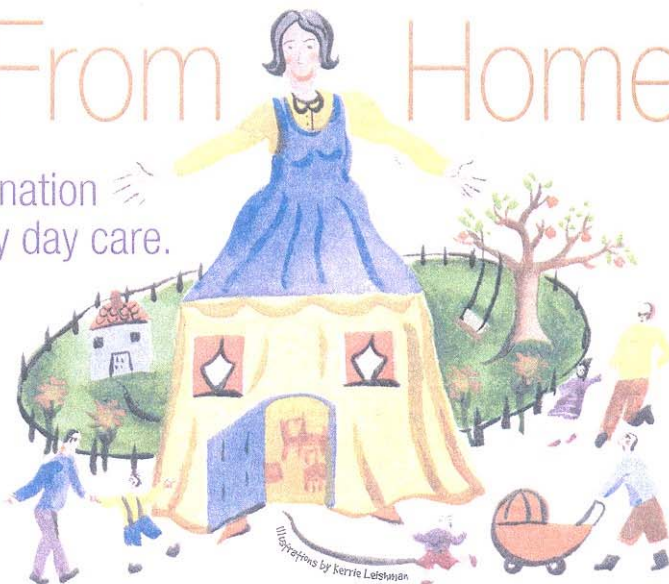


Home Away From Home

Kylie Ladd looks at the modern incarnation of a long-time childcare option: family day care.



Illustrations by Kerrie Leiskujan

Christy Friedman was thrown into turmoil when she was offered her dream job two months after her first child, Riley, was born. "I hadn't intended to go back so soon, but my husband and I decided that I would be mad to turn down the opportunity, particularly when the organisation agreed I could work part-time," she says. "The thing is though, that because I'd planned to be home for at least a year, I hadn't really looked into childcare. I immediately went out and started touring the local creches... but while they were all nice enough, Riley just seemed so little to be in such big, active places. In my heart, I really wanted him to be in a more home-like environment, but I knew we couldn't afford a nanny... I was actually saying all this to my health-care worker at Riley's eight-week check-up when she suggested family day care."

Family day care is a form of childcare where children are looked after in the homes of registered carers.

"As soon as I heard about it, I was keen to find out more," says Christy. "It seemed the perfect solution: Riley would be cared for by one ongoing person in a family atmosphere, and among just a small group of children. The local council arranged for Riley and me to meet with a few carers in their scheme, and we were lucky – within a month a spot came up with one of the ones we liked. That was almost a year ago, and we've been delighted with the arrangement.

use this service can receive the full range of childcare fee subsidies available, including Child Care Benefit and the Child Care Tax Rebate. Fees are similar to those for long day care, though they may vary between services depending on what is included, such as nappies, out-of-hours care or outings.

Kym Groth, president of Family Day Care Australia (FDCA), explains that individual family day care services are each registered with a local scheme, usually through a community-based organisation, and monitored by a central coordination unit. In turn, each scheme is overseen by its State organisation. FDCA supports the State organisations and provides policy advice and advocacy for family day care as a whole. "Family day care has been operating in Australia for more than 30 years now," says Groth, "and has around 340 schemes and 12,000 carers across all States and Territories." Until recently, the number of family day care centres was capped by the Federal Government, but since this cap was lifted in early 2006, there has been a significant increase in available places.

"Family day care really is the best of both worlds," notes Groth. "The back-up support, monitoring and resources – such as toy libraries and playgroups – provided by the coordination unit sets family day care apart from sole carers and nanny services, while the small size of the group involved may make care more personal than in a long day centre." This was certainly the case for

person each day, someone they could get to know really well, who would know them really well in return, someone they could have an ongoing relationship with," says Sally Coburn, whose four daughters have all gone to the same family day care service. "It's worked perfectly. Their carer is more like an aunt than someone we employ."

This has advantages for the carer too. Sandra Magnus has worked in family day care for 15 years. "I had a phone call from one of the first children I cared for the other day. He's now 18, but still keeps in touch... in many ways, they become part of your family, and you become part of theirs, someone that family trusts and turns to. It can be a lovely and supportive two-way relationship." Children in family day care also develop strong bonds with the others in their group, Magnus points out, and can be kept together with older or younger siblings, something that often isn't possible at day care centres.

the family day care environment is both safe and stimulating. Quality assurance within family day care is governed by the National Childcare Accreditation Council. Under this system, family day care services are assessed against a set of indicators for evidence of quality practice. Financial support for the service, as well as Child Care Benefit for parents, may be withheld if these are not met.

As part of the national childcare framework, family day care services must also meet State, Territory and national licensing standards. These comprehensive criteria cover such items as maintenance of home furnishings and play equipment, storage of chemicals, medicines and dangerous implements within the home, nappy-change and toilet facilities, heating and cooling settings, mandatory fencing and safety-glass requirements, and regulations regarding pools, pets and sleeping facilities, among many others. The central coordination unit for each family day care scheme is responsible for ensuring that the carer and their home meet these standards, through a series of scheduled and spot checks. Margaret Phillips, quality and services coordinator for Banyule Council in Melbourne, points out that parents need to make sure that the carer they have chosen is registered with a scheme. "The majority of providers are registered, but since the cap on the number of family day care services was scrapped... a number of new schemes have been established. Such services are not always regularly monitored."

