Who's Minding the Child Care Workers?:
A Look at Staff Burn-out

by Marcy Whitebook, Carollee Howes, Rory Darrah and Jane Friedman

According to the National Day Care Study, which investigated quality and cost in child care centers in the United States, about 40 percent of the approximately 200,000 day care workers earn close to or less than the minimum wage, despite their considerable training and education. The turnover rate at most centers is 15 to 20 percent a year—a rate which exceeds the national average of 10 percent for most workers in human services fields. This annual exit of many trained and committed workers—primarily women under 40, about a third of whom are ethnic minorities—gnaws away at the morale of those left behind.

Burn-out, the phenomenon whereby an energetic staff person loses interest in her or his work and becomes likely to quit, is currently the focus of much debate in child care circles.

The conditions leading to burn-out tend to be viewed from three different perspectives. J. Freudenerberger and M. Mattingly suggest that it is the nature of the work itself that produces the condition: the necessarily intensive interaction between adult and child is thought to become more draining and less gratifying over time. Thus, one solution to burn-out involves diversifying the type of work people in centers perform so that there are breaks from constant direct work with children.

Freudenberger, M. Reed and B. Sutton contend that those who enter the field have personality types which lead them to burn out: staff members are seen as people with unconscious needs to come to terms with their own troubled childhood experiences and, when unsuccessful, they "burn out." A variation of this view suggests that those who engage in this work are idealistic and highly motivated to improve conditions for young children, but they "burn out" because they do not have a realistic sense of their own ability to create positive change. The cure based on this second perspective involves a new emphasis on self-awareness in training programs.

Finally, in identifying factors that may be influential in causing or alleviating burn-out, C. Maslach and A. Pines found that lower ratios of adults to children, more dependable breaks, the availability of substitutes and better communication among staff members can positively affect workers' experience and, therefore, their ability to perform the job with less stress.

Although all of these views contribute to an understanding of burn-out, we believe that these explanations are insufficient. Our experiences as child care workers suggest that the working conditions—particularly low pay, lack of benefits and unpaid overtime—contribute significantly to workers' job dissatisfac-
tion. Furthermore, working conditions in most occupations are closely tied to one’s job title as well as to the program’s source of funding. In this light, we wondered whether burn-out and turnover occur at different rates among staff at different levels and at different centers.

The little information available on child care staffs has frequently been based on information gleaned through observation; we have little direct knowledge of the experience and perceptions of those who actually do the work. To explore how child care workers themselves understand their work experience and the burn-out problem, we interviewed 95 staff members of full- and half-day programs in 32 of San Francisco's 165 child care centers.

The study centers were randomly selected and included public programs (those run by the school district as well as Head Start and others receiving public funds) and private centers, both non-profit and proprietary.

The interviews, which were conducted by phone in 1978 and 1979, consisted of open-ended questions and scaled items. The latter were used to obtain information about staff members’ training, experience and education; job responsibilities; wages, hours of paid and unpaid work and benefits; and the center structure, including the adult to child ratio, breaks, policy on substitutes, frequency of staff meetings and the topics discussed, and the decision making process.

Open-ended questions sought to determine the sources of tension and satisfaction, the frequency of and reasons for turnover and the changes staff members would like to see made in their centers. Information about budgets and funding sources was solicited from the center administrators.

Study Results

One-third of the staff members interviewed were head teacher/directors, one-third were teachers and another third, aides or teaching assistants. Although the head teacher/directors performed some administrative functions, all spent considerable time with children. Eighty-nine percent were women and half of those interviewed were members of ethnic minorities, most of whom held positions as aides or assistants.

Compared to the national average, the day care workers in our study were very highly educated. The National Day Care Study found that 54 percent of child care workers had completed some post-secondary education. However, among those we interviewed, 96 percent had completed some college work. Seventy percent had earned bachelor's degrees, with 45 percent completing some additional coursework, and 17 percent held master's degrees.

Those in our sample had also accumulated extensive work experience. Seventy percent had worked in the child care field for three years or more, and more than half (56 percent) had five years' experience or more.

