

By Lorna Hughes and Angela Owens for NCAC

Overnight care\* for children in a family day care home is an important feature of the flexible care options that are frequently available in family day care. However, when providing care outside regular care hours, including weekends, there are many issues that need to be considered to ensure positive experiences and outcomes for children. The issues that schemes† consider when planning for quality in regular care often require additional reflection when considering quality in overnight care.

The main factors that will help to ensure that children's health, safety and wellbeing needs are met when in overnight care are the development of effective policies and procedures and the cultivation of effective systems for communication and collaboration between families, carers and staff.

As with any aspect of family day care, it is important that children in overnight care engage in experiences which are appropriate and responsive to their needs. Schemes should remember that overnight care is different to the regular care that is offered during the day, and that it is inappropriate to assume that policies and procedures for regular care will translate directly into overnight care situations. Schemes also need to bear in mind that, as with most family day care arrangements, overnight care is a child care business that is occurring within a family home. This requires particular consideration in relation to the child in care, the care environment and the carer's family.

Some of the main issues that schemes need to reflect upon when considering the provision of overnight care include:

- the carer's family and their routines and activities
- child protection
- children's emotional wellbeing
- safety and the physical environment
- health and hygiene
- the child's experiences

## The carer's family and family routines and activities

One of the unique and most important aspects of family day care is that child care is normally offered in a family home. Schemes need to consider the specific issues associated with this and they need to develop policies to ensure there is an appropriate balance between carers' families and the needs and interests of children in care.

This requires additional consideration in an overnight care situation for the following reasons:

- the majority of a carer's family members are most likely to be home in the evenings and at weekends
- evenings and weekends are often times when families may engage in social and/or sporting activities both at home and elsewhere
- many family routines such as cooking, eating, sharing leisure time and hygiene activities occur in the evening
- some family members may participate in leisure activities in the evening that are not appropriate for children. For example, drinking alcohol, watching television or videos or playing computer games with content that is not appropriate for children

Where a carer and/or their family engage in sporting or social activities during evenings or weekends, it is essential that careful consideration be given to how a child in overnight care will be involved.

Some issues that need to be considered include:

- the relevance or suitability of activities to individual children
- the safety of environments outside the family day care home, such as sporting venues and other people's homes
- how the carer can manage child protection with people outside the family day care home
- the safety of transport arrangements for children in care

\* The term 'overnight care' includes care that is provided for children over weekends

† The term 'scheme' includes carers, coordination unit staff and management

It is important that clear strategies are developed to ensure that children in care are not adversely affected by a carer's family, and that carers and their families have clear guidelines to support the appropriate sharing of the family day care home and resources.

## Child protection

Having clear child protection policies and procedures for children in overnight care, and ensuring that these are clearly understood by carers and their families is vital to the wellbeing of children, supports quality practice and can protect carers and their families. When developing a child protection policy for children in overnight care staff, carers and families need to consider matters such as:

- relevant legislation, as well as any recommendations made in child protection training
- the ages of the children in care and the ages of the carer's family members
- how children are protected when they are dressing, bathing/showering and sleeping
- how children's behaviour will be appropriately guided while they are in overnight care, and who is responsible for this
- procedures for releasing children from care to an authorised person
- procedures for protecting children when there are visitors to the home, or when the family attends events outside the home

It is crucial that all family members are aware of the child protection policies and procedures for children in overnight care. The carer is ultimately responsible for ensuring that these are followed by family members. Carers may need support from staff to develop strategies to monitor and promote the compliance of family members with child protection procedures.

## Children's emotional wellbeing

A child who separates happily from their family during regular care may not do so during overnight care, particularly when this occurs infrequently or is a new experience for the child. Children, and in particular young children, are often tired during the evening, and can be very reliant upon their own home environment and routine at this time of the day. They may experience difficulties separating from their family and settling into overnight care.

The key to maximising positive experiences for children in overnight care is through effective communication between carers and families and, where possible, planning in advance to manage potential difficulties with settling children. For example, it will be useful for carers to know what time children usually go to bed, what rituals or routines are associated with bed and sleep time, what routines the child has at home for eating and hygiene, what toys or activities the child finds comforting or activities that settle the child at home.



Carers also need to be prepared for children in overnight care to be unsettled during sleep, and they may wake frequently and feel anxious about being in a strange environment. Carers will need to consider appropriate strategies to manage this and will find it helpful to collaborate with families to develop an individualised plan of action.

When overnight care occurs in an emergency situation, carers need to be aware of, and sensitive to, other issues that may impact upon the emotional wellbeing of a child.

## **Safety and the physical environment**

Coordination unit staff need to work with individual carers to assess the suitability of their home environment for overnight care, particularly in relation to the physical environment. An environment that is suited to the regular care that is offered during the day may not necessarily be suitable for overnight care.

