your relationships with current parents and staff to **increase loyalty and retention**
- Developing a **strong referral program** that will consistently bring you all the kiddos you can handle
- Providing **hiring and interviewing strategies** to help you find the very best teachers for your center
- **Troubleshooting common – yet costly – problems** that can decrease enrollments and increase undesirable staff turnover

If you're ready to take your child care center to the next level, I invite you to call (603-340-1854) or email (jennifer@daycareindemand.com). Let's talk about what you need, and I'll help you reach – and retain – more of the great families and teachers that keep your center thriving.

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