

Family day care – a unique learning environment

By Anne Stonehouse

One of the unique advantages of family day care is the opportunities that it provides for children to learn and develop in a home setting. This Factsheet explores ways of making the most of the everyday learning opportunities available for children in family day care settings and balancing this with carers' family and home responsibilities.

Physical environments are not just backdrops for learning – they provide important learning opportunities for children, whatever the setting. One of the unique strengths of family day care is that children's experiences happen in a home setting and alongside the carer's family life. A home environment that is set up well both indoors and out is a great place for children to learn.

Why is a home a good learning environment?

Children are interested in everything. They want to explore, solve problems, meet challenges, be creative and find out how things work. They need a balance of variety, change and consistency in places and objects for learning. The variety and change stimulate their interest, and the consistency gives them feelings of security and mastery. When places and things are familiar, children feel comfortable and confident to explore, experiment and learn.

A home environment offers different rooms and spaces for different purposes – bedrooms to sleep in, a kitchen in which to prepare food, an eating area, a bathroom and play areas indoors and outdoors. This variety gives children much needed diversity for learning. Although carers need to supervise children, different spaces encourage children to spread out, to spend time on their own or in small groups rather than being all together all of the time, which can result in unpleasant social interactions.

When carers offer care from a space not used by the family, such as a garage, shed or other room set aside just for family day care, children can miss out on rich learning opportunities. In fact, when this happens, children may miss out on many of the advantages of family day care.

Offering family day care in a home setting does not mean that children in care need to have access to the carer's entire house and everything in it. Particular rooms may be made off limits all or part of the time. Similarly, parts of a space can be made inaccessible by the placement of furniture such as shelving. Explaining to children in a clear, respectful way why certain spaces or parts of spaces may not be used is an important learning experience in itself.

A good quality family day care home contains a mix of furniture and equipment, some of which is for family life and some especially for the children in care.

In summary, the special strengths of a home-based learning environment are that it is:

- Rich and diverse
- Multi-purpose
- Home-like
- Natural
- Familiar (Stonehouse, 2004, p.14).

What kinds of learning experiences can family day care offer?

Children learn best as they go about their daily lives, when there is a real reason for learning something, rather than learning through special 'lessons' that adults initiate. In family day care children can learn life skills such as eating, dressing, tidying up and keeping themselves safe and healthy in natural and real contexts.

When family day care takes place alongside family life in a home setting, children have rich opportunities for authentic learning. Being present when a family member practises a musical instrument, helping to wash the family car or watching someone decorate a cake are just a few examples of interesting learning opportunities that children can experience in family day care.

Interacting with members of the carer's family enriches children's learning. Children can get to know other members of the carer's family, and these interactions and relationships with people younger and older than themselves, with both children and adults, add to feelings of belonging. Some family day care situations offer children the opportunity to have care in a family whose culture, language and lifestyle are similar to their own, or to experience a different culture, language and lifestyle. Each of these situations can provide positive learning experiences.

Planning and evaluation

Advocating for naturally occurring learning experiences in the context of family life does not mean that planning, preparation and ongoing evaluation of children's experiences are optional.

Caring for children well and promoting learning demands critical reflection that leads to ongoing improvement and positive outcomes for children.

One way of planning is to think each week or fortnight of events and activities that are coming up that relate to your home and family life and to list these. Alongside this list, consider the interests, needs and strengths of individual children and the group of children as a whole, and think about the outcomes you want to work toward. Then reflect on ways to use the events and activities to offer good quality learning experiences for children.

Always include the physical environment as a focus for evaluation and planning. Think about how it contributes to children's learning and how it can be improved.

Some common examples of everyday home and family activities that offer rich learning opportunities include:

- Planting and taking care of a garden
- Preparing a meal
- Folding laundry
- Sweeping indoors and outside
- Washing outdoor furniture
- Shopping
- Going to the bank
- Posting a letter
- Making a bed
- Bathing a baby
- Attending a school event
- Celebrating a birthday or other family event.

Challenges

Offering good quality family day care in a home setting that includes many homelike experiences can present a number of challenges. Some of the common challenges are discussed below.

Balancing family life with children's learning experiences.

The carer must balance the responsibilities of maintaining a home and participating in family life while giving priority to the children in care. Involving children in chores such as gardening, shopping, preparing meals and even cleaning in ways that make them valuable learning experiences requires planning, often slowing down, accepting that the result may be less than perfect and adapting these experiences to take advantage of the learning potential in them for all children, regardless of age and ability.

Promoting the value of everyday learning experiences.

Some children's families may need to be convinced of the value of learning opportunities in ordinary, everyday experiences in family day care. They may not think of these as being as educational as more formal, adult initiated and structured 'teaching' activities.

Simultaneously meeting the needs of children in care and family members.

Striking a comfortable balance between meeting the needs of children and those of family members can be a challenge. There can be tensions between the messiness created when children play, experiment and explore and the tidiness needed and desired by family members. Family day care homes that are good places for children in care also need to be comfortable places for families to live. Carers are likely to have to negotiate with family members about the use of spaces and equipment.

Conclusion

Providing high quality family day care experiences demands ongoing critical reflection and continual improvement. While home and family settings can offer some complex challenges, the benefits of meeting those challenges are that children have authentic, rich and valuable learning experiences every day ■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.4, 2.1, 2.1 and 3.1–3.7

References and further reading

- McFarlane, J. (2006). *Family Day Care Quality Assurance Factsheet #9: Operating a Child Care service in Your Home*. Surry Hills, NSW: NCAC
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