When reflecting upon the physical environment, and how this might be suited to the provision of overnight care, staff and carers may ask questions such as:

- Is there a private, safe and appropriate place for the child to sleep?
- Is there a proper bed or cot available for the child to sleep in? For young children, does this meet safe sleep recommendations?
- Which areas of the home will the child be able to access?
- Are there areas of the home that need to be made inaccessible to protect the child's safety or to maintain the family's privacy?
- Does a member of the family smoke in the home?
- Is there a space for the child to store and access personal items?
- Is there a private space where the child can dress or bathe/shower if needed?
- Is there adequate space for the child to play while other family members are at home?
- What outdoor equipment may pose safety risks for children? For example, pools, barbecues, outdoor sheds containing potentially dangerous equipment or chemicals

Some carers may find that it is too difficult to compromise space and family routines to provide overnight care when the majority of the family is at home at night. Others may find that they can only accommodate the needs of children within a certain age range in overnight care. It is essential that carers, staff and families collaborate and communicate honestly about their needs and the issues related to overnight care to ensure that each situation is considered individually.

## **Health and hygiene**

Ensuring that children are cared for in a healthy and hygienic environment is central to quality care. This is particularly important in an overnight care situation as many children's personal hygiene routines such as bathing/showering and dental care occur during the evening or morning, and the evening meal may be the main meal of the child's day. Staff and carers also need to consider hygiene in relation to the bedding that is provided for children.

Some issues to consider include:

- What will the child eat while in care? Will food be provided by the carer or by the child's family?
- Will the child eat at the same time as the carer's family?
- Will the carer provide linen, blankets and pillows and how will these be laundered? Can families be asked to provide linen from home?
- How will young children's nappy change and/or toilet training requirements be met during overnight care?
- What hygiene procedures will be followed if bed linen becomes soiled during the night? For example, if a child wets the bed.
- How will carers supervise or support older children's hygiene routines while respecting their dignity and protecting their privacy?

By considering issues such as these in consultation with staff and families, carers can develop health and hygiene strategies for overnight care that will be workable in the family day care home.

## **The child's experiences**

When thinking about the experiences provided for children during overnight care, it is important to remember that for children, as with adults, evening is generally a time for leisure and relaxation, and that 'formal' experiences or activities may be inappropriate. When at home, children are often involved in routine activities such as preparing meals, setting the table, washing up and undertaking personal hygiene activities. Evenings are also often a time when children, like many adults, 'unwind' by watching television, reading or participating in quiet games or play. Carers need to seek extensive information from families about their child's routines and activities at home, and use this information to ensure consistency between the home and overnight care environments. Coordination unit staff also have an important role to play in supporting carers to ensure that children engage in appropriate, quality experiences while they are in overnight care.

## Developing policies for overnight care

As with all scheme practice, it is important that practices in overnight care are informed and supported by current policies. Effective policies should reflect best practice and, where applicable, current authoritative research. All stakeholders should have opportunities to be involved in policy development and review.

Schemes may be tempted to simply apply existing 'day time' policies to overnight care. However, this needs to be carefully assessed; the provision of overnight care can have implications that are either minimal or non-existent in regular family day care. Developing clear policies that guide the actions of carers, carer's families, staff, families and children will help to ensure that everyone has a common understanding of how overnight care will operate, and will assist them to meet any obligations or requirements outlined in policies.

Schemes should collaborate with staff, carers, families and, where appropriate, children, to develop general policy guidelines about overnight care procedures. Once general guidelines are in place, staff can work with carers to ensure that plans or strategies are developed to support overnight care practices in specific family day care homes.

There are many ways that a scheme can develop its policies on overnight care. Some options include:

- developing an overarching policy that covers all aspects of overnight care
- developing a group of policies about aspects of overnight care
- including procedures for overnight care in policies developed for regular care. However, schemes need to ensure they develop additional policies where 'gaps' in regular policies are identified

Regardless of how a scheme chooses to develop policies about overnight care, it is crucial to ensure that these are current, responsive to the needs and interests of stakeholders and are able to support quality practices in overnight care. It is also essential that carers have a clear understanding of overnight care policies and that these are easily accessible to them.

## Collaborative communication

Effective communication is central to the provision of quality overnight care for children. Carers and families need to exchange important information to ensure children's wellbeing during overnight care and that their individual needs are understood and met. Carers also need to communicate with their own families to balance the provision of overnight care with their family's routines, activities and needs.

Coordination unit staff play an important role in supporting carers and families using overnight care, and it will be beneficial for them to consult with individual families and carers to develop an appropriate plan (where possible) to maximise the quality of children's experiences while in overnight care. Staff also need to support carers and their families to understand their obligations in relation to overnight care. It is important that carers are able to contact a staff member for support during care which occurs beyond regular business hours.

When considering overnight care and how to best meet children's, families' and carer's needs, schemes should consider this type of care individually, rather than as an 'add on' to the regular care offered. Even when overnight care occurs infrequently, schemes have a responsibility to ensure that all children receive quality care and experiences.

## References and Further Information

- National Childcare Accreditation Council. (2004). *Family Day Care Quality Assurance Quality Practices Guide* (2nd ed.). NSW: National Childcare Accreditation Council
- Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways*. Gosford: National Family Day Care Council of Australia



**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](mailto:qualitycare@ncac.gov.au)  
Level 3, 418a Elizabeth St  
Surry Hills NSW 2010

[www.ncac.gov.au](http://www.ncac.gov.au)