

# Dedication Doesn't Have to Mean Deedication

by Paula Jorde Bloom

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Being an administrator of an early childhood program is not just a state of employment; it is a state of mind. So many individuals who don the director's hat with noble intentions of creating exemplary

centers end up leaving the field frustrated, depleted, and disillusioned. They burn out. They find that there is simply too much to do and too many people tugging on their sleeves for help, advice, and support. Are you at risk of burning out? Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you dread leaving your center for a long weekend or a short vacation because of the mountain of work that will pile up in your absence?
- Do you feel you do the work of several people and many things not in line with your job description?
- Does your work consume your whole life, rarely allowing you time to pursue outside interests?

If you answered affirmatively to these three questions, you may be at risk of becoming another burnout statistic; a member of the Director-Has-Been Club. The irony from a mental health perspective is that while many directors express concern that they cannot continue to perform their jobs at their

current level of intensity, they feel helpless in knowing how to modify their jobs to be more manageable. The frustrations that directors experience are not inconsequential.

Notwithstanding all the pains and pressures inherent in their positions, many directors find their jobs stimulating, challenging, and personally rewarding. They have developed a repertoire of skills and personal strategies as well as the mental attitude that allows them to grow, indeed thrive, in their roles.

I use the word *thrive* purposefully. Some people talk about coping with stress, but to me coping implies you're hanging on by a thread. Why not strive for something higher — creating a job suffused with excitement, engagement, passion, challenge, creativity, and joy? Drawing on the collective wisdom of those happy, healthy thrivers in our profession, here are a few things that you can do.

## Be aware of your own reactions to stress

Research into the psychological characteristics of job stress is an imprecise science, to be sure. The point at which daily frustrations can legitimately be classified as job stress is far from clear. But it is clear that stress and tension are a part of the everyday lives of early childhood administrators. Even the best-organized director is bombarded daily with frequent interruptions; even the most conscientious administrator must handle petty annoyances.

Stress is complex because there is no single identifiable profile or set of reactions that apply to all people. It covers a wide range of physical, behavioral, and psychological symptoms. Physical symptoms include such things as a headache, backache, a stiff neck, an upset stomach, a tight feeling across the chest. Psychological symptoms include all those feelings that can be associated with stressful situations — for example, feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or worry. Behavioral symptoms are the things people do when they are under stress — yelling, moping, eating, biting their nails, smoking, or drinking.

The key is to become sensitized to the stress indicators in your own life. Observe what gives you energy and what drains you. Listen to your body. Tune into the inner tension, aches, and subtle changes in your energy level. For each individual the symptoms will be different. Sensitizers are keenly aware when their body is experiencing stress. Repressors, on the other hand, ignore the signs or try to counter negative symptoms by pushing harder and working longer.

## Strive for balance

To be sure, *balance* means different things to different people. One person's stress is another's welcomed stimulus to peak performance. When we talk about balance, we mean the balance between giving and receiving, talking and

listening, planned and spontaneous, alone and together, now versus later, variety and routine, seriousness and silliness — the yin and yang tensions that make up a life.

So many directors who work in early care and education are also mothers who leave their full-time jobs to go home to another full-time job. So how do you structure a job to achieve a balance between your personal and professional lives? Psychologists use the term *affective neutrality* to describe the capacity to balance compassion with emotional detachment. This is the key to becoming a long-term thriver in the field — the ability to emotionally close the door at the end of the day.

Achieving a balance also means diversifying your interests. Don't define who you are solely by your professional accomplishments. Hillary Clinton had it right when she said, "Don't confuse having a career with having a life. They are not the same thing."

Every year *Working Mother Magazine* summarizes the accomplishments of 25 influential working mothers in America. One of the recent honorees said, "I don't believe in juggling. What you have to do is create a life that is a web of work and home, community, family, friends, teachers, and neighbors. Webs are strong." Think about ways that you can create better balance in your life by strengthening your own social support network.

## Embrace a new mantra — "Simplicity is power"

Simplicity is the art of doing less of what doesn't matter and focusing more on what does matter. Effective directors strive for substance over bureaucracy. They keep memos short, policies crisp, words to a minimum. They go for the essence. They are constantly looking for ways to streamline their programs without compromising quality.

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One of the hopes for the computer age was that small businesses would be able to become paperless work environments. That has been hardly the case. Most directors report that despite computerizing many of their office tasks and functions, they are dealing with more paper than ever before.

Take time to do a paper inventory of your office operations. Meet with your office staff to think of ways you can reduce the amount of paper generated and routed to others. Ask your team, "What things are we doing today that if we were not already doing them, we would not start doing?" Create standard templates for forms, memos, newsletters, and minutes, and keep paper communications lean to reduce the amount of mental clutter people have to wade through to get to the essence of your message. And don't allow things to accumulate that no longer have a real function. "If you get rid of it, you don't have to organize it,"

says Elaine St. James, author of the best seller *Simplify Your Life*.

