

## **BURNOUT IN INFANT AND TODDLER CHILD CARE STAFF MEMBERS**

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**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this study was to identify variables or combinations of variables that are related to burnout in infant and toddler child care staff members. The 207 participants were employed in privately and community-sponsored programs in large metropolitan areas of five midwestern states. Staff members were administered the Maslach Burnout Inventory, a 20-item semantic differential measuring mood, and a questionnaire about personal and job characteristics. Data were analyzed by means of one-way analysis of variance and stepwise multiple regression. Participants who were college graduates, or aged 25-34, or received a higher salary, or had fewer than two children of their own, reported more burnout. The amount of space and materials available, parent and staff relations, and the amount of staff input into the program were also found to be significantly related to burnout.

Stress in life, whether it be at home or at the workplace, appears to have significant effects on the physical and emotional well-being of adults. Many studies have been conducted examining normative life stressors such as marriage, the birth of a child and retirement. While burnout in some professions, such as corporate executives, helping professionals (teachers, social workers, nurses) and white collar workers have been studied, little is known about stress in child care staff members. Questions about stress, stressor events and burnout in the child care profession have seldom been asked.

Monat and Lazarus (1977 p. 13) define stress as "any event in which environmental demands, internal demands, or both, tax or exceed the adaptive resources of an individual, social system or tissue system." The fact that workers in the helping professions experience stress has been well documented (Cichon, 1980; Cherniss, 1980a; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1978a; Needle, 1980; Sharit & Salvendy, 1982; Cooper & Marshall, 1980).

Freudenberger (1975) explains that the burnout that professionals experience in the helping professions differs from that of other professionals. Workers in the helping professions are fighting a battle on at least three fronts: trying to cure the ills of society, meeting the needs

of the recipients and trying to meet personal needs. Maslach (1982 p. 3) defines burnout as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind." While the definitions may differ, researchers do seem to agree that the concept of burnout is multidimensional and cannot be measured and summed into one overall burnout "score" (Research of Berkeley Planning Associates, 1977; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Perlman & Hartman, 1980).

### **Involvement with People**

Professionals in the helping professions are in contact with people often, and these people usually have problems. The very nature of their jobs requires that they focus on the deficiencies and weaknesses of recipients. Wills (1978) found that professional helpers have a consistently more negative evaluation of the people they help than does the general public. Jameson (1980) reported that the major cause of job dissatisfaction among family physicians was lack of appreciation. When this lack of positive reinforcement continues over a length of time, helpers may begin to feel negatively about the "ungrateful" people for and with whom they work.

### **Personal Characteristics**

Many researchers have written about the personal characteristics of professionals prone to burnout in the helping professions (Cherniss, 1980b; Freudenberger, 1975, 1977; Helliwell, 1981). Freudenberger (1975) lists three personality types that are prone to burnout: the dedicated worker who takes work too intensely; the overcommitted worker who has an unsatisfactory outside life; and the authoritarian who has a need to be in control.

When looking at the biographical characteristics of helping professionals and their relationship to stress and burnout, the literature is not conclusive. Kyriacou and Sutcliffe (1978b) report very little association between self-reported teacher stress and gender, qualification, and length of experience. While Maslach (1982) also found little difference between the sexes, she did find that experience and qualification do relate to stress and burnout.

Maslach (1982), Cherniss (1980a), and Freudenberger (1975) state that helping professionals are very prone to burnout in the first couple years of their career.

Education also appears to be an important factor. Helping professionals with some college education, but not a completed bachelor's degree, show the least amount of burnout. The greatest amount of burnout was found in persons with a four-year college degree who have not had any graduate training.

Marital and family status also are related to the frequency of burnout, with single people experiencing the most burnout, divorced people experiencing less, and the married person experiencing the least. Men and women without children also have a greater risk of burnout (Maslach 1982).

### **The Job Setting**

The policies of an agency or organization can strongly influence the attitudes and performance of the professional (Cherniss 1980b). The bureaucracy defines much of the nature of the care that recipients are to receive, what kind, how much, when, and for how long. At times, this bureaucratic control conflicts with the needs of individual clients and the humanitarian values with which the professional has been educated.

