

Building relationships between parents and carers in early childhood

Sarah Wise

Harmony between the way that parents and early childhood professionals raise children is an important dimension of child care quality aimed at enhancing child wellbeing. The foundation for this harmony is positive and trusting relationships between the two parties. Yet, research conducted at the Australian Institute of Family Studies and elsewhere suggests that carers do not always initiate practices to share caregiving information with parents, and that conflict with parents in matters of children's care are commonplace, particularly in culturally diverse early childhood settings. The current paper outlines several strategies that professionals may employ to support and strengthen parent/carer partnerships.

Harmony between home and child care for child wellbeing

It is a reality of modern life that early childhood professionals have joined the ranks of grandparents, aunts and uncles, neighbours and friends in supporting parents to raise young children. According to the 2005 Child Care Survey (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005), professional carers provided care to approximately 7% of all babies under 1-year, rising to 54% of all children aged 3.¹

A number of different criteria are used for determining standards of care in formal child care settings such as family day care homes and day care centres. The quality of carer-child interactions, and other practices such as health and safety regimes are core considerations. It is increasingly recognised, however, that caregiving in child care needs to be 'in step', or harmonised, with the care provided at home. In practice, this means carers are familiar with the ideas and aspirations of parents, as well as their specific approaches to parenting. It is also important that carers incorporate aspects of the home culture into the child care curriculum, by incorporating cultural materials into the child care environment, celebrating religious festivities and other celebrations, supporting and respecting the child's home language and, wherever possible, nurturing in ways that are familiar and expectable, by following the care routines used at home.

Home-child care harmony is thought to contribute to a child's ease of transition to the child care setting, help promote healthy identity development and support a range of developmental

¹ Excludes pre-school.



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The author

Sarah Wise is a Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. She has a background in developmental psychology and a research interest in out-of-home care, non-parental child care and parent-child relationships.

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AFRC Manager: *Elly Robinson*

Australian Institute of Family Studies
Level 20, 485 La Trobe Street, Melbourne 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Email: afrc@aifs.gov.au
Internet: www.aifs.gov.au

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and educational outcomes (Frigo & Adams, 2002). By contrast, when practices in child care are very different from the home, the child may feel insecure, overwhelmed, frustrated or confused by the inconsistency. Such feelings may lead to behaviour problems, cause delay in the development of specific skills such as learning to talk or even damage the child's sense of belonging and connection to his/her family.

Building trusting relationships in the early childhood setting

Carers cannot assume that parents have the same image of children as they do, who they should become, and what practices assist in the developmental process. Attitudes towards children's care and development are influenced by factors such as socio-economic background and age. The ways in which parents socialise children and accommodate their basic needs are also culturally based. Early childhood theory, curriculum and training, which reflect a western perspective of child development, can also create a wedge between parents and carers on parenting-related issues, especially if the parent is from a culture other than the dominant or mainstream culture in Australia.

Caregivers and parents need to share information about caregiving practices so that areas of common ground and points of difference can be identified. The foundation of such practice is a trusting relationship with parents, and central to relationship building is communication and open dialogue with parents on child care matters and other issues relevant to the child.

Anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that parents may have closer relationships, and more extensive communication with carers in family day care than carers in centre-based settings (van IJzendoorn, Taveccio, Stams, Verhoeven & Reiling, 1998). Certainly, structural features of family day care, such as small group sizes and continuity of caregiver, and the relative degree of choice in selecting a particular caregiver, could contribute to these outcomes. A study conducted in Melbourne by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, called *Child care in cultural context* (CCICC) (Wise & Sanson, 2000), which compared children's home and child care environments, suggested that carers in family day care adopted a more informal approach to communicating with parents and tended to work somewhat more intensely on parent engagement and communication than carers in centre-based

care, primarily using transition times at the beginning and end of each day to engage parents (Hand & Wise, 2006).

Despite spending more time talking with parents, carers in family day care may not necessarily initiate strategies specifically aimed at home–child care harmony. In the CCICC study, less than half of carers in the family day care group reported that they actually engaged parents to discuss their childrearing perspectives. This finding echoes previous research suggesting that interactions in home-based settings frequently involve conversation about topics unrelated to the child (Powell & Bolin, 1992). There were culture-stereotyped attitudes from within the family day care group in the CCICC study as well, as some carers simply assumed that they understood parents' point of view on care issues because they were from the same cultural background.

