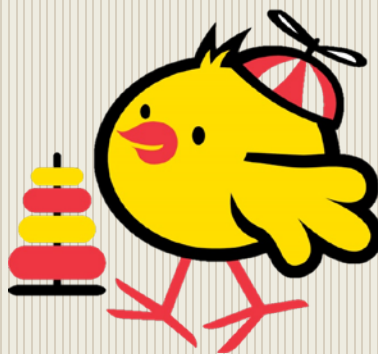


Insider Tips for Finding—and Keeping—Great Staff

Jennifer Carsen, Daycare In Demand
Quality Conference 2015 session transcript



Jennifer Carsen: Hi, everyone. This is Jennifer Carsen. I'm with Daycare in Demand. I'm just so excited to be with everyone here today at the Quality Conference, 2015.

I guess we go ahead and get started. Again, this is Jennifer Carsen. My presentation today is called, "Insider Tips for Finding and Keeping Great Staff," which I know is on everyone's mind in the childcare field.

Just a quick introduction, I think you already know a lot about why great staff are so crucial for your childcare center. I just wanted to give you a little personal story to kick things off.

I actually have two young children who are in childcare. Lorelei is almost five, and Nicholas is two-and-a-half. They had been going to a great local center, pretty much since they were born, until about six months ago. There was a new director at the center.

She was fine. When there's a new director, there's transition. It's a little hard for everyone, both staff and existing families. We found that one of our biggest issues with the new director was that she seemed to have very teacher unfriendly policies. She was very Draconian about cell phone usage, very inflexible with schedules. Again, not a bad person, not a bad director, but we were finding that the very best teachers were starting to leave the center.

As a parent, I can tell you that I could have gone a very long time with a director I didn't really feel all that connected to. Once those teachers who we loved and trusted with our children started to leave, that was really the breaking point for us. When we saw that there was this exodus of teaching talent that didn't seem to be replaced by people of comparable caliber, we decided that it was time to find a different center for our children, which we did.

They're at a great place now, and we're very happy with it. We still miss those few great teachers who are still at the old place, because parents get connected to teachers, and children get connected to teachers. They are the backbone of your program. If you find that you can hire great people, but those people keep leaving, or if you just can't get anybody good onboard, the whole quality of your program is just not going to be what it should be.

I know you know this, just a little anecdote to get us started. Great teachers are critical.

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Obviously, there are high costs of turnover. The human cost, which I just mentioned, loss of goodwill. You might find you're losing other good teachers. When one follows, others tend to leave as well.

There's also a real dollars and cents cost to losing teachers and having to rehire them. Turnover in a lot of industries -- it's hard to put any exact figure on it -- but the cost of replacing an employee has often been pegged up to 200 percent of that person's annual salary.

When you get into job ads, and time spent looking, and interviewing, and doing background checks, it's costly in a lot of ways. That's why it's so important to find those good teachers, get them to your center, and hang onto them.

Again, as I mentioned, good teachers leaving is very disruptive to co-workers, to the families, to the other staff. There's also, which I don't think gets enough attention in childcare, something called institutional knowledge.

Basically, in your childcare center, or any other business, people are going to come and go, even very high up people like center owners, center directors. Your institutional knowledge is the procedures, and the policies, and the documentation your center has in place that remain after specific people leave.

Once you have staff who are with you for the long haul, they will help keep that institutional knowledge going even when someone else, like a director or an owner, might leave and move on. They are the brains of your operation, so to speak...and not even just the public face of it, but also the knowledge of how things operate. They help train new teachers. They're there for mentoring purposes. It's just very important.

Finally, one other thing I'd like to talk about is the virtuous cycle of great staff. You've heard of the vicious cycle, which is something we don't want in our childcare centers, or anywhere else. The virtuous cycle is the more great teachers you have and retain, the more great teachers you're going to attract, and the more great families you're going to attract. Once you get those great families and those great teachers, they continue to attract more people like them.

The quality of your center as a whole just continues to go up and become the self-perpetuating cycle of excellence. That is just a wonderful thing. It's almost like getting a fly wheel spinning, that it can be really, really hard to get it moving at the beginning.

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Once it starts clicking along, you find, just like we've all been on those stationary bicycles, that once you get moving, it takes less and less effort. Suddenly, you're going to be finding that your center is just a better and better place. It all hinges on your teachers.

Why great staff are hard to find? This is no great mystery to anyone listening in on the call today. Childcare is traditionally underpaid. It's a hard job, as you know. It's very demanding. It takes a lot of patience. You're also competing for teaching talent with places like elementary schools that can offer summer breaks, more regular vacations. It's a tricky industry to find the very, very best talent. We'll explain some secrets today about how to help overcome that.

Finally, what you can and can't control about the process...As with everything, there are things that are within your power to do something about, and things that are not. I think you can do a lot to be very proactive about getting out there. Sales people talk about, "You should always be closing." I think in our industry, you should always be hiring.

Not necessarily hiring somebody new every day, but you should always be on the lookout for great talent, and finding a way to try to integrate them in your program, or at the very least, keep in touch with these folks, even if you don't have a spot for them today. As you know, openings happen, sometimes unexpectedly.