Wages, Benefits and Hours

According to the National Day Care Study, average annual wages for child care workers

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head teachers and teacher's aides in 1978 were $7,180 and $4,940, respectively, for full-time work. We had predicted that those in our sample would earn more than the national average both because of their high level of experience and education and because they were from an urban California community, a setting known for public financial support for child care.

While our data did reveal wages higher than the national average, the workers in our study still placed among the lower 10 percent of adult wage earners. Nearly 30 percent had gross monthly incomes of $500 or less, about 32 percent earned between $500 and $800 a month, and only 14 percent had gross earnings of over $1,000 a month.

The centers' funding source and staff members' job classification emerged as the basis for wage differentials in our sample. Staff members in private centers were most likely to earn the lowest wages and although those working in publicly funded programs had higher wages, staff in public school centers were the only ones to net over $800 a month. Through unionization, staff members classified as teachers had won parity in pay and benefits with elementary school teachers. These public school employees were the only unionized employees in our sample and are among the few currently unionized child care personnel nationwide.

Aides consistently earned less than those classified as teachers and head teachers/directors. (Two-thirds of aides and teaching assistants earned $500 a month or less, compared to about a quarter of teachers and head teachers/directors.) Although aides had less formal education than other staff, their own educational levels (88 percent had taken some college courses) were considerably higher than the national average. In this light, their low wages are particularly striking.

Wages were further reduced by the recurring and informal process of workers in all positions personally purchasing supplies for their centers. Sixty percent contributed as much as $10 each month of their own money for supplies because of the inadequate budgets in their centers.

Staff members in publicly funded centers were more likely to receive medical coverage, and they also received more paid holidays and sick days and longer paid vacations than those in private (particularly proprietary) centers. In our sample, about half received no medical coverage and 16 percent had no paid sick leave. Staff members with the lowest wages—those working in private centers and aides—received the fewest benefits.

Low pay and minimal benefits were not compensated for by a relatively short work week. On the contrary, the majority (63 percent) of the staff members in our sample worked several hours each week without pay in addition to their full-time jobs. Unpaid hours involved curriculum planning and preparation, meetings, parent contacts and general center maintenance. Almost half received no compensation for extra hours worked.

Responsibilities

Although job titles did reflect differences in pay benefits and educational level, they indicated little about the types of tasks performed by staff members of different rank. Head teachers/directors, teachers and aides all engaged in the same range of duties: curriculum planning and implementation, meal preparation, center maintenance, communication with parents and clerical and administrative tasks. The only difference was that the head teacher/directors spent more time talking with parents and performing clerical and administrative work.

All teaching staff members had limited input and involvement in major policy decisions, such as hiring, firing and budget allocation. Only 18 percent of those interviewed said that they were included in major decision making, and over half expressed dissatisfaction with their center's hierarchical policy structure.
Job Satisfaction

Intense personal contact with children and adults—the essence of child care work—has been claimed to fuel the turnover rate in the field. In contrast to this assertion, 78 percent of those we interviewed reported that it was aspects of the direct work with children which most engaged and pleased them about their jobs—immediate feedback, physical contact with children, facilitating and observing a child's growth, and related opportunities for self reflection. Other sources of job satisfaction included relationships with other staff members (learning how to communicate with and depend on each other), autonomy and flexibility ("no two days are alike") and the opportunity to learn and grow on the job.

When asked to state what they liked least about their jobs and to identify sources of tension in their work, low pay and unpaid hours were cited. Staff-child ratio, hours of direct work with children, breaks, mechanisms for input and flexibility of center structure were also all correlated with staff members’ perception of job dissatisfaction.

Although by law California workers are entitled to a 15-minute paid break for every four hours of work, more than a third (37 percent) of those in our study did not receive it. Moreover, 38 percent of those who did receive breaks found them inadequate because there was too limited a staff to cover them.

