

# Building better networking skills: The early lessons of COVID-19 for early care and education programs

*"I've been a director at this center for 15 years, and I've never made so many changes in so short time as I am now." (Licensed director's response when asked how COVID-19 has affected her early learning program.)*



March and April 2020 were months to never forget. As we looked forward to spring break and adventures with family and friends, the world seemed to come to a stop. We quickly halted plans for vacations; we had no date to anticipate returning to school, or plan for the uncertain future for early care and education programs.

Instead we followed every news report with data on infections and deaths from a new virus that defied prevention and cure. Guidance was inconsistent and sketchy, the most concrete being to wash your hands often, observe social distance, and cover your face.

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COVID-19 shifted the focus in our personal lives and also in our roles as business owners, administrators, or teachers. At that moment, a new normal was evolving. Early care and education program administrators who had demonstrated proficiency in educational programming and business operations were faced with shuttered classrooms and an unknown future.

## NETWORKING IS A RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP.

Would online classroom interactions and new financial support be enough to continue to balance both educational philosophy and practice with business profit? In this emerging (and unique) situation, directors were competing to make the bottom line based on enrollment with minimal support from external funding. COVID-19 has unearthed a clear and pressing need for program directors to network through unforeseen times.

But a new question arose—"What happens when you have to collaborate with your competitor?"

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) proposes professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators (2019). Administrators and directors are also *educators* as they create and sustain the learning and professional environment within early learning programs. The NAEYC (2019) standard on professionalism encourages educators to become advocates for others within the field and to work productively with families and other professionals. How does a

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program administrator demonstrate this proficiency?

Networking is a reciprocal relationship with mutual benefits that is developed through communicating with colleagues (Bridgstock, Jackson, Lloyd & Tofa, 2019). Benefits can include helping to obtain access to information and resources; sharing of ideas, practices, successes, and challenges; and providing emotional support to one another (Bridgstock, Jackson, Lloyd & Tofa, 2019; Merida Serrano, Gonzalez Alfaya & Olivares Garcia, 2017).

## Meeting the bottom line

From survey data and interviews in our research, we (2020) noted that directors do share many of the same business responsibilities. However, hiring and training staff, recruiting families, and creating and supervising curriculum implementation were done in isolation—each program managed responsibilities uniquely. Competition for staff and families was identified as the primary reason for programs to work independently. Collaboration seemed to be counterproductive.

The COVID-19 pandemic shook this status quo. Directors and program administrators realized that if they wanted their programs to survive, they needed help. This frightening demand required moving outside the established comfort zone to seek support from others, but how and where to find that help wasn't clear. In general, program leaders were unfamiliar with the tools necessary to locate cohesive information on new business requirements and practices.

Our research determined directors commonly expressed questions that reflect their deep concerns:

- How do I meet new social distancing and health guidelines?
- How do I maintain safety procedures to keep staff and families healthy?
- How do I negotiate new enrollment eligibility requirements that are based on parental work status?
- How do I manage a budget given limited enrollment?
- Will my program be able to reopen or enroll children again after the pandemic lessens or ends?
- How do I deal with the increased possibility of program closure?

One program director reflected on responding to the challenges presented by COVID-19:

*I'm talking to other directors now more than before. [My enrollment has decreased from 120 to 20 children]. I know*

*other directors from conferences, but we didn't talk about our business. [Instead] we talked about upcoming conferences in the area that were free or low cost. Now I'm contacting them more to learn what they are doing for the families and staff. It's hard because we don't have all the answers and the people we contact don't always give us the same response.*

## Finding help—in unexpected places

Based on best business practices coupled with director input, the following action steps can help guide directors through challenging times.

**Create an inner circle.** Rely on people who have expertise in your area of need—for example, your Child Care Regulation representative, an immediate competitor, and a child care health consultant. Build a networking relationship that is based on the person first. Good business practices will follow. We must remember that we are faced with a common challenge.

**Network in multiple ways.** Remember traditional networking tools are still available. The telephone allows us to remain connected by hearing a voice. The sound and tone of a person's voice compared to the words of a text or email can lessen misinterpretation and build much needed personal relationships.

Conduct face-to-face meetings when safe to do so, or communicate through technology that allows you to see each other and be reminded of our need for human interaction. A colleague—another program director (who maybe was once only a competitor)—can be there in a time of need. Through an exchange of ideas, we can improve *both* early learning programs. Current circumstances remind us that technology can be used as an asset to keep the talks alive.

**Join a professional organization.** Professional organizations focused on early care and education stay current with the changes that will affect our programs and businesses. One of their goals is to provide guidance for their members about the latest happenings in the field and to advocate for programs when needed.

A professional organization can be based at the local/county, regional, state, and national levels. Some memberships do come with a cost, but the organizations pride themselves on providing value to you as a member. Overwhelmingly, they offer timely, clear, and practical support when we are

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faced with challenges outside our control.

Professional organizations can help directors successfully network and collaborate—both by offering support when a program encounters a new challenge and celebrating successes when a program overcomes challenges. Research shows that being a part of an organization gives directors access to information as it becomes available.

Local professional networks can provide leads on securing essential materials (like milk, eggs, or toilet paper, for example) when broader media frighten everyone with reports of scarcity. Professional networks and organizations in our research (2020) also gave some directors help with applying for small business funds and completing paperwork to enroll in the child care registration portals.

## Look to professional resources

Explore these professional resources (and consider membership where appropriate) to get answers to immediate questions and to measure their worth to your program in the long term.

- Texas A&M AgriLife Extension provides online training for programs who are caring for children during the current pandemic at <https://agrilifelearn.tamu.edu/catalog?pagename=child-care-and-covid-19>
- Texas Association for the Education of Young Children offers a comprehensive list of resources for programs at <http://texasaeyc.org/resources/covid-19>
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children is offering over 100 free presentations for 6 weeks starting June 1 at [www.naeyc.org/virtual-institute](http://www.naeyc.org/virtual-institute)
- The Council for Professional Recognition is offering free webinars through November at [www.cdacouncil.org/newsletter/1808-2020-leadership-and-learning-webinar-series](http://www.cdacouncil.org/newsletter/1808-2020-leadership-and-learning-webinar-series)

## Navigating troubled waters

*People first* is a maxim that can be worthwhile any time but is especially useful now as COVID-19 has reminded us of our vulnerability. When we work in isolation, our senses become limited to our inner thoughts. There are times when we have to call on each other to bridge our experiences and overcome challenges we cannot individually eliminate.

A key to navigating the troubled waters is to remain connected with like-minded people. This can

be accomplished only by working together.

## References

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## About the authors

Lisa Taylor Cook, PhD, is an assistant professor who teaches child and family study courses at Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas. She has worked in military, public, and private child care programs as well as family child care and schools for 20 years.

Erika Aziegbe, EdD, earned a degree in educational leadership at University of Houston Clear Lake. Her experience includes being a school leader, director, training and curriculum director, and special education teacher, in both schools and child care programs for 18 years. ■