You always want to be able to have this network of great people, either that you can try to hire, or people who might know great people that you can try to hire. That is all very important. What you can't control, and we'll talk about this in a little more detail later on. You can't control when people leave. This is a hard thing.

Sometimes you might find the perfect teacher for your program. She, it's usually a she, not always, is wonderful with the kids, she's reliable, she's on time, she brings a lot of creativity and good ideas. A lot of times these superstars are going to leave, either leave childcare completely, or leave to go to a different center. Families move.

Sometimes things are preventable, and sometimes they're not. The important thing is not to beat yourself up. Don't obsess over the factors you can't control. Sometimes the very biggest stars, in any industry, star employees are the ones that are always going to be moving on. That's really OK.

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It's wonderful that you were able to be a stop on their journey. You need to appreciate them while they're there. Give them the best working experience you can, and then gracefully let them go if they decide to leave you. Again, we'll talk about that a little more later. Finally, one more thing in our introduction.

Feel free to take notes, obviously. I will tell you at the end of the session how to get a free transcript of our whole session. You're going to have it all written if you'd like to, so don't worry about scribbling furiously away. Feel free to listen, and jot down a few key points.

Again, at the very end I will explain how you can get a transcript of our whole session. I know our time is limited, so I'll give you a little, tiny bit about me. As this slide mentions, I've called myself a recovering employment lawyer. I was an employment lawyer.

Those are people who do things like harassment law, discrimination law, and family and medical leave. I was an actual practicing attorney for about 11 months! Then I decided I'd had more than enough. I still found it was a very valuable, interesting area. Most everybody has a job at some point in their lives.

A very human area of the law, so I still love talking to people about how not to discriminate, how not to harass people, how to make working conditions really good, and legally compliant. After I left the active practice of law, I became, as it mentions, a workplace policies and best practices writer and consultant.

Once my own kids were born, and went into childcare, I became really passionate about helping childcare centers become fully enrolled, and very, very high quality places. I found that so many folks in the childcare industry are amazing with children, just incredible.

I have so much respect for everyone who opens a center, who works there. It's a skill set I, myself, do not possess. A lot of childcare people don't have any business background, training, or marketing experience, and that's where I come in. I help them position their programs so that they can attract very good families who stay with them for a long time, and good staff.

That's what I do. I help childcare centers grow their programs to become bigger and better. As I mentioned earlier, I'm the mom of two young kids, that's me and my husband Eric, and Lorelei, and Nicholas. They are actually at their center right now while I'm recording this! That's it for the introduction. Let's get started!

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A quick overview, I'm not going to read this verbatim, but we're going to talk about generally, where are these good teachers hiding, how to write a good job ad that attracts those people, how to interview effectively, so you don't end up with duds.

How to get people settled at your center from day one, to kick off the employment relationship in a good, productive way, so that people want to stay and thrive with you. Why mentoring is so important and how to institute a good mentoring program that doesn't take up too much time, too much money.

Again, keeping people once they get in. Sometimes getting people in the door, and on board isn't really the tricky part. It's keeping them around, and keeping them happy. Finally, what to do when a great teacher leaves. Again, as I mentioned, they're going to leave, but there are some things you can do to minimize the impact and maybe even get them to come back, which is awesome when that happens.

Where are these great teachers? Where to find them. I always recommend that the very first thing people do is look to their existing network. Childcare people are people-people. You know a lot of people, the families at your center, the staff at your center, your own extended circle of family and friends, acquaintances, personal and professional.

These people all know a lot of people, and sometimes we're afraid, I don't know if it's just shyness or if it's just not thinking about it, to leverage these existing relationships, but that is really where you want to start and especially if you're not hiring in desperation or trying to fill a slot for this awful teacher you just can't wait to kick out the door.

You don't need to be secretive about it. You can always let people know, "We're always looking for great talent. Always, always, always, so if you have a sister or a friend or somebody who might be a good fit here, if you enjoy working here and have somebody who might enjoy working here too, let me know."

Parents current and alumni parents are a great source, current and past staff, and I would say this is one place where putting your money where your mouth is does pay off in the form of a formal referral program.

How those tend to work, and they don't have to be super complicated, it's just if you do find and hire a candidate who came to you through an existing teacher or an existing parent and

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they stay with you for a set period of time, usually six months or a year, then than referring parent or staff member or whoever gets a referral bonus.

I like to make those pretty substantial. I would say in the neighborhood of \$250 to \$300, which sounds like a big chunk of money, but really when you think about all the costs of turnover we've already talked about in terms of disruption, in terms of your time, in terms of actual dollars and cents costs of looking for new staff, it's a bargain.

You can either just write these folks a check or what I really prefer to do is make it really fun. Give them a great evening with childcare included if your referrer has young children, get them a great dinner and a bottle of champagne, or something they can talk about and talk up.

Get other people excited to start looking around and say, "Who would I know who would be a great fit at ABC Childcare." Those are very, very effective programs. "That's so much money to give up at one throw," but truly it is worth it. It will be some of the best money you've ever spent, and it will pay for itself many, many times over.

You'll see I've got a little note there, a caveat. The one thing I would caution against, or just not even a caution, just so much to keep in mind, is if you're looking to increase diversity at your center, let's say you're looking for more male teachers, and you don't have any or more teachers of color.

