

F A M I L Y D A Y C A R E

Dimensions

EXCELLENCE IN MANY WAYS

YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE
TO FAMILY DAY CARE

ANNE STONEHOUSE

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National Family Day Care Council of Australia

With thanks...

This project was supported by the invaluable expertise of the following people:

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First published in 2004 by
National Family Day Care Council of Australia
Level 3, 107-109 Mann Street
Gosford NSW 2250

Editing by Persimmon Press
Project management by Monique Webber, NFDCCA
Index by Forsyth Publishing Services
Design by PDQ Design
Illustrations by Jocelyn Bell
Printed in Australia by Print National

© Stonehouse, Anne Willis, 1947 –
Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways

Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 9578048 4 9.

1. Family Day Care – Australia 2. Child care services – Australia I. National Family Day Care Council of Australia II. Title

362.7120994

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FOREWORD

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Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways highlights the diversity of Family Day Care in Australia, enabling readers to appreciate the many facets that underpin excellent practice in home-based child care.

All children in early childhood programs, no matter what the setting, deserve rich and diverse experiences that will help nurture their joy of learning, enable them to flourish, foster their wellbeing and build on their connections with their family, their culture and their community. For this to occur, the adults around them need to understand how children develop and change, and to appreciate how supportive and responsive adult-child interactions can optimise that development.

Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways is a book for Family Day Care Carers. It includes ideas and stories shared by Carers from around Australia. The book challenges readers to reflect on their own practice and to question themselves using the provocative questions sprinkled throughout the text.

Being a professional means always wanting to know more; and acknowledging that you never know all you need to know. The author recognises that professional development is an ongoing process that involves critical reflection, recognising and celebrating our own strengths and talents and at the same time being honest about what is difficult and challenging. The book aims to stimulate discussion and debate and to encourage professional interactions between Carers, and between Carers and co-ordination unit staff in Family Day Care.

Anne Stonehouse is an acknowledged leader in the early childhood field who uses her passion and commitment to seek new ways to guide and promote excellent practice for children using early childhood services.

I commend this book to you as professionals who have the privilege of working with children and their families.

Bron Dekok
President
National Family Day Care Council of Australia

August 2004

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Chapter 3

A Professional Carer - a Way of Working

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CHAPTER THREE: A PROFESSIONAL CARER - A WAY OF WORKING

The whole of this book is about professional practice in Family Day Care; therefore a discussion about what it means to be a professional Carer is central.

Nothing's simple

Being a professional means working with the understanding that there are very few, if any, simple answers to questions about what to do, how to respond, or what is right and wrong in Family Day Care practice. Working as a professional in any field, and certainly in an area as important and complex as Family Day Care, cannot be reduced to a list of dos and don'ts. Professionals have to use their judgement in decision making. Professional Carers reject 'quick fixes' that reduce things to 10 (or even 30) easy steps.

Carers are constantly faced with competing priorities — the two children who need comforting at the same time, the child who wants help with a puzzle just when you are settled looking at a book with a toddler, the question of whether to purchase some new craft materials or upgrade the book collection, a toss-up between having lunch at the usual time or waiting a while because the children are so engrossed in building a camp outside, a parent needing to talk to

you when you're trying to settle a new baby. One of the ways professionals have to use their judgement is in making decisions about what can and can't wait, what matters a lot, what matters less, and what matters very little.

Two related challenges are balancing striving for excellence in terms of what you provide children to support their learning and at the same time preserving and making the most of the wonderfulness of the ordinary and blending the best of 'being a good mum' and being a great teacher into being a professional Carer.

Do you ever experience tension between your expectations of being a warm mothering person as a Carer and being a good teacher? If so, how do you resolve that tension?

Strengths and limitations

Being a professional means recognising and celebrating your own strengths and talents and at the same time being honest about what you find difficult and challenging. It also means recognising and respecting your own personal limits and those of your family. Being able to do this carries with it a willingness to accept constructive criticism and feedback when it is given respectfully.

What are your particular strengths as a Carer?

Describe some of your personal limits.

What are some of the limits placed on your work as a Carer by your family?

