



Perspectives on quality in Australian family day care

Never Stand Still

Arts & Social Sciences

Social Policy Research Centre



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Glossary

Coordination Unit	The coordination unit is the team responsible for administration, management, and compliance with regulations for the whole family day care service. The coordination unit visits educators in their homes, monitors quality, processes fees and matches new families with educators. Sometimes they also provide additional services such as training, playgroups and resource libraries for educators.
FDC	Family Day Care
FDC Service	The Family Day Care service is the whole family day care service, including the coordination unit and all the educators. This is also known as a Family Day Care Scheme.
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework
NQF	National Quality Framework
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre

1. Executive summary

The Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) was commissioned by Family Day Care Australia to conduct research into quality in family day care. Six high quality services agreed to participate in the study. At each service, the SPRC research team conducted interviews with families, educators, coordination unit staff and representatives from managing organisations, comprising a total of 44 interviews with 52 people. All interviewees were strongly committed to providing quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) and had a belief in family day care's unique strengths.

The interviews explored ideas about the distinctive nature of quality in family day care, strengths and challenges, and how quality can be best supported. The data was analysed to reveal common themes across the services.

The findings reveal a wide range of strategies to foster high quality family day care. Often this meant starting with high expectations: highly qualified and experienced educators and coordination unit staff, structured ongoing organisational and professional development, and a commitment to regulatory compliance. The services embraced innovation among the coordination unit staff and the educators, and recognised the diversity of circumstances and needs among children and families.

All the services deliberately fostered good relationships throughout their networks, emphasising trust, reciprocity and communication. They saw relationships (between children and educators, educators and families, educators and coordination units, and within the coordination unit) as integral to high quality family day care. Particular strategies that fostered good relationships included ensuring educators provided detailed information about children for families, providing peer support and mentoring for educators, and encouraging a two-way flow of ideas and information between educators and the coordination unit.

Family day care is often lauded for offering flexible and non-standard hours of ECEC to families who need it. In the services that participated in this study, flexibility extended beyond operational hours to a whole approach to early learning. In these high quality services, educators made flexible use of their own space and that of the local community. They took flexible approaches to programming to implement the Early Years Learning Framework in ways that responded to children's diverse and changing interests, and group dynamics.

Educators and coordination units alike appreciated the autonomy with which educators could operate, and parents appreciated the responsiveness of family day care to their needs and those of their children. Having established trusted professional relationships and a commitment to high standards, services could allow educators to develop their practice in unique ways. This meant that the services offered a diverse set of options for families, and could meet a diversity of needs in the community. In some cases, family day care services were able to support children and families experiencing adversity, working flexibly and collaborating with other services in the community to pursue children's best interests.

2. Introduction

Family day care is an important part of early childhood education and care in Australia. In September 2014, 203,790 children aged between zero and twelve years of age attended family day care (ABS, 2015). This represented approximately 17 per cent of all children that age attending formal ECEC.

While operating within the same policy and regulatory framework as other ECEC models, family day care offers a different kind of service to children and families. Educators work in their own homes to provide care and education for up to four children, including their own children, below school age. Family day care has been praised by families for the flexible and individualised care that it provides (Baxter and Hand, 2015).

In Australia, educators are supported and monitored by a family day care coordination unit. Typically, a family day care service consists of a small team of staff who work as a coordination unit alongside a group of educators. Coordinators in the unit assist educators in all aspects of ECEC and are additionally responsible for ensuring compliance with the regulations. For educators and families, this model of home-based care offers flexibility and diversity, as well as the reassurance of regulatory oversight.

This report presents the findings of a study commissioned by Family Day Care Australia into the nature of quality in family day care. Using a case study methodology, key aspects of quality highlighted by families, educators and coordination unit staff across six services were explored. These aspects are:

- professional practice
- relationships
- flexibility
- autonomy
- diversity and social support.

In addition, examples of particularly good or interesting practices and programs at each of the six services are detailed, including:

- Communicating with Families, Blue Mountains Family Day Care
- Leadership Groups and Educator Pods, Greater Hume Children Services
- Inductions for Families, Kids In Family Day Care
- Link Program, Wynnum Family Day Care
- Paired Educators, Blue Mountains Family Day Care
- Bush Playgroups and Natural Play, Greater Hume Children Services
- Child Development Initiative, Wynnum Family Day Care
- Empowering Educators, Camden Family Day Care

- Supporting Children and Families through Hardship, Gin Gin Family Day Care.

The remainder of this introduction describes the policy setting in which this research took place. This policy information provides a context for the findings. The focus of the report is on the elements of quality family day care that emerged in our interviews.

2.1 Australian Family Day Care Policy

Early childhood education and care has experienced significant policy attention in the past five years in Australia. Policy reforms have introduced changes to family day care through improved qualification requirements and enhanced recognition among the ECEC sector. While many of these have been welcomed by the sector, there is a perception that some reforms could have negative impacts on the sustainability and quality of family day care. Key reforms from the last decade are outlined below.

2.1.1 National Quality Framework

In 2007, the Labour Government announced changes to the ECEC sector that established greater national consistency in regulations across the states and territories. The reforms most relevant to family day care were the introduction of a minimum qualification of Certificate III for educators or Diploma for coordinators. This change required upskilling for many family day care educators. While the change was supported by the family day care and broader ECEC sector (Cook et al, 2013), there were challenges for the sector to attract and retain qualified educators (Ishmine and Tayler, 2012). The second component of the NQF that affected family day care educators in some states and territories was the change in educator to child ratio for family day care to 1:4 for children below school age, and 1:7 when including school aged children. This represented a significant change in New South Wales and Western Australia, for example, where the ratio for children below school age had been 1:5.

2.1.2 Community Support Programme

In recent years, the Commonwealth Government has provided operational funding to family day care services (and other ECEC services) through the Community Support Programme. The Community Support Programme supports co-ordination units to establish and sustain a viable service in parts of the country that might otherwise not be viable (Department of Social Services, 2015a). The funding provides essential support to services operating in disadvantaged, regional and remote areas.

Reform to the Community Support Programme has introduced new challenges for the family day care sector. In March 2014, it was announced that the eligibility criteria for *new* family day care providers to receive operational funding would be brought into line with the criteria applied to long day care and outside school hours care. This meant that family day care services applying for Community Support Programme funding would need to be the only provider of family day care in the surrounding area. This new measure applied to new services from 1 April 2014. In announcing the changes, the (then) Assistant Minister for Education, Sussan Ley, recognised that the exemption of family day care services from stricter criteria that applied to other service types helped the family day care sector become a viable child care model. However, she stated that changes were needed to refocus the program on the objective of supporting regional, remote and disadvantaged areas (Ley, 2014).

The new funding eligibility criteria were later extended to *all* services. This came into effect in July 2015 and involved significant tightening of eligibility for Community Support Programme funding with the intention of both reigning in funding and stemming sector growth. Budget papers indicated that the tighter criteria would provide savings of \$157.1 million over three years

(Commonwealth of Australia, 2014: 81). As a result, 80 per cent of family day care services lost Community Support Programme funding (Family Day Care Australia, 2015). Research conducted after the policy announcement (but before implementation) found that services were very concerned that the loss of such a significant funding stream would diminish family day care quality (Cortis et al., 2014). Their planned strategies to manage the loss included: seeking additional funding from sponsoring organisations; attempting to minimise costs through efficiencies and reduced services (such as service playgroups and resource libraries); increasing income, primarily through administrative levies on educators and families; and relocating, or amalgamating with another service.

The new eligibility criteria will apply until July 2017 when the Coalition Government's Child Care Assistance Package is rolled out. Under the new Child Care Assistance Package, the Community Support Programme will be replaced by the Community Child Care Fund.

2.1.3 2015 Federal Budget: Child Care Subsidy and Community Child Care Fund

The *Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Bill 2015* was introduced to parliament in December 2015 and includes three main elements:

1. the streamlined Child Care Subsidy (to replace Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate)
2. the Nanny Pilot Programme (commenced January 2016 and to provide 3,000 spaces for children requiring non-mainstream ECEC), and
3. the Child Care Safety Net.

The Child Care Safety Net in particular is designed to provide additional assistance to children and families facing barriers to accessing affordable child care and has three components¹:

1. Additional Child Care Subsidy (\$156 million) will target additional support to children and families who are genuinely disadvantaged to minimise barriers to participation and provide access to early learning.
2. Community Child Care Fund (\$304 million) will provide grants through a competitive process for services to reduce barriers to access child care, particularly in disadvantaged, regional or remote communities and in areas of demonstrated high demand but with low child care availability.
3. Inclusion Support Programme (\$409 million) will improve the capacity and capability of child care services to include children with additional needs, particularly children with disability.

The Draft Regulation Impact Statement on the Child Care Assistance Package, released for consultation in June 2015, outlines the types of services and circumstances under which ECEC services can apply for competitive grants. In the Regulatory Impact Statement, family day care was excluded from many of the initiatives designed to enhance the sustainability and accessibility of services in disadvantaged, regional and remote areas (Department of Social Services, 2015b). As a result of feedback provided in response to the Regulatory Impact Statement, the Family Assistance Legislation Bill 2015 (under review at the time of writing), states that the Department will continue to consult with key stakeholders to refine the programme design, including whether family day care will be eligible to apply for grants under the new programme.

¹ <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/families-and-children/programmes-services/early-childhood-child-care/child-care-safety-net>

The recent changes to the ECEC policy in Australia present concerns for the sector as it moves forward. While the introduction of the NQF has brought many positive changes to the sector, namely increased qualification requirements and recognition of the professionalism of the workforce, the exclusion of family day care in many of the funding grants potentially constrain services' ability to provide adequate support for educators and families.

Family day care can provide a high quality and enriching ECEC setting for children of all ages; however, recent policy changes potentially risk the systems, structures and practices that contribute to high quality education and care in the sector.

3. What we know about quality in family day care

Research, both in Australia and overseas, has tended to focus on centre-based care, rather than family day care and other home-based models of ECEC. Across all ECEC contexts, research has demonstrated that structural features, such as ratios and qualifications, contribute to better quality provision for educators working in centre-based and home-based childcare settings (Raikes et al, 2005; Davis et al, 2012). However, less is known about quality in family day care and how it might differ.

In this section, we compile a brief review of research into quality in family day care, primarily drawing on Australian data and research, but also with reference to some key international studies. Internationally, 'family day care' is the term most frequently used, but in the United Kingdom the service is referred to as 'childminding'.

3.1 Existing data on family day care quality in Australia

Family day care educators in Australia have extensive experience in the sector. An analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) found that the average time that educators had worked in child care was nearly 10 years, with much of this, an average of 8 years, in family day care. Some educators had over 20 years' experience. This is consistent with data collected from the most recent ECEC workforce census, which shows that educators working in family day care are more likely to have been working 10 years or more, compared with educators in long day care. Almost 40% of educators in family day care had been working in the sector for 10 years or more, compared with 28% in long day care (Williamson et al, 2011). This suggests there may be a long term commitment to family day care from those who work in the system. It also suggests that some educators previously working in other settings may move to family day care at some point in their career.

The Australian family day care sector has rapidly adopted the new NQF requirement that all family day care educators have at least training to Certificate III level in education and care. This is a significant shift from earlier ideas that qualifications were not important for family day care workers. Only 20 years ago, Camilleri and Kennedy found there was a 'widely held view that family day care is an extension of the "mothering" skills of the provider' (1996: 39).

Analysis of data from the LSAC (collected around a year after qualification requirements were introduced) found that 28 per cent of educators were studying towards a qualification in child care or early education (Williamson et al., 2011). In addition, just under half of the educators already held a qualification in child care or early education (45%) and a small proportion had other education qualifications (7%). Data from the National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census collected in 2010 found that 60 per cent of family day care workers had early childhood qualifications (including three per cent with Certificate II or less) (Ishimine and Tayler, 2012). These figures increased significantly within the first two years after the qualification requirements were introduced. The 2013 National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Census indicates that over 83 per cent of family day care educators had at least a Certificate

III qualification, and almost a quarter (24.1%) held a Diploma or higher (Social Research Centre, 2014).

As outlined above, the rollout of the National Quality Framework (NQF) introduced significant changes for family day care. Cook et al. (2013:119) described the roll out of the NQF and the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) as a 'seismic shift' for family day care, with particular implications for isolated educators as their work load intensified and they had limited opportunities to share ideas or frustrations with colleagues. For coordination units, managing the process of professionalising the sector required careful support of educators (Cook et al., 2013). Others have reported that these changes were generally welcomed by the sector, while also posing challenges. A particular challenge identified by educators is the amount of time needed to complete the increase in paperwork to meet compliance measures under the NQF (Cook et al, 2013). As will be discussed in the findings, coordination units in this study introduced strategies and plans to ensure that educators, both new and established, are being supported to adapt to the new regulations.

