



Project Postcard

# Warning: Child Care Work May Be Hazardous to Your Health

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by Marcy Whitebook and Gerri Ginsburg

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As most child care staff are painfully aware, working conditions in the field leave much room for improvement. Low wages, minimal benefits and unpaid overtime contribute to staff burnout and rapid turnover. What's more, as serious as these conditions are, they do not represent the whole story.

In a 1978 study of working conditions conducted by the Child Care Employee Project, two thirds of the child care workers responding reported that their health was adversely affected by their jobs. In 1982, the Project pursued this finding by conducting a nationwide survey of child care health and safety working conditions (Child Care Employee Project Newsletter, Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring 1983.) The results indicate

that, indeed, there are serious health and safety hazards present for staff in many child care environments. Workers suffer from illness, emotional distress, physical disabilities and exposure to harmful chemicals.

Very often, staff will ignore the ill health effects caused by their jobs, concerned that children's needs should always be considered first. While it is our job to respond to children's needs, what child will benefit from a burned-out, ill caregiver? Placing value on our own health and safety will help both us *and* the children, by preserving our physical and mental health and by insuring that we will be vital and healthy people

*and child care workers* for a long, long time.

## What Staff Can Do

After identifying hazardous health and safety working conditions, staff can bring their findings and concerns to the attention of their administration, or the administration can initiate the discussion with staff. Staff should request training and materials to learn more about improving working conditions and avoiding their negative consequences. Listed here are some basic suggestions and resources.

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*Marcy Whitebook is coordinator of the Child Care Employee Project. Gerri Ginsberg is consultant to the Project. The photographs are from the Project's postcard series, sold to raise funds for free services to child care staff.*

## Illness/Infection

Be sure you are following the most up-to-date procedures for preventing illness and infection (yours and the children's) in the center. Check out the suggestions in two recent articles:

- "Preventing Illness in Infant/Toddler Day Care", Ruth Highberger and Mary Boynton, *Young Children*, March 1983.
- "Health Update: Infection in Day Care", Susan Aronson, M.D., *Child Care Information Exchange*, March/April 1983.

## Body Strains

Most child care-related injuries occur in the lower back. Such injuries can be reoccurring. Ask your director to have a physical therapist come in and demonstrate preventative back care. (Many physical therapists will do this for low or no cost.) Until then, follow these tips:

- To lift, use your legs, not your back.
- Bend your knees and lift from a partial squat position.
- Face what you're lifting; don't bend and twist.
- Hold things as close to your center of gravity as possible, not on your hips.
- Bend your knees when you reach for something.
- Push more than pull.
- Change your position often.
- Keep your knees and hips at the same level. (When sitting in a small chair, sit on a telephone book.)
- Clear a space on the floor so you can do periodic back stretching exercises.
- Don't use child-sized furniture when you can avoid it. Use regular, comfortable adult-sized furniture for breaks and staff meetings. Make an adult-sized table or counter available for eating and doing desk work.
- Ask for help when you need it.

## Hazardous Chemicals and Art Materials

Many items used in day care, even some of those listed as "non-toxic," can have harmful effects on adults and children. Substances may irritate skin and eyes, vapors can harm respiratory systems, and chemicals can enter the bloodstream through cuts and infections. Always maintain good ventilation and circulating air in the center, and use gloves when working with dangerous or irritating substances. Some other hints to avoid trouble are:

### Cleaning Solutions

- Avoid known dangerous substances.
- Read labels carefully to find out ingredients, to learn how to use solutions safely, and what to do when problems occur.
- Learn the signs of distress from inhalation, ingestion and skin contact.
- Don't mix chemical cleaners such as ammonia and chlorine bleach.
- Teach new staff members about the safe use of chemical and art materials.