A co-ordinator offered the following story:

Jessica had been a Carer for less than 12 months when she phoned the co-ordinator about two small children she was caring for. The children's father had been detained by the police. There was a concern that the children might be taken from the mother. Jessica had a good rapport with the grandmother, and both were working together to provide stable, consistent care and security for the children. Jessica was upset that she was feeling judgemental, that she couldn't be objective! She said she was worrying about the children when they went home.

This situation is common — when do you let go, when do you get to the point of being too involved or too attached?

The response from the co-ordination unit was that it was okay to talk out feelings with a staff member, to verbalise the worry and the desire to want to judge. It would not be appropriate to express any of this to the family. The children needed the security and warmth of a Carer such as Jessica. Her role was to focus on the time the children were in care, the time that she did have control of.

The co-ordination unit also discussed with Jessica her emotional and physical energy. Jessica wondered how she would cope with 'lots' of families such as this one. The staff member suggested that Jessica be selective in the

families she accepts — it is her call who she takes on. Not only does the family requiring care need to feel comfortable and at ease with the Carer, but the Carer has the right to feel equally at ease and sure of being able to provide the optimum care for the children. Considering the Carer's own family, the current children in care, and the blend of those with new children is vital for everyone concerned.

More, more, more

Being a professional means always wanting to know more; knowing you never know all you need to know. Learning is a life-long or, more accurately, career-long proposition.

Sometimes you come across early childhood professionals who work as though they turned their brains off a long time ago. They may be competent enough to get by because they are very experienced, but there's no creativity, energy or enthusiasm in what they do and how they do it. They are often the people who say that they believe they know everything they need to know to do the job well. They may be doing a good enough job, but they aren't getting much satisfaction out of it.

You can actually feel a culture of learning where it exists. You see it and hear it in those schemes and with those Carers where the desire to learn and grow is nurtured and supported by the culture of the scheme. The absence of this culture is just as obvious. Things may be going reasonably smoothly, but there's little light, colour,

action, richness or energy. It's as though people are operating on cruise control. If you reach a point where that happens, you need to do something about it.

The best early childhood professionals are those who approach their work as researchers: people with questions that they are trying to find answers to, who experiment and try things, test their hypotheses, people who are alert and alive intellectually. We know that it is good practice to say to children, 'What do you think will happen if ...?', as they go about their explorations and experiments. Creative professionals approach their work with that question as well. What makes a professional is not just what you do, but also the thought behind it — why and how you do it.

As long as you are learning, you are necessarily open to change. However, that openness is informed — it doesn't mean that you adopt new ideas, theories, perspectives, or even activities uncritically, just following whatever is popular or 'in' at the moment. Professionals are both open to change and clear about values, bottom lines, where they will and won't compromise. In other words, they approach things in a constructively critical way.

Eagerness for learning and openness to change bring with them a hunger for challenges and the confidence to take them on. This confidence allows reasonable risk taking because, when you are confident, failure isn't devastating.

Some Family Day Care schemes have established mentoring systems to encourage learning. These operate successfully in a variety of ways, and usually involve the assignment of each Carer to a

designated mentor, whose role it is to support and enhance the skills and knowledge of the person being mentored. Other schemes achieve a learning culture in a less structured way, based on the belief that within the scheme everyone is a learner and everyone is a teacher.

What are some of the issues that you feel most strongly about in your own practice, areas where you are not likely to compromise?

What are some topics that you would like to know more about? How can you go about doing this? If the good fairy who can grant instant wisdom came down and said, 'Choose an area that relates to your work and I will make you very wise about it', what would you choose?

What areas of your practice do you find challenging or difficult? What do you not know enough about?

What are some areas that you could help other Carers learn more about?

Carers will be at very different places in their knowledge, understanding and skills. What marks the professional is an appreciation of the need to return to many of the same issues and questions over and over as you gain understanding and perspective. In other words, the ways you will answer some of the same questions and the ways you will work with children when you are new and when you have been a Carer for some years are likely to be quite different. A Carer commented on this when she said, 'This is something I do a lot of, often returning to something better but

not that different than where I started after having been on a round-about journey. The journey has led me to realise what the better practice is for me.'

