

A TRAINING MODEL FOR OLDER ADULTS FOR WORK IN CHILD CARE AND EMPLOYMENT RETENTION

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the reasons some older adults forego or leave child care employment while other older adults remain employed. The participants were 140 persons 50 and older who had completed a training course for work in paid child care. Participants were interviewed and subsequently sent questionnaires at 9, 18, and 27 months after training. Of the 140 first contacted, 24 (17%) had never worked in a paid child care position following training, 21 (15%) worked less than 6 months while 95 (68%) had worked longer than a year. This retention rate is higher than published retention rates of younger workers. Low pay was cited most frequently as a reason among persons never working, while health problems were the most common response for persons working less than 6 months. For persons working at least a year, common reasons for leaving child care employment included few benefits, poor pay, health, and transportation problems. The implications of these findings include the useful role training may provide as a screening device, and the different supports older workers may need while employed.

Introduction

Over recent years, there have been two important advances in the child and youth work field. One is the emphasis on proper training and education of the workforce, as a significant aspect of the overall professionalization movement. Another advance has been the field's increased life span perspective, with emphasis on the applicability of developmental work with older populations, and with recognition that the relationships children and youth have with older adults can be a highly constructive

influence. During the same time period, the number of intergenerational programs in North America has grown rapidly. Intergenerational programs bring unrelated youth and children together with older adults for planned, mutually beneficial activities. They include programs in child care centers, long-term care facilities, schools, and other educational and human services agencies.

With this rapid increase has come the need for a competently trained workforce to staff these programs (Newman & Olson, 1997), just as there has been in the child and youth work field heretofore concerned with preparing practitioners to work with children rather than with a relationship pairing. However, the quality and availability of training for work in programs cutting across generational lines varies widely. There are few programs that train persons with the skills needed for specific intergenerational settings. One exception to this dearth of training for specific settings is the training of older adults to work in child care – a form of intergenerational programming as well as an issue in professionalization of the field as a whole.

This paper will briefly describe a training model for older adults in child care and assess the impact of the training model on the retention of those trained in child care work. The research reported here is among the first to assess what happens to older adults following training for work in child care. We first examine the reasons some trainees give for their decision to forgo child care employment and then look at the reasons why some trainees continued to work in child care while others left employment. The results have implications not only for the training and employment of older adults in intergenerational settings, but for child care in general.

Background

Child care is a field that lends itself to intergenerational programming and has potential benefits both for older adults and for children. Research with older adults working in preschool settings, primarily Head Start, suggests that older adults with widely varying skills can find satisfying work in preschool settings (Tramel-Seck, 1983). By working in child care, older adults can meet their needs to nurture and contribute to the growth and development of another generation (Newman & Riess, 1992). For the children in child care, older adults bring a unique combination of skills, life experience, understanding, patience, and nurturing that help give young children a sense of security and safety (McDuffie & Whiteman, 1989).

Child care is also a field in which the demand for trained personnel will continue to grow, thereby offering continuing intergenerational employment opportunities for older adults. Not only has the labor force participation of women with young children grown in the last decade (Kamerma, 1996), but the work requirements established in the 1996

welfare reform will further increase the demand for child care as women are pushed into the workforce.

It is important that child care workers have appropriate training. Child development and child care organizations such as the Association for Child and Youth Care Practice (formerly the National Organization of Child Care Worker Associations) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children recognize the link between training and the quality of care (Henderson, 1988). Training programs are important not only for the skills and competencies that they teach, but for the orientation they give trainees to the realities of work in child care and the child care workplace. Presumably, this exposure can help reduce the high turnover characteristic of child care work, turnover that is not only costly to employers, but which research has shown to impact negatively on children when they lack continuity of caregiving relationships (Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1989).

Child Care Worker Retention

Retention of workers is a problem common to child care employers. A National Research Council panel on child care policy reported that over 40% of child care workers left the field annually during the 1980s (Hayes, Palmer, & Zaslow, 1990), while Whitebook, Phillips, and Howes (1989) found that over 50% of child care workers were leaving annually. Either estimate points to a large turnover each year among child care workers.

A variety of studies have shown the link between work-related factors and high turnover in child care. Low pay, lack of benefits, and stressful working conditions are the major reasons child care workers leave their jobs (Phillips & Whitebook, 1986; Pennsylvania Legislative Budget and Finance Committee, 1989; Whitebook, Phillips, & Howes, 1989). Stremmel (1991) found that workers' level of commitment to the work, their satisfaction with pay and opportunities for promotion, and their perceived availability of job alternatives were the most important predictors of the workers' intention to leave child care employment.