They reported using formal meetings, written daily records of naps, feeds and nappy changes, as well as taking advantage of transition times for informal chats. Information about the philosophical perspectives and approaches to curriculum were generally communicated via newsletters and information booklets. In terms of encouraging contributions from parents, approximately three-quarters of carers in centre-based care reported that they engaged parents to discuss their childrearing perspectives. A variety of situations were used for this purpose; daily transition times, when the child commenced care and at parent-teacher evenings and other social events. Less positively, several carers in centre-based care expressed an attitude that parents often resisted being engaged in discussion about their children, or that they expected parents to voluntarily share this information.

Findings from the CCICC study and other research suggests that early childhood professionals need to be mindful of working collaboratively with parents and children. In addition to the relatively large proportion of carers in family day care and centre-based care who did not actively seek parent perspectives on child care issues, and the negative attitudes and practices of carers to engaging parents on such matters, carers in the CCICC study also identified practical barriers

to facilitating dialogue with parents. Lack of time was frequently mentioned, especially when communication centres on informal contacts at the beginning and end of each day. This resonates to other Australian research in which carers suggested that transition times were too hurried for giving and receiving information (Hayden, De Gioia & Hadley, 2003). Carers in centre-based care also mentioned miscommunication due to gaps in language as a barrier to effective communication.

To smooth the progress of home-child care harmony, carers need a level of self-awareness of their own perceptions, assumptions and behaviours, and how well their approach works for the children and families concerned. Observing how parents interact with their children, noting words and behaviours they use when carrying out care routines and examining parents' direct and indirect reactions to their own practices will also help. Observing child responses and behaviours in the child care setting, particularly signs of discomfort, confusion, or anxiety may provide a vital clue to a difference in caregiving practice. The resources cited at the end of the paper offer detailed practical advice for early childhood professionals about ways to enhance communication and build partnerships with parents.

Carers in centre-based care tended to adopt more formal strategies than carers in family day care to facilitate information flow about the child's day-to-day experiences.

Common areas of caregiving conflict

Given the diversity in caregiving that exists, it is inevitable that parents and carers will sometimes disagree on child care matters. Studies conducted outside Australia have documented considerable differences between parents and carers along aspects of parenting such as interactions initiated by the child, contacts initiated by the parent/carers, discipline practices and developmental expectations (Coe, Thornburg, & Ispa, 1996; Nelson & Garduque, 1991; but see Feagans & Manlove, 1994, for consistency between parents and carers). The CCICC study produced similar findings. On a range of parenting dimensions, and especially in relation to the use of power as a behaviour management strategy, significant differences were observed

between groups of parents and carers. When the parents and carers were from separate cultural backgrounds, differences in parenting were accentuated.

The CCICC study also documented specific areas of caregiving where parents and carers differed. Approaches to discipline and toileting (e.g., the age when toileting is begun, use of training pants) were most often reported. A number of carers reported differences with parents about the value of sand, mud and water play (from the carers viewpoint such play offered children a valuable sensory experience, whereas some parents could not get past the messy consequences). Differences were also noted in feeding solid foods, specifically the amount of child independence that is allowed or encouraged (carers emphasising independence and exploration and parents assisting children to minimise waste and mess). In the child care practice literature, communication between parents and carers has been described as problematic and complex (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2002), and disagreements between carers and parents over educational approaches, physical discipline, gender-stereotyped play, and basic care regimes (such as how long, how often and where a child sleeps), are often cited (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001).

Responding to caregiving conflicts in the early childhood setting

Diversity of opinion and outlook that creates discomfort, frustration, anxiety or anger for either the parent or carer can place significant strain on the relationship (Gonzalez-Mena, 2001). If a carer is not comfortable doing something a certain way, or doing routine tasks differently, the matter needs to be resolved in a positive fashion. In this respect, the practice literature emphasises the importance of approaching parents with an open mind and a respectful attitude. However, reports from carers involved in the CCICC study revealed that at times both carers and parents adopted an uncompromising position. An unhelpful attitude that experience and training in the child care profession placed carers' wisdom above that of the parent was also evident from the research.

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In addition to highlighting the importance of interchanges with parents being based on respect for diversity, the practice literature offers some specific guidance to resolve caregiving conflicts. It is recommended that carers and parents negotiate an appropriate time and location to discuss the issue. Initially, the conversation should aim to identify the problem in words and to clarify both points of view. Both parties then need to discuss how they feel about the other's viewpoint and practice.

