



Decreasing Burnout and Promoting Well-being among Early Childhood Educators

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This guide provides information about workplace burnout on early childhood educators. In this guide, the term “educators” refers to all childcare providers working with children aged birth to 5 years. Research-based techniques and strategies are provided to support early childhood educators in effectively managing their work stress, and to increase psychological well-being and workplace engagement.

Introduction

The first five years of a child’s life are a crucial period of development. It is during these years that children develop socio-emotional, cognitive, language, and regulatory skills. Early childhood educators play an essential role during this rapid stage of development for children. Over 75% of children in Nebraska under the age of six reside in homes where all adults have working status, making the role of early childhood educators even more important (Buffet Early Childhood Institute, 2020). Early childhood educators have many workplace demands, such as caregiving responsibilities, engaging in professional development and training, managing and engaging in successful parent-educator relationships, and staying up to date with emerging technological teaching tools. Meeting these constant demands can influence the physical, psychological, and organizational well-being of educators. Working in early childhood education also requires higher physical work de-

mands (e.g., lifting children and moving furniture around for daily activities), and when psychological factors such as stress, anxiety, or depression occur, the combination can lead to lower job satisfaction and commitment.

In Nebraska, early childhood educators surveyed from 2015–2016 reported clinically depressive symptoms ranging from 8% in home-based childcare to 10% in PreK programs, with the majority (86%) of early childhood educators in Nebraska reporting experiencing depressive symptoms (Nebraska Early Childhood Workforce Survey, 2017). When educators perceive the continual unequal balance between their efforts and the rewards they gain at their workplace, the “burnout cycle” begins (see Figure 1). Burnout can adversely affect the quality of care and education children receive, and results in occasional or chronic absenteeism on the part of the educator, employee turnover, and educators leaving the profession altogether. It is important to support the health and well-being of the Nebraska early childhood workforce to be able to provide high-quality care and education for children.

What is Burnout?

Workplace burnout has commonly been defined as long-term occupational stress and unpleasant and negative feelings that arise due to different workplace stressors. Early childhood educators may experience stressors that fall

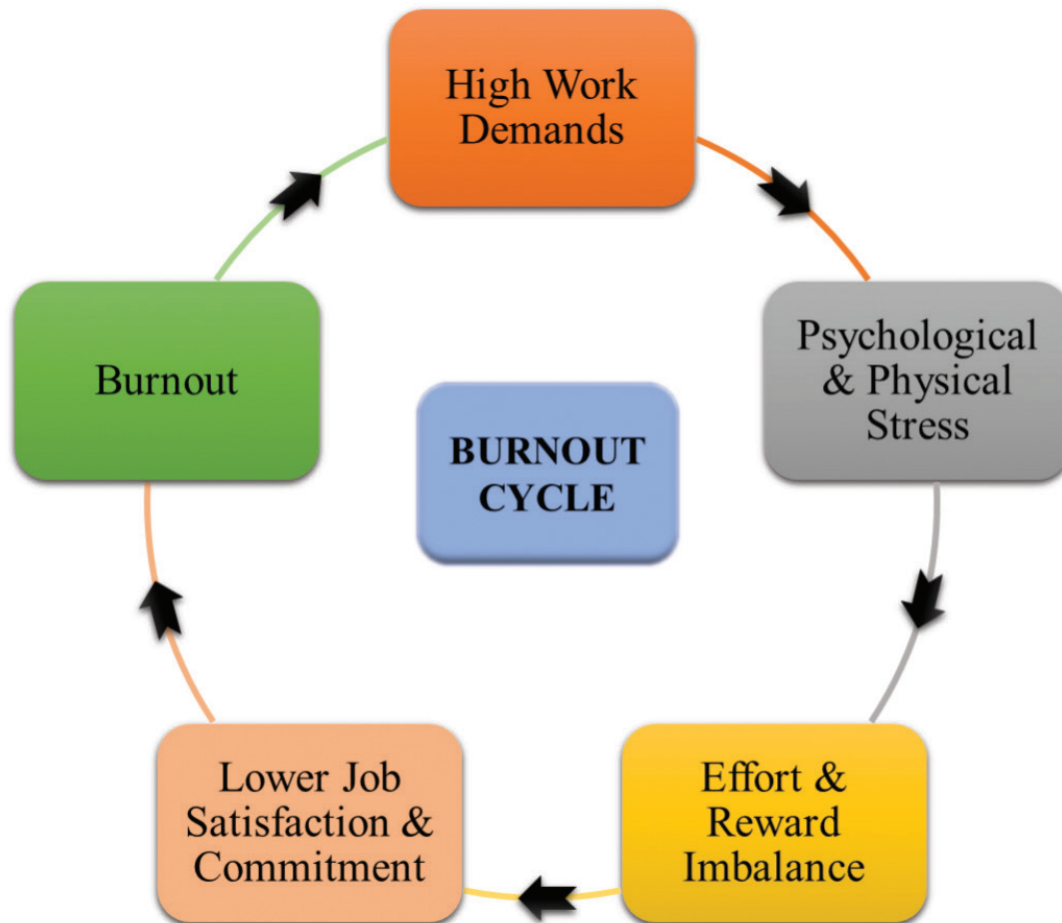


Figure 1. Common Stressors Early Childhood Educators Face

within three dimensions: *emotional exhaustion*, *depersonalization*, and *decreased personal accomplishment*.

