



Not in Praise of Praise



What's In This Kit?

This training kit introduces the concept of using encouragement instead of praise with young children in the classroom. It contains:

- Expected training outcomes
- Preparation instructions
- Training strategies and tips
- Implementation steps
- Follow-up activities for teachers
- Follow-up activities for administrators/directors
- A learning assessment
- A training evaluation/further needs assessment
- A resource list
- The article "Not in Praise of Praise" by Kathleen Grey
- A training certificate to award to teachers for attendance and participation
- A certificate for the trainer and other presenters



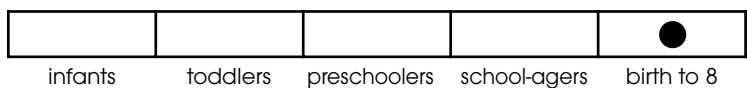
Who's the Target Audience?

The target audience for this kit is beginning and intermediate teachers working with young children from birth to age 8.

Teacher Skill Level



Children's Age Level





Kit Timeline:

Preparation time for this kit is from 1-2 hours. Implementation time is approximately 1.5 hours.



Training Outcomes:

1. Teachers will understand the advantages and disadvantages of praise.
2. Teachers will identify different positive discipline strategies to use in place of praise.
3. Teachers will practice changing praise statements into reflective listening or encouraging statements.
4. Teachers will refine teaching skills in using reflective listening or encouragement to supplement or replace praise in the classroom.

These training outcomes address the following:

- A-6a; A-6b of the Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1998).
- 1 and 4b of NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation, Initial Licensure Level (NAEYC, 2001).
- Standard 1304.52(h)(1)(iv) Head Start Performance Standards (Federal Register: Nov. 5, 1996, Volume 61, Number 215).



Preparation:

1. Read the article "Not in Praise of Praise." Locate and read any of the following additional resources to support an understanding of using reflective listening and encouragement rather than praise.
Hitz, R., & Driscoll, A. (1988). "Praise or Encouragement?: Insights into Praise — Implications for Early Childhood Teachers." *Young Children*, 43(5), 6-13.
Neugebauer, B. (January/February 1995). "A Manner of Speaking." *Child Care Information Exchange*, 101, 68.
Stephens, K. "Praise: Like Sugar, It Should Be Sprinkled, Not Poured." *Parenting Exchange*, (Item #5232001).
*You can purchase *Child Care Information Exchange* and *Parenting Exchange* articles at www.ChildCareExchange.com.
2. Read the training kit.
3. Observe teachers in their classrooms to collect praise statements. Use the handout "Collecting Praise Statements" (pages 5-6) to record the statements. You should have at least 12 statements. It is not necessary to record by whom the statement was made; in fact, you don't really want to point out the speaker. The goal is to collect statements that are actually used by teachers — those that will seem valid — not to point out a particular teacher's skill or lack of it.

4. Review the mini-lecture notes on page 7 in preparation for this training segment.
5. Copy and distribute the article for teachers to read before the training session.
6. Duplicate the learning assessment and certificate of attendance and participation.



Training Strategy:

- Mini-lecture
- Small group activity
- Discussion

Training Tip: Make your mini-lecture a good one by practicing it a few times. You will want to know the information well enough to be able to put it in your own words.



Implementation:

1. Give the mini-lecture on alternatives to praise, reviewing the key points of the article and any other resource materials you read in your research. This should be a brief segment — perhaps only 5-7 minutes.
2. Divide teachers into groups of 3.
3. Give the small groups a few minutes to discuss Grey's idea — considering whether they agree or disagree with her view.
4. Instruct the groups to try out Grey's idea by rephrasing the praise statements you collected into a reflective listening or encouraging form.
5. Allow groups about 10-15 minutes to work on the statements.
6. Ask each group to share a few of the statements — both old and new. Discuss whether the task was easy or difficult.
7. Facilitate a discussion among teachers to uncover the impact of this activity on teaching techniques. Explore whether teachers feel confident to incorporate the presented information.



Follow-up Activities for Teachers:

1. Ask teachers to keep a note pad nearby for 10 minutes each day during the next week to write down any praise statements used. Meet together again to restate the praise statements into reflective listening and encouraging statements.