Older Adult Worker Retention

The retention of older adults in the work force has been linked to several different factors. There is little literature related to the retention of older adults in child care, thus many of the conclusions reported are based on employment in general.

Employee benefits and pay are factors related to retention. For example, adults 55 and older identified forms of remuneration such as comprehensive health insurance, competitive salaries, generous vacation time, comprehensive retirement plans, and disability insurance as important to their retention (McCool & Stevens, 1989). Many of these work-related benefits are typically not available in child care employment.

Beyond concrete benefits, older workers cite job satisfaction and feelings about the work environment as being important. Working in a clean environment, feeling a sense of accomplishment from the job, using one's educational background and experience, working in a position respected by others, and having a sense of job security and a career ladder are all deemed important by older workers (Doering, Rhodes, & Schuster, 1983).

Flexibility appears to be an important work-related factor in retention. Many older workers agree that if flexible hours were offered in the work place, they could remain as productive contributors (Fyock, 1990). Availability of part-time work is also considered a good way to retain older workers in the labor force (Meier, 1988).

For many older adults, health and physical problems would not preclude work. For example, Koyl (1983) reports that 90% of the people age 60 to 75 have the necessary physical and mental capacities to stay on a job. However, a survey conducted by Generations Together for the American Association of Retired Persons found that among older child care workers, health problems were one of the difficulties of the job (AARP & University of Pittsburgh, 1993).

Methods

The Training Model

The training and placement programs that enrolled the older workers in this study all used the same training model. The curriculum, designed by Generations Together over more than a decade beginning in the 1980s, includes complete written materials for student and teacher use and materials that explain how to organize and implement training courses (Smith & Mack, 1993; Ward & Smith, 1993). The training prepares older adults to work as child care aides through approximately 120 hours of classroom instruction and supervised practicum. The training includes units on child development, learning and development, classroom management and positive guidance for children, program planning, play, and various content areas such as art, math and science, music and movement, children's books, communicating with adults, and professionalism. In addition to using the practicum experience that brought trainees into a child care work environment, each training project included job search and workplace preparation and to varying degrees assisted graduates with job placement.

The child care training took place in 21 different sites across the United States, including sites in Pennsylvania, California, Florida, Michigan, and Washington. Generations Together staff carried out the training in some locations, primarily Pennsylvania. In other sites, Generations Together provided the curriculum and onsite technical assistance to staff of community colleges, child care agencies, or community centers. Training occurred at different times during the period of 1990 to

1992, and Generations Together remained in regular contact with all sites during their training and placement periods for the purpose of monitoring and evaluation.

Participants

The workers participating in the study were persons 50 and older who had completed the eight-to-ten-week older worker child care training and placement program in the 21 sites. The study began tracking graduates of the training cycles six to 18 months after the end of their training.

The research team compiled a database of 238 graduates of the 1990-1992 training cycles either from post-training evaluation questionnaire cover sheets already on file at Generations Together or from lists previously supplied by the training sites. All 238 graduates received letters describing the potential research and requesting their participation in the study. The letter indicated that they would receive an initial phone call to solicit their participation and to screen for their eligibility. To enhance participation rates, the letters were co-signed by the original trainers from the various sites.

Contacting the child care training graduates for the screening interviews proved to be difficult. Some had moved and others had their telephones disconnected or had given no phone number on their training records. To solve this problem, we asked the trainers for alternative ways to contact graduates, checked with directory assistance and the post office, and called up to five times a day at different times of the day.

Using these methods, we were able to contact a total of 140 older adults of whom 24 had never worked in child care after the training, 21 had worked but by the time of the telephone screening interview were not working in child care, and 95 were still working in child care at the time of the follow up. Of these 95, 68 agreed to participate in the study. Over two years, 44 worked in child care throughout the study and 24 left child care.

Data Collection Procedures

Graduates of the training were screened by telephone to determine their work status. While our original intent was to interview just those persons still employed, we realized that the screening could provide relevant information about why persons decided against pursuing employment in child care or were no longer working. Therefore, a component of the research reported here utilized data gathered in the initial telephone screening interview. These data are reported as "screening instrument group."

