Why Early Childhood Programs Succeed, Why They Fail

By Ken Jaffe, International Child Resource Institute

Introduction

Working to establish or improve early childhood programs in the United States and more than 50 countries has led us to gain a deep understanding of why and how ECD programs become the best in their town, region, or state. Sadly, we have also observed early childhood programs that, with all of the best of intentions, lack the systems, approaches, and understanding to develop their programs to capture the attention and respect of children, families, and their communities. We have witnessed the development of outstanding programs that have gained a deep understanding of what must be done to maintain the level of connection in all aspects of program, finances, and operation that allow them to produce the desired financial return and provide top services to children and families for many years.

There are hundreds of small nuances that every founder, director, operator, or program leader of early childhood programs must learn to deeply understand the fiscal, programmatic, environmental/design, and community-building efforts that must be made to develop outstanding early childhood programs. In addition, since many of these refined nuances are constantly changing, it is imperative that you find ways to learn yourself or work with others in all of the required subject areas to make your program grow and glow.
In the sections ahead, we will describe the key areas that must be attended to in order to assure initial and continued program success, while at the same time allowing for the necessary adjustments along the way. These adjustments are critical to assuring that any program will grow, thrive, and succeed for the long run. We will also discuss those common missteps that serve to hurt more than they help.

The following keys to success have been proven over the past 30 years in the field. Their application cuts across most areas of the United States and around the world.

THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

The following are key features for developing and operating successful ECD programs. It should be noted that anyone can enact these steps:

Planning — It is imperative that a clear, well-developed, time-sensitive plan be established when any early childhood program operator or family childcare provider wishes to start or improve one or more centers or programs. Stated simply, a clear planning approach will help you to determine:

• what you want to accomplish.
• how you can remain on the cutting edge as the “highest quality program in your community.”
• what you will need to do to serve children and families most effectively.
• how you will accomplish each stage in the planning process.

At ICRI, we have refined a tool known as the Planning Blueprint, which helps anyone attempting to develop a plan to determine:

• what their goals or outcomes will be.
• what objectives are necessary to meet those goals or outcomes.
• what activities must be accomplished to meet each objective.
• who will accomplish each activity.
• how long it will take for those activities to be accomplished.
• how you will develop realistic costs for personnel and non-personnel.
• how you will evaluate and make structural adjustments to your work over time.

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An effective and clear plan can be achieved by those who are committed to program success. There are numerous planning tools available through the Internet or through organizations or companies that specialize in helping people to plan for success. The following constitute the most critical steps in creating your plan for success:

**Program Leadership** — Hiring the right director and other program leaders will be one of the keys to the success of your program for many years to come. This also applies to those of you who may be the director of your own program. We have often seen directors characterized as having either “earth mother” / “earth father” traits or as “bean counters,” with great expertise in fiscal matters. It is rare to find a director who has both qualities. We can point to one leader who truly embodies the qualities of loving every child in her program while at the same time having a complete fiscal and management knowledge of the programs being provided. This director is our own Ellie Mashhour, formerly Director of one of ICRI’s centers and now the Childcare Operations Manager and Chief Operating Officer of our multi-country organization. The reason for her success is a love of every child and a dedication to operating a curriculum that works for parents and most of all, for children, that helps each child to be fully ready for school. The right leader will be able to develop the “it” factor in their program (as will be discussed later). “It” factor programs will help each child to become an “outside the box” thinker, an abstract reasoner, and a young scientist. Directors/leaders set the tone for the program and also act as the clear connection to the communities they serve. When in doubt, we would opt for an earth mother to be that connective tissue to the community where a separate fiscal analyst or accounting expert will stay in the background. A director provides for that natural link to the community and to parents. In the end, if parents deeply appreciate and trust the director/leader, they will follow her programs to the “ends of the earth.”

