

## Module 4

### Special Considerations for Child Care Professionals: How To Take Back Your Time (and Life)

Hello, everybody, welcome back. We're now in Module Four: Special Considerations for Child Care Professionals: How To Take Back Your Time and Your Life.

I'm really excited about this one, because I think there's a lot of tools here that you specifically are going to find very valuable. First rule for child care professionals, don't be the mom. I see this all the time with the centers I work with.

The director or whoever's in charge, and it tends to be a woman, just because there's a lot of women in childcare, is always being the mom. What I mean by this is, people are coming to this person with their personal problems, they want a shoulder to cry on, there's a lot of, "My coworker just told me this thing and I don't think it's very fair." Things like that.

Things that are more something a mom would be dealing with than a professional. It's hard, because childcare professionals are wonderful, compassionate, giving people. You want to give everything you can to your staff, and that's a great impulse.

The problem is when it spills past a normal work relationship and becomes unprofessional and takes a lot of your time. You're finding yourself negotiating as you would with the children at your center.

What I say is, it's very important to be compassionate, but professional. One of the best strategies for doing this is always bringing it back to the workplace. Let's say you've got an employee that comes to you: "My car broke down and my boyfriend left me and I don't know what to do." What you would say is, "Are you seeing that this is going to impact your ability to work this week's schedule?"

The employee might say, "Yes, and I don't know what to do." Then you say, "Well, we're going to figure out how to fix that." It doesn't mean, "I will come pick you up and bring you to school." You're going to be more creative than that. You do not want to start getting into taking care of your employees in this fashion. It's a slippery slope.

If your employee says, "I don't think it's going to mess up my work, but I'm just so sad." You gracefully say, "That's great. I'm glad to hear that you can be here and bring your best self to the kids at the center. We'll talk later." If you, especially, are used to being very embroiled in the details of your employees' personal lives, this might feel cold, it might feel unfeeling.

It's neither of those things. It's a matter of context. Even in these very family-like atmospheres, you need to maintain this level of professionalism. In addition to helping you have a better, more efficient center, it will free up a lot of your time. Employees will eventually learn.

Obviously, a genuine life tragedy, you're going to be a little more touchy-feely than you would otherwise, but the ebb and flow of everyday life, it is not your job to step in and try to be the mom. Set boundaries, this ties in with what I was just talking about. Set personal and

professional boundaries. Also, there's this little door here [in the slides]. You need closed-door time.

Depending on the administration of your center and your particular job, you might find that you need closed-door time with open hours as an exception, or you might have open-door time most of the time, with closed-door hours as this exception. Either way, regardless of your job, you need closed-door time to work on your big picture goals and get everything done – very important.

Literally, you need to say, “Unless the building is on fire, from noon to 1:30, I am not to be disturbed.” Your team knows that. Even better, if you can get out of the office, go to a local coffee shop, maybe work at home for a little bit. You just say, “I’m not here. Whatever it is, you all figure it out, and I’ll be happy to help you during open office hours, or when I’m back.” Those boundaries are very important. You will find yourself so productive when everybody learns that this is not a time you’re accessible to them.

Get your team a book. This is a great tip from Julie Bartkus, who is a child care consultant, like myself – I thought this was a wonderful idea, so I’m going to share it with you.

A lot of things come up during the day. “We need Mary’s take on this.” “What does Mary think about this?”

What you do is you get a book, a loose-leaf notebook, put it in a central place, maybe put it on a tether, so it doesn’t walk off. That is where your staff is to record things during the day, stuff that they need to remember to tell you about for whatever reason, but that isn’t necessarily urgent enough to be disturbing you all day.

As you know, in a child care center, every staff member, even if they have just one thing, “I’ve got to tell her this,” “I need a question answered,” that could easily eat up your whole day and then some. The book is a place where everybody writes this stuff down. It’s not like “the center’s on fire!” type level things, but just the stuff that comes up every day that people need feedback on: “Just an FYI...didn’t want to forget to tell you about...” write it in the book.

You, as the administrator or center director, you take one or two times during the day when you look through the book and you write little notes like, “OK, got it,” “Here’s the answer to your question.” You will find it eliminates a remarkable amount of back and forth of random interruptions in the middle of the day that disrupt your focus. It’s a very, very good tool. I recommend you try that at your center.

If you don’t like it, that’s fine, but I think you will find this is a very good way to streamline a lot of the everyday back and forth you’ve got with your team.

Relating to your team, trust them. Micromanagement means the death of good management, and your time. It can be hard, especially if you take pride in your work. You take pride in your center. You want everything to be just right.

You can't do it all yourself. Unless you're running a center in your home and you're the only person there (in which case, more power to you), you're going to need to delegate and learn to trust the people on your team. This doesn't mean letting people fend for themselves, not being there to support them, but it does mean, if you've got two staff members, you can say, "I trust you two to work this out and go do that."

