

communicating with families about food

The foods children are eating and how much food is eaten are common concerns for families. These concerns can make some families feel overwhelmed.

Careproviders are well placed to work through these challenges with families by offering factual information, encouragement and support. That doesn't mean we need to have all the answers. Being ready to listen and knowing about agencies for referral can be the catalyst for new opportunities for families.

Building relationships with families

What kind of professional relationship do you have with families? Are there opportunities for discussion between families and Careproviders about the child's well being, interests and development? What do you know about each family's aspirations and ideals for their child?

Careproviders are in an ideal environment to build trusting relationships with families. Families trust Careproviders with their children to nurture them, care for them and provide opportunities for learning. One of the best ways to facilitate mutual trust and respect is regularly chatting with family members.

If family members have very little time to stop and chat, creating opportunities may mean some planning and flexible thinking.

Some ideas

Find out from the family member the ideal time to catch up with them. For example:

- a quiet time at work to chat over the telephone.
- some free time at home during the day to chat by phone.
- giving parents enough notice in order to rearrange their commitments.

Remember to find times that are going to work for you and for families.



You could even arrange some home visits or make special times to invite families to the house to see what the children do. Suggest a picnic, a supper, a morning tea or afternoon tea. Food is a great way of bringing people together and a good opportunity to model healthy food choices.

Sharing nutrition information with families

What kind of information does work for families?

The truth is we all learn in different ways. Some of us like to research areas of interest. Others of us want short pieces of information that is factual and to the point. Some of us gain more information by looking at diagrams or pictures with key words near by. Often it is a combination of strategies that is most useful in sharing information with the range of families using Family Day Care.

Some ideas

Get to know your families and find out the strategies that will work for them. Often people want to get the right information in a short space of time.

- Using enlarged photographs or posters with captions are effective. Parents love looking at photos of their own children, and you can make the pictures up with the children as an activity.
- Sometimes graphic images are needed to change behaviour. For example, showing a picture of dental caries to reinforce the impact of large amounts of sugary foods. Ask your Fieldworker for ideas and where to get free resources

Creating the interest with families is also important. Again, having some knowledge of family values and parent's ideals for their child will give us clues to what is important for families. Using these clues to make information relevant for families will increase the chance of it being heard.

- Pamphlets or fact sheets are often best used as discussion starters with key points highlighted for parents. Remember to follow up with the parent a short time after the discussion to see whether the information has been useful for the family. This also gives another opportunity to support the family and strengthen the relationship between parents and staff.
- Sometimes getting the correct information can make all the difference. For example, highlighting points that food advertising leaves out such as high amounts of salt or sugar in products.

Addressing food issues

When issues arise about children's eating, this may be the occasion to make a formal time to talk through the issue with families. By regularly catching up, you will have gained some insight into what is important for each family member, how they see their child progressing in Family Day Care, some interests of the parent to use as a discussion starter and the types of written information each parent prefers.

We all have differing values about food and eating. These values can colour the way we see families addressing food issues as well as our views about the food provided for children. Before discussing a food issue with families it is worthwhile for Careproviders to spend some time reflecting on their own values in relation to the issue to ensure objectivity.

Following are some guidelines to use when exploring food issues with families.

- Approach the family and find a time to get together
- Choose a space that is free from distractions but is near where the child can continue to play with others
- Be ready to listen, show sensitivity, empathy, be supportive and respectful
- Share some observations with the family that highlight the child's interests, interactions and achievements while in care and reflects the importance of the family
- Express your concerns. Share ways that you are using to manage the child's eating. How does the family feel about these strategies? Are they meeting the needs of their child? Are there other alternatives that you or the family haven't explored?
- Is food and eating the real issue or are there other considerations such as the child's behaviour?
- Affirm the parenting role and the priorities of families. It may or may not be an issue they want to discuss at this stage.
- Respect that decision but continue to observe the child and discuss with your Fieldworker if necessary
- If you continue to be concerned, approach the family again at another time.

There is no doubt that encouraging all of us to provide healthy food choices for children is an ongoing focus. There are many competing interests particularly from food advertising aimed at children. Are we providing the best role model for children? Are we as adults eating from the main food groups, for example, plenty of vegetables and using water as our main drink?

Careproviders have a key focus in creating an environment where families feel comfortable to share a child's achievements, discuss concerns, share information about the child's development and be supportive and encouraging of each other's role in the child's life.

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Written by
Accredited Practising Dietitians,
Family Day Care
Produced by
Noarlunga Health Services
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