3.2 Australian and international research

A brief review of the literature, detailed below, revealed that research frequently explores the effects of educator qualifications on family day care quality. Some of these studies also point to the importance of extending our thinking about quality beyond qualifications. These and other features of quality in family day care are discussed in this section.

Service support and improvement

The nature of the organisation which connects and supports educators is a key element in family day care quality. Access to support, good leadership and commitment to family day care and service improvement have all been found to improve quality in family day care.

A US study with 177 caregivers found that training in child care and having access to support networks explained almost two-thirds of the variation in caregiving practices (Fischer et al., 1991: 557). In a UK study (Otera & Melhuish, 2015), data collected through observation and interviews with 99 childminders identified structural predictors of good quality practice. In addition to ratios and years of experience, another key factor associated with process quality was training and support provided through a quality improvement program and quality assurance scheme, which involved extra training, advice and guidance, and additional professional support.

Educators with a strong commitment to family day care have been shown to be more likely to provide a high quality service (Doherty, et al., 2006). This commitment may be seen through seeking training opportunities regarding ECEC and child development, networking with other educators, careful planning of experiences for children, or describing family day care as their preferred and long-term profession (Galinsky et al, 1994, cited in Doherty, et al., 2006). Also, well-organised play spaces, understanding the rules and having lower ratios are all associated with better behaviour for children. Children had better social skills when educators pre-planned activities and routines and paid positive attention to them (Rusby et al., 2013).

Educators in a recent UK study outlined four features of quality practice (Callanan, 2014):

- supporting learning through implementing the early years curriculum
- fostering health and wellbeing by providing a safe and secure environment that fosters confidence, independence and enjoyment
- supporting parents by providing support and advice and building good relationships, and
- continually striving for quality improvement by reviewing and improving practice, with an

emphasis on maximising the benefits to the children in their care.

Another element – and which resonated with the coordinators and educators in our study – was the willingness to reflect and change practice (Fauth et al, 2011). A study from the United Kingdom concluded ‘there needs to be more focus on driving (rather than inspecting) quality through professional development, peer interaction and training’ (Parker, 2013:4).

It seems that Australian family day care educators also feel well supported. In their analysis of LSAC data, Williamson et al. (2011) found that 93 per cent said they could rely on others for support and assistance. Moreover, the majority said their service also listened to them, with 77 per cent agreeing that they were able to contribute to decision making about family day care policies and practices.

Professional development

Research has consistently demonstrated that qualifications are an important predictor of ECEC quality, including in family day care (Burchinal et al., 2002). Research specifically examining the effect of training on family day care quality has found that post-secondary training of a sustained nature, covering a number of topics on early childhood, improve family day care quality (Davis et al. (2012). University courses tend to provide the most improvement.

While Davis et al. (2012) report that educators with higher levels of education tend to be more sensitive towards children, other research has found that training does not necessarily improve the quality of interaction between workers and children (Ishimine and Tayler, 2012; Raikes et al., 2005). This leads Ishimine and Tayler (2012) to suggest that other professional development opportunities and practices may also be important for enhancing the quality of family day care.

Such professional development is common among Australian family day care educators. Data from the 2010 LSAC indicated that two-thirds had attended at least three days of professional development training in the previous year (Williamson et al., 2011). A very small proportion - only one per cent – had not attended any training at all. However, little is known about the structure and content of these professional development courses or sessions. Data collected for this study offer some insight into the different strategies and approaches for ensuring educators are engaging in a range of professional development activities.

Relationships

Research shows that relationships are central to quality ECEC provision, particularly in family day care. Relationships are fostered at various levels of family day care service delivery: between educators and children; educators and families; and to varying extents, between educators and coordination units (see Brooker, 2014). As will be discussed in the findings, positive relationships at all of these levels are integral to providing good quality care.

International evidence on family day care has found that educators who are connected to some kind of support organisation or well-connected to other educators, as they would be in the Australian model of family day care, tend to provide a higher quality of care (Davis et al. 2012). This is especially true where services employed coordinators specifically trained in early childhood and support to home-based educators (Bromer et al., 2009).

The best family day care services are those which supported respectful and supportive relationships with educators (Bromer, et al., 2009; Corr et al., 2014). In these services, there was a sense of interdependence between the educators and the coordination unit. The services most praised by educators were prompt and helpful when educators had questions or needed assistance or advice.

The value of trusting relationships between educators and the coordination unit is particularly

apparent in the tension between the role of the coordination unit as a monitor of quality and enforcer of regulations on the one hand, and its role in providing supportive, mentoring supervision on the other hand. This was noted by a service manager reported by Cook et al.:

The thing that does concern me in spot visits too and the quality improvement stuff is, it's a little bit punitive in nature. So they're always designed to catch you out, as I said, and to me that mitigates against quality. (2013:117)

Corr et al. (2014) found that educators described the need for a degree of social support from the coordination unit as a way to promote positive relationships. These positive relationships provided some protection against other difficulties educators might face, for example, if working with children or families that were challenging.

Ishimine and Tayler (2012) suggested that creating networks for family day care workers, possibly through professional development opportunities, could improve quality by encouraging collegial connections among otherwise isolated educators. This is supported by findings from the United States and Canada that educators who are networked with other educators provide higher quality services (Doherty, et al., 2006; Fischer et al, 1991).

Family day care can also help support family relationships by caring for mixed age groups of siblings in the same setting (Ishimine and Tayler, 2012). A study which asked educators in the United Kingdom about the hallmarks of good quality childminding reported that good relationships with families and offering support and advice to families was highly valued (Callanan, 2014). Another study in the United Kingdom found that one of the key elements of good quality care and education were childminders' abilities to sustain 'caring, consistent one-to-one relationships with children' (Fauth et al, 2011: 11).

In Australia, a study on educator well-being and mental health reported that educators described close and warm relationships with children and their families, with one educator saying 'We are all like family' (Corr et al., 2014:6). Warm, respectful and caring relationships with children and parents were also found to be central to the caregivers' concept of good quality family day care in the 1990s (Clyde and Rodd, 1996).

Autonomy

Corr et al., (2014) found that autonomy was a vexed issue for educators. Some services offered little support to educators, but provided them with a great deal of freedom to run their businesses as they saw fit. Other services more tightly controlled educators' work, and this could cause frustration if the educators felt their autonomy to run their own small business was being undermined. One educator described being 'de facto employees, whether we like it or not' (Corr et al., 2014: 11).

Research in the United Kingdom suggests that a key barrier to childminders registering with agencies is a perception that they will become employees of those agencies and lose their independence and autonomy (Callanan, 2014). Findings from this study could perhaps shine some light on this issue, and identify ways for family day care services to engage closely with educators while also supporting their autonomy.

Flexibility

Flexibility is a key factor in family decisions about which kinds of ECEC to adopt for their children (Ishimine and Tayler, 2012). It has particular appeal for families who need care at irregular times and mixed age groups of children from birth to school-aged; family day care is the main form of approved ECEC which can cater to these needs. In Home Care also offers flexible care, but only to a targeted group of families. In Home Care is often provided by Family Day Care services.

As will be shown in the findings, flexibility can also operate in other ways, such as through flexible approaches to learning and the use of home and community spaces. For example, use of local libraries and going to story-time has been found to be associated with good quality family day care (Doherty, et al., 2006). A UK study based on surveys, observation and semi-structured interviews (Fauth et al, 2011) found that flexibility is an important factor in childminders' abilities to respond to children's interests and needs. Community resources, such as parks and playgroups, were identified as an element of high quality care which affected families' decisions to use childminders instead of centre-based services (Fauth et al, 2011, 2013).

Fostering children's learning and wellbeing

A UK study found that in addition to building trusting relationships with children there were several other elements identified that supported effective childminding practices. This included tailoring provision to children's interests and needs, embedding learning in play, and extending child-directed play (Fauth et al, 2011). Consistent with findings from this study, these practices were facilitated through the flexibility offered in the family day care/childminding model which allows educators to be responsive to children's interests and needs, and to use a range of community resources that suit individuals and groups of children (Fauth et al, 2011).

An Australian study explored family day care educators' knowledge and capacity to foster children's wellbeing and identify mental health issues (Davis et al, 2011). The findings indicated a range of skill level across individual educators, and identified the need for service-wide strategies and approaches, including appropriate training, to address these issues with families. Findings from this study point to some important practices and approaches to assist children and families in need of additional social support.

Summary

There is a tendency to focus on educator qualifications in research on quality in family day care. This review has shown that qualifications are important, but other factors also contribute to high quality family day care services. This includes the overall approach of the service towards professional development and practice improvement; the nature of relationships within a service, particularly between educators and children and their families; flexible approaches to children's learning in a range of different contexts; and ensuring educators are well-connected and well-supported, while also maintaining their autonomy.

4. Methodology

This report is based on case study research with six high quality Australian family day services. In consultation with Family Day Care Australia, the research team developed a short list of services that received the highest level ratings under the NQF, either 'exceeding the National Quality Standard' or 'excellent'. We then selected six sites that represented a mix of services that were:

- managed by a private business, local government or community organisation
- large, medium or small in terms of numbers of educators
- based in urban areas, the urban fringe or rural areas
- continuing to receive Community Support Programme funding or had lost this funding
- characterised by educators being either closely concentrated near the coordination unit or widely dispersed.

The selected services were based in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. The six services are described in detail in the following chapter and include: Blue Mountains Family Day Care, Camden Family Day Care, Gin Gin Family Day Care, Greater Hume Children Services, Kids in Family Day Care and Wynnum Family Day Care and Education Service².

The services which took part in the study all agreed to be identified in this report; however, the identity of individual interviewees has been protected. Wherever names are used in this report, they are pseudonyms.

4.1 Interviews

At each service we interviewed families, educators and coordination unit staff. When it was possible, we also interviewed representatives from the auspicing agency, such as the local council manager. In each interview, we asked what practices at the service supported quality early childhood education and care. The interviews took place between October and December 2015.

We conducted 44 interviews with 52 people (some participants preferring to be interviewed together). Each interview was around 40 minutes long, although they ranged from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours.

Families and educators were given a \$50 voucher as a way of thanking them for their time.

² Referred to as Wynnum Family Day Care, or Wynnum throughout the report.

Table 1: Interview participants

Service	Coordination unit staff	Educators	Families	Auspic agency
Blue Mountains FDC	2	2	2	1
Camden FDC	5	2	2	1
Gin Gin FDC	1	3	2	1
Greater Hume Children Services	4	3	2	0
Kids in Family Day Care	3	2	2	0
Wynnum FDC	6	3	2	1
Total	21	15	12	4

The interviews focused particularly on aspects of quality that we anticipated might be challenging for family day care or in which family day care might be uniquely positioned to excel. These aspects included: use of space both at the educator's home and elsewhere; fostering relationships and communication between educators and families, the coordination unit and educators, and the coordination unit and families; early learning and the implementation of the EYLF; monitoring quality; and flexibility. A copy of the interview topic guides is provided in Appendix A.

While the interviews were guided by particular topics, the interviewers allowed the conversation to flow freely so that respondents were able to share their thoughts on other features of quality, and other strengths or challenges for family day care.

The people who participated in the interviews were selected by coordination unit staff. As staff knew the research was focused on quality in family day care, they selected those who they thought would best demonstrate high quality practice at their service. As a result, the interviews were likely biased toward educators who were identified by the coordination unit as offering high quality ECEC or because they were articulate in the way they described quality provision. For interview participants from families, coordination unit staff often selected those who had various experiences with family day care (and were possibly able to compare with other services), and who most appreciated the quality of the service. There would, however, be some variability in each service, both in quality and in satisfaction with the service. As this research sought to explore features of high quality in family day care, this bias in the selection of participants does not significantly affect the findings.

4.2 Analysis

Following completion of the interviews, the research team analysed and discussed the findings and themes that emerged from each of the case study sites. The research team identified a number of common themes, but also some distinct programs and practices within each of the services. The digital voice recordings of the interviews were professionally transcribed. Using the initial themes identified through our discussions, the research team examined the interview transcripts to explore if and how these themes were evident in the practices of each of the services. Through this process, new themes were identified that were pertinent to individual services. In this way, the research team followed an iterative approach to analysis, exploring data across sites as well as within sites, in order to identify patterns and distinctive practices.

