Time Management for Directors

by Ellen Hofstetter Jaffe

A life lived in chaos is an impossibility.
Madeleine L'Engle

A frequent complaint of center directors is not having enough time. Most work extremely long hours and still feel they are not getting enough done. Yet others seem to have time not only to manage their center but also to volunteer in professional associations, serve on non-profit boards, and contribute in other ways. How do they do it? Here are some ideas to help you work — as they say — smarter, not harder.

Ellen Hofstetter Jaffe, M.S. Ed., helps adults to help young children in many ways. As a center director, she spent many years hiring and training staff, interns, parents, and volunteers to conduct exemplary early childhood programs. As director of a hospital-affiliated center serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, she helped develop a program to train pediatric residents in the development of typically developing children. Her articles have been published in *Child Care Business*, the journal of the National Association of Child Care Professionals, and she's been quoted in other publications. Five years ago, Ellen founded Hilltop Early Childhood Services, a firm specializing in management and staff development. After September 11, Ellen became a Project Liberty trauma counselor, teaching coping skills. Her book and companion workbook to help children cope with the death of a grandparent have not yet been published. Ellen is a keynote speaker and presents at conferences both locally and nationally, including NAEYC, NACCP, NCCA, and the NHSA's Parenting Conference. A validator for national accreditation for NACCP, Ellen also helps programs make improvements necessary for NAEYC accreditation.
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Taking stock

Carefully examine your expectations for yourself and others as related to time. Create a chart like the one shown by making a list of the tasks you feel you should be doing in a week. Leave a column at the end for a time estimate of each activity. Ask yourself if these can all be accomplished in the time allotted. Can you do this only if there are no interruptions? Is it realistic to plan like this? Review your list again and create more realistic time estimates. If the tasks cannot be accomplished in the specified timeframe, you have to change either your methods of work or your expectations.

Do you have a supervisor who says, "Get it done" without giving you the resources to do it: money to hire staff; technology to speed the work? I have met many directors who know that their supervisor's expectations are impossible to meet, yet they try to do it, working overtime without pay at the risk of health and family or personal time. If you find yourself in this situation, what can you do — or have you done — to try and shed light on these unrealistic expectations?

Self-assessment

What gets in the way of your being as effective as you would like in managing your time?

- Interruptions from staff and parents
- Situations with children that require your assistance

TASK	TIME SPENT ON TASK					TOTAL TIME FOR TASK
	M	Tu	W	Th	F	
SCHEDULED TIME FOR TASKS EACH DAY						
TOTAL WEEKLY TIME FOR THESE TASKS						

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- Phone calls
- Paperwork including reports on deadlines
- Filling in for staff who miss work
- Inadequate or no support staff
- No technology or inability to make good use of it
- Lack of funds

Crisis management

Do certain crises reoccur? Why? What can be done to solve or prevent these? You (or a committee or task force) might want to examine these to figure out changes to avoid having to operate in a crisis mode. For example, if you have three people on your sub list and four teachers call in sick, you may want to work on expanding your sub pool to begin getting a handle on this situation.

Some useful time management strategies

Prioritize: Spend most of your time on what's most important.

- Go back to your list of tasks and prioritize it.
- What can you do to increase your productivity/efficiency?
- Can you minimize or eliminate areas that require a lot of your time but do not measureably improve your center?
- Can someone or something contribute to your success in some areas? For example, I used to do all of the paperwork at a small center even though my secretarial skills are not nearly as strong as my early childhood skills. However, we didn't have the money to hire a secretary. When our center bought a used computer and simple software, I found myself spending more time on the important things and less time on administrative paperwork.

Of course, the first priority is staffing classrooms and addressing health and safety concerns. Staff supervision and program issues are high priority. Others are compliance and regulatory issues (licensing), cash flow (collecting tuition and paying bills), and enrollment. Establishing goals for yourself and your center can be a valuable exercise. Sherry Workman, executive director of the National Association of Child Care Professionals says, "It is important to set your goals and then prioritize your activities based on reaching and attaining those goals."

Additionally, Kate Duffy, founder of the Director Business School, recommends conducting a time audit to see how your time is actually spent compared to how you want to be spending your time. You can use the chart you created earlier to help you with this analysis. Then you can evaluate whether you are spending your time in a way that is consistent with your values or if lower priorities keep getting in the way of your addressing your primary concerns.

Organize your time.

- Use to-do lists and timelines to keep yourself on track.
- Write it down. Jennifer Dixon, director of Bragtown Day Care Center in North Carolina, suggests writing everything down, from staff requests to planned visits and appointments. She records "must-dos" along with a wish list of things she would like (to have the time) to do.
- Mary Cleck, a Head Start director in Texas, finds it helpful to post meeting agendas in advance. Other meeting tips include starting on time and facilitating meetings to keep discussion focused and moving.

Create a master calendar.