Policies are made without staff consultation in many institutions, organizations, and agencies. Maslach (1982) contends that burnout is high when people sense a lack of control over the care they are providing. Karger (1981) states that a worker's lack of ability to affect policy and administrative decisions often leads to cynicism, resignation and eventual alienation.

Co-workers and administrators are also important factors in the job setting. Depending upon the institution's policies with regard to these people, burnout may be reduced or accelerated. Policies which do not call for staff meetings and group sharing of problems can foster distrust and distance between people. Workers can feel alienated and alone (Maslach, 1982; Freudenberger, 1977).

### **Research Relating to Burnout and Child Care Staff Members**

Maslach and Pines (1977) reported that the staff/child ratio had a great impact on both the working conditions and the staff members' feelings about their jobs. The more children per staff member, the more hours of direct contact the workers had with the children.

More stress and negative attitudes of the staff were associated with longer worker hours. However, if the long hours involved more administrative or non-child-related work, the negative response was less likely to occur.

Stress and burnout also seem to be associated with breaks for staff members. Maslach and Pines (1977) reported that breaks for staff members were more often available in centers that were well-staffed, had shared work responsibility, had flexible work policies and had a variety of job tasks for each staff member.

Program structure is a more complex variable. While the more open, unstructured centers had better working conditions, they required a greater emotional toll from the individual staff members. Unstructured programs did not assign staff members or children to a specific room; staff members were not responsible for a specific group of children each day; and volunteers and children came and left the center at irregular times. The staff of unstructured centers reported a greater change in emotional feelings (from high to low), were much less cheerful, less tolerant, less idealistic, less alert, less playful and more moody and irritable as the day progressed.

Staff members in centers where breaks were not available gave lower evaluations of the work relationships in the center and of the staff-parent relationships. After a day's work they reported being more impatient, more irritable, more strained and more upset and psychologically distant.

Both the number of staff meetings and the perceived importance of staff meetings were closely related to better working conditions in the center. Centers which had more staff meetings and staff input into policies were rated more positively by the staff. Staff members who had this input reported they liked their jobs better, conferred more with other staff members, felt free to express themselves on the job and had a more positive attitude toward children.

It appears that the burnout syndrome in child care staff members is related more to the *what* as Maslach (1982) proposes. Variables that are job related may contribute more to staff member burnout than biographical or personal characteristics.

### **Research Question**

This area of investigation is lacking in well-developed theoretical and empirical support from which to hypothesize. Therefore, as recommended by Marx (1963), a research question was posed instead of research hypotheses.

The research question for this study was as follows: which variables or combinations of variables are related to burnout in infant and toddler child care staff members, working hours, staff/child ratio, breaks, vacations, working relationships with other staff members and parents, staff meetings, parental status, education, work experience, program struc-

ture, age, amount of space and equipment, salary, and marital status.

### **Dependent Variable**

The dependent variable in this study will be burnout in infant and toddler child care staff members. Burnout will be measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Mood Scale.

### **Independent Variables**

The personal independent variables in this study will be staff members' age, parental status, marital status, education and work experience. The job-related independent variables will be working hours, staff/child ratio, breaks, vacations, working relationship with other staff members and parents, staff meetings, program structure, contribution to policy-making decisions, and the amount of space and equipment available in the program.

### **Methodology**

#### **Subjects**

Subjects for this study were 207 staff members working in infant and toddler child care centers in large metropolitan areas of five adjacent, midwestern states. The staff/child ratio mandated by day care licensing standards in these states ranged from 1: 3 to 1: 12. The centers in which the staff members worked were both privately and community-sponsored. The staff members who participated were head teachers, teachers, teacher aides and directors who worked with the infants and toddlers at least 20 hours a week. Two hundred and four of the participants were female and 58% of the sample was married. Thirty-eight percent of the subjects were under 25 years of age, 29% were between the ages of 25 and 34, 16% between the ages of 35 and 49 and 16% were 50 or older. The levels of education of the participants were widely varied with 39% having a high school education or less, 43% having obtained some college education, and 18% having done some graduate work. One hundred and forty-seven of the participants were white, 46 were black and 7 were Hispanic or American Indian. Forty-five percent of the participants had no children and 54% had one or more children.

