

Guidelines for Implementing an Anti-Gossip Policy

Countering Center Gossip

by Margaret Leitch Copeland and Holly Elissa Bruno

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When asked about their greatest management challenges, a group of Vermont directors mentioned gossip as eroding professionalism in their centers. Two factors contributed to the directors' concerns: 1) during the staffing shortage, new hires are often young, inexperienced and under-educated, and 2) in small, rural towns, employees know the families enrolled in the program, which creates home and center boundary questions.

Why Do Staff Gossip?

Then when asked why staff gossip, the directors were also very clear in saying:

- 1) Staff members have a need to talk with other adults, and many love to talk
- 2) Other than common employment, staff members may have little in common with each other so they talk about parents, children, other staff and the director's decisions

- 3) People are trying to fit in
- 4) Passing on information increases a sense of self-worth
- 5) Staff members have strong feelings of frustration and are looking for a way to release their anger
- 6) People are looking for support

Gossip is a form of power. Gossipers have negative power to influence opinion, to be part of an inner circle, to feel one up or in the know, to isolate

another person who is seen as a threat or to undermine constructive change. One wise director commented that no staff member thinks that the comments he makes or the information he passes along is gossip; that, by definition, gossip is what other people do! Ironically, he also thought that all staff would agree that others need to be stopped from gossiping.

What Is the Director to Do?

The first questions to ask are:

- 1) Is the center mission clear? Is it a mantra for staff?
- 2) What is the center policy about gossip? Is there one? Does everybody know it? Are there consequences?
- 3) Does the director herself inadvertently engage in gossip?

Without a living mission or vision statement, the goal of the center is not clear



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to staff. Tee shirts, plaques, note cards, and brochures with the mission displayed help get the mission out of the file cabinet and into the life of the center. If staff cannot recite the mission of the center, there is little likelihood they will live it.

What Guidance Does a Director Have for Creating an Anti-Gossip Policy?

Fortunately, the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct (1998) provides critical guidance in creating a center policy about gossip:

“Ethical responsibilities to families:

Ideals: I-2.1 To develop relationships of mutual trust with the families we serve . . .

Principles: P-2.9 We shall maintain confidentiality and shall respect the family’s right to privacy, refraining from disclosure of confidential information and intrusion into family life.”

“Ethical responsibilities to colleagues:

Ideals: I-3A.1 To establish and maintain relationships of respect, trust, and cooperation with co-workers . . .

Principles: P-3A.1 When we have a concern about the professional behavior of a co-worker, we shall first let the person know of our concern, in a way that shows respect for personal dignity and for the diversity to be found among staff members, and then attempt to resolve the matter collegially . . .

Ideals: I-3C.2 To create a climate of trust and candor that will enable staff to speak and act in the best interests of children, families, and the field of early care and education . . .

Principles: P-3C.2 We shall provide staff members with safe and supportive

working conditions that permit them to carry out their responsibilities, timely and non-threatening evaluation procedures, written grievance procedures, constructive feedback, and opportunities for continuing professional development and advancement.”

The aforementioned directors suggested a policy that would include a definition of gossip and the consequences of gossiping, both to the injured party and to the employee. It would also include a statement that staff is expected to remind colleagues and parents about the confidentiality policy. Depending on the center, the policy may be developed by the board of directors, the director, or in concert with the staff and parents. It should be included in the staff handbook and posted in the staff lounge. The purpose of the policy is to create a culture of safety, encouragement and respect that is consistent with the Code.

It is important for staff to understand the purpose of the policy and to buy into upholding it. Sometimes it is not obvious to staff what is considered gossip or confidential information and what is simply common knowledge and shared information.

The Vermont directors suggested this activity for a staff meeting to clarify the difference between gossip or negative talk and common knowledge or shared information:

Confidential or Not Confidential, That is Part of the Question! (The Other Part is the Intent!)

1) The director listens for examples of inappropriate comments and carefully camouflages them to depersonalize the content. Then she makes up some outrageous examples, or perhaps uses real ones from her past. She writes enough vignettes on note

cards so that each staff member can have one. Examples might be:

- a) At circle time, Charlie tells about his mother’s boyfriend hitting her last night
 - b) The director has a new Monica Lewinski crocheted pocketbook
 - c) Tiffany’s father had on his jogging suit this morning and didn’t look like he was going to work
 - d) The board of directors is voting tonight on our raises for next year
 - e) Misty has a cigarette burn on her hand
 - f) The new staff member always wears long sleeves, even in summer
 - g) Tony’s aunt who has a child in another classroom wants to know how he’s doing
 - h) The teaching teams are going to be different next year; Cheryl is going to get demoted
 - i) Tyrone got expelled from another center before he came here
 - j) Charnetta’s mother couldn’t pay her child care bill this month
 - k) The Paperback Kiddie Book Klub money is missing and Juanita has new earrings
- 2) At the staff meeting, a hat is passed and everyone takes a card. The director creates small groups, making sure to divide up established gossip partners. The groups are then charged with deciding:
- a) Is this confidential information?
 - b) Is it accurate? Or gossip? Or rumor?
 - c) With whom should it be discussed? Should it be documented?
 - d) What is the intent of sharing this information? Helpful or harmful?
 - e) If you were the other person, would you want it discussed?
 - f) Are there safety issues (abuse, neglect, etc.) to be considered?
 - g) Is time essential or can you think about it first?
 - h) How would you recommend someone deal with this?

- i) How does the Code of Ethical Conduct apply?
- 3) Finally, groups report to each other.
- 4) The director then makes it clear what the policy is and what the consequences will be for violating it, as well as the unintended consequences for the innocent families and staff being discussed.