**Teachers** — The force and lifeblood of any program are its teachers. Teachers must exude confidence and own the chosen curriculum. If a teacher does not deeply understand the chosen curriculum or is uncomfortable or unwilling to carry out the curriculum and program approach set forth by the center or family childcare home, no amount of effort will make the program the best that it can be. Any teacher with understanding of how children grow and develop and with a deep respect for the child and her parents will also know that communication with parents as well as children is a critical part of their job. Teachers must feel honored and respected by their administration in the work that they accomplish each day. They represent the program
in the center and also in the community in which they live. The honoring of teachers must be carried out each day by program leadership through displays of caring, kindness, and teamwork. This will go far to bring the sense of quality and caring that every top-level program displays.

**Location, Location, Location** — The location of the center or home will dictate the type and nature of program that will reflect the needs of local children, parents, and communities. When any program accomplishes the “it” factor, its area of service will broaden extensively. Parents will come from as far away as 20 miles, especially if it is on their route to work, in order to have their child in the best program possible. Even with very low-income programs that are subsidized through state or federal funds, one must still be conscious of the location. If your program is located within a busy or public place such as a school building, choose the area most separated from the noise and intensity of typical elementary schools. Thus, a program for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers should be able to retain a separate identity within other public space in order to assure that they never become the “step sister” program to other services. A sense of quality and intimacy can be created at any location with an understanding of how to utilize very low-cost design features, sound dampening materials, soft colors, and plants wherever possible.

**Making Your Program Sing** — Any program attempting to gain a sense of uniqueness and high program quality would wish to develop their own “curb appeal.” This term means that any family childcare home or early childhood center can and should show, from the time a parent makes her way to the front of the space, that the program is child-centered, engaging to children, and understanding of state-of-the-art concepts and issues that directly meet the needs of children, families, and the community where they live. It should be noted that modern child development practice sees engagement of children and families beginning before the entry door and flowing into other environments, by featuring the children’s own work that shows their process of creativity. This can be contrasted with many programs that have paintings created by adults — whether inside or outside the structure — of cartoon characters or other scenes that do not allow for the children and teachers to define what is going on in their program. Programs do not have to invest in costly or elaborate artwork or interior designs. Rather, the right simple treatments will provide for a level of peace and detachment while being easy to get to, where there is adequate parking (at least nearby), and where the program becomes a gathering place for parents, children, and the community. All programs should seek to “brand” their work, not with trademarked...
cartoons, but with its own innovative approaches to helping children to reach their full potential.

**Using Resources Effectively** — As discussed earlier, we have seen for more than 30 years that it is necessary to gather resources in such amount as to make a difference for the children and families served. At the top of the list of this necessary expenditure is that teachers should be paid higher wages at or near the top of the pay in the area served. While this may be difficult in the early stages of program operation, the tremendous gain in staff loyalty and, most of all, in staff longevity, can never be underestimated. Teachers in programs with very low turnover rates become a family and are engaged and involved in raising generations of children. The best teachers who are well compensated and benefitted will often serve four or five children from the same family over time. This teacher longevity leads directly to keeping your program full at all times. It is necessary whether starting a new program or continuing to improve programs to expend the necessary resources, whether with financial expenditures, volunteer contributions, or engaging the community in building or restoring your program to assure that your process leads you to long-term success. This expenditure of time and/or money is a prerequisite to being ready to become that program in your community or area that is respected by all and desperately sought by parents. The preplanning, as discussed above, will lead you to an ongoing dialogue with your team that will enable you to develop that intangible “it” factor that all aspire to and few possess.

**Refresh and Renew** — Every year an assessment must be made of what needs to be refreshed, upgraded, and made more child-, family-, and teacher-friendly in your program. This upgrading is critical in keeping the program current with latest design features and developments and an understanding of early childhood education trends. Local environmental design experts can work with you or your child development expert team to assure that the program remains fresh and relevant, both inside and out. The refurbishment and refreshing does not have to cost a lot of money. Parent work groups are critical to the success of any program, regardless of how much they pay for that program, and can assist in that refreshment and renewal. While certain subsidy programs do not allow required hours of service, we have always made these parent involvement sessions major social events with food and music. Parents who have not been able to attend these events are always disappointed. Parents will love to do that work so long as they see that it is benefitting both their own child and the program as a whole.
DEVELOPING THE “IT” FACTOR

What is the “it” factor?