Confidence and humility

Being a professional means operating with both confidence and humility. This means having convictions, beliefs, values, resilience, and the capacity to persevere when faced with obstacles and challenges. Sometimes this means carrying on when there is opposition or little support. It's about believing in yourself.

Ironically, humility and appreciation of one's limitations come with confidence. Knowing what you don't know, acknowledging and celebrating the strengths and talents of others, acknowledging that you don't always know what is best — all of these come from feeling sufficiently confident. Confidence allows you to say that you are sure that you are not always right, that there is always something more to learn.

Confidence invites other perspectives and ideas. It is actually lack of real confidence that leads to closed-mindedness and seeing opposing views and difference as a threat. After all, there are many good ways to rear children, as long as they feel loved and valued for who they are.

Humility allows openness to new possibilities, allows parents to teach you, especially allows children to teach you. It allows openness to the perspectives of people from other disciplines. Early childhood professionals sometimes become impatient because professionals from other disciplines who work with children see them differently and

have different priorities. Valuing those different perspectives rather than rejecting them leads to much better outcomes for all.

People who believe that it's easy to figure out what is in a child's best interests are often people who are closed to other perspectives, who are sure that they know best, who deny the complexity of working as a professional, and who fail to look at the cultural, family and community context of the child's life. A healthy combination of confidence and humility lead to openness and to diversity.

Have you had encounters with professionals from other disciplines who see children differently or who focus on only one aspect of the child? How did you respond?

Biased — who me?!

Being a professional involves recognising your own biases. We all have them. Sometimes we can overcome them; sometimes we can do no more than acknowledge them to ourselves and then make sure that they aren't evident in our practice and in our communications with others. Biases or prejudices are often about particular cultural or religious groups, but they can also be about other categories of people; for example, mothers who return to work when their child is very young, sole parents, career-oriented parents, or older men with younger partners or wives and 'second families'. We can also harbour professional biases about different theories and philosophies of early childhood, service types, and even particular types of training or training institutions.

What are some of your biases? Where did they originate; that is, how did you acquire them?

How do you make sure that they don't interfere with your practice as a professional Carer?

No child saving

Being a professional means avoiding lapsing into seeing yourself as someone who is rescuing children from an uncaring society and parents who can't or don't want to stay home with them (Gonzalez-Mena, 1997). You probably wouldn't think to express it exactly that way, but it is easy to slip into that way of thinking. Of course it is important for Carers to appreciate the importance of their work and their role in children's and families' lives, but the appreciation needs to be without any sense of being superior to parents or more committed to children than parents are.

Have you ever found yourself feeling sorry for a child and at the same time thinking that he or she is lucky enough to have you to care for them? If so, do you agree that those feelings can be dangerous, or can work against having a professional relationship with parents? What can be done about these feelings?

My values, your values

Being a professional means having strong values and beliefs and accepting that others have different values and beliefs. Confidence, mentioned above, leads to being appropriately sure; this is, you are clear about your 'bottom lines' and where you won't compromise, you

stick to your beliefs even when you face opposition, and you are open to others' perspectives and are willing to compromise.

What are your most strongly held values about child rearing?

Have you ever come across people in your personal or professional life who hold views quite different to yours but hold them just as strongly as you do?

Boundaries and fences

Being a professional carries with it awareness of the limits of your professional expertise. Put simply, you know what you don't know. Being a professional Carer does not mean that you have to be an expert on everything about children. It means knowing when to refer people on for expert help and advice. Carers are often in the front line in hearing about problems and issues that families are dealing with. It can be flattering to be confided in, and compassionate Carers may find it difficult to not get involved in issues outside their areas of expertise. Tension can exist for Carers between showing compassionate interest in the whole family and maintaining a focus on the child, the area where you do have professional expertise. The support of the co-ordination unit and strong connections with the broader professional human services community help to ensure that families are put in touch with the assistance they need and are supported to access it. Professional Carers are experts at knowing and using other resources and professionals. The stronger the professional links, the easier it is to not over-step your boundaries.

Researcher

Being a professional means seeing your work as a kind of ongoing research project. This doesn't mean that you conduct formal studies or experiments, but that you continually ask questions, look for answers, monitor what is happening and evaluate your work.