The remaining participants in the study, that is, those who were employed in child care at the time of the screening interview, were divided into three groups: group one completed their training in 1990; group

two completed their training in 1991; and group three completed training in 1992. Those persons who were working and willing to participate were sent questionnaires at three time points following their training: nine months, 18 months, and 27 months. Groups one and two received questionnaires at all three time points. However, group three completed training after the study had begun and therefore received only two questionnaires. These three groups represent the “longitudinal sample.”

Instruments

The study gathered demographic data, job-related data, and attrition-retention data using project-developed instruments. The project team constructed these questionnaires using items from previous Generations Together studies, and piloted and revised them before administering them to participants.

Findings

Screening Instrument Group

Of the 140 older adults contacted post-training, 24 (17.2%) had not worked in a paid child care position despite offers of paid employment in child care to eleven persons. The 24 respondents offered a variety of reasons why they had not gone to work in child care (see Table 1). Low pay (mentioned by 7 respondents) and the lack of benefits (1) were disincentives for some respondents. Even with low pay, one respondent was concerned about the impact of paid employment on the level of her Supplemental Security Income program benefits. Four respondents had taken jobs in other fields and two had lost interest in working in child care. Other respondents noted personal reasons such as poor health (4), caregiving responsibilities (4), were too busy (4), or had transportation problems (2). Finally four respondents noted that they had received no offers, one respondent was unable to obtain state clearance to work with children, and one felt that the interviewer at the job site held a negative attitude towards her.

An additional 21 persons contacted after training had worked for a time in child care but were no longer working in child care at the time of the follow-up. Only 7 of these persons were continuing to look for work in child care. Persons in this group had worked an average of six months. Nine respondents mentioned health issues such as surgery, declining health, or broken bones as the reason for no longer working. Interestingly, only one person noted pay and benefits as being a problem, and a second person noted benefits. Further, only one person noted caregiving responsibilities as the reason for no long working in child care. The remaining reasons included concerns about the number of hours, lack of interest in child care work, the position being terminated, transportation, and relationships on the job (see Table 1).

Table 1

Reasons not working in child care by Group^a

Reason	Never Worked (n=24)	Stopped Prior to Study (n=21)	Stopped During study (n=24)
Pay	7	1	5
Benefits	1	2	8
Health	4	9	5
Transportation	2	1	7
Caregiving	4	1	1
Too busy	4	0	0
Took another job	4	0	0
Lost interest	2	2	0
No offers	4	0	0
Laid off	0	2	0
Job relationships	0	1	0
Too few hours	0	3	0
Too many hours	0	2	0

^a Respondents could mention more than one reason, therefore columns do not sum to the number of respondents.

Longitudinal Sample

Of the 68 respondents employed at first contact, 14 (19.2%) were still employed 18 months after training, 30 (41.1%) for at least 27 months, 19 (26%) were no longer working by 18 months after training, and five (6.8%) had stopped working between the 18-month and 27-month time period.

The 68 respondents reflected a diverse group geographically and on other demographic variables. Barely half (51%) were married and the majority (60%) were white. Living arrangements were diverse with 23% living alone, 39% lived with a spouse only, and 38% lived in multigenerational households or shared residence with other relatives or friends. Most household incomes were low with 31% living in a household with an income below \$10,000 and 43% living in a household with income between \$10,000 and \$20,000. Only 8% had graduated from college. Finally, 45% reported providing care to a spouse or another family member.

The only statistically significant demographic difference ($z=3.79$, $p < 0.1$) between workers and persons who stopped working at some point was that persons who were married were more likely to stop working than single persons (never married, divorced, separated, or widowed).

There were no differences on ethnicity, caregiving responsibilities, income categories, living arrangement, age, or perceived health status.

Persons who stopped working mentioned a variety of reasons for leaving child care employment (see Table 1). The most common response offered by eight respondents, was that there were too few benefits offered, and five respondents noted that the pay was poor. Seven noted difficulties with transportation, five noted health problems, and one reported family obligations.

While pay was noted as a reason for no longer working, the pay of those persons no longer working was not statistically different nor very different in actual amounts than the pay of those persons who continued to work. At the start of the study, those who continued to work earned an average of \$4.95, while persons who stopped working earned \$4.77.

