

LEARNING AT HOME – DESIGNING AND CREATING ENVIRONMENTS FOR FAMILY DAY CARE

The family day care (FDC) home environment is the most visible aspect of the work of a family day care educator. It conveys a message: that this is a place where educators have carefully thought about the quality and the learning potential of the spaces within the home.

Each environment within a family day care educator's home represents a set of values or beliefs about the children and families that may use the environment and the learning experiences that take place there.

Drawing on the work of Reggio Emilia in Italy, educators in New Zealand have been exploring the 'language' of learning environments for young children (Pairman & Terrini, 2001). They identify key aspects of early childhood environments as:

- ▶ physical – organisation and aesthetics for learning
- ▶ interactional – social interactions between children and adults
- ▶ temporal – routines and timetables.

This article explores possibilities for designing and creating FDC environments that are rich in play-based learning opportunities for young children and their families.

The *aesthetics of a physical space* at home can promote constructive activity and purposeful exploration with open-ended recycled and natural materials displayed to offer children many opportunities to explore, investigate and problem solve, while constructing and representing their understandings.

Quality Area 3: Physical Environment

Standard 3.2 The environment is inclusive, promotes competence, independent exploration and learning through play.

Element 3.2.2 Resources, materials and equipment are sufficient in number, organised in ways that ensure appropriate and effective implementation of the program and allow for multiple uses. Play provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine (DEEWR 2009, p. 15).

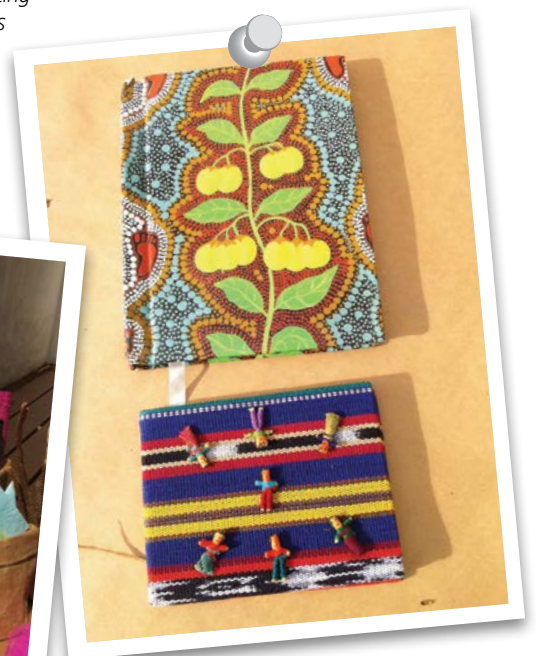
The interactional aspects of the home environment can invite meaningful social interactions between educators and children and their families. Some possibilities: inviting families to record babies' routines to display in the home.

Learning environments are welcoming spaces when they reflect and enrich the lives and identities of children and families participating in the service and respond to their interests and needs (DEEWR 2009, p. 15).

Another possibility: introducing Friday conversations with children to promote listening to children's views and ideas – educators can record the conversations in a conversation book for children and their families to review at any time, and children's conversations can provide an excellent basis for future planning and reflection.

Indoor and outdoor environments support all aspects of children's learning and invite conversations between children, early childhood educators, families and the broader community (DEEWR 2009, p. 16).

Learning through play in family day care: when children play with other children they create social groups, test out ideas, challenge each other's thinking and build new understandings.





Learning materials enhance learning when they reflect what is natural and familiar and also introduce novelty to provoke interest and more complex and increasingly abstract thinking (DEEWR 2009, p. 16).

When children engage with blocks, educators can be sketching their constructions to share with their families. Perhaps set up an easel in the home and use a large piece of paper to sketch the children's construction with blocks. Underneath the sketch or drawing, record the children's conversations and planning ideas.

'Visual representation' of children's learning can assist educators to document children's learning with children.

Educators use a variety of strategies to collect, document, organise, synthesise and interpret the information that they gather to assess children's learning (DEEWR 2009, p. 17).

The *temporal aspects* of the FDC environment include routines and timetables. Routines and transactions constitute a unique opportunity for maximising learning possibilities for children, especially as much time is dedicated to routines each day.

Educators in FDC may spend up to 80 percent of each day in routine and transition times with babies and toddlers. During the preschool years (birth to five years), a child may spend up to 6000 hours engaged in routine and transition experiences in early childhood settings (Malenfant, 2006).

Planning routines and transitions with children present new dialogue thinking differently about routines and transitions and invites early childhood educators to reflect on their current routines.

Planning possibilities for rest time or introducing transitions to rest time: children can place their photos on their beds to create a picture of their own space and a place to rest.

On the bed could be a bed box of quiet learning possibilities to engage with before resting – add a photo to the box so children have their own belonging for rest time.

A shoe box of quiet learning experiences

Introducing family stories for rest time – families are invited to tell stories, sing songs or create messages for children on a CD. At rest time, children can listen to their families as they rest in FDC environments.

Finally, a routine for babies and toddlers called 'getting to know you': a basket of babies' photographs in a magnetic tin for babies and toddlers to place on a magnetic board – just wait for the response as young children see their faces being displayed on the board! Oh, what a feeling!

Educators interact with babies and children to build attachment. They use routines and play experiences to do this (DEEWR 2009, p. 15).

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A shoe box of quiet learning experiences

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'Getting to know you': a basket of babies' photographs in a magnetic tin for babies and toddlers to place on a magnetic board