A delicate balance

Being a professional means balancing work, family life and personal life. Doing this is so complex in Family Day Care because the very nature of the work connects

your personal, family and work lives. A healthy balance is unique for each Carer, and may change over time. One major issue for many conscientious Carers is what they see as a tension between being a good mother to their own children and working well as a Carer. Carers often feel that their own children are not getting as much attention as they should. These issues are a great topic for discussion among Carers, and also should be discussed with family members from time to time.

Nature of the relationship

Being a professional means knowing the difference between a warm, caring professional relationship with parents, and a friendship. While there is some overlap, they are not the same. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 7.



Connections

Being a professional means establishing and maintaining strong connections with other Carers, the co-ordination unit, the scheme, and other professionals. Attending scheme functions, getting to know other Carers, going to playgroups, participating in professional development activities, and getting involved in broader children's services organisations bring their own rewards to you and improve the quality of children's experience in care.

Support for others

Being a professional means assuming some responsibility to support and assist other Carers, including those who are new to Family Day Care. A professional takes on some responsibility for the next generation of people coming into the profession and gains pleasure in sharing her knowledge and experience with others. A confident professional wants to share her skills and knowledge with others.

How do you support new Carers? What more could you do?

What, if any, support or help would you need to feel comfortable about sharing your expertise with other Carers?

Confidentiality

Being a professional requires maintaining confidentiality. Each scheme should have clear policies and guidelines relating to confidentiality so that:

- Carers know who they can talk to about concerns about a child

or a family, and at what point they need to seek permission; and

- Parents know that Carers have an obligation to discuss challenging or troubling issues and concerns with the co-ordination unit staff.

Particularly in small communities, Carers need to be conscious of the fact that they will inevitably have information about families that cannot be shared with anyone other than a co-ordination unit staff member.

Pride and pleasure

Being a professional means taking pride in your own work and the work of colleagues, gaining pleasure in doing your work and valuing it. Acknowledging and celebrating achievements, acknowledging to yourself a job well done, and enjoying recognition of your work by others helps to maintain motivation.

Continuing improvement

Along with pride, an attitude of continuing improvement towards work is a hallmark of a professional. Think about our top swimmers or runners – they are always striving to get better, even when they are already very good. Being just good enough to win is not good enough for them. That's what should be aimed for in Family Day Care in attitudes toward quality assurance. Carers and schemes need to go beyond wanting to be 'just good enough'. Hopefully Carers can experience the inherent value of being a part of ongoing reflection and improvement and see it as something enriching and satisfying. Hopefully they will be eager to learn

more and be creative in their practice. When professionals feel that they are good enough, that they don't need to learn more, to change, to get better — then they stop being professionals. That is true not only of top athletes, but also of Carers.

The big picture

As a professional gains confidence, she is increasingly interested in seeing the whole picture, in looking beyond her own practice, beyond Family Day Care. She can see that ultimately her work is part of supporting all children's learning and wellbeing. Professional Carers have no desire to promote Family Day Care by criticising other forms of children's services.

Advocacy

Being a professional in Family Day Care means being an advocate — for children, for families, for early childhood services, for the early childhood profession, and for Family Day Care. There are many ways to be an advocate. It doesn't necessarily mean taking to the streets, meeting with politicians, or even writing letters and submissions, although all of those can be very effective forms of advocacy. Advocacy in Family Day Care means using whatever opportunities you have to raise the image and increase understanding of the profession, the importance of early childhood services as they are and as they could be and, most importantly, the rights and needs of children.

When you speak with pride and enthusiasm about your work, with respect about children, with empathy in response to 'parent bashing', (that is, blaming parents for everything wrong with society),

when you take a stand about current issues involving children and families, you are being an advocate.

When you participate in forums, seminars and conferences where participants come from a variety of children's services types, and you listen and speak with openness to commonalities and shared challenges, you are being an advocate.

Whenever you go outside your professional 'comfort zone' and participate in forums and groups beyond early childhood where the concerns are children and families, you are being an advocate.

