

**THE HEART OF PARTNERSHIP  
IN FAMILY DAY CARE –  
CARER-PARENT  
COMMUNICATION**



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- reviewing research about communication in family day care
- examining available resource materials
- analysing questionnaires distributed to family day care schemes across Australia including family day care co-ordination units, carers and parents
- conducting focus groups with co-ordination unit staff, carers and parents.

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## USING THIS BOOKLET

The goals of the booklet are to:

- ▲ support reflection on ways carers communicate with parents
- ▲ raise awareness of "value-added" communication between parents and carers
- ▲ provide suggestions to improve communication between parents, carers and co-ordination units
- ▲ highlight the importance of communication about the child as part of quality care.

The material in the booklet has been designed for both the carers and the co-ordination unit staff. It has been divided into sections that relate mainly to the work of carers and of coordination units, but the whole booklet is

relevant to carers and coordination unit staff. The Appendix: *A starting point for effective communication* will assist reflection on developing good carer-parent communication. It is hoped that it will stimulate discussion on current practice and areas for improvement.

This booklet will be more useful when used in conjunction with: *The cornerstone of quality in family day care and child care centres - parent-professional partnerships*, which has also been developed by and available from the Centre for Community Child Health.

The information in this booklet can be used along with other resources to document quality practice. It can assist schemes to work through the quality elements in the Quality Assurance for Family Day Care.