5. Family day care services participating in the research

This section describes each of the services which participated in this research. The information is drawn from the interviews at each site. Any errors are the responsibility of the authors.

The research team would like to thank each of these services for bravely opening their doors to the research team and for generously sharing their ideas and innovations.

5.1 Blue Mountains Family Day Care

Blue Mountains Family Day Care is situated just beyond the outskirts of Sydney, New South Wales. The Blue Mountains are a popular tourist destination and tourism is a key employer in the region. Many other residents have long commutes to the city for work.

The service was established in 1980. It has around 50 educators and 360 families, mostly in the Blue Mountains City Council area, but some also located in western Sydney and the central tablelands past Lithgow. Until 2015, Blue Mountains Family Day Care was the only family day care service in the area. The coordination unit employs seven staff: a manager, four coordinators, and two staff responsible for administration and marketing. Blue Mountains Family Day Care also runs an In Home Care program with five educators.

The service is managed by the Blue Mountains City Council, which values the contribution of the service to the community and the local economy (the Council estimated the economic contribution of family day care as \$1.7 million). In 2015, the service lost all of its Community Support Programme funding, 'a substantial proportion of the service's income - it hurt' (auspicing agency representative). In recognition of family day care's importance for the Blue Mountains, the council agreed to support the service for several years 'to get us to a place where we are sustainable' (Manager).

In response to the loss of Community Support Programme funding and other pressures on the service resulting from the introduction of Certificate III minimum qualification requirements and the 1:4 ratio, Blue Mountains Family Day Care started intensive organisational analysis and remodelling, guided by the council. The council has put considerable staff resources into working with the service to develop a new business model, including redesigning the fee structure, developing electronic and online resources (for example, enrolment forms) and communication, changing advertising and marketing approaches, and restructuring the coordination unit.

Unlike many other services³, the Blue Mountains Family Day Care does not charge families an administration levy, rather there is an administration levy to educators 'because it is tax deductible' (auspicing agency representative).

³ Administrative levies are generally paid by both educators and families to family day care services. The amount varies from service to service, as does the way levies are calculated.

Coordinators visit each educator approximately once every six weeks. When new educators start, they receive weekly visits but these gradually reduce as they establish their business. Educators are given more intensive support when they or the coordination unit feels they need it. Experienced and well-qualified educators are sometimes visited less often.

One distinctive feature of Blue Mountains Family Day Care was their use of paired educators, which allowed for flexibility for both the educators and for families (see Practice Highlight 4).

5.2 Camden Family Day Care

Camden Family Day Care is a council-run service in Sydney's south-western outskirts. The area is characterised by new housing developments and rapid population growth. New families moving to the area, many of who commute large distances to work in the city each day, are contributing to a growing need for early education and care.

The coordination unit's highly experienced staff work closely together in a stable team of six mostly part-time coordinators. The team supports each other across coordination functions, is well supported by its leadership, and has access to Camden Council's training and professional development opportunities. The unit supports 53 educators. Coordinators make monthly unscheduled visits to educators and offer transition to school and wellbeing programs for children and families.

The service had a detailed business analysis and planning process and, at the time of research, was implementing its Business Improvement Plan 2015-2016. A key priority was to develop service sustainability by attracting a growing number of educators through their capacity to offer a high quality model of support. Growth is challenging due to high levels of competition from other services in the area.

Although family day care is not seen as a key area of council provision, it has a long history having existed for over 30 years and experienced a number of waves of regulatory reform. Camden Family Day Care lost its Community Support Programme funding in 2015. Coordinators were also concerned about the impact of funding loss in the context of the recent change in ratios from 1:5 to 1:4, which was seen to adversely affect educators' income, reducing the viability of their businesses. Responses to financial pressures included raising levies, streamlining business practices (including marketing and recruitment), and ensuring coordination support provided excellent value to educators. A strong focus had been placed on recruiting highly capable educators, who the coordination unit could most efficiently support. At Camden Family Day Care, coordinators promoted a strong sense of autonomy and empowerment among educators (Practice Highlight 7). There is a strong focus on quality improvement, and the service's 'exceeding' rating was seen to help promote the profile of the service within the council. The service is currently exploring ways to grow in 'new release' suburbs.

5.3 Gin Gin Family Day Care

Gin Gin Family Day Care is a small service operating out of the town of Gin Gin in rural Queensland. Gin Gin is located in the Bundaberg Regional Council Local Government Area and is equidistant between Brisbane and Rockhampton. In 2011, its population was 1,190. The area is predominantly rural with many families employed in agricultural production and related services, often performing seasonal work.

Gin Gin Family Day Care has run for over 20 years and is currently one of three family day care services in the area auspiced by a large multi-state non-profit community service provider, Churches of Christ Care, which is based 120 kilometres away in Hervey Bay. The service operates with a sole coordinator, who at the time of the research was supporting nine educators

spread across 390 kilometres, although the number of educators has fluctuated over time. Family day care is just one of the early childhood services provided by Churches of Christ Care, which also offers a range of other social programs, including early intervention, family and community support.

Gin Gin Family Day Care's coordinator, who has a background as an educator in family day care and centre-based settings, nurtures strong relationships with educators by visiting at least fortnightly and supporting them through more frequent, and sometimes daily, phone calls. She is directly supported by an area manager and curriculum and business support staff working across three Churches of Christ Care family day care services. She works closely with the coordinators at the other Churches of Christ Care services, despite the long distances between them, to ensure family day care meets the diverse needs of local families, including those with seasonal or other non-standard working arrangements. Increasing pressure on family day care in recent years was attributed to the establishment of a heavily subsidised for-profit centre in Gin Gin which was reportedly offering very low-cost care to local families. Anticipation of loss of operational funding in 2016 has caused the service to introduce fee increases, spread across levies on families and educators.

Gin Gin Family Day Care provides an integral service to the community that it services. As discussed in Practice Highlight 9, the coordination unit and educators at Gin Gin Family Day Care provide more than ECEC services to families, also offering social support which is recognised and valued by families and others in the community.

5.4 Greater Hume Children Services

Greater Hume Children Services family day care service was established in 1994 and is managed by the Greater Hume Shire council. The coordination unit is based in Jindera, a small community located approximately a 20-minute drive from the main regional town of Albury (in NSW) and Wodonga (in Victoria).

Greater Hume Children Services is a medium sized service, with 57 educators, over 400 families and 600 children. The service also delivers In Home Care. The coordination unit consists of six full- and part-time staff members: two staff members responsible for educator visits, one playgroup coordinator, one In Home Care manager, and one administrator. The coordinators visit new educators weekly and once they have settled into their educator role, most educators are visited once per month. The coordination unit is funded through fees from both educators and families. The families' fee is incorporated in the hourly fee set by the educator.

The service is geographically dispersed, covering an area that borders NSW and Victoria. There are 24 educators based in Albury, 10 in Wodonga, and four in Jindera, with the remainder of the educators scattered throughout other smaller communities in the region. A couple of educators are located a two-hour drive from Jindera, where the coordination unit is located.

As a result of the geographical dispersion, Greater Hume Children Services has developed innovative approaches to supporting their educators and families. In particular, playgroups are located at different locations in order to ensure that educators in different communities have an opportunity to attend sessions. The coordination unit also established 'pods' of educators in different communities to provide mentorship and to facilitate educators to network with each other outside of sessions organised by Greater Hume Children Services (see Practice Highlight 2).

The geographical dispersion of educators is significant to the daily operations and organisation of the service. Coordinators travel long distances to visit their educators, and educators themselves also travel for school drop offs and pick-ups, to attend playgroups and other community excursions, and to participate in professional development activities and social events organised by the coordination unit. The playgroups are located in parks and other natural spaces as much

as possible. The coordination unit has supported educators to develop new ideas for outside play and to use natural spaces (see Practice Highlight 6). It has also supported educators to be innovative and try new ideas. In addition, the coordination unit takes a consultative approach to support and monitoring, through ensuring that educators' voices are taken into account in any changes.

5.5 Kids in Family Day Care

Kids in Family Day Care operates in an area that is transforming from rural to suburban with new developments of large homes and many young families. Located on the Melbourne fringe, about 50km south east of the city centre, the coordination unit is on the border of two local government areas, Cardinia Shire and City of Casey.

It is a small privately operated service consisting of 40 educators, supported by a four-person team in the coordination unit. The coordination unit staff all work part-time except the manager. The other team members include the owner, who steps in when she is needed, the educational leader, and administrator. While the educational leader is primarily responsible for visits to educators, this is something that all members of the coordination unit team participate in. The team pride themselves on their close working relationships and their flexibility.

In 2015, Kids in Family Day Care lost all its Community Support Programme funding. While describing this as a difficult time, the coordination unit were clearly proud of the adaptations they had made to make it possible to continue to run the service. The team have strong personal commitments to the service and they worked hard.

Kids in Family Day Care has only ever collected an administrative levy from families, 'because at the end of the financial year, you know, they get Child Care Rebate, 50 per cent. But then on top of that they would have their subsidy [Child Care Benefit]'. Educators pay only a one-off fee to join the service. The service describes this as a point of difference that will help attract educators.

The coordination unit staff also pride themselves on the quality of the relationships they have with educators. They have a highly consultative approach to policy development and a detailed induction process for educators and families. The family induction process (described in more detail in Practice Highlight 3) involves meetings with a number of the coordination unit staff, plus a follow-up to ensure that family day care is meeting their expectations.

5.6 Wynnum Family Day Care and Education Service

Wynnum Family Day Care and Education Service (WFDC) is based in the eastern suburbs of Brisbane, located approximately 30-minutes from the Brisbane CBD. Wynnum Family Day Care was established in 1988, sponsored by Community Child Care Inc.

Wynnum Family Day Care is a large service, with approximately 100 educators and over 600 families. Most educators work within 10 kilometres of Wynnum, but there are some up to 30 kilometres away.

The coordination unit has a fee for service which is charged to both educators and families as a weekly levy (educator and family) and an hourly rate (family). Families pay an hourly fee to the service based on the booked hours of care, and this is collected by the educator on behalf of WFDC. Families also pay a weekly family levy to WFDC regardless of the number of booked hours or children in the family. Other fees and charges include an annual affiliation fee to Community Child Care Inc (paid by all employees, educators and families), and a registration fee for new families and educators. The registration fee for new educators varies depending on whether the educators have come from another service.

The coordination unit consists of seven team members, plus consultants and other professionals that provide additional activities and supports. The operational model consists of seven distinct roles, with each team member having responsibility for supporting educators and families in distinct ways. The roles include:

- Service Manager – overall responsibility and strategy
- Service and Project Coordinator – provides managerial support, educator and family liaison, parent/educator training
- Family Liaison and Enrolment Coordinator – matches families and educators for care, parent support and referrals
- Professional Development and Research Coordinator – professional development for educators, educational leader, Inclusion Support Subsidy
- Educator Professional Practice and LINK Coordinator – professional development plans, coordinates LINK program (alternative model to playgroups)
- Learning support coordinator – observation, assessment and early intervention, Child Development Initiative
- Business and Systems Development Coordinator – educator recruitment and orientation, business efficiencies, curriculum technologies and trainer.

Educators are visited once a week by coordination unit staff for professional development sessions when they commence, and then generally every four to six weeks, depending on the educator's identified professional development plan or the identified needs of the children in their care.

Wynnum Family Day Care has developed an innovative model for supporting educators and families. Two examples of this are the LINK program and the Child Development Initiative. The LINK program exposes educators and children to different activities that are run daily by external consultants at various locations across the service area (see Practice Highlight 4). The Child Development Initiative provides early intervention support to children who may have developmental delays or other additional needs. The program links families to speech pathologists, occupational therapists, local health nurses and other medical and community supports (see Practice Highlight 8).

6. Findings

Energy, enthusiasm and passion for high quality early childhood services was evident in all the interviews conducted for this research. When describing what they enjoy most about the work they do, educators and coordination unit staff typically leaned forward with shining eyes to describe their latest ideas, experiments, successes and failures. They were eager to share and happy that others were interested. Their excitement about their work infused their day-to-day work, their leadership and relationships with colleagues, and their interactions with children and families. It seemed that fostering this enthusiasm and connecting energetic people together contributed to developing high quality practices within a service.

Many of the people interviewed lamented what they described as a lack of knowledge about family day care among families, the community and policy makers. They felt that family day care had an undeservedly poor reputation, was undervalued as a model of ECEC, and that there was limited understanding in the community and among policy-makers of how Australian family day care operates, and what it achieves for children and families. These interviewees relished the opportunity to outline what they saw as the unique strengths of family day care and its particular benefits for children.

