

Why You Should Invest in Professional Membership

by Jeff A. Johnson, author of Do-It-Yourself Early Learning

Over the last few years, I've talked with hundreds of child care providers about stress and burnout. Some of them describe feeling empty, out of gas, run-down, listless, directionless, and/or unfulfilled. But through hard work, mindful decision-making, and a focus on self-renewal, others, who used to have those feelings, have managed to move beyond burnout. One important tool providers have used to get past stress and burnout is involvement in a professional support group. Many providers have shared with me how becoming involved with other child care and early education professionals has helped them through some very tough times.

There are plenty of excuses for not joining a local, state, or national providers group, including "I don't have the time," "The membership fee is too high," "They'll want me to do stuff," and "I won't get anything out of joining." But most providers find that they get a lot from the time and money they invest in a professional membership.

If you ask 10 providers why they maintain membership in a professional group, you'll probably get 10 different answers; the reasons for joining can be very personal. Some of my favorite reasons to join such a group are that you gain

- access to useful new information, training, and resources,
- contact with peers who understand, support, and respect what you do for a living and who have shared many of the same experiences (good and bad) that you have had in your early childhood career,
- a chance to share your special skills, talents, and knowledge with other professionals,
- validation in your career choice,
- opportunities to build new friendships,
- a connectedness with others that so many providers, especially family-based providers, are missing in their professional life,
- a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself,
- growth as an individual and professional, and
- a stronger political voice.

Which organization you choose to join depends a lot on what you are seeking. The following national organizations have much to offer child care providers seeking a political voice, cutting-edge information, and professional growth:

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has a huge member base and affiliates across the country. Its membership includes center- and home-based providers, early elementary school teachers, and other early childhood professionals. Founded in 1926, it is the world's largest organization working on the behalf of young children. It offers many great resources and is a strong advocate for young children and early childhood professionals alike. Visit NAEYC's Web site at www.naeyc.org.

The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC) is an organization that seeks to promote quality child care by strengthening the profession of family child care. NAFCC has a lot to offer family child care providers seeking a connection to other family-based professionals, training, and resources. NAFCC also offers an accreditation process for family-based programs. Visit NAFCC's Web site at www.nafcc.org.

The Redleaf National Institute (RNI) seeks to improve quality family child care by helping providers successfully manage their business. Director Tom Copeland writes a full line of family child care business resources, including books on contracts and policies, tax preparation, marketing, record keeping, and legal and insurance issues. RNI's monthly e-newsletter offers tax and business advice and answers to family child care provider business questions. Visit RNI's Web site at www.redleafinstitute.org.

Providers looking for more of the social benefits of professional membership—contact with peers, new friendships, and great training—may want to consider membership in a state or local providers' group. These organizations range from statewide associations with thousands of members to informal groups that meet regularly to socialize. In state and local associations, you'll find people who understand what you do for a living--people who have been there and who know where you are coming from.

As you no doubt recognize, there are things about the early childhood professions that people who don't spend their days caring for small children do not understand. For example, the delight of seeing a child acquire a new skill, the tranquility of a day when everyone sleeps during naptime, the way your body tenses when a parent says the words "was just treated for head lice," or the joy of a few minutes alone in the bathroom without a herd of one- and two-year-olds sticking their fingers under the door and calling your name.

If you don't know of a group in your state or community, try contacting your local resource and referral agency, meal program, or social service agency. They often have contact information for area associations. The national groups NAEYC and NAFCC also have state and regional affiliates.

As a family child care provider, I am a member of all the national organizations listed above, plus a local providers' association and a statewide association. Each organization gives me something different that I need as a professional; I benefit from each membership in a unique way.

While no one says you have to join a professional association, doing so is one the best ways to grow as a professional and escape some of the isolation, stress, lack of appreciation, and other negatives that come with a career as a caregiver. A professional membership is a great way to invest in yourself and your career.

After 16 years directing a child care center and community center, Jeff Johnson became a Family Child Care Provider in 2003 with his wife, Tasha. Their program focuses on emergent learning in a play based environment.

According to Jeff, "The best thing about our program is the great kids we get to work with each day. Our days are spent with laughs, conversation, play, exploration, discoveries, and fun. We enjoy creating an environment conducive to 'light bulb moments'—you know, the moments where kids grasp new ideas. It is wonderful to get to see them rediscover the world." Jeff travels around the country presenting on topics such as combating stress and burnout in family child care and inexpensive, easy-to-make toys that promote learning.

*Jeff is the author of the best-selling Redleaf Press book *Do-It-Yourself Early Learning: Easy and Fun Activities and Toys from Everyday Home Center Materials*. His next Redleaf book on combating stress and burnout in family child care, *Finding Your Smile Again: A Child Care Professional's Guide to Reducing Stress and Avoiding Burnout*, is coming out in spring 2007. For more information on books and training, you can visit his website is www.explorationsearlylearning.com.*

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