



Welcoming Gen Z: Opportunities and Realities in the ECE Workforce

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Generation Z, the generation born in the late 1990s and early 2000s, is the newest group to enter the early childhood education workforce. Often referred to as Gen Z, this latest group of young adults brings fresh energy, digital fluency, and a strong desire for belonging and impact. Many are entering the workforce confident and well-prepared, while others face challenges with preparedness, expectations, and resilience. While not universal for all, these challenges can impact their effectiveness working with young children and their co-teachers.

VOICES FROM THE COHORTS: AIM4EXCELLENCE INSIGHTS

As part of the facilitated [Aim4Excellence](#) cohort model, we interact with groups of directors working to welcome and integrate Gen Z staff into their early childhood program settings. In our discussions with these cohort participants, we are learning that they require more than just orientation—development points include intentional mentoring, clear communication, and support systems that acknowledge their strengths and growth areas.

While it is reported that many Gen Z teachers are eager to make a difference, they often need help translating the day-to-day realities of early childhood work, which has tended to frustrate their co-workers born within a different generation. As each facilitated cohort occurs, shared experiences from early childhood program leaders note consistent trends emerging across the country. While Gen Z brings emerging strengths to the workforce, leaders note the struggle between the different generations of staff members. However, they also share what seems to work best with Gen Z staff members: including clear structure, consistent mentorship, and meaningful support to thrive. To address these generational dynamics effectively, it's essential to first build a shared understanding of who makes up today's workforce and the unique perspectives each generation brings.

WORKFORCE GENERATIONS: TRENDS, TRAITS, AND TAKEAWAYS

Each generation's unique blend of historical events, cultural shifts, and technological advancements shapes its identity. The Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964) grew up in a time of post-war optimism, economic expansion, and social change, becoming a driving force behind movements like civil rights and feminism. Following them, Generation X (born 1965–1980) has been known for its independence and adaptability. This generation introduced technology and experienced the bridging between analog and what is now the digital age.

Millennials born between 1981 and 1996 witnessed the dawn of the internet, 9/11, and the Great Recession. This generation grew up using the internet to work collaboratively. They positively humanized it by connecting, creating, and empowering each other. Early forums such as MySpace and the beginning of Facebook were intended to be digital communities to provide inclusive spaces for niche interests, support groups, and cross-cultural exchange. Online communication was meant to be fun, relatable, and a creative way to communicate.

Generation Z members *were born* into the internet. Rather than it being a tool, as experienced by Millennials, Gen-Z has grown up *living online*. They blurred the line between online and offline, turning the internet into a key part of self-expression and belonging. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and multiple other apps allowed this generation to express identity, explore interests, and build community. In return, this constant need for digital connectivity exposed them to anxiety, comparison, and burnout. They inherited the downsides of the internet: information overload, mental health challenges, and a constant pressure to be “on”.

Each generation has navigated the world shaped by unique experiences. However, Gen Z emerges with both distinct strengths and unprecedented challenges. Their deep digital fluency and comfort with rapid change position them as innovative, resourceful, and socially conscious individuals. However, their upbringing in a highly virtual world—compounded by the isolation and disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic—has led to noticeable gaps in real-world interpersonal experience, emotional resilience, and professional readiness.

Understanding generational differences helps program leaders gain insight into their perspectives and those of more experienced staff. Marrying the generations together can be achieved by fostering a shared effort to [support and connect](#) with the needs of Gen Z.

GEN Z PERSPECTIVES: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Due to limited real-world experience working with young children, Gen Z staff often struggle to read children’s cues, manage group dynamics, redirect behavior, and confidently lead play. Additionally, and possibly attributed to social interactions primarily being digital, Gen Z staff are challenged with communicating with families professionally and productively. While seasoned staff usually understand early childhood work is emotionally intense, Gen Z staff members may experience heightened emotional sensitivity, anxiety in chaotic classroom settings, and difficulty navigating professional relationships, especially with more experienced staff. Self-awareness, while valuable, must be paired with emotional regulation and coping strategies—tools that some Gen Z staff members are still building.

Since early childhood education may be the first professional role of Gen Z staff, challenges in navigating professionalism and workplace expectations are necessary steps in development. Many directors have reported recurring issues such as using personal phones during work hours, arriving late or frequently calling out, and struggling to receive constructive feedback as intended. It is important to realize that these behaviors are [typically not rooted in laziness or lack of commitment](#), but instead reflect unclear

expectations or generational differences in workplace norms and communication styles. Gen Z staff have also noted that they have been surprised by the demanding physical labor, emotional intensity, and structure required in group care environments. Without proper orientation and support, responsibilities such as cleaning, diapering, and maintaining consistent routines can come as a surprise and feel discouraging, often resulting in disengagement. Staff working with Gen-Z team members must be reminded to [always assume positive intent](#).