## SECTION 1: SETTING THE SCENE

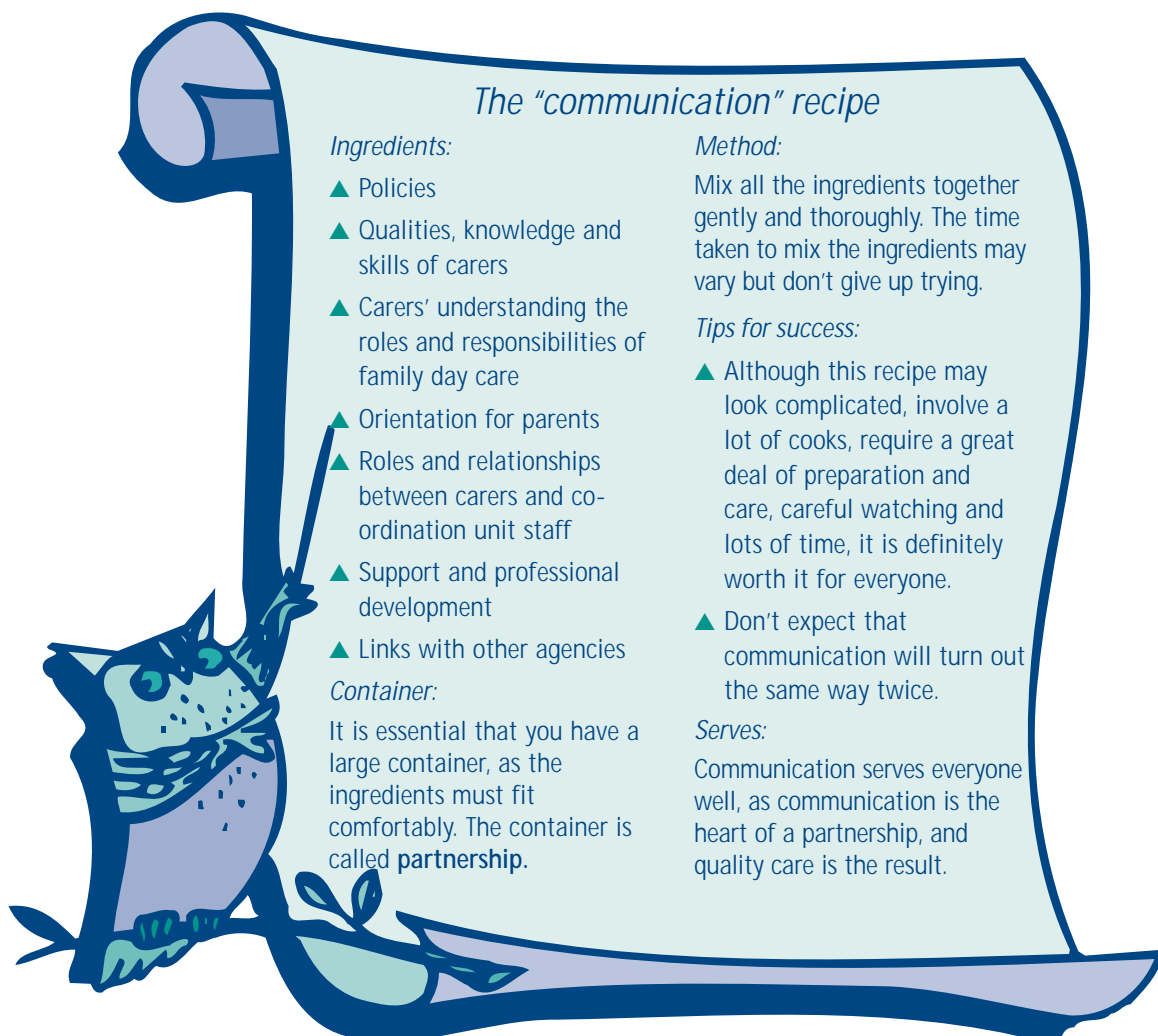
### Introduction

Family day care as a professional service focuses on providing an excellent experience for children. More people now are appreciating that to give children an excellent experience, carers need to have a good relationship with parents that involves lots of two-way communication. Carer-parent communication cannot be thought of as an “add-on”. It cannot be looked at separately from the other parts of the operation of a family day care home or the operation of a whole scheme. Good communication is not an additional thing to find the time to do, rather it is a way of doing things.

Strengthening the parent-child relationship is the most important thing a carer can do for a child. As the consistent long-term person in a child's life the parent impacts most on the child's health and wellbeing. Carers can make a big difference to parents' understanding and appreciation of their child, and this positively influences the quality of the parent-child relationship. The main way

a carer makes a difference is through communication. Mutual understanding grows when parents and carers share their insights, concerns, stories, observations, and questions about a child with each other. Parents and carers become wiser about the child and being with the child becomes more rewarding. A shared understanding of the child can lay the basis for the child to have a better experience at home and in care. In other words, talking together encourages more talking. Sharing creates greater understanding.

Rather than the “icing on the cake”, rich communication that happens most days between the parent and carer about the child is at the heart of excellent care. It is not an extra, or something that can be added to or separated out from quality care. Good quality care does not exist without good communication. There are some essential ingredients for good communication.



## About Partnership

The “recipe” on the previous page indicated that the container in which carer-parent communication forms, is a partnership. A partnership is a relationship, a matter of heart and mind, a perspective and not a discrete set of activities or strategies. The focus of parent-professional partnerships in family day care is the child’s wellbeing. The specific nature of interactions and relationships is unique to each parent.

Partnerships will only be described briefly in this booklet. It is recommended that this booklet be used in conjunction with *The cornerstone of quality in family day care and child care centres – parent-professional partnerships*, another booklet developed by the Centre for Community Child Health.

The following points highlight beliefs about parent-professional partnerships and the application to practice in family day care;

- ▲ The ultimate purpose of family day care is to provide each child with an excellent experience, and doing that necessarily involves making every effort to help parents feel powerful in and connected to their child’s life.
- ▲ There are benefits to parents, carers and children when parents and carers work in partnership.
- ▲ Family day care is an arrangement where parents and carers share child rearing with the parent being the senior partner.
- ▲ It is essential that each child be seen and worked with in the context of his or her family, culture, and

community. A partnership is not possible if professionals have biases about parents, or make judgements about the decisions they have made to use child care.

- ▲ A partnership is not the same as friendship, although warm, caring, respectful partnerships have some characteristics in common with friendships.
- ▲ For partnership to happen, everyone in the scheme must understand what is involved. Putting partnerships into practice means that carers are willing to compromise and to hand over some decision making to parents about the child’s experiences.
- ▲ It takes time to build a partnership. It is not an all-at-once or once-and-for-all phenomenon. Partnership doesn’t usually happen quickly. Parents may need to be reassured over time that you view the care of their child as a partnership.
- ▲ There is no generic formula that applies to all. The practice of partnerships must be tailored to each scheme. Similarly, the relationship with each family is unique. Just as practice is individualised for each child, so must it be with each parent.

There is nothing more worthwhile that professionals can do than strengthen parents’ understanding and appreciation of their child and contribute to a strong parent-child relationship. A good parent-professional partnership supports the parent-child relationship. It is not easy, but it is worth the effort.



## SECTION 2: IN THE FAMILY DAY CARE HOME

### Why communicate?

Communication about the child is the heart of excellent care. Carers should be able to discuss anything with parents that support the child's learning and development and the parent-child relationship. The following points highlight the benefits of good communication for the child, parent and carer:

- ▲ Children benefit when there are some similarities in their home and family day care experiences.
- ▲ Children have a better experience because the adults looking after them have more information.
- ▲ Parents don't miss out on what's happening with their child while they are in care.
- ▲ Parents will appreciate the quality of the care and the professionalism of the carer more.
- ▲ Parents will be able to contribute to their child's family day care experience.
- ▲ The carers' job will be more interesting and satisfying.

Communication builds on itself. The more the carers shares, the more she invites and encourages parents to share their perspectives, the more it gives parents confidence to ask questions and share their own insights. Communication is much more than giving information. It involves encouraging parents to share their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and questions, and doing this in a way that lets them know that you are open to them.