#### **Instruments**

*Background.* A questionnaire was filled out by each subject on the

first day of the study. The information collected included: caregivers' age, sex, marital status, number of children, formal education, other training, ethnic origin and experience. Data about the caregivers' job included: ages of children, working hours, staff/child ratio, breaks, vacations, working relationships with other staff members and parents, staff meetings and hours spent on work-related activity away from the center. In addition, caregivers' attitudes and feelings about child care work and children and how these attitudes had changed since they began working in child care were obtained.

*The Mood Scale.* This scale dealt with the caregivers' perceptions of their own moods. The Mood Scale is a 20-item semantic differential scale depicting the staff members' attitudes and moods about their work with infants and toddlers. The Mood Scale was filled out by the caregiver before and after a full day of work.

*Maslach Burnout Inventory.* To assess burnout in the infant and toddler staff members, the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson 1979) was used. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) was labeled the Human Services Survey, so subjects were less aware of what was being investigated. The MBI consists of 22 statements. The participants were asked to rate "how strong" they felt about the 22 items, on an 8-point Likert scale. They were asked to rate the frequency of these feelings on a 7-point Likert scale (points ranging from "never" to "everyday"). Subjects were asked to fill out the MBI before work on the second day of the study.

## Procedure

Center directors were contacted by phone and asked if they would allow their staff members to participate in the study. Fifty-five of the 68 centers contacted agreed to participate (81%). Packets were then mailed to the directors, who in turn gave the packets to a contact person who was one of the participants. This contact person was responsible for distributing, collecting and mailing information. The purpose of having a contact person was to alleviate possible fears that the director might see the participants' responses. A total of 386 questionnaires were distributed to possible participants; 239 questionnaires were returned (62% return rate). Thirty-two of the questionnaires were not used due to incomplete data.

## Results

Factor Analysis was conducted on both MBI scales and the Mood Scales. The items on each of the scales are listed in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1**  
*Factors and Items for Maslach Burnout Inventory*

**“How Often” Factor**

**Factor 1: Burnout**

- I feel emotionally drained from my work.
- I feel used up at the end of the workday.
- I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
- Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
- I feel burned out from my work.
- I feel frustrated by my job.
- I feel I’m working too hard on my job.
- Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
- I feel like I’m at the end of my rope.
- I feel recipients blame me for some of their problems.

**Factor 2: Competence**

- I can easily understand how my recipients feel about things.
- I deal very effectively with the problems of my recipients.
- I feel I’m positively influencing other people’s lives through my work.
- I feel very energetic.
- I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my recipients.
- I feel exhilarated after working closely with my recipients.
- I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.
- In my work, I deal with emotional problems very calmly.

**“How Strong” Factor**

**Factor 1: Burnout**

- I feel emotionally drained from my work.
- I feel used up at the end of the workday.
- I feel fatigued when I get up in the morning and have to face another day on the job.
- I feel I treat some recipients as if they were impersonal objects.
- Working with people all day is really a strain for me.
- I feel burned out from my work.
- I’ve become more callous toward people since I took this job.
- I worry that this job is hardening me emotionally.
- I feel frustrated by my job.
- I don’t really care what happens to some recipients.
- Working with people directly puts too much stress on me.
- I feel like I’m at the end of my rope.

**Factor 2: Competence**

I deal very effectively with the problems of my recipients.  
 I feel I'm positively influencing other people's lives through my work.  
 I feel very energetic.  
 I can easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my recipients.  
 I feel exhilarated after working closely with my recipients.  
 I have accomplished many worthwhile things in this job.

**Table 2***Factor and Items for Mood Scale***A.M.****Factor 1: Morning mood**

patient-impatient	needed-unwanted
calm-tense	satisfied-dissatisfied
upset-cheerful	strained-easygoing
intolerant-tolerant	moody-even tempered
weak-strong	irritable-relaxed
intimate-distant	inept-capable
unfair-fair	caring-uncaring
cool-warm	alert-exhausted
effective-ineffective	playful-somber

**P.M.****Factor 1: Afternoon mood**

patient-impatient	needed-unwanted
calm-tense	satisfied-dissatisfied
upset-cheerful	strained-easygoing
intolerant-tolerant	creative-uncreative
weak-strong	moody-even tempered
intimate-distant	irritable-relaxed
unfair-fair	inept-capable
cool-warm	caring-uncaring
effective-ineffective	alert-exhausted
	playful-somber

Of the 17 independent variables, the one-way analyses of variance indicated that the following six variables showed no relationship with the dependent variables: structure, marital status, total number of hours worked, number of hours worked directly with children, number of weeks off per year and staff/child ratio. Therefore, these variables were not further explored. Additionally, the following two independent variables were eliminated because they were not found to be significant in the regression analysis: number of minutes of break per hours worked, and time off. Nine independent variables approached significance ( $< .10$ ) and were therefore retained for further analyses. These variables were: education, having one's own children, salary, age, material, space, parent relations, staff relations and staff input.

