

The Ants Go Marching

BY CARA MURDOCH

In early childhood education and care (ECEC), we know that some of the simplest ideas can carry the biggest lessons—and many of us have been singing “The Ants Go Marching” for years without realizing it might also be a leadership guide. Ants may be tiny, but their colonies run on teamwork, communication, flexibility, and a clear sense of purpose—all things ECEC programs rely on every day. By taking a closer look at how ants work together to support their colony, early childhood leaders can discover practical and familiar ways to strengthen teamwork, value every role, and lead programs where everyone is marching in the same direction for children and families.

Ants are busy creatures; they work with a purpose and know their jobs in the colony. Ants exhibit teamwork and collective effort. Ant colonies demonstrate intelligence, division of labor, communication systems, and cooperative behaviors. They can recognize and respond to the colony's needs. They overcome their challenges through trial and error, learning from their experiences, and sometimes even develop innovative strategies.

In the ant colony, individual ants work together as a unit, each with a unique role that determines the colony's survival and success. The ant colony functions just like a superorganism, where the actions of each individual ant are a part of the highly efficient system that supports the whole colony. This concept of collective action is closely related to human teamwork! Ants have a lot to teach us, as we work in ECEC.

TEAMWORK

Just as ants collaborate, relying on their communication and coordination to complete tasks, humans thrive when working together, as each individual brings their own unique skills and perspectives to their “colony.” Ants depend on each other. Each ant has a specialized job, and the colony relies on the cooperation and coordination of all its members to thrive and survive. Each ant’s contribution, no matter how small it may seem, is vital to the success of the colony as a whole, and the strength of the group is built on the cooperation of each individual.

Similarly, in ECEC programs, teamwork — working together and helping one another — leads to better results than trying to do everything alone! When we collaborate, we pool our strengths, share our knowledge, and support each other, which can lead to more creative and efficient solutions. Each person in the program brings unique skills and perspectives, filling gaps and helping compensate for one another’s weaknesses. This shared effort allows your program to tackle tasks and achieve goals that would be difficult, if not impossible, for one individual to accomplish on their own... just like in an ant colony!

ADAPTING TO FACE CHALLENGES

Ants are highly adaptable creatures. Have you ever watched a disrupted colony hurry to move the uncovered eggs to a protected space? They respond quickly to changes or disruptions in their

environment. Their ability to quickly assess new situations and adjust their behavior will help the colony continue to function efficiently, even when the unexpected happens. Their adaptability is the key to their survival, allowing them to overcome obstacles and thrive.

Early childhood programs also need to adapt to challenges. When unexpected changes occur, each person needs to be flexible and find new ways to contribute to the program's success. Just as ants adjust, programs must reassess their strengths, collaborate, and develop alternative solutions. Adaptability is essential for proper teamwork!

HONORING INDIVIDUAL ROLES

In an ant colony, different ants take on very specific roles. There are worker ants, soldier ants, and the queen ant. Each ant's role is crucial to the success and survival of the colony, and all roles are interdependent; they work together to achieve common goals.

This division of labor that exists in an ant colony can be compared to the different roles and unique talents found in an ECEC program. Just as ants rely on each other to perform specific tasks, each ECEC team member brings their own expertise and skills to the program. In a project or workplace setting, one person may excel at brainstorming creative ideas, another might be skilled at organizing tasks and managing timelines, and someone else may be particularly adept at technical skills or problem-solving. This diversity of roles within a team ensures that every aspect of a project or goal receives focused attention. In center-based programs, there are the director, teachers, kitchen staff, and other roles as needed. The diversity of roles in a program helps to ensure that the program is successful and thrives.

CLEAR PURPOSE AND GOALS

In an ant colony, survival is the common goal. The colony's success depends on each member performing its specific role. Their unwavering focus on the survival of the colony is connected to their success. It demonstrates the power of their collective action, driven by a clear and unified goal.

ECEC programs thrive when they are aligned around a shared and clear purpose and goals. When program members understand and commit to their common goals, the well-being and growth of children and families, their efforts will become more effective and coordinated. Just as ants bring different strengths to the program, each person brings different strengths to the program. It is alignment around shared goals that enables the program to overcome challenges and succeed. When everyone in the program is clear on the goals and helps work together toward them, the whole program becomes more focused, resilient, and motivated - just as an ant colony becomes stronger when every member is working toward survival!

Ants work together harmoniously to achieve their common goals; they set aside individual competition in favor of colony cooperation. Each ant focuses on its specialized task. This spirit of ant cooperation is key to the colony's survival and success, as it enables the colony to accomplish more complex tasks than any single ant could manage alone.

ECEC programs can benefit from adopting a similar approach that emphasizes collaboration and shared goals over individual achievement. In an ECEC program, when members support each other and work together, they can leverage each person's strengths to accomplish more than they could individually.

Instead of competing for recognition or resources, each member can focus on the program's success, fostering a more positive and productive environment.

LEARNING FROM ANTS

Ants have so much to teach ECEC programs when it comes to cooperating and working together as an effective team. Whether it's knowing your own role and abilities, supporting each of your fellow team members, communicating clearly and effectively, being flexible, or avoiding competition, the ant colony is an excellent example of these qualities! Let your ants go marching!!!

Ant Life, author unknown

I am just an ant,
A small life is what I live,
But I have dreams for bigger things
And so much more to give
If only I could grow
A foot or two would do
I could live a life
That others look up to.

***Cara Murdoch, B.A.**, is an assessor and training specialist at the McCormick Institute for Early Childhood at National Louis University. Cara earned a baccalaureate degree in art and psychology, as well as a lifetime teaching certificate for Art K-12, from Culver-Stockton College. Previously, Cara was a Quality Specialist. She spent 20 years in the Early Childhood Education field in classroom settings and as an assistant director. Cara initiated, advised, and was a consultant in the development of the year-round Essentials Preschool Curriculum for Gospel Publishing House.*