

-It's Fine! Everything's Fine! (And You're in Charge)



**Real-World Wisdom
for Early Childhood Directors**

JILL JACOBI-VESELS, PhD & AMY KAY POWELL, PhD

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Published by Gryphon House
P.O. Box 10
1310 Lewisville-Clemmons Rd.
Lewisville, NC 27023
800.638.0928; 877.638.7576 [fax]
Visit us on the web at www.gryphonhouse.com.

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2026936229

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Introduction

You are probably reading this book because you are a new director—or are already deep into the position and wondering what on earth you got yourself into. Few professional roles span such widely varying duties, responsibilities, and liabilities; yet, being the best director that you can be is essential to the success of children, families, and staff. Unfortunately, unpredictable workdays, tight budgets, and knowing that the buck stops with you can dim even the most passionate director's enthusiasm and can become overwhelming and isolating. Let's be honest—sometimes being a director can feel like you're riding a flaming bike over rough terrain while constantly putting out all the other fires. There are, however, ways to make the ride a little smoother and minimize those daily fires.

Research shows that early childhood experiences play a critical role in brain development (Head Start, 2025), social skills (Post University, 2023), and resiliency (Masten, Gewirtz, and Sapienza, 2024). The importance of our work cannot be overstated, and it cannot happen without directors who work hard every day, facing fires and bumpy roads, to ensure that classrooms function well and children have high-quality early childhood experiences. The work of early childhood program leaders matters tremendously. In this book, we share words of wisdom from directors across the country and some hard-learned lessons and tips from our own experiences to help you calm the flames a bit, recognize the impact of the work that you do, and find the affirmation you so richly deserve.

First, let us tell you that you are not alone. Directors across your state and country are having the same bike-on-fire experience as you. We want you to recognize that you, and other directors just like you, are geniuses who are already rocking this difficult job. You must be. Who else can be an expert in child development, understand conflicting regulations and requirements, mentor and counsel stressed or irritable staff, manage limited resources, and get the most bang for your buck? And, you do all this while making certain that children are safe, happy, and learning; fixing the overflowing toilet; spotting pink eye from twenty feet away; and covering for six absent staff members (sometimes even including the cook)! Now that you acknowledge your genius, let's talk about ideas that can take you to a new level. Some ideas will be familiar. Others may be new to you. But first, let us tell you a little about ourselves, where we came from, and how we got to where we are now: authoring the book you are holding in your hands.

Who We Are

Jill: My first job straight out of college was as the director of a children's theater in Frankfurt, Germany. I was astounded at the abilities and determination of young children. I had no idea that they were so capable. Together, we traveled to many schools and theaters to present shows for up to five hundred people at a time. They were *really good*! This experience had a strong impact on me and lit my desire to work with children as a career.

When my husband was reassigned to the United States, I needed a new position. The only available job that involved working with children was as director of a before-and-after-school children's program. They hired me because they considered the position to be purely entertainment, not education, and I had a degree in theatre. Perspectives and my professional development path have changed quite a bit since then!

I had the great fortune to be part of a well-established, high-quality program for military families early in my career. I received excellent training, an outstanding policy framework for operations, opportunities to take part in national conferences, and mentorship from one of the best in the business, Carolyn Cohen Corliss. To this day, she is one of my best friends—a guiding light for those moments when I am at a loss or feel overwhelmed in my work. She showed me the limitless potential of children and the deep need for quality early learning experiences. Her love for children and drive to create top-quality programs were contagious and are with me still.

I eventually earned higher-level degrees in early childhood education and moved on to other child-care settings, including a corporate center and a university campus-based center. I continue to find support and wisdom through my relationships with other directors across the country, especially those in the National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers (N4C). Through N4C, I met my coauthor, Amy Kay Powell. The experience of directing through the COVID-19 pandemic could have been a complete disaster for my center without the directors' amazing ideas, passion, and willingness to share. Their generosity and wisdom were the spark for this book and lit my own fire to share lessons learned with those who may already be feeling the heat or who are considering stepping into the role. Wherever you are in your early childhood career, I thank you for the love, dedication, and skill that you give to children. You are changing the world.