Knowing that adults do not always change their behavior just because there is a policy created and that people need some practice when a new behavior is expected, the director plans some role-plays for the next staff meeting. Again, he has created scenarios based on veiled local examples and typical dilemmas faced in early care and education. Staff is divided into dyads chosen in advance by the director: one person who does not have clear boundaries about gossip and one who does. There should be enough role-plays so that each participant gets to play the person who is trying to uphold the confidentiality policy and then to switch and play the opposite role.

The director makes a chart of phrases that are appropriate when a staff member is asked an inappropriate question: Didn't I see Brenda (teacher) at the Stark Brewery on Friday? Is Sally pregnant or is she just gaining weight? How could he afford that car? Is Kenny still biting? Do you think she had artificial insemination? The director circulates, listening for the phrases and reinforcing appropriate responses. The second meeting ends with an ultimatum clarifying the policy, the expected behaviors, and the warnings and terminations that may result if the expectations are not met.

One director reports that she writes up incidents and includes them in annual evaluations with examples of how gossip has gotten out of hand. She finds that staff who are in their first real jobs, dealing with many personalities, need explicit guidance.

Finally, the director must assiduously avoid any temptation to listen to the gossip that she abhors. She must articulate the mission, confront gossip and negativity immediately and promote peer responsibility to do the same. In this era of shortages in staffing, some directors report that they are loath to let any staff go and thus feel powerless to take action. Others report that the gossip is a good worker otherwise and that drawing a line in the sand may result in the termination of a valued teacher. But other staff members are demoralized by the culture of gossip and are watching to see the director's response to negativity and overt breaches of confidentiality.

What About Parents? How Can the Director Impact Their Conversations With Staff?

Helping parents understand the policy may require modifications of the activities used with staff. It is important to put the confidentiality policy in the parent handbook and to explain it at parent meetings. Instead of role plays, skits done by the staff may help parents see how they benefit from confidentiality and how some of their questions about who bites or has head lice may seem innocuous at first, but inappropriate on second look. One seasoned director notes that first-time parents simply haven't thought about the confidentiality they would like to be afforded, and thus ask such questions quite spontaneously.

One center distributes the Code of Ethical Conduct to parents with a letter explaining it. Their parent handbook gives examples of how staff must adhere to the Code. At first, when staff referred to the Code, parents were surprised to hear that their questions were considered inappropriate; but then when they thought about reversing roles, they would not have wanted their children's behavior commented upon by staff to another parent.

How Can the Director Get Staff to Confront Each Other When They Hear Gossip?

Staff need training on how to confront each other on gossip without falling prey to the shame-blame game, which only leads to defensiveness. Four key principles make for effective peer-to-peer confrontations:

- 1) Each person gets equal time to state the problem without being interrupted (a timer may help).
- 2) Active listening is required; paraphrasing what she has heard is allowable.
- 3) Phrases like "You should . . ." or "You shouldn't . . ." are not appropriate, but phrases from the training are: "Is this confidential?" "Why do I need to know this?" "If you were . . . would you want this discussed?"
- 4) Referring to the center's mission or the Code of Ethical Conduct keeps the discussion on a higher, depersonalized level.

The director can help by creating spaces where adults can sit and talk with each other with the door closed. She can also provide mediation when two staff members are not getting along. But primarily, when trained in appropriate techniques, staff can provide coaching on peer confrontation for each other. The coach guides each person to state her version of the problem, to say what she needs, to brainstorm possible solutions without criticism and to agree on common ground.

Because this process is a radical change from the indirectness of gossip and negativity, resistance is likely initially, but it becomes futile when the center culture changes to empower staff to confront ethical conflicts among their peers.

In *The Visionary Director* (1998), Carter and Curtis include a Conflict Resolution

Agreement (p.245), which may be helpful to directors trying to help staff take responsibility for confronting one another on gossip.

But What Will Staff Talk About?

In the absence of gossip, just how much can people talk about the weather? The reasons why people gossip have not changed. The director may find that he needs to influence the conversation in small ways; talking about changing the environment or enriching the curriculum, asking if teachers have read the latest article in *Child Care Information Exchange* or suggesting an upcoming workshop may need to be a very conscious effort to change the center conversational culture. Discussing plans for upcoming center events and what roles individual staff members will play can help people feel part of the team.

Giving staff enough ventilation time in supervision sessions can help with the feeling of frustration that early childhood educators feel when they are not well compensated for difficult and meaningful work. One director suggests that using some staff meeting time for expressions of frustration keep staff from exploding at parents and children.

Increasing staff appreciation strategies can help with feelings of self-worth and daily conversation with every staff member will create a sense of support from the director.

One director of a program with multiple sites puts out a daily newsletter with accurate information, including birthdays, employment anniversaries, substitutes working that day. She has found that by creating appropriate news items she is able to counter trivial gossip and rumor.

Another director takes every staff member individually out to lunch in Febru-

ary. After an initial awkwardness, she learns their dreams and concerns, and they enjoy having her undivided attention. She is able to tailor her questions to their professional developmental levels and to insert the kind of conversation she would like to hear in the center.

“The gossip problem is never totally gone,” cautions another director. “We need to keep talking and asking how we are doing. If we don’t, gossip keeps creeping into the center.”

Most of all, the director must model loyalty to the center mission, use the phrases, and keep asking the questions from the first exercise: What is the intent of telling that? Who needs to know? Is this helpful information? How does this advance the mission of the center? One director is careful to check with parents: “Is this something you want shared with other staff?” A gossip-free center culture supports everyone in the center community and eventually helps them focus on the mission and the work to be done on behalf of children and families.

References

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