This section presents findings from the interviews with educators, coordination unit staff and families. The findings are organised according to key themes that emerged from the interviews:

- Professional practice
- Relationships
- Flexibility
- Autonomy
- Diversity and social support

There were other aspects of quality family day care that were discussed in the interviews, but the elements listed above were those that arose most strongly. The findings are interspersed with examples of practices or programs that support good quality in the six services that participated in the research. Some of these are examples of innovative approaches, and others are examples of good practice that show a commitment to high quality in the day-to-day work of family day care.

6.1 Professional practice

Professional practice was at the core of the services' visions, planning and daily practice. Service managers and individual coordinators talked about their objectives to provide high quality care by establishing standards, systems, training and leadership. These practices centred on different aspects of professional practice, which are discussed below.

6.1.1 Striving for high quality

The services in this study prided themselves on offering high quality family day care. They were all pleased to have been rated as 'Excellent' or 'Exceeding the National Quality Standard'. Striving for high quality guided the services' approach to professional practice. The following quotes provide examples:

What determines the quality of your scheme⁴ is [...] having people that understand the service, understand what potential issues are, that think ahead of the game, that actually feel like they have ownership of it and will go that extra step in terms of customer service, in terms of supporting their educators. But first and foremost they are all passionate early childhood people themselves and have a real commitment to providing really high quality education and care. (Auspicing agency representative)

So we want to really conduct ourselves as professionals in everything we do and we hope that that will really shine through with our educators because it's not about putting anyone else down. It's about just celebrating our own achievements and the professionalism and the quality of the service, and other services. (Coordination unit staff member)

We are very committed to continual improvement. We always have been in this service. Our business plans, our quality improvement plan, our staff meetings all have sections on there for addressing identified issues that could be improved. (Coordination unit staff member)

When asked to reflect on what makes her service a high quality one, this coordinator said:

I think it's the reflective practice. It's driven by, I guess, [our manager]. But there's the high expectation of every team member that they'll engage in that, and not being scared to be innovative and try new ideas. (Coordinator)

The coordination unit staff and educators that participated in the research all spoke passionately about the quality of their service. There was a strong sense of professional regard from the educators for the coordination unit, and from the coordination unit for educators. This educator, like several others, praised her coordination unit:

[I've] seen a lot of people from other [schemes] and the things that they have said - I've thought, 'I think we've got a really good coordination unit'. (Educator)

6.1.2 Orientation for new educators

The services who participated in this research all took particular care when selecting new educators. Knowing from the very beginning, during recruitment, that educators would provide a high quality service was essential. For example, one service explained that they expect educators to offer more than the minimum Certificate III qualification. They also check if the qualification is from a quality provider and expect the educators to be interested and engaged with their studies. In addition, they require new educators to have experience:

But then to move one step further and say that we need to be having an expectation for everybody, that educators are not just enrolled with an intent to study a Certificate III, and to work through that at an actively engaged rate, but that they were [also] coming with a whole range of skills that we could really confidently [...] say, 'This educator is going to be able to support your child in their growth and development'. (Coordination unit staff member)

⁴ The language of family day care has changed over the years. What is now commonly called a family day care 'service' has also been described as a 'scheme'. Many who work in the sector prefer to use 'scheme'.

When prospective educators approached another service, they were asked how they might contribute to the service's high quality reputation:

One of the most important questions is 'Why do you want to be an educator with our service?' We really address that we are an 'exceeding' service, so, 'What could you bring to the table?' Then we assess that with the suitability of their home, their level of skill, their level of experience, and just a general feel about them. (Coordination unit staff member)

The services also emphasised that they are a professional quality service when inducting new educators:

We show that professional image. We talk to them about how, 'We do support you in all areas of your business, and we have the staff to be able to support you in all of those areas'. As well as being able to provide, at no cost, things like playgroups and resources and training, and different things like that. We also do tell them that there's an expectation of quality and that [...] we pride ourselves on the quality that we have. We do have expectations around paperwork, we do have expectations around meeting quality standards and working within the frameworks, and things like that. (Manager)

The orientation processes were generally extensive and detailed, often involving several sessions with a number of different coordination unit staff. Orientation sessions offered new educators advice and guidance on all aspects of operating family day care including: considering how to present themselves as educators; business skills; discussing fees and Centrelink with families; child protection, safety and other regulations; and compliance expectations of the service. The coordination unit staff personalised the orientation to the needs of new educators depending on whether they were new to family day care, had previously worked in long day care, or already had extensive family day care experience. As one coordination unit staff member explained:

So they might be extremely experienced, been a group leader or a director [at a long day care centre] and can program till the cows come home - but what does that look like in a Family Day Care environment? Because it'd be very different to what a centre environment would look like. We do tailor that. (Coordination unit staff member)

A number of the services praised the introduction of minimum qualifications for family day care educators. Not only did they feel this enhanced the quality and professionalism of family day care, but it also made the task of coordination units easier as they are now able to assume a level of knowledge among educators:

A lot of prospective educators now are coming to us with Certificate III and higher as a minimum, so we're not having to start from scratch. We're talking with really educated women who, a lot of them, have come from early childhood centres, and they want to start their family day care business. So it's made our job easier. We just pull out their strengths and foster that. (Coordination unit staff member)

Coordination units designed professional development programs and training to foster the strength of educators, as described in the following section.

6.1.3 Professional development

All the services that participated in this study worked hard to support the professional development of educators and members of the coordination unit. As described above, there was a commitment from coordination units to provide leadership to educators. Peer support was also encouraged, described in more detail below in Section 6.2.3, Educators' peer relationships.

The coordination units also supported educators' work in other ways, such as providing access to toy and resource libraries, offering regular suggestions on activities with children, and

connecting educators or families to services for children who needed additional support. One educator told us how she valued the coordination unit's advice on the particular needs of one child:

I had a child who was diagnosed with autism for a short time, and I was able to get support from the coordination unit with information of where to find more information about that. (Educator)

Coordination unit staff at all the services provided regular information to educators about training opportunities, ideas for activities for children, online resources, and invitations to participate in themed weeks, such as healthy eating or sustainability. To encourage educators to participate in themed activities, one service introduced a competition, asking educators to document and share their activities, which were then judged and rewarded by the coordination unit.

This kind of leadership extended to modelling good practice for educators. Sometimes coordinators modelled particular approaches when visiting educators in their homes. Other times they modelled education techniques or themes during training sessions or playgroups. This coordinator gave an example:

I had a prep⁵ readiness activity. So educators that had children of prep age they came [...] it was more for me to model to the educators, too, that prep readiness was not about doing work sheets. It was a lot about following instruction, doing different activities and all that sort of stuff as well. (Coordinator)

All the services in this research offered regular in-house training for educators. In some cases, these training sessions were compulsory or there was an expectation that educators would engage in a minimum number of training sessions annually. As one manager explained:

We do ask them to have as part of their contract that they attend for professional development throughout the year. That's just so that they're continually growing and they're learning new things. (Manager)

The training focused on ECEC issues such as behaviour management, health and safety; play and education topic areas; implementing the NQF and the EYLF; the family day care environment at home; and business management, such as tax and record keeping. Sometimes this training was offered in-house by the coordination unit in order to keep costs down; at other times services brought in outside trainers with particular expertise.

In addition, the coordination unit staff alerted educators to other training opportunities, particularly online courses. One educator told us about the training that her service offered:

I think they're trying to do that more. I did [...] a few different courses, which have been really valuable, actually. There's a quality in those courses as well, which has been great. (Educator)

Another educator explained how her coordination unit tailored training opportunities to educators' interests.

If you want a particular area, they will help you find where you can do that course, or give you ideas of what to do to learn more about that. If there're a few educators that want to find out more, they will put on a workshop for it. (Educator)

One service brought all educators together for a whole day every year to run workshops and other professional development activities. Some educators were able to access financial assistance for training fees from their service and some coordination unit staff were able to access support through the auspicing agency.

⁵ Prep is the term used in Queensland for the first year of school, called kindergarten in the rest of Australia.

Several of the services developed professional development plans for educators. This would help the coordination unit to support each educator in the areas they particularly wished to develop, affirm an expectation that all educators could and should engage in training, and allow for discussion between educators and coordination units on how to improve.

It would be expected that within the first three months, a professional development plan is established [...] That's really some short-term and long-term goals that they're setting at the beginning and that we're responsible then for helping them find what they need. (Coordination unit staff member)

So we like to make sure that they also are obtaining training which is highlighted in their professional development. [...] If they're doing really well in natural play, we don't mind them attending that, but we don't want them to attend it all the time, because they're doing so well in it. We want them to grow. (Coordination unit staff member)

Home visits were an important time for information sharing for educators and coordinators:

When whoever at the time is coming out to visit me on my visits, I can discuss with them as well, and they can help me or they can give me ideas or say this is a good place to go and get information [...] I may even have that child here on that day, and I could say, 'Well, could you just watch, and am I picking up something different to you?' Ask them their opinion and see what they think about the situation as well. (Educator)

What you're referring to as a visit, we would call a professional development session, because they've either had a need or an interest for something. The appropriate team member, who has the best knowledge skills, will respond directly to them, generally as a one-on-one as well. And resourced with additional supporting information. (Coordination unit staff member)

Similarly, one service offered training to educators in their own homes, explaining:

We would prefer that training happens onsite at a time that suits them. That they're not expected to come after hours to do additional training with 90 other people when they've just worked a 10-hour day. It's better that we can individualise the training so that it can happen onsite and it fits in, it matches. (Coordination unit staff member)

All of the services visited offered immediate support to educators when they needed it. They could contact someone from the coordination unit, or sometimes another educator, to ask a question at any time they were working. The contact methods ranged from telephone, to email, to Facebook, to text messages. They emphasised the importance of promptly answering questions and providing support. This included ensuring educators had access to the information they needed to understand and meet the compliance regulations under the NQF.

6.1.4 Compliance

All the services that participated in this study strongly believed in adhering to regulations and guidelines regarding the provision of family day care, and all the services took this responsibility seriously. However, they had different approaches to compliance. While all services stressed the importance of supportive and respectful relationships with educators for ensuring compliance, some noted that their service did not emphasise compliance. For example:

Of course if we turn up and their environment is unsafe, they don't have safety plugs – if there's something unsafe there we will say something to them there and then, but we're not compliance based. (Coordinator)

Other services, however, placed greater emphasis on compliance in their dealings with educators, ensuring that educators knew that there was no room to disregard regulations. This coordinator, for example, told us that she states clearly that regulations must be met, but offers to work collaboratively to ensure that it happens:

You know, and I think it's about putting it back onto them that they have a choice [...] no one's making them do family day care. But if they choose to do it, then you have to comply. And we're not the ones who make the rules, we're purely the ones that have to make sure they're being met [...] This is what the policy or the law states so let's work together to comply. (Coordinator)

One coordinator explained that they would close an educator's business if the compliance issues were serious enough:

If it's a minor thing that can be rectified then it gets rectified in the next visit, or whatever is appropriate. If it's not then it gets fed back to the service manager. Then, if need be, I feed it back up to ops managers and further up the [organisational] ladder. Then it's handled appropriately. We may need to do some notifications if it's an injury or an illness, or something like that for the child. We may need to do some intervention. We may need to shut the service down. (Auspicing agency representative)

Even where there was a strict expectation of compliance, it was important to educators and coordination unit staff alike that this did not dominate the relationship between the coordination unit and educators. As one educator said:

They're like the police, but the guys at [the coordination unit] probably don't really feel like that. They're really quite supportive. Their role is a policing role, really [...] Their role is that, but they're also there to support people in the programs. (Educator)

And a coordination unit staff person agreed:

It's really important to strike that balance of monitoring and supporting [...] It's really hard to do that [...] Especially when you realise that there's something a little bit, you know, tricky or a little bit difficult that you're going to have to speak about [...] approaching that really sensitively so that when you go back, you're going to be welcomed the next time. Because you are entering their personal space. That is their home. Being respectful of that. But also there's an ownership and a responsibility, it's also their workplace. (Coordinator)

The quote above illustrates the important role of relationships between the coordination unit and educators. Positive relationships, embodied through trust and respect, are beneficial for both educators and coordinators and are discussed in the next section.

6.1.5 Conclusion

A strong commitment to professional practice was clearly evident in all the services that participated in this study. This commitment drove their focus on providing high quality ECEC, the selection of highly skilled educators and the training and support that services offered. As will be seen in the remainder of the report, professionalism underpinned each of the key findings. Services fostered strong professional relationships because they believed they were essential for the best ECEC. Trust between the coordination unit and educators, built on strong relationships and good professional practice and qualifications, meant that educators could be afforded autonomy in their day-to-day work and approach this work flexibly.

