

Overcoming the Fear of Firing

by Robert Gundling

Firing someone may be the most difficult action a director ever has to take (Neugebauer, 2019). To manage this unnerving aspect of the job, I have relied on my understanding of the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, the development of clear policies and procedures, and a consistent process for employee evaluation and feedback.

As I developed the skills to become an early childhood education leader, I viewed firing an employee for a performance issue as terminating their employment at the center, rather than simply “firing someone.” I felt that

firing an employee is what a “boss” does, and my identity was as a leader who entered into an agreement with a candidate to join our team. I was intentional about letting candidates know during the initial interview that the interview was the first step in determining if the culture of our center was a fit, and an opportunity for them to decide if our program aligned with their purpose and values. Often, the candidate would tell me the purpose for applying for the vacant position was to get a job working with children “until they figured out what they wanted to pursue as a career.” They would tell me they loved working with children and thought working with young children would be fun. This was a red flag for me, because the culture I created at the center was one in which teachers were expected to clearly convey a passion to create a learning environment where young children were able to thrive, rather than merely survive. I recognized my responsibility was to create a professional development plan that included a reasonable amount of support, and the resources employees needed to fulfill the responsibilities in their job description.

My first step toward minimizing the times when I had to terminate an employee was to develop and include in our employee handbook a list of behaviors that would result in immediate termination. I used the NAEYC Code

of Ethical Conduct and local licensing regulations to create the list. “Above all, we shall not harm children. We shall not participate in practices that are emotionally damaging, physically harmful, disrespectful, degrading, dangerous, exploitative, or intimidating to children (NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct, revised May 2011).” The list I created included some of the following behaviors:

- Leaving children unsupervised at any time the employee was responsible for the children;
- Using physical punishment to deal with challenging behaviors a child exhibits;
- Withholding food to punish a child;
- Bullying children.

Creating and consistently implementing a progressive discipline policy also helped me know when it was time to terminate an employee, so I could do so with confidence and without fear. The orientation/onboarding program that all new employees were required to complete included a review of this policy. When I either observed or identified an employee’s behavior that was inappropriate, I implemented the steps included in the progressive discipline policy. The first step is to give the employee a verbal warning. This warning includes describing the



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specific behavior causing concern, and describing what is expected to eliminate this behavior.

If a teacher consistently arrives to work more than 10 minutes late, the next step (following the verbal warning) is to have the employee complete, in writing, responses to the following prompts.

- Briefly describe the reasons for arriving later than your scheduled time to begin working at the center;
- Briefly describe the impact you feel arriving late could have on the children in your classroom, and on your relationship with coworkers;
- Briefly describe the impact you feel this has on your relationship with the families of the children in the classroom;
- List three things you will do to stop this behavior; and,
- Are there any resources or support you feel is needed to change this behavior?

As I work with teachers as a coach, I find that, sometimes when there is an issue with performance, the teacher is entirely unaware. They continue doing what they have always done when they are with the children. Their supervisor becomes frustrated and decides to terminate the employee, in order to resolve the frustration they feel. This creates a vicious circle, wherein the employee is upset and reacts negatively, which in turn makes the administrator more fearful about confronting employees' performance issues in the future.

I found, in some cases, that the teacher had not thought about the impact of their behavior on children, families, or coworkers. I use this as a teachable moment to discuss the impact of their behavior on those who they serve each day. In some cases, this strategy is

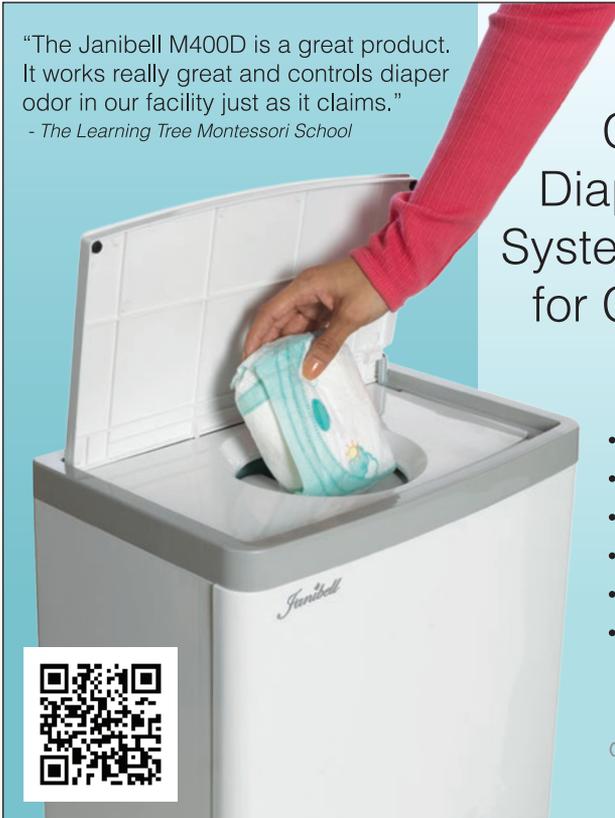
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enough to resolve the matter. However, if the behavior continues, I have objective evidence that the teacher was aware of the problem, and for some reason is still unable to change their behavior. We had discussed the problem and agreed upon what they were committed to do to stop the behavior. The employee signed and dated the form. This concrete evidence reduces any fear on my part around potentially having to terminate the teacher.

For example, in the case where a teacher was consistently late and completed this form, I went to the other teacher in the classroom to ask what they wanted to see happen regarding this matter. The teacher told me they wanted me to terminate the teacher because of the extra responsibility she had to take on when her colleague was consistently late. Because she had to supervise all of the children, she was not able to implement the schedule for the day. After I terminated

the employee, her co-teacher respected me for honoring her needs. Over time, I found those teachers who were meeting or exceeding their responsibilities were loyal and dedicated, and rarely left the center for a position elsewhere.

In addition to documentation, I have found consistently completing classroom observations, providing feedback, and creating individual performance plans with all staff to all be helpful key aspects of our work. We revisit this process quarterly. Over time, this results in teachers' continuous improvement and increased engagement with the children and families in their classrooms.

Contemplating firing an employee will always bring with it a measure of stress. But by writing strong policies and procedures and educating staff about them, leaders can mitigate their own personal stress by relying on consistency, documentation and intentionality.