Advocacy has to do with how we talk about what we do and, in fact, whether or not we talk about it at all. The complexity of working well as a Carer is not obvious to most people. Sometimes people working in Family Day Care, as well as other types of early childhood services, act as though the challenge and complexity of the work, as well as the skills and knowledge required to do it well, are obvious. Some Carers seem to think that if only people watched them work they would be awed by their wisdom, skill, and general cleverness. Regrettably, this isn't so. Appreciating takes more than seeing. The work of a Carer may look and sound easy to someone who doesn't really understand. Others may think that it requires little more than a strong bladder, resistance to germs, a back that's in good condition, a sizeable comfortable lap and a sense of humour! These are the people who make comments to Carers such as, 'Aren't you lucky to get paid to stay home and play with children all day!' or 'I don't see how you do it — I just wouldn't have enough patience.'

If you think about it, the better the practice, the easier it looks. Imagine



a sand pit experience supported sensitively and knowledgeably by an experienced, wise Carer. Now compare that with a Carer sitting in a chair, surrounded by well behaved children seated on the floor in a circle, legs crossed, silent, still, drilling them in letter or number recognition. Ask the average person on the street which is more impressive, worthwhile or educational. Often what we would see as inappropriate practice impresses people more than appropriate practice.

Another important point about advocacy is that whatever shape it takes, it needs to be informed, more dispassionate than passionate. The passion for what you do and what you believe in must be there, but passion is not enough.

People outside of Family Day Care will genuinely value Carers' work only when Carers can talk powerfully and persuasively about what they do. To be effective, Carers need to speak

more through the head than the heart. Members of the early childhood/children's services profession have to take responsibility for the fact that other messages, ones that we are not comfortable with — about childhood, children's rights, and what really matters in the early years — are louder and more persuasive than our messages. We have to own the problem and do something about it. It isn't enough to say 'I just love children!'

The ability to be an effective advocate grows with increasing confidence, grows with linking with other professionals.

There are many things that most Carers know and understand that people outside the children's services profession do not. Some examples of the messages that Carers can share are:

- There's no need to push children to gain skills at an earlier age than they would without the pressure.

- There's nothing terribly important about being able to recognise letters of the alphabet at an early age — however there's nothing wrong either with knowing the letters of the alphabet as long as it emerges from the child's desire to know.
- There is something important about learning to love books and being read to at an early age.

Carers need to find ways to let others in on the wisdom they have about children.

Image

Being a professional entails taking some responsibility for the image of the work that you do and the service that you work in. The image of Family Day Care and Carers is caught up with the image of children and of work in children's services. Be careful when the local newspaper wants to come around and take photos. Ensure that they are respectful of children and of your practice. Avoid photos of children that would rate high on a cuteness index, children as objects of amusement for adults. One Carer, who was contacted by the local paper with a request for a photo of a young child painting — and with paint all over the child — used her professional judgement and declined the request.

Take a close look at the images of children around you. Look at the images within the organisation, on promotional material, on shirts and name badges, bags, brochures, posters, Christmas cards. Do they enhance the image of Family Day Care as a serious, complex and important kind of work? Do they portray children and Carers respectfully?

'Our work is child's play' comes to mind as one slogan seen in Family Day Care. When Carers meet with each other that slogan can be shared, as it makes sense because we all know what is meant. In the larger community, however, that slogan probably doesn't do much to promote the valuing of the work of Carers. We need to always be mindful of the meaning made by others of what is said and written within the profession and outside of it.

Of course, we want to maintain the sense of joy, fun, exuberance and enthusiasm that is characteristic of children and of working with children, but not at the expense of respect for children and the work of Carers.

Qualifications and professional development

One (of many!) good ways to get a debate going among people involved with Family Day Care is to raise issues about the importance of Carers having formal qualifications. Views range from insistence that they are essential, to desirable, to unnecessary, with some people going so far as to say that they interfere with desirable practice in Family Day Care.

It has already been stated that being a professional involves continuing to learn. One of the most effective ways to do this is to participate in professional development activities or to complete a formal course of study. One of the particular strengths of the Family Day Care system in Australia is that Carers are supported, resourced and monitored by people with formal qualifications who not only provide informal support, advice and new

information, but who also organise and offer professional development sessions where Carers can learn new skills and obtain new information.

