

Lessons from Family Home Providers

Ideas for training staff

by Margie Carter

Over the past few years I've had the opportunity to spend more time with family home providers in different professional settings. This has been enriching and illuminating for me, because the different components of our field often stay in our own niches — child care, Head Start, pre-K, home providers — and we miss opportunities to cross-pollinate. Despite their different settings, it seems to me that some of the common themes I've been hearing from home providers have some usefulness for center directors. In many ways, the message from these very professionally minded family home providers can bring us home to our roots.

Keeping the focus on home and extended family

Family providers have been consistently saying that they are feeling strong pressures to “centerize.” With the ever-growing early childhood emphasis on school readiness, outcomes, and assessment, home providers fear if they don't structure themselves into some kind of school-like setting, they won't be seen as legitimate within the profession, and will likely jeopardize their business in the community. Some are revamping their environments, schedules, and activities toward this end, while others are becoming quite vocal about the value of their home-like settings. It is this latter group that I think has some things to teach our profession as a whole.

Though our profession has long championed the notion of being “developmentally appropriate” and family-centered, the truth is we have been steadily developing programs that feel far more institutional and school-like than home-like. As we've worked to have professional standards and criteria for quality, and strive to rise above babysitting and custodial care, our early childhood settings have drifted farther and farther toward a school-like model with our environments, schedules, routines, and notions of curriculum.

Providers who set up quality programs in their homes can offer us different models. Rather than school, many of them are oriented towards a kinship network, caring for small groups of children of different ages, spending time casually moving through daily activities with a relaxed, rather than regimented schedule, and engaging children in the tasks that keep a home and extended family engaged in cooperative, healthy activities of shared responsibilities and achievements. How can directors adapt some of these strengths for their center based programs?

Strategy: Put a living room in every classroom

Whatever your center's setting, one of the first ways to de-institutionalize your program is to add some home furnishings. Consider putting some stuffed chairs, a love seat or couch in every

classroom, or at least, in your entry way, along with some lamps, plants, and soft colored rugs. Rather than shoving this cozy furniture to the back or in some corner, why not put it in the center of your classrooms, creating a living room feeling the minute you enter? Consider home furnishings for some of your shelving units as well, interspersing these with attractive child-sized tables, chairs, and furnishings from early childhood catalogues. Wooden furniture always feels more home-like than plastic. You can put fabric runners on the top of shelving units to further create a home-like feeling. Changing the lighting with floor and tabletop lamps will instantly add a homey touch. Securing these with industrial Velcro® keeps children safe and licensors happy.

Strategy: Fill the environment with images of family life

Now that digital cameras have become so affordable, consider them one of your most important tools for your environment. Invite families to send a picture frame with a family photo, including

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extended relatives, pets, and others that represent their family life. Put these around on the shelves, rather than hanging them on the walls so that they can be carted around for children to incorporate into their play or position closely in moments when extra comfort is needed, like naptime. If families have limited resources, you can use your digital camera to capture a photo, or loan it to the family over the weekend. Frames could be handmade by the children at the center if necessary.

Strategy:

Create opportunities for children to be in mixed age groups

Though most state licensing requirements prohibit mixed age groups in center based programs, you can still create ways for children to spend special moments across age groups. Perhaps the older ones can help the very youngest with a feeding, rocking, or backrub at naptime. Younger ones can visit the older children and explore books and blocks together. You can designate particular times of day for this, or particular spaces in your building. Children benefit greatly from spending time with others who are younger and older.

Strategy:

Develop meaningful curriculum

Every day children enter our programs with ideas, experiences, and excitements about the world around them. Using this *emergent* approach to curriculum planning doesn't mean that teachers just sit around hoping that some idea will bubble up for a project. Rather, teachers develop close partnerships with families to learn about what is going on in their lives, and they put things in the classroom environment related to these interests and experiences in order to help the children pursue meaningful explorations and investigations. Remembering how much children love to be a part of the adult world, think of everyday routines

in your classroom and places in your neighborhood as great sources of extending curriculum possibilities. Remember that the word "curriculum" is a school word and that the approach we can learn from family provider settings is helping children learn, investigate, and gain skills through their everyday living with us, as well as with special planned activities.

Scheduling time blocks for professional development

It first surprised me to meet family home providers at state and national conferences. I had the mistaken assumption that they couldn't get away from their homes during the week and didn't have the time or resources to travel far. While this is no doubt true for many home providers, I'm impressed with the determination and creativity many others have mobilized on behalf of their ongoing professional development and networking. At the heart of this endeavor has been building strong relationships and communications with their families, so that families understand the importance of providers taking this time off and have plenty of advance notice to make other arrangements for their children's care. I've begun to see some center based programs do this as well; but in my opinion, it needs to become a more common practice in order for all of us to further our professional development.

Strategy:

Develop awareness and policies

Nearly every K-12 program has regularly scheduled days when school is closed for professional development, parent conferences, or other teacher related work. Somehow, child care programs haven't managed to build this into our identity or schedules. I have been inspired to hear some family

providers tell me that they include a description of their professional development plan in their parent handbook and explain the importance of this as they orient every new family. In some cases they have a regular event or schedule listed, like for a state or national conference; and in other cases they state that there will be four professional development events that they will participate in every year, and at least one month's notice will be given for families to plan for alternate care.

