

Professionalism in Child Care

By Maureen Lyons for Wildwood CACFP

Do you want or need to make more money through your child care business? Learn how to take your program to the next level by following the guidance in this training to put together your professional portfolio and build a successful business. Boosting your professionalism may allow you to take fewer children while also making more money. Raising your standard of care can help you create a top-quality child care program. Learning to advocate for yourself and putting the needs of your clients first will set you apart from others who lack this ambition.

Quality child care is not expensive, it's PRICELESS!

Your smile is your logo. 😊

Your personality is your business card.

How you leave others feeling, after having an experience with you, becomes your TRADEMARK.

~Jay Danzie

There is a BIG difference between a babysitter and a professional child care provider. When you are ready to make the leap from care giving as a convenience of being home with your own children, or not wanting the hassle of pursuing other employment, and being a serious business owner; the following list will give you the action steps necessary to help you make the transition.

When you can help others see the value of a quality care environment that meets the needs of parents who are looking for the best program for their children, then you will begin the transition from a babysitter to a professional child care provider. When you notice that a low-cost program is the only factor (or the most important) being considered by parents, you'll know that they are not a good fit for your type of care. When we want the best for ourselves, we also want the best for the children in our care. The best is rarely the cheapest option, no matter what we are shopping for.

Consider this comparison: when choosing a cellular phone, the model that is the cheapest may be able to make a call, but it probably won't have the additional features you're looking for, like data service, camera quality, or network coverage. A more appropriate fit is likely a more expensive model. A salesperson at the store can help to explain the differences and show the true value of the more expensive phone. With child care, parents often don't realize that cost is relative to the quality of care, education level, motivation to meet licensing requirements, and professionalism of the provider. It is our job to advocate for our program and educate potential clients about what we have to offer and explain the value of the service we provide.

With any business transaction, there is much to be learned from either side to determine the most appropriate fit for both the care giver and the parents. Not all children will fit into your program, and that is OK. Some parents are looking for high quality care, while others are looking for a program that is inexpensive or close to home or work. We cannot meet the needs of all families. Instead, we must be true to ourselves and trust that our program matches our values and passion for providing children with a trusting care environment where we nurture a curiosity for learning and respect for others.

Choose and Register Your Business Name

One of the first steps to becoming more professional is to choose a business name. Having a business name is important as a means of being recognized and set apart from those who provide care only as a convenience or favor to friends and relatives. The name you choose could say something about your program or help perspective clients remember you. Your name could use a rhyme or sound matching concept, Mike's Tykes or Tina's Tots, or your name may be more open ended, like: Fun & Friends Child Care or Little Wonders Care Center. Business names should be registered with the Secretary of State and must be unique. The forms and fees to register a business name can be processed through the state directly or through your banking institution or attorney. Registration fees are generally around \$100.00 but vary by state, so check online for current cost.

Apply for a Federal Employer Identification Number (EIN)

When you are self-employed there are certain things you can do to protect your identity. By applying for an Employer Identification Number, you are not required to give out your personal Social Security Number (SSN) to your clients. Your new EIN can be used on financial forms and receipts that are given to your customers in place of your personal SSN. Using an EIN does not change the way you file your taxes, but it does help to protect against others using your SSN for fraudulent activities.

Set up Business Banking and/or Credit Accounts

As a small business owner, you will have some expenses that are separate from your usual household expenses. Having a checking account that is used exclusively for business purchases helps to keep personal and business spending separate. This is a great

way to pay for and track licensing costs, training expenses, and membership fees for professional associations. If you have clients who pay you through automatic deposit from their bank account, this is another level of protection for you. By giving out your business account information, instead of a personal account, you are not sharing details that are best kept private. When it comes to income verification, having an account that shows your business income and expenses will make it easier to qualify for credit the next time you need a car or home loan (as long as you keep your accounts in good standing).

Create an Interview Binder

To make it easy to prepare for interviews with prospective clients, put together a three-ring binder to include all the information they will need to know if it is mutually determined that they will join your program. During the interview you can walk them through your Child Care Policies, Tuition Rates, and Contract for Services. Your binder should include samples of any specific forms they will need to fill out before enrollment, like their child's immunizations record and permission to administer medication – should the need arise.

In addition to your business policy and contract, keep training certificates neatly in the binder to show your dedication to being educated on current topics and trends impacting child care services. To give parents an idea what to expect from your program, it is helpful to include photos of children engaged in activities that are common for your group. Do you celebrate certain holidays with the children or have special days that they can bring items from home to share? What about art projects or Pre-K readiness? Be sure to show-off the fun and educational things you do with the children by having a few samples on hand. Whether you focus on “no-screen time” or “having a technology

center”, you can find ways to share your specific priorities and values with parents to find those who share your ideals for their child. You might share your involvement with local, county, or state early childhood groups, boards, or councils. This gives a perspective of the big picture of who you are and your involvement in the field.