## Art materials

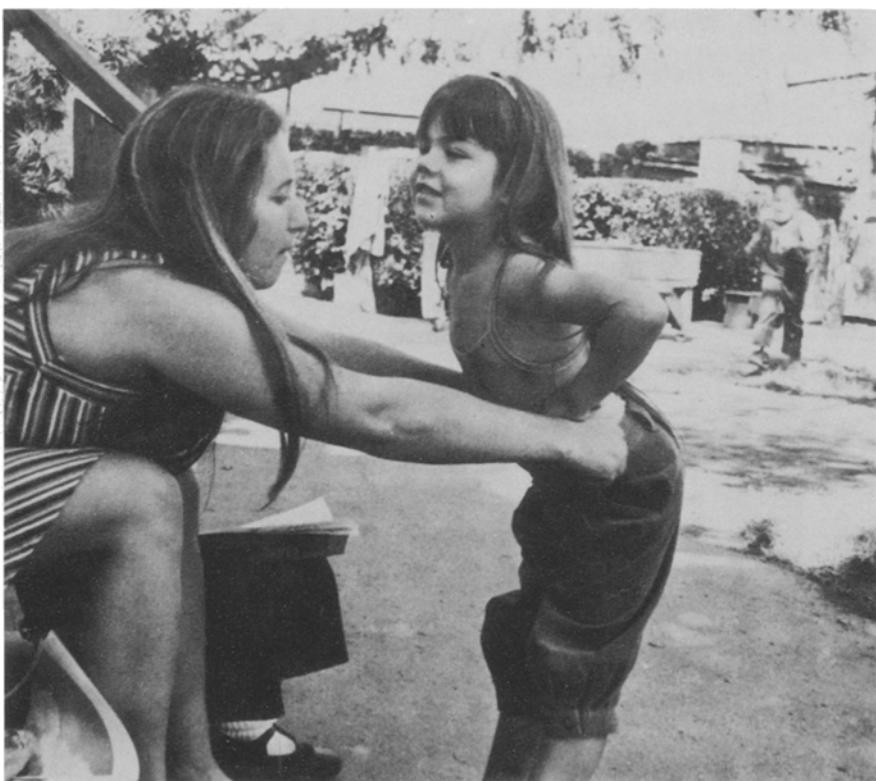
- Learn about the art materials you use. For information on non-toxic art materials write to:

The Arts and Crafts Institute  
715 Boylton St.  
Boston, MA 02116

or address your concerns and questions to:

Art Hazards Information Center  
5 Beekman St.  
New York, NY 10038

- Use water-based colored markers and other art materials.
- Use wet clay and liquid paint. (Dry clay contains silica, which can be toxic when inhaled. Other dry materials to avoid are instant paper mache, pastels, aerosol sprays, and powdered tempera.)
- Use poster paints instead of glazes on clay.
- Keep the art area well ventilated.
- Clean the area well so that toxic dusts do not accumulate.
- Keep food or drinks out of the art area.



## Pesticides

- Try to avoid the use of chemical pesticides (little is known about their long-term effects) by emphasizing good sanitation procedures.
- Caulk all cracks around sinks, cupboards, moldings and bathroom fixtures.
- Install new washers on faucets to eliminate dripping water.
- Store all food in tightly sealed glass jars.
- Put away all animal food or dirty dishes.
- Seal your garbage.
- Use boric acid for hard-to-get-at places. (Boric acid is safe except when ingested, so make sure children can't reach it.)
- If you must spray with pesticides, request that spraying be done when needed, not at the exterminator's convenience.

- For More information and resources on alternative pest management contact:

The John Muir Institute for  
the Integration of Applied  
Sciences, Inc.  
1010 Grayson St.  
Berkeley, CA 94710

## Stress

Limited resources, staff scheduling, and communication problems are often the causes of stress on the job. Given the current economic climate of child care, raising wages and lowering staff/child ratios may not be immediately feasible. However, there are some improvements which do not demand immediate funds. Staff can call upon and work with their administration to:

- Clarify and improve substitute policy.
- Institute a dependable break policy.
- Investigate possible medical coverage alternatives.
- Design and enact appropriate grievance procedures.
- Participate in shared decision making.
- Improve staff-parent relationships.



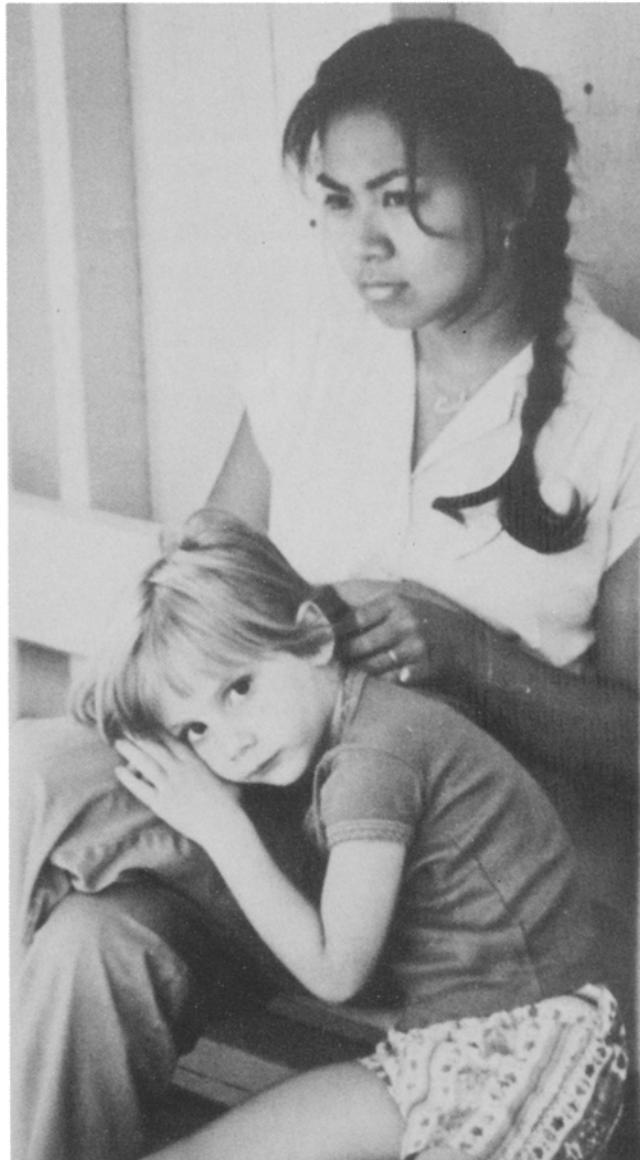
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## Legal Recourse