Follow-up Activities for Directors:

1. Do a 30-minute observation in selected classrooms to see how teachers are doing applying the concepts presented in the training session. During the observation, write down praise statements that are used as well as reflective listening or encouraging statements used by the teachers. Meet with each teacher for a few minutes to share what you observed. Leave a copy of the lists you made to validate progress in using encouraging and reflective listening statements and to offer further practice in changing praise statements to reflective listening or encouraging statements.
2. In your next conference with teachers, ask them to reflect on the impact of their teaching skills of learning to use reflective listening and encouraging statements instead of praise. To get ideas about what might have changed, re-read the article to discover how the author, Kathleen Grey, felt her feelings and skills changed. If teachers are unable to identify changes, explore whether more training would be helpful.
3. Publish "Praise: Like Sugar, It Should Be Sprinkled, Not Poured" in your next family newsletter.



Learning Assessment

Ask teachers to complete the learning assessment to validate their understanding of the topic.



Training Evaluation / Further Needs Assessment:

1. Ask teachers to complete the evaluation.
2. Use the responses to identify further training needs.



What's Next?

If the training evaluation and further needs assessment indicates that your staff needs further training in positive discipline, take a look at "Time Out: How it is Abused — What it Could/Should Look Like" (Training Kit #4400903).



Resources:

- Hitz, R., & Driscoll, A. (1988). "Praise or Encouragement?: Insights into Praise — Implications for Early Childhood Teachers." *Young Children*, 43(5), 6-13.
- Neugebauer, B. (January/February 1995). "A Manner of Speaking." *Child Care Information Exchange*, 101, 68.
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Handout

Collecting Praise Statements

<i>Praise Statement</i>	<i>Brief Description of Context</i>	<i>Reflective Listening Rewrite</i>
Good job!	After children in the art center cleaned up their work in the 3-year-old classroom.	You picked up all of the paint brushes and put them away.
I like the way you are sitting at the table.	Teacher's comment to a child who is sitting still at the lunch table.	

Handout

Collecting Praise Statements (continued)

<i>Praise Statement</i>	<i>Brief Description of Context</i>	<i>Reflective Listening Rewrite</i>

Mini-lecture

“Not in Praise of Praise”

Praise has not always been seen as a good thing; in fact, in the last century, it was assumed that praise spoiled children. Today, many consider it to be “self-esteem building.”

Two themes connect the old way and the new way of looking at praise. One theme is the idea that how children think about themselves and evaluate themselves is dependent upon what adults tell them about themselves. The other is the constant emphasis on goodness, badness, and obedience.

Praise is an important and powerful form of communication. This author is concerned about the frequent use of praise because it fosters undue dependence upon the external judgments of others rather than on the child’s own valuation of the experience.

Grey described what it felt like to use praise in her classroom, before she learned additional group management skills. She was exhausted, tense, tired of trying to anticipate what the children would do next, and be ready for them. Then she learned about reflective listening, based on Thomas Gordon’s idea of active listening, and became a changed teacher.

This kind of communication approach is based on the belief that children come into this world with an intense interest in participating in the human race, learning its rules, and expressing selfhood. This changed the author’s thinking from feeling like she needed to *make* children grow to thinking that children *wanted* to grow.

She found out that when things weren’t working out for her in terms of guiding children, it was often because she was not “listening” to the child’s communication.

The negatives of praise she discovered were:

- Praise is too frequently a manipulation. *If you do this, I will praise you again* is the feeling praise can give the child.
- Praise can lead to children behaving in ways to elicit praise again and again — to being hooked on the teacher praising every effort or making each experience with praise bigger than the last.
- Praise may validate less than stellar performances because praise doesn’t take into consideration the child’s reality at the moment.
- Children may do things (like comply or listen) only because the teacher wants them to, not because they really want to do so.

The author proposes that teachers focus on reflective listening (also called encouragement) instead. These statements describe — tell the child what and how his behaviors look like regardless of the performance level. Most often, these statements begin with “you” and a description of what the teachers saw the child doing. For example, “You have on blue shoes.” They can also begin with “I” if the teacher is describing what she sees. For example, “I see you playing chase with Brent.”

When teachers use reflective listening, children feel like their behaviors and their sense of self are validated. Grey’s premise is that children deserve validation, not approval, from teachers.

