

# Caregivers of Quality

by Sally Cartwright

**B**uilding toward a topnotch child care staff is anything but easy. More than love for children, more than training and experience makes a valuable caregiver. Below, named in bold type, are the essential ingredients in caregivers of quality.

**Good physical health** is a prerequisite for caregivers at work with young children. More difficult to assess is **emotional maturity**. It was clarified by Barbara Biber of Bank Street College of Education when she wrote that a caregiver “needs to be a person so secure within herself that she can function with principles rather than prescriptions, that she can exert authority without requiring submission, that she can work experimentally but not at random, and that she can admit mistakes without feeling humiliated” (Barbara Biber, in *Childhood Education*, March 1948).

One discerns such qualities in a caregiver neither by resume nor

interview, but by observing him at work with children. Watch the caregiver for these qualities, and watch the children as well, for their behavior reflects caregiver competence. Is there cooperative child initiative? Is there a mix of friendly humor and purpose? Most of all, are the children deeply involved in their work and play? Clear, consistent evidence of a caregiver’s personal integration and inner sense of security is truly important for his success with children.

A matured and perceptive **kindness** or unconditional love, so important in good caregivers, means both heart and detachment (discussed below) in helping children to help

themselves. A good caregiver knows intuitively what child at which moment requires warm and close concern. She is approachable and friendly. She listens well, gives support as needed, and shares in laughter with, not at, the children.

A good caregiver is keenly aware of emotional and physical safety for each child. His care is shown in constructing the environment for active child learning with his discerning choice of equipment, materials, and spatial arrangement within a consistent, predictable program framework. Children need the support of steady, warm approval. A good caregiver may condemn a child’s words or action, but not the child himself.

A good caregiver needs courage and integrity. **Courage** means a strong,



*Sally Cartwright, with a masters degree from Bank Street College of Education and later studies at Harvard related to day care environments, has been teaching and learning from children for 50 years, the last 15 as teaching director in early childhood settings.*

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upbeat will to work through whatever odds for what one most cares about, in this case the children. A courageous caregiver goes to bat for child needs, often working closely with other staff members, parents, and/or community leaders.

**Integrity** means a well-knit personality along with honesty in all one does. It means what Polonius told his son: "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man (Shakespeare)."

As caregivers develop **self-awareness**, they improve each quality mentioned as well as self-evaluation. Caregivers may help each other toward self-awareness through constructive criticism with mutual trust and respect. Quiet reflection and professional counseling may help as well. Working with children will sometimes stir emotions from the caregiver's own childhood. A truly fine caregiver will have searched and brought to light salient unconscious factors in herself. She's aware of their influence when at work with children, and steers her own behavior accordingly.

Good caregivers need a **theoretical ground**, a conceptual framework in which to see children. The developmental-interaction point of view put forward by Bank Street College of Education (Betty Boegehold, Harriet Cuffaro, William Hooks, and Gordon Klopf, *Education Before Five* Bank Street College, 1977; Barbara Biber, Ellen Shapiro, and Elaine Wickens, *Promoting Cognitive Growth from a Developmental-Interaction Point of View*, NAEYC, 1971; and Ellen Shapiro and Barbara Biber, *The Education of Young Children: A Developmental-Interaction Approach*, Teachers College Record, Vol. 74, No. 1, September 1972) is perhaps the most useful foundation and guide for

helping youngsters learn at their best. The word *development* suggests a continuing, complex process of growth and learning, while *interaction* occurs internally between the child's emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, and externally between the child and his expanding physical and social environment. The accent is on *integrative* action by the children themselves. Developmental-interaction is clearly aligned with NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice (Sue Bredekamp and C. Copple, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*, NAEYC, 1997).

Research in the last ten years indicates that a caregiver's intellectual understanding of DAP is often sadly unable to implement appropriate practice with the children (Loraine Dunn and Susan Kontos, "What Have We Learned About Developmentally Appropriate Practice?," *Young Children*, July 1997). Hands-on workshops can be somewhat helpful in training caregivers, but protracted, daily participant experience in a child care environment that supports active child learning, peer cooperation, creativity, and the keen interest shared by the children in their self-impelled work of learning together is by all odds the best training for beginning caregivers.

A good caregiver, daily responsible for child experience, should have, besides the thorough background in developmental psychology mentioned above, the **equivalent of a college graduate's general knowledge**, and effective access to the media, libraries, and the internet.

Experience with elemental care of our physical environment and with young children's books is also valuable, while a working knowledge of grass-roots democracy will support cooperative learning. It is through cooperative learning experience

from age three onward that children gradually come to understand the benefits and responsibilities of democratic community, which, not incidentally, is so important to the health of our country today.

Child care experts know that, aside from their attainment of needed skills, young children do not need proficiency in traditional academic subjects. The salient point is not so much what, but *how*, they learn. And, again, how children learn best is through their own action: asking questions, finding answers, and testing their answers by using them in their work and play, all with adult *guidance*, not didactic instruction. Good caregivers know the value of a child's innate curiosity and deep satisfaction in the experiential learning process. Let no child care environment dampen a child's interest and joy in learning!

Good caregivers show unfailing **warm respect for and courtesy to children** as a group and to each child as a unique and unrepeatable individual. Helping a child to make constructive, independent choices toward self-disciplined creativity depends very much upon our genuine, full, and caring respect for that child and his way of working, his way of learning. Such respect cannot be accomplished without a very real knowledge of child development, as well as the personal caregiver qualities of inner security, integrity, and self-awareness.

Allied to respect is a good caregiver's **trust in each child** to find his own way, in a supportive child care environment, toward personal integrity, acceptable behavior, good learning purpose, and ultimately to realize his unique potential. Genuine trust in a child depends on fundamental knowledge of child development, close observation of the individual child, and the care-

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giver's own inner sense of security mentioned above.

Integrity and respect invite **discretion**. A child's problems should remain confidential. Respect for the privacy of the child and her family is essential for their trust and confidence in the caregiver.

Contrary to strictly linear thinking, which western science and philosophy have championed for three centuries, **intuition**, a non-reasoning, often quite sudden, insight is finally gaining credence. Einstein said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge," and imagination lives with intuition. For many of us, intuition often sways our thinking simply because it feels right and it works. A well-balanced, mature, and keenly observant caregiver *knows in her bones* how to be with a child.

Professional **detachment** allows respect, trust, and kindness (unconditional love) to come through to the child. On the surface, detachment and love may seem a paradox, but precisely the opposite is true. A caregiver with inner security and mature self-awareness, a caregiver at ease and fulfilled by her own adult development, does not impose her personality needs onto her relations with children.

Detachment in caring allows empathy without projection, without naively attributing her own unconscious negative feelings to the children. Detachment gives the children psychological space. It avoids sarcasm and contempt which are crushing to a child. Detachment helps the caregiver test and use her knowledge of child development with a degree of wisdom.

Don't forget **laughter**. One sign of detachment is often delightful humor, and humor in the classroom

is important. It signals enjoyment. It invites friendship. It often opens the way for cooperative learning. While shared humor lights the morning, laughing at a child's expense should be nipped at once. Affectionate laughter is an indispensable quality in good child care.

Finally, the **caregiver is a model**. Whether conscious of it or not, he models feeling, thought, and behavior for the children in his care. An inevitable part of child learning is copying; trying to think, feel, and act like persons consistently near and admired by the child. A beloved provider may demonstrate values which the children cherish all their lives. The personality of a caregiver, her instinctive kindness, her deep integrity, her lively interest in life and learning, will all affect the children. It is a sobering responsibility, an inspiring challenge.