### What do parents and carers talk about?

There are many things that carers and parents *must* talk about. Some of these are related to care arrangements while others focus on the child's

experiences and development. Following is a list of some of the essential topics that need to be discussed;

- ▲ schedule changes
- ▲ who will pick up the child
- ▲ fees
- ▲ policies
- ▲ changes in circumstances at home or in the family day care home
- ▲ general reports on the highlights of the child's day
- ▲ information about the child's behaviour or routine
- ▲ major developmental milestones
- ▲ problems with or concerns about the child

Parents generally say that the more information they are given about their child and his or her day the better. They may have modest expectations about the amount and type of information they may receive from the carer and of how much they should contribute themselves.

Carers may not be fully aware of the impact they can have on a parent's understanding and appreciation of his or her child. Occasionally a carer may say something like "I don't need to talk much with \_\_\_\_\_'s parents because she's never a problem." When carers are asked, the large majority of them say that they do communicate a lot with parents, but what they are talking about might be called essential communication. There is also a tendency for carers to talk less to parents of older children than to those of babies or toddlers. This may be based on an assumption that the parents of very young children are more concerned because of the children's vulnerability and that once children can talk they will report on the day's events.

## “Value-added” communication

### *Contributing to the carer-parent relationship and the child's experience*

The communication content that is the focus of this section is “value-added” communication; that is, the communication that enhances and builds on the essential information exchanges that already take place. Value-added communication makes a significant contribution to the carer-parent relationship and ultimately the experience for the child. It can:

- ▲ show parents your delight in the child: *Isn't it wonderful the way Miles loves to tell stories. My whole family enjoys them - and his language is so colourful. Why, today he told one about...*
- ▲ reassure parents when a child's behaviour is okay: You know, I've had so many children around two who have a hard time sharing. *I think we will just have to work around it until she gets older and understands more.*
- ▲ give parents some ideas about the reasons behind children's behaviour: *I wonder if the reason Emily gets upset now when you leave and she didn't before is that her understanding is developing so quickly, and now she understands better that when you leave it will be some time before you come back.*
- ▲ empower parents and enlist them as partners in working with their child: *James has been having trouble going off to sleep lately. I wonder if we could work out a routine that we could both follow, and maybe that would help him. How do you do it at home?*
- ▲ reinforce the message that the parent is the most important person in the child's life: *Not a day goes by that Matthew doesn't tell me something about you - your work, what you did on the weekend. He's happy here, but he clearly thinks about you a lot.*
- ▲ show your respect for the family's culture and language: *I wonder if you could teach me a couple of words in Vietnamese that I could use with Tran.*
- ▲ let parents know that you are interested in the parent and family's life (without prying): *How's your new job going?*
- ▲ call parents' attention to behaviours and characteristics of their child that they might otherwise pay less attention to: *Sam is so tuned in to other children. He*

*seems very aware of others' feelings. Today he took a toy over to a baby who was just about to cry.*

- ▲ show your awareness of and respect for the family's lifestyle and the child rearing practices of the family: *You know, Angelo seems more upset on the days when you bring him early because of your work shift. I wonder if we could try him having his breakfast here with my family, and that would give you a bit more time at home to get ready.*

What is talked about includes lots of good news or the things parents like to hear, and of course sometimes not so good news. Following are some considerations and suggestions for adding value when:

- ▲ sharing good news
- ▲ discussing difficult issues

### *Sharing good news*

When it comes to sharing “good news” with parents, the kinds of things they like to hear about their child, you should operate with the idea of “the more the better”. Share your insights and observations about the child freely and frequently. Most parents enjoy hearing what other people think of their child. Of course, when you talk about the child's development, learning and experience you almost always end up talking about what you do with children, and parents are interested in that as well.

What are some of the kinds of things that most parents like to hear?

- ▲ Information about what the child did
- ▲ What the child enjoys
- ▲ Anything significant about their day, positive or negative

However, in addition most parents are looking for some other things in the communication. These include:

- ▲ Evidence that you pay attention to their child
- ▲ Reassurance when you think there is nothing to be concerned about in regard to the child's development and behaviour
- ▲ Signs that you know and appreciate their child and hold him or her in high regard
- ▲ Reassurance about their parenting.



You let them know these things, but not usually by telling them directly. These messages usually come across indirectly when you share stories about the child, show pleasure and delight, and even sometimes puzzlement or curiosity. Most parents probably wonder what you think of them. By actively seeking their views and perspective on their child, you are giving parents the message that they are important in their child's life.