Amy Kay: From an early age, I knew I wanted to work with children, and my aspiration in college was to become a certified teacher. Upon graduating from the University of Georgia (UGA) with my T4 (entry-level) certification, I ended up working in a half-day program with two-year-olds. The educational requirement for this position was a high school diploma. However, what I learned with those children, coupled with my formal education, laid a solid foundation for the

next decade of my teaching career. After that, I taught for five years in public prekindergarten and five years in public kindergarten. During that time, I went back to UGA and earned a master's degree in elementary education. Next, I began work on my doctorate in language and literacy education; I left the classroom in 2005 to focus on preparing for my dissertation. My purpose in getting my doctorate was to be able to teach preservice teachers; I had no thoughts, desires, or aspirations to go into administration or leadership. But, life had a different plan. In April 2006, I was initially asked to be the director of the campus lab school for two months while they sought a permanent director. This quickly turned into, "Can you stay until the end of the year, rather than leave in June?" I agreed. During this extended time, I realized that I was learning a lot about administration and believed I had something to contribute to the program, so I decided to apply for the permanent job. Now, two decades later, I am looking at the sunset of my career. It still surprises me that I spent twice as much time "behind a desk" as I spent in the classroom, but I am absolutely certain that I've been exactly where I was supposed to be.

The majority of my training as a director of an early learning center was hands-on and on-the-job. I had often wished I had a manual of sorts to help guide me. Our hope is that this book can provide some information, resources, support, and, most importantly, connection and the reassurance that *you are not alone* on this journey of being a leader.

What This Book Is About

Together, we have had well-attended conference presentations and numerous conversations with other administrators about the details of leading, how to lead well, and what the work involves. The gracious invitation of Gryphon House to put our thoughts, experiences, lessons, wisdom, and pro tips into print has resulted in the creation of this book. What you will read in these pages is based on our administrative experiences as well as wisdom gained from friendships and professional relationships with administrators across the country.

Before beginning this book, we asked others in similar positions what they wish they had known. We were able to identify definite themes in these responses, which we used to create the framework for this book. Here are some "wish I had knowns" from others who truly understand this work and life:

- 🔥 The importance of relationships with staff: building a program culture/ climate, communication, hiring, and retaining (see chapters 1–4)
- 🔥 The importance of relationships with families: building mutual understanding and appreciation, working as partners (see chapters 5–6)

- 🔥 The critical need for documentation, documentation, documentation (see chapter 9)
- 🔥 The importance of self-care and how delegating empowers others and helps protect your sanity (see chapter 10)

Because we know that other components of your program require your attention as well, in chapter 7, we share information on program quality and accreditation, and in chapter 8, we share insights on budgeting.

We would love for you read this book cover to cover, because we believe that there is a benefit in being proactive and prepared for fires before they ignite. However, we know that directors must often put out the fires at hand, and every topic may not be relevant in your present situation. We intentionally wrote the book in a way that you can select the topics you need, when you need them, by reviewing the table of contents. It's a book that you can pick up, get the idea(s) that are helpful, tag pages and strategies to try out, and then put back down on your desk until the next fire erupts. We include pro tips and vignettes throughout to make the content more familiar, relatable, and easy to immediately put into action. Use this book as it is most helpful for you: from beginning to end, or picking and choosing from the table of contents to find what you need in the heat of the moment.

CHAPTER 1

Communication, Connections, and Relationships: Building the Bucket Brigade

Directors tell us that one of the things they most wish they had known before taking the job is the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships. In her book *Dial Down: Holistic Strategies to Move from Chaos to Calm*, Raquel Durden (2025) asserts, "Connection is not just a desire—it is a human necessity." We agree that connection and relationship building are critical to a director's success because, simply put, you can't do it all alone without bursting into flames. Let's talk about key opportunities for connection and relationships so that you can better help others and, importantly, get the help you need.