The identification and elimination of hazardous health and safety working conditions requires an alert staff and responsive administration. The combination of the two can ultimately reduce the likelihood of injury and illness to staff members. However, if unsafe conditions continue to exist despite staff efforts to have them corrected, or if a staff member is injured while on the job, workers have some available options:

- Contact the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to report hazardous conditions and request an inspection. (Unfortunately, many child care-related hazards are not regulated in this manner.)
- If injured on the job, staff may be eligible for Worker's Compensation. Consult a lawyer who specializes in this area immediately. No fee will be assessed at this time. Attorney's fees will be determined and awarded by the Worker's Compensation Board after a settlement is reached.
- Find out if you may collect Disability Insurance benefits while awaiting a Worker's Compensation settlement. Contact your state employment department to find out more information.
- For more information on occupational health and safety contact:

Labor Occupational Health Program  
Institute of Industrial Relations  
Center for Labor Research and Educ.  
University of California  
Berkeley, CA 94720



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# **Checklist for Health and Safety Conditions**

Staff can use this preliminary checklist to identify major problem areas.

## **ILLNESS/INFECTION**

1. In the past year, how many staff have been exposed to and/or contracted:

head lice \_\_\_\_\_ flu \_\_\_\_\_ colds \_\_\_\_\_ sore throat \_\_\_\_\_  
impetigo \_\_\_\_\_ childhood illnesses \_\_\_\_\_ hepatitis \_\_\_\_\_  
giardiasis \_\_\_\_\_

2. In the past year, how many staff have worked when sick? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Is there an adequate and effective substitute policy? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is there established policy for caring for sick children? \_\_\_\_\_  
Is it always enforced? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Is there a separate area set aside for sick children? \_\_\_\_\_
6. How and where are children diapered? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How is the diapering area cleaned? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Are staff members screened for rubella? \_\_\_\_\_ TB? \_\_\_\_\_

## **BODY STRAINS**

1. In the past year, how many staff have suffered from back/neck/shoulder or leg strains? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Is there adult-sized furniture available for staff? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How often do staff members move heavy equipment or furniture? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Is there adequate and easily accessible storage available? \_\_\_\_\_

## **CHEMICALS AND ART MATERIALS**

1. Name the chemicals/cleansers used on-site: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Are all chemicals/cleansers labeled properly with directions for use? \_\_\_\_\_  
with warnings? \_\_\_\_\_ with instructions for emergencies? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you use: powdered tempera \_\_\_\_\_ permanent markers \_\_\_\_\_  
dry clay \_\_\_\_\_ lead glazes \_\_\_\_\_ instant paper mache \_\_\_\_\_  
Others \_\_\_\_\_
4. Have staff members experienced skin, nose, eye or respiratory problems  
from cleaning solutions and/or art materials? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Do you spray with pesticides to control fleas, roaches or  
other vermin? \_\_\_\_\_

## **STRESS**

1. How many staff members feel their job is stressful? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What areas do they think are most stressful? \_\_\_\_\_
3. How many staff have experienced:  
headaches \_\_\_\_\_ trouble sleeping \_\_\_\_\_ muscle strain \_\_\_\_\_  
eyestrain \_\_\_\_\_ changes in menstrual cycle \_\_\_\_\_  
digestive/stomach problems \_\_\_\_\_  
nausea/dizziness \_\_\_\_\_ exhaustion \_\_\_\_\_
4. Are there established, effective policies for:  
breaks? \_\_\_\_\_ pregnant workers? \_\_\_\_\_ grievance resolution?  
\_\_\_\_\_



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### The Child Care Employee Project

The Child Care Employee Project (CCEP) is a program of the Child Care Staff Education Project a nonprofit organization devoted to improving child care working conditions through research, training, consultation, and distribution of a newsletter and resource materials. The CCEP can provide information and resources on all of the topics in this article. A packet of handout materials pertaining to occupational health and safety is available from the Project for \$3.00. A postcard series is available for \$5.50 per pack, including postage and handling. For more information, please write to:

Child Care Employee Project  
P.O. Box 5603  
Berkeley, CA 94705

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