If you rely heavily on referral programs, and they're great, you're probably going to end up with more people who look a lot like the people you already have at your center, which is great if you love those people, but when you're looking to branch out into different types of people for whatever reason, referral programs tend to bring in more of the same.

That can be good and bad, and just if you're looking to increase your diversity that's something to keep in mind. LinkedIn, hopefully you're all on LinkedIn. It's a great, free, professional resource, and there are some wonderful groups specifically for childcare owners, directors, and administrators, for childcare professionals, that are free to join.

You just set up your profile. Once you join these groups, those are great places to make relationships with people in your field and say, "I'm in Racine, Wisconsin and I need a teacher to teach this age. Does anybody have any leads?" You can talk up your center and explain what you're looking for.

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Even a teacher across the country might have an idea for a reference for you, either somebody, “Hey, I happen to know somebody who’s in your area or I know someone who might or this is a great resource you should be looking at. I found a great teacher on Monster.com or this other online resource.”

It’s a great place to get in, get your feet wet, and just start poking around in there and working your connections because as you know, childcare folks are so friendly and so helpful, and that’s really a good place to start looking.

Craigslist is wonderful, if you’re not familiar with Craigslist, and that’s all very locally oriented, so get on Craigslist and you’ll find there is one for your specific area, whether it’s just a specific part of your state if you’re in a larger state.

I’m in New Hampshire. We have a Craigslist for all of New Hampshire, and generally what’s great about Craigslist is obviously it’s online. A lot of the teachers you’re looking to attract spend more time online than you could ever imagine just because they tend to be young, and especially millennial-age teachers, that is just their go-to.

They’re not generally flipping through the newspaper in the morning as much as some older folks are, so online is a great place to go. Craigslist, depending on where you live, it’s either free to post a job or it’s very, very inexpensive, so I always recommend you post on Craigslist.

Facebook, if your center has a page, great place to put the word out, “We’re looking for a new teacher or we’re always happy to talk to people who might be a good fit.” Indeed.com is another -- fairly new to my knowledge -- website that’s a good place to post for teacher positions.

Monster.com, it’s the granddaddy of online job hunting, job seeking websites. It can be somewhat more expensive to post there, but I would say if you’re having trouble or if you’re looking for something very specific, that’s not a bad place to go.

More on this, local colleges, especially those with ECE programs, always a good place. Your local childcare resource and referral office, they can either help you with job listings directly or give you ideas for where you can look for teachers locally.

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The third one, targeted pay-per-click ads may be a bit beyond what you want to get into if you're not terrible Web savvy, but it is a great way to find teachers. I don't know if you've ever done a Google search and you notice those little, shorter ads that run along the right side of your screen and at the top and they say "sponsored."

Generally speaking those are paid ads, so you can actually go into Google and set up an account, and for very little money because yours is going to be geographically targeted, you can write up a little ad, "We're looking for a teacher." Just a few words.

Then the candidate would click through to a specific page on your website where they would find out more about the job. Those can be very, very effective and not a lot of money, and if you have any questions about how those work generally or more specifically, that's something I'd be happy to you about after the call.

Just something that isn't on a lot of folk's radar that's a very, very good resource. Local newspaper, nothing wrong with the local newspaper, but as I say here it should not be your only source because most of these young teachers are not reading the newspaper, probably not even online.

That's not where they're spending a lot of their time, so if you have a chance for a free placement or something not too expensive, there's no harm, but that should not be your primary recruiting source. As I say at the very end here, the bottom line is you go where the fish are.

Your "fish," your teachers, and your families for that matter that you're looking to attract to your center are generally going to be online-first type people, so just keep that in mind as you go about looking for your teachers.

How to write the job ad. We've all seen ads, written ads, for our industry, in our industry. A lot of them are deathly boring. "This teacher sought for this age group with X amount of credits and call this number and blah." [laughs]

The one cardinal sin as I say here is do not be boring. Boring ads get you boring people in my opinion. What you really want, and it's going to take a little time to do this, but once you do you're going to want to spend a little time writing the ad that really captures the essence of your center, and why it's such a great, fun place.

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You want the ad to appeal to the people you want to attract, the fun, the talented, the really go-getter teachers, who are going to make your center such a great place to come to work, and to play every day. You need to look at things from their perspective. This is W-I-I-F-M, What's in it for Me?

The "me," is the person reading your ad, that you want them to call up about an interview. Be a little silly if that's your personality. Talk about the philosophy of your center a little bit, but it should read as if it comes from a real person, and a real place. Someplace that, "Wow. That would be a fun place to work.

I should look into this further." I say include some hoops. I always recommend this. They don't have to be big hoops, but if you say, "Include a résumé, a cover letter, and three references," you should immediately discard anybody who does not include the résumé, the cover letter, and three references.

I find that putting those hoops in both ensures that people have actually bothered to read your job ad carefully. They can follow directions. They have a certain amount of wherewithal to follow through on those things. People who don't follow through on even these little specifics that you ask, if they're lazy when they're applying for a job, think about how lazy they're going to be if they actually get the job.

