The Director's Link

E-mail and All That Jazz

Training Staff to Use Electronic Communication Tools Professionally

Karen Stephens

I love email. I depend on it a lot. I can relay specific details to any number of 'need to know' persons at the click of a *send* icon. I can do it any time of day, without playing endless phone tag or waking someone up on the wrong side of the time zone. I can get 'newsy' information out fast and save printing costs, too. No need to wait for a newsletter to come out to tell parents or staff about a last-minute event.

An added benefit is that my e-mail message fits my receivers' schedules, too. They can open it when they can best concentrate on the message and act upon it. When I allow e-mail addresses to be viewed in the *To:* line, receivers can also see everyone in the communication loop so they don't have to duplicate conversations. That also helps keep everyone on the metaphorical same page.

E-mail is also a helpful memory aid. It keeps a traceable record of items or issues I've addressed, to whom, and when. It helps me log who has responded as well.

There are also times when I hate e-mail; most often when I send a message prematurely. Or when another method of communication would be more effective but take more time. When poorly written, e-mail leads to an endless stream of *re: re: re:* that takes forever to resolve.

There's much to be gained from using e-mail, but also much to be avoided. This article covers topics you should address with your staff before they jump on the worldwide web of e-communication. Issues relating to Facebook, Twitter, and other means of social networking will be addressed in a future issue of *The Director's Link.*

E-Policy Statements for Electronic Communication

Before your staff begin using your program's e-mail resources, spell out in writing what type of staff usage is acceptable and what is not. Include the information with all the other policy compliance expectations a staff member 'signs off on' upon employment.

Yes, I know, you're rolling your eyes because your staff have been using e-mail for years without any kind of written policy. So why go to the trouble of creating one now?

Consider this: 21% of surveyed employers had an employee e-mail or instant message subpoenaed as part of a lawsuit or regulatory investigation. Yes, a program's e-communications constitute a legal record.

E-Policy Statement Parameters

Your e-policy statement should be clear and simple. Specify who may use program e-tools, why, when, and for what. Address aspects of e-communication related to use expectations, limitations, guidelines, procedures, and consequences of violation. Some companies categorize staff e-mail guidelines as *acceptable* or *unacceptable* or *permitted use* vs. *prohibited use*. Others simply list dos and don'ts when using e-mail.

Failure to set clear policies and then train staff on proper e-protocol puts your program—and staff personally—at risk, both in terms of reputation and legal liability. Ignoring the nuances of e-communication and its possible ramifications, is just not wise program practice.

Topics to be covered by your policy statement could include, but are not limited to:

- Program's right to supervise and monitor employee's use of e-tools

- Statement of program ownership of e-tool resources
- Confidentiality of both program and client information and data
- Expectations for abiding by copyright laws
- Job responsibilities which can, and can not, be performed using e-technology
- Expectations for managing e-mails for program documentation, including how long to maintain e-records (both hard copy and electronic versions)
- Standards for *netiquette*, such as sentence text with correct grammar and spelling, so your program's public image is consistently professional
- Scheduling expectations for e-mail use (e.g., requiring e-mail inbox to be checked daily at the beginning and end of each shift or setting the goal of answering e-mails with 24 hours)
- Topics which require copying supervisor on e-communications (for example, classroom updates or reminders to parents about classroom policies)
- Non-bias communication expectations, such as zero tolerance for harassing, offensive language related to gender, age, race, culture/ethnicity, faith, disability, marital status, appearance, or sexual orientation, or sharing violent or sexually explicit language or images
- Extent of staff rights to use e-resources for personal communication during break times
- Limits on forwarding items, such as jokes, chain letters, advertisements, political lobbying, or religious proselytizing
- Scope of staff rights to use e-resources for professional development outside of work hours (e.g., online learning, listserv participation, etc.)
- Consequences of violating e-policy, such as rescinding e-mail usage rights or even termination of employment

Staff Training Supports E-Policy Compliance

Once you have a policy, it is your responsibility to educate your staff on the particulars of that policy. Your goal is to help them use e-resources to carry out their job duties successfully, not to add more work to their already busy days. Remember, the best training tool around is your own good example. Model proper and effective e-mail use and staff are more likely to comply with your expectations.

Talking Points to Cover with Staff

Determine when e-mail is—and is not—the best tool. E-mail is one way to communicate—not the only way. Talk to your staff about the importance of matching the right communication tool to the right purpose. If you have public factual information that is short and sweet to pass on, e-mail is a great tool. If you need an immediate answer, e-mail may not be the way to go. E-mail is not best for sharing very personal or secured information. I've found e-mail is just too easy to hide behind—especially when I'm facing a difficult or touchy conversation. I doubt that I'm alone in that folly.

Confidentiality: First, last, and always. Specifically itemize the topics of information best suited to e-mail and topics that aren't. For instance, use e-mails to schedule a parent conference but not to convey private conference information such as the results of a child's developmental assessments. In general, e-mail should not be used to discuss confidentially sensitive topics. And of course, refuse to allow gossip in e-mail. Help staff to remember not to say anything in an e-mail that they wouldn't say to someone's face.