These independent variables were analyzed with the six factored scales as discussed earlier: (1) Morning Mood, (2) Afternoon Mood, (3) Competence (How Often), (4) Burnout (How Often), (5) Competence (How Strong), (6) Burnout (How Strong).

The ANOVAS showed that college graduates, staff members with higher salaries, and staff members between the ages of 25-34 years of age experience more burnout. Staff members experiencing less burnout had less than a college education, had two or more children of their own, and were 50 years old or older. In addition, they reported they had more than adequate space in which to work, positive parent relationships, more staff input into the program and better staff relations. Staff members with more competence perceived better equipment, more than adequate space, and better staff relationships.

On both the morning and afternoon mood factors college graduates and participants between the ages of 25 and 34 reported more burnout. Staff members with more input into the program, two or more children, perceived better space, and perceived better staff and parent relations reported less burnout on both scales.

To determine what variables or combination of variables were related to burnout in infant and toddler child care staff members, stepwise multiple regressions were conducted for each of the six factors. Only variables whose individual  $F$  values were significant at the .05 level of confidence remained in the model.

On the Morning Mood scale, good parent relations and good staff relations were negatively related to burnout, with the variable of education positively related to burnout. Therefore, more burnout was shown if parent and staff relations were perceived as poor and if the staff member was a college graduate. Because the classification of college graduate had such a strong relationship to burnout on the ANOVAS, education was entered as a categorical variable.

The Afternoon Mood scale showed that having fewer than two chil-

**Table 3**  
*Summary of Stepwise Multiple Regression  
 for Burnout and Competence Factors*

**Morning Mood Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	Staff Relations	-.250	8.92	.003
2	Parent Relations	-.197	9.34	.002
3	College Graduate	-.173	3.71	.05

**Afternoon Mood Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	Parent Relations	-.216	6.08	.01
2	*Space	-.150	11.02	.001
3	Two children	-.260	6.35	.01
4	Age 25-34	-.259	5.82	.01

\*reversed scoring

**Burnout (How Often) Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	Staff Input	-.450	22.11	.0001
2	Age 25-34	-.493	9.64	.002
3	College Graduate	-.455	5.94	.01

**Burnout (How Strong) Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	Staff Input	-.460	13.02	.0004
2	College Graduate	-.686	8.16	.004
3	Age 25-34	-.502	6.01	.01

**Competence (How Often) Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	*Materials	-.303	12.14	.0006
2	College Graduate	-.744	12.92	.0004
3	Staff Relations	-.462	5.96	.01

\*reversed scoring

**Competence (How Strong) Factor**

Step number	Variable entered	Beta	F	p > F
1	Staff Relations	-.593	7.97	.005
2	*Materials	-.244	6.18	.01
3	College Graduate	-.443	3.66	.05

\*reversed scoring

dren, perceived poor parent relations, perceived poor space, and being between the ages of 25-34 were positively related to burnout. Because the age group 25-34 and having two children showed such strong relations, these two variables were entered categorically.

On both burnout factors, How Often and How Strong, having poor staff input into the program, being a college graduate, and being between the ages of 25-34 were positively related to burnout. Better material, better staff relations, and a college degree related to higher competence on both of the competence factors, How Often and How Strong.

## Discussion

The personal characteristics that emerged as related to burnout on the ANOVAS in this study were: education, number of children staff members had in their families, salary, and the age of the participant. The job characteristics were: perceived adequacy of the amount of material and space available in the program, perceived parent and staff relations and the amount of staff input into the program. The ANOVAS showed that college graduates, staff members with higher salaries, and staff members between the ages of 25-34 experienced more burnout.

While no child care staff member received a large salary, college graduates probably are paid higher wages than nongraduates. These college graduates may also come to the "real" world with an idealistic expectation of how programs for young children will be. During the early years of their career, college graduates may experience conflict between their expectations generated by professional training and reality.

