

The Underlying Principles of this Training Curriculum

(from "The Introduction to the Workbook Series" developed and provided by McKenzie Consulting, Inc.)

The *Staff Retention in Child and Family Service* workbook series is based on a review of research literature in child and family service, human services and business. The research focused on the many studies that have to do with staff turnover and retention. Additionally, resilient workers and supervisors who stayed with their current agencies for at least two years were interviewed and surveyed in public and private agencies throughout Michigan to determine what underpins their commitment to the field. There was a strong consensus about what was learned about workplace retention across business, human service work and child and family service, but there were also some significant differences. Understanding the differences between child and family service and business is critical to retaining and developing staff in human service. Those differences are fundamental to the approach that is expressed in this training program and are summarized as follows:

Child and family service is challenging and life-changing work

Child and family service staff, many of whom are young and inexperienced, often make "god-like" decisions every day that have profound effects on the lives and destinies of children and their families. They see and experience the most tragic human conditions, extreme poverty, child neglect and abuse, inter-generational violence and substance abuse. Yet, they have to find a way to assure safety of children, while supporting their families and improving the well being of both children and families. Child and family service staff do this in a system that is under-funded, under-staffed, and sometimes chaotic and hardened to the plight of the people who are served by it and those who work in it.

This curriculum does not minimize the difficulties of the work (the reality of low pay, high workloads and high turnover) but it doesn't belabor these issues either. It recognizes that these issues need to be addressed, especially when an agency is not competitive with other similar agencies offering the same service. However this curriculum stresses that child and family service retention rates can be improved by understanding and building upon those resilient factors that attract people to and keep them in the profession.

Child and family service is mission and values centered

Those who enter the profession of child and family service are not motivated by profit. They are mission-driven. They are usually motivated by "doing good and making a difference" for others, particularly children who have been victimized. They come to accept that child and family service work is mainly about working with and through parents.

This curriculum offers an understanding of the mission and value-centered nature of this work as a context for all of the materials developed. To undervalue the significance of idealism and a need to help others in the motivation of staff would be wrong. The concept of mission is what energizes child and family service people and needs to be reinforced at every step of the retention process. Attention to feelings, showing appreciation and strengthening resiliency are essential for prevention of burnout and achieving good outcomes for children and families.

The supervisor in child and family service is the most influential person in staff retention

The research shows that having a good relationship with the frontline “boss” or supervisor is one of the most important factors in retention. This is even more essential in child and family service due to the stressful nature of the work. Managing one’s own feelings and learning effective relationship skills to help others manage their feelings and assumptions are a big part of the work that has to be done. The inadequacies of the system, along with the multiple demands and challenging relationships, can cause stress, burnout and result in “secondary trauma” for child and family service staff. An effective supervisor will facilitate professional development of his/her staff by consistently modeling effective relationship and strengths-oriented behaviors that help staff grow through their most difficult and/or emotionally charged times and events. An effective supervisor will pay attention to the personal and professional growth needs of their staff and offer recognition, encouragement and support. To do this well, supervisors have to be aware of their own vulnerabilities, while building on their personal style and strengths.

What a new staff person experiences within the first year is crucial to retention

An experienced supervisor recognizes that over half of turnover occurs in a staff person’s first year on the job. What a staff person first experiences, especially with their supervisor, will determine whether he/she will stay with the agency and ultimately build a career in child and family service.

Respect for a person’s strengths, uniquenesses, and rights are the primary elements in the success of all staff retention efforts

How a staff person is treated by the agency and, in particular, by his/her supervisor will become a mirror for how clients will be treated by staff. Honoring and building on staff strengths, including the individual’s capacity to cope with stress, learn and change, is key to successful retention in child and family service. Preserving the dignity of the individual is not only important in staff retention. It is a principle that is essential to achieving positive outcomes with families. A fundamental belief in the resiliency of people provides a reservoir of hope in child and family service.

This training curriculum takes the view that all participants: agency leaders, supervisors and staff, are partners in improving retention of staff in child and family service. The agency’s culture for retention will be continuously improved only to the extent that people share and learn from one another. Training materials, language and case examples are designed to be strengths-based and respectful of public and private agencies, supervisors, staff and families.