Protect program e-resources. To limit the chance of a computer virus, never open an attachment from someone you don't know or one that looks suspicious.

Maintain e-resource security. Never share passwords with anyone.

Make communication and networking easier with signature information. Your program's profile and staff networking are enhanced by including signature information that is automatically included at the end of each outgoing e-mail. Signature information typically includes the sender's full name with title, program affiliation, program address, phone, FAX, and website address.

I hope these guidelines help. Keep in mind that nothing in this article constitutes legal advice. As with all other human resource issues, consult an attorney when developing your program's specific electronic communications policies and procedures.

Karen Stephens is the director of the Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for ISU Family and Consumer Sciences. She is author of the electronic parent newsletter, "Parenting Exchange" (www.ChildCareExchange.com). This article was adapted from Stephens' article in the November 2008 issue of Exchange.

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The Director's Toolbox

Writing effective, efficient e-mails: Tips to share with staff

Staff often need assistance in using e-tools as a timesaver that promotes clarity and cooperation rather than chaos and confusion. E-mail shouldn't add more weight to our workload. It should serve the goal of making our work day more efficient. Share the following tips with your staff:

Use the subject line. Make it specific and descriptive. Give the reader a topic clue so the e-mail can be filed and managed appropriately. Avoid vague subject titles such as *Update, This & That, FYI, Two Things,* or, *Question.* Instead, say *Update on gate repair* or *Question on late pick-up fee.*

Preface each subject with a classroom name or number, especially if you have a large program (for example, *Infants 1: Evacuation crib needed).* You can then organize e-mails by classroom to prioritize your work.

One topic per e-mail: Messages and responses are easier to track if you avoid putting too many topics into one e-mail.

Keep e-mails brief and paragraphs short. At the very most, one screen of text per message. Bulleting or numbering points is helpful.

Be specific about dates and time. Don't rely on *today, yesterday, tomorrow,* or weekday names to communicate. Instead, when you refer to time, specify: *Tomorrow, Friday, Oct. 31st at 9 a.m.*

Don't send e-mails too quickly. Double check the *To:* section to be sure the correct address shows up.

Reply to all when appropriate. When more than one person is included in an e-mail and the response is relevant to all, keep everyone up to date by using the *reply all* feature.

Blind copy recipients or use a group name. If you are sending a mass e-mail be sure to hide individual addresses by using one of these procedures.

Use attachments wisely. Only send attachments when the information can't go into an e-mail or when the receiver needs a clean copy of information to post.

Avoid wallpaper and splashy graphics. They may look great on your screen but the recipient's program may not be able to decode them.

Use a font style and font size that are easy to read. Using a universal font style will ensure the readability of your message.

Avoid sending extremely large files as this can overload systems. This is often the case when e-mailing digital photo files.

Remember to actually attach attachments. It is often forgotten and generates more e-mail between sender and receiver.

Include a confidentiality disclaimer. This can be set up to automatically appear at the end of each e-mail. Here is a sample:

Confidentiality Statement: This message is intended for the use of the individual or entity to which it is addressed and may contain information that is privileged, confidential, and exempt from disclosure under applicable law. If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient or the employee or agent responsible for delivering this message to the intended recipient; you are hereby notified that any dissemination, distribution, or copying of this communication is strictly prohibited. If you received this communication in error, please notify me immediately by e-mail reply or by telephone at_____and immediately delete this message and any attachments.

Adapted from Stephens, K. (2008, Nov/Dec.) E-mail and all that jazz. *Exchange,* 19-20

Planning Ahead

Technology Training for Early Childhood Administrators

There is a $45 fee for each of these trainings.

Snazzy Snapshots: Digital Documentation in Your Program

Bring documentation and parent communication to life with a number of easy-to-use online tools. Learn how to use a digital camera and sites like Shutterfly to create colorful, engaging portfolios and photo books that are sure to impress. Discover innovative ways to incorporate your digital creations into your program as tools for communicating information with parents and marketing to your community. *No desktop publishing, advanced computer skills, or web design experience required.*

Date: Thursday, February 18, 2010
          9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Location: Blackhawk College Outreach Center
          301 Avenue of the Cities, East Moline, IL 61244

Facebook and Twitter as Marketing Tools for Early Childhood Programs

Social networking isn't just for teenagers anymore! Learn how Facebook and Twitter can be used as powerful tools to help market your program and communicate with stakeholders. Participants will walk through the process of establishing a Facebook page for their program, learn how to update their page, post photos, set permissions for visitors, and track the page's effectiveness. Discover how your organization can use Twitter as a communication tool to "tweet" your way to the top. Participants will also discuss the implications of social networking tools and how to establish policies and procedures that ensure the privacy of families and staff. *No past social networking or advanced computer skills required.*
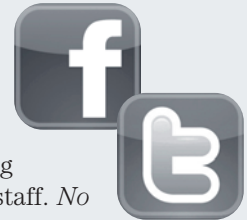
Date: Friday, March 12, 2010
          9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Location: National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

Date: Friday, March 19, 2010
          9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Location: Lewis and Clark Community College
          NO Nelson Campus, 600 Troy Road, Edwardsville, IL 62025