Every program, no matter what its size or breadth, wishes to assure that it will be full for each new year with a waiting list. Beyond that, each new or continuing program wishes that there will be competition for the spaces in its program every year. Further, each program wishes that its program will be seen in its town, city, region, or state as the top program in its area. The “it” factor will only be gained if a groundswell of parents who are highly engaged in the program begin to naturally spread the word that this program is the best in the area. No amount of publicity, whether paid or unpaid, will do the trick. It is only those who are the potential clients of the program who will create that cachè that leads the program from success to greater success. Those programs that have the “it” factor will not need to carry out any paid advertising. On the first day of enrollment and at any open house for those enrollments, the “it” factor programs will have a line stretching down the street waiting to come in to compete for the few open spaces for the following year. Our own preschool programs are now harder to gain admission to than the University of California down the street.

In order to accomplish the “it” factor, there are several components that must be developed. Those components include the following:

- **Staff Leadership and Connection With the Community** — In order to assure that your program rises to the top of the list and that you can become the most successful program in your area, your staff leadership team must understand that their role goes far beyond the crucial efforts that it must put in to create an outstanding program for each child. The leadership, including director, owners or operators, teachers, and assistants must all have a common “language” and communication approach that assures that everyone understands their value to the children they serve, to its community and to the importance of its presence as a torch-bearer and change maker in improving every child and family’s life.

- **Staff Make the “It” Factor Come Alive** — Without highly engaged, deeply knowledgeable staff no “it” factor can be developed. The staff, especially the director and teachers or the child care program owner “sell the program” to the community and the parents who know that they are placing their child in the top program in that community every day. Teachers must be supported by the program and the staff leadership in many ways and their role in the program can never be under-
estimated. In order for any program to gain and maintain the “it” factor, they must have top-level teachers who are well compensated and who feel that they have a true stake in the growth, development, and long-term consistency of the program.

- **Leadership** — Perhaps the most important factor in beginning to engage the “it” factor in any program is that the leadership must be seen as top individuals in their community and as sources of knowledge. The best leaders will understand the cutting edge of early childhood and have the ability to carry out high-quality programs at all times. Those leaders are the ones who will appeal to parents, who will allow for programs to attain the “it” factor, and who will have the parents they wish to work with and their children clamoring to get into their program.

- **Environments** — A critical element in achieving the “it” factor is the physical environment. The space within which the program is carried out can be developed in a stunning purpose-built early childhood building or in a converted space that was never intended to house children. The key feature here is the knowledge and understanding of the leadership of the program that they can, through gaining deep knowledge of designing children’s space or through gaining connections with those who do know, create environments that are second to none. For example, in a building designed in 1908 initially as a church by Julia Morgan, the first woman architect in California, we have created an early childhood space that is considered among the most child-friendly in the region. That space utilizes the redwood walls of the building, understands that parts of the space must be “brought down” from very high ceilings through lighting and draping that creates highly stimulating, engaging, and delightful activity zones in each room in the program, taking advantage of the 1908 qualities of the building and yet delivering a high-quality modern program that children and families love and support. Great interior and exterior design and the knowledge that each learning zone must be a texture-filled, light-filled, soft color-filled treasure trove of child opportunities will bring any program closer to achieving the “it” factor. The “it” factor, thus, as related to environment, is often called quite correctly, “the third teacher.” We consider parents to be the first teachers of children, teachers to be the second teachers, but clearly the environment should be characterized as the third teacher. These environments as stated above must be developed with care, innovation, artistry, and a deep sense of children’s needs for growth and development through each activity area. If any program attempts to gain the “it” factor, it will be through careful attention to the above necessary features.
A BRIEF GUIDE TO “IT” FACTOR ENVIRONMENTS:

Lighting
Studies conducted primarily in England show that highly active children exposed to intense fluorescent light become more intensely active. The use of natural lighting through large window areas, incandescent lighting, skylights, and “Targeted Lighting Over Activity Areas” makes for a more comfortable “natural” light setting.

