

A Good Sub is Hard to Find: Establishing a Substitute Referral System

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Child Care Employee Project

Finding and keeping good substitute child care workers is a problem that touches everyone in the field: teachers, administrators, resource and referral workers, and of course, the subs themselves. This article is addressed to all these groups in the hope that coordinated efforts can lead to better practices and new solutions. Below, you will find information on what's causing the substitute "crisis" and how community agencies around the country are responding.

The Problem

It's 6:30 in the morning and two teachers have called in sick. Next week, another teacher will go on vacation and still another has given notice that she will be leaving the job in thirty days. Next to the phone, a list of possible substitutes is taped to the wall, but you've already called six of them: three have found permanent teaching jobs, one is already substituting elsewhere for the next two weeks, and two have moved out of town. What next — short of abandoning child care and moving out of town yourself?

Child care programs throughout the country report that their problems in finding reliable substitutes are increasing. In many areas the lack of substitutes is the most visible sign of a larger problem: a steadily worsening shortage of trained teachers.

Directors speak of job openings that remain vacant for months, and of spending unreasonable amounts of time and energy locating substitutes or subbing in the classroom themselves.

Teachers hesitate to stay home from work because of illness, convincing themselves that they are really "not that sick." They feel pressured to work extra hours to cover for absent co-workers and are drained by the constant need to orient and train one new co-worker after another.

Substitutes, for their part, often feel under-recognized and unwelcome (as well as underpaid). At a recent meeting in Oakland, California, an after-school teacher/director admitted that, "A lot of subs just won't come back. I don't have

the time to orient them when they come in; I need them to be there with the kids right away. Often they walk out of here in a daze, like they're thinking, 'What happened this afternoon?'"

Apart from the obvious cost of paying substitutes an hourly wage, centers pay enormous "hidden costs" for substitute care which are not calculated in creating a "sub budget."

Consider:

- The number of hours the administrator or other staff members spend looking for subs each month or year, or subbing themselves instead of doing their regular jobs.
- The number of staff days per year for which subs are hired; the cost of paying a staff member for working overtime when no sub can be found.
- The cumulative and disorienting effect on both children and parents.
- The drain of energy and resources which caregivers could so much better devote to children — and to each other.

This article is excerpted from the booklet A Good Sub is Hard to Find. To order copies please write: Child Care Employee Project, P.O. Box 5603, Berkeley, CA 94705.

What's causing the teacher and substitute shortage? Several trends at once:

Child Care Expansion

The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts a growth rate for preschool teachers in the coming decade of 37.9% to 43.9%, compared to a total projected labor force growth of 23% to 28%. As birth rates rise and mothers continue to enter the workforce, the demand for child care can be expected to keep increasing. So can the competition among programs for trained, qualified teachers.

Turnover

Studies conducted by the Child Care Employee Project and local groups across the country have found teacher turnover rates (the number of staff leaving their jobs) ranging from 15% to 30% a year. *In 1985 the Child Care Information Service of NAEYC estimated that, "Between 1980 and 1990, 42% of all child care workers in educational and service positions . . . will need to be replaced each year, just to maintain the current supply of child care providers. These rates are more than double the average replacement rate of 19.4% for all occupations. Low pay, lack of benefits, and stressful working conditions are the major reasons child care providers leave their jobs in such high numbers", (NAEYC, 1986).*

A recent Bureau of Labor Statistics study ranked child care among the ten job categories with the highest turnover in the nation; dishwashers, peddlers, and gas station attendants shared the top "honors."

Shortage of Elementary School Teachers

School enrollment is on the rise at a time when more than half the nation's teachers are approaching retirement age. Cutbacks in recent years have eliminated many younger teachers from the profession, and the current low wages and low professional status of the education field leads college stu-

dents to prepare for more lucrative careers.

Nationwide, the average *starting* salary for public school teachers was \$14,500 in 1984, more than many child care teachers earn after years on the job (NAEYC, 1986). Public school jobs, therefore, are an attractive option for early childhood staff with bachelors degrees and/or credentials, creating a further drain on the pool of trained personnel available to work in child care programs.

Low Pay

If child care providers typically make an annual wage at or below poverty level, substitute providers are on an even lower rung. In the San Francisco Bay area, the average sub pay is about \$5 an hour — a wage most temporary clerical or domestic workers would consider unacceptable — but in many areas of the country the average is much lower.

A resource and referral worker in Iowa says she tells subs to expect "minimum wage and little more." A substitute child care program in Pennsylvania asks potential subs for five references, conducts a standard interview of up to fifteen questions ("What strengths would you bring to the position?", "What is the most important ingredient in working with children?") — then asks, "Are you willing to work for \$3.35 an hour?"

