

Strategies for Preventing Teacher Burnout in Early Childhood Education

by Ellen M. Drolette

Burnout is prevalent in early care and learning programs. Children and families are showing up in early education programs vulnerable and needing more interventions than ever before. Teachers are learning to navigate big emotions, opioid addictions, or domestic violence within families, all while being paid meager wages, receiving few benefits, working second jobs and, at times, being treated with little respect. The turnover is high in early childhood education, and the work is tough. Those who stay in the field do so because of their dedication to children and families. They have an undeniable passion for the work they do.

These facts do not change the compassion fatigue, burnout and depression that run rampant in the early childhood field.

This is not a regional problem; it is global. At the World Forum on Early Care and Education in April 2019, Rhian Evans Allvin, chief executive officer of The National Association for the Education of Young Children, and Swati Popat Vats, president of the Early Childhood Association in India, spoke about some of the challenges of being an early educator. In the United States, we are at the same crossroads as India.

“Teaching is not considered one of the most sought-after careers in India; hence the primary challenge is to raise the status of teaching as a career choice,” Vats said. Both speakers reiterated the urgency by saying, “It is time to bring positive changes to workforce issues globally. As a child in India, or the United States, as a world citizen, lack of quality will affect all of us, by reducing the quality of learners and humans that we are inadequately nurturing in the world.”

Children deserve the best start in life with teachers who are well compensated, respected and consistent in their

workplace. Children deserve security and safety each day.

Self-Care

Self-care is a practice. Just like a yogi practices their routine and a National Football League great like Tom Brady eats, drinks and practices football to be the “greatest of all time,” so must an early childhood educator care for his or herself. Self-care is not about making time for a shower without children barging in or getting a massage once a year. Preventing burnout begins with creating lasting strategies. Focusing on some key strategies and making simple plans in each of the following areas will help in designing approaches to tackling burnout. Deep, thoughtful, intentional self-care is in fact self-preservation for a professional in our field.

Attitude

“Attitudes are contagious; is yours infectious and worth catching?”
—Author Unknown

Attitude has a direct impact on everyone on the team. I went through a period of struggling with Mondays. I would get the Sunday blues really



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bad and I was starting every Monday on empty. I am sure the children felt it, and it was not fair to them. It took a life coach talking me through what I wanted to feel, to help me realize what I was doing to myself. I was not at my best. You cannot show up to your job with your personal gas tank on empty.

When I am at my best, the children are at their best.

I often remind educators I am working with, that we can only be responsible for our attitude and mood. Everyone else is responsible for theirs. Knowing this takes the pressure off of having to be the sunshine committee for an entire school, center or program. Having a good attitude is contagious.

Additional strategies for changing your attitude that have worked for me include using an essential oil dispenser or getting outside. Taking a walk in the woods is a natural mood enhancer. It does not have to be a 25-minute power walk. Take five minutes at the end of the day and go into the woods and just be. When babies are cranky, sometimes putting them in a tub, a pool or a lake cheers them instantly. Guess what? It works for adults too.

Play

For some, the idea of play as an adult seems a bit absurd. After presenting at the 2019 World Forum, I was reminded that while the concept of play comes easy when sitting on the floor with children, it is not easy for teachers to do something fun for themselves. The idea persists that, if we are not overworking, stressed out and fatigued, we are doing something wrong.

Two women stand out in my mind, one from Iran and one from China. Both came up after the session on Sustainable Selves with tears and hugs.

One said, "I have been so rigid with my staff for so long, I need to change."

The other said, "I have been working so hard and needed this. I need to 'work more play' into my life."

As early educators, we stress the importance of play for children. How about play for adults? It is essential. What brings you joy? What brings you laughter? When was the last time you danced? Sang? Stuart Brown, the author of "Play," says, "Far from standing in opposition to each other, play and work are mutually supportive. They are not at opposite ends of our world. They are more like timbers that keep our house from collapsing down on top of us" (Brown, 2009).

Using segments of staff meeting time or network meetings to play board games, toss a beach ball, have a dance party or sing karaoke can change the tone of a meeting within minutes. Just a few minutes of laughter and the brain opens up and is ready to take in information.

Remind your co-workers and peers that they need to fill their proverbial cups, in order to have enough joy to give to children and families. Finding what makes them truly happy outside of work can also be a natural strategy for preventing burnout. For some people this is playing golf, watching live music, sitting by the lake and drinking coffee or taking a hike in the woods. Whatever it is, find it and do more of it.

Environment

A cluttered, overstimulated environment is a lot for children. Guess what? It can be a lot for adults too. If you are unhappy with the setting that you spend ten hours a day in, change it. What are calming colors? What quotes or photos motivate you that you can add to your space as a reminder of the vital work you do. Remember that less is more.