Color Choices
Around the world, trained designers of children’s environments have been moving away from the use of a primary color approach to the use of what might be called an “ice cream” palate — soft color hues where tints of color in a white base have been used to convey warm peaches, creams, blues, greens, pinks, and roses.
**Surfacing**
Floor surfaces should include safe wet-and-dry, and active/passive zones. The art, eating, and wet play areas should have vinyl, cork, or other nonslip flooring while the reading, manipulative, dramatic play, and related areas should make use of softer or carpeted surfaces.

**Special Interior Developments**
The infant area should include a crawling area/nest for young babies. Amphitheater corners or walls can be developed with carpeted stairs to be used as risers and library sections.

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Floor and Ceiling Heights
Attempts should be made to provide varying ceiling heights so that more sequestered intimate areas and more open areas can be created. Variations in floor heights through the use of risers or lowering some heights with simple material hanging can be effective in separating activity zones.

Zoning the Interior and Exterior Areas
Each center and each group within the center should have space developed into clear activity zones. From wet to dry, and from active to passive, the zones should accommodate activities that include the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wet/Active</th>
<th>Dry/More Passive</th>
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<tr>
<td>Eating</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<td>Cooking</td>
<td>Manipulatives</td>
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<td>Art</td>
<td>Pre-Math</td>
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<td>Dramatic Play</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
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<td>Music</td>
<td>Teacher-assisted Activities</td>
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<td>Wet/Water Play</td>
<td>Napping</td>
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<td>Science</td>
<td>Small projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Discovery Table</td>
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<td>Wheel toys</td>
<td>(should change daily)</td>
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<td>Blocks</td>
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We have noted all too often that otherwise higher quality programs have lost their way by mistakenly placing music/movement areas too close to reading/math areas.
A Brief Guide to “It” Factor Environments

- Lighting
- Color Choices
- Surfacing
- Special Interior Developments
- Floor and Ceiling Heights
- Zoning the Interior and Exterior Areas
- Interior Climbing Structures/Gross Motor Play
- Storage Areas
- Staff Lounge
- Parent Resources
- Configuration of Rooms
- Bathrooms and Sinks
- Yard Areas
- Other Considerations

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Interior Climbing Structures/Gross Motor Play

Each grouping should have some structure or area that will encourage gross motor activities, especially on days with inclement weather. Either commercially available or custom-built climbing or gross motor features can be developed in the gross motor/dramatic play activity areas for each group.
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Storage Areas
The axiom in childcare is that there is never enough storage area. Both walk-in storage areas and ample shelf storage above children’s height should be available in each room. Storage can also be located in recessed areas along hallways and in transition space.

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Staff Lounge
The Staff Lounge should provide a “retreat” for staff, and a place that provides comfort, support, and potential assistance with activity planning. A separate but contiguous curriculum prep area is desirable. A small mini-kitchen and eating area, and couches, chairs, and comfortable furnishings should be provided for staff. Many Scandinavian staff areas look like a living room in a warm and comfortable home. Almost any area can be transformed into a staff retreat zone.

Parent Resources
A parent resource library and training room can be developed in a manner where the center and the community can make use of its resources. Trainings and workshops can be offered to parents and to the community in such a setting. Family child care programs can offer easily accessible parent resource materials.

Configuration of Rooms
It is preferable that if there is more than one room used for the same age group that those rooms be next to each other, and have access for teachers to go between the rooms.

Bathrooms and Sinks
In infant and toddler rooms, there must be changing tables with direct access to a sink, as well as diaper disposal. In order to promote maximum flexibility, both the 1-2 year old and the 2-3 year old rooms should also have a small changing area. It is preferable that the changing areas be developed in such a manner that the caregivers stay within the activity room while diapering so that they can supervise other children at the same time. Staffing of a room where diapering is necessary generally requires a teamwork approach between staff who are engaged in child-related activities and staff who are changing diapers. A misguided design practice in the U.S. has been the sequestering of the changing area in an adjacent room. This has caused many programs to be out of licensing compliance many times per day when one caregiver is out of the main room with one child.