The National Day Care Study recommended acceptable enrollment-based adult-child ratios ranging from 1 to 8 to 1 to 10. Although two-thirds of the staff members in our sample worked in centers with adult-child ratios of less than 1 to 10, 57 percent felt that their center ratio only occasionally allowed for individual work with children. Seventy-eight percent of proprietary centers in our sample had ratios of over 1 to 10—and the fact that staff members in these centers were mostly likely to perceive children as a source of tension may be linked to their higher adult-child ratios.

Other less pressing reasons were mentioned as contributing to job dissatisfaction. Cleaning, washing dishes and food preparation were noted as distasteful aspects of maintenance work, and while staff relations were also cited as a source of satisfaction, close working conditions sometimes served to exacerbate differences in educational philosophy and/or personal values.

Workers in private centers were more likely than those in public programs to feel some tension on their jobs, and full-day program staff were more likely than half-day staff to say that they experienced tension. Head teacher/directors, who were more likely than aides or teachers to say that they felt tension, tended to mention the diversity of their responsibilities as the source—a factor which suggests that stress may be tied to the additional tasks that accompany increased authority. Finally, in many cases, the pay and benefits of head teacher/directors were not significantly higher than those of other staff members, although they often had more training. Thus, their tensions may also reflect conflict about career expectations.

Job Security and Turnover

Staff members in our study tended to switch centers often. At the time of the interviews, 37 percent had been at their current jobs for a year or less and 30 percent for one to three years.

Differences in turnover rates appear to be correlated with job structure and working conditions. Part-time program staff members—those with higher wages, better adult-child ratios and less intense work environments—had the lowest turnover rates, while the rates were highest for staff in proprietary centers—those with the highest adult-child ratios, the worst working conditions, fewest benefits and most stated tension.

Staff members most frequently cited underpayment as the cause of staff turnover. Lack of mobility within the field was also noted; 58 percent felt there was no opportunity for advancement in their jobs. Given the lack of opportunity for securing better jobs in the field, it is hardly surprising that 20 percent of those interviewed said that they expected to leave child care work in the next year. Only a quarter saw themselves as making a lifetime commitment to work in the field, despite their education and training in this area. Finally, cutbacks or threats of layoffs coupled with high unemployment were seen as undermining their ability to stay at any one job or in their field.

Conclusions

The results of this study confirm the commonly held assumption that child care staff are underpaid and overworked. Furthermore, the study clarified the significance of differences with respect to working conditions and job satisfaction, job title, center funding source and length of program day. Our data also suggest that the high turnover and burn-out rates among child care personnel are closely tied to stressful working conditions. In other words, the results suggest a new understanding of how an enthusiastic worker gradually loses his or her eagerness and becomes fatigued, irritable and likely to quit.

We recognize burn-out as a complex process influenced by the interplay of many factors, including the intense nature of the work, the needs of those attracted to the field and the specific structure of child care centers. Our research indicates, however, that burn-out is less an intrinsic element of the child care worker's personality or activity than a function of the context in which the work itself is performed. By context we include not only the particular structure of a given institution but also the larger social forces—available money, re-
sources and prevailing attitudes toward programs and caretakers—that affect institutional policy.

We are not suggesting that higher wages, more benefits and better adult-child ratios alone will eliminate burn-out and turnover in the field. But in view of our findings and experience, we suggest that working conditions is the area in which to begin making changes.

Many agree that working conditions need to be improved but argue that improvements are not possible in times of economic recession. We believe that, given limited resources, it is necessary to differentiate between those changes that can be made in working conditions which demand immediate funds and those which do not. The following suggestions are made with the acknowledgment that more money is both needed and difficult to obtain.

Changes Within Centers

Previously noted studies of burn-out in child care have included valuable suggestions for changes. Among them are the introduction of a greater variety of tasks, reduction of the number of hours working directly with children, increased vehicles for peer support and communication among staff members and the establishment of small “familial groups” within larger centers. Three additional suggestions emerge from our survey:

- **Increased Staff Involvement in Decision-Making.** Staffs with more input and involvement in decision making appear to be more satisfied with their jobs. Methods should be developed to involve staff members in policy making and in such decisions as hiring. An ongoing evaluation process to assess staff and administration and to inform administrators of the implications of their decisions is also needed. A well-functioning grievance policy written into staff contracts is basic to developing this involvement. However, lower level staff members must be guaranteed “immunity” when sharing their ideas, reactions and grievances.