Find ways to actively promote parents' feelings of competence, worth and confidence. One way to do that is to seek out their ideas about the child and the child's experience, and act on those ideas. It should become clear that the child's experience in care is based on a combination of the parent's, the child's, and your perspective. Parents also want to know that you are not going to replace them in their child's life, in other words, that their child is going to become more attached to you than to them.

Think about what a parent wants to know. Think about the disappointment or lost opportunity if nothing is said or if comments are limited to the vague and general ones such as "she had a good day" or "he was happy all day". If you are a parent yourself, think about what you like to hear about your child.

Sometimes you will be caring for children with additional needs. Communicating with a parent of a child with additional needs requires the same skill and professionalism needed for communication with any parent. There are no special requirements here, except to appreciate that this parent is likely to be getting information and advice from a number of professionals, and also be clear about the limits of your own expertise. No doubt the most valuable contribution you can make to the child and the parent is to talk about the child as a child first and foremost, and to talk about the child's interests, strengths, and experiences in family day care.

### *Discussing difficult issues*

Quite often issues arise with children in care that cause the carer concern, for example challenging or very inappropriate behaviour for the child's age, something unpleasant that happened to the child, or a worry that

you have about a child's development. If what is on your mind about a child is likely to worry or concern parents, then you need to think more carefully about whether to talk to them about it. While honesty is usually the best policy, and most parents want to be fully informed about their child, it isn't always appropriate or desirable to tell parents absolutely everything the child did. What's the point? There are many behaviours that appear in children that may be annoying but not of concern. However, if the behaviour goes beyond this it is useful to take observations and then to discuss the concern with the co-ordination unit.

Having decided to talk to parents about something that concerns you about the child, think very carefully about not only when but how to talk with the parent about the issue. A discussion with staff at the co-ordination unit can be helpful in clarifying how to raise the issue in the most constructive way, a way that does not put the parent down or alarm them, but emphasises that you are working as a team. It may be something that needs to be raised immediately or can wait. Remember that you don't need to be the expert, but can seek guidance from the co-ordination unit.

So when should potentially "difficult issues" be brought up? Not within the child's hearing. Not when other parents or children are around. Not when the parent looks exhausted, distracted, or bothered about something. Certainly not "on the run" so that there is not time to discuss the matter thoroughly. Perhaps they can be discussed most constructively over the phone. A carer and a parent must work out a mutually convenient time.

Sometimes carers say that they don't like to bring up difficult issues, so unless they can think of something positive to say they don't say anything. Of course, the stronger the relationship and the greater the communication between carer and parent, then the easier it is to bring up difficult topics.



## Effective communication

### *Introduction*

The emphasis in this booklet is on informal verbal communication. Happening “on the run”, mainly at drop-off and pick-up times. The focus is not on formal interviews, checklists or increased paperwork. It is not about reporting formally on a child’s developmental status.

It is critical that whatever is communicated you are clear that the parent is the most special person in the child’s life and that you are not trying to take the parent’s place. It is possible for a carer to do an excellent job of providing information, encouraging parents to ask questions about the service, without conveying that the aim is for the carer and the parent to pool their knowledge and perspectives. Carers need to appear confident about what they are doing without giving the impression that they have all the answers. Asking parent’s advice and seeking information from them about what to do can have a positive effect on communication. Together, carers and parents can frequently come up with a way forward that they may not have thought of alone. Even when you are puzzled or frustrated about a child try to be optimistic when you talk to parents, showing confidence that a problem can be solved, even when you are not sure.

### *An understanding of effective communication*

Effective communication in a partnership is two way. It is about:

- ▲ encouraging the parent to talk and listening to what they say, not just speaking yourself.
- ▲ giving parents the appropriate amount of information over an appropriate period of time. It is not about all at once, but rather keeping up a steady flow.
- ▲ encouraging parents to share their insights with you. This is just as valuable as you sharing yours.
- ▲ giving clear messages, and being tuned in to body language and other non-verbal means of communication.
- ▲ understanding some of the cultural differences in communication.

Using interpreters or bilingual workers will enhance communication with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This will also show that you are sensitive and respectful of the family’s needs. Resource agencies in each state and territory are able to assist with information and advice on cross-cultural communication.

### *A range of strategies for verbal and written communication*

The following is a list of communication strategies that carers have used. Parents take in information in different ways. Some like written information, while others prefer an emphasis on verbal exchanges. Some of the following strategies will suit the preferences of the parents in your service.