Learning Assessment

Not in Praise of Praise

Name _____

Date _____

1. Praise and encouragement are different. How?
2. This author reported that finding the right praise statements was difficult and tiring. Why?
3. What are some of the characteristics of encouraging or reflective listening?
4. The author reported two different themes in thinking about building character. One is the idea that how children think about themselves and evaluate themselves is dependent upon what adults tell them about themselves. The other theme is that children's goodness and obedience is a measure of the kind of job the adult is doing. What is wrong with these themes as teaching values?

Learning Assessment Evaluation Rubric

Not in Praise of Praise

1. Praise and encouragement are different. How?
Praise is external validation from someone in the child's life designed to shape behavior by reinforcing appropriate behavior. Encouragement is respectful and reflective communication that enhances self-esteem by placing the valuing of experience in the child's hands.
2. This author reported that finding the right praise statements was difficult and tiring. Why?
She felt that she had to work hard to stay ahead of the children's need for more praise and felt she was manipulating children rather than teaching them.
3. What are some of the characteristics of encouraging or reflective listening?
Any of the ideas from the article.
4. The author reported two different themes in thinking about building character. One is the idea that how children think about themselves and evaluate themselves is dependent upon what adults tell them about themselves. The other theme is that children's goodness and obedience is a measure of the kind of job the adult is doing. What is wrong with these themes as teaching values?
Here are some of the possible answers. Look to the article for others.
 - *Both devalue children's individual efforts to control their own behavior.*
 - *Neither helps children value their own ideas, thoughts, and creations.*
 - *Both sound like manipulative strategies.*
 - *Both result in a preoccupation with compliance with the goals and expectations of adults, rather than integration of goals and expectation into behavior by children.*



EVALUATION

Your Opinion Matters! Please share your perceptions about this session.

Training Topic: *Not in Praise of Praise*

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Length and format of the session	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Presenter's instructional style	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Presenter's knowledge of the topic	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Overall usefulness of the information	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
Training room comfort	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

The most important thing I learned during this session was . . .

I would like to learn more about . . .



Not in Praise of Praise

by Kathleen Grey

"I want my baby to grow up to have high self-esteem so I praise him when he does things. Babies need to know that we admire them and think they are special. Praising them is a good way to let them know that. I think praise not only helps children learn to do things well, it also makes them want to be good." — Mother speaking of her six month old infant

"There is a little girl in my classroom who is two and a half years old and is always into everything. The other teachers and I have to put her on time-out a lot because she is so hard to handle and she has to learn to be good. We use praise with her every time we notice her doing something good so that she'll learn what's right and what's wrong." — Teacher in toddler center

"My grandson has cerebral palsy and has to work extra hard to do even the simplest things for himself. His parents always look for things to praise him about and tell him he's doing a good job. They try to make sure that everyone who works with him is willing to do the same thing. They feel that he won't keep trying if they don't praise him a lot." — Grandmother

"My son has to learn how to behave from us. We don't like spanking and shaming so we use praise to make him act right. I think it's a much better way to teach children than the way I was reared — with a lot of criticism and blame." — Father

Using praise to teach children what is expected of them is a relatively new kind of teaching and parenting technique. Less than a century ago it was commonly assumed that praise would spoil children and that criticism and disapproval would strengthen their character and turn them into good citizens (Miller, 1983).

Today it is commonly accepted that self-esteem is the root of strong character and good performance (Nelson,

1987; Clarke, 1978). From that realization has come the obvious extrapolation that good teachers and parents should therefore build self-esteem if we want our children to have a strong character. And doesn't self-esteem mean having a good opinion of yourself? Wouldn't it help our children have a good opinion of themselves if we point out what's good about them and tell them frequently how good they are?

Building Character — Themes, Old and New

There are two themes that link both the *old way* and the *new way* of building character and teaching good behavior. The first theme is the idea that how children think about themselves and evaluate themselves is dependent upon what adults tell them about themselves and has little to do with their own evaluation of themselves. This point of view supposes that adult evaluations are more *right* than a child's, and that adults have the responsibility to mold the way children perceive themselves by stating their evaluations frequently.

The second connecting theme is the constant emphasis on the concepts of goodness, badness, and obedience. There is good or bad behavior, good or bad self-concept, good or bad feelings, good or bad thoughts. There is an undercurrent of belief that goodness and badness are definable by adults, simply by virtue of being an adult, and have nothing to do with children's age, developmental level, psychological needs, or internal motivation. Adults are responsible for telling children what is good and what is bad and for using whatever *consequences* are necessary to see that children comply with this message. Children's obedient behavior, then, is seen as a measure of whether the adults have done a *good job* or *bad job* of defining and talking about goodness and badness.



