

Operating a Child Care Service in Your Home

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 2.1, 3.1, 3.2, 4.1, 5.1, 5.2, 6.2

By Jan McFarlane for NCAC

Caring for children in family day care impacts on the carer's whole family. It means sharing almost all aspects of family life with other children and their families and it takes a very big commitment from the carer's whole family to make it work successfully.

Being a carer in family day care is different from providing care for children in any other setting and it is often difficult to separate work from other aspects of your life. The care environment is a workplace as well as a family home. The people who live there, while making a significant contribution to the child's experience in care, also need the carer's support and attention. Carers need to develop a variety of strategies to help maintain an appropriate balance between their professional responsibilities and home or family life. Coordination unit staff have a responsibility to assist carers to prepare their own families to have family day care children in their home and in managing this shared environment.

The decision to use the family home as a professional child care environment should always be carefully considered, based on sound advice and made in consultation with the whole family.

The rewards of working from home

For many early childhood professionals there are obvious benefits working from home. These include the time and cost saved from not having to travel to and from work; the opportunity to combine care for their own children and family members with a fulfilling and worthwhile job; flexible work hours that can fit around family responsibilities, as well as assistance and professional support from other carers and coordination unit staff.

Providing a child care service in the family home can also be rewarding for other members of the carer's family. There are opportunities for the carer's children to observe the range of different lifestyles and cultures that are reflected in the families using care, as well as opportunities to form relationships with older and younger children. Older family members can also gain a significant amount of satisfaction from becoming involved in the day-to-day experiences of the children in care and in knowing that they are supporting other families in the community.

The challenges of working from home

Many carers find that while there are many benefits from operating a child care service in the family home, there are also many times when it can become extremely challenging.

Working as the only adult responsible for several young children for long periods of time each day is professionally and physically demanding. When

this work is combined with maintaining a home and supporting a family, it can create a real ethical dilemma for the carer. Many carers feel that running a child care service from home takes away from the time they have to spend with their own family and that family responsibilities make it difficult to sustain a high quality child care service. Finding a balance can be extremely challenging.

The needs and interests of individual family members also change over time. Even the most enthusiastic and supportive family can, as time goes by, become less sensitive to the needs of the children and families in care, less tolerant of a large number of people coming in and out of the house, and less happy to share so much of their family's life with other people. In this situation it is often the carer who must become the mediator, sometimes sacrificing their own needs to keep things running smoothly.



Making the decision to become a carer

Before making the decision to care for children in the home, it is important to think carefully about the impact this may have on the family. Talking with existing carers in the family day care scheme about how they manage their service can be useful for both highlighting the issues that need to be considered and learning some 'tried and true strategies' for making it all work.

If providing a child care service in the family home is to be a positive experience for the children coming into care, it is critical that all family members respect and support the work of the carer. By talking openly and honestly with each family member about what family day care will mean for them, many potential difficulties can be avoided.

The following questions will be helpful for those considering becoming carers:

- How will family day care impact on you personally, your partner and your own children? How do they feel about you being a carer?
- What will stay the same and what will need to change? Think about things such as family mealtimes, teenagers who want to sleep in, a partner who is a shift worker, having friends around to play or sleep over, your own children's other activities, such as sports practice and music lessons
- How will the family manage household tasks such as cleaning, mowing the lawn, ironing and grocery shopping while caring for children?
- What changes will need to be made to the family home? Which spaces will need to be shared? Which ones will be 'out of bounds' and how will this be managed? How can you ensure your family's privacy?



- How safe is the environment for young children? How will the family ensure children do not have access to dangerous or poisonous items? For example, shampoos, deodorants, medicines, cleaning products, as well as cars, gates, swimming pools, barbecues, tools and sheds.
- What rules will need to be put in place to ensure that children are not exposed to alcohol, smoke, inappropriate videos and TV programs?
- How will animals be kept apart from children? Is there an area for them to still be comfortable?

Making it work

The health and wellbeing of the carer and their own family should always be the first priority in making the decision to run a child care service from the family home.

Carers need to think carefully, and talk with their family, about the number of children they can care for, the most suitable age group, and the number of hours they can realistically work each week so that they can do the job as well as accommodating their family responsibilities. Working as a carer can be very tiring and, at times, become stressful, so it is important to also factor in some regular periods of leave. Exhausted carers are not able to provide high quality care and may risk jeopardising relationships with their family and the children in their care.

Every effort should be made to respect the carer's family's need for privacy. It is particularly important that the carer talk to the family about how they feel about the children in care having access to their rooms, special toys and personal items so everyone is clear about what is to be shared and what is not.

Care must also be taken not to place unreasonable demands on the carer's own children. It is unreasonable to expect carer's older children to be responsible for the supervision or

entertainment of the younger children in care, or for the carer's own children and family day care children to be together all the time. All children need to be able to choose whether to spend time with others or spend some time alone.