6.2 Relationships

The importance of relationships identified in these quality family day care services – between coordinators and educators, and also with children and families – are discussed in this section. Relationships were central to the approach of operating and supporting quality. As one coordination unit staff member said:

The best thing, I think for me, was walking in the door and just seeing that relationship. So because the numbers are smaller, and because they're family grouped, just the relationship that's built between, not only the children, but between the child and the educator, and the educator and the families. I think because of the numbers it's so much easier for them to develop and maintain and have those relationships ongoing. (Manager)

They commonly described family day care as uniquely positioned to develop good quality relationships when compared to centre-based ECEC services. For example, when asked what is unique about family day care, a representative from a coordination unit said:

The relationships and the closeness of those relationships. Yeah, I think that's where family day care does it so tremendously well [...] The best ones we see, it's a family around the educator. All of the children know each other, all of the parents know all of the other children and the other parents and there is such community and closeness and great support. (Coordinator)

In the quotes above, the relationships that were often discussed were those in educators' homes – between educators and children, educators and families, and between children – but other relationships were also important. One service director described family day care as 'that whole sort of family – children, educators, support coordinators, me'. This section presents findings on all aspects of relationships that were highlighted in the research.

6.2.1 Children and educators

Families, educators and coordination unit staff all emphasised the close bond that can form between children and educators. A mother with two children who used family day care said:

[The educator] is just really involved with them. She likes thinking up activities for them and she remembers, you know, what they like and she likes to tell us afterwards what they got up to. (Family)

Another mother summed it up as, 'Really one word, and that's the love' and went on to explain how she felt the small group size helped children to feel an educator's love:

I think kids have got to have love and I think if you've got the time to sit down [...] Like if there's four of them painting, you can go to this one 'Oh, that's beautiful' and then you've got time to go to this one. Because there's only four children. (Family)

Often in the interviews, the relationship between educators and children was likened to an extended family and a home:

What I honestly feel, this house that [the educator] provides here, I don't know how other places work but I feel this is an extension of my home, that's honestly how I feel about home day care. (Family)

I think, as a family day care educator, I can build closer bonds with the children and the families and they actually do become part of your life. I don't think the framework or the government or anybody else has that understanding that [that what we] provide to these children is a home away from home really. We're a great service for children who have trouble separating or who become overwhelmed in the centres because it's so big

and there are so many people and it's so noisy and it's quite scary for some children.
(Educator)

The close relationships that can be developed were described as integral to the education and support of children, particularly children who might have struggled in larger and less intimate settings:

I think if they can develop that secure trusting relationship there that really sets them up for learning. Because they're in a comfortable place, they're really happy in their environment and with their educator. And hopefully then the educator is going to help them develop other social strengths with the relationships with the other children too. And that's the best way for learning is when they're secure and comfortable and confident in themselves. (Coordination unit staff member)

The power of the relationship between children and educators is evidenced by the long lasting connections that sometimes occur. The research team were each given examples of children and educators remaining friends for many years. For example, one educator told us about going to comfort a child who was grieving after a sudden and unexpected death:

She's 13 now, nearly 14. I went to the house to give my condolences and everything and they go for a cuddle and she just took a deep breath and she said, 'You still smell the same'. (Educator)

The closeness of this relationship is clear. The educator and child had stayed in contact after the child started school. The bond was such that the educator visited the girl's home at a time of great distress and the girl had a depth of memory about the educator's smell that is usually reserved for the closest of family relationships.

6.2.2 Families and educators

Relationships between children and educators were discussed in the context of the relationship between children's families and educators. This comment was typical of many heard:

All of our educators know the children. That is one thing that they are all really passionate about. They can tell you anything and everything about the children that are in their care. So I think that the relationships created between educator and child, child and family, educator and family just that relationship and bond that they have creates the quality. (Coordination unit staff member)

Some parents described feeling a strong sense of collaboration with educators in rearing the children. Jane's⁶ mother gave a particularly clear example when she described herself and her daughter's educator as 'Team Jane':

One of the things that really worked for me and my child from the get go, and was perhaps part of the bond forming thing, was that we decided between us that we were Team Jane. We kind of looked at each other in the eye early on and said, 'Right, we are Team Jane and we work together', to fulfil her emotional and learning et cetera needs [...] My child was a really routine child and routine was really important to me and important to Jane. And so [the educator] said, 'Righto, whatever you're routine is, that's what we've got to do'. So there was a seamless transition [...] But, like I say, we made a pinkie promise if you like, that we are Team Jane. So if there was stuff going on for Jane, then I would let [the educator] know, she would fill me in. So that kind of level of communication and that deeper level of understanding about where a child's at and what the child's needs are, is something that I feel that I've benefited from and my daughter's benefited from. (Family)

⁶ This name and all other names of people used in the report are pseudonyms. Only the names of services are real.

Many families and educators had experience with long day care as well as family day care. The quality of relationships, educators' depth of knowledge and understanding of the children, and their ability to communicate this to families, were the most commonly cited benefits of family day care:

Having one person with him all day was a really big difference, because what they don't tell you when you book into a centre, I was told he'd be in this room and these are his two carers, but in the morning they have different carers and in the afternoon they have different carers, so by the end of the day it's obvious he's had like five different people. You ask the person how was his day and they'd always say 'fabulous' [...] it was kind of difficult because I knew that I wasn't getting the whole score. (Family)

There's an intensity when it's really small [...] The relationships I used to pride myself on [when I worked in long day care] are nothing compared to what I have now with the families. (Educator)

Both educators and families appreciated the time that educators took to communicate with families as they felt that this helped deepen their understanding of the children and their lives. The drop-off and pick-up times were not always rushed so families and educators discussed children's days, child-rearing advice, and happenings in the children's lives:

If a parent wants to sit down on the doorstep and have a chat to me they can. If they want to talk to me - I mean obviously I have other children around, but it is a more relaxed atmosphere than in a centre. (Educator)

So [the educator] with her big experience – she's been in family day care for a long, long time – has dealt with a lot of children and she's got fantastic knowledge, and [...] you really feel like that knowledge is made available to you. And so she's able to give you a really good hands-on account of what [my son] has been up to that day under her care. And then she's able to offer a whole range of suggested activities about what he might enjoy as a further learning step for him on the activities that are done in her house. (Family)

While face-to-face communication was critically important, many of the educators in this study put considerable effort into communicating to families through written and visual forms as well, particularly for observations following the EYLF. Educators had a range of techniques to communicate with families. Often they would send text messages throughout the day to reassure families their children had settled in well or to share a special moment:

Occasionally she sent me like a text message, you know, telling me something [...] like, oh, she's fallen asleep or, you know, something really weird – oh she just did a poo on the toilet! (Family)

Other educators used Facebook to communicate with families. One educator described the information she would upload every day:

So this is my page. They're the photos from nature playgroup. She had a pulley attached to the tree and she was pulling on it. We just jump in the mud puddles and [...] this is my way of communicating. (Educator)

It should be noted that educators talked about the importance of protecting the children's privacy⁷. They created closed groups on Facebook so only families with children in particular groups (i.e. the Tuesday group) had access to the photos and sought consent from families to post photos of their children.

⁷ All educators who used social media in this study worked at services which had social media policies or guidelines.

Practice Highlight 1: Communicating with Families - Blue Mountains Family Day Care

At Blue Mountains Family Day Care, the educators put a lot of thought into what type of communication best suited themselves and their families. It was not necessarily the method, but the frequency, detail and evidence of close engagement with a particular child that mattered to families. One educator described her daily observations in detail:

I take photos throughout the day and when I take photos - because in my mind is going through why I'm taking the photo [...] I've got one child at the moment who's not been really all that interested in drawing and his parents have been wanting him to take a little bit more interest in drawing. So I set it up that they take a line for a walk and that way you can't go wrong [...] and in the photo it shows how he holds his pencil. I don't have to write that. The photo shows that.

But I'd rather write about what he's doing and how he came about to be doing it [...] I'll ask [the children] questions like, 'What would you like me to write about your day? So they'll tell me what - because what I think they're really enjoying there might be something else that I didn't notice or that they might have liked better.

So then I'll write about their day and I try to write it so it's just newsy and interesting and easy to read, not technical because you wouldn't want to be writing up sort of an observation of a child in the way that it can be done technically' [...] and then I can look at it and see how it compares with the early learning framework.
(Educator)

This document, with photos and text was given to families at the end of every day. It was highly valued. The educator reported that one father, who she had never met, said his son's sheet was 'the highlight of my day'. A mother whose father collected her child from this educator said:

And so my dad would talk to [the educator] and find out about the day but when we get home my dad doesn't remember what they've spoken about. Yeah we very much get all of our accounts through that activity sheet. (Family)

The parents appreciated and valued these daily forms of communication, whether on hard copy, through emails, Facebook or text messages. Parents appreciated that they could share this communication with their partners or extended families.

A number of educators used the 'Kinderloop' program to communicate with families. One educator described how she used this app:

Sometimes they're just little happy snaps; sometimes they're more in depth about what we are doing and what I plan to do. At the end of the month we usually write up an evaluation just of what we've been trying to attain for the month [...] I find it [Kinderloop app] great and the parents love it. They share it with friends. They can actually link grandparents in if they're living away or whatever, so they can see it as well. I think it's a really nice way of communicating. (Educator)

The app was also used to communicate practical reminders to families, which in long day care centres or other family day care might be made through posters on the wall:

I reminded them about the Christ Caremas party, health alerts - it's got all these little poster things that you can choose from instead of adding a photo, so you can do that.

So there's one for evaluations, health alerts, birthdays a million different things. So you can put that on and it's all bright and colourful. I think it's a really nice way of sharing.
(Educator)

For both families and educators, strong relationships were fostered through various practices that were grounded in trust, respect and communication. It was important that trust was established early in their relationship, while ongoing communication was important on a weekly, or even daily basis. Educators found different ways to form and maintain these relationships depending on the needs of the children and their families.

Educators' peer relationships were also important for sharing best practices, developing new ideas and providing a network of support.

6.2.3 Educators' peer relationships

All the services who participated in this study encouraged connections between educators. They recognised that educators might otherwise have little contact with their peers. As one educator put it, 'I have to say, it's isolating. That's a downside.' She missed the team that working in a centre provided and being able to 'bounce ideas'.

Family day care playgroups, organised by the service, were often used by educators to connect with other educators, as well as to offer children a larger group environment:

Well I think for educators it's a good time to be with other adults and to share information and maybe ask a few questions if they're having difficulties or that sort of thing and sort of become part of a likeminded group of people. Colleagues, in effect. (Educator)

At one service, they found that some educators were not able to attend group sessions because they did not have appropriate transport or permission from families. The service asked other educators to visit them so that they would not miss out on peer connections:

There are a couple of educators, not many, but there're a couple of educators that either don't have a car or they choose or the parents don't want them going out in the car. It's those sort of educators that maybe I need to work a little bit harder with, because they don't have the networks with these educators that are attending [playgroups]. But I do have a number of educators that are prepared to go to educator's houses that don't have cars as well [...] they go and have conversations. (Coordination unit staff member)

Services also set up Facebook pages so that educators could share ideas and ask each other questions:

We've got a closed group on Facebook, and that works really well for after-hours questions as well. Because it's so hectic through the day that of an evening, when the educators are doing their paperwork and reflection, you know they might just ask a question on Facebook and within five minutes [...] a few people have responded so they've got their answer immediately, so that works really well [...] and you get lots of people making little suggestions [...] If there's a physical problem, an issue in the environment or something, or whether it's a child issue [...] Or just sharing ideas.
(Coordination unit staff members)

Some services were running mentoring programs where more experienced educators could mentor educators that were new to the service. One coordinator described the benefits of mentoring:

And they don't want to bother us, 'Oh I'll just quickly ring my support mentor'. [One educator] had some issues with the child behaviour guidance. She [...] rang her support mentor that night to get feedback because she was feeling a bit unsure and a bit down about how her day was. So she had a debrief with that educator, with her mentor. Which

was great because they've been there and they can understand where they're coming from so that was great. (Coordinator)

Greater Hume Children Services took a structured approach to encouraging peer connections among educators. They developed educator 'pods' and leadership groups as a way for educators to share ideas and support each other (see Practice Highlight 2).

Educators and coordination unit staff also felt that training organised by the service helped build collegiality between educators:

Then we do bring people together to do two days of training and we hope that they'll learn a lot from each other. And once again it's starting those partnerships and that team work where they connect with other people. (Coordination unit staff member)

The relationships formed between educators underpinned models of high quality provision across the services. A number of services had developed different ways of providing mentorship for new educators and for encouraging educators to share their ideas with each other.