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Yard Areas
Each classroom should have access to its own yard area or section of a larger yard area, especially when different age groupings are served. The infant group can have a small outdoor crawling nest contiguous to their room that also allows for other activities. The toddlers and transition-age group may be able to share a yard area. While it is not always possible, the goal is that each room have direct access to an outside yard area.

Other Considerations
There are many important features that are critical to the development of quality, effective environments. These features must be carefully planned and designed before building commences. In addition to the features discussed above, it is important to consider the following:

- Crib rooms in infant areas (not allowed to be counted as part of the usable square footage for determining licensed capacity of the center in certain jurisdictions).
- Wall surfacing, both smooth and textured, appropriate for children.
- Safe indoor stimulating play areas for younger children that show a deep understanding of the extremely rapid neurological development of each child’s brain from birth to eight years.
- Exterior surfacing — hard and soft.
- Exterior climbing structures that are matched with child readiness.

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What to Avoid: Why Programs Fail

Those programs that have failed after a year or ten years often have common traits including an attempt at a quick-fix, the desperate-move approach, or a lost-opportunity challenge. Too often during a financial crisis or even during start up, the necessary steps are not taken to make your program the best in your area. Whether you are a family childcare provider or a center operator or director, it is necessary to avoid anything that will compromise your program quickly such as cutting staff, through changing the quality and consistency of your program, or through seeking lower paid staff in order to keep a certain profit or break-even level. Instead of the quick fix, it is often necessary to seek a line of credit that can be paid back over time or, in the alternative, to develop certain austerity measures that do not relate directly to the quality, consistency, and effectiveness of the program. Perhaps a secretarial staff person may need to be placed on a part-time basis or a less costly accounting service may be necessary, or you may need to engage in more tasks and chores necessary to starting your program and growing it to excellence. It is crucial to avoid cutting highly successful staff that keeps children and families in the program.

Not Knowing Your Market — It is surprising that many of those wishing to start new programs or to improve their programs lack a deep understanding of developing comprehensive budgets, understanding what they can charge, and knowing the “true cost” of operation in their own communities. Before ever starting a program or when you wish to reenergize or “go to the next level,” any effective operator or program leader must have long before determined what the “going rate” is for the highest quality care in their community. It is often easy to gain information on the rates of those programs that are the best respected and/or that command the greatest interest. We have often seen that program operators either over- or under-estimate the “sweet spot” for fees. It is also important to determine whether top operators in your community charge what is known as a “materials fee” for assuring that new materials and equipment are brought into the program on a regular basis. As such, a good quality center charging a materials fee twice a year at $150 per term with 100 children in its program will reap an additional $15,000 times two or $30,000 total in increased income. We have also seen that when a landlord tells the operator that their space will no longer be available, they at times see no other alternative but to cut the program to serve fewer children. This loss of income and cash flow to a program is critical to its longevity and continuity. Thus the program leader should, on the day of the announcement of lease termina-
tion, request an immediate lease extension for up to six months and pull out all stops to locate another building immediately within the area around the existing program(s), so that program momentum, quality, and consistency is never lost.

**Not Knowing Major Cost Factors** — It is imperative that any program operator or leader has a deep understanding of the major costs of early childhood programs, since the three major costs are almost invariably labor, housing/rental, and food. All efforts should be made to understand both the income/cash flow as described above, but also deeply understand how enrollment should take place to maximize the number of children who comfortably fit within the program each day. One of the most destabilizing factors in the operation of early childhood programs is the attendance vs. enrollment factor and the lack of deep understanding about how children must be enrolled for program stability, security, and income. So often we hear those who have sought our help tell us that they have 50 children enrolled in their program. This appears to assume that having 50 children enrolled is all that they need to know. However, if those 50 children are comprised of 20 children coming two days a week, 20 children coming three days a week, and 10 children coming 5 days a week, there are large gaps in overall attendance leading to the production of far lower overall tuition income. Every center should enroll to reach the maximum number of full-time equivalent children paying at the rates that will bring in the maximum amount of income to the program. Thus for every 2-day child, there must be a matching 3-day child filling out the same single slot. Many programs require that slots be “matched” to cover full-time care. Program leaders must gain a strong understanding of program enrollment in order to assure that they are reaping the rewards of full attendance covering all hours of operation leading to full tuitions covering payment of highest quality staff and leaving a significant profit or surplus. Leaders must thus decide what they can realistically charge for the “best program around,” what their hours of operation will be, and how they can effectively fill their program with children for the entire day. Creative fiscal program leaders even offer 4-day programs with the day off chosen by the center for 4 parents in each room. One more child can be added to each room in this manner. If the program tuition is at $1,200 per month per child and there are 5 rooms in the program, the gain could be as great as $75,000 per month.