I know it sounds kind of harsh, but this is a very good first step to weed out a lot of the people you don't even want to be wasting your time with. That's to include a few little hoops, or even, "Tell me in a few sentences why you enjoy working with infants."

Before they can advance to the next level in your process, make sure that they have done what you've asked. The final thing I recommend is you set up a dedicated email address just to receive these job applications, especially if you're putting your job ad online, like I recommend, like on Craigslist.

You've got an email address out there, and sometimes those email addresses can be targets for spam, and you're going to start getting lots and lots of stuff coming in there eventually. I recommend you set up an email address just for this specific job, just for the short term.

Again, you can do this for free on Yahoo, or Gmail, or whatever you'd like. Once you've hired your teacher, deactivate it, and don't check it anymore. That really solves a lot of the spam

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problems, and makes your life much simpler. Candidate Screening. As I mentioned you want to reject immediately, no matter how great someone else looks.

I can't emphasize this enough. If they don't follow your directions get rid of them. I found this, in the times that I've hired people, I've disregarded this advice on my own a few times, and I've always lived to regret it. Once, I had to evaluate a writing sample from someone. I gave her a very firm deadline.

I think it was 6:00 PM Eastern time on such-and-such date. The sample didn't come in very late, but it came in a little late, and I hired her anyway. She missed deadlines the entire time she worked for me. Eventually, I had to let her go. I should've listened to my gut, and listened to my own rule, which is do not hire, or consider anyone who can't follow your instructions.

You might choose to ignore that advice, but do so at your peril! The next thing I recommend is that you schedule a preliminary phone interview. This saves a lot of time for both you and the candidate. If it's not a good fit, you know that pretty soon, and you can both go your separate ways before someone has taken the time to come in, and you've carved time out of your day to meet with this person.

Again, if somebody seems promising, either via email, or a short phone call, set up a preliminary phone interview, and have the candidate call you. This is to help weed out the flaky people who call you 20 minutes later, "I couldn't remember if I was supposed to call you at 1:00, or 2:00," or who don't call at all.

They've just saved you a lot of time and trouble. This is not the person you want to hire. You're going to watch for poise and professionalism generally. Picture this person answering the phone at your center. Is this someone you would be comfortable having current and prospective parents speaking to?

Just something to keep in mind. Again, the initial interview is a good time to follow up on potential red flags. That's the kind of thing, they've got a pretty good-looking résumé, but there are two years in here that are totally unaccounted for. There might be a perfectly logical reason, "I was home with my newborn for those two years," which is great, but sometimes it indicates there's something a little shaky they would rather you didn't ask about.

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Now is the time to ask about it, rather than at an in-person interview, or certainly after you've hired the person, and you realize, "This person had a really sketchy thing that I wanted to ask about." This is the time to follow up on those potential red flags. This first interview doesn't need to last very long.

It shouldn't, maybe 15 minutes tops. If everything still looks good, then and only then, you can schedule an in-person meeting. You'll find that once you do a few of these phone interviews, you'll start to get a feel of who might be really great, and who is, "Thank you very much for your time," and we're done.

Good questions for the phone interview. "What first attracted you to this position? Why are you leaving your current or previous position?" That's always good. It's just a very revealing answer. Sometimes there's a perfectly logical reason, and sometimes you can tell this person might be trouble.

Once again, ask about red flags. "Do you have any questions for me about the position?" A good candidate is always going to have some questions. If they say, "No, no, no. I'm good. I'm good," usually that's not a great sign. It means they haven't thought enough or researched enough about the job.

Another thing I caution you to watch out for is self-serving answers. "This job would be really great for me because..." That's not what you're looking for. You want somebody who says, "I think I would be a great fit for you, and be a really good addition to your center, because..."

You always want people looking at it from that perspective, why they would be an asset to you. The folks who are all me, me, me, "The hours are so convenient. You're right around the corner from my house," that type of thing, it's not a deal breaker all by itself, but usually those are not the people you are going to find to be your superstar teachers.

The interview itself, the in-person interview, and again, obviously if you run your own center in your home and it's just you, you're going to have to find some ways around some of these things because there's nobody to cover.

But as much as possible you need to clear your calendar, carve out some time and some space. Get someone to cover the phone, get someone to cover the door. You really want to be able to give the candidate your full attention. It's just a question of respect, and also, you can really

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evaluate someone properly if you're watching this sea of little kids, Maggie's about to fall off a counter, and you're trying to answer the phone or if the UPS man is at the door.

It's much better if you can really dedicate your full time and attention to this interview. Consider it a working interview, these are great. If you can bring the person in, and you're both willing, for maybe a couple of hours, half a day, and just see how they interact with the kids and with your other staff. How is their professional bearing with every one they encounter?

Your custodian, someone who unexpectedly crosses their path. You really get a sense for who this person actually is if you can see them in the center environment. Another thing that is important is, obviously there is some room for improvisation, but you should always have a baseline set of questions that you ask everyone.

This both gives you a standard of comparison, and it also helps you in the event of, God forbid, a lawsuit. If somebody says, "You didn't hire me because I'm gay" or "because I'm Jewish" or some kind of illegal reason that they feel you didn't hire them for. If you can say, "No, I wasn't asking you this question because you are you, this is our standard list of questions."