- ▲ When a family first starts using your service, and even when they are considering using it, give them some information about yourself, your family, and the care you provide and back it up with something written (Of course, you will share more as you get to know each other)
- ▲ Keep a notebook on each child, one which goes back and forth between home and care and which is written in by both yourself and the parents
- ▲ Exchange notes in children’s lunch boxes and bags and in sign-in books
- ▲ Have a parents’ notice board for information, photos etc.
- ▲ Keep a portfolio or scrapbook on each child, accessible to parents, with observations, examples of the child’s work, short stories about the child
- ▲ Take and display photos and/or make videos that families can borrow. These are an excellent way of providing information to families from other cultural and linguistic backgrounds about their child’s day.
- ▲ Give parents information sheets or brochures on children and child rearing (these would be provided to you by the co-ordination unit)
- ▲ Make home visits (if parents are comfortable with the idea)
- ▲ Communicate electronically, via e-mail
- ▲ Find out what times are convenient, and speak to parents by phone
- ▲ With assistance from the co-ordination unit, offer parents an opportunity at regular intervals (say two times a year) for a more formal interview or discussion about the child. It would be important to have interpreters or bilingual workers available during this process to provide support when the carer and parents are not fluent in the same language.

- ▲ Use a brief questionnaire or information sheet for parents every quarter. This contains space for the parent to jot down thoughts and can be the basis for a discussion between you and parent about the child. Headings or categories for writing information might include: Main interests, Biggest challenges, Favourite things to do, Least favourite things to do, Current strengths, Parents' concerns. The co-ordination unit staff may be able to assist with having these translated so information can be gathered from a wider range of families.
- ▲ Display plans ahead of time and provide information about what has happened during the day, making sure they are written in a way that makes sense for parents.
- ▲ Invite parents or prospective parents to observe at your home or at playgroup. This is not a common practice, but is a wonderful opportunity where it exists.

Even if some parents do not respond to some of these efforts, the overall message that the carer wants to communicate is not lost. Doing a number of these things conveys an attitude of openness, a message that you want to talk about the child and hear what they think, how they see their child, what questions or concerns they may have.

### *Taking care with written communication*

Pay careful attention to the tone of written communication. Being given a long list of "musts", "dos" and "don'ts" can be off-putting and isn't in the spirit of partnership. Also a word of warning about written communication - whilst it needs to be done regularly making it a daily requirement or expectation may mean that it becomes viewed as a chore and the quality of what is written is diminished.

If mainly or only one parent brings the child and picks the child up, then some sort of written communication in

addition to conversations increases the likelihood that there will be some contact with the other parent. It may not be accurate to always assume that a parent will share information with the other parent.

Taking photos of the children in your care is an excellent alternative if you don't feel comfortable writing in English and will show parents how their child spends the day. Also the way you interact warmly with a child gives the parent a powerful message of how you feel about their child.

None of the written ways of communicating listed above substitute for conversation and informal chats between you and the parents. Rather, they supplement that most important means of communicating.

## **Making sure that communication is with all parents**

Every carer needs a system, which may be informal or formal, that helps her or him to check whether they are communicating with all parents, even those who seem less interested.

Consider these questions:

- ▲ Are you focusing on each child in your care, regardless of age, culture or ability and making sure that you share insights, stories, and information with the parents?
- ▲ Are you actively seeking parents' views and opinions about their child and his or her experience?
- ▲ Are you making every effort to communicate with parents whom for one reason or another are difficult to communicate with?
- ▲ Are you actively seeking ways of communicating with parents when you don't speak the same language?



## SECTION 3: ABOUT THE ROLE OF CO-ORDINATION UNITS

### Introduction

This second section of the booklet is about the “bigger picture” of family day care operation, and how it impacts on carer-parent communication. Topics to be highlighted include;

- ▲ Policies
- ▲ Qualities, skills and knowledge of carers
- ▲ Carers' understanding the roles and responsibilities of family day care
- ▲ Roles and the relationship between the carer and the co-ordination unit
- ▲ Orientation for parents
- ▲ Support and professional development
- ▲ Links with other agencies and professional networking

### Policies

It is very important that each scheme has powerful, up-to-date policies that are understood by all and that relate to carer-parent communication. The contents of these policies should include:

- ▲ The nature of the carer's role and professional practice
- ▲ Mutual rights, obligations and responsibilities of carers and parents
- ▲ A commitment to and a process for shared decision making
- ▲ Respect for diversity based on culture, language, lifestyle, and individual differences

- ▲ Dealing constructively with conflict and grievances
- ▲ Roles and responsibilities of co-ordination unit staff in relation to parents
- ▲ Relationships with outside agencies, including primary health care and specialist services
- ▲ The role of the co-ordination unit in communicating with parents after initial placement
- ▲ Inclusive management that gives parents a formal voice at the scheme level, including the development of new policies and review of existing ones

Policies must stress the function of family support in family day care, and explicitly discourage notions of carers being a parent substitute, a friend or extended family member.

Policies should exist within the context of a scheme philosophy of partnership with parents. While it is probably appropriate to have a specific policy on carer-parent communication, the entire culture of the scheme must reflect a commitment to partnership based on good communication. It is worth examining all scheme policies to check they reflect a commitment to and the practice of partnerships that encourage communication. To support the implementation of policies there should be appropriate procedural guidelines.