One of the most significant challenges lies in the [communication gap](#) between generations, which can lead to misunderstandings. Gen Z places a high value on collaboration, continuous feedback, and a sense of psychological safety in the workplace. Meanwhile, experienced early childhood leaders—accustomed to top-down leadership styles—may misread these expectations as entitlement or resistance. At the same time, Gen Z staff might view traditional leadership approaches as inflexible or lacking support. These disconnects are often less about ability and more about unclear or unspoken expectations from both sides.

Finally, many Gen Zers view early childhood education as a meaningful stepping stone rather than a lifelong career. While they are often passionate about working with children, they tend to prioritize flexibility, a strong sense of purpose, and opportunities for personal and professional growth—often exploring various career options along the way. This tendency toward short-term employment can make it difficult for program leaders to build and maintain consistent, stable teaching teams, especially in a field already challenged by staffing shortages and high levels of burnout.

CREATING CONNECTIONS: WHAT BRINGS US TOGETHER

Facilitating conversations within Aim4Excellence cohorts has allowed us to learn more about the Gen Z workforce. Participants shared frustrations and also shared successful strategies. Discussions often led to realizing that Gen Z was a new generation who needed to be understood, mentored, and empowered. Early childhood leaders have an opportunity to support their growth and tap into their potential as they [recruit](#) the workforce. Through these rich discussions, three key areas emerged as essential for effectively supporting and growing our newest workforce members.

Clear Expectations

It's essential to set clear expectations—from dress codes and attendance to [communication](#) styles and daily responsibilities. Don't assume these expectations are understood; be explicit and consistent, creating opportunities for modeling, practice, follow-up, and feedback. Consider how expectations are presented and reinforced, and think creatively to ensure your Gen Z audience knows where to access information and how to take the next steps. Considerations may include digital distribution, classroom observations aligned with expectations, and staff meetings and training aligned to reinforce expectations.

Creating space for [professional growth](#) is equally important. Offer meaningful development opportunities, encourage reflection, and help Gen Z staff envision a long-term future in the field. A strong culture of

feedback is key to their development, and using coaching provides opportunities for learning. Effective coaching must be based on open, two-way communication, which takes time to nurture and build. This has been found to alleviate power struggles rooted in generational differences by fostering a respectful and collaborative environment. An essential realization as an early childhood program leader is that the gap between expectation and reality is your responsibility.

Meaningful Mentorships

One of the most effective strategies is to [mentor](#), not just manage. Purposefully pairing new staff with experienced educators or finding opportunities to pair staff members to complement strengths and areas of opportunity allows for modeling effective practices, real-time coaching, and building confidence through supportive relationships. It also allows for support and reinforcement to be provided by peers, allowing for empowerment and accountability across teams.

[Quality mentorships](#) are an approach that accelerates professional growth and strengthens organizational culture. When team members feel supported and valued, they are more likely to engage fully, share ideas, and take initiative. [Mentorship](#) fosters trust, encourages collaboration, and creates a sense of shared purpose. As an early childhood leader, the payoff over time creates connections, contributing to stronger retention, deeper expertise, and a more resilient team that thrives on collective success rather than individual effort.

Intentional Support to Thrive

All program leaders should be reminded about the importance of empathy. Empathy is a key driver in improved communication and stronger relationships. This is necessary to create the sense of workplace belonging that the Gen Z workforce craves. Knowing what we do about Gen Z, consider how communication and support can be tailored intentionally. Additional considerations include how best to support the development of the Gen Z workforce, knowing that their role within your program may not be aligned with their long-term goals. Should the outcome be short-term, early childhood leaders must remember the importance of helping [shift perceptions](#) to support their path forward.

By [leading with empathy](#), program leaders can foster an environment where Gen Z staff members feel seen, heard, and valued. When communication reflects genuine understanding and support, it builds trust and encourages engagement. This helps young professionals stay motivated in their current roles and reinforces a sense of shared purpose, even if their long-term career path lies elsewhere. When leaders invest in understanding employees' aspirations, they can better align responsibilities with individual strengths and provide meaningful development opportunities—ultimately cultivating loyalty, improving retention, and strengthening the organization's overall culture.

IN CLOSING

Clearly, Gen Z brings emerging strengths to the workforce. Marrying these strengths with the strengths of current generations within the program environment provides great stability and balance in the workplace. As early childhood leaders, it is important to understand how to support this generation in the workplace effectively. With clear expectations, meaningful mentorship, and intentional support, Gen Z staff members have the potential to grow into compassionate, capable educators who make meaningful connections with young children. But it [starts with leadership](#). To shape the future of early childhood education, we must meet Gen Z where they are—then guide, support, and inspire them to grow into the professionals our youngest learners deserve.

Want to Learn More About Supporting an Aim4Excellence Cohort? Contact: [Lorena Rodriguez](#),
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