



Guiding Child Care Providers To Early Childhood Higher Education

A Tip Sheet for CCR&R Trainers from the Montana Child Care Resource & Referral Network

How do I know when a provider is ready for early childhood higher education?

As an early childhood trainer, you work face-to-face with providers. Over time, you will recognize that some providers aren't satisfied with the CCR&R instruction and other offerings in your community. They may say to you, "The workshop was good, but I want to do more," or "I feel like I've been to all of this training already," or "What else have you got for me?"

Some providers are simply ready for a higher level of training that can't be found locally, and isn't part of a college degree program. This advanced training will generally involve class series, much longer sessions, and more intensive study of a single topic. This kind of advanced study is a good exercise in learning before tackling a higher education degree program.

What personal attributes and indicators of readiness should I look for in a child care provider?

She or he:

- Is strongly motivated to learn more about children and child care.
- Is open to new ideas and continually refines practice as a result.
- Demonstrates stable and responsible work habits.
- Perseveres and reflects upon challenging situations.
- Exhibits the ability to be flexible.
- Reflects upon values and beliefs, and how they guide decisions and expectations.
- Is a leader in the local child care professional association, for example, as a board member.
- Is involved in the local CCR&R in a leadership role, for example, as a mentor or peer trainer.
- Reads early childhood journal articles, or books about children and child care.
- Brings other providers into training because of a strong belief in the value of continuing education.
- Influences spouse and/or friends because of contagious dedication and enthusiasm.
- Has basic literacy skills.
- Is a problem solver.
- Is willing to ask for help.

What is the first step a provider should take to investigate early childhood higher education options?

The first step is to identify future plans and interests and learn about their options. You can help by asking them questions: Are they planning to stay in the business? Are they committed to advancing professionally?

Suggest some of the options that are available to them through higher education: CDA credential, two-year Associates degree, four-year Bachelors degree. Share the brochure, *Early Childhood Higher Education: How Can It Work For Me?* from the MCCR&R Network, and the booklet *A Guide to Montana Early Childhood Higher Education Programs* from the MSU Early Childhood Project.

If you live in a rural area and/or the provider is interested in self-study options, have them call UM-Western staff at 1-866-799-9140 to learn more about the *ECRural* program, which combines home study, work at an early childhood facility, and intensive institutes to earn 24-credits of core early childhood course work over four semesters.

What educational background does a provider need to be ready for higher education?

A provider needs a high school degree or a GED to be ready for higher education. If they don't have this yet, then getting a GED is the first step. You can help them by referring them to your local Adult Basic Education/Continuing Education program.

What if a provider has some higher education course work, but hasn't finished a degree program?

Some providers started college but didn't finish a degree program. They have higher education background and demonstrated academic skills. They can look at how close they would be to getting an early childhood degree after taking the 24-credit *Early Childhood Core Course* series that is offered through UM-Western. (This is the four semester series that leads to the CDA credential.) Some folks find that their previous course work combined with the 24-credit core courses will bring them very close to a degree. If a provider hasn't yet finished a college degree, she or he may be eligible for federal financial aid including student loans and grants, and for scholarship funding from the MSU Early Childhood Project.

Many providers accumulate college credit for courses they took through their CCR&R. Urge them to visit with an academic advisor before investing in these credits, which may not apply towards a degree program.

What if a provider already has a college degree?

If the degree is in a related field, she or he may wish to take additional course work in early childhood to achieve another level in the Montana Career Path. Some individuals choose to go on for an additional Bachelor's degree or even a Master's degree.

Can a provider's level of commitment to a higher education program change?

Learners often change their plans. For example, some providers enter higher education intending only to get the 24-credit CDA credential. Once they have completed the 24 hour course of study successfully, many of these students go on to complete a two-year Associate's degree. Some of the two-year degree graduates then decide to go on to a four-year Bachelor's degree program.

One the other hand, some providers begin a degree program and then change their mind. They may not have the literacy skills that are required. They may feel that they won't use the degree. Not everyone knows the final outcome of their adventure in higher education—they are taking it one step at a time. Learners move in stages! That's why we want our degree programs to articulate well, so that learners can move up the higher education ladder easily when they are ready.

What if a provider needs help with academic skills?

Reading and writing skills are important to a student in a higher education program. Many colleges and universities provide study skills review courses, tutoring and other kinds of support to "non-traditional students." A student with a learning disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act will have access to help on-campus through the college as well. A student should talk with her or his college advisor or instructor about any special needs.

Do many early childhood higher education students fail?

MSU Early Childhood Project staff report that providers entering Montana's higher education programs have a very high success rate. Problematic students usually self-select out in the first or second semester, not because of a lack of study skills but rather because they lack the personal attributes of a lifelong learner, such as willingness to listen to others. Instructors work with committed students to assist and support them in achieving mastery of necessary principles and tasks. For example, courses are designed for varied adult learning styles. Therefore they can offer a broad range of options for demonstrating mastery of a principle, and assignments can be individualized to reflect student strengths.

How can I help a provider succeed in a higher education program?

The most important support you can give a provider entering higher education is the feeling that somebody believes that *this is the right step!* Many providers didn't expect to go to college. But they took a course and found that they were a wonderful student, an excellent writer, a critical thinker, a dedicated professional. You can help them by showing that you believe in their ability, and you believe in the value of higher education for the field of early childhood.

What kind of financial aid is available to students in an early childhood higher education program?

It's always a good idea for the student to call the Financial Aid office of the college she or he is enrolling in for details and the most current information on available help paying for college. From the federal government, there are Pell grants and student loans. Students can learn more about these from the Financial Aid Department of the institution of higher learning, or from the Federal Student Aid homepage at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSFAP/Students>. They can apply for financial aid online at the Free Application for Federal Student Aid website www.fafsa.ed.gov.

Providers who are still paying back previous student loans should know about the U.S. Department of Education's new child care provider loan forgiveness program for FY 2002. Under this demonstration program, some child care providers may have a portion of their student loans forgiven for continued work in certain child care facilities for each year up to five years. The demonstration program seeks to draw highly trained individuals into the early child care profession, retain those providers for longer periods of time and target providers in facilities serving low-income communities. For more information, providers can contact staff at the Early Childhood Services Bureau, Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 406-444-5900.

There are also programs funded by the state to support early childhood higher education students. These include Montana Early Childhood Scholarships, Best Beginnings Merit Pay, and Montana Child Care Development Specialist Apprenticeships. For more information on these, providers can contact the Montana State University Early Childhood Project at 800-213-6310 or the Early Childhood Services Bureau at 406-444-5900.

How can a CCR&R trainer work more closely with early childhood higher education programs?

CCR&R trainers have worked successfully with their communities' higher education programs to build an early childhood training network or continuum. How do they do it? Here are some strategies:

- They work with the local college or university to position the CCR&R as a site for student recruitment.
- They avoid duplication between CCR&R training and current higher education offerings.
- They plan CCR&R's entry-level and intermediate offerings to provide a foundation for higher education course work.
- They sponsor training that the higher education program doesn't offer, such as the West Ed Infant-Toddler Curriculum, Dollars & Sense, and specific child care topics that complement the higher education offerings.
- They work with their local higher education programs to offer a range of educational materials in CCR&R courses.
- They work with community partners to develop child care options for students.

For more information on how you can help child care workers pursue early childhood higher education degrees, contact:

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