

The Grandma Mary Story Series: A Stitch in Time

BY BARB VOLPE

In early childhood leadership, small things left unattended don't stay small for long. As administrators, knowing when – and how – to take timely action can make all the difference. It's a lesson I first learned from my grandma, Mary.

A proverb is a short saying that states a general truth, piece of wisdom, or life advice. My Grandma Mary loved to impart proverbs to me when she thought I needed guidance for an action I may have taken or advice to keep me on the right path. As a child, I would sit by Grandma as she mended her family's clothes, repairing small tears or replacing missing buttons, etc. This was one of her favorite tasks. She often told me, "A stitch in time saves nine." Along with sharing the proverb, she would explain why this was important: if she took care of the small tear now, it would prevent the tear from becoming much larger, which would require more time and energy to fix or a perfectly good piece of clothing could be ruined. We are often influenced by the messages we receive when we are young, and this proverb stuck with me. I came to value the importance of being proactive and addressing issues promptly rather than allowing them to escalate.

This proverb can apply to various aspects of life, whether personal relationships, professional endeavors, or even maintenance tasks at work or home. Consider some common workplace issues and occurrences that often benefit from prompt attention to prevent them from becoming more significant. Here are a few:

1. **Communication breakdowns:** Proactive communication to address misunderstandings, clarify expectations, and resolve conflicts early can prevent them from escalating into larger issues that affect team dynamics.
2. **Deadline management:** Proactively managing deadlines by identifying potential obstacles, allocating resources efficiently, and addressing delays promptly helps avoid last-minute rushes and assures timely completion of tasks or projects.
3. **Performance issues:** Providing feedback and support to team members who are struggling or underperforming can help them improve and prevent a negative impact on overall team performance. You can find a great activity on the benefits of proactive feedback [here](#), including a downloadable PDF version.
4. **Risk Management:** Identifying risks early in a project or process reduces the likelihood of them becoming significant problems that could derail progress or cause financial losses.
5. **Family or Staff feedback:** Addressing concerns or complaints promptly demonstrates responsiveness and commitment to family and staff satisfaction, preventing dissatisfaction from spreading or damaging the program's reputation.

It's easy to let small tasks slide—responding to an email, giving feedback to a staff member, documenting a concern, or following up on a missed deadline. On the surface, these tasks may seem minor or not urgent, but left unattended, they often grow into more complex problems that demand even more time

and emotional energy to resolve. So why do we put them off? Sometimes, the task is tedious, time-consuming, or doesn't feel satisfying to complete. Other times, we lack time management strategies or struggle to prioritize amidst a flood of daily responsibilities. And often, the task feels uncomfortable—addressing performance issues, setting boundaries with families, or giving constructive feedback can push us outside our comfort zone. We tell ourselves we'll do it later, but "later" can become a missed opportunity or a much bigger challenge.

Taking care of the small things—especially the uncomfortable ones—doesn't just save time; it builds trust, clarity, and a culture of accountability. As my Grandma Mary would also say, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure!"

STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME PROCRASTINATION

Here are a few simple and practical strategies to help early childhood leaders tackle procrastination:

- **Try the five-minute rule**
Commit to working on a task for just five minutes. Getting started is often the hardest part, and once you begin, momentum takes over.
- **Break big or uncomfortable tasks into smaller steps**
Instead of "have a performance conversation," start with "review notes" or "outline what I want to say." Small steps make big tasks feel more manageable.
- **Use time-blocking**
Schedule focused time in your calendar for important but easy-to-delay tasks. Treat that time like a non-negotiable meeting.
- **Reframe discomfort**
Remind yourself that giving feedback or addressing concerns isn't about confrontation—it's about growth, clarity, and care.
- **Watch out for perfectionism**
Waiting for the "perfect time" or ideal wording often leads to inaction. Done is better than perfect.

Think of one task you've been putting off—something small that could become a more significant issue if left unattended. What's been holding you back, and what small action could you take this week to move it forward?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION FROM THE MCCORMICK INSTITUTE FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD

Barrett, M. (2024, June 4). *The power ingredient to manage your time*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership. <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/power-ingredient-24/>

Bella, J. (2015, September 29). *Thanks for complaining: Appreciating feedback as an opportunity for growth*. McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership.

<https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/thanks-for-complaining-appreciating-feedback-as-an-opportunity-for-growth/>

Barb Volpe, M.Ed., is the Director of Professional Learning at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood. She oversees the development, facilitation, and implementation of leadership academies for early childhood center administrators. Barb is a state and national trainer in areas of early childhood program leadership and administration. Barb obtained her M.Ed. from National Louis University (NLU) in early childhood administration and her B.S. in child and family development from Southern Illinois University-Carbondale (SIU-C). Building on past experience as a statewide assessor for the Illinois QRIS system, she supports statewide technical assistance providers through training on quality assessment tools and coaching practices. Prior to her work at the McCormick Institute, Barb worked as an infant/toddler and preschool teacher, site director, and education coordinator for both community-based and Head Start programs. She has written articles on topics in leadership and management of early childhood programs and taught for several years as adjunct faculty at a local community college. Barb's passion is to support center-based administrators to continuously grow professionally and improve the essential care and education services they provide for young children and their families.