Professional development experiences should help carers to appreciate how these policies are demonstrated in their everyday work.



## Qualities, knowledge and skills of carers

When a scheme selects carers there are certain essential personal qualities to look for. Professional development and support should nurture and strengthen these qualities. These include:

- ▲ Respect for diversity
- ▲ Respect for children and families
- ▲ Openness to alternative perspectives and new ideas
- ▲ Empathy
- ▲ Willingness to change
- ▲ Basic communication skills
- ▲ Ability to be non-judgmental

Over time, co-ordination unit staff should help carers gain and strengthen the following:

- ▲ Sufficient confidence in their own skills and knowledge to allow themselves to question and to accept constructive criticism
- ▲ Clarity about their own unique strengths and practices
- ▲ Acceptance of their limitations
- ▲ Tact and professionalism
- ▲ In-depth knowledge of children's behaviour, learning and development

When it comes to children's behaviour, development and learning, we can never know enough. New theories and research lead to greater understanding of how children see the world and explanations for why they behave the way they do. Sharing new insights with parents is one of the most valuable things a carer can do.

## Carers' understanding the roles and responsibilities of family day care

The process of choosing potential carers should ensure that they are clear about their roles and responsibilities. It must be clear that being a carer is working with families, not just caring for children.

The introduction to family day care for new carers must include a lot of information about the nature of a professional relationship. This is critical, in as much as there are still carers who see themselves as extended family for children in care and their parents. That perception might lead them to think that they don't need to share much with parents, unless they have a concern or need for the parent to know or do something.

Members of the carer's family typically play an important role in children's and even their parents' experience of family day care. Therefore it is important that they participate in some sort of orientation to family day care, which must include ensuring that they are sensitive to the perspectives of families using care and that they have a good idea about the kinds of relationships that should exist with families.





## Roles and the relationship between the carer and the co-ordination unit

Good communication and a sense of collaboration and partnership between the carer and her co-ordinator underpin the model for carer-parent communication about the child. The desirable relationship between a carer and her co-ordinator is one where there is clarity that the most important responsibility of the co-ordination unit staff member is to support the carer to provide care of high quality. One implication of this is that it is important to be clear about procedures and communication channels. While parents can have direct access to co-ordination unit staff members, most of the time communication is between carers and parents. It is important to have an explicit policy that if parents have a problem they go first to the carer and if they can't resolve it, then they can go to the co-ordination unit staff.

Carers must feel respected and well supported by the co-ordination unit staff, knowing that there will be a quick response to a request for help.

Through visits, the co-ordination unit staff gets to know each child and family in care and can provide an additional perspective that increases the carer's understanding of each child. In other words, she adds to the carer's knowledge about each child. When the carer and her co-ordination unit staff discuss a child, set goals and make plans they are adding to the pool of knowledge about that child.

## Orientation and ongoing communication with parents

The initial intake interview with parents is a critically important time to establish the expectation of ongoing communication with the co-ordination unit. For many parents this will be their first exposure to family day care, for some to child care in any form. It is important to think carefully about what they are told about communication, about what to expect from the carer, and about their obligations and responsibilities.

It is important to give parents help to figure out what is important in care for them. If this is their first care experience, they may not know what the choice points are. This help should go beyond general advice about

looking at the physical environment, what the children in care are doing, and the carer's interactions with children. The more specific the information, the more it sharpens a parents' ability to be clear about what is important to them in care.

While ongoing communication between carer and parent is the critical ingredient, there is much that the co-ordination unit can and should do to maintain contact with parents. Specific suggestions for supporting parents include the following:

- ▲ Have a comprehensive easy-to-read handbook containing an abbreviated version of policies to give to parents who enquire about family day care.
- ▲ Assist the carer to maintain an up-to-date picture of each child.
- ▲ Assist the carer and parent to be clear about mutual responsibilities.
- ▲ Provide information on children's health, nutrition, development and learning to both carers and parents. There are some advantages in providing the same to both, as it gives the message that is important for both.
- ▲ Prepare a scheme newsletter that focuses on topics of interest to both parents and carers and that contains information about children and about communication.
- ▲ Put in place a system for finding out on a regular basis what parents think about the care they are receiving.
- ▲ Provide all resources in the first language of parents and carers where possible.
- ▲ Hold occasional parent meetings or joint carer-parent sessions with a speaker on a topic of mutual interest, using interpreters as appropriate to enhance understanding of all parents.

Communicating well with parents needs continual emphasis. It is not something that can be "put in place" and expected to stay there. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation, with the aim of improving continuously, is imperative in this area as it is in all aspects of quality service delivery.