Current thought, as illustrated by the introductory statements of parents and caregivers, recognizes that praise is an important and powerful form of communication. It can nourish the spirit and add a sheen to daily experiences. It is a potent payoff for effort. But . . . it is a judgment, nonetheless. Because children value the opinion of adults so highly, frequent evaluative comments, even when positive, can foster undue dependence on the external judgment of others, causing them to devalue their own perceptions about their competence and capabilities. Used indiscriminately, praise loses its potency and becomes empty and meaningless.

Praise in the Classroom — My Story

In my own teaching, both with children and adults, I don't use praise words very much any more. They often sound manipulative and insincere, even when I use them judiciously. And there are times when I don't like receiving praise for exactly the same reason.

The conviction that we should not risk putting anything of ourselves out into the world — through writing, teaching, singing, or simply just being — unless we know for sure that it will meet with approval is a devaluing, self-defeating state of mind. Yet it is a product of the old discipline of criticism which often imprisoned creative energy and perverted personality. It is no wonder that we have turned to praise to mend our ways as we search for more effective means of teaching and rearing our children humanely.

To many of us, praise seems like such a good, positive way to get children to behave. It's a way to make them feel good about themselves so they'll try harder to do what they should. We congratulate ourselves that we have abandoned the use of criticism in exchange for teaching with praise. What we fail to see is that praise is simply the positive face of criticism, that both presume the right of one person to impose judgment on another.

For many years, my ideal of good teaching was to use praise frequently and admonition or criticism rarely. These were my primary tools for controlling a group of children. It was not unusual for me to end a day of teaching feeling totally exhausted and tense, having spent most of my time trying to be one step ahead of the children, and searching for words that would cause them to behave in line with my ideas about how they should behave. I often had a headache and, in my earliest years of teaching, a heavy, barren feeling as well. I was constantly occupied with a mental image of what I expected of children and of how to make them want to behave according to those expectations. Whatever interest I had

in knowing their needs was simply so I could use that knowledge to motivate them to meet my expectations. I was preoccupied with getting them to adopt my goals and expectations for their behavior.

I'm not sure why it was so important to me that they meet my expectations and behave as I saw fit. Certainly I was sure that I knew how they should behave. And I felt very deeply my responsibility to impress that upon them. I was also very sure that total permissiveness doesn't make anyone feel good, even when they protest mightily against limits on their freedom. Yet, in my zeal to avoid total permissiveness, I operated out of a position of excessive control . . . what I later came to perceive as simply the flip side of permissiveness.

I think that is where I made the mistake. For certainly I could see that I was making mistakes. The level of energy I poured into my teaching usually produced clingy whiners or out-of-bounds troublemakers and my classrooms were either noisy and chaotic or excessively quiet and strained . . . and I was exhausted and unfulfilled. I knew that many of my children were resisting me harder than they would if I didn't have expectations about their behavior and that some of them were denying some of their own needs in order to fit themselves into the niche my expectations created for them. It was obvious to me that my expectations for these children were not good for them, yet I knew that an absence of expectations would not be good for them either!

Reflective Listening as Image Builder

Then I learned about reflective listening and the world opened up for me. This is a respectful and reflective communication style that had its genesis in Thomas Gordon's (1987) "active listening" as described in his book *Parent Effectiveness Training*. I discovered that reflecting back to children what they are doing, and what I perceive that they are feeling, reinforces their sense of themselves in such a way that they feel strengthened and validated as potent, competent, worthwhile human beings.

This kind of communication revealed to me something that I had glimpsed only occasionally before . . . that children come into the world with an intense desire to participate in the human race, to learn its rules and protocols, and to find a niche where their selfhood can be uniquely expressed. This meant that I could trust them to want to grow; no longer did I have to *make* them want to do that. I began to see that my role was to be aware of this desire in them and to communicate my support of it honestly and forthrightly.



All these realizations didn't come at once, of course; there was no "aha, now I understand" kind of experience. What actually happened was that the reflective listening style of communicating felt so clear, uncomplicated, honest, and real that I just sank into it with a sense of great relief. It was like dropping a pebble into a still pond. From that time, the ripples that traveled outward in ever widening circles were the increasingly frequent experiences of connecting with the children, of watching their dawning understanding, and the evident pleasure in being able to behave in prosocial ways. Even when I had to set limits, I experienced the companionship that comes with genuine connection and the shared knowledge that the limits were set in the interest of continued growth.

