

Crossing Bridges Between Home and Center-Based Child Care

by Alison Lutton

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When I opened my family child care home, I filled my living and dining rooms with open shelves, child-sized tables, and child-sized chairs. I hung the walls with children's artwork. When I explained my new career to friends, I made it clear that this was just the beginning. Everyone nodded with encouragement. My program would grow. Soon I would need assistants. In a few years, I would own a real child care center.

As I spent days with my little band of children, my talk about growing up to be a real child care center grew false. I came to understand something about myself. Those child care center dreams were not my own. They were an attempt to legitimize my career choice, to make my work seem more important. I was falling into the trap of thinking that what defines real teachers is that they work in classrooms. They do circle time. But I came to love starting the day by reading and talking with a squirming, giggling pile of children on my living room sofa.

I joined the struggle to professionalize the work of early childhood care and education. I examined the biases our field has toward women who provide early care and education in their homes. I ran into many people who did not respect family child care, and I learned some hard lessons.

The Rivers That Divide Us

Our field is proud of its diversity and yet mighty rivers divide us. We examine our identities and biases regarding language, race, nationality, geography,

inclusion of children and adults with disabilities, gender, and sexual preferences. We do this work with incredible honesty, sincerity, energy, and integrity. We do this in part because we must if we are to succeed in uniting ourselves into a profession. We must if we are to build the leadership we need.

The deepest rivers that divide our field were carved from the force of these aspects of diversity interacting with economic and social class. These rivers that evolved with our nation run wide and cut deep through our field today.

Most textbooks begin the story of early childhood education in the United States with the educational theories and the kindergarten/nursery school programs created by educators and reformers of the Victorian period. Rarely does the story include the establishment and growth of day care programs. Even more rarely does the story mention care and education provided in the child's or

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the teacher's home. Yet our profession's true story begins long before there were kindergartens or nursery schools. It begins with household slaves, servants, and women who took other people's children into their own homes.

In Colonial times, middle and ruling class children received early care and education at home from slaves, servants, nannies, and tutors. Working class children were cared for in homes by neighbors, relatives, and older siblings. Many of our nation's first schools were home based. From the Colonial to Victorian period, children received early care and education in "dame schools" — preschool through grade school provided by an educated middle-class woman in her home.

As the 1900s began, education became institutionalized in nonresidential public and private schools. The schoolhouse replaced the dame school. The education and child care systems each went their separate ways. Dame schools died and "family child care" was born. But home-based care and education has always been and remains a big part of our profession.

Crossing Bridges to Learn With and From Each Other

Defining quality early care and education in ways that can work in multiple settings, across cultures, and integrate multiple regulatory and funding systems is the central task for our field today. One of the most exciting aspects of NAEYC and NAFCC (National Association for Family Child Care) accreditation systems and community accreditation support projects is that they build bridges between different sectors of our field.

Center and home-based leaders of these projects find common ground in their commitment to children and their con-

viction that accreditation systems offer a powerful tool for defining quality, communicating with others about quality, and making improvements in their own programs. I believe that nurturing leaders who have the ability to move back and forth across these bridges — leaders who can unite our entire field — is one of the biggest challenges the early childhood field faces today.

Michele DiAddezio is a home-based child care provider and past president of the Pennsylvania family child care association. Here is her story of how one NAEYC-NAFCC accreditation support project encouraged continuing education and changed relations between home and center-based child care providers:

We're fortunate to have some community colleges in our area that offer a dynamite education in early childhood. Home and center providers who were working hand in hand to increase the number of accredited programs in our area are now sitting side by side in class every week. People who have been immersed in only the center or the home-based sector of the field sometimes develop an "us and them" perspective. Now both home and center-based providers are seeing that "they" are learning and practicing the same thing that "we" are learning and practicing.

The new NAFCC accreditation standards are helping family child care providers to learn the lingo of our profession, to see that not only can we talk DAP with the best of them, we are practicing it, too. Really understanding that there are many right ways to developmentally appropriate practice takes some deep thinking. Being able to communicate this idea to others requires leadership.

Before participation in this project, most center-based people didn't know any-

body from child care homes, and home-based people didn't know anyone from centers. It was as if we were in two totally different worlds. And we're not in two totally different worlds! When you can focus on something objective like accreditation standards, you see that our problems are so much the same. For example, now I know that, just like home-based programs, many centers working on accreditation need mentors to help them break the habit of too much television. I didn't even know they had TVs in child care centers!

Crossing Bridges to Build a Profession

At the 1999 Mid-Atlantic AEYC Leadership Conference, a lunch table discussion group talked about the ways to cross the bridges between home and center-based child care. Family child care providers have resources and knowledge to offer center providers. Family child care has decades of experience with the satisfactions and challenges of primary infant caregivers, teacher-child relationships that are sustained over many years, and mixed-age groupings. Center and home-based providers could work together to develop training, lending libraries, shared substitute programs, child care consumer education programs, and accreditation support projects.

Dawn and Valerie came to the conference together. Dawn is a family child care provider. Valerie is a preschool teacher. Valerie explained, "I noticed Dawn during a training. I could see that Dawn was professional, that she understood and used developmentally appropriate practices."