Much of a director's life is spent getting things partially done in bits and pieces. We work in the weeds on important deadlines, suddenly drop those tasks because someone is upset and needs to talk *now*, then frantically pick the tasks back up after helping the person in need. The temptation to hunker down at your desk and stay focused on one task at a time is a strong dream. After all, the to-do list just keeps growing, and the squirrel keeps bouncing around in your brain. While the hunkering-down-at-your-desk strategy is sometimes unavoidable, especially when you have a serious deadline, the job is largely focused on people (both young and grown) and our relationships with them. They all have different needs, viewpoints, and opinions.



Positive relationships and connections are key to a director's success.

Positive relationships and connections will help you build a strong program and navigate moments when the road gets rough. The people around you can be your biggest struggle or your best resource. Children arrive with joy and anticipation, rather than reluctance and tears, when they know that you and your staff place them at the center of all that you do. Families who already know that you genuinely care

and want to know them and their children are more open to pitching in or talking about difficult issues in a collaborative way. Strong and positive relationships with staff members are the foundation for a workplace climate of collaboration and teamwork. Preestablished mutual trust and respect can lead your larger organization or community to share resources and have your back when you need help.

Much of what we do is met with appreciation and does indeed make the lives of others better. Yet, the inevitable moments when we must deal with conflict or deliver unwelcome news can weigh heavily. Helping center stakeholders work and play well together takes balance, skill, dedication, and sometimes the ability to let go and forgive yourself for not being perfect. Showing grace to yourself and others is a critical skill requiring attention and development. None of us has all the answers, because each center and the people involved are different and have changing needs and wants. There are, however, some effective strategies to help

you balance the needs and skills of staff members, understand and prioritize the preferences of the families and children you serve, and meet the expectations of institutions or communities—all while ensuring that you meet regulations and standards. This chapter examines these strategies through key relationships with staff, families, professional peers, and community stakeholders.

Relationships with Staff

Directors are typically good-hearted people who want to make a positive difference for others. They are often creative, experienced, and passionate, which means that they are also full of ideas for their programs and are anxious to get started making improvements, especially when they are new to a center. That drive can be energizing and can lead centers to new heights if ideas are presented to staff in a well-paced way that includes and excites. We recommend that directors pause and get to know programs that are new to them before implementing any changes. Eagerness to do big things can go in unexpected directions if staff feel that what they have already accomplished is not noticed or appreciated, or if they are not included in planning. Take time to get to know the program, staff, children, and families by spending time in classrooms and supporting current efforts before you make sweeping changes. Doing so will help everyone climb on board and steer in the same direction.

Directors who are new to a center or new to their position should also be aware that there is sometimes a honeymoon period when staff are working to get to know you and are friendly and willing to help you get settled. As time passes, teachers become reabsorbed into the daily life in the classrooms, and that extra grace may slowly slip away, especially if they are feeling pressured to make changes when they are already

overwhelmed, or if you have not made time to invest in relationship building. Now is the time to dig deep to build long-term, lasting relationships and aim for building a collaborative and positive workplace culture. Consider the following strategies to create these strong staff relationships.

PRO TIP:

Directors who are new to the position should get to know the current program before making changes. Involve staff in making decisions to create a positive and collaborative work environment.

Making the Most of Small Moments

Finding large chunks of undivided time and attention to cement relationships with staff members may not be possible. They are busy with the children, and you have a long to-do list. Make the most of scattered, impromptu moments by pausing the squirrel in your brain and being fully present. Make eye contact, actively listen, and consistently follow through afterward to build the confidence of others that they can rely on you and that you value their suggestions and care about their needs. Of course, you will probably be stopped by four or five other people before you make it back to your desk, so consider carrying a small notebook and jotting down reminders of what you need to do before moving on to the next person. We used to rely solely on our memories, but we've found that critical pieces of information and promises to get things done inadvertently fall out of mind. Writing things down in the moment can be especially helpful to prevent an accidental memory lapse. If you are having a relatively calm day (or a relatively calm moment, because who gets a whole day of calm?), you might even be able to pop in to follow up or send a quick email to tell a staff member what you did to address the discussed question or need.

