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Safety in the child care center is also for the early childhood staff

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In a study analyzing 54 day-care centers, results indicated that the major causes of injury in early childhood practitioners were constraints imposed by the classroom lay-out, as well as posture and physical exertion in conducting early childhood programs. The early childhood centre must not only be a safe and healthy place for children but also for the early childhood practitioners who work there. Unfortunately, we still have early childhood practitioners who have muscular-skeletal problems, particularly in the lower back. Improving the working conditions will not only benefit the staff and the children, it will also have an impact on sick leave and the quality of life in the centre. This article will provide you with some food for thought about the working conditions at your centre and a short checklist to use in assessing your own centre.

Examples of working conditions that are often present in early childhood centres and which have the potential to cause problems are noise, child-sized furniture, and the diapering change table. The goal of the following activity is only to make you aware of your situation. If your assessment indicates a high level of risk, it is probable that your work environment is a source of physical and mental discomfort to you. Repeat this exercise for each classroom, and at different periods in the day and throughout the year.

Noise

Risk factors:

- Architectural problems such as noise reflecting material (windows, painted ceiling, polished floor), children crying or fighting, noisy toys or activities.
- Effects on the early childhood practitioner:
- Stress, aggressiveness, fatigue, lack of attention toward some children. The problem can be made worse by the cumulative effect of many different noises.

Check out your situation:

- Which are the materials used in each room?
- Are there particular activities or games that are a greater source of noise?
- Could some toys be changed or used differently to avoid certain noises?

Possible Solutions:

- Decrease reverberation by putting curtains on the windows.
- Add acoustic tiles on the ceiling.
- Have children play on the carpet with noisy toys.
- Minimize the risk by selecting low noise toys.
- Frequently plan a short period of relaxation during the day, preferably with soft music.

Child Sized Seating

Risk factors:

The back is not supported and is bent or twisted without the appropriate sized seat. A child care practitioner often sits with one or more children in her lap. While holding the children, the practitioner may be twisting while trying to help the children or to carry out demanding tasks such as dressing or feeding the children.

Effects on the educator:

- Back pain, blood circulation to the legs and feet is slowed down.

Check out your situation:

- Do you have an adult sized chair in each room?
- Is the chair easy to lift, pull or push?
- Is the chair lightweight and safe for the children? (a rocking chair may be hazardous for children)

Solutions:

- Have an adult- sized chair in each room.
- Look for a product such as a floor seating chair which provides back support.
- Make sure the practitioner's legs can slide comfortably under the children's table.

The Diapering Table

Risk factors:

The table is not at the level of the adults height. The orientation of the table does not allow a good view of the group. One must lift the child up on the table, there is no helping device for the children to get on the table. The access to the various materials is inadequate (soap dispenser, sink, towel, garbage can).

Effects on the educator:

- Stress caused by not being able to see the group of children. Stretching and twisting from reaching or from lifting may cause back pain.

Check out your situation:

- What do you see while changing diapers?
- Is it possible to do a diaper change all at once?
- Can you keep in continuous contact with the child without having to stretch to reach for the material needed for the task?
- Is it possible to carry out the task without being disturbed continuously by the other children?

Solutions:

- The entire setting must be conceived in such a manner as to enable the educator to see her group while changing diapers. The child being diapered should be placed on a mat equipped with a thicker edge,

preventing the child from rolling on his side. Everything should be handy for the task before it is begun. An air-tight garbage container can be placed under the sink. This has the advantage that the practitioner would not need to bend over to dispose of a diaper and it can be out of reach for the other children.

A Working Conditions Checklist:

Use the checklist at the end of the article to assess your classroom for negative working conditions that are affecting your health and safety. When you discover a problem, take steps with your co-workers to remedy the situation. The checklist will help to identify the risk factors in your workplace. Injuries result from extra effort, poor posture, and repetition of movements or standing.

Aggravating factors recognized as being a direct cause of injury in early childhood care centers:

- Lifting heavy loads using mainly the force of the back rather than the leg muscles: lifting and handling children, serving meals...
- Adopting a poor posture: mainly caused by the physical layout of the premise.
- Tasks are repeated very often and at short intervals: Educators frequently change positions but the rest period is brief between each awkward position, as a result, there is very little benefit from changing position.
- Tasks that call for bending for a prolonged period of time: Since they work in the world of the little ones, they often have to bend forward or lean forward for a long period of time.

Aggravating factors which amplify the effect of the above:

- Stress: educators experience a high stress level, uncomfortable positions bring on muscular aches which will be further amplified if the surrounding conditions are stressful.
- Aging: physical fitness decreases with age. This makes the body more prone to injury. The number of injuries to child care practitioners increases in relationship to the number of years spent working in an early childhood centre. However, statistical analysis of our study indicated that the most important risk actor is task performance and not age.
- Work organization: sharing responsibilities among practitioners, getting the children's participation in various child care activities (setting the table, getting one's mat for the nap, picking up the toys in the main room and in the yard...)
- Lighting and noise: a high noise level or inadequate lighting causes the practitioner, in certain situations, to modify her posture in order to see or hear better. This may aggravate the effects of a poor-working position.

Do something !

Many actions can be taken to improve working conditions in an early childhood centre:

- develop a physical layout that considers the workload of the staff;
- train leaders in health and safety at work for child care centers, specializing in the proper movements and posture to adopt in the centre;
- make sure that the initial training received by practitioners in college includes courses on health and safety at work;
- establish policies for early childhood services that consider the importance of prevention of physical stress

and harm in the work place.

We can't wait for things to get worse in early childhood centres before doing something. Solutions exist ~ they need to and can be applied.

A Working Conditions Checklist

In the Classroom	Y/N	What can be done? Priority?
Tables and chairs are light and easy to move.		
Tables and the bench attached to the wall are easy to pull up or down.		
High chairs attached to the wall do not represent any physical constraint for the practitioners.		
Practitioners can easily store mats and cots.		
Counters and sinks used to prepare snacks are at adult height.		
A cart is available for the practitioner to carry food to the table.		
In the nursery, sides of cribs are easily pulled up and down and do not make much noise.		
Easy access to the playground.		
The cloakroom has a counter at adult height to use when dressing the children.		
Hooks in the cloakroom are at adult height for the infants and toddlers and at the level of the children who can dress themselves.		
The cloakroom has individual boxes for children's mitts, caps and boots.		
There is an outdoor shed that allows adequate storage and arrangement of toys and equipment.		
In the whole of the day-care center		
There is adequate area for an adult to move around.		
The kitchen is easy to access for deliveries.		

Dishes used are light and unbreakable.		
Dishes are stored at adult height.		
Heavy objects are placed at adult waist height for easy lifting.		

P. Markon and D. Le Beau "Health and Safety at Work for Day-Care Educators,"research study, Université du Québec ~ Chicoutimi, May 1994. Available through Child Care Connection's library or you may order a copy by contacting Dr. Markon at theaddress below. (English and French)

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Resources: Connections Library

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