



## The Complete Guide to Hiring & Retaining Early Childhood Educators



## Why Hiring & Retention Matters

Staffing is a challenge for any business, but this is perhaps most true for the child care industry. On the one hand, you need to find qualified, responsible candidates who you can trust to care for your customers' young children. At the same time, these employees typically do so for low pay over long and very busy hours, often with little recognition of the important work they do.

This is why it is especially important for early child care providers to make hiring and retention a top priority — and the data shows they are. In the 2018 North American Child Care Sector Benchmark Survey, early education leaders ranked labor as the #1 organizational risk they face.<sup>1</sup> Running a center is demanding in its own right, and when staff turnover rates are high, it can become impossible.

There will always be things beyond your control with staffing, but there are many things that you *can* do to keep the staff you have for longer and motivate them to enjoy coming to work each and every day. And when your staff is happy, it becomes contagious.

In this guide, we'll take an in-depth look at how to find, hire and keep the best early childhood education staff. Whether you're hiring your first employee or have hundreds of staff, it's never too early or too late to improve your approach to staffing.

**Happy hiring, from our team to yours!**

<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.himama.com/benchmark-2018/>





## Finding Candidates

To hire the best early childhood educators, you need to make sure that your opportunity is discoverable in the right place at the right time.

### Creating a Job Posting

A well-written job posting is one of the best gatekeepers you can have during the hiring process. Done correctly, it will encourage only qualified candidates to apply; done poorly, you will have to sort through a larger mix of candidates — or worse, those best-suited for the job won't apply for it.

Ask for a cover letter. Experience is great, but you should also hire for passion and potential. A cover letter allows candidates to explain why they think they will excel in this role. For those who do not include one, this will also be an easy way to screen for those who don't follow instructions well or only want to do the bare minimum, which are definitely not qualities to look for in potential new hires.

When writing your job posting, don't feel like you need to make it overly formal. Try to make the tone reflect your company culture. If you have a fun and light-hearted environment, have that reflected in the job posting so you attract like-minded individuals.



## Qualifications & Skills to Look For

- Bachelor's Degree in Early Childhood Education or related field
- CPR training
- Knowledge of early learning philosophies/frameworks
- Patience
- Communication skills
- Creativity
- People skills
- Passion for children & early learning
- Observation & documentation
- Flexibility
- Dedication/loyalty
- Time management
- Organization
- Judgment & decision-making
- Understanding diversity



**Always be on the lookout  
for great talent.  
Only searching when  
you're desperate can  
often lead to poor hires.**

## Leveraging Your Network

Networking isn't just handing out business cards at a conference. All of your daily interactions with other people are a form of relationship-building and can be useful for hiring.

If you don't already know of potential candidates, share the job description with friends and ask them to forward it to anyone they think would be a good fit. Even better, share the posting with parents and staff. They will be especially careful to only share with qualified individuals since they have a vested interest in having top talent be hired.

To up the ante, you can create a referral program where you provide a bonus after your new hire passes a certain milestone (usually their three-month probation). It may seem like a substantial extra cost, but a \$500 bonus compared to the time and effort of staff turnover will be money well-spent.



## Where to Post Your Job

If a job is posted in a forest and no one is around to see it, does it really get posted? Make sure you list your job posting where the right candidates are the most likely to find it.

### Job Board Websites

These days, the #1 place for job hunters to look for employment is on a job board website. Post your opportunity on all of the major job websites that teachers use to find their next role.

#### Examples of popular sites include:

- Indeed
- Monster
- Workopolis
- Glassdoor
- LinkedIn

To make this easier, there are also services like ZipRecruiter that allow you to create your job posting once and then distribute it to all of the major job websites automatically.

### Social Media

After your job posting has been created, share it on social media and encourage others to pass it along to whoever they know that may be a good fit. If

you have a company page on Facebook then share it from there, and also share it on your personal profile to reach even more people.

If you're having a hard time getting applications, LinkedIn is an often overlooked tool that can be a really valuable asset. Search for qualified early childhood educators in your area and send them your posting. Since you've already qualified them, you can invite them to a phone interview in your intro message. For even more networking, you can also ask them to share the listing with anyone in their own network who may be interested.

### Local Organizations

There are likely community centers, associations and schools in your area that have programs for early childhood education professionals. Chances are they will be very interested in helping their members find employment. You may be able to post a notice at their location, or they may even email your job posting to their community.