Lack of Training

In most parts of the country, where unemployment rates are high, the problem is not so much a shortage of workers as a shortage of *trained* workers. Child care programs themselves typically have few resources to train substitutes; as we have noted, subs often do not receive even the basic orientation they need to get their bearings.

Many programs rely on their local child care resource and referral agency or another community group for a current pool of substitutes, but feel frustrated by the minimal child care training — or even screening — subs undergo before entering this pool. In the

last-minute desperation to find a sub, inadequately trained people are often hired sight unseen, tried once, and rejected.

If even a minimal training program were available, many subs could be better prepared for the job. They might even be motivated to pursue child care as a career option instead of giving up in frustration.

Establishing a Substitute Referral System

How are communities coping with the shortage of substitutes? In order to study the situation and to generate new approaches, the Child Care Employee Project interviewed dozens of people around the country who have been tackling the problem in various ways — resource and referral staff members, teachers and subs, consultants and trainers. We talked to people who are just now establishing a substitute system in their area, and others who have had a system in place for years; people who feel their current arrangement works well, and others who are dissatisfied and experimenting with new approaches.

Recruiting and Advertising

When you undertake a recruitment effort, begin by targeting all the groups who may be interested and identify how best to reach them. Consider students, parents of young children who may want only part-time or occasional work, retired seniors, and job training program participants. Where can these groups be found? Where do they gather, work, or shop? What newsletters or newspapers do they read? What other agencies serve them? What are the best times of year to reach them?

The most important step is to make and maintain personal contacts with agencies, colleges, and other institutions. For example, you can alert a great number of students to substitute work if you arrange to include information in their fall registration packets.

Most groups coordinating a substitute program find that they need to advertise regularly to keep the system going. Even a program that has been active for years can dwindle if outreach efforts slacken.



Michael Schulman

Although the **Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts**, had been producing a monthly substitute teacher list for about ten years, by the summer of 1985 the number of listings for subs had shrunk to less than ten per month. CCRC sent flyers and information packets to every college student placement office, vocational training program, senior citizen group, and community agency in the Boston area. CCRC also placed ads in neighborhood and student newspapers, which were less costly than city papers and produced better results. After this increased outreach effort throughout the fall, CCRC's list now includes more than twenty subs per month and continues to grow.

It's important to make sure that you are reaching all the major sources of potential subs in your community, using every possible means of low-cost advertising at your disposal. Don't be afraid to advertise — it may cost less than you expect. **Child Care Connections**, a new resource and referral agency in **Boise, Idaho**, has obtained free ongoing space in the Boise newspaper to publicize its substitute placement and other services. Check with

your local newspapers, radio, and TV stations about the possibility of free advertising, calendar listings, and public service announcements.

Screening and Interviewing

Substitute programs vary widely in the amount of screening and interviewing they conduct before referring subs to child care programs. Most referral programs disclaim any liability for sub placement. Instead they offer a centralized service that saves child care centers a few steps without eliminating the necessity of carefully checking potential employees. Child care providers, on the other hand, are often unable to screen a sub carefully when they need someone to cover a classroom right away. Hence, many communities feel a conflict over where the role of screening lies: within each child care program, or at a community agency level. Centers feel rushed and needy; referral workers are reluctant to become employment agencies.

Whatever level of screening they conduct, most substitute referral programs have developed an application form — the simpler, the better — to elicit basic information about a sub-

stitute's experience and work preferences. Applications should include:

- education level
- experience with children (which age groups, what kinds of settings, how many months or years, which age groups preferred)
- special interests or skills (music, sports, other languages spoken)
- when and where available for work (which time shifts, limits on transportation)
- recent employment or experience
- names, addresses, and phone numbers of two or three references, preferably those who have seen the applicant's work with children

Many cities and states — especially in the wake of recent accusations of child abuse in child care programs — also require fingerprinting or criminal background checks. Although the practical value of such safeguards is extremely limited, substitute referral programs can save child care centers valuable time by gathering this kind of information centrally, if it is required by law. Medical exams and TB tests may also be required by law in your state, and again, the referral program can save centers time and assist potential subs by researching where to secure these services easily and cheaply.

Frequently an application form and any required criminal and health checks are all the substitute program collects before placing subs on its availability list. Child care providers are then completely responsible for interviewing the sub and checking references.

Some sub programs, however, have become dissatisfied with this minimum approach and have started to screen subs more thoroughly before referring them to centers, largely because of complaints from child care providers and concern about safeguarding the quality of care. The **Child Care Resource Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts**, now interviews applicants and checks their references. CCRC has found that people who are inappropriate for subbing tend to "screen themselves out" by not following through on all the required steps.

