

Carers and Families Working Together

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 3.1, 3.3, 4.2, 4.4, 5.1, 5.2, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4

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Quality family day care supports families in their child rearing. Carers and coordination unit staff understand the importance of working collaboratively with families with a focus on each child's wellbeing. Partnerships are not always easy, but the rewards for everyone make them worthwhile. Working together does not require carers to take on additional responsibilities, although for some carers it may mean doing things in different ways, with a different attitude and perspective. This *Factsheet* will explore what it means to share care with families, why it matters, some challenges and some ways to support and strengthen partnerships.

What does it mean to share care with families?

In the past some people saw family day care as a substitute for the child's own family, home and parents, as though it took the place of what the child would experience if he or she was at home with a parent. Now we know better, and family day care is seen as extending and complementing the home and family experience.

When there is a partnership:

- You, as a carer, believe that the best experience for each child happens when there is a strong comfortable relationship between you and the child's family and you demonstrate that belief in your daily practice. This requires mutual respect and ongoing communication
- The child's experience is the result of discussion about the child and sharing views about what matters in this child's and every child's experience
- You and the parent interact with good will and trust
- You respect the parent's beliefs and values, even when yours are different. If you and the parent come from different cultural and language backgrounds or have very different lifestyles, you make an effort, usually by talking to the parent, to find out about the family's background. Care is taken to avoid letting biases and stereotypes get in the way of getting to know the family
- You accept that you will not always agree with parents, and when that happens you make every effort to work out a constructive solution

Partnerships and sharing care are complex, in part because the relationship with each family will be

different. Just as each child is unique, so is each parent and each family. For example, some will:

- Be more confident as parents than others
- Be more open and willing to share information with you than others
- Be more comfortable using care than others
- Have many stresses and concerns in their lives that affect their parenting of the child in care
- Take much longer to trust you than others and some will be more challenging than others.

Why do partnerships matter?

If partnerships are challenging and complex, then you may be thinking 'Why bother?'. There are many reasons:

- Most importantly, the child will have a better experience, one that makes more sense. The younger a child, the more important continuity is. For example, handling routine experiences such as going to sleep in a similar way. Even when carer and parent cannot do things the same way, it helps them and the child when they know about the other experiences the child is having.



- The child benefits when important adults in her or his life relate comfortably to each other, showing respect and liking. Experiencing this relationship is a great way for a child to learn about relationships and communication.
- Both you and the parent operate with a more complete picture of the child than you would have without the other's contribution. You both know more about interests, challenges, concerns, new developments, likes and dislikes and some of the child's experiences when you are not present.
- Parents have the satisfaction of not only knowing what is happening but also playing an important role in their child's experience when he or she is in care.
- The more you and parents share the care, the more likely it is that parents will understand and appreciate your work as a carer and become informed advocates for family day care.
- You have the satisfaction of knowing that you are making a major positive difference in the child's life. When you work in partnership with families and share the care, you make a positive difference in several ways: you affect the parent's picture of their child, you help parents appreciate their child's uniqueness, you boost parents' confidence in themselves as parents, and you provide them with useful information about services and other resources in the community.

Helping partnerships to grow

Strong partnerships rely mainly on the skills and attitudes of the carer, but there are a number of other factors that help.

At the service level:

- Philosophy statements give priority to partnerships with families. Policies, procedures and most importantly daily practice should reflect the philosophy. If the words on paper do not translate into daily interactions and communication, they are not effective.
- Everyone involved in the service is clear about the difference between a friendship and a warm comfortable professional relationship. Although they have some characteristics in common, the goal is for carers to have a positive professional relationship with parents
- Most issues between carers and parents can be resolved constructively between them,



but when they cannot the coordination unit plays a crucial role. Both carers and parents need the assurance that they can call on the coordination unit for support and help.

- Procedures for resolving conflicts are clear and known by everyone. There is awareness that conflicts are inevitable, and that when they are dealt with constructively they can have positive outcomes.
- It is acknowledged that sharing care with parents demands the utmost in professionalism from carers. The service provides carers with clear information about roles and responsibilities in general and expectations for partnerships. This information is supported through a carer's handbook and professional development. Parents receive clear information about their responsibilities and about partnerships as well.
- Carers receive support and professional development to develop and strengthen effective communication skills.