Parents should then be encouraged to communicate how they would handle the situation. From this point a plan of action that is comfortable for both caregiver and the parent can be negotiated. It is also helpful if resources and materials are made available to parents to assist the discussion.

Not all differences will be successfully resolved. In reality, early childhood professionals work within accreditation and legislative frameworks, so it may not be permissible to incorporate parents' care decisions within the early childhood setting. For example, formal child care services are supposed to offer non-sexist programming for young children and to respect and promote equity (National Childcare Accreditation Council; 2001, 2004), which may run counter to gender-stereotyped decisions that some parents make for children's care. In the CCICC study, several carers noted that accreditation and licensing requirements created a barrier to integrating certain caregiving practices into the child care curriculum, and regulations have been known to work counter to the aim of parent-carer partnerships in other studies as well (De Gioia, 2003). Carers involved in the CCICC study also identified a number of practical considerations and impediments to incorporating parents' decisions in the care setting, such as the impact on other children in the group, high adult-child ratios and large group sizes. When conflicts cannot be resolved or negotiated, differences must be managed and accepted.

Supporting parents outside the early childhood setting

When a parent's relationship with an early childhood practitioner or service is not running smoothly, they may seek support and advice from a family relationship support program. In this instance, the worker's role is to assist the partnership between the parent and the carer to grow.

Parents may have difficulty sharing information with carers or trusting them with information about their family, especially if stress is having an effect on their parenting. Some parents lack confidence in their own parenting, or the confidence to question routines and practices within the early childhood setting, or to ask for things to be done a little differently. In this instance it may strengthen the parent–carer partnership to give the parent confidence in his or her parenting and role as advocate for the child, and strategies to start talking to the people who are caring for the child.

If an issue is already out in the open but remains unresolved, it may be useful to broaden the parent’s understanding of what the early childhood service is trying to achieve and the complexities of working effectively with children and their families. Parents may also need help to clarify the particular problem or concern from their own perspective, as a basis for more effective communication with carers. Offering an objective opinion may give the parent the resolve to revisit the particular issue, or a reason to accept the alternate perspective, even if they continue to disagree. Emphasising to the parent the value of open, honest and respectful interactions with the carer, even when beliefs and values clash, is important if a strong and comfortable parent/carers relationship is to evolve.

Conclusions

Positive and trusting relationships between parents and carers are the lifeblood of child care practices that honour the child’s home culture and language to enhance child wellbeing. Given the diversity of cultures that make up Australian society, it is vital that child care professionals have the skills and inclination to work collaboratively with parents with different values, beliefs and languages. The practice messages included in the current paper offer some guidance to carers to enhance communication and build productive relationships with parents. Information directed at family relationship support workers may also help foster strong parent/carers relationships through the provision of objective information and support.

Positive and trusting relationships between parents and carers are the lifeblood of child care practices that honour the child’s home culture and language to enhance child wellbeing.

Resources to assist home-child care harmony

Services

STTAR Program

217 Lutwyche Rd, Windsor, Qld, 4030
PO Box 2072, Windsor, Qld, 4030
Tel: (07) 3861 1022
Fax: (07) 3861 1101
Email: sttar@diversity.net.au
www.sttar.org

FKA Children’s Services Inc.

1st Floor, 9–11 Stewart Street
Richmond, Victoria Australia 3121
Tel: +61 3 94284471
Facsimile: +61 3 94299252
Email: fkacs@fka.com.au
www.fka.com.au

Lady Gowrie Child Centre

Contact the Lady Gowrie Child Centre in your State
www.gowrie-brisbane.com.au
www.gowrie-sydney.com.au
www.gowrie-adelaide.com.au
www.gowrie-melbourne.com.au
www.gowrie-tas.com.au

Supplementary Services (SUPS) Program

Contact the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) in your State

Video

Gonzalez-Mena, J., Herzog, M., & Herzog, S. (1996). *Diversity and conflict management* [Video] Crystal Lake, IL.: Magna Systems, Inc.

Factsheet

Stonehouse, A. (2006). *Carers and families working together* (Family Day Care Quality Assurance Factsheet No. 8). Surry Hills, NSW: National Child Care Accreditation Council. Retrieved 7 May 2007, from <http://www.ncac.gov.au/factsheets/factsheet8.pdf>

Books

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Gonzalez-Mena, J. (2005). *Diversity in early care and education: Honoring differences* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Gonzalez-Mena, J., & Eyer, D. (2004). *Infants, toddlers, and caregivers: A curriculum of respectful, responsive care and education* (6th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

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