- **Job Title Distinctions.** Much tension in centers revolves around conflicts over distinctions in title and pay without equal distinction in the actual work performed. Centers should re-examine their structures and title assignments. Are the distinctions based on differences in skill and experience? Or do they reflect the lack of mobility in a field which values on-the-job training and is unable to offer upward mobility in terms of pay? Open examination of these questions may spark ideas about how to equalize limited resources and implement job definitions based on skill and experience. It will also allow for shared recognition of inequities.

- **Break and Substitute Policy.** Attitudes of staff and administration can greatly affect a center’s policy regarding the use of breaks and substitutes. For example, many may feel that the need to stay home “with only a cold” is a sign of weakness or lack of commitment. Acknowledgement of the value of breaks on the job and staying home when ill can lead to greater cooperation between staff and administration. Slight adjustments in scheduling can enable workers to have 15-minute respites; a substitute policy agreed upon by all staff members—one which does not leave arrangements to the sick staff member or the person on the floor—is another useful step.

Changes Beyond the Center

Currently there are only two methods of increasing child care resources: charging parents more money or cutting center costs. The former approach does not take into account the fact that many women pay almost as much for child care as they earn—and the latter approach runs up against a “Catch 22.” Currently, 70 to 90 percent of center budgets is spent on salaries. The only real method of saving money, cutting salaries, would defeat the purpose of obtaining the money—that is, to increase salaries and benefits to help deal with the problem of burn-out. Thus, to meet the needs of child care staff for a decent income and of parents for affordable services, either government or industry will have to bear its share of the costs.10

Obtaining increased financial support will require changing the prevailing view that child care is unskilled work and enhancing public appreciation of it. As long as child care work is considered unskilled, this will be reflected in its pay and status.

Thus, already overworked child care staff members must join together to inform the public about their work’s value and the level of skill required. This involves informing legislators and policymakers of work conditions and defining the minimum employment standards that need to be included in future legislation and guides for establishing centers. It requires pressuring organizations which represent child care workers, like the National Association for the Education of Young Children, to focus more of their resources on working conditions. Finally, organizations might be created to help workers share ideas about break and substitute policies, contracts and health insurance, and to offer workers support.

Amelioration of the situation which leads to burn-out requires changes within centers and in the broader community. Tackling burn-out by reassessing a center’s existing organization can be time-consuming and initially awkward. But such a process can also have the effect of energizing staff and improving work relations by helping workers see that they are not personally responsible for their unsatisfactory working conditions. It can be a valuable beginning in addressing the larger tasks which face the field: publicizing and legitimizing child care work and allocating to it the social and financial resources it needs and deserves.

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3 The three views are presented, in simplified form, in Child Care Quarterly.


Detailed information on statistical analyses may be obtained from The Child Care Staff Education Project, P.O. Box 5603, Berkeley, Calif. 94705.

U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics: Employment Perspective: Working Women, Report No. 574, No. 2, Second Quarter, 1979. San Francisco has one of the highest standards of living in the country, which suggests that higher wages may be less a reflection of high educational and experience levels and more a result of regional salary schedules.

Regrettably, since the completion of our interviews, there has been a tremendous change in the situation of public school child care staff in San Francisco. Proposition 13 resulted in many layoffs of those classified as teachers. Some teachers have been replaced by aides who earn $3.84 an hour with no benefits. Some of the laid-off teachers have been rehired for their former jobs as aides.

Additional information about unionization and child care may be obtained from Boston Area Day Care Workers United (BADWU), 77 Turner St., Brighton, Mass. 02135.

Parents and Workers United for Child Care, Who Cares for the Children?, a slideshow available through St. Patrick’s Day Care Center, 366 Clementina St., San Francisco, Calif. 94103.

Proprietary centers typically spend between 50 to 60 percent of their budget on salaries. One center in our sample allotted 25 percent of its $100,000 budget to salaries; the owners’ share of the profit was 36 percent of the budget.