- Post major events and important dates including deadlines and regular happenings in the life of your center.
- Create a tickler file system, with reminders two months before major events. For example, January is the month to order the supplies for teachers' spring gardening projects. If you have committees working on annual activities, have their reports due three months before the event. This way you can review and suggest changes and there will still be enough time for placing orders for necessary supplies.
- Make new deadlines. If you see that your schedule tends to get more booked up in some months than others, anticipate this and schedule some things for the month before. You don't have to hold your annual event early, just be ready for it.
- Keep folders for each annual event or happening. Put all materials associated with that event in the folder — fliers, letters home, supporting documents, receipts, lists of orders.
- Soon after the end of the event, make a note sheet (keep it on the computer if possible) with comments about what went well and what should be changed for next year. If there was food involved, note the quantities and what should be adjusted for next time. Make that sheet the first item in the file. When you do your review two months prior to next year's event, you can save yourself a lot of time by looking at these notes first.

Organize your space.

Disorganization is a major cause of poor time management. When you have to spend time looking for important papers required for your work, you are wasting time.

- Create a system for organizing incoming and outgoing mail, child and staff files, and program files that will streamline your job. Keep on top of this system to be sure that your system is enhancing your ability to accomplish tasks, not interfering with it.
- Try to handle each piece of paper once. For example, use the 4 D's to deal with paper:
  - Do it
  - Delegate it

- Delay it or
- Dump it.

- There are many ways to organize your office to increase your efficiency. Explore the many options available to discover what works best for you: Color-coded files, standing files on your desk, combining storage and filing systems (file drawers, magazine holders, etc.). It's never been more fun to get organized!

Use technology wisely. Efficient use of your time involves avoiding duplication of efforts.

- Having written communication computerized allows you to access these over and over again with little or no revision. For example, if you live in a cold climate, you will send home an annual letter about notification of snow days. You just change the date each year and reprint it. If some of the information changes, you still have most of the work done. Use of computers is even more important when it comes to big jobs like writing grant applications, parent handbooks, and personnel policies.
- Use e-mail for regular (paperless) communication. Save messages in your e-mail filing cabinet and keep hard (paper) copies only if necessary. Of course, make backup files and store them off site.
- Use database management software to enter data once and create many different kinds of reports. You can organize the same children by class, birthday, date annual check-ups are due, schedule (full time, part time, etc.).

Plan for the unexpected. Directors handle emergencies. One of the realities in a director's life is that when she opens the door to her center each morning, she will not be able to predict the day that awaits her.

- Don't try to plan every minute of the day in advance. If your plan is too full, you will get behind early in the day and be disheartened before noon. If you schedule some *free* time each morning and afternoon, you can still accomplish most of your scheduled tasks without rushing from one thing to another.
- When you plan your supervisory meetings, try to make them on the first and third weeks of the month. This way, you can re-schedule into the second and fourth weeks if a true emergency arises and not be backed up into other meetings.
- If you have a deadline for a certain task and you think you can do it by Wednesday, promise it for Friday, saying it might be done by Thursday. This way, when unexpected things arise, you can still get the work done on schedule. If, by some chance, you get it done on Wednesday, you can always have the pleasure of completing it ahead of time.

Delegate.

- Think of no-cost or low-cost solutions that will help you accomplish some of the work of the center. Parents, staff, and volunteers can be organized for these purposes.
- Empowering staff to assume new responsibilities is a wonderful way to relieve yourself of tasks and build leadership in your teachers. Make sure you have veto power over delegated tasks.
- Make committees of parents, staff, or volunteers to help with larger or long-term projects. Designate a committee chair and check in periodically with this person to see how the work of the committee is progressing.

Personalize your approach to time management.

- Identify the time of day when you are most productive and use it. If you do your best work in the morning, after you make sure staff has arrived and begun their work, schedule that time for your most important work. Kresha Warnock, a former center director and current instructor at Ball State University in Indiana says, "Let everyone know that for one hour, you will not take phone calls or any interruptions unless they are true emergencies."
- Use a day planner that works with your style. Some directors like week- or month-at-a glance calendars they can carry with them. Others like wall or desk calendars. Yet others like electronic planners (e.g., Palm Pilots). The success of any time management strategy is developing it around your personal preferences. Using a system that works for you helps you to use it more faithfully.

Refuel.

- Take time out for relaxation and lunch. At least once a week, schedule a working lunch with someone. Make sure that at least some of that time is spent discussing non work-related topics like family, community events, and the like. When you do discuss work-related events, the casual atmosphere enables you to think on a different plane.
- If you can, close your door for 15 minutes, play some soothing music, lean back in the chair, close your eyes, and just let your thoughts drift. (You might want to arrange for someone to knock on the door at the end of the scheduled time so if you drift off to dreamland, you can come right back!)

Time management is a skill. Like any new skill it takes time and commitment to develop. But if you're feeling overwhelmed with unfinished business, long to-do lists, and a sinking feeling that you are failing to meet your own and others' expectations, it may be time to take charge of your schedule and make it reflect your priorities and values instead of having it run your life for you. Don't expect to solve it in a day

or even a month. As you gradually take more control of your time, you will work more productively. You and your center will see the benefits with each change you make. Being less frazzled is a good thing. Try it, you'll like it!

For more information

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