

The Power of the Cook

By Ann Hentschel, M.Ed.



This article and learning tool relates to ECERS-3 Item 33 Transitions and Waiting times.

One of the many lessons I learned as a teacher of young children was the internal time clock that goes off when it is meal time in a classroom. Children seem to intuitively know when it is time to be fed. If something throws off their predictable schedule life in the classroom can become tumultuous.

Imagine a classroom of active three-year-olds busy at play. The teacher announces it is clean-up time; time to get ready for lunch. There is an enthusiastic buzz about the room as they all work together to put the toys away. Off they dash to the bathroom to wash hands and then over to set the table. Most of the children are sitting at the tables with empty plastic cups and plates in front of them. Suddenly, the cook passes by the classroom and announces lunch will be a few minutes late because the broccoli is not quite tender. You can probably picture what happens next.

The teacher suggests they all sing a song while waiting for lunch. The children join in for a rousing round of "Wheels on the Bus" but still no lunch. So they continue with "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" and "Old MacDonald." Needless to say, some of the children lose interest in singing and begin playing with the only objects accessible which are the plates and cups. In the midst of all the clatter and singing, a few children start nudging and pushing. One child falls off his chair; another begins to cry because she is hungry. At this point the teacher is at a complete loss. She attempts to read a story at the table but many children can't see the pictures and it is too difficult to keep their

attention. Does she gather the children over to the rug for a story? If she does, they will need to all go back and wash their hands again. How long does it take to steam broccoli anyway? Will lunch be here in two minutes or seven minutes?

The cook in this particular situation had a significant influence over the classroom environment. She had good intentions of wanting to provide a healthy and delicious meal for the children; however, she did not seem to realize the consequence of serving a late lunch to a group of hungry young children. Perhaps it is the bus driver, janitor, or office manager that does something that interferes with the teaching staff being able to do their job effectively. Do you have any support staff whose actions may inadvertently have a negative impact on the classroom? If so, how might you help them become more aware of how their work affects the quality of care for children?

Teachers may approach you with frustrations or concerns they have with support staff. Others may believe this is a problem they simply have to accept as a reality. Creating opportunities for support staff and teachers to meet and discuss how things are going is beneficial. It sets you on a path to creating a great place to work.

Here is a simple exercise for the teacher to complete prior to meeting with the support staff. The purpose is to assist in getting the conversation started and to focus on strengths as well as additional areas for needed support.

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Branagh Information Group (BIG) builds data systems with an emphasis on early childhood. BIG is the creator of the ERS Data System, a leading-edge Tablet PC implementation of the Environment Rating Scales® (ECERS-3™, ECERS-R™, ITERS-R™, FCCERS-R™, and SACERS-Updated™) and the Program Administration Scales (PAS, BAS).

Exercise

Try to be specific in capturing the current help you receive from support staff. What are concrete examples of the support you appreciate? Next, candidly assess where you and your classroom could benefit from additional help. Finally, include an explanation for how the work of the support staff directly impacts quality improvements for children in the program. It is important for support staff to recognize the value they contribute to creating program excellence.

The current help I receive from support staff—what is appreciated

An area where our classroom would benefit from additional help—what is needed

Why this matters—the impact this support would have on improving the environment