Gradually I came to realize that reflective listening leaves no room for manipulation and that this fact is the source of its potency. Although I sometimes found myself trying to use it to manipulate, I quickly learned that when I did so, it *didn't work*. In fact, I began to realize that the sense of my communications "not working" could actually be a signal that I was attempting to manipulate the children. This brought the realization that as long as my goal was to cause a certain preconceived behavior, whatever communication strategy I used would be unproductive and exhausting. On the other hand, I saw that if my goal was simply to participate in the process of a child's growth, without manipulation and a preconceived agenda, a likely by-product of that joint endeavor might be productive and socially-competent kinds of behaviors, some preconceived and others totally undreamed of. And, most important of all, those behaviors would be self-engendered out the child's own desire to participate effectively.

Some Negatives of Praise

So what does all this have to do with praise? Simply this . . . praise as it is commonly used, expressed through an excess of *wow words*, is too frequently a manipulation. As such, it breeds resistance and suspicion (which may be only half consciously felt) and acts to weaken the connection between the praiser and the praised. And for many people, it sets up a puzzling dilemma — "If I do this again so I can get this praise again, will I be doing it of my own accord or because I'm hooked on having this person's praise?"

Another hazard of praise is the tangled situation that is familiar to anyone who has reared or taught young children. I want to validate this child so I praise some act or way of being only to discover that the child wants to hear the praise again and tries to elicit it by repeating the

behavior I had praised. But what if it was an act for which I have lost my enthusiasm? Do I pretend I didn't see the bid for more praise? Do I fake the enthusiasm to make her feel good (this is especially hard when I faked it to start with)? Or shall I be brutally honest and tell her it isn't cute when she does it over and over again? In other words, how do I deal with the obvious need for praise in the child who looks to me for praise for an act performed over and over again long after I have lost my admiration for it? And most important of all, what is the message this experience conveys to the child . . . that she must dream up something more stunning in order to elicit those addicting *wow words* from me again? Is this what *making her feel good about herself* is all about? Is that really building self-esteem? It looks like abject dependence to me.

"So why not just use an enthusiastic voice and a firm 'good job' to praise a child's efforts?" you may ask. "Wouldn't that help him feel good about himself and reinforce his efforts to do well?" Perhaps it would, but what if he actually didn't do a good job, yet you knew he tried hard and you wanted to reinforce his efforts? Reflective listening is especially eloquent in such a situation because of its focus on *what's so*, not on an arbitrary standard of what ought to be. Describing what you noticed about the child's effort and the progress he is making toward his goal communicates your interest in and support of him more powerfully than any kind of praise could do.

Praise is often empty because of our tendency to go on automatic pilot when we're busy and to say, "Great!" "Good job!" "Oh, isn't that pretty!" "You're such a good painter!" without stopping to think about the child's reality (other than the assumption that he needs praise). Such praise doesn't tell the child what it is you're affirming as good, nor does it tell him why you think it was good. In fact, it doesn't even tell him what you mean when you say something is good . . . does it mean that it's morally right? . . . or that it's what you like? . . . or what makes it good? Wouldn't it be more informative, and therefore more satisfying (to you and to him), if he could hear his effort described and his intention noted, no matter what level of performance he achieved?

As an adult, have you ever had the feeling that your job or classroom performance was below par, only to hear a "Good job" from your supervisor or to find an "A" on your essay? Did you then retain your original judgment of your performance or did you immediately revise it to fit with praise you'd received from "someone with authority"? Did you wonder about the praise and what



you had done to justify it? Did the praise help you understand why it was a “good job”? Or did it just make you wonder what you should do next time in order to win such a comment again?

Can We Make a Child Feel Good About Himself?

Let’s go back to the earlier discussion of why we use praise . . . to make children feel good about themselves. What is the underlying fallacy in this statement? It’s the idea that we can make people feel a particular way. That’s a terrible burden to carry around . . . the supposition that if someone isn’t feeling good about herself that I have the power, hence the responsibility, to find a way to make her feel good about herself again. So I praise her with “You did a good job!” or “Good for you!” Does that validate who she perceives herself to be? Can she use such comments to build a reliable standard of competence within herself, one that she can self-reference so that she isn’t constantly dependent on others’ opinions?