**Not Being Bold** — When program operators face a challenge, there are certain approaches that can best serve to get them through those difficulties. For example, we recently became aware of a very good program that was beginning to gain momentum in its community. Operating out of two houses, the landlord announced to the
owner/operator that it wanted to refurbish and sell one of the houses being leased by the operator. At a pivotal point the operator made a decision or, more accurately, did not make a decision that will serve to cost her for many months to come. She simply accepted the determination of the landlord and began to inform parents that she would have to cut spaces in her program and that she would only be able to serve half the number of children she had before. The bold, yet effective, program operator or leader would have taken a quite different route. She would have immediately requested a 6-month extension with a small rental increase in order to have time to seek another house in the same area. In most cases landlords, in order to avoid conflict, would have continued to lease the space for at least 3 and potentially 6 months. The operator, even in more challenging real estate markets, could have come up with another site and readied it for immediate occupancy after the 3-6 month period. This willingness and necessity to take bold action is what often separates those who develop the “it” factor in their programs from those who do not. It is virtually always far more difficult to rebuild attendance in your program rather than to take the extra effort to assure that you maintain what enrollments you have worked so hard for.

With the features discussed above, it is now only necessary to summarize briefly the key features which will help any program to survive, thrive, and become the best program in their community:

1. From day 1 of your new or change-making journey, make a decision that your program will be the best in your community by developing the “it” factor and by assuring that staff are honored each day and that your program is consistent, follows an effective chosen curriculum or program approach, deeply engages parents, and develops a level of trust and support where everyone belongs.

2. Be aware that it may be necessary to spend money or utilize volunteers (even from your own family and friends) to gain the level of improvements that will bring your program to the highest level possible, whether for profit or nonprofit. You can also study how you can refurbish your program or renew your indoor or outdoor areas at little cost. There are community grants, foundation grants, corporate support and donations that can be made to nonprofit organizations. Many of the best programs in the nonprofit sector, even while receiving local, state, or national
subsidies can still hold events and fundraisers that can greatly assist in buying equipment for the program or in increasing salaries to key staff. A program in Northern California maintains the “it” factor by hosting an annual silent auction that raises between $30,000 and $35,000 for new equipment and supplies for their centers and thus makes donations to sister schools around the world. The creative use of found objects and local materials will go far to reduce costs but still stay cutting edge.

3. In order for any program to start or improve to the level of becoming the highest quality program possible, they must often seek the advice of others who have travelled the same road. This can be accomplished in several ways. You can develop a mentor relationship with a program you admire within your community, state, or region, especially if that program is not in direct competition with you. That mentor relationship has been utilized by those who wish to assure that their programs will be of the highest quality. Your author has benefitted greatly in his early years from developing those mentor relationships. My primary mentor is the primatologist and child development expert, Dr. Jane Goodall. Her sage counsel and words of wisdom have helped me daily in my life to aspire to great things for children around the world. You can do the same in your own community. You can also work with consultants who help make these transformations every day. They should tailor a plan that is within your means.

4. Finally, it is never expected that these tasks will be easy. If any of us were looking for the easy road, we would not have gone into the field of early childhood education. Rather, because the work is challenging and finding the right balance is critical to our success, when we succeed, children and families also succeed.

It is hoped that the above information will assist you in developing a program that will survive and succeed in the long run and enable you to gain great satisfaction in developing a program of the highest quality that has supported you as well as the children, families, and community that you so importantly serve.