This provides some legal protection for you. Again, keep detail, but nondiscriminatory notes. If you're interviewing a lot of people, making a note something like, "Candidate was wearing a red shirt" but you don't want to say, "Latino woman, 55" or something, because not that you meant it in any kind discriminatory way, but it does provide ammunition in the event of a lawsuit or a dispute.

These are protected characteristics, age and ethnicity. Detailed but nondiscriminatory notes. OK, some good interview questions. For starters, scenario based interview questions are always good. "OK, let's say you've just had a child come to you covered in tempera paint and you've got a child over in the corner who is asking you this and then the phone rings. What do you do?"

These are good, because even if you're not doing a national working interview they quickly put the candidate into the mindset of your probably sometimes crazy childcare-center setting and see how would they address this. Those are always good.

Non-leading questions. This is a big one. A lot of times people would ask the question, "How do you feel about workplace gossip?" and no candidate is going to say, "I love it. I'm always leading



the charge in talking about my co-workers behind their backs.” That’s what we call leading question.

They know the correct answer. “Do you tend to run late all of the time?” No one is going to say, “Actually, yes. I never get anywhere on time.” There’s no harm in asking a leading question, but it’s not going to tell you anything you don’t already know.

This is a good one, “What accomplishments are you most proud of in your life?” Everybody, even if it’s someone still in high school, they should have something they can point to and it doesn’t have to be professional, but a candidate who can’t find anything, that’s a red flag. Something to watch out for.

You always want people who have done good work and good things in their life and they can say, “Yes, I’m proud of my work or my efforts here, in this thing.”

“What would your previous or current manager would say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses are?” This is a good one because it takes you a step away from that old, “What would you say your greatest strengths and weaknesses are?” It gets in a little more objective state of mind.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?” There’s a difference of opinion in this question. Some people think it’s a waste of time. I really like it because the answer is always revealing. Whether or not you think the candidate is trying to spin his or her answer somehow.

It is always very revealing. If somebody might say, “I love children. I love early childhood education. In five years I ultimately see myself working in finance.” Then you know. That person might still be a great fit for your center right now, but you then know what you’re dealing with.

“What do you like most and least about your previous job?” This answer will tell you a lot about the person’s mindset, in addition a little more about what their experience is. Then, “How do you resolve personal confrontation?” This is a great one, because everyone in the world is going to have personal confrontations of one nature or another.

They’re going to have to have some way of dealing with them. Whether it’s good or bad or productive or counterproductive, but this is something everybody has had to deal with and everybody should have some kind of interesting answer to.

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The bad interview questions. We've all have a number of these too. "Tell me about yourself." Ultimately, this is really the overarching goal of any interview, but that question is just way too broad to elicit any kind of meaningful answer. It's just too big.

Similarly, those I call them Barbara Walter's questions "If you were a tree or if you were an animal, what kind would you be?" Again, no harm in asking these, but they're a little silly. You're both there with finite time. I would cut to the chase with something a little more direct.

"How do you feel about workplace gossip?" This an example of one of those leading questions that don't really get you anywhere. Same with, "What's your biggest weakness?" Usually you're going to get some sort of pre-packaged spin like, "I'm such a perfectionist" or, "I'm always too early for things" it's not bad, but it's not very illuminating.

Now we get into the illegal interview questions. These are very easy sometimes, especially if you're hitting it off with a candidate. You have good rapport. You just want to find out about each other and you can start going down this personal path without really meaning to, and these are really things you should not be ever asking about.

Even if your intentions are good, don't go there. "Are you married?" "Do you attend church regularly?" "When did you graduate?" That gets into how old someone is. "Are you planning to start a family of your own sometime soon?"

Especially in your field is a reasonably seeming question to ask, but this is very bad if you find out...if the candidate says later, "You didn't hire me because I said I was planning to start a family soon" or, "I'm already pregnant"

"You've an interesting last name. Where is your family from?" Not the kind of thing you want to be asking. Sometimes there are questions that you want to ask because they relate to a legitimate job related task, and here's an example, your teachers might have to move tables around on a fairly regular basis, big heavy tables.

Instead of saying, "Do you have any physical limitations?" which can start getting into the illegal area of disability, which you don't want to get into, you can say something like, "All of our teachers need to move these tables around on a regular basis, and each table weighs 25 pounds. Is that something you'd be able to do?"

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You're really getting right at the heart of what you want to be asking about, without getting into the illegal stuff. Or, "Sometimes our center is open on Sunday mornings for XYZ reason. Would you be able to work then?" Rather than, "Do you go to church every Sunday, and would that be a conflict?" Again, you're getting at what you want to know without getting into the legally problematic things.

Making the decision. I always say review the interview in a holistic way. Look at everything, and sometimes again as I mentioned, sleep on it. You don't ever want to be hiring somebody at the very end of an interview, no matter how great it went. You need some time to let it all sink in and situate itself in your mind.

Their demeanor, their guard-down moments. Did they snap at a child who ran across their path? Something, the sort of off-the-record moments, those sometimes are the most revealing. If you have an assistant director, or another teacher who met the candidate, talk to him or her a little bit. "Hey, what did you think of Joe?" See what they say.

Check references, always. I cannot emphasize this enough. You should always be asking for references, for candidates, and you should always be checking those.