As well as offering a way for educators to share ideas, many of these strategies to foster peer connections between educators also provided a way for ideas and issues to be discussed with the coordination unit. This helped build strong relationships between the educators and coordination units.

6.2.4 Educators and coordination units

All the services in this study worked at fostering good relationships between the coordination unit and the educators. They described educators and the coordination unit being in a partnership, each group dependent on the other and comprised of skilled professionals. They felt that these strong relationships underpinned the operation of the service. As one coordinator said:

If the coordination unit don't have that respect and relationship and bond with their educators, I think that's when you're going to have issues and when you're going to find things start falling apart. But once you've got that respect and that relationship with them it's the foundation that you create that it just makes your life so much easier. (Coordinator)

Respondents described the elements of successful relationships between coordination units and educators as including respect, trust, flexibility, compassion, and an understanding of the reciprocal dependence of educators and coordination units. For example, one educator told us 'we just have got a really good coordination unit'. When we asked what makes the unit so good, she said:

I think the respect that the coordination unit has for the educators. They don't come and tell you what to do. I mean obviously if there was an issue they would have to come and discuss it but they don't come and say 'Now where's your program on the wall?' and, 'You're not doing this today why aren't you doing it?' [...] All of them they are just so respectful towards the educators. (Educator)

A coordination unit staff member said that the respectful connectedness between the coordination unit and the educators fits well with the EYLF:

Acknowledging that they are running their own services, they are self-employed. However, we're there when they need us and I'm on call 24 hours, if anybody needs anything, they'll ring and just talk. I think that's the key to a successful family day care organisation, is that we respect each other and our roles and relationships. But we are connected and there is that sense of belonging which fits really nicely [with the] EYLF, doesn't it? (Coordination unit staff member)

Practice Highlight 2: Leadership Groups and Educator Pods – Greater Hume Children Services

Greater Hume Children Services has a 'leadership group' of family day care educators, which was developed because the coordination unit wanted to make sure the ideas and practices of educators were being shared with the coordination unit and with other educators. This, they believed, was the key to fostering quality among their educators. The leadership group is made up of educators from across the service, both new and experienced, and they meet at a coffee shop on Saturday mornings to share ideas with each other. The manager talked about how and why the group was established:

So we wanted to create team leaders in communities, team leaders of educators who had leadership qualities and who were generous and really wanted to be the mentors. [...] The other thing is, we have educators who are just so well-qualified and knowledgeable, we want to stay connected with them because my opportunity to talk with them and get their wonderful ideas is limited. So I thought, 'I want to be talking with them on a regular basis and finding out what they're thinking about'. [...] I want to share ideas about the leadership and the direction and obviously the philosophy but bigger than that, the strategy. Because they know about what's going on in other services. They're connected, they're friends with other educators and other services. They're connected with families so actually on a really holistic level, we share stuff with the leaders group. (Manager)

The model was also used to encourage educators to get together on their own. Since the service is so geographically dispersed, many educators were not always able to attend playgroups organised by the coordination unit on a regular basis. By organising the educators into 'pods' based on their geographic location, many of the educators could meet up, or have other educators to call on if the coordination unit was unable to visit them right away and they needed peer support. The manager even indicated that one of the educational leaders was taking initiative to organise sessions for the other educators in her area:

She was going to try and bring them together. She had some ideas of getting in speakers and just bringing them together for informal sessions in the evening and we were just sort of like, 'That's wonderful.'

The things that can happen when educators are working together in teams, it makes my job so easy. [...] if someone is going on holiday, they've organised themselves with their parents and they just know what other educators are doing and they support each other. If someone is having a bad day, it's just that simple, that they'll support each other. (Manager)

The leadership groups and educator pods at Greater Hume Children Services helped to foster good relationships between the educators, and also between the educators and coordination units. By establishing formal groups of educators within different areas, the educators were able to more easily share ideas and resources, and to support each other with daily routines. The educator pods also created a system to identify leaders across the service, which could feedback ideas and issues to the coordination unit. This system also promoted good relationships between educators and the coordination unit.

Within such respectful relationships, there was an understanding that individual educators would operate in unique ways. The quality of relationships between the coordination unit and educators underpinned the autonomy that is discussed in Section 6.4 below.

Interviewees recognised that the monitoring and compliance role of the coordination unit could make for a difficult relationship with educators who might be apprehensive that they were not meeting regulations or appropriately implementing the EYLF. However, trust between educators and the coordination unit made monitoring and addressing problems when they arose easier:

This is what we say about our educators and feel about our educators – when they’ve gained our trust and we know that we’ve given them the information that they need and the tools that they need through their regulations and policies and procedures [...] we trust them to have that safe environment. And we will be guiding them on our visits because that’s always part of what we do, but we have this implicit trust with our educators and we’re not there [to monitor] – we say we’re supporting [...] We really trust our educators and we acknowledge them for the professionals that they are.
(Coordination unit staff member)

Just as educators have a relationship built on understanding and compassion with children and families, the coordination units also provided compassionate support for educators. As an example, one coordination unit staff member told us:

We’re not counsellors, we don’t go in and solve [educators’] family problems but we can listen and be there and we can help. We’ve had educators who’ve had cancer and needed treatment, we’ve gone and we’ve actually sort of cared for the children while they go for appointments if they’re still working. (Coordination unit staff member)

In several of the services in this study, educators could feed into decision making at a service level:

They are feeling valued, and they’re feeling like they can say what they - say give their opinion about things because we do listen and change things. (Coordination unit staff member)

When developing new policies and procedures, some services would involve all educators or representatives of the educators, as described in the following discussion at a coordination unit:

Lily: I think we have a different approach in that we do see the whole unit as a team. So our educators are respected and valued for their opinions and their thought processes as well. So we don’t sit here and write policies...

Amy: And dictate.

Lily: ...and dictate what and how things are going to happen.

Bea: It’s very consultative.

Often during the interviews respondents would stress that their family day care service was made up of both the educators and the coordination unit, emphasising that the service needed both groups to operate; neither group could do it on their own. One coordination unit staff member said that her service has a ‘strong emphasis on educators and the coordination unit working as a team – and without one, you couldn’t have the other.’ One educator described this partnership:

It kind of works in partnership with each other. They kind of respect us as educators and the business that we’re running, and we also know that they’re there if we need any advice or support for the parents. (Educator)

Overall, it was evident from interviews with educators and coordination units at all the services that respectful relationships between these groups were very important for fostering good quality services. When educators and coordination units had trusted relationships with each other, there

was a shared commitment to working in partnership to provide high quality ECEC to children and families.

6.2.5 Other coordination unit relationships

In addition to respectful relationships with educators, the services in this study worked hard to build respectful teams within their coordination units. As one service manager said:

The main thing I'm really proud of about the service is the team aspect. I know that doesn't sound like much, but I think that the team aspect plays a valuable role in everything we do. And I say the team; I mean the team aspect of the whole coordination unit. We are like a family in this coordination unit [...] I'm really proud of that because that takes a lot to establish and it's not an overnight process. (Manager)

This manager and her coordination unit had made a significant effort to establish good relationships, and these good relationships extend to those between the coordination unit and the educators.

By contrast to the many other strong relationships the research team observed in this study, all the services in this study agreed that there was limited connection between families and the coordination unit. For some, this was appropriate as they felt the primary connection for families should be with educators. One manager, for example, said:

The relationship is with the educator and the family. It's not with us. It's not with the coordination unit. (Manager)

This is not to suggest that coordination units did not value good relationships with families, but rather they indicated that their role was to ensure families settled into the service with the educator at the beginning. Coordination units had varying levels of interaction with families across the services. Several of the services talked about the strategies or approaches they used to help families settle into the service.

Others would have liked stronger relationships with families and had several strategies to develop this. These included a Facebook page for families, emailed observation reports about a child from the coordination unit to families, or extending service training or playgroups so that some sessions could be run for families. At one service, the coordination unit put on a Christ Caremas party for families every year.

A number of coordination unit staff said that educators would help connect them with families, for example:

Some of my educators, too, will sometimes take a photo of me with the kids when I visit, and have that in their run through at the end of the day and say it was lovely [the coordinator] came to visit us today and she read this story or played this game, or whatever. That's nice and that helps connect. (Coordination unit staff member)

As the quote above indicates, it was more common for the coordination unit staff to have formed relationships with the children during visits to the educators, playgroups or excursions. Families often knew the coordinators by name because the educator would talk about their visitors, or through email or phone correspondence for practical reasons (for example, when parents wanted to increase or change the number of days with an educator).

Some services, though, did see their own relationship with families as an important part of good quality service provision. One example of this is the induction process used by Kids in Family Day Care, described below in Practice Highlight 3.

Practice Highlight 3: Inductions for Families – Kids In Family Day Care

Kids in Family Day Care believes strongly in the importance of providing a thorough induction for families to help them settle into the service and ensure that any questions they had were answered early. A coordinator explained her approach to discussing the payment process with families, so they know what to expect and understand the various elements. The coordination unit holds an interview with families after the family and educator have been matched. At the interview, the coordinator gives the family a Parent Handbook and goes through the various parts of the handbook to see if they have any questions:

So I have a list that I go through. Things like absences, the allowable absences and how many they get. Holding fees, their childcare rebate and childcare benefit. I talk to them about home visits and what they can expect with those. We obviously cover statements [...] I just ask them about their experience with childcare, what they can expect, I ask them how their interview has gone with the educator, where they go out and meet with them, if they have any further questions. (Coordinator)

Referring to the invoices that parents receive for payments, she explained what is covered with the parent:

[I have] a sample that I share with families so that they are confidential obviously that they can see how the template is, how it works, how to read it. You know, I think that if you can educate them in the beginning, it saves a lot of anxiety and things later on by giving them their first date of when they can expect their first statement based on their starting date. How they can read it, how to reach us if there's an issue and going through that really works. (Coordinator)

The coordinator believed this process was important for reassuring parents and helping them settle into the service. It offered a way for the coordinator to get to know the parents, and helped make the parent feel comfortable about approaching the service if they had any questions:

So working collaborative partnerships with them in that way and then with families, I tend to, if they've been a little bit unsure or if it's their first time using care, I try to send them a reassuring email through Harmony because it's just a matter of a couple of clicks. Just letting them know that their enrolment forms gone through, everything's fine, wishing them all the best for their first day and just lovely to meet you. So just having that personal touch so that they feel as ease is the first foremost. (Coordination unit staff member)

At Kids in Family Day Care, as well as other services, inductions for families were very important for establishing relationships between the families and coordination unit. In addition to helping families settle into the service, these inductions were also important for establishing a familiarity with the service, so the family were comfortable approaching the coordination unit if they had any concerns about their educator.

6.2.6 Conclusion

Overall, strong relationships underpin the practices of family day care services. Relationships are not only important to the daily interactions between educators and children, they are also at the core of the systems and processes inherent in a family day care service. Relationships and good communication are dynamic and fluid in a family day care service as coordination units recruit new educators, educators look for new families, and families seek a service and educator that best suits their needs. At the same time, the services talked about the importance of relationships between educators as peers, and between educators, the coordination unit and their community. Trusting and respecting relationships between educators and coordination units were also essential ingredients for promoting flexibility and autonomy, which are discussed in the next two sections, respectively.

6.3 Flexibility

Family day care has traditionally been associated with more flexible service provision. As noted by Ishimine and Talyer (2012), the flexibility of early drop-offs and late pick-ups is attractive for families with unpredictable and changing work schedules. Family day care can also offer increased flexibility through overnight care. In addition, interviews in all six sites illustrated that, for many educators and families, quality in family day care is reflected in the range of activities children are exposed to, which is only possible because of the flexibility the family day care model allows.

Family day care is required to follow all the same regulations as long day care centres. They are both regulated under the NQF and, in both settings, educators must have a minimum Certificate III qualification. However, the NQF, and accompanying EYLF, provide some flexibility that can be adapted to meet different settings. In family day care, there can also be flexibility between educators within a service.