I've begun to see some child care centers inch toward a similar acknowledgment of the importance of giving their teachers paid time during work hours for professional development. Some close early once a month, like at 3:00 pm, for professional development days. Other options include a few days or a week before the Labor Day weekend, or a Friday closure once a quarter for staff training. Choose a beginning place for yourself and then expand this every year, building it into your policies, handbooks, orientations, and calendar.

Strategy:

Document and spread the news

One of the ways to get parents to support the idea that you will be periodically closing your program for professional development is to keep them closely informed about what the staff is working on during these sessions. Memos to them in advance of the day, as well as documentation displays of the day's activities help families understand how this work will improve their child's experience in your program. And, incidentally, when your staff revisits their experiences through a documentation display or book, they get a first hand understanding of what this process is like for the children. As Ron Baer, early childhood teacher, said, "There I was in the pictures — doing what I had done. I was excited to see

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them. Now the experience had a new richness for me. The photographs shouted out, 'You did this! You were here!' What had been ordinary was now for me extraordinary. I realized how important the documenting of the experience was for me" (Carter & Curtis, *Spreading the News*, Redleaf Press, 1996, p. 44).

Building networks and collegial relationships

Each of us has to find the colleagues, professional networks and organizations that will strengthen us. Our work is stressful and under-resourced and we need each other for support and mutual aid. I've been impressed with the family providers and center based directors who have resisted the temptation to see their colleagues as competitors in the marketplace, and have instead, built informal networks, if not specific organizations to come together for assis-

tance, building a stronger voice, and celebration of accomplishments. This past year I've met family providers who've come together to national conferences, heard providers challenge each other to improve particular components of their programs, and learned how others have supported each other by sharing aides, substitutes, and resources. How could center based programs do more of this?

Strategy:

Form neighborhood networks

Whether you go visiting, make a call, or send an e-mail, make time to introduce yourself to other program directors in your neighborhood. Host a gathering so that you can get a sense of who your colleagues are in your neck of the woods. You may find that an informal network with a schedule of meetings will adequately serve your needs, or you may want to establish a more formal organization with bylaws and specifi-

cally stated purposes and goals for coming together. In either case, building relationships with other providers and center based programs, along with your city's Resource and Referral Network, licensors, and state professional organizations, has the potential to consolidate a support network, larger influence, and clout for your shared goals.

Strategy:

Collaborate on professional development activities

Sharing professional development activities with other programs has a number of advantages. The expense and effort can be shouldered by more people, and you can cross-pollinate the strengths of each of your programs. With ongoing efforts to share training experiences with others in your area, you may discover other possibilities, such as sharing substitutes, setting up mentoring relationships, and making

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Becoming stronger advocates

At one state conference I met a group of family providers headed to the conference planners with input on the kind of topics they needed to see offered as seminars at future conferences. Another provider shared a story of how their provider group organized a letter writing campaign to successfully overturn a new regulation banning wading pools in their programs. I've learned of several states where providers have managed to get public officials to visit their homes on Worthy Wage Day with coverage by the local media. All of these efforts should further inspire center directors to stronger efforts on behalf of early childhood care and education. If

family providers, with no office or teaching staff can make time for these activities, surely directors can find a way.

Strategy:
 Put advocacy work
 on your schedule

Moving back and forth between individual center work and network meetings, consider ways you can schedule in an hour a week for some kind of advocacy work. It might be letter writing or phone calling, or helping with a local early childhood campaign. Put this advocacy work on your calendar and treat it as important to get to as any of your other tasks.

Caring for the caregivers

Some of the most striking stories I've heard from family providers are centered around their commitment to take care of themselves and have fun together. I've heard of pedicure parties, weekly dates

at the gym, piggy banks for trips, formal dances, and award ceremonies. With all the stresses and demands of their work, it's always a treat to see providers and center directors taking time for themselves, either in quiet retreat settings or joyful celebrations.

This may initially seem like just one more thing to plan and organize, but my own experience has shown me that making time to exercise always gives me energy, even when I think I'm too tired to do it. Taking time to care for ourselves, individually and in group settings, is one of the most important keys to our sustainability. My dream is to see more occasions where family providers and center based directors come together, not only for mutual aid and professional development, but in shared experiences of self-care and jubilation. This happens annually at the Leaders in Action Summer Leadership Institute, and with a bit more intentionality could be happening in our communities throughout the year.

I encourage center based directors to learn more about the work of family providers through some of the professional resources that are available. Examples include: *Many Right Ways: Designing Your Home Child Care Environment* by Kathy Modigliani, Ellen Moore, and The Family Child Care Project, and *Circle of Love: Relationships Between Parents, Providers, and Children in Family Child Care*.

Consider attending some of the workshops geared toward family providers. Rather than waiting for them to show up at something you are attending, extend yourself to your neighborhood family providers, inviting them to your center professional development days or seasonal celebrations. Cook up some advocacy work together and plan a day at the spa. You'll find your life enriched by this engagement and possibly your professional knowledge expanded.