Packing Power into Presentations with Microsoft® Office PowerPoint® 2007

Take your presentations to the next level. Learn the potential of Microsoft® Office PowerPoint® 2007 for creating winning presentations. Learn how to add graphics, video, hyperlinks, and custom animation to enhance your presentations. Find out what you need to know before purchasing a multimedia projector for your center. Become familiar with best practices for integrating technology into presentations. *No past PowerPoint® or advanced computer skills required.*

Date: Friday, April 16, 2010
          9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.
Location: National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex

Program Administration Scale—Assessor Reliability Training

January 12-15, 2010 or October 19-22, 2010

The Program Administration Scale (PAS) measures leadership and management practices of center-based early care and education programs. Assessor Reliability Training includes an overview of the instrument, how to relate indicators and score items, the protocol for interviewing and collecting data, and procedures for verifying documentation. Individuals who successfully complete the training are eligible to become certified PAS assessors.

This four-day training is designed for technical assistance specialists, quality monitors, management, consultants, researchers, and other professionals interested in using the PAS to reliably assess early childhood leadership and management practices.

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex
Fee: $1,025 includes all texts, materials, and meals

Participants may receive two semester hours of graduate credit (ECE582C, Early Childhood Program Evaluation) by paying an additional fee.

Promoting Excellence in Family Child Care

February 24-27, and May 24, 2010

Promoting Excellence in Family Child Care, presented in collaboration with the Grand Victoria Foundation, is designed to create a cadre of experienced program consultants who can provide technical assistance to family child care providers interested in applying for star levels three and four in the Illinois Quality Rating System and implementing suggested program improvements resulting from the *Business Administration Scale for Family Child Care* (BAS) assessment. Participants will learn how the BAS can be used to set goals to incrementally improve business practices that result in better communication with parents, financial stability, reduced risk in operating a home business, and compliance with legal requirements.

This training initiative is designed for seasoned professionals. College instructors, resource and referral specialists, family child care network supervisors, and independent consultants are encouraged to apply. This training experience will be limited to 15 participants. Deadline is January 18, 2010.

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex
Fee: $150 includes all texts, materials, and meals

Family Child Care Institute—Best Business Practices

February 27 and May 15, 2010

Managing a high-quality family child care program and sustaining a viable business can be challenging. This institute, presented in collaboration with the First Step Fund and funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS), will provide you with the tools you need to improve your family child care business practices and get on the path toward accreditation.

Designed for current family child care providers as well as those who offer technical assistance and support to providers, this institute stresses the importance of professionally designed contracts, parent handbooks, and promotional materials that help family child care providers successfully market their programs, demonstrate best practices, and enhance business stability. Institute presenter will be Judy Bumpus, National Curricula Manager for the First Step Fund.

Location: McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership
National-Louis University, Wheeling Campus Annex
Fee: $199 includes all texts, materials, and meals

Participants may receive three quarter-hours of undergraduate credit (ECE335, Best Practices in Family Child Care) by paying an additional fee, completing a project, and engaging in an online discussion about family child care program practices.

Hotel accommodations for these trainings are available at the Candlewood Suites, adjacent to the Center. To make a reservation, call (847) 520-1684.

LEADERSHIP Connections

May 13 - 15, 2010

Join Us to Celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Center and the 10th Anniversary of Leadership Connections

Location: Westin Chicago North Shore
601 North Milwaukee Avenue
Wheeling, IL

Fee: $375 before February 1, 2010
$400 February 1 - March 31, 2010
$450 April 1 - 30, 2010
$500 after May 1, 2010

Discounts are available for groups of 10 or more

For more information about registration or sponsorship opportunities, contact Donna Jonas at (800) 443-5522, ext. 5058 or donna.jonas@nl.edu or http://cecl.nl.edu/training/lc.htm

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Take Time Out to Join a Discussion Online

The Center hosts a series of online discussions moderated by nationally recognized early childhood experts. These online discussions are open to the public. Join the conversation to chat with the people who have helped shape early childhood policy and practice.

Best Business Practices for Family Child Care

Monday, March 1 – Saturday, March 6, 2010

Guest expert: Judy Bumpus, First Step Fund, Kansas City, MO, was part of the development team for the *Developing Your Family Child Care Business* curriculum. She has taught the program since its inception and has trained other programs across the country in use of the curriculum.

Join us on our website (http://cecl.nl.edu) as we focus on understanding core business practices needed to ensure profitability and developing a system to implement these practices.

Happy New Year from our family to yours…

The faculty and staff of the McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership

Carmen Adamczyk, Giovanni Arroyo, Jill Bella, Paula Jorde Bloom, Linda Butkovich, Melissa Casteel, Eileen Eisenberg, Lisa Ellis, Lila Goldston, Ann Hentschel, Donna Jonas, Tarah Kandell, Robyn Kelton, Kara Lehnhardt, Heather Knapp, Leslie Norman, Martha Owens, Liliam Perez, Kathy Radice, Lorena Rodriguez, Kathy Rousseau, Paula Steffen, Teri Talan, Debra Trude-Suter, Barb Volpe, and Migdalia Young