## Support and professional development

Maintaining good practice in family day care requires ongoing assistance with problems and challenging situations, exposure to new ideas and information, and opportunities to reflect and think critically about practice in carer-parent communication. The scheme can provide systems, procedures, and sometimes materials that help carers communicate more effectively and reinforce the importance of communication. These may include:

- ▲ Parent newsletters that highlight issues about communication, carer-parent relationships, and children's development and learning; that promote the idea of carers as sources of information about the child; that "normalise" parents talking openly and frequently about the child, asking questions, making requests
- ▲ Forms for carers to use to get parents' views and information about their child
- ▲ Suggestions for using post-it notes, notice boards, notebooks, and other ways of communicating
- ▲ Supporting carers getting together to share experiences and insights about carer-parent communication
- ▲ Supporting carer-parent interviews
- ▲ Ensuring that carers have easy access to resource materials that will support carer-parent communication about the child
- ▲ Operating a well-run playgroup, which can be a time for carers to learn from each other, and for information about children's development and learning to be passed on in an informal and non-threatening way as children play, interact and participate
- ▲ Organising family functions for carers and the families using care
- ▲ Involving parents in developing and reviewing policies, and ensuring that all parents understand the implications of policies

- ▲ Helping carers develop their own letter of introduction or philosophy statement for parents and prospective parents.

Letters of introduction should contain information about the carer, her family, beliefs about children and the kinds of experiences they need, and the family day care experience that is offered to a child and his or her family. To be meaningful, these statements must be backed up with clear policies and procedures at the scheme level. Equally importantly, each carer needs to have a clear sense of her own uniqueness; that is, she needs to be able to talk about what she does, so that parents know what they are getting if they choose her. Carers don't always know what is unique about their practice, because they work in relative isolation and because much of what they do they may do rather intuitively or unconsciously rather than consciously. The co-ordination unit can help her to figure out what she does especially well, and how the family day care experience she offers is special.

A particularly important kind of support that a co-ordination unit can provide is to assist carers gain confidence and skills, particularly in regards to determining whether or not the relationship with parents will be a comfortable one, and they will be able to communicate effectively. Each carer needs to be able to state clearly what her expectations of parents are, and what she provides in family day care.

It is worth giving consideration to the issue of the extent to which co-ordination unit staff can assist in helping to "match" carers and parents, while still leaving the final choice to parents and carers. In some schemes, co-ordinators with responsibility for carers in the geographic area where parents are looking for care do the initial interview and are then in a good position to suggest several carers that they think may be suitable for the family.



Ongoing professional development for carers and co-ordination unit staff is essential. Topics can include the following, among others:

- ▲ Issues about development, health, learning, and behaviour of children and what to do if carers or parents have concerns about any aspect of children's development
- ▲ Communication skills, including information about English as a second language, and the importance of helping children to keep their first language
- ▲ Observation and ways of documenting children's learning and behaviour
- ▲ Methods of planning based on knowledge about the children and families in care
- ▲ A range of appropriate experiences for children of different ages, cultures and abilities
- ▲ Resolving conflict constructively
- ▲ Assertiveness
- ▲ Family issues (for example, the impact of separation and divorce on children)

- ▲ Information about various cultures and cultural groups
- ▲ Information about agencies and organisations in the area that can support carers and the children they work with
- ▲ Working with children with additional needs

A particular challenge for co-ordination unit staff may be finding ways to make child development information interesting and relevant for carers, convincing them that by increasing their understanding of children their own work will be made more interesting. In providing information about development, it is important to make the links to practice, that is, to always raise the question of "What are the implications of this for what I do with children?"

Obviously some of this professional development for co-ordination unit staff as well as carers would be best run for both groups together, some separately. At regular intervals carers can be helped to reflect critically on and improve their communication with parents.





## Links with other agencies and professional networking

Family Day Care schemes are part of a local system of services that support families. By networking with these local services, good knowledge of other universal and specialist services can be established. In addition, schemes benefit from being linked to other children's services, including other family day care schemes as well as child care centres.

Strong vigorous links can be a resource for carers and co-ordination unit staff and also support parents around specialist issues related to their child.

When carers have a child who participates in another service, such as a preschool, child care centre, speech therapist, or early childhood intervention service, it may be useful for the carer to have contact with these other services to share information, with the family's permission. Such contact could be facilitated by the co-ordination unit.