Even if the reference is very guarded, and can only confirm that, "Yes, Jane worked here as a preschool teacher from this date to this date," and that's all they can confirm, then at least you know Jane didn't lie on her resume about the fact that she worked there.

Sometimes references will be able to tell you much more, both good and bad, so you've got to always ask for them, and you've got to check them. This is a big one here. Trust your gut.

I have found that for me personally, and for most of the center owners I have worked with, owners and directors who do hiring, if you've got a niggling bad feeling about someone, even if you can't quite put your finger on it, and you try to plow past it and say, "But look at this and look at that, and they seem so great," you're going to regret it.

Always trust your gut. If you have any kinds of qualms or reservations that you can't resolve in your mind, listen to that.

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This is a big one. Hire for attitude, not skills. You can always train on skills. Sometimes you might even be better off with a candidate who is new to early childhood education because then they haven't learned other bad habits, or bad training from another employer.

They're this great blank slate, and you can teach them the right way, which is a good thing. Don't ever dismiss someone out of hand because they don't have the right skills. If you think they are trainable, and you think they have the right attitude, go for it.

Finally, post-hire, once you've actually signed on the dotted line and you've got your new candidate, follow up with everybody who applied. I think this is just good manners, especially if you're looking for candidates online.

Some people think that the Internet is just this resume black hole, and it's very discouraging. It's just a matter of common courtesy to say, "Thank you, we filled the position."

But it's also good in that if your new hire for whatever reason doesn't work out, and you had a few promising finalists who maybe didn't make your final cut, then you sort of continue that bridge with them, if you ever need to go back and say, "Hey, you applied with us for a job a while back."

It's just a good way to maintain that network of people you might want to call back at some point later on.

Teacher onboarding. Onboarding is something that's often talked about in larger organizations. But it's important even if it's just you in your home, and you're hiring your very first teacher to help you out, teacher onboarding is important. The very worst thing you can do on day number one is nothing.

By that I mean just sort of have the teacher come in, "Oh yeah, you were starting today. Let me see if there's a place for you to put your bag down." That's just the worst feeling ever. I think it happens with organizations of all sizes that it's just not on the calendar, so-and-so was supposed to get this ready, but she's not here today.

You need to make it even a little big deal about this person starting, because it is a big deal, and this first day sets the tone for the entire employment relationship. You need to have it on your

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calendar. You should tell everybody else on your team that this person is coming, a little bit about who he or she is, and get excited about it. Get prepared.

Again, just a little bit of laying the groundwork. Making sure, does she have a locker? Does she have the tools she needs for her classroom, for her projects? It's huge. Everybody wants to feel welcome and expected.

The worst thing you can do is have this person slide in as if it's a regular old day. Even if you can have the person come in maybe 10, 15 minutes early, go grab a coffee, and just make it special. The worst thing you can do is nothing.

Line up a mentor. I have found in childcare, probably if you have more than a few employees you'll know you have some long-timers who are just natural not just educators of children, but teachers of other teachers.

Those people are great, they are gems. But you should also officially assign a mentor, "I'm sure everyone will make you feel welcome, Susie. Just so you know, your official mentor is Alice, and she's going to be meeting with you four times a year."

It just sends off the impression that you are organized, that you expect this person to stay around for the long haul, and that you're excited about their development. Also have a handbook in place. Again, this is part of the institutional memory I mentioned earlier.

It's always very reassuring when, especially if you can get the person a handbook even before the first day on, "Where do I park? What's the policy on can I bring my cell phone into the center? Is there a dress code?"

It's always good to have those policies written down in one place, and especially to be able give that to a new teacher, so he or she has a baseline for what to expect. Finally, as I mentioned, get excited. It's a big deal, it's a great thing, so make it count.

Mentoring that works. You need to build it into your culture. An informal mentoring is wonderful, and you should always encourage it, but make it an official part of something you do.

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Every new teacher is assigned a mentor. Even if your mentoring program is something as simple as, “I want you to meet with your mentee four times a year. Take her out for a cup of coffee on the center, and just talk.”

That’s really all it needs to be, but it’s important that you have something in place. When I say, “Know your end game,” it just means know what you expect to happen, from every new hire, and from this mentoring relationship.

Do you expect that ultimately this new teacher will eventually take over for this mentor, when he or she retires, or do you expect that this new teacher will ultimately move into a different classroom, or go from a floating position to a set position in a certain classroom?

Just know what your big-picture goals and expectations are. Those may change, as always, but it’s good to know. Again, put some money behind your program. It doesn’t have to be a lot, but again even an annual pizza mentor-mentee lunch, fine. That is great.

Check in periodically. Meaning you, as center owner, director, or person in charge of hiring, you should check in with the new hire every now and again, “Hey Sally, how’s it going? How is everything? Is there anything you need, are there any questions I can answer?”

Again, just so this person doesn’t feel completely adrift, especially in a larger center by the person who brought them onboard and then you never see this person again.

Retention strategies. This is really where the rubber meets the road. You hire great people, and you want them to stay. You can’t always control who stays and who goes, but you can make their work relationship with you as productive as possible.

