

A Collaborative Approach in Family Day Care

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 2.3, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, 5.1, 5.2, 6.2, 6.4

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A family day care scheme comprises three distinct groups of stakeholders; management and coordination unit staff, carers, and the families of the children in care.

Each group relies on the others and without any one of them the family day care scheme does not exist. For example, a well managed coordination unit cannot find and support child care for a large number of families without a group of committed and trained carers. Similarly a family day care scheme with a dedicated group of carers and coordination unit staff cannot operate unless there are families wanting to use the service. The best outcomes for children in family day care are achieved when management, coordination unit staff, carers and families work together.

Working collaboratively is something that we often espouse in scheme policies and procedures but can be difficult to put into practice. In reality it is more than words; it is about a philosophy, perspective or way of working together with the focus clearly on the child's wellbeing, growth and development. This can only be achieved when relationships between each group of stakeholders is built on mutual trust and respect and each party is prepared to accept the others as equal partners in the provision of care.

Partnerships

Carers and coordination unit staff are a team of people committed to the notion of providing quality care for children. The relationship between both groups greatly influences the quality of care being offered.

Carers and coordination unit staff who recognize and value each others' experience and expertise and are prepared to share decision making, are more likely to work collaboratively on common goals that have positive outcomes for children and their families. In schemes where there is rivalry and competition between coordination unit staff and carers, the outcome for the child and family is more likely to be overlooked.

In family day care, families play a much more important role than just being recipients of care. When carers and coordination unit staff take on the role of expert and continually tell them how to rear their child, families feel inadequate and can lose confidence in their own ability to parent well. On the other hand, when carers and coordination unit staff are prepared to work in partnership with them, families benefit by having their relationship with their child supported in a way that builds their confidence and reinforces their understanding and enjoyment of their child.

Respect

Respect between the stakeholders in family day care has to do with recognising that each family, each carer, each coordination unit staff member and therefore each relationship will be different. It is about each group being prepared to listen and encourage each other to share their thoughts and ideas, rather than making judgments or reiterating that this is "the way we do things around here". We cannot know

what is in the child's best interests without being open to other perspectives and it is only when all perspectives are combined that we get the most useful and complete picture of the child.

The way we think, move and express ourselves is influenced by our own upbringing, our values, beliefs, our life experiences, family traditions and customs. In family day care, management, coordination unit staff, carers and families will each bring a set of beliefs, values and expectations about what is best for the child in care. Inevitably there will be different points of view. In a collaborative approach each stakeholder is committed to truly trying to understand and appreciate other points of view rather than letting their own values and beliefs limit their perception of what is possible.

In family day care, differences in expectations about things such as mealtimes, toileting, sleeping and guiding children's behaviour can often be a source of tension and conflict. In reality there are many different, acceptable and successful child rearing practices. An openness to new perspectives, that are different from our own, means more than accommodating those practices that fit with our own way of thinking and ignoring or denying those that do not. While it does not mean uncritically adopting a practice, especially if there are safety or legal issues involved, it does mean openly discussing differences, asking questions when you don't understand and asking yourself "why not do it differently?"

We often find it difficult to talk about issues to do with differences in expectations and lifestyle choices but if we honestly want the best outcome for the child it is important that we rise to the challenge. By asking questions about things we don't understand and listening to the other person's point of view it becomes easier to work together towards a mutually acceptable solution.

Carers, coordination unit staff and, in particular, families who experience relationships in the family day care setting that are built on respect and acceptance are likely to become the greatest advocates for the scheme.

Trust

As child care providers we should never underestimate the level of trust a parent gives us when they place their child in care.

Families trust that the coordination unit has really considered their child's interests and needs when they recommend a placement, that the carer's home is safe, that the carer and their family have been screened and will be monitored, that carers know about children and quality early childhood practice, that the carer will be focused on their child, that they will be listened to and their decisions will be respected.

Carers trust that the coordination unit staff and management will treat them as equal partners, inviting their input in decisions about the scheme. Carers trust that they will be provided with timely, honest and complete information, and that their feedback and opinions will be valued when the scheme reviews its policies, procedures and practices.

Working as a carer in family day care involves trying to balance family and professional responsibilities and it is easy to become discouraged when you work alone all day and things go wrong. Carers trust that coordination unit staff are going to be available to provide support quickly when they need it.

In turn, management and coordination unit staff trust that carers will fulfill their obligations to the family day care scheme by honouring scheme agreements, complying with State Regulations and/or National Standards and monitoring their own practices through a process of regular self-reflection and continuous improvement.

Communication

Open, honest communication between all stakeholders is the key to working collaboratively in family day care.

It is a fact of life that not all families, carers and staff members will read a newsletter, come to a meeting, complete a survey or read a strategically placed sign. We cannot make the assumption that a poor response to our communication strategy indicates that families, carers or staff are satisfied with what is happening or are not interested. It is probably more likely to mean that they have busy lives and the communication method we have chosen is not very effective.

An important strategy in maintaining a collaborative approach is to regularly evaluate communication methods used in the family day care scheme and ask each stakeholder which approach would work best for them. For example:

- would families have more time to read a newsletter during their lunch break at work if it was e-mailed to them?
- how often would families like to have contact with coordination unit and how should this occur?
- is it easier for the carer to make a time to telephone a parent to discuss their child's progress than to try and do this hurriedly at drop-off or pick up-time?
- would a telephone poll of a sample of families about a particular topic work better than a survey?
- would a series of mini workshops conducted during play sessions or on home visits work better than asking carers to travel after work to attend an evening workshop?

In a true partnership, the power is equally shared and is not reliant on all partners being equally involved in the day-to-day operations of the scheme. Finding a way to create partnerships in family day care can be challenging, time consuming and requires an ongoing commitment from all stakeholders. However, the family day care scheme that takes the lead in empowering coordination unit staff, carers and families and promotes trust and respect through open communication will be rewarded with strong, supportive relationships and the best outcomes for children.

Further Information

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