- **Emotional exhaustion** consists of drained energy, chronic fatigue, and a general feeling of being worn out.
- **Depersonalization** is characterized by a distant or indifferent attitude at work, both toward children and colleagues.
- **Reduced personal accomplishment** is commonly characterized as the decrease in the perception of one's self-competence within the workplace.

Educators who experience high burnout levels can become less sensitive to children's needs, less engaged in daily activities, and more distant, and they can miss opportunities to actively engage children in their learning process. This can negatively impact children's social-emotional and academic outcomes. High educator burnout levels also result in high turnover rates, an issue that drastically affects

the quality of childcare in Nebraska. More than three-quarters of childcare centers in Nebraska reported turnover of lead and assistant teachers (Buffet Early Childhood Institute, 2020).

Experiencing long-term stress at the workplace is a common predictor of early childhood educators' feelings of burnout. The sources of stress experienced by early childhood educators are multi-faceted and are impacted by the systems they work in.

- The most frequently recognized stressor is *poor compensation and pay* for early childhood educators. In Nebraska, the median annual pay for in-home early care providers is \$25,980 and \$18,706 for center-based educators. PreK educators' median annual pay is \$36,000. Although the pay may vary and is higher at the PreK level when compared with other age groups, educators still face financial difficulties and often have a second job. In Nebraska, 27% of home-based and 20% of center-based professionals rely on some kind

of public assistance to make ends meet (Sarver et al., 2020). The financial strain of difficulties can lead to feelings of fatigue or a distant attitude at work.

- Early childhood educators face increasingly *multi-varied work demands*, with non-teaching responsibilities such as administrative work, professional development, and excessive documentation. Not all educators have the benefit of staffing structures to cover for scheduled educator planning time (e.g., out of class time) to meet these increasing demands, leading to a highly stressed workforce.
- *Relationships* can contribute to educators feeling stressed. Poor relationships with colleagues and strained partnerships with families of the children they care for can cause isolation, conflict, and add to the educator's stress. Most importantly, when educators experience stress of the various mentioned demands, it can detrimentally affect the *educator-child relationship*, negatively impacted the learning and caregiving environment, and lead to feelings of inadequacy in educators. This, in turn, can lower their overall efficiency at work and affect their holistic well-being.

Spill-over of prolonged stress in the educators' personal lives can hinder their work-life balance and make the burnout cycle seem endless.

Helpful Tips for Managing Stress in the Workplace

Early childhood educators are crucial for young children's quality learning and development. When educators are at their best, they help create a supportive socio-emotional environment for the classroom. To provide the best care to children, it is essential for educators to be supported. Supportive systems and policies are critical for addressing burnout. Prioritizing self-care and wellness is also essential.

Some strategies that should be considered within the policies and systems of the program, as well as healthy ways to manage stress, are listed below. For any strategy to be sustainable, there needs to be support, and wellness strategies should not be solely the responsibility of the educator.

- *Wellness Coach*: One strategy that can help educators effectively manage their stress is a wellness coach. The coach and the educators co-identify the educators' wellness needs and collaboratively work to find solutions and strategies to increase educators' well-being. Childcare program administrations usually provide

wellness coaches as resources for educators. One example of a wellness coach program is the Be Well Care Well for childcare programs. It provides participating childcare programs with a wellness coach, who along with the administrators, educators, and a family representative form a Well-being Committee. Working together, they create a well-being plan, with the goal to promote well-being through various activities.