The interview is a time for both you and the visitors to learn about one another and gauge your comfort with each other. When someone chooses your program, you want to know that they have full-faith in you and your program before leaving you with their most prized possession. At the end of the interview, ask parents, “Would you willingly give me the key to your house?” Let them think it over and respond if they choose. If they say no, then this is not the best fit for their child. Child care is about trust. Parents need to trust that their child is safe and in a loving place while they are away.

On-Going Communication with Parents

Open and clear communication builds trust and confidence in the parent/care giver relationship. As part of your program, have a plan for how you will communicate with parents on a regular basis. Options might include:

- Daily notes about when and what their child ate, how and when they napped, and/or anything unusual that happened – both good and bad?
- Weekly or monthly newsletters sharing interesting early childhood topics
- Having an information board in the drop-off/pick-up area to share news
- Doing annual or semi-annual conferences with parents to review contracts and evaluate changing needs of children (i.e.: when to begin toileting vs. diapers)

- Have a website or blog where parents can find updated information about your program
- Periodically texting or emailing parents updates on children's activities/day
- Respect parents' privacy by discussing sensitive topics by phone or after hours at an agreed upon time

Build your Professional Network

Join and participate in local, county, state, and national organization as your time and finances allow. The contacts and knowledge you'll gain is immeasurable and provides collaboration and insight from others with shared experience to offer a sounding board to discuss challenges, as long as client privacy is protected.

Since home child care can be an isolated, lonely job, it is important to connect with others who can relate and share positive solutions when problems arise. These groups provide educational experiences and conferences on a variety of levels for your benefit. Participation can help you see child care from a global perspective instead of just what happens in your individual program.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a wealth of information on the website (www.naeyc.org) to benefit all child care providers. You will find more local groups through your county and state websites.

"Individuals make impressions and judgements about people very quickly, very easily, and with minimal information. And once those judgements are made, they tend to be hard to undo. They're quite sticky."

~Dr. Vivian Zayas

Personal Appearance and Grooming

Although we hate to be judged by others, that's exactly what happens when prospective clients meet you for the first time. Their first impression is based on how well you take care of yourself and prepare for the interview. If you are scattered, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and haven't showered, they are likely to question your ability to adequately care for yourself, let alone their child. This negativity distracts them from seriously looking at your program. Whereas, if you are cleaned up, look rested, and dress nicely, parents are able to consider your program instead of looking only at you. It may seem critical but taking the time to look good and prepare for an interview is one of the most important ways to build your program and attract great clients.

You never get a second chance to make a first impression

~Will Rogers

Ethics and Privacy

While working with children and families you will likely encounter details about clients that are privileged and best kept private. This may include knowledge about parents' jobs, family health issues, or facts about their personal relationships. It is vitally important to respect the privacy of clients by keeping their information confidential and not gossiping about their lives to friends or family. When discussing sensitive issues with colleagues in a professional setting, be sure to protect their identity by using generalizations when you are seeking advice or suggestions on how to handle specific circumstances.

When parents understand that you will protect information they tell you in confidence, they are more likely to share difficulties

they may be going through. This type of care partnership allows multiple adults to help children work through emotions and challenges that arise in their lives.

Raise your standard of care

Participating in programs like Child Care Aware, Colorado Shines, NAEYC Accreditation, or pursuing your Child Development Associate Degree (CDA) are voluntary and may have a cost associated with them. These investments, however, allow us to evaluate our program from a different point of view and see opportunities for personal growth and professional improvement. Each of these various standards enable child care providers to look at numerous aspects of their business (from record keeping to safe supervision) to find ways to provide enhanced, more holistic care, which will raise your program and your standards for care well above the minimum required for licensing. Providing superior care involves going the extra mile, doing more than our clients expect, and striving to be the very best option parents have for child care.

After looking over the options for your state choose a standard that works for you and get started on the application. Soon you will evaluate your program and begin the process of raising your business above the competition. When you are finished with this process, which can take 12-18 months, you will fully understand the difference between care that meets the minimum regulations and a program that SHINES brighter than the rest. That is when you know you can raise your rates and feel confident that the cost is well worth the effort you've made. You'll also be confident that Quality Child Care is not Expensive, It's Priceless!

Putting it all together

When you get out of bed each day knowing that you make a positive difference in the lives of tomorrow's leaders, knowing that you take good care of yourself so that the little people in your life see and understand how to take care of themselves as they grow, and you make a decent income along the way, the smile you wear will be authentic. The enthusiasm you show for your career choice will be contagious. The job of being a professional child care provider is one of the most difficult yet important in our world, for we hold the future in our hands. Step up and show them they are worth it!

A hundred years from now...
it will not matter what kind of car
I drove, what kind of house I lived in,
nor how much money I had in my
bank account, but the world may
be better because I was important
in the life of a *child*.



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