## Making Your Short List

As you receive applications, it is helpful to divide applicants into three general categories:

### The Clear Nos

There is something fundamental about this applicant that makes them unqualified.

#### Examples:

- Don't have a required certification.
- Not enough experience.

### The Maybes

They don't wow you, but they might be good enough if no one more qualified comes along.

#### Examples:

- Minimal details on resume.
- Partial experience.

### The Standouts

Any of these candidates have the skills and experience they'll need to excel (at least on paper).

#### Examples:

- Great & relevant cover letter.
- Meets all requirements.



## Hiring

Once you have a pool of applicants that you're happy with, it's time to move them to the next stage.

### Phone Interview

A well-conducted phone interview can help you screen candidates to make sure they're truly qualified enough for a lengthy in-person interview.

During the phone interview, keep the discussion high-level. Find out why they are interested in the role and why they are looking for a new position. You can also ask them to clarify concerns about their resume, such as long gaps in their employment.

Keep the call to 15 minutes maximum. As their first test, you can arrange for them to call you. If they don't follow through, that can help you eliminate those who can't stick to a schedule or are not truly interested in the role.

After the phone interview, allow yourself some time for reflection before moving them forward in the process. This will allow you to have a better perspective on the conversation as a whole and make sure you are not overlooking any red flags.

### Sample List of Phone Interview Questions

- What first interested you about this position?
- Why are you leaving your current position?
- Please explain any gaps in employment on your resume.
- Do you have any questions for me about the position?
- What are your salary expectations?





## Formal Interview

More than any other stage of the hiring process, the formal interview is where you will learn the most about each candidate. To make a sound decision, you need to make great use of this time so you get a complete understanding of what this person will be like in their role.

Before you start interviewing, create a standard list of questions for you to ask all candidates. If every conversation is different, you will not have a fair way to compare each applicant.

If possible, don't conduct the interview alone. Involve a trusted staff member so you can get their perspective as well — after all, they will need to be working with this person on a daily basis. If possible, you can include a parent representative to ensure that your customers will be happy with your selection as well.

You may have a particular answer in mind, but be careful to not ask leading questions. You want to get their honest answer, especially if it's not the right one.

Vague questions will get vague answers, so be specific. "Are you good at conflict resolution" is very different than "give an example of a time when a parent complained and how you resolved the situation."

Ask questions that challenge candidates to think on their feet, so you can observe how they problem-solve and would react in a real situation. For good measure, use a situation that actually happened at your center.

Although you will want to see if you will get along with this person, be sensitive to avoid illegal interview questions about their personal life. This isn't the time to find out if they go to church, if they're married or when they're planning on having kids.

As with the phone interview, allow yourself time to reflect on the interview before moving forward. The best thing you can do at this moment is to sleep on it. If something still feels off after you've given yourself time to think about your decision, it is usually best to trust your gut and keep looking.

## Sample List of Formal Interview Questions

- What do you enjoy most about working in child care?
- Why are you interested in working in early childhood education?
- What are the 2-3 accomplishments that you are most proud of?
- Provide a few examples of fun educational activities.
- How do you get the children to settle down for nap time?
- How would your previous manager describe you?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- What did you like most about your previous job?
- What did you like least about your previous job?
- How would you handle a confrontation from a parent?

*(Provide a specific example in your question for the candidate.)*





## Checking References

You may not know what this person will actually be like until they start, but others do. If you are happy with a candidate, always check with at least three of their references.

Reference checks can be challenging because the candidate will have only referred you to individuals that they trust will say nice things about them. This is why you should pay close attention to not just what they say, but how they are saying it. Listen closely to their tone and see if you can tell the difference between them saying what they “should” say vs. genuinely believe what they’re saying.

Like the candidate formal interview, have a set list of questions ready for your phone interview. Although a reference check is usually high-level, ask for a few specific examples as well. This will also help with determining whether the person is really speaking from experience or just trying to help their friend.

You can also try to align questions from the reference checks and formal interview to see if they match up. For example, if you asked the candidate how their previous manager would describe them, you can now ask their actual former manager to do so.

## Criminal Background Check

Perhaps more than any other profession, a criminal background check is extremely important for early childhood educators. When being trusted with this most vulnerable demographic, only the most trusted individuals should be chosen.

Most of the time the background check can seem like a formality, but one bad hire can cost you your entire business, not to mention do serious harm to a child.

## Trial Day

Since this is such a hands-on job that is much easier said than done, many centers have finalists work for one day to make sure it’s the right fit. This provides an opportunity not just for you to observe a candidate’s abilities, but for the candidate to decide whether this is truly the right role for them.