Here are some things that I always recommend. People want to be challenged at work. They want exciting things to work on, and problems to solve. They want autonomy. It’s very, very important not to micromanage your teachers.

Obviously you have policies and procedures, and you have certain benchmarks that need to be met, but you should let each teacher, or each teaching team, or however things are set up at your center, kind of go about them in their own way.

It’s just very important that people be given autonomy over their work lives, especially in childcare, which is an industry, as you know, where there’s very little autonomy a lot of the

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time. You can't just even take off and go to the bathroom in the middle of the day without making sure that everybody's covered.

As much as possible, give people freedom to run their classrooms as they see fit. Sincere appreciation is something that costs you nothing. It is so big for retention.

Just, "Hey, thank you so much for staying late on Tuesday, when Abby's mother didn't come until seven o'clock. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. I know you had your family at home and you missed dinner. Thank you."

That's all it has to be, just an honest acknowledgement that I have noticed what you did and thank you, and I appreciate it. It is so surprisingly rare in the workplace, but it is very, very valuable. Individual recognition, and by this, what I mean is that teachers like, we all do, like to be recognized and appreciated as individuals, as Lorelei and not as Teacher Number Three in this room.

By that, what I mean is you should get to know your teachers a little bit, and know their personal situations, "This person really likes chocolate, and this person really loves softball." We need to be known and seen as individuals. Part of that in the professional context, as I listed next is to play to individual strengths.

You might have a teacher who is incredibly creative. She might not be the best at getting in paperwork on time, and probably again, you can set minimum standards. That teacher is probably never going to be really great at getting her paperwork in, but play to her creativity.

If you have a teacher who loves social media, that person should be encouraged, with some guidance, to post on your Facebook page. Let each person, each teacher develop in the direction of his or her personal strengths. It will make them happier, and it will make your center a stronger place.

Generally, if someone is weak in an area, you can kind of get them up, and this is true of me and you and all of us, you can get them up to a certain standard, but that is never going to be probably where they excel. Focus on strengths and encourage teachers to grow in the area of their individual strength.

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Investment in teachers is very important. I recommend performance appraisals, both from a legal standpoint and a staff development standpoint, at least twice a year. Nobody loves them, the teachers or the people doing the performance appraisals, but they're very important, "Here's where you've been, here's where we're going, here's how you're doing."

They matter. They matter a lot both in terms of a legal standpoint it's a good process to have in place, and just that someone is here noticing what I'm doing every day and they care that I'm still here, and I'm growing as a teacher and an educator. They're very important.

By the same token, you also want to invest some money in training, and continuing education and staff development days.

Money. Money is probably, we'll see in the next few slides, not as crucial as you might think to teacher retention, which is good because you probably don't have a lot of it to invest in salaries. Nobody in early ed does. The good news is even your best teachers, nobody goes into early childhood education to strike it rich, obviously.

The more you can pay a little extra to your very best teachers, either in the form of a slightly higher salary, or the occasional bonus, it goes a long way because it ties back into the appreciation for what you do.

Fun. This is very important, especially in our field of childcare. It's maddening and stressful and very difficult at times, but it is fun. These little guys are amazing.

That's really your biggest factor in a lot of ways in being able to keep your teachers around is, "Is it fun to come to work every day and help these children grow and develop?" If it's fun, and if you make it fun and focus on that, everybody is going to be so much happier.

Finally, the big "why." People love to part of something bigger than themselves. I always use the example, I'm sure you've heard of it, of the people, the stonecutter. You ask the stonecutter number one, "What are you doing?" "I'm shaping this rock." You ask person number two, "What are you doing?" The stonecutter, "I'm building a wall."

But, the stonecutter number three says, "I'm building a cathedral." They have this grand vision of what they're doing. In childcare especially, when the day to day can be messy and

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discouraging, it's important to have that big why. Why do you do what you do, and how are your teachers helping you get there?

You need to let them in on what that big why is, and explain to them as much as possible that, "Hey, we're doing this together. You are an integral part of our team, and I couldn't do it without you." A lot of times, people in charge get a little defensive about being in charge, and want to hold all the power and all of the information for themselves. That never works very well.

You shouldn't have a lot of secrets, if any, from your team. You are a team. The more you can let people in on this grand cathedral you're building, the happier they'll be, the more productive they'll be, and the longer they'll stay.

These next two slides, I'm not going to read them verbatim. What bosses think employees want versus what employees actually want?

Bosses think that at the top of the list is good wages. Appreciation notice is way down at the list, tactful discipline is way down. Feeling in on things is way down at the bottom. But if we look at the next slide, good wages, really only in the middle of the list.

Appreciation is at the very top. Feeling in on things, at the very top. Sympathetic help with personal problems, also very, very important. This all ties into being seen as an individual with a life outside of school.

I will give you the transcript and the slides after the presentation, but just take a look at this list. It's very interesting in that the things you think you might not be able to offer employees, such as a lot, a lot of money, aren't really the things that are going to keep them or drive them away anyway.

These are two quotes to remember, great quotes in life, and in managing people, "You have to expect things of yourself, before you do them." Michael Jordan, obviously a man who got a lot accomplished in his life on a basketball court.

But it's true of your employees, too. You have to expect things of people, and say, "Hey, this is how we do things here. We're excited for you to be a part of it. I want you to take this and run."

