



A quarterly publication of the Association of Children's Museums

Building a Better Floor Staff

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This article first appeared in the Winter 2006 Volume 20 Number 4 issue, "Keeping It Real: Stories from the Floor." © Association of Children's Museums. All rights reserved. Mary Maher is the *Hand to Hand* editor; MMaher2049@aol.com.

Over a year ago, visitor services and floor staffing at Providence Children's Museum experienced a transformation. We redistributed personnel budget, reorganized managerial staffing and reinvented floor staff training and recognition. For years, visitor services staffing followed the typical model: a manager and several assistant managers who spent the bulk of their time on the floor and supervised a minimum-wage staff and an ever-changing group of volunteers. Staff training, attendance and performance were inconsistent at best. But even worse, this system encouraged a divide between front of house and back of house staff, inhibited communication and led to a disaffected, disconnected staff and frequent turnover. Last fall, we reorganized staffing around a few key premises.

It takes a team. Being on the floor can be a challenging, isolating and often thankless job. So, we "professionalized" floor staff by creating Experience Coordinators, a team of five who are primarily responsible for the quality of the visitor experience and who are an integral part of the education department. As a team, the coordinators share the tasks of training and supervising staff and managing daily programs as well as the burdens of being on the floor. Each coordinator also has individual tasks and projects, and they also have taken on a larger role in the direction of the education department.

Pay for quality. We reallocated our staffing budget and eliminated paid floor staff positions. By retaining our best people as Experience Coordinators and paying them more, we can make better use of volunteers. We now rely solely upon volunteers, college work-study students and AmeriCorps museum educators to staff the floor.

Departments unite. With increased dependence on volunteers, visitor services and the volunteer program were united and relocated to the education department. Through biweekly team meetings we continuously evaluate staffing, training and the visitor experience.

Improve training. It's hard to find time to do enough training, especially working with volunteers' schedules. We determined what was absolutely necessary for volunteers to know and conveyed that as efficiently as possible through a two-part mentoring program that focuses primarily on play strategies and customer service. Experience Coordinators mentor new volunteers, which allows Coordinators to develop relationships with their staff and volunteers to feel more connected to the museum.

Make it FUN! We have special treats for floor staff, especially during our busiest times, along with game nights, snowball fights, ice cream parties and token gifts. The results? We have nearly doubled the number of hours of floor coverage each week. Volunteers feel more supported and are more invested in the museum. We had more floor staff return to us this year than ever before and they are staying longer. Longevity means a better-trained staff and greater consistency for visitors. Judging by comments received by staff, visitors are happier, too. Visitation and membership have increased this year.