The carer's own children should not be made to feel like they have to have their parent's skills in caring for children and therefore have to be on their best behaviour all the time. Carers need to view their own children's behaviour challenges in the same way they would those of the children in care; just a normal part of development. For example, their two year old will probably behave like every other two year old would when they are asked to share not only their toys and play space, but also their mother or father with other children.

It is often difficult to talk about issues that are culturally based or that have to do with subtle family or individual differences and lifestyle choices. However, in the care situation they can be the source of tension, and even conflict, if they are not addressed. It is important to talk with the families coming into the carer's home about their expectations so that everyone feels comfortable. For example:

- Would you prefer people to walk in unannounced or knock and wait for you to open the door?
- Would you prefer people to remove their shoes before entering your home?
- Are you happy if a parent opens your refrigerator and places their child's drink bottles and lunchbox inside?
- How comfortable do you feel about a parent going into your bedroom to wake their sleeping child?

Scheme responsibilities

Effective recruitment and induction processes ensure that the best possible carers are attracted to and retained by the family day care scheme. A similar amount of attention needs to be paid to the induction and orientation of the carer's family members.

Coordination unit staff need to meet with the whole family before registering the carer, so that there is an opportunity to clearly explain the scheme's philosophy, policies and procedures as well as an outline of what is expected in a positive home environment that supports the provision of family day care. This is also a time to discuss issues with the whole family, such as balancing work and family commitments.

A new carer and their family may appreciate the opportunity to meet and spend time with an existing carer who can become a mentor as the new carer settles into the scheme. The mentor can act as a consultant as issues arise and provide some real, practical strategies for making things work well for the whole family.

Coordination unit staff also need to consider the carer in the context of their family when they are placing children in care. The fact that a carer has a vacancy is not, on its own, a reason to place a child in a particular family day care home. The needs of the carer's own family should be considered alongside those of the child and the family needing care. For example, the carer who needs to drop their own children off and pick them up from school or pre-school may not be able to provide the best placement for a baby or toddler who needs to nap several times during the day.

A policy regarding visits to carers' homes by the coordination unit staff should be developed in consultation with carers and, where possible their family members, so that everyone is clear about the way in which visits will be conducted. The policy needs to clearly outline the purpose of visits, their frequency, the time of day visits will be conducted, and whether visits are to be scheduled or spontaneous.

One of the many roles of coordination unit staff is to provide feedback and encourage reflection to assist carers to identify ways to improve their practice. This task, however, needs to be approached thoughtfully and with respect, remembering that the carer's workplace is also a home. Criticism of the carer's practice or home environment will inevitably be taken very personally and as a reflection of the family's lifestyle and parenting practice. Carers and their families are more likely to feel valued when coordination unit staff show consideration for the whole family's needs, listen and empathise when concerns are raised, and work with the family to find real solutions that work for all concerned.



Making it work takes time

Regardless of the amount of planning and preparation that has been put into place, operating a child care service in the family home will not always be straightforward or easy. Carers should expect some challenges as they settle into the role with family day care, especially in the first year. These challenges will come from both the children and families in care and their own family as they adjust to running a child care service in their home.

The needs of the carer's family members may also change over time presenting some new challenges

of their own. For example, the four or eight year old child who really valued the company of the children in care will one day become a teenager who values their privacy more. Making time to talk regularly with the family about how things are working from each person's perspective can make it easier to discuss issues when they do arise, and to work out appropriate ways to deal with them.

Talking with other carers and coordination unit staff can also help when things are not working. It is easy to become discouraged when working alone everyday, but talking with someone who has had similar experiences may keep things in perspective.

Further Information

- Douglas, C. (2003). 'Managing the Risk in Family Day Care'. *Jigsaw*, Issue 28 Autumn 2003. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.
- Kidsafe. (2003) 'Glass Safety in Australian Homes'. *Jigsaw*, Issue 27 Summer 2003. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.
- NAPCAN. (2004). 'Child Protection is Everyone's Business'. *Jigsaw*, Issue 31 Summer 2004. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.
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- Thomas, P. (2004) 'Stress Management for the Carers of Young Children'. *Childcare and Children's Health*, Vol 7 No 6 December 2004. Centre for Community Child Health: Melbourne.
- NFDCCA. (2005). 'Kids and Cars.' *Jigsaw*, Issue 37 August 2005. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.
- NFDCCA. (2005). 'Safe Car Travel for Kids.' *Jigsaw*, Issue 38 November 2005. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.

Useful Websites

- Australian Government Business Website - (<http://www.business.gov.au>)
- Centre for Community Child Health - (<http://www.econnections.com.au>)
- Early Childhood Australia - (<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au>)
- Kidsafe - (<http://www.kidsafe.org.au>)
- National Family Day Care Council of Australia - (<http://www.familydaycare.com.au>)



For more information on FDCQA please contact a NCAC Child Care Adviser.

Telephone: 1300 136 554 or (02) 8260 1900
E-mail: qualitycare@ncac.gov.au
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St
Surry Hills NSW 2010

www.ncac.gov.au