

Making the most of play sessions

By Jan McFarlane

In Family Day Care Quality Assurance the term play session is used to describe the situation where two or more carers join together with the children in their care for child focused play experiences. They may be organised by the carers themselves or by coordination unit staff and can be held in carers' homes, coordination unit facilities, community venues and parks. Play sessions are an important part of the family day care experience for both children and adults.

Play sessions can enrich the family day care experience by creating opportunities for carers and the children in their care to interact and build relationships with other adults and children in the family day care scheme.

All children, including babies, enjoy learning more about their world and the people in it. Play sessions offer opportunities to explore new toys and learning experiences, as well as a safe environment to develop and increase social skills. The larger group of children at play session offers opportunities for children to learn more about working together, turn taking and negotiation.

Children who do not usually attend care on play session days are often invited to attend these with a family member. Building relationships with different adults and children at play sessions can have the additional benefit of making the transition to an alternative carer much easier when a child's regular carer is unavailable.

Carers and coordination unit staff also benefit from play sessions. They provide a place to meet and get to know each other, as well as the chance to share one another's knowledge, experience and skills. Play sessions can be a 'hands on' training session for new carers and coordination unit staff; an opportunity to work alongside more experienced colleagues and learn about different approaches to providing quality care for children and their families.

Play sessions provide an opportunity for carers and staff to explore a variety of stimulating environments and innovative experiences for children and to observe them in a larger group setting. There may also be opportunities for carers and staff undertaking formal studies to complete some practical components of their course work during regular play sessions.

Rural and remote schemes

The distance between the coordination unit facilities and carers' homes in rural and remote communities makes organising a regular play session extremely challenging. While it may be possible for carers and coordination unit staff to meet from time to time in a park at a half way point, many carers take advantage of local

community playgroups or visit extended family or friends on neighbouring properties as an alternative way of extending and adding variety to children's learning opportunities.

Coordination unit staff may also extend their regular home visits to isolated carers to include a play session. Children who do not usually attend on that day, and their parents, can also come along if this is possible. The staff member can bring along new resources or activities making these visits a special event. This type of play session can also provide an informal training opportunity when the carer and staff member interpret their observations of the children and plan experiences that the carer can implement to build on children's interests and abilities.

Planning for play sessions

Thoughtful planning is needed to ensure that each play session offers a variety of opportunities for children's learning and development and has positive outcomes for all the children who attend.

In some schemes planning for play sessions is undertaken by coordination unit staff, in others by carers themselves, while in many schemes carers and staff share this responsibility. No matter who is responsible, there are a number of important factors to be considered when planning for play sessions:

- The venue – is it safe and comfortable? If play sessions are held outdoors can activities be organised in a way that makes the best use of available shade? Does the venue allow for a balance of active, quiet and creative experiences and the different interests of babies, toddlers and older children?
- Space, equipment and learning materials – is there sufficient space and enough suitable equipment and resources for the number of children who are likely to attend?
- Children's learning – how can staff and carers ensure that the program builds on children's strengths and interests and meets the needs of children of different ages and abilities? How will carers and coordination unit staff contribute to the development, documentation and evaluation of the program?

Case study

In a small regional family day care scheme a number of carers were completing Certificate III in Children's Services through the local TAFE college. They were enjoying their studies but finding it difficult to complete some of the practical components of the course. The TAFE lecturer was experiencing difficulties in placing the carers into centres or preschools for training and assessment and the scheme's coordination unit was finding it almost impossible to find alternative care for children when a carer was completing a practicum. The family day care scheme's regular play session provided an innovative solution to the problem.

Each week the carers took responsibility for setting up, maintaining and packing away the play session. They were also required to complete tasks such as planning and evaluating learning experiences for groups of children. Each carer was assigned a different role each week. For example, one carer was asked to work with a group of babies and toddlers while another implemented a music activity or conducted story time for a group of preschoolers. The TAFE lecturer attended each session and was able to assess each of her students 'on the job'.

The focus placed on play sessions during this time has had a number of benefits: positive outcomes for children were achieved through the creation of a stimulating environment by the students with carefully planned experiences; staff and carers felt more positive and enthusiastic about attending the play session; the play session provided an informal training opportunity even for the staff and carers who were not studying; and the documentation prepared by the students was shared with families.

- The role of carers and coordination unit staff – how will tasks be allocated? How will carers and staff share responsibility for supervising children? Is there an action plan to cover any incidents that could affect adult to child ratios?
- Children's health and safety – how will routines such as toileting and nappy changing and meal times be managed? How will staff and carers be informed of emergency procedures in different venues?

Safety first

When a larger group of children and adults come together, accidents are more likely to occur and simple safety procedures designed specifically for play sessions may be needed. For example:

- Developing a procedure to ensure that the environment is safe, clean and securely fenced. If a venue is shared with other users, cleaning products and other items may pose a danger and will need to be made inaccessible to children. It may be useful to develop a safety checklist for each play session venue.
- Visiting an outdoor venue in advance of a play session can help to identify and manage any potential hazards or supervision issues. It is also

an opportunity to check that there is adequate shade and toilet facilities.

- Limiting the number of carers and children or introducing a play session roster when play sessions are held in carers' homes or small venues to minimise overcrowding, conflict, accidents and mess.
- Preparing activities and setting up the environment prior to a play session can reduce the risk of accidents. Consider strategies for the safe handling and storage of equipment.
- Developing emergency procedures for each venue and regularly practicing evacuations will help to prepare carers, staff and children for any emergency situation that occurs during a play session.

Conclusion

Play sessions can offer a wealth of opportunities for children's experiences, interactions and learning, as well as being a key way for carers and coordination unit staff to network, mentor each other and develop their professional skills and knowledge ■

Family Day Care Quality Assurance

Principles: 1.3, 1.5, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2–3.7, 4.1 and 4.3

References and further reading

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- Stonehouse, A. (2004). *Dimensions: Excellence in Many Ways*. Gosford: National Family Day Care Council of Australia.



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