It is often said that experience is the best teacher. Experience may bring about new skills, new knowledge and understandings, but does not necessarily do so. Experience itself can just mean doing the same thing over and over, becoming entrenched, eventually working on 'automatic pilot' because everything becomes totally familiar. Experience can sometimes ingrain poor practices. *Experience combined with critical reflection* is the kind of experience that leads to learning, broadened visions and better practice.

Every Carer should participate in professional development on a regular basis. This includes attending sessions, but involves much more than that. Discussions with other Carers, visiting other Family Day Care homes and other types of children's services, reading, trying new ways of planning and recording, and attending conferences are just some of the additional kinds of professional development.

Hopefully, there are very few people who still hold the view that training and especially formal study actually interfere with good practice. People who hold this view often have a story about someone they know who has a formal qualification who isn't as good as someone they know who hasn't got one. Consider these three responses:

1. There are exceptions to everything, and it isn't a fair argument to single out the exception.
2. Even the best course cannot convert someone who is

basically unsuited for the challenges and complexity of working well in children's services into someone who is.

3. If obtaining a formal qualification decreases a Carer's warmth, compassion, and sensitivity instead of enhancing them, then the quality of the course that led to the qualification should be questioned.

Increased knowledge and skills shouldn't interfere with spontaneity; in fact, the more understanding and knowledge you have to base practice on, the more wisely intuitive and spontaneous you can be.

There are some Carers who are very skilled, but who are not very good at articulating what it is they are doing and why it is good practice. They operate naturally and intuitively. The role that formal study or sound professional development often plays for these Carers is that it gives them an understanding of what they are doing and why, and language to talk about it with others.

In general, there's no substitute for study. Besides, Carers can't claim to be professionals and then say that formal qualifications aren't important. Part of the definition of a profession is that it requires qualifications gained through formal study.

What does it mean if you say that you are a professional Family Day Care Carer?



In summary, professional practice in Family Day Care is underpinned by:

- discussion with others
- spontaneity
- openness to possibilities

- looking to children for inspiration and guidance about the content of experiences
- enlisting families, children and the community as partners
- using the wisdom and skills of colleagues to inform practice
- playful and creative thinking
- a culture of enquiry.

In Family Day Care, professionalism in Carers is nurtured best when the whole scheme embraces continuing improvement at all levels. Carers who operate as professionals take some responsibility for finding their own resources, seeking out their own professional development and not just taking up what is offered to them, but they do so within a culture of continuing improvement at all levels within the scheme. In other words, the growing professionalism of Carers is mirrored by that of the scheme.

Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways

Aimed primarily at Family Day Care Carers, *Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways*, focuses on excellent practice in individual Family Day Care situations. As the book's title implies, excellence can be demonstrated in many ways – it is not a homogenised 'one-size-fits-all' formula that is duplicated in Family Day Care homes across Australia.

Excellence is about being aware of the *potential for excellence in the ordinary*, and having the skills and commitment to make the potential real.

There are many ways in which high quality child care can be delivered; this book will support Carers to think about how they provide their service, validate what they do well and challenge them to embrace professional growth by learning and continually improving what they do.

Anne Stonehouse says, 'The emphasis in this book is on 'doing the improving', finding ways of going about your work so that you stay open, enthusiastic, creative, motivated and thoughtful, and most importantly, so that you gain pleasure and satisfaction from what you do.'

Written in a relaxed, easy-to-read style, *Dimensions – Excellence in Many Ways*, explores the strengths and challenges of caring for children in the home, discusses relationships and interactions between the Carer, the child and the child's family and looks at ways Carers can support children's learning through planning and evaluation.

Family Day Care plays a vital role in supporting families. Dimensions will play a vital role in supporting Carers.



Anne Stonehouse is a well known and respected advocate for children and early childhood services. Anne was awarded an Order of Australia in 1999 in recognition of her contribution in this area.

Anne's particular current interests include the nature of excellence in children's experiences in children's services, appropriate and mutually supportive relationships between families and children's services professionals, and infant-toddler care.

Anne's wealth of experience and her passion for quality drives her to challenge accepted practice and to seek new ways forward for the early childhood sector.



National Family Day Care Council of Australia