Be sure to give the candidate clear instructions and expectations so they have everything they need to be successful on this trial day. Don’t forget to also brief your other staff so they can provide any required assistance and know to pay attention to the candidate so they can provide you with feedback afterward.



## Making Your Offer

After a successful round of interviews, reference checks and trial day, it's now time to make an offer! It's never easy to lose a great candidate at this stage, but it does happen. This is why it's so important to be thoughtful when drafting up your offer and how you present it.

It is important to acknowledge the realities of the market when coming up with the salary. You can run the best center in the world, but if your teacher salaries are only 60% of what they would make elsewhere, you will have a very hard time convincing teachers to work there — especially the really good ones. To avoid surprises, many employers will ask the candidate's salary expectations at the beginning of the process.

Be thoughtful about how you present your offer. Instead of a one-sentence email with a PDF attachment, write a thoughtful email about how excited you are for them to join the team. For an extra personal touch, you can call first to share the news verbally before sending your contract via email.

At this point, you may be looking forward, but don't forget about all of the candidates along the way! Whenever someone has been removed from the running, take a moment to let them know. That way they can move on without wondering what is going on, and you will leave a good impression. You never know when you will have to hire again, and you want your center to have a good reputation in the teacher community.





## Their First Day

Your new employee is feeling excited, nervous, apprehensive, thrilled, and every other emotion before their first day. This is your opportunity to assure them that they made the right decision and set the tone for a happy and successful working relationship.

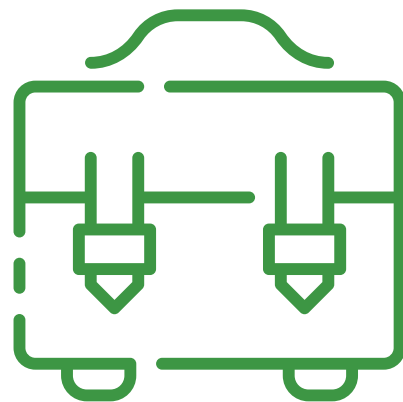
Before they start, get everyone excited to welcome your new team member with open arms. Tell your staff about their new coworker and why they are going to be such a great asset for your organization. Keep parents in the loop as well to avoid surprising them with a new face. This way, your parents will be expecting them and have been encouraged to say hello.

When they arrive, have a welcome gift ready for them. Even a small gift bag with a few snacks in it can be enough to show that you are thoughtful and excited for them to start.

Have a dedicated time at the beginning of the day to introduce the new team member to everyone, and have your current staff introduce themselves as well. To make this less formal, you can have everyone share one fun fact about themselves.

To help the employee get up to speed, it is extremely helpful to have an employee handbook. This way, your staff has a clear source for information and will be less likely to ask the same questions over and over again. That being said, never make the employee feel like they are annoying others by asking questions as they settle into their role.

If your budget allows, this is a great time to treat the whole team to a meal. This will help increase the excitement about the new person starting, and also provide an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other.



# Retention

Employee retention begins on day one. If you make a conscious effort to keep your employees happy and motivated, they will be more likely to stay for longer and perform better at their jobs.

Retention is not something you get out of the way with a holiday party each year; it is the sum of many small parts. Anything you can do to make your employees feel valued will strengthen your relationship.

Many employers believe they can't do much for employee retention because there is not enough budget for extras like these. When you consider the costs for replacing employees, a budget for retention efforts is money well spent.



**It costs 10-30% of an employee's salary to replace them**

## Create Core Values

Core values may not be what come to mind when you think of retention, but they provide a clear shared purpose for everyone to rally behind. They will help you attract the right candidates when hiring and serve as a reminder for what you should focus on. For example, if one of your core values is to give back to the community, your staff would likely enjoy organizing a volunteering day as a team-building activity.

At HiMama, our core values for our own team are:

- **Be a good person**
- **Own positive change**
- **Work hard & win**

These values motivate our team to focus on initiatives that reflect at least one of these values, and we celebrate when someone has done something that reflects these values.

It can be easy when creating core values to put a bunch of buzzwords that don't actually mean anything, so make sure that your core values are things that you will actually live by and truly reflect who you are!





## Recognition

Never assume that your staff knows how much you appreciate their great work. We all crave approval, and great employers make a conscious effort to regularly praise their employees.

Have regular check-ins with your employees so you have a set time to focus on them. Throughout the week, make a note of any time you notice something that they have done well. Mention these during your check-ins so your employee knows you have noticed their great work.