Intentional small moments for casual conversations with those you supervise go a long way to helping your team feel supported and provide you with a chance to breathe. One way to achieve this is to give yourself the gift of play by stepping



PRO TIP:

Carry a notebook and pen with you wherever you go. Jot down staff members' problems or questions, and be sure to follow up as needed. Staff will feel heard and remembered, which will go a long way toward building trust in your leadership.

into a classroom to engage with small groups of children. Classroom staff will view you as more relatable and in touch with their daily work, and they may feel more comfortable getting to know and trust you in their own space. You can further develop goodwill by stepping in to help when things get messy, such as working with the children to clean up the chaotic block area or helping the group wash hands for lunch while the teacher

has a one-on-one talk with a child who is upset. We know you may be thinking, "But when do I ever have time in my already overscheduled, busy day to do this?" You don't necessarily have the time, but it can be particularly beneficial to *make* the time for being present in the classrooms.

Keeping an Open-Door Policy

Reliable opportunities to talk with you outside of the classroom are a necessary ingredient for positive relationships with staff. Directors can establish an open-door policy with consistent times on selected days. Ideally, directors should make drop-in conversations the priority during open-door hours so that staff feel that their time and needs are valued. When it is not possible to give full attention because a fire is burning, statements such as, “I can tell you really need to talk, but I’m not available right now. Let’s make time to talk (later today or later this week).” Be sure to honor that time and give your full attention and focus.

Varying the open-door times by day will give more accessibility to more staff. For example, some staff may be able to stop by during a Monday and Wednesday 8:00–10:00 a.m. time slot, and others may be able to stop in on Tuesday or Thursday, 12:00–2:00 p.m. Make sure that you are there when scheduled. Of course, if no one drops by, you can work on your impressive to-do list. If an emergency occurs outside your scheduled office hours, you may have to stop and be present.

Building in Time for Collaboration Among Staff

Moments when staff members can regularly meet as a group are beneficial in creating a positive, team-based work environment. Directors often schedule planning time for teachers but neglect to build in time for collaboration between classrooms. Consider setting aside one hour per week or every other week for teachers to share ideas, discuss the curriculum, and plan special events. This will go a long way toward building a sense of trust and respect and can generate some of the best new ideas for your program.

Strategies for making these meetings possible will vary from center to center because we all have different resources and structures. One center might plan lunch- or nap-time coverage using available substitutes. Another might pay staff to come in early or stay late one day per week. Meetings might be used to discuss planning and curriculum, equipment needs, upcoming special events, or playground schedules. It’s up to you. Directors who make time to periodically attend such meetings—but not always manage the discussions—show their

PRO TIP:

Feeling trapped in the classroom can isolate your team. Prioritize scheduled time for staff members to meet with each other for collaboration, goal setting, creativity, and shared problem-solving.

Being a director isn't easy

but, **finally**, there's a book that *gets it*.

It's Fine! Everything's Fine! (And You're in Charge) delivers honest, practical, and often humorous guidance from two seasoned leaders who have lived the realities of early childhood administration. From licensing and enrollment to staff support and family relationships, this book speaks directly to the everyday challenges directors face—with empathy, clarity, and real-world solutions.

Written in an approachable, easy-to-digest style, this resource is designed for busy leaders who don't have time to read cover to cover. You'll find actionable strategies, ready-to-use scripts, and field-tested advice to help you navigate the moments that matter most, both big and small.

Inside, you'll discover how to:

-  lead and support staff with confidence and compassion.
-  manage enrollment, finances, and documentation effectively.
-  build strong relationships with families.
-  maintain program quality and compliance.
-  care for yourself while caring for everyone else.

Whether you're a new director finding your footing or a veteran leader seeking fresh perspective, this book offers encouragement, humor, and practical wisdom you'll turn to again and again. Perfect for coaching, mentoring, or professional development, it's a trusted companion for leaders at every stage.

With **It's Fine! Everything's Fine! (And You're in Charge)**, you'll gain the confidence to lead with heart, resilience, and just the right amount of humor—because great leadership doesn't require perfection, just real support.

About the Authors



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www.gryphonhouse.com

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\$21.95

ISBN 9781636501802



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9 781636 501802