On the other hand, there were differences in the actual number of benefits offered. Those persons who continued to work received more benefits than persons who no longer worked. These benefits included paid vacation, paid sick leave, health insurance, dental insurance, life insurance, pension plans, and paid holidays. At the onset of the follow-up, persons who continued to work reported an average of 1.36 benefits, while those persons no longer working had only .33 benefits. While in both instances, the number of benefits reported were quite low, the difference was statistically significant ($t=3.22$; $p < 0.05$).

Finally, respondents who continued to work had a higher level of work satisfaction than those who stopped working ($t=1.94$; $p < 0.1$). Conversely, there were no differences between the two groups on perceptions about promotion or fairness of their pay. Both groups were fairly ambivalent about these issues.

Discussion

Did the training increase the likelihood that these older adults would seek employment in child care or reduce the attrition rate of those who went to work? The data do not provide a simple answer to the question particularly in light of the very high turnover rates for child care in general as reported earlier in this paper. To summarize, of 140 respondents 45 (32%) had either never worked or had stopped working within one year. However, the remainder, 95 (68%) of the 140 had worked for at least one year. This percentage is somewhat better than the rates of retention for younger child care workers reported earlier. Eliminating persons who did not work in child care increases the percentage of those working for at least a year at 82% (95 out of 116). This retention percentage is far better than reported rates for younger workers. Further, among persons working at least one year and for whom we had follow-up information, most continued to work beyond 27 months.

In judging the training program's effect on those who did not subsequently find employment, it is worth considering whether all those who

enrolled in these programs did so because they were seeking employment. The programs were free or very low cost to the participants. Some participants may have enrolled for other positive and useful reasons such as to explore career options, to learn about the child care field, or to find emotional or intellectual stimulation in the classroom. Some of the 24 who never found work probably enrolled with employment as a secondary priority. Among these were persons who responded that they were too busy to work or lacked any interest in working in child care.

Alternatively, the training programs may have served as a screening function for some of the 24 who never worked. Some in the program may have assessed the nature of the work, compared it to their needs, and decided that child care employment was not for them. The eight who indicated that they never worked because pay or benefits were too low may reflect a group who either needed more fiscal security or did not think the pay was commensurate with the demands of the work. Given the relatively short length and low cost of the training, this screening function may be very useful not only to older adults who learn whether child care work is for them, but also to child care centers who are interested in retaining their employees.

This study found that among the reasons older adults may leave paid child care employment are some that are shared with the general population of child care workers. Employing older persons does not eliminate turnover due to low pay and few benefits endemic to child care. Yet, as a reason for attrition, pay and benefits do not appear as central to many older workers as they do to younger workers.

On the other hand, some reasons for not working in child care are more particular to older workers. These reasons include health problems, transportation problems, and caregiving responsibilities.

Across the three groups (never worked, stopped prior to the study, and stopped during the study) health problems was the most frequently mentioned reason for the older adults not working in child care. Health was mentioned particularly frequently by those who left child care employment soon after training. This may suggest that programs that prepare older adults for work in child care consider health in several ways.

First, training programs could prepare trainees to deal with health conditions that may not present a problem for them in many employment situations, but which may be a concern in child care environments. Such preparation could include instruction on how to become sensitive to and avoid injury in the work place by using proper techniques for lifting children, creating safe traffic patterns, and including instruction on health supporting physical activities to reduce the vulnerability of the older worker.

Equally important, programs that train older persons for intergenerational work may need to work with employers on ways that they can

accommodate the physical and health needs of older adult employees. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has recognized the need to work with employers in this way and has adopted a set of guidelines for those who employ older adults in child care. Such guidelines could be used as the basis for employer workshops or other training (Ward, Newman, & VanderVen, 1995).

Specialized training programs should be designed so that participants are aware of these concerns. Such programs can offer pretraining screening to potential trainees that emphasizes the need for transportation to the workplace; the realities of pay, benefits, and typical work schedules in child care; and how employees can work with employers on simple accommodations that can make the workplace more productive for everyone.

Finally, organizations engaged in training need to work closely with employers to ensure the best possible work environment for all their employees including older adults. While older workers share concerns with younger workers, they have additional concerns as demonstrated by the findings of this study. Employers may need to make some accommodations for older workers in order to promote older workers' successful retention in the workplace. In a time of increased demand for child care workers, and the finding of lower turnover among this group of trained, older child care workers, such efforts are beneficial to the organization, the child, and the employee.

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