Dawn saw professionalism in Valerie, too. "I could see Valerie's heart was in this; it was not just a job to her. Basically we are all doing the same things with children, the same work. We all need

and use the same training. I've gone to observe preschools. It helps me to define my own program and identity."

Both Dawn and Valerie learned more about their own career choices by learning more about each other. Valerie saw that family child care providers "have to work with the parents more, deal with late payments. I don't have to deal with that." Dawn has "more freedom to do what I want, to make changes."

Valerie believes that "what I do is not that different from family child care. I teach in a preschool in a farmhouse. My classroom is just me and seven kids. It is a very intimate group size and setting. Parents choose our preschool because they want a home environment. Sometimes we need to focus on what's the same, not just what's different."

In many communities, the time for building the bridge between child care centers and family child care homes is now. We have a lot of work to do together. As we work together, we are learning how to acknowledge and respect all of our history and all of our present. That is the only way we can hope to build a future.

Building the Bridges

Here are a few ways to start building bridges with family child care providers. If you already have bridges, cross them!

■ **Begin discussions at both individual and organizational levels.** Is there a family child care support group or professional association in your area? Where are the family child care providers in your community? You may find them at a professional workshop or conference, on a neighborhood walk, or at the library. Expect the same range of professional knowledge and attitudes in

family child care that exists in center child care.

■ **Be open to many possible ways of making new connections.** Make sure local and state NAEYC affiliates include family child care providers on boards and committees. NAEYC affiliates can join with family child care associations to co-sponsor events, develop training ideas, create a shared substitute program, or conduct joint field trips. Home and center-based providers may want to meet to discuss a book or portfolios of children's work, or to share curriculum and project ideas.

■ **Use inclusive language.** Think hard about the words you use to refer to our profession and the people and places it embraces. Referring to *classrooms* or *homes* will result in someone feeling left out. Try just saying *room*. Instead of using either *center* or *home* language, try *facility* or *building* when referring to the physical site and *program* when referring to what people do. Some people think of themselves as *teachers*, some as *providers*, some as *child care workers*, and others as *caregivers*. Alternate these words, or try using *practitioners* and *professionals*.

■ **Learn more about each other and respect differences.** Family child care is different from center-based care. This is child care in someone's home. Remember to respect the privacy of the household. The environment will reflect the culture and values of the people who live there. Cultural authenticity and identity may be just as important to the program as cultural diversity — especially for providers from minority or oppressed cultures.

■ **Consider diverse ideas about professionalism.** Professionalism in family child care is generally perceived as less hierarchical than professionalism in center or school-based child care. In

family child care, both the brand new provider and the provider with decades of experience, accreditation, and a graduate degree are referred to by the same title. The person working alone with three or four children and the person supervising staff use the same title — most often simply *provider*. Professional providers resent being called babysitters, substitute mothers, or day care moms.

■ **Movement between roles and titles is not generally seen as the path to increased professionalism.** Most family child care providers see professionalism as choosing to pursue training and education, supporting and mentoring others, helping to build professional organizations, and increasing mastery in direct work with children and families. As in center-based child care, individual credentials and program accreditation are increasingly valued among experienced leaders in the field.

■ **Consider diversity in career paths.** Some providers begin their careers in family child care and move on to other roles. Some open their child care homes after many years in the field. Some never finish high school. Some hold graduate degrees. Some choose family child care in order to stay at home with their own children. Some choose family child care because it is the best match to their own teaching style and philosophy.

■ **Think hard about stereotypes and quality.** Some child care centers look and feel like home. Some child care homes look like a preschool with just one classroom. Some centers are experimenting with family-style mixed-age groupings. Some homes specialize in just one age group. Sometimes excellent programs create a special children's environment. Sometimes excellent programs welcome children into the adult environment. Across settings, real

quality is measured in supportive relationships with families and in sensitive, responsive interactions with children. The entire range of quality, from harmful to excellent, exists in both home and center-based programs. In both settings, only a small percentage (10% to 12%) of programs are high quality. Overall, quality is slightly higher in centers, but this is balanced by the overall lower quality of infant-toddler care in centers.

Remember that we are all colleagues and peers in the same field. Professionalism is defined by making a commitment to a long-term career in this field, a commitment to high quality care and education, mastering our common core body of knowledge, and continuing professional development.

Too many center-based providers think of home-based providers as uneducated and unprofessional and home care as unstructured. Too many home-based providers think of center-based providers as market driven and unprofessional and center care as impersonal and institutional. Building bridges that bring home and center providers together as colleagues is key to developing the future leaders our field needs.

Today the field of early care and education is being shaped and defined for decades to come. We have an opportunity to create new definitions of quality, professionalism, career development, and leadership. We have an opportunity to help break the barriers between mothers who choose to work out of the home and mothers who choose to stay home with their children. We'll have the most interesting discussions and come up with the best ideas if we can figure out how to teach and learn from each other. And if we are respectful of differences and interested in finding common ground, crossing this bridge could turn out to be one of the best things to happen in our field.