As with so many areas concerned with providing high quality family day care, the quality of the relationship between the carer and the coordination unit staff is crucial in underpinning good practice. The carer needs to feel

comfortable with being open and honest with coordination unit staff about any concerns or issues with parents and confident that help will be given.

At the individual carer level:

- The road to partnerships begins with the first encounter between a carer and a parent who may use care. Make clear from the beginning that you want to share the care and the decision making. Let parents know what matters most to you about your work with children and families. Find out what their priorities are for their child, and what is important to them.
- Make sure that your daily interactions reinforce your desire to share care. Ask parents questions about what they think about the care. Invite them to tell you what they want, and try your best to meet their requests. When you cannot, whatever the reason, offer parents an explanation and let them know that although you cannot do what they have asked, you are glad that they asked.
- Invite parents to share any information about what's happening at home that might be useful for you to know. 'Invite' is the key word here. It is inappropriate to make parents feel as though they have an obligation to tell you everything. Encourage them to tell you not just about big events, but little ones as well – for example, that the family went to the zoo at the weekend, or that they have a new pet.
- Share all the 'good news' you can about the child. Let parents know that you know, enjoy and pay attention to their child.
- When you need to discuss difficult issues, think first about how this may feel to the parent. Consider discussing the issue with the coordination unit first. Most parents feel vulnerable when it comes to getting 'difficult news' about their child. Think about how to be both honest and supportive. Choose the time and place carefully. Obviously talking about a difficult issue, whether a concern about a child or an issue between yourself and the parent, cannot happen 'on the run' or in the hustle and bustle of the beginning and end of the family day care day when children and other parents are around.
- Remember that many parents may not have known as many children as most carers have. Also, parents' attachment to their child may

get in the way of them being objective or rational about a concern or a problem. Your experience as a carer lets you know that many if not most of the issues encountered with children, for example, refusing to eat, toilet training, biting, being uncooperative and swearing, are normal for some children at particular ages. Parents may not know this. Sharing your more objective perspective can be very reassuring to them.

- Use a variety of ways to communicate with parents. For example, consider using videos, photos, email, parent interviews, communication books, and displaying the program to inform parents about what is happening. These are useful, but make sure that you do not allow them to be a substitute for face-to-face (and telephone) communication. There is no good substitute for talking together on a frequent basis. Some days the conversation will be brief, but the door should always be open for dialogue. If a parent wants to talk at a time when you are busy, make sure you arrange an alternative time.
- Let parents know the 'house rules'. Carers may have particular and varying views, about such things as parents knocking before entering the house, whether parents should have access to certain rooms, and who is responsible for the child when the parent is in the carer's home. Tensions can arise if parents unknowingly do things that annoy carers.



- Get issues out in the open. Let parents know that you are not trying to take their place in the child's life. Be reassuring about the child whenever you can.
- Be cautious about giving advice. It is easy to become very invested in our own beliefs about child rearing. Too much unasked-for advice from a carer undermines a parent's confidence. As a general rule, avoid giving advice unless asked, and even then think carefully about the difference between facts, your professional knowledge and your beliefs, preferences and opinions. Make sure that you refer parents to an appropriate person or organisation when an issue is beyond your professional expertise.
- When you find yourself thinking critical thoughts or being judgmental about a parent, put yourself in their shoes. Keep in mind that just as there are many ways to offer quality family day care, there are also many ways to be a good parent. Similarly, be aware of prejudices or biases you might have about certain lifestyles, types of families, or cultural backgrounds. We all have prejudices and biases, and awareness is the first step to overcoming them.

Sharing care has its complexities but is clearly worth it. Experienced carers, when asked to talk about major achievements or big accomplishments, often speak about supporting a family in its child rearing role. What could be a more worthwhile job?



Further Information

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- Stonehouse, A. (2001). *The cornerstone of quality in family day care and child care centres – parent-professional partnerships*. Centre for Community Child Health: Melbourne.



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