Such interviews should be brief and simple; this is not the time to ask the soul-searching questions you might

pose for a permanent position. **Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) in Rochester, Minnesota**, for example, typically asks substitutes two questions in a group interview: "What kinds of things do you like to do with children?" and "How do you handle misbehavior?" CCRR also invites several directors at a time to meet a similar number of potential subs. This group screening helps subs to get more information about "what they're getting into" as well as providing directors with an unpressured screening mechanism.

One of CCRR's special features is its recruitment and training budget, supported by parent fees for child care referral and fees for community training sessions (\$2.50 per training hour). This allows CCRR to pay potential subs, after an initial interview, either \$10 for a three-hour visit to a day care center or a family day care home, or \$20 for both. The provider then sends an evaluation of the sub to CCRR so that other providers will know that, at the very least, some concrete, on-the-job screening has taken place. Although \$10 is low pay for a three-hour visit, it's a great improvement over the unpaid initial visits that many programs ask subs to make.

Training

All of us in child care know that money and resources for training are scarce. Yet sub programs around the country have developed some low-cost models. Following are some examples:

Child Action, Inc. in Sacramento, California, combines screening of applicants with some basic training. Every two months, using guest presenters from the local Infant/Toddler Network and other provider groups, Child Action conducts a three-hour training and screening session to provide basic information on health and safety, first aid, child development,

and practical suggestions for classroom activities. Each applicant is then briefly interviewed (the typical format is four situational questions), asked for references, and promptly notified by pre-printed post card whether he or she has been accepted onto the sub list.

Family and Children's Services of Kansas City, Kansas, formed an ad hoc group with two other organizations early in 1985 and worked with their local NAEYC affiliate to develop a "Substitute Provider Training Program." A small one-year Membership Action Grant from NAEYC helped them publicize the program and develop a training manual, a 100+ page anthology of basic child care readings from a variety of sources. Three-hour training sessions are held monthly, and subs are then encouraged to observe at centers before they begin work.

Although the **Child Care Resource Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts**, does not conduct ongoing training for subs, each person who signs up on the sub list receives the excellent orientation booklet "Guidelines for Day Care Substitutes." The booklet includes a brief form that subs can use to get written references on their work.

Community colleges may also be a resource for training substitutes. The Early Childhood Education department at **Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, California**, has held a six-week series of three-hour Saturday classes for subs. These classes give an overview of child care work including health and safety and communication skills.

In **Corpus Christi, Texas**, the **Coastal Bend Child Care Administrators' Association** — a group of about 40 directors — worked with the Early Childhood Specialist Department of **Del Mar College** to set up a 12-hour non-credit course during the summer of 1985. The course included information on child growth, child abuse, dis-

cipline, handling emergencies, and the state minimum standards. The 28 participants who completed the course were placed on a substitute list sent to local child care centers. Their training costs were reimbursed by the administrators' association, and they also obtained a food handlers' card, job references, a TB test, and a training certificate. The course was so successful that the organizers plan to repeat it. An information packet describing the development of the course is available for \$5 from Glenda Stanton, YMCA, 3166 Reid Dr., Corpus Christi, TX 78404.

In other communities, such as **Oakland, California**, local child care directors' associations are considering conducting occasional training sessions specifically for substitutes. Association members would rotate the responsibility for teaching the sessions, and by pooling their efforts they would each decrease the amount of time spent training and orienting every sub they use.

Referral/Feedback/Updating

Many substitute programs produce a substitute list monthly or bi-monthly for members or subscribers. The **Child Care Resource Center (CCRC) in Cambridge, Massachusetts**, for instance, mails a monthly list to subscribers who pay \$15 per year. The list contains the basic information from each sub's application: name, address, phone number, best time to call, education, length of experience with different age groups and in different kinds of programs, languages and other skills, times available for work, and any transportation limits or needs.

CCRC reminds its subscribers that, "We have not evaluated the work of these substitutes. We ask that you, the provider, fill out the enclosed evaluation form for each substitute concerning their performance and return it to us. All evaluations will be reviewed to determine if a person's performance is satisfactory, or whether removal from the list needs to be considered. Evaluation forms will be kept on file at CCRC and may be read by providers and the substitute." Providers have found this evaluation system helpful, but CCRC admits that they tend to receive only the extremes — the very

The Child Care Employee Project (CCEP) advocates for improved wages, status and working conditions of child care providers in order to ensure high quality child care available to all families regardless of economic status. The CCEP is a non-profit agency that provides resources, training, and consultation to the child care community. For more information, please call (415) 653-9889 or write CCEP, P.O. Box 5603, Berkeley, CA 94705.

positive or very negative evaluations. Substitutes who wish to remain on the list can simply re-register by phone each month.