It means when someone asks, "I'm wondering about the best way to integrate this new concept into our classroom. What do you think?", you respond, "Why don't you come up with a few ideas and we'll talk about them?" It means empowering your people to do their best work, to come up with great ideas on their own. Again, this frees up a lot of time if you're not involved in every little thing.

Clearly, there are some things you can and should be involved in, but a lot of the time, your staff will come up with these amazing ideas on their own. It's incredible, too, just like with children, the more trust and autonomy you give people, generally speaking, will rise to the occasion. Now, some of them will fall on their face, yes. That happens. But a lot of the time, the more you're able to trust somebody to do the right thing, they will do it.

They will astonish you. They will make you so proud. They just need this chance to show what they can do, so give them that. If you can't do this with your staff, probably, in a bigger picture sense, and this is a topic for another program, it probably means there's a problem with your hiring. You might have the wrong people in these jobs if you really can't trust them.

You shouldn't have people on your team you can't trust. I know sometimes, obviously, we've all made those hires in desperation, but generally speaking, if you can't trust somebody in your team to do their job, they should not be there.

Delegate. I mentioned this in the personal context, and in the work context, it's so important.

Let's say you're the center director. Does this – whatever it is – *have* to be done by you? *Should* it be done by you? Yes, you can do it very well, but even something like developing good processes for your center or taking over your center's social media, there might be people on your staff who are itching to expand their own skills in these areas, or who already have those skills.

Let them help you. Let them be part of your center's vision and what you're accomplishing by using their own unique skills and talents. This is so important – delegate, delegate, delegate. The more you delegate, it's one of those things, the more comfortable you get with it, the better you get at it. You'll develop a sense of what you can delegate and what you personally really need to hang onto.

Especially if you have this great staff, let it go. Most people love to be given more responsibility and feel like they're a really important part of the work of your center.

Empower your staff to problem-solve. This ties into some of the other stuff we've been talking about. *Empower your staff.* I can't say it enough. Not only does this make your life easier, it makes your center better.

The more ideas you have coming from more different sources, the stronger and more creative and more fun your center is going to be. Now bear in mind, if one of your staff has a real problem – “Alexa and Amy are fighting in the corner!” – it's not you saying, “Well, let the stronger teacher win.” It's not that. It's not ignoring people. It's not refusing to intervene when intervention is necessary.

But as much as possible, as we do with children: “I've got this problem, Mommy.” “Well, what do *you* think we should do about it?” See what they say. Oftentimes, all of us are inherently lazy. It's nice to be told what to do, to have our problems solved by someone else, but as much as possible, let your staff solve their own problems.

Nip gossip in the bud. This is always a big problem at childcare centers. If it's not a problem at yours, I applaud you. I think the problem is, a lot of the time, it's a lot of women working together, and not to stereotype, but I think it's safe to say that this does happen in a lot of all- or mostly-female workplaces. There's a lot of clucking and cheeping.

It's not productive. It's not professional. It's something you shouldn't tolerate. It eats up time, energy, and morale, and it requires more workplace administration. Managing gossip can be so time-consuming, I felt it was worth a mention here. It distracts you and your team from your big-picture goals. It eats up a lot of time managing this squabbling.

What you need to do as a leader is refuse to participate in it. That means when you hear something like, “She just told me that Julie said XYZ, and Julie said...”, your response should be, “It sounds like you need to talk to Julie about this.” End of story. That's all you need to do.

An important part, too, is, are *you* perpetuating any of the gossip yourself? Juicy gossip can be juicy and delicious and fun, but if you are participating in it in any way, shape, or form, you're sending a message to your staff that that's OK to do. Be sure that you, yourself, are not part of the problem. As soon as someone comes to you with gossip, you send them right back out. Refuse to play ball. You'll be amazed by doing just those two things alone, how quickly the gossip will go away if you don't give it any time or energy.

Learn the power of “No.” This is so important for everyone, but especially for people like you all, who are so giving with your time and your talents and your energy. Again, as we talked about earlier, it doesn't do anyone any favors if you string them along. It's not an indictment of the value of what they're asking you to do, but you've got to learn how to say your “no”s and to say them quickly and decisively and move along.

I can't stress this enough. If you don't learn how to do this, it's very hard to get control over your time, because when you say yes to everyone else's stuff, you necessarily have to say no to some of the things that are important to you. It's not worth it. This is something that can be honed over time.

Get used to saying, “Sorry, I just can’t do it.” People will understand. It might be hard for you, maybe more so than for them to hear it, but get used to saying “no.” We’ve got one module left in the course. I’m going to give you some additional resources, so I’ll be back with you shortly.

I’ll catch you in the next one. Thanks.