

Small Strategies That Have Big Payoffs

BY WENDY CONNELL

Early child care and education leaders are busy! That feels like an obvious statement, but it is also an important one to acknowledge and say out loud. In my work coaching center directors in Illinois, I often hear a similar theme: there are many things they want to improve, but the days are already full to overflowing. Between staffing, licensing, supporting families, and responding to whatever unexpected situation and challenge walks through the door, it can feel like there is no space left to think about quality improvement. Even when there is a desire to make changes, the biggest barrier is often not **what** to do, but simply finding the **time** to do it.

At the same time, meaningful improvement does not always require large blocks of time or major initiatives. Sometimes, it comes from small, intentional moments woven into the day. A five-minute conversation with a teacher, a quick check-in with a family, or a short pause to notice something going well can begin to shift a program's culture. These small actions may not feel like much in the moment, but over time, they build something bigger, like helping families feel welcomed, staff feel valued and connected, and the center becomes a place where people want to be. The ideas that follow are designed with that reality in mind. Here are some simple, manageable practices that can fit into even the busiest days, while still making a lasting difference.

ORIENTATION & FOLLOW-UP WITH NEW STAFF

- Set aside 10-15 minutes during a new staff member's first week to ask how things are going and what questions they have. This gives them a structured opportunity to speak up and helps you catch small concerns before they become bigger challenges.
- Plan a short check-in about a month after they start to reflect on what feels comfortable and what still feels unclear. This helps reinforce that learning takes time and shows that your support does not end after the first few days.

COMMUNICATION & CLARITY

- Choose one consistent place to share important information, whether that is a bulletin board, weekly email, or app. This reduces confusion and helps staff know exactly where to look rather than trying to keep track of multiple sources.
- Explain the "Why." When you introduce a change, take a moment to explain the reason behind it. Even one sentence can help staff understand the purpose and increase their willingness to support the change.

PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

- Share one short tip, strategy, or reflective question each week to keep up with the “basics” of daily care or to ignite curiosity about something new. This keeps learning manageable and allows staff to try new ideas without feeling overwhelmed.
- Invite one teacher each month to share something that is working well in their classroom. This not only builds confidence in the teacher sharing, but also creates opportunities for learning across the team (and takes one task off your plate!).
- Use language that reinforces that everyone is still growing. Saying things like, “We are all practicing this,” or “We are all in this together” helps reduce pressure and encourages staff to take risks and try new strategies.

COLLEGIALITY AND STAFF MORALE

- Five-minute check-ins. Ask one or two staff members each day, “What’s going well?” or “What do you need this week?” This does not have to turn into a long conversation, but the consistency matters. Over time, these small check-ins build trust and help staff feel like their voices matter.
- Celebrate progress, not perfection: Take time to notice and share small improvements. When staff see that growth is valued, they are more likely to stay engaged and motivated. Name the specific positive actions you see, not just a general “good job.” When you say something like, “I noticed how you supported Mateo during transitions today,” or “I appreciate that you reassured Kolby’s mom today at drop-off,” it reinforces effective practice and shows that you are paying attention to the details of their work.
- Take a few minutes at the end of each staff meeting (small teams or center-wide) to ask everyone to share one success from the week. This helps shift the focus from what isn’t working to what is, and reminds the team that progress is happening, even in small ways!

CLASSROOM SUPPORT

- Spend five minutes in a classroom without an agenda. Sit on the floor, observe what is happening, and notice something specific that is going well. Sharing that observation with the teacher later can build confidence and reinforce effective practices.
- Create a quick survey with one question. Ask staff what one thing would make their day easier. Choosing just one item to address each month keeps improvement realistic and shows that you are listening and taking action.
- Protect planning time! Even 10 uninterrupted minutes can make a difference for a teacher. Protecting that time when possible sends a strong message that you respect their work and the thought that goes into it.

SYSTEMS & ORGANIZATION

- Simplify one process. Look for one form, report, or routine that feels frustrating and consider how it could be streamlined. Even small adjustments can reduce stress and free up time for more meaningful work.

- Create a “how we do things” binder. Having clear, simple guidance for common routines can reduce uncertainty for staff. This is especially helpful for new employees who are trying to learn how things work. Seem overwhelming? Ask seasoned staff to help with this, and add one thing a day or week at a time until complete.

At the end of the day, it can be helpful to take a few quiet minutes to reflect. Think about one thing that went well, one interaction that stood out, or one small action you took that made a difference. This does not need to be formal or written down, but simply taking the time to notice can help you stay grounded in your purpose. On the hardest days, this kind of reflection can shift your perspective and remind you that even small efforts are meaningful.

Over time, these small, consistent actions begin to build something bigger. When staff feel seen, supported, and appreciated, they are more connected to their work and to each other. That sense of connection plays an important role in retaining staff, which is ultimately reducing the time and challenges associated with constant turnover.

If you are looking for more ideas and support, consider joining one of our [Leadership Academies or online offerings](#), or attending the [Leadership Connections National Conference](#) in May. Opportunities like these provide space to reflect, learn, and reconnect with the work in a way that feels manageable and energizing.

Do you have a small idea that makes a big impact in your work? Send me an email at wconnell1@nl.edu, and I'll share it in a follow-up article. In our world of early childhood leadership, one of the best things we can do for each other is support each other and share our resources and ideas! If you are at Leadership Connections this year, let's connect!

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