Child Action in Sacramento, California, goes a step beyond printing a disclaimer on its substitutes list; before child care or family day care providers can subscribe to the list, they themselves must receive a brief orientation to the sub program from the Child Action staff. To keep their list up-to-date, Child Action periodically sends post-cards out to its registered subs.

Other programs, such as **Cariño in Albuquerque, New Mexico**, or **Child Care Resource and Referral in Rochester, Minnesota**, give substitute referrals to providers over the phone instead of mailing out a list. Providers then maintain their own sub lists and call the substitute program only when they need new referrals.

Broader sponsorship of a substitute program can be very beneficial. The **Office for Children (OFC) in Fairfax County, Virginia**, has a unique network of 52 school-age child care programs sponsored by the the county government, and has a staff member at its central office to coordinate the referrals. OFC budgets nine permanent "floating sub" positions, and also keeps a list of about 35 on-call subs who are hired as needed.

The **University of California at Berkeley**, which provides space and student fee support for six state-funded child care centers, holds free in-service training — a one-week series of workshops on subjects such as infant/toddler curricula, health and music — every six months. Subs are paid to attend! Moreover, University sponsorship of these centers allow an unusually high rate of pay for subs. As of Spring 1986, starting pay was \$9.47 an hour for those with early childhood education credentials and \$8.36 an hour for non-credentialed subs. Although subs aren't guaranteed daily employment, the size of the University system, combined with the high rate of pay, creates a pool of eager, well-trained temporary teachers.

Child Care Substitute Registries

People in many other professions — such as public schools, hospitals, and

business offices — have long had centralized "registries" or employment agencies which simplify their search for substitute help. Several child care agencies around the country are now investigating the possibility of adapting such a model to our profession. The **Western New York Child Care Council in Rochester, New York**, is seeking start-up funds for a "child care personnel service." So is a group of about 30 child care centers in the **Fremont, California**, area.

Public school districts, for example, have operated substitute registries for years. Once substitutes have enrolled in the registry, they call in for assignments, usually at least one day before they are available. A central school district office typically arranges subs on both a daily and a weekly basis. Schools call in for subs as soon as they identify a need; even after office hours they are often able to leave a recorded message. The school district, not the individual school, is liable for any provable negligence or wrongdoing by a substitute.

In the **San Francisco (California) Unified School District**, between 100 and 2,000 subs are typically available, and work an average shift of four hours per day. Wages are quite high, especially since 1984 when subs organized a union — the San Francisco Substitute Teachers' Organization. As of September 1986, subs receive a starting pay of \$11.43 an hour; after 75 assignments the hourly pay increases to \$12.14.

A substitute registry for child care centers is an appealing possibility. Individual centers could save considerable time and money getting subs, even if they had to pay a significant annual subscription fee; training and orientation could become standardized, and hence more reliable; and sub wages could improve — although not, most likely, to public school district levels!

Yet there are still some unresolved dilemmas, especially concerning such issues as liability and insurance. In the current child care insurance crisis, liability coverage for a central registry office would most likely be prohibitive. Child care registries may need to modify their systems so that the liability remains with the individual centers.

The **Fremont, California**, area **Directors' Council** is offering to manage a substitute registry and dispatching service for 150 local child care centers. A staff member would be responsible for recruitment, interviewing, training, evaluation, and referral of subs. Local centers would pay an annual subscription fee based on their size, and an additional fee each time they used the service. Policies, procedures, and pay would be standardized, with built-in pay increases to reward subs for length of service. Individual centers would assume liability as the employers of each sub they hire. For insurance purposes, the registry's role would be similar to that of a resource and referral agency in giving child care referrals to parents. The registry would save centers several steps, but each center would retain the responsibility for making careful choices in hiring.

Foundation and Corporate Support

In breaking new ground to improve the substitute teacher situation, child care programs need all the allies they can find. Start-up funding may be available from a variety of sources. Don't overlook foundations and corporations in your area, although they may prefer to support a child care project that benefits the entire community rather than a single center. A number of the resource and referral programs described above obtained small grants from a Substitute List Fund established by **Work/Family Directions**, a corporate-funded resource clearinghouse in **Boston, Massachusetts**. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has also awarded Membership Action Grants for local affiliate groups to create sub programs.

Conclusion

We hope this information, gleaned from so many dedicated child care people, will assist you in your efforts to make good subs easier to find and keep. We encourage you to discuss your policies and ideas and to share them with us at CCEP so that we can pass them along to others around the country. ✱