A teacher is trying to reinforce the behavior of a child who has voluntarily carried out a classroom rule. She says to him, “Good job, Tom! You’re doing just what you’re supposed to do, aren’t you? You’re always such a good boy.” The message to Tom is not about his intrinsic worth, but about his value *when he does what his teacher wants him to*. If Tom’s teacher truly wants to affirm Tom’s intrinsic worth, as he expressed it through his desire to participate competently in classroom culture, she might say, “I saw you carry all the dirty paint brushes to the sink, Tom. You had to make three trips to get them all! I sure appreciate your help.”

If Tom regularly hears the unspoken message in the first scenario, how is he likely to apply it to himself? How do you think this message will affect his ability to make judgments for himself? Would he have a different sense of his competence if he regularly received the message in the second example?

In my own experience over the last ten years, I have found repeatedly that the unease I sometimes feel in a praise situation can usually be explained by this new understanding of how we use praise to manipulate children and one another. In fact, it’s even getting easier for me to catch myself when I use praise in this way — and reflective listening always helps me communicate more forthrightly. One of my university students summed it up for me recently when she commented, “I really like it

when you use reflective listening with us.

You expect us to always be so tuned-in to the children and to tell them what we notice about their activities and their feelings. It feels awfully good to me, and I learn so much, when I realize you’re that tuned-in to me!” Her comment left me glowing. Not only had she recognized my effort to support her, she also told me how much it meant to her. I didn’t feel praised, I felt truly validated.

References

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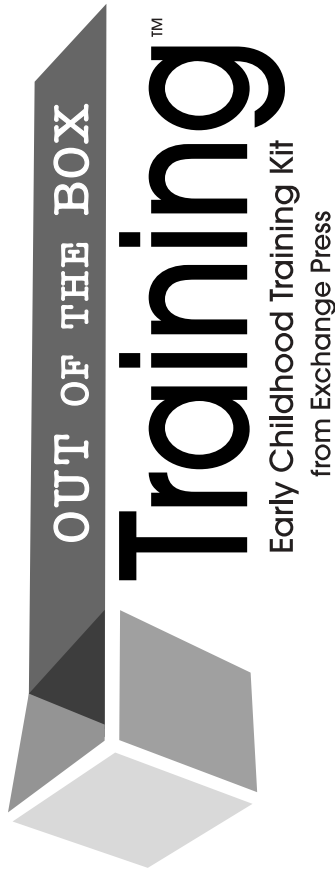
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Kathleen Grey, MA, is academic child development specialist for the infant/toddler program of the Child and Family Study Center at the University of California, Davis. She is a certified trainer for the California Department of Education’s “Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers” and for Parent Effectiveness Training, Inc. The focus of her current work with infants and toddlers at the Study Center is the management of problem behavior in infants and toddlers.



Certificate of Attendance and Participation

1.5 hours training session entitled

Not in Praise of Praise

Awarded to _____
by Exchange Press

Certified by:

Trainer's Signature

Kay M. Albrecht

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D.
Out of the Box Training

Certified by:

Bonnie Neugebauer

Bonnie Neugebauer, President
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Roger Neugebauer

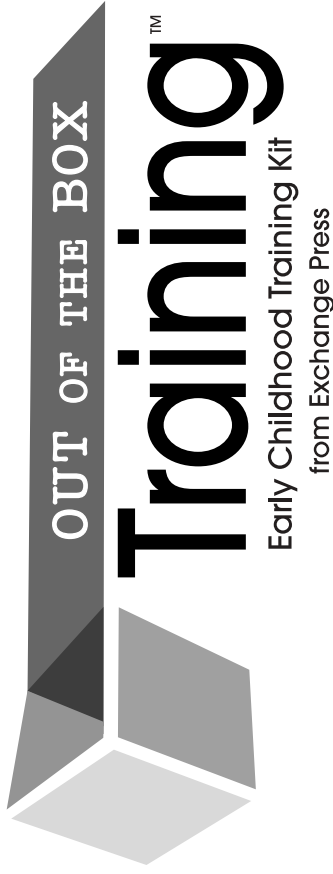
Roger Neugebauer, Vice President
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Child Care Information
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Certificate of Training

1.5 hours of training

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Kay M. Albrecht

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D.
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