- *Practicing Mindfulness*: Using various types of mindfulness-based practices can help educators manage stress and promote a more positive and kind outlook toward the world and themselves. Some examples are focused-attention mindfulness practices, such as guided meditations and yoga; informal daily practices such as pausing, being aware of the environment, and reflecting in a non-judgmental way; and gratitude acknowledgment and expression. Early childhood centers providing mindfulness-based programs for their employees is a great opportunity for educators to integrate mindfulness-based practices in their daily schedule and classroom.
- *Healthy Body, Mind, and Exercise*: Keeping the body and mind healthy with frequent exercise, healthy food, and quality sleep can help fight fatigue that accompanies stressful situations. Some research suggests waking up at the same time each day can support quality sleep. Taking walks during breaks at work allows for de-stressing, and educators can return to the classroom feeling refreshed and energetic. Programs having available substitute staff also allows the educators to step out of the classroom for a quick break in stressful or overwhelming situations. Additionally, policies allowing educators to carry water bottles around with them helps ensure adequate water intake and maintains a healthy and fit body.
- *Breathing Techniques*: Early childhood educators often face situations that can create a reactive response from them, such as trying to calm down a toddler refusing to nap and disturbing others during nap time. Using deep breathing techniques can help lower stress in the body and calm the mind from its reactive mode, and give the educator time to formulate an appropriate response.
- *Self-compassion*: Recognizing the need for self-care requires a kind, non-judgmental, and compassionate attitude toward oneself. Being self-compassionate, recognizing that suffering is experienced by all, and

avoiding negative-self talk fosters a positive lens to help combat stressful situations. This also fosters compassion for others and helps to build a supportive and collaborative work environment.

- *Colleagues and Personal Relationships*: Colleagues are a great source of support at the workplace. Supportive interactions with colleagues can aid in problem-solving classroom difficulties, thus decreasing stress. Family and friends may also be part of a support system to help maintain the work-life balance.
- *Re-evaluate Situations*: A conflict situation with children, their families, or colleagues can automate a reactive response, such as using dismissive language or speaking in a loud voice. Taking a step back to re-evaluate the situation and practice compassionate understanding can help avoid further conflict and make it less stressful. Educators try and do their best with available resources, and being kind and compassionate to others makes conflict situations occur less and be less stressful.
- *Physical Space and Storage*: To decrease the physical strain of caring for young children, offer both child-size and adult-size furniture, and have a dedicated space for early childhood educators to store their personal belongings. Programs making their workplaces more accommodating helps daily activities to progress smoothly and educators to feel appreciated and valued.
- *Plan for Educator Breaktime*: Caring for children can be mentally taxing. Early childhood educators need planned break time to use the restroom and have a few minutes to refresh physically and mentally. Having substitute staff is beneficial and ensures greater flexibility for the educators.

RESOURCES

- *Calm* app: This app is developed for sleep, relaxation, and meditation. It provides calming music, video lessons, and numerous guided mediations to help with various difficulties such as sleep issues, anxiety, and stress. <https://www.calm.com/>
- *Nebraska Department of Education*: The Nebraska Department of Education-Early Childhood Training Center provides educators with various options of workshops and trainings related to early childhood care, professional development, and self-care. For example, the Whole Body Classroom Series is a virtual

series focused on developing meaningful interactions and relationships with children and educator self-care and mental health. <https://www.education.ne.gov/oc/early-childhood-training-center/>

- *Liberate* app: This app is developed by and for the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color community. The app is intended to help ease anxiety, find gratitude, and heal internalized racism and microaggressions. There is also a Facebook page that provides users with additional information and useful resources. <https://liberatemeditation.com/> <https://www.facebook.com/liberatemeditation/>
- *Everyday Self-Care for Educators: Tools and Strategies for Well-Being* by Carla Tantillo Philibert, Chris Soto, and Lara Veon: This book helps educators with various self-care practices to enhance well-being both inside and outside the classroom. It also covers the impact that educators' self-care can have on children.
- *The Happy Teacher Project*: This project uses a comprehensive approach to understanding physical, psychological, and professional well-being for early childhood educators, and provides strategies for building supportive workplace conditions in these three areas. <https://www.ou.edu/tulsa/education/research/happyteacherproject/about-project/happy-teacher-project>
- *Getting Ready*: This educational approach, which is offered by the Nebraska Early Development Network, is a child- and parent-focused intervention for promoting school readiness by enhancing both parent-child and parent-educator engagement. <https://edn.ne.gov/cms/getting-ready>
- *CHIME*: The Cultivating Healthy Intentional Mindful Educators (CHIME) is a UNL Early Childhood Development program for educators that provides guidance and education on incorporating mindfulness and reflective practices into daily routines. This program benefits health and well-being for both providers and young children. <https://child.unl.edu/chime>
- *Circle of Security (COS)*: This evidence-based intervention helps enhance attachment security between caregivers and children by increasing awareness of children's needs and caregiver responses. COS is from Circle of Security International, and is part of the support program for children, young adults, and families offered by the Nebraska Children and Families

Foundation. https://www.nebraskachildren.org/old-site-structure/ebp/circle_of_security.html

- *Be Well Care Well Program*: This program provides participating childcare programs with a wellness coach, with a goal to work together to increase well-being through various activities. <https://scpitc.org/be-well-care-well/>

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