Children do not like clutter any more than you do. Looking at challenging behaviors in relationship to space is extremely important when it comes to young children. It is as essential for you as the caregiver to find the same joy in the space as children do; it has to be aesthetically pleasing to both children and adults.

Using Pinterest can be a helpful way to decide what you want to achieve and families can be an excellent resource for collecting items needed to create the space you have always wanted. Do not be afraid to get rid of stuff that is cluttering the space. Think about the material you are holding on to and if you have enough space to keep it. As an ECE professional myself, I know how quickly this gets out of hand. Collecting loose parts and recyclable materials will allow you to use them and get rid of them without guilt.

Optimism and Positivity

"A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an opportunist sees the opportunity in every difficulty."
—Winston Churchill

How does one create an optimistic, positive work environment? The idea of positivity and optimism does not have to be over the top so that everyone is driven crazy. It is at its core an understanding that life gets hard and things can get rough but there is still a lot of good in the world. There is always something to be grateful for. When we are struggling in our daily work, finding a few gratitudes each day and writing them down, no matter how small, can make a world of difference. Over time this practice becomes more natural, and there will be more to feel gratitude for. Gratitude isn't easy when you are in a negative place, but after some time you will find the good in every day. When you are down in the dumps,

being grateful is the absolute last thing you want to do, but it is the most important thing to do.

My mom warned me in my teen years about the vampires I seemed to be attracted too. I somehow found people who knew I would listen to them, and they would pour their hearts out to me, leaving me feeling exhausted and drained. The vampires were the people in my life who were “fun suckers.” They would suck me dry of my energy and positivity with their suffering and negativity.

Another friend of mine would say, “They invite you into their house of suffering so you can help them redecorate.” It is not that you cannot be a listener; it is about finding the positive and holding it tight.

Find your tribe. The people who fill you up with joy. The tribe that encourages you is the tribe you want to surround yourself. The tribe that congratulates you, celebrates you and holds space for you when needed. THAT is your tribe.

Use Your Voice

“When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful.”
—Malala Yousafzai

Change in the early childhood field is imminent. Transformation is hard; a lot of people struggle with change and some just float through it with no problem. We have a choice about how to deal with it. We can let it happen or we can have a voice in it. Systems are hard to understand. Ask questions. Figure out who the players are, hold legislative forums, create opportunities for involvement, find your local affiliate association and see what opportunities there are for you. Reach out by sending a simple email to an organization to ask about involvement. Getting involved in advocacy can give a person higher

purpose and meaning for the work they do.

Your stories about children, families and yourself are what transforms systems. Policymakers need to hear these stories in your voice. Do not underestimate the power of knowledge and experience.

Mental Health

It would be downright irresponsible if I did not mention the importance of mental health and the role it plays in the work of early childhood educators. There should be no stigma in discussing it with colleagues. Mental health struggles are our reality.

Secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, anxiety and depression are widespread in our community of early childhood workers. According to the World Health Organization, fewer than 50 percent of people living with depression globally are being treated (Koskie, 2018). Depression affects people of all backgrounds and ages regardless of socioeconomic status. In 2014, Child Trends wrote, “Early childhood educators must be well to do well.”

Early childhood educators suffer disproportionately from poor mental and physical health (NHSA Report, 2016). Bottom line, we must do better. Recognizing and understanding the statistics will help the stigma fade.

“Adults who are well, physically and mentally, are likely to have an easier time engaging in such relationships than adults who are struggling with chronic illness, such as depression. Thus, it is critical that we pay attention to, invest in, and be compassionate about the well-being of the adults who provide early care and education. Create space for coworkers to address mental health needs” (Gooze, 2014).

If you are struggling and need a place to turn, the following website provides resources: <https://www.healthyplace.com/other-info/resources/mental-health-hotline-numbers-and-referral-resources>.

Boundaries

“It’s not what you achieve; it’s what you overcome. That’s what defines your career.” – Carlton Fisk

Lastly and most importantly, setting boundaries and developing the ability to say no are two strategies that need to be practiced regularly in ECE. As early educators, we are people pleasers. We are helpful and flexible, sometimes at the expense of our self-care or time with family. It is vital that we create guidelines for how many nights a week or weekends will be committed to work, professional development or additional hours covering for other people. Make sure that saying yes to extra commitments, committees and boards of directors is genuinely filling you up and not poking holes in your cup. Making time to go to the gym, be with your own family and do the activities that you enjoy are as important as work time.

There is no hard and fast solution to curing burnout. There are strategies. Strategies take practice, trial and error, and digging deep toward self-reflection. Rediscovering your “why” in the work you do can be difficult, but it also can be a rewarding journey.



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