

# Research Notes

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## Factors Impacting Meeting Productivity: Directors' and Teachers' Perceptions

Whether it is a weekly staff meeting, a monthly parent meeting, or an annual board meeting, administrators of early childhood programs rely on meetings as the primary vehicle for communicating information, identifying and solving problems, making new decisions, and modifying old ones. Technically defined, a meeting is any formal or informal gathering of three or more individuals with an expressed intent to share information, solve problems, plan events, or promote professional development. Given that meetings are so essential to smooth program functioning, it is important to understand early childhood practitioners' perceptions about the meetings they attend.

The Center for Early Childhood Leadership at National-Louis University recently conducted a study of 450 early childhood practitioners from 18 states regarding their perceptions about meetings. Participants completed a two-page questionnaire about meeting productivity. Approximately one-half of the respondents were directors and assistant directors; the other half were teachers. The sample was fairly experienced. Directors averaged 16 years of experience in the field of early childhood; teachers averaged 9 years of experience.

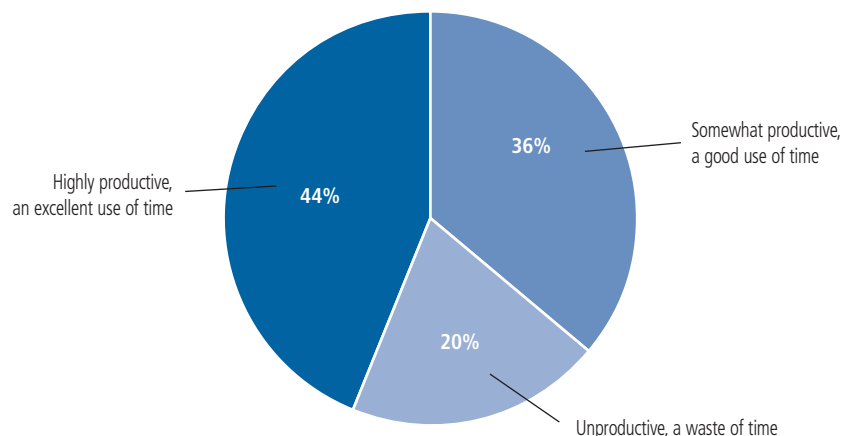
The programs in which respondents worked were private and public, for-profit and nonprofit, half-day and full-day. The average enrollment at respondents' centers was 142 children. Almost three-fourths of the sample (72%) worked in centers that were part of a larger agency, organization, or institution (e.g., hospital, college).

### Are Meetings a Good Use of Time?

As would be expected, directors and assistant directors spend more time in meetings than teachers. Administrators report that they spend an average of 6 hours per week attending different types of meetings. Teachers report that they spend only 3 hours per week in work-related meetings. Individuals whose programs are part of a larger agency, organization, or institution spend more time each week in meetings than those working in single-site programs not associated with a larger agency or organization (5 hours vs. 3 hours per week).

Respondents were asked to assess their personal investment of time in meetings by noting the percentage of the meetings they attend that are "highly productive," "somewhat productive," or "unproductive." As can be seen in the pie chart below, respondents indicated that 20% of the time they spend in meetings is "unproductive, a waste of time." They view less than one-half of the time they spent in meetings (44%) as "highly productive, an excellent use of time."

**Early Childhood Practitioners' Perceptions about Meeting Productivity**



Directors and teachers differ in their perceptions of meeting productivity. Whereas teachers indicate that 23% of the time they spent in meetings is unproductive, directors indicate only 16% of the time they spent in meetings is unproductive. These differences may be due to the fact that directors conduct more meetings and thus may have a greater personal investment in meeting success.

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## Which Problems Surface Most Frequently?

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From a list of 11 common meeting problems, respondents were asked to indicate those that they felt keep meetings from being more productive. The problems related to how meetings are planned, how they are conducted, and specific elements of the group process that take place during meetings. The following table summarizes the results.

### Percentage of Respondents Indicating that the Problem Impacts Meeting Productivity

%	PROBLEM
46	People are reluctant to express their true feelings.
44	The group does not stay on task; it jumps from one topic to another.
44	Participation is not balanced. Some people dominate the discussion.
40	There is insufficient follow-through after the meeting.
34	The agenda is too ambitious; too much to cover in the time allotted.
32	Meetings don't start on time or they don't end on time.
31	People often arrive late or leave early.
29	Decisions are left vague as to what they are and who will carry them out.
28	An agenda is not distributed beforehand. People don't know how to prepare.
28	People talk at the same time and don't listen to each other.
17	No one takes minutes so there isn't an accurate record of what happened at the meeting.

An analysis of the responses to this question provides some insight into how early childhood practitioners feel meetings could be more productive. The top four problems selected relate to meeting facilitation, specifically managing group interactions and keeping the meeting focused. These top four problems were selected by both administrators and teachers.

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## What Support Do Practitioners Need to Become Better Facilitators?

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Respondents were asked to indicate if they regularly lead meetings and if so to rate their level of knowledge and skill as a facilitator. Ninety percent of the directors and assistant directors indicate that they regularly facilitate meetings compared to 25% of the teachers. Only one-fourth of respondents rate themselves as being highly skillful. Fully three-fourths of respondents indicate they could use more training and/or mentoring in meeting facilitation.

In open-ended questions, respondents were asked to indicate what type of support or training would be most helpful in bolstering their knowledge and skill in meeting facilitation. The responses fell into two categories. First, practitioners indicate they need help in getting more balanced participation during meetings. *"I want to learn how to make people feel their ideas are valued but not allow any person to dominate, including myself."* *"I need to learn to listen more, and talk less."*

The second category of responses relate to establishing accountability during the meeting and ensuring follow-through after the meeting. *"I need help staying on task and balancing my responsibility for facilitating the group with my responsibility for participating in the group."* *"I need help guiding discussions toward specific action plans, assignments for task accountability, and a timeline for follow-up."* *"I need to find a balance between getting the work done and meeting the needs of participants for support, fun, and expressing themselves."*

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## What are the Implications for Training and Practice?

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Over the span of a 25-year career, the typical director will spend over 7,800 hours attending and conducting meetings. If a fifth of that time is perceived as unproductive, the implications for program effectiveness and the job satisfaction of the early childhood workforce may be serious. The results of this study have practical implications for both training and public policy as they relate to current efforts to stabilize and professionalize the early childhood workforce. When planned and conducted well, meetings can be a powerful tool for fostering greater commitment to early care and education. If run poorly, however, meetings can be a waste of time, a waste of public and private dollars, and a real source of tension among staff.

Early childhood practitioners indicate that they need training to improve the caliber of the meetings they attend and those they conduct. Specifically, gaining the skills to help groups achieve balanced participation, stay on task, ensure adequate follow-through, and promote open communication should help improve overall organizational effectiveness and practitioners' commitment to the field of early care and education.

*For further information about research conducted by the Center for Early Childhood Leadership, call 800-443-5522, ext. 7703. Funding for the Center's Research Notes is provided by the McCormick Tribune Foundation and the Illinois Department of Human Services. Individuals may photocopy and disseminate freely.*

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