

Copyright © Exchange Press, Inc.
Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.
All rights reserved. Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com
or call (800) 221-2864.

Questions that Get You Great Teachers

by Jennifer Carsen

High-quality teachers who are a good fit with your program and who stay with you for the long haul can seem as elusive as the Loch Ness Monster. These teachers are worth their weight in gold in terms of the experience and continuity they bring to your program, as well as the peace of mind they bring to parents.

Unless you are very, very lucky, these teachers won't just show up at your doorstep by chance. You need to hire them — and the right hires start with the right interview questions.

The Pre-Interview

So you've posted your job opening, you've sorted through the applications, and you've identified a few candidates you're pretty excited about. The next step is to ask these people to come in for an interview, right? Wrong. Many applicants look good on paper, but don't hold up nearly as well in person. To save everyone's time — yours as well as the applicants' — make interviewing a two-step process, with the first interview scheduled as a 15-minute phone call.

Have the applicant call you rather than the other way around. That way, you can automatically eliminate anyone who calls in late (or not at all)! This may sound harsh, but anyone who isn't prompt and proactive about an initial phone interview — a time when she should be eager to impress — is not likely to be a superstar employee.

What should you ask during this pre-interview? This is a good time to gather more general information about the

applicant, clarify any questions you may have about her application or credentials, and get an overall sense of whether a second, in-person interview is warranted. At this stage, you want to be evaluating the applicant's poise and professionalism, too: Does this sound like a person you'd be comfortable having speak to current and prospective parents?

Good questions for the telephone pre-interview:

- **What first attracted you to this position?** Watch out for answers that are all about why the position is good for the applicant rather than what she can do for you.
- **Why are you leaving your current/previous position?** Beware applicants who badmouth former employers or supervisors.
- **Can you tell me about this gap in your resumé?** It's best to address potential red flags like this earlier, rather than later.
- **Do you have any questions for me about the position?** Again, watch out for self-serving questions ("How much time off will I get?"). Ideally, the applicant will have at least a few questions for you, and those questions will reveal that she has done some homework. For example, strong applicants will ask questions relating to something they saw on your website, rather than asking, "Do you have a website?"

The Main Event

Good news! Your applicant has cleared the telephone interview with flying colors, and you're excited to meet in person.

Child care centers can be hectic places, but in order to get the most out of the interview experience you must be prepared to focus on it 100%. Plan to have someone else answer the phone during your interviews, and be clear that you are not to be interrupted, except for an emergency. You need to be able to focus your full attention on the candi-



Jennifer Carsen is the founder of Daycare In Demand, which specializes in working with preschools and child care centers to grow their enrollments and attract/retain the very best teachers. She is a member of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Jennifer is a former employment lawyer who was

named a "Top 25 Online Influencer in Employment Law" by HR Examiner in 2012. She is a member of the New Hampshire Bar Association and the author of *HR How-to: Employee Retention* (CCH, 2005). Visit her website: www.daycareindemand.com.

date, and she, in turn, deserves a chance to shine. Additionally, even candidates who are accustomed to the hectic atmosphere of a busy child care center will be turned off by a constant stream of interruptions during a job interview; it makes you appear unprofessional.

If there's no way to guarantee an interruption-free interview at your center, hold it off-site — maybe at a nearby coffee shop. Then, if there is still mutual interest at the conclusion of the interview, bring the candidate over to your center for a tour. Note that the tour itself is a good opportunity to observe how the applicant interacts with both her prospective co-workers and the children at your center. Being comfortable with young children, and excited about spending time with them, is a skill that's very difficult to fake.

Additionally, promising applicants are polite and respectful to *everyone* they encounter during the interview — whether it's a parent, a teacher, a child, or even the vendor servicing your balky boiler. Curt or dismissive behavior directed towards someone the applicant perceives as unimportant (due to the person's lack of involvement in the hiring process) provides a revealing glimpse into her character.

Finally, if at all possible, have another administrator or master teacher present for the interviews. She will be able to ask questions you may not have thought of, and will also be able to provide an additional perspective after the interviews are over.

Depending on your management style and the formality level of your center, you may wish to conduct the interview seated in adjacent chairs, or across a low table, rather than on opposite sides of your desk. This can make the interview more relaxed and conversational, and applicants tend to open up more in this type of setting.