6.3.1 Hours and non-standard schedules

The flexibility of hours was regularly cited as a benefit of family day care, compared with long day care. This flexibility was apparent in the accounts of both families and educators. Some educators provided non-standard hours of care for children, occasionally on a regular basis. For example, one coordinator indicated that a lot of the service's families commuted into the city and required very early start times. Providing non-standard hours is a strength of family day care more generally, but is especially important in areas where parents tend to work in specific industries, or are required to travel for work. One parent talked about how flexible her educator was and, when asked whether she would be available at short notice for different hours, she responded:

Oh definitely, because I've had to – my husband you know he has to fly away for work sometimes at a moment's notice, and I [had to start work] really early in the morning so I've had to call up and say, 'I've got to drop [child] off at like 6^am is that okay?' And she's gone, 'Yeah that's fine, no problems.' So she's wonderful. (Family)

She continued saying that, 'it doesn't happen every week but when it does, we need that support because I don't have family [nearby] so I really need someone who I can rely on'.

In small communities in particular, family day care was essential to working parents. For example, in one site, the coordinator explained that there were a lot of small crop farms in the region, and many parents working in these industries relied on family day care. These industries are not nine-to-five jobs, which means that many families were dropping their children off as early as four o'clock in the morning and not able to pick them up until six or seven o'clock at night. In a

small community in another site, the family day care educator was the only child care option in the area. The key local professionals all relied on her for their children so that they could do their jobs.

Most of my families worked in between the eight and six o'clock times. I had teachers, the nurses were doing day shift because the night shift their partners were home to look after the children, I had the policeman's children, I had the pre-school teachers children, I had a high school teacher's children. Even now, I have the doctor's children, the police officer's son, I have a high school teacher's children. (Educator)

One coordinator believed one of the strengths of family day care is that it can offer the flexibility that other services cannot. It was very important to her that the educators in the service were willing to offer hours to meet families' needs:

It is not difficult as long as you have really cooperative educators on board, and we do. What I always try and do with the initial applications that come through is that I [explain], 'You're going to have a family who is going to come in, and they're going to say, 'I need care till 9.00 pm' [...] you're going to have to have that flexibility to accommodate those needs, because that's the idea of flexibility. So to initially make them understand that that has to happen, means that they're a little more cooperative to families when those demands come. (Manager)

One parent explained that long day care was very challenging with her work schedule because her child was repeatedly excluded from the centre because of minor illnesses. The centre had a strict policy that required the parent to pick up their child within 15 minutes, which was not realistic with the parents' job. A number of other educators and families said that educators provided the flexibility for parents to be a few minutes late if needed.

Some educators also offered flexible hours for families in difficult circumstances who needed overnight or extended hours of care on an irregular basis. One educator took school-aged children when their father, who was a single dad, was working three jobs:

He would bring his children here early in the morning, I'd give them their breakfast and take them across to school. And then [I'd] pick them up in the afternoon and I'd take them to all the different sporting things they were involved with, swimming lessons, soccer, Scouts, the whole lot. (Educator)

Another educator offered a 'halfway point' for children with separated parents:

Their dad lives far away so they spend a lot of time with dad and with mum. They meet halfway. So if dad is busy and can't have them and mum has to go to work that's when they come to me. I'm just their [...] backup. (Educator)

For parents with a child attending school and a child below school age, family day care allowed parents one drop-off and pick-up point. Not all educators had a car and did school drops-offs, and so for some parents it was very important that they find one who could accommodate their school-aged child.

The potential challenge with family day care is that when an educator is away or sick, there is no back-up care. However, the families and educators interviewed indicated that the coordination unit and the educators had good systems in place to ensure that families were not inconvenienced when their educator was away. This included having other educators in the service who would take the children during planned leave periods, and also as back up if the educator was sick at the last minute. This of course required that an appropriate educator had an extra space available on the day. One educator's daughter was studying for her Diploma and also provided back-up care – for both short periods and longer periods if the educator was away.

Practice Highlight 4: Paired Educators – Blue Mountains Family Day Care

One of the challenges in family day care is that there is little scope for educators to take time away because they are sick, need to go to appointments, or would like to take annual leave. Families find it difficult when their only caregiver is unavailable and educators do not want to take time off and let down families who rely on them to go to work.

Educators in Blue Mountains Family Day Care worked in pairs in order to better address their own preferred schedules, as well as to help families in circumstances where the educators are away.

Paired educators had set days, where they each cared for the same group of children. For example, one educator worked Monday and Wednesday, while the other worked Tuesday, Thursday and Friday. This arrangement took place with educators in different homes, couples living in the same home, or educators who lived separately but shared the one space for family day care provision.

This is two young women, who are going to work together. They are going to provide the service, one is going to provide Monday and Wednesday in the service. The other Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday; so they're covering a whole week. We have husband and wife teams that run the services together. We have a mother and daughter team, the mum is going to be working Monday to Wednesday and the daughter Thursday, Friday. So they're providing full coverage for their families. (Coordination unit staff member)

It's really good they can give consistency to families, because one of the things I found was five days was too much. Because, you know, I was doing care from seven 'til six, plus there's an hour or so setting up beforehand and an hour or so cleaning at the end of the day, then paperwork, then shopping, then resourcing and researching and study and family and there wasn't a whole lot of time left. Yeah, four days is enough for me, but I think if I had someone who could come in that fifth day, it would be great. (Educator)

A key advantage to this model was the educators could fill in for each other and adapt their days if one educator went on holiday or was sick. This helped families enormously as the service could be maintained even when an educator was away.

So we've tried to maintain service provision and have some flexibility for the educators so they can take holidays, they can take time off when they need to for an appointment or something. So that it's a workable thing for them too. So over the years different things have sort of morphed and changes within the regulatory environment, and what's possible. (Coordination unit staff member)

There might be some different combinations, but what we found is particularly with two people in the service that is if one person is on holidays, the other person picks up those days. (Coordination unit staff member)

Blue Mountains Family Day Care has found one way to overcome one of the challenges of being a sole educator. Paired educators offer a model that increases flexibility for both educators and families using the service.

At one site, there were teams of educators working part-time who shared a group of families. At another service, the manager tried to make sure that at least some educators were available for back-up and overnight care for families, as she believed being able to offer such flexibility to families was a key strength of family day care.

Flexibility in hours and scheduling can also benefit educators. Some educators chose to not work some days, or to change their hours. Sometimes these changes were to respond to families' needs, but other times they were to work around their own lives and commitments. One educator explained that she had gradually started working longer hours than she wanted (7am to 7pm), and it was 'just too much' for her at the time. She told the parents that she wanted to do shorter hours and she said that 'everyone really valued what [she] was giving', so she did not lose any families.

Small group sizes in family day care present challenges as well. In particular, a number of educators and families talked about not having enough space for siblings.

But I think that's the hardest part about family day care, I don't know how you fix it [...] She might not be able to and I would prefer to put [son] and [daughter] in the same care, but if I can't get the days I can't get the days. (Family)

This meant that siblings went to different family day care educators until a space opened up or, in one circumstance, a family was using two different educators for the same child on different days.

6.3.2 Adapting to individual needs, group dynamics and circumstances

The educators interviewed planned for and organised a variety of activities. The diversity of activities was possible because of the flexibility that educators had to program their day. They planned activities to meet the different needs of each group of children. However, most importantly, the educators allowed for flexibility of activities on a daily and weekly basis. This included flexibility in the types and scheduling of activities, in eating and sleeping times, and also providing individual attention to children's interests or needs. For example, some children required individual attention at sleep time, which they were able to provide because of the small group sizes:

So it is very individualised [if] you've got a young baby who has this type of routine, and then you have another baby in your care who has a completely different routine, it can definitely be met. Unlike in long day care where their sleep time is at, like, 11 o'clock and, you know, they've all got to go down at 11 o'clock because in order to meet to ratios staffing wise you have to do that. That is not the case in family day care. (Educator)

[Child] has always been a hopeless sleeper so she would never just lie down and go to sleep. She was really able to kind of focus on the things that helped each individual kid. (Family)

Almost all coordination unit staff, educators and families identified the flexibility of programming and activities as one of the distinct features of quality in family day care. The flexibility of programming allowed educators to be child-focused, and to adapt to different circumstances and the dynamics of groups of children. This allowed educators to respond to children's interests, moods and health. One educator believed that 'the beauty [of family day care is that] we can gauge that with our group, and we can change our mind if it doesn't suit or it's just not the right time'. If children were sick or tired, one educator said she would adapt her weekly program to do quieter activities in the home. At the same time, educators were flexible to adapt to individual children's interests, for example, 'if they want to be outside they can be outside, and if they want to come in to do their own thing they can, it's a bit more flexible [than long day care]'.

Families also identified the strengths of family day care in terms of flexibility. While acknowledging

that family day care has to follow the same policies as long day care, one parent believed family day care is 'more about accommodating the family'. In particular, family day care was described as being accommodating to children's interests. An educator explained why one family and child really liked family day care:

Painting, if they ask for it, it comes out. Whereas I know one little girl I used to have, the reason she came to me was because they tried centre-based care but every time the mum went to the centre the painting was put away. (Educator)

Another educator talked about the ability to change routines to adapt to children's interests and energy levels:

Like today, they were really into playing in a dramatic play and stuff. So rest time was 15, or it was probably about 20-25 minutes later than it is normally. I had the beds out, and they're all sort of lounging around, but it was an amazing thing where all four of them were really engaged. I thought I'm not going to go, 'Okay, it's rest time. Let's go to our beds.' That's what it's about [...] is those moments. That's what I like, is I can do that and honour that. I feel like it's honouring them as individuals, and their space, time. That's valuable. (Educator)

These represent a handful of many examples that illustrate how educators' flexible programming allows them to foster children's interests and take a child-focused approach to each individual child's learning. There were other examples of educators planning for specific activities, but not using them in the end because the children were not interested. This educator justified her decision to follow children's interests:

Some days you do all this planning because you think that would be wonderful they loved that last week – I made this elaborate cubby thing outside with an old net and I think they ran in and went, 'Oh, this is nice', and that's all they did with it all day. I spent all that time doing that. But it's not about what you're doing is it? It's what interests them and what they find fun and educational. If they're just scratching around in the dirt for the day that's fine as far as I'm concerned, whatever it is that they're gaining from it and if you can spend a bit of time with them and extend on them [...] I just want them to be interested in things and inquisitive and try different things in different ways of doing things. (Educator)

Educators were constantly adapting their own space. These changes were sometimes seen as improvements to previous set-ups, and other times simply as a way to keep children interested and to adapt to different ages and groups of children. Educators would often involve the children in activities to change their environment, such as building a garden, a sand pit or a mud pile.

Educators and families also talked about the value of children being part of daily household chores in and outside the home:

I'll do the washing and sometimes when they're asleep I'll do the ironing, and I'll potter around in the garden which they all [join in]. Sometimes you think, 'Oh dear, that job probably was a 20 minute job not a two hour job,' but that's alright. They like to do those sorts of things with you [...] This morning they were helping me with the washing, so they're handing me the pegs and they're talking about red ones and blue ones and counting the pegs. (Educator)

Daily routines were viewed as learning opportunities. For example, educators and families talked about experiences such as going to the op-shop and to the hardware store, often to get materials for activities or to build new features in the setting:

I believe being in Family Day Care you can offer things to children that they can't get in other learning environments. So for example we can – we can go to the shops and learn about money, and buying healthy food and you know, get them to write a shopping list of healthy food and then go to the shops. (Educator)

Practice Highlight 5: LINK Program – Wynnum Family Day Care

The LINK program at Wynnum Family Day Care was developed as an alternative to their traditional playgroup model. It was developed to try to attract more educators to use the sessions by running the sessions at different locations across the service that were accessible to more educators. The program provides a range of activities in the community on a daily basis. Educators can take children to attend LINK activities at no additional cost for families or the educator. LINK activities are offered every day of the week (sometimes with two activities on the same day) at different locations. Educators wishing to attend a session are required to sign up through a simple online system so that the coordination unit can keep track of the number of educators and children that are expected at each session. Some activities have a capped number of places. Most educators use the LINK program, although the frequency varies. Some attend almost every day, while others may attend once a fortnight at an activity most convenient to them. Attendance was often dependent on whether the educator had a vehicle.

The program includes: gymnastics, yoga, 'Pocket Rockets' (mixed-sports), Indigenous culture and inclusion, Boppin' Babies (music lessons), art classes, reading time, learning how to care for different animals (e.g. Poni mini mates, underwater world), African drumming, magic shows, and learning about hygiene (e.g. visit from the tooth fairy), among others. New activities are added, or popular ones expanded, in response to requests and feedback from educators.