Most important, give up on the notion that more is better. Consciously think of ways you can streamline your life. While many people long for simplicity, thrivers made conscious steps in their lives to make it happen. Their motto is: *The secret to happiness is not in getting more, but in wanting less.*

The simplicity movement is also challenging notions of how we spend our time. We live a 24/7 culture where we are connected to people continuously — while we drive, shop, and attend concerts — and where time is measured in nanoseconds. Thrivers don't try to manage time by working harder, cramming more into 24 hours each day, but rather working smarter, focusing on those things that matter the most, and letting go of those that don't. Years ago Mahatma Gandhi said, "There's more to life than just increasing its speed." The advice still holds true today.

## Accept the fact that you can't please all the people all the time

You'll always have parents who want you to change the program to be more academic and others who want you to lighten up and allow more unstructured play time. You'll always have teachers who have personal issues they'd like you to help resolve. And you'll always have professional colleagues who want you to serve on a committee or volunteer for a project. No matter how hard you try, you will always disappoint some people some of the time; and that is okay.

The teachers and support staff you work with on a day-to-day basis, the board or agency executive to whom you report, the families you serve, and the professional colleagues you work with in your community all have grand expectations for you — some of them realistic, and some of them not. Part of becoming an effective leader is accepting that you will never be able to win the approval of everyone you work with. There will always be someone eager to tell you how you could do your job differently (better) or use your time more wisely (to meet their agenda).

As blasphemous as it may sound, one of the best ways to become a more effective leader is to *lower your expectations*. Especially for perfectionists and high achievers, this may be the only prescription that really works. Destructive stress can result from setting unrealistic expectations. How about becoming the director that 80 percent of the people want to work for 80 percent of the time!

So take in the unsolicited advice, friendly suggestions, and stinging criticisms that come your way. Weigh them against your core values, and then decide what is best for you to do given the time, resources, and personal energy available. This will help you be true to yourself and comfortable with the knowledge that you can never please all the people all the time.

## Carve out time for positive self-indulgence

A common theme expressed by many directors is that they are expected to be all things to all people. Women in particular often define themselves as moral agents in terms of their capacity to care. Their sense of self-worth is tied to how much they give to others. The result of this orientation is that many women put their own needs at the bottom of the list after children, staff, and family members — even to the point of depletion. Diane, a preschool director, captured this feeling poignantly when she used the metaphor of an ATM machine to describe her job. "Just like an ATM machine, I'm always ready to give different amounts of time, energy, and care to different people at a moment's notice."

Everyone deserves and needs time for renewing body and spirit. Those who have no fire in themselves cannot warm others. Become deliberate about your self-care. Managing personal time means consciously setting aside a portion of each day for pursuits that enrich your mind and replenish your spirit. William Glasser calls these commitments to self *positive additions*. Ceramics, guitar, yoga, meditation, photography, jogging, or just soaking in a tub full of bubbles in a candlelit room — it doesn't matter what the particular indulgence is as long as you have one — something that makes you feel special.

In the end, I think we are wise to follow the advice of Grace Mirabella, founder of *Mirabella Magazine*. She says, "The name of the game is taking care of yourself, because you're going to live long enough to wish you had."

## Learn how to advocate for yourself

The thrivers in our field take seriously the old adage, *You are the architect of your*

*own future*. They have consciously crafted interventions to redefine their roles, their workload, and their interpersonal relationships. The most common strategy they share is their ability to say *no* with sensitive assertiveness. They can say *no* with unapologetic directness to someone who asks them to join yet one more committee, bake cookies for one more fundraiser, or solicit donations for one more cause. They have reexamined their need to be needed — the one that others can always count on.

In order to advocate for yourself, you need to have a clear sense of what you stand for, what you believe. Try to be more intentional in your focus about what is really important. Be clear about your core values and how they shape your decisionmaking.

One director I know has a great banner hanging above her desk: *I have the right to do less than is humanly possible*. Thrivers set high but achievable goals; they are clear about their priorities, and set realistic expectations for themselves and for others.

## In sum

Individuals in control of their lives have a deliberate game plan. They are well informed, sensitive to the stress indicators in their own behavior, and realistic in assessing their skills and resources. They have learned to put their jobs in perspective by adding diversity and interest to their lives. In other words, directors who thrive in their administrative roles do not do so by happenstance. Their actions declare that they are not passive about their destiny, not controlled by events. Rather, they are social engineers shaping their environment to meet their needs.

*"I slept and dreamt that life was joy.  
I awoke and found that life was duty.  
I went to work, and discovered that  
duty can be joy."  
Bengali poet Tagore*