Some organizations have a program like Employee of the Month to recognize those who have recently excelled. To avoid making it seem like you have your favorite employees and causing tension within the team, you can have the winner of this award choose and present it to the next month's winner. It is also helpful if the award is an actual object (such as a trophy, doll, or anything else), to serve as a visual reminder and motivator throughout the month.

Pay close attention to birthdays and work anniversaries as well. Job searching tends to go up when work anniversaries are approaching, so this is a crucial time to show how much you appreciate all of their hard work.



**Commit to doing at least one employee recognition initiative per month.**

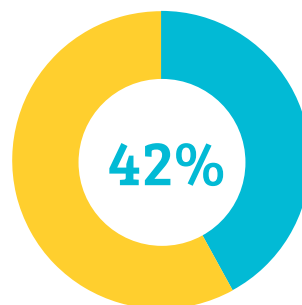
## Professional Development Opportunities

Your employees will want to grow in their roles, and you will be able to keep them around for longer if they can do so with you.

If you have enough employees, try creating a mentorship program that pairs senior staff members with their junior colleagues. This helps newer staff develop more skills, provides senior staff the opportunity to develop leadership skills, and also helps to nurture positive relationships among team members.

Develop a five-year plan with each staff member. A long-term goal gives them something to aspire towards, plus shows that you are committed to their development. For example, if a teacher would like to be a director within five years, you will know to provide them with more responsibilities so they will eventually be qualified for that position.

Ongoing training can also help make your employees better at their jobs and help them grow as professionals. These can be with specialists that you bring into your center, going offsite to a professional event in your area, or even through a free online webinar.



**of millennial employees say learning and development is the most important benefit when deciding where to work.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> <https://about.udemy.com/ideas-and-opinions/2018-millennials-at-work-research-report/>



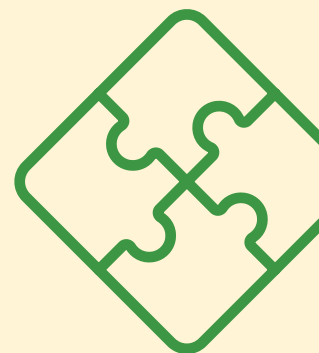
## Team-Building Activities

A fun social activity can do wonders for improving morale, especially in an often stressful and exhausting environment like a child care center. They provide employees with an opportunity to unwind together, get to know each other better and create fun memories to reflect on later.

There are many types of activities to choose from, and which one is best will depend on your staff's interests and what your budget allows. If possible, host it outside of your workplace. A new environment will help your staff leave their work behind and shift their focus towards having fun. Also, choose an activity that will encourage staff to interact with one another.

### Team-Building Activity Ideas

- Escape room
- Painting
- Bowling
- Restaurant or bar
- Potluck
- Picnic
- Karaoke
- Scavenger hunt
- Community service
- Arcade
- Board Games



## Rewards & Incentives

Having a tangible reward gives employees something to go above and beyond to work towards.

For example, you can award a \$50 Amazon gift card to the teacher who includes the most photos in their daily reports for parents. This will motivate your staff to focus on producing detailed reports, which will improve your relationship with parents. Just be wary of preventing animosity among staff when providing individual rewards like these.

A team goal will encourage your staff to work together so they can all share in the reward. However, since the prize will be for everyone, it will need to be more substantial than an individual reward. An example of a team reward can be going out for a free dinner at a restaurant if the classroom passes an organization inspection each day for a month.



## Anonymous Staff Surveys

To some degree, an employee will always be uncomfortable fully disclosing what is on their mind. Employers will often only discover this information when an employee leaves, and sometimes the employee will still be uncomfortable sharing this information at this point. Providing a way for staff to anonymously share what is bothering them or ways to improve will allow you to address these concerns while you still have your employee, which will hopefully keep them around for longer.

You can collect feedback with a suggestion box left in a place where they can easily leave a note without others seeing. Some employees may still be uncomfortable with this because they may worry about their handwriting being identified, in which case you can allow them to provide feedback digitally. For example, you can use Google Forms to easily create a form and adjust the settings so submissions are anonymous.

## Stay Up-To-Date on Market Rates

It is always a good idea to keep a pulse on what early childhood educators in your area are making, especially if your center has been around for a long time and your salaries may not have not aged well.