Family day care workers are recruited by the central coordination unit attached to each scheme, and undergo a thorough screening process before beginning work. This includes a police or criminal-record check on the potential carer and also anyone in the household who is over 18, and a Working with Children check. Those wishing to work as family day care providers also need to have public liability insurance and an up-to-date first-aid certificate. A home-safety inspection in line with State and national requirements is then carried out by coordination-unit staff, while vehicle and car-seat checks are also required should the carer plan to transport children in his or her own car. All checks and inspections are repeated annually.



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Riley loves his carer and he's so happy to go to her that I do too!"

Family day care differs from long day or centre-based care in terms of its setting (in a home rather than in a purpose-built facility) and the size of the group of children being cared for: no more than five preschoolers per carer (four in States other than NSW, and in the ACT), plus two school-age children (three in States other than NSW, and in the ACT). In many other important aspects, though, the services are the same. Children in family day care must be signed in and out as they would be at a long day care or occasional-care centre, an incident book is kept, and daily individual planning and written observations for each child are provided. As family day care is an approved form of childcare, parents who

mother of three Catherine Wade. "When I went back to work after having my first son, we used a creche for care, but it didn't suit him. He wanted to nap at a particular time, but because of their schedule they wanted him to sleep when everyone else did. As a result, he often wouldn't sleep at all, and when I came to pick him up he'd be overtired and a nightmare. We moved him into family day care because his carer could be far more accommodating of his needs; there was a lot more give and take."

Many families who use family day care also appreciate the close and ongoing bonds that their children develop with their carers.

"I chose family day care because I wanted my children to feel as if they were in a home rather than a centre, and for the consistency of care – I wanted them to be with the same

Another major advantage of family day care is its flexibility. "One of the key differences between family day care and other forms of childcare is our ability to accommodate a range of childcare needs," says Groth. "Depending on the provider, family day care can offer standard hours, part-time, before or after-school, school-holiday or even evening or weekend care." Magnus agrees: "I used to have a child who would be dropped off at 5.30am because her mother was a nurse working shifts, and who would sometimes stay overnight for the same reason. I've also always been happy to drop children at preschool, or at a party they've been invited to – anything really that their mother would do."

There are a number of State and national standards in place to ensure that

Requirements in terms of family day carer qualifications vary around the country. In South Australia, carers must hold a Certificate III in Children's Services, and Kym Groth points out that Queensland and Victoria are expected to move towards this standard by 2009. At this time, there is no move to implement formal qualifications for family day care workers in NSW, WA or the ACT. Jody Stewart, child development officer at Port Stephens Family Day Care, notes, however, that all carers must undergo training provided by their central coordination unit prior to beginning work, and attend a prescribed number of professional development in-services each year. Some schemes have also imposed their own requirements. Banyule Council, for example, only recruits carers with a Certificate III or higher in any discipline. According to Margaret Phillips, this is because they have found that carers with a tertiary qualification are better equipped to handle the paperwork and administrative aspects of the position.

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"Ongoing monitoring is obviously important too," says Stewart. "Coordination unit staff carry out impromptu visits to all carers, just to keep an eye on safety standards and to make sure their program is running well. These occur every week for the first five or six months for new carers, and at least once a month after that." Similar standards are in place in all registered family day care schemes. "Something I've always appreciated about family day care is that every so often I will receive a letter from the council, telling me that a worker had

made a visit to the service my children are in and what they found," says Sally Coburn. "It's reassuring to know that the system is monitored."

Parents wishing to find a family day care service are advised to contact their local council or State organisation, or to use the scheme locator on the FDCA website. Sue Smith, president of Family Day Care Victoria Inc., adds, "We also suggest that when deciding on a service parents ask themselves a number of questions. These might include 'Are the children in care happy and busy? Is the care provider relaxed and in control of the setting? Does the environment have a safe, comfortable and hygienic appearance? Is parental involvement welcomed?' amongst others."

As with any form of childcare, family day care does have some disadvantages. These include the need to organise alternative care should the carer become ill or unavailable, and a reduced range of toys or equipment relative to long day care centres, though the latter may be ameliorated by attending scheme-run playgroups and

outings. "Some people have the perception that family day care is second best; that it is 'backyard' or a lower level of care," says Groth. "But if anything, carers are required to meet higher standards than in other forms of childcare. They are monitored more closely and complete just as much planning, programming and paperwork, but form closer, more personal bonds with their charges." As a veteran of nine years of family day care, Coburn adds, "You are trusting these people as the sole carer of your children for a day or more a week, so at first it is a bit scary... but with the right one it is magical." ■

Some of the names of parents and children have been changed.

Becoming An FDC Provider

Becoming a family day care provider is a great way to work from home, particularly if you have young children of your own to care for. In most cases, training and assistance with set-up is provided by a local scheme, and providers are able to set their own hours of work.

There are some downsides though: providers and their families must be prepared for the responsibility and wear and tear of having additional children in the home; must be able to provide continuity of care; must be able to manage the administrative aspects of the position, such as individual programming and written observations for each child; and must be prepared to ensure their home meets State safety standards and to undergo regular checks and visits.

For further information on becoming a family day care provider, contact your local council or see: http://www.familydaycare.com.au/childcare_career.html.

Providers may be eligible for a Family Day Care Start Up payment from the Federal Government, see: http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/childcare/services-factsheet_familydaycarestartuptm

For Further Information:

- Family Day Care Australia (FDCA) website: www.familydaycare.com.au
- FDCA scheme locator: www.familydaycare.com.au/scheme_locator_search.html
- NSW Family Day Care Association Inc.: www.nswfdc.org.au