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Tim Ferriss, the author and lifestyle management consultant, “It’s amazing how someone’s IQ seems to double as soon as you give them responsibility and indicate that you trust them.” It is absolutely true.

Once again, micromanagement is the worst thing you can do to kill a good teacher’s spirit. If for some reason you realize, “I don’t trust this teacher. I don’t want them handling this,” then they shouldn’t be on your team.

These are both good, overarching things to remember. You want to hold people accountable for what they do, and let them run their classrooms their own way, and give them the space to excel. They will love you for it.

Getting into the sad occasion when someone leaves. People leave, it happens. The more superstar employees you have, the more likely it is that they will not be with you forever. You have to go into it knowing that it’s going to happen, and that’s OK.

I would say the first thing is to keep the lines of communication open. You never want to become a closed door and say, “OK, you’re leaving. Goodbye, we’re done. Don’t talk to me anymore.”

Sometimes you’re going to be a little hurt and defensive if someone is leaving your center, especially if you really came to like and rely on the person. You’re going to be a little upset that they’re leaving, and that’s OK, but you’ve got to stay in their corner, as much as you want to say, “Fine, I’m done with you.”

“Is there anything we can do to change your mind?” This is a question that people don’t ask enough. Oftentimes, it won’t change the person’s mind. But sometimes you might be surprised, even if you can’t change their mind, what they say.

It could be something you hadn’t even thought about, “Oh gosh, I had no idea that was troubling you, or that this was something you needed in your work life.” Sometimes, lo and behold, they will actually say, “Yes, actually if you could just do XYZ, I would be happy to stay.”

Number three, offer to be a reference and a resource. This is part of staying in this person’s corner, even after they have left your employment, “Is there anything you need from us? How can we help make your transition easier? Please stay in touch.” That’s important.

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That helps the last bullet point on this page, lay the groundwork for the boomerang. Just as sometimes you've probably had families leave your center that the grass was not greener and they eventually came back, and you were so happy to have them back. The same can happen with your teachers.

If you're gracious when people leave, and you stay in touch with them, and you don't get defensive, and you're able to say, "Hey, you're always going to be part of our center's community, and let us know how you're doing."

If you have that sort of attitude, people will feel comfortable saying, "You know, my husband actually didn't get transferred, like I expected," or, "That new center? Oh my goodness, you wouldn't believe the problems there are at that new center. I would love to come back."

If you've been supportive of them, and have an open-door policy, you will be able to welcome them back. That is a wonderful thing, when that happens.

Finally, just some key takeaways from today's session. These are the, "If you remember nothing else from this presentation, just look at this slide and remember these points." Hiring in desperation leads to poor hires, almost inevitably.

Someone leaves, we're no longer in ratio, "Oh my gosh, get someone in here, get a warm body in here, it doesn't matter." Obviously it happens. It does happen sometimes. You need someone.

But as much as possible, you want to try to avoid hiring...What is that old saying? "Marry in haste, repent in leisure," or something like that. It's the same of hiring. If you hire in haste, you're not going to get very good hires.

If you're always hiring, always looking, you've got this network that you can pull from when you need it, and you will just have a better pool of talent to draw from.

In general, the better your program, the better your talent you'll be able to attract and keep. It's unfortunate, but you're probably not going to be able to improve your program by just saying, "We'll hire a lot of great teachers."

Great teachers want to work for programs that are already great. You need to get the rest of your house in order before you start to really attract top teaching talent.

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You might get a few teachers who you catch early on in their careers who become your superstars, but just know that you're going to need a really good place for them to work, in order for them to want work for you.

Employee retention begins on day one. It's so important to remember, and it continues. You're never done with retention, you can never assume that, "Oh, she's been here for 20 years, we have nothing to worry about."

You always need to be retaining people. To go back to the marriage analogy, once you have that ring on your finger, we tend to relax, we tend to eat a little more, get a little sloppy. Ultimately, you need to always be, "Is my spouse happy? Am I happy?"

It's always a relationship you need to be working on, and improving. Don't get complacent, because that's when you turn your back, and you stop appreciating your great teachers. That is when they leave you.

Finally, and again you know this, happy, engaged teachers make your whole program better, and your retention efforts easier. They are the key to everything, and I hope today we've talked about a few things that can really help you create a great program, and a great retention-focused, hiring-staffing strategy.

Thank you so much for your time today. It's been a lot of fun, for me. If you have any questions you'd like to ask, or comments about this session, or you would like to just say, "Hi," I would love to hear from you.

My email address is right here, Jennifer@daycareindemand.com. As I mentioned, I'd be happy to send you a transcript of the session. Just go to this link here, daycareindemand.com/qualcon, and it will just ask you for your name and your email address.

Once you fill those in, you'll instantly get the transcript, and a few of my other goodies, as well as some references about hiring, and staffing, and sample cell phone policy. Some good stuff.

Thank you again for joining me today, and for joining us generally at the Quality Conference this year, and I hope to hear from you soon, and have a great day. Thanks very much.

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About Jennifer Carsen

Jennifer Carsen is a mom, child care marketing and 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**
- Polishing up (or writing from scratch) your **website** and your **ads**
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