Interview Questions: The Good

Ultimately, the best interview questions help reveal both who the applicant really is, and how she would perform on the job. Always ask open-ended questions, rather than those with “yes” or “no” answers, and avoid leading questions where the correct answer is implied. For example, “How do you enjoy working in a close-knit team environment?” No candidate is going to respond, “I don't!” to that one.

... the right hires start with the right interview questions.

Some good questions:

■ Scenario-based:

“You’ve just heard one of the preschoolers tell a classmate that his dark skin is ‘dirty.’ How do you respond?” or “You strongly suspect a

child in your class may have autism and recommend an assessment to his parents, but they say he’s fine and that they don’t want to take the time away from work. What do you do?”

■ **What accomplishments are you most proud of in your life?** Everyone has something they can — and should — be proud of, and the best candidates will probably be able to talk about more than one thing.

■ **Where do you see yourself in five years?** There’s no single right answer to this question, but the answer is always illuminating. “I have no idea” is never a good answer. Neither is something like, “I see myself as a manager at a large corporation” if you’re looking for a long-term hire.

■ **What would your previous (or current) manager say your strengths and weaknesses are?** This one is illuminating as it requires an additional level of thinking beyond the candidate’s own self-assessment.

■ **What did you like most and least about your previous job?** The answer will reveal not only the applicant’s job and task preferences, but also her professionalism and level of diplomacy.

■ **How do you resolve personal conflicts at work?** Every job presents challenges in working with others. Strong applicants recognize this and will have developed strategies for effectively addressing — rather than avoiding — them.

Interview Questions: The Bad

The following sorts of questions don’t tend to elicit a lot of helpful information:

■ If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?

Whatever the applicant answers, it’s probably not going to tell you anything useful.

■ What's your favorite animal, and why?

If you're hoping for the applicant to reveal something about a desired characteristic ("I like mules because they're very tenacious!"), it's much better to ask about that characteristic directly. For example, "Tell me about a time in your previous work history when tenacity paid off for you.")

■ **What are your weaknesses?** Applicants have been conditioned to spin a negative into a positive here ("I'm a relentless perfectionist!"), so you're not going to get a truthful answer. No job applicant is going to volunteer info about his spending problem, or her procrastination.

■ **How do you feel about workplace gossip?** Again, even if she is an enthusiastic participant in workplace gossip, the applicant is not going to level with you on this one. Additionally, this type of question can make applicants worry that your workplace has a gossip problem — which will drive away the strongest candidates.

■ **Tell me about yourself.** This is too broad, and too vague to elicit the type of information you're seeking in an interview situation. Additionally, it opens the door wide for disclosures about the applicant that you're better off not knowing from a legal standpoint (more on this in the next section).

Interview Questions: The Ugly

Sometimes, especially in a people-oriented field like child care, interview chit-chat can wander into illegal territory. You should *always* avoid questions relating — even tangentially — to an applicant's marital status, religion, age, ethnicity, disability, or other protected characteristic:

- Are you married?
- Do you have kids?
- Do you attend church regularly?

... regardless of how great someone seems during the interview, resist the urge to offer the person the position right then and there. Sleep on it before making a final decision.

- Are you planning to start a family soon?
- Is your spouse supportive of the long commute you'll have if you work here?
- How old are you?
- When did you graduate from high school/college?
- Do you live with anyone?
- You have an interesting accent/last name. Where is your family from?

If you have a legitimate job-related concern, ask about it directly. For example, "We'd need you to rearrange the classroom furniture from time to time, and some of the tables weigh 25 pounds. Would you be able to do that?" is legally safe. "Do you have any physical disabilities?" is not.

Final Tips

It's important to ask all candidates the same questions, both so you are comparing apples with apples when reviewing your notes, and also to avoid any potential allegations of illegal bias down the line.

Keep detailed notes, but make sure that all of your notes are job-related. You never want to write down something like 'middle-aged Latina woman' or 'gay man,' even if it's just to help jog your memory about which candidate is which.

Ask all candidates for references, and be sure to actually check those references. While many former employers will play it safe and only confirm the dates of past employment — which itself can be valuable information — some will volunteer more. Always ask, "Would this candidate be eligible for re-hire with you?"

Finally, regardless of how great someone seems during the interview, resist the urge to offer the person the position right then and there. Sleep on it before making a final decision.