There are a number of practical ways that co-ordination units can facilitate the forming of linkages with other agencies. These include the following:

- ▲ Develop agreements between the scheme and other agencies outlining when and how communication should occur and how issues around confidentiality and parent consent will be managed.
- ▲ Use resource agencies to find out where appropriate information and services can be obtained.
- ▲ Encourage staff to develop strong working relationships with agencies that support children with additional needs. Co-ordination unit staff don't need to be experts about everything.
- ▲ Use Supplementary Children's Services Workers (SUPS). These workers are funded to support family day care as well as centre based childcare.
- ▲ Encourage carers to develop lists of local services that they can refer parents to. These lists need to be regularly updated and could include, for example, child health nurses, general practitioners, playgroups, toy libraries.
- ▲ Encourage carers to promote to parents the use of local health services, reminding parents of the benefits of discussing their child's health and well being, especially any concerns that they might have about their child, with professionals in these services.
- ▲ Encourage co-ordination unit staff to join networks:
  - of family day care schemes
  - of other children's services including centre based care
  - that could support the scheme such as child health, education, family support networks.
- ▲ Consider opportunities to share resources and training with other services.
- ▲ Invite other agencies to attend staff meetings.
- ▲ Avoid the development of links between individuals only, encourage the staff to share their contacts and networks.

## CONCLUSION

Effective communication is informed by being clear about the nature of the desirable relationship that should exist between a carer and a parent. Communicating effectively does not require being an expert on the latest research and theories about children. It does require:

- ▲ respect,
- ▲ warmth,
- ▲ sensitivity,
- ▲ professionalism,
- ▲ observation skills,
- ▲ a willingness to always try to know and understand the children better, and
- ▲ an appreciation of the positive difference carers can make in the lives of the child and parent.

There is a risk of formalising or structuring carer-parent communication about the child too much, so that there is an over-reliance on the structure at the expense of informal ongoing communication. Reducing it to a collection of strategies misses the point, as the carers' commitment to and appreciation of partnership and communication is what matters most.

Effective communication is a key element in the development of a carer-co-ordination unit-parent partnership and is at the heart of excellent care.

## RESOURCES

The Centre for Community Child Health has three other publications that will assist carer-parent communication in family day care. These are:

*The cornerstone of quality in family day care and child care centres - parent-professional partnerships*

*Partnerships for Children - Parents and Community Together*

*Sharing a Picture of Children's Development*

Details about these resources can be obtained by contacting the Centre for Community Child Health, Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Flemington Road, Parkville 3052.

Telephone: 03 9345 6150

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Email: [ccch@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au](mailto:ccch@cryptic.rch.unimelb.edu.au)

## APPENDIX: A STARTING POINT FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

It may seem obvious that communication is valuable, and it may sound as though it should be easy, a natural thing to do. However, there are many things to consider to ensure that good carer-parent communication is achieved. The following questions have been compiled to reflect the issues that were raised throughout the booklet and could be used to assist reflection of current practice and potential areas for change in practice. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list nor should it be used as a checklist. It should simply be stimulus material.

### *Questions for reflection and stimulation.*

Is there:

- ▲ Clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the carer and the parent?
- ▲ Accurate notions about the role of family day care in a child's life?
- ▲ The perception by parents, co-ordination unit staff, and sometimes the carer herself that because the carer isn't formally qualified she is therefore not equipped to provide information and insights about the child?
- ▲ Appreciation on the carer's part of the pro-active role she can play in communication?
- ▲ Language and cultural barriers?
- ▲ Differences in carers' and parents' child rearing practices?
- ▲ Differences in status and education level of parents and carers?
- ▲ The carer's perception that the parent isn't interested in lots of communication, and only wants to know enough to be sure that their child is safe and happy?
- ▲ Fear that the carer may offend or being misinterpreted?
- ▲ Appreciation of the importance of communication?
- ▲ Lack of knowledge about children's development and learning?
- ▲ Ideas about what kind of communication is appropriate or expected in relation to giving parents information about child rearing and/or child development?
- ▲ A limited notion of communication, the belief that it is only confronting issues, solving problems, raising concerns, discussing "big" issues?
- ▲ Parental satisfaction with limited communication because of lack of awareness of what else is possible?
- ▲ Parents' lack of confidence and/or willingness to initiate discussion?
- ▲ The carer's belief that communication needs to be 50-50, so that if a parent doesn't initiate discussion and sharing information the carer doesn't either?
- ▲ Competing demands on the times of the day when communication could take place, times when both parent and carer have other responsibilities and may be pre-occupied or rushed?
- ▲ Confusion about the nature of the relationship between parent and carer, in that it is seen as a friendship and thus it is not seen as necessary or appropriate to communicate a great deal about the child?
- ▲ Lack of clarity about boundaries of the relationship; for example, if parents overstay their welcome, or become overly dependent and otherwise take up the carer's time, then carers may be reluctant to engage in more communication?
- ▲ The perception that parents don't want to hear bad news?
- ▲ Less communication about older children?
- ▲ Worry about repercussions to the child if they say anything negative to a parent?
- ▲ A place to talk confidentially?
- ▲ Inadequate knowledge on the part of carers so that they report achievements or behaviour but have limited understanding of what these mean?

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