Freudenberger (1975) and Maslach (1982) both report that younger professionals are more prone to burnout. Many college graduates are in their 20's during their early professional years. Burnout may continue for several years as these new professionals learn to identify burnout and discover techniques to alleviate the syndrome, as well as to come to a comfortable compromise between unrealistic expectations and reality.

Staff members experiencing less burnout had less than a college degree, had two or more children, were 50 years old or older, reported they had more than adequate space in which to work, felt they had positive parent relationships, perceived more input into the program and perceived better staff relations. Staff members, who are 50 years old or older, who do not have a college degree and have raised at least two children would not experience the conflict between educational, idealistic expectations and reality. Additionally these women have had hands-on

experiences with children through all the stages of growth and development and probably have developed some skills to alleviate burnout. These older, more experienced staff members may be highly respected and trusted by the young mothers of the babies for whom they are caring. This respect and trust may positively reinforce the older caregiver, making the caregiver feel needed, appreciated, and consequently, less burnout. Staff members who perceive they have more than adequate space in which to work, perceive positive parent and staff relations, and feel they have more input into a program report less burnout, thus supporting the findings of Pines and Maslach (1980).

More burnout was experienced by staff members between the ages of 25-34 on three of the six multiple regressions and four of the six ANOVAS. Thirty-five percent of this age group had college degrees and were receiving better wages. Infant and toddler staff members in this age group need to be investigated further.

On the Morning Mood and Afternoon Mood factors, perceived poor space, perceived poor parent relations, and perceived poor staff relations were related to more burnout. Having less than adequate space in which to work could lead to more accidents and more negative interactions among the infants and toddlers, leading to more burnout. If there are poor parent and staff relations, the staff members may feel unappreciated which may result in job dissatisfaction as Jameson (1980) reported.

More burnout was experienced by college graduates between the ages of 25-34 who perceived they had poor input into the program, on both multiple regression burnout scales (How Often and How Strong). Staff members with college degrees, who felt out of control of their own jobs, experienced more burnout. This supports the findings of Maslach (1982) and Karger (1981).

Staff/child ratio, structure, number of direct contact hours with children, and the lack of opportunity for breaks were variables found to be significantly related to burnout in staff members working with children from 2-5 years old, by Maslach and Pines (1977, 1980). They found staff/child ratio had greater impact on both the working conditions and the staff members' feelings about their jobs. Although this may be true of staff members working with children aged 2-5, the present study does not support that fact with staff members working with infants and toddlers. This could be a result of differences that exist between programs for 2-5 year olds and infants and toddlers and the fact that 2-5 year old children are in different developmental stages than infants and toddlers. It should be noted that in all five states participating in the present study, the staff/child ratio for infants and toddlers was lower than the staff/child ratio for children 2-5 years of age.

## Conclusions and Implications

1. The job characteristics negatively related to burnout are: the amount of space and materials with which one has to work.
2. Parent relations, staff relations and the amount of staff input into the program are job characteristics positively related to burnout.
3. The personal characteristics negatively related to burnout are: the number of children in the staff member's family and age (with the exception of the 25-34 year old group).
4. Education and salary are personal characteristics positively related to burnout.

Since infant and toddler staff members who were 50 years old or older, had two or more children, or had less than a college degree, reported less burnout, they may be more suited for the specialized job of working with infants and toddlers. Directors hiring staff members for infant and toddler programs may look for staff members who have some combination of these personal characteristics. To hire older women with a high school education who have raised two or more of their own children would be a logical choice. Once these people were hired, on the job training, attendance at workshops, conventions, or organized classes could increase their knowledge of the subject matter.

Since most employers like to keep turnover rates at a minimum, there are efforts made to keep employees happy. This study identifies specific items that may reduce burnout and consequently may reduce turnover rates. Providing staff members with large amounts of space and good quantities of materials with which to work could prove to be beneficial.

The results of this study suggest that positive staff relations and positive parent relations may result in less burnout. Therefore it would appear that directors of infant and toddler programs would want to initiate and continue any policies that would improve these two areas.

In order for young college graduates to experience less burnout, early childhood educators at the college level may want to identify and investigate with the students in more depth the realities of infant and toddler programs. Burnout symptoms, possible causes, and relief strategies should be included in the professional curriculum.

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