Speak to any center owners or educators in your network and see if they are willing to share salary information. If you are uncomfortable doing so, there are also some websites like PayScale, Glassdoor and Indeed that allow people to anonymously share their job salaries, which are then collected to present salary ranges. When viewing this information, pay attention to how many submissions these are based on to judge how accurate these salaries truly are, and make sure you are only searching for salaries in your area or a comparable city.



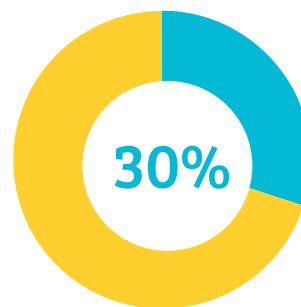


# Turnover

Hopefully you've done everything in your power to keep your staff happy, but no matter what, eventually your staff will leave.

Staff turnover can have a significant impact for your business. Morale may be low among your other staff because of losing a valued coworker, increased workload while finding a replacement, or causing them to reflect on things they are unhappy with. Parents can lose trust in your center, and children can be upset to lose a beloved teacher. Plus, you are now burdened with having to start all over again and find a new employee.

Take this as an opportunity to reflect and improve your business so you can provide an even better workplace for your current and future staff.



**of child care staff in the United States will leave their employer each year.<sup>1</sup>**

## Understanding Why Staff are Leaving

Conduct an exit interview with the departing staff member to understand their motivations behind leaving. Sometimes these are factors beyond your control — such as moving to a new city or changing careers — but often times this is because of opportunities your center was unable to provide.

This is also your chance to ask about their experience working at your center, including what they loved and what they would want to change. For the latter, employees can be nervous to voice their concerns and instead keep them to themselves. Try to discover what your organization has been not-so-great about and commit to addressing the concerns that may be affecting your other staff members. As for the things the employee liked, be sure to continue or double down on them to keep your existing staff happy.

### Common Reasons Why Staff Leave

- Salary too low
- Stressfulness of job
- Long hours
- Relationship with their boss
- Relationship with coworkers
- Bored or unchallenged
- Job stability
- Lack of recognition
- Low faith in leadership
- Internal politics
- No opportunity for growth



## Addressing Their Departure

The biggest mistake you can make when a staff member leaves is to try and sweep it under the rug. Everyone in your organization — including the parents and children — will have conflicting emotions about the situation. This can lead to low morale and gossip, which can quickly get out of control and lead to bigger problems.

First inform your staff of the news and provide more clarity. You may not be able to go into too many specifics, but acknowledge what has happened and how everything will be fine moving forward. In cases of contentious departures, as the leader

you should always take the high road. No good will come of negativity, so wish your departing employee all the best in the future, and assure your current employees that you will work hard to ensure there will be minimal impact while searching for a replacement.

Finally, do the same for the parents. An email announcing your staff's departure, their reason for doing so (if appropriate to disclose), wishing the employee well, and assuring minimal impact on your services will ensure there are no surprises — which parents never want when it comes to child care.

## Conclusion

A happy, talented and motivated workforce is one of the most important (if not the most important) resources for any child care center. Even if you have a state-of-the-art facility, if you don't have qualified staff to provide top care for the children, your business won't be able to thrive.

It can be easy to get bogged down with student enrollment, scheduling, taxes and any of the other dozens of responsibilities you may manage, but never take your employees for granted. When things

are running smoothly, you owe it to your business to do everything you can to keep things that way before they even have a chance to go awry. Whether you're searching for employee one or one thousand, it's never too early or late to improve your approach to hiring and retention. In the underappreciated field of child care, staff need all of the recognition they can get. By making them a top priority, you will make them feel valued which will help to serve your ultimate goal: to improve the quality of care for children.

# About HiMama

**HiMama is the only certified social enterprise child care app.**

Our top rated platform streamlines documentation, delights parents and amplifies the work of early childhood professionals.



## Attendance and Health Tracking

Check in and check out, enrollment and reporting



## Daily Reports For Parents

Digital Daily Sheets with meals, naps, activities and more



## Real-Time Parent Updates

Share updates directly to parents' email or phone



## Messaging Via Email, App & Text

Send Mass email and text messages to parents



## Staff Management

Check and view teacher-to-student ratios in real time



## Program Planning

Plan learning with our classroom program partner



## Parent Billing & Payments

Plan learning with our classroom program planner



## Calendars With Reminders

Keep parents informed of upcoming events and meals



## Development Assessments & Portfolios

Record and reflect on development with online reports



## Comprehensive Training & Support

Unlimited phone and email support for staff and families





# hiMama

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at your center today!**

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