A coordinator at Wynnum described the reasoning behind the shift from playgroups to the LINK program:

We wanted something that was best for children to have best practice as well. So we felt as well that educators have more qualifications now. They all had their Certificate III, they had their diploma and some people were getting their bachelor in early childhood as well. So the old model of playgroup wasn't needed anymore, it didn't need to be a learning circle for them to learn about all these things, because they already knew about that from their studies. (Coordinator)

As educators have higher qualifications than in the past, and many are doing further training and upskilling in ECEC, coordinators believed that it would be more beneficial for children to have exposure to a wider range of activities and expertise:

All these highly trained clinicians that would come through and teach the children in the different areas; we thought they deserved that more than what we had to offer that's for sure. As much as the educators have changed, we've changed here as well to realise that we don't have all the skills, that's why we've got all the different projects and we can just contract on certain areas. (Coordinator)

The service faced some challenges in the transition from the playgroup model to the LINK program. Educators had lots of different views about what the program should look like. Consequently, the coordination unit established a group of educators to help develop the program.

There were ten educators to start off with, and they were from different locations, all different types of child care practices that they believed in, different types of history that some of them had been educators for a very lengthy time. One educator joined, she was an old girl, she'd been with us for about 30 years or something like this, and she joined only because she wasn't happy with anything and she wanted to get in there and make sure her voice was heard. So we had a variety of different opinions that's for sure. But by the end of it, once it started after the first 12 months, most people were loving what was happening. It would have taken that good 12 months for them to be able to accept it. But because they knew their voices were heard, we were hearing their opinions on things. (Coordinator)

The coordinator saw her role very much as a facilitator than anything else. Explaining her role in developing the program she said:

[The educators] were the ones that were coming up with ideas. All I was, I wasn't the coordinator anymore, I wasn't organising, I was purely just an events manager; they were the ones that were driving what was going to happen, what sort of activities were going to happen. They were the ones that were driving it, not me. I was doing all the behind the scenes stuff, I was the one ringing around people trying to get the best price for things, availability, listening to all the educators ideas. And some of them just couldn't work [...] but as long as they knew that their voice was being heard, and I had investigated it, they were happy with that. (Coordinator)

Educators and families talked very highly of the LINK program, and the range of activities available to the children. One educator commented that the LINK program 'extended on a few things that we were doing with them and happened at the right time'. Another educator believed the decision to move to the LINK program reflected the service's commitment to change and improvement, and to meet educators' needs, 'I just find that there is that level of thinking, they're happy to change and to modify how their scheme is working so that it suits everyone, rather than just being stagnant'.

It was a valuable part of Wynnum's service, as one coordinator suggested parents wanted to make sure they found an educator who utilised the LINK program. Parents also saw the benefits:

Unbelievable, really fantastic. Today she's going to the Science Museum for a display on rescue. The other day it was steaming hot and so they jumped into the wading pool. She takes them to community gardens, the LINK Program that they run here, I can't rave about highly enough. She goes to Pocket Rocket and Boppin' Babies. (Family)

The positive feedback about Wynnum Family Day Care's LINK program demonstrates an innovative approach to delivering diverse programs and activities for children. Through the voices of coordinators, educators and families alike, it is evident that one of the strengths of family day care is the capacity to offer children exposure to a range of activities.

Families talked very positively about the variety and flexibility of activities and programming. Families found the flexibility in family day care supported individualised learning opportunities for their children, which some parents did not feel were possible in larger group settings. For example, when asked what they liked about the educator's approach to learning, one parent responded:

For me, it's exposure to different things. It's encouraging them to do different things and to extend on what they're doing. (Family)

Educators, coordinators and families alike talked about the strengths of family day care in relation to the flexibility in programming for children. In addition to being able to respond to children's changing interests and moods, family day care also allowed educators to go somewhere outside their home, to participate in excursions with other educators, and to engage with their local community.

6.3.3 Excursions and community engagement

Flexibility allows educators to take children on various excursions and activities in the local community. In all of the services, outdoor activities and excursions in the local community were valued by the coordination unit, educators and families. These included, for example, nature walks, 'bush playgroups', visits to the botanic gardens, and picnics in nearby parks. Some activities were organised by the coordination unit, while others were organised by individual educators or groups of educators. Other activities were also offered by local community organisations.

One barrier to participation in excursions and activities was the educator having a vehicle large enough to carry all the children. Some educators had large vehicles to accommodate four or five children, while others chose to only go on excursions on days when there were fewer children (three or less), or would use public transport with older children.

Coordination unit staff, educators and families celebrated the variety of activities and routines that children are exposed to in family day care. Parents especially appreciated the range of excursions that children were exposed to through family day care:

They [educators] look at the whole range of activities for children. It's not just staying within the home, it's lots of engagement out of the home, lots of different activities, lots of different experiences. So they're really stimulating children's development. (Family)

The range of activities available was discussed specifically in relation to Wynnum Family Day Care's LINK program (see Practice Highlight 5). Families talked very highly of the LINK program; many only wanted to go to an educator who regularly attended the LINK activities. One mother commented on the benefits of the LINK program, saying:

I think that access to things like the LINK program. Programs which get children out of the house, out of the Family Day Care educator setting and just engaged in lots of different activities, I think it is hugely important, and that's number one.

Services also linked up with local community groups, including schools, libraries and TAFE, to participate in a range of activities with children. In one service, an educator was invited to take the children to story time and music groups that were offered by the primary school. Another educator organised to take the children to an aged care facility in the community once a week:

On Thursdays we go up to [aged care facility], which is the aged care facility in [town] attached to the hospital, and we spend an hour and a half up there doing activities with them. Today we made hairy harries, and we had stacking, nesting cups. So the more able residents were able to help the younger ones with the nesting cups, and the more able children were able to help the not so able elderly people with the stacking blocks,

and the same with making the hairy Harries. They were helping to spoon the dirt into the cups and put the seeds in, and they drew on the cups first of all, and then we have a sing-a-long. (Educator)

A coordinator talked about how, in one small community, an educator took the children out into the community in her everyday activities and routines. As a result, the children were very much a part of the community, even before they started school:

The children within the service have been going off to school for many years so they understand how that community works, the library, the council, the bakery, the bank, all of the community members. So they get that community feel. (Coordinator)

These experiences were also valued by parents, for example:

[The educator] is sort of going out into the community and I just think they're learning a lot by going out into the community and experiencing things like crossing the road. You know, just those daily little daily things they mightn't get if they were in long day care and at the centre all day. (Family)

At another site, educators were encouraged to go to a nature playgroup organised by the local TAFE. An educator who regularly attended the playgroup described it as a 'wonderful little playgroup':

[It's] a bush setting and there's actually a creek that runs through the back of [the] TAFE that comes in round the little area where we are so the kids can actually play in the creek and this week they were catching tadpoles. (Educator)

Other educators organised nature excursions on their own, or with groups of educators. They viewed these trips not simply as activities to fill the day, but as central to their approach to learning. Talking about trips to the creek, one educator said:

Often we don't get past the boardwalk. They just hang out and play there because they can see the baby fish in the water and try and catch crabs and climb trees and play in the mud. So we stop wherever the kids stop. So if they keep on walking, we keep on walking and we go into the woods. So we teach them a lot about the bush and respecting them and what you do if you see a snake and, you know, 'You don't break spider webs.' We look at them and we have magnifying glasses. So my thing is so much nature, sustainability, organic and just the children really integrating with nature and what's actually on their doorstep. (Educator)

For some educators, their capacity to develop flexible programs and activities was enhanced by the EYLF. As will be explored further in the next section, educators and coordinators believed the EYLF provided space for interpretation, which allowed educators to be flexible in the range of programming and activities. Comparing her experience under the previous regulations, one educator felt that the EYLF is more relaxed, indicating that the 'five areas can cover so much'. Another educator agreed:

I think the framework is great, and I think it's broadening what we are allowed to do, and I think we can challenge the frameworks and the reasons why we do things that we do. So I might take my children up into the bush and yes there could be snakes or we could be swooped by a magpie, but if your parents are aware of the risks, I can't say that you won't get bitten by a snake, for example, it could happen. But that's life, and I think that that's something in family day care we can show other services that you can do this; this can be done. Whether you've got a small group or a larger group, I think that's one thing that we should be proud that we're not just sitting at home and babysitting these children, they're learning, and children that leave family day care and go to school are strong little children. (Educator)

This reference to the positive elements of the EYLF was shared by several educators and coordinators across the services.

Practice Highlight 6: Bush Playgroups and Natural Play – Greater Hume Children Services

At Greater Hume Children Services the coordination unit supported educators to use the natural environment. The service recently introduced ‘bush playgroups’, which bring educators together in the outdoors to explore, respect and learn about the natural environment.

Our playgroup facilitator, she has had a fantastic attitude to natural play and wild play and natural play spaces and really wanting to extend educators about the idea of not necessarily have it within confined spaces and fenced areas. She wants to give them real experiences. I think that’s part of our philosophy as a service, that we’re sort of embracing that new idea of wild nature wherever we can. (Manager)

Educators at this service learned from their time attending organised playgroups, and often returned to the same place with other educators, or found new natural environments to go to with the children. The manager talked about how providing support gave educators the confidence to go and try new activities on their own:

We’ve had a couple of educators who have really enjoyed the traditional way of holding playgroups where it’s been in a community where there’s a fence and it’s really safe. We’ve really looked at that because they’ve let us know that they’re not entirely happy with the new system of having a playgroup beside a stream, or on a farm with a fire, or in a park where there is no fence and there’s a main road somewhere over there, or there might even be some water somewhere over there. But we’ve really tried to expand their understanding of what can be gained and that’s a process. We haven’t completely succeeded with that yet. But it’s been an interesting year and we can certainly see that we’ve made significant gains and people that didn’t really see the benefits before are seeing the benefits and they’re communicating that with other educators as well. (Manager)

One educator explained her initial hesitation to the bush playgroup:

Now I feel a bit iffy about that [bush playgroup] because of snakes and spiders and things like that, where other educators might feel a bit more at ease taking them out in the bush [...] So I think I’ve got to try and get myself accustomed to taking them out, because with long day care we wrap the children in cotton wool for safety issues. Where [...] family day care can actually take their small group out and go out. I’ve seen on Facebook some beautiful photos and comments about doing the playgroup out in a paddock and making a cubby amongst the trees and that sort of thing. (Educator)

Overall, there was positive feedback about bush playgroups and the benefits for children and educators choosing to attend them. These experiences highlight the potential for other family day care services to look outside their comfort zone when designing playgroups and activities for educators and children. There are good existing models in family day care that succeeded in developing processes for teaching educators to manage risk and, at the

6.3.4 Interpretation of Early Years Learning Framework

A number of educators talked about how the EYLF allowed room for interpretation of the seven areas. Educators organised their own home settings in various ways to align with the EYLF areas. Coordination unit staff and educators talked very positively about the EYLF.

The EYLF allows educators to develop their own approach to programming and learning. This was identified as a strength by a coordinator, who believed the EYLF had 'given more opportunity for educators to be more particular in the way that they market themselves, the way that they can set themselves aside from their competitors'.

Educators referred to the strengths of 'being', 'belonging', 'becoming', and believed the framework offered opportunities for interpretation and flexibility in family day care, which, some believed, would not be possible in long day care:

So I believe everything that the framework stands for can be implemented in any environment, can be implemented – doesn't even have to be a Family Day Care, it can be in playgroups and things like that. I believe it's how you interact with the children, what you provide them, like natural resources and being connected to your community. If anything I feel the framework encourages a community connection with Family Day Care. I believe we can actually do that better probably than long day care because we can actually go out into the community and learn things and go to all the different places that we visit, or if a child has a certain interest in something, we can actually go there and do it. (Educator)

It just flows, and if you're providing a nurturing environment that children feel a sense of belonging and that they feel safe and secure and they've got ways to communicate to you if they have a voice. If you implement their ideas then you're following the framework anyway, it's not a formula, it's just a guide as how to get children to, basically, have their own ideas and their own thoughts. (Educator)

The EYLF was applauded by another educator, who believed the 'Being, belonging, becoming' is 'excellent'. She used the framework in her approach to her natural environment and her belief that children needed to learn to take risks and make mistakes:

They need to belong to the environment where they're free to make mistakes [...] I think the EYLF is amazing. I love the whole concept of it. My interpretation of it has always been that each one of us brings our own slant to the EYLF and it's about who we are, what we believe and what we are prepared to do or what we intentionally or unintentionally teach the children. (Educator)

Service coordinators confirmed this approach of interpreting the EYLF, particularly with regard to compliance and regulation: 'We look at the regulation and say, "This is what we need to meet, how can you do that?" Rather than say, "You will do it by ABC"'. The flexibility of the EYLF also allowed for and supported diversity among educators within a service (see section 6.5).

One manager talked about her service's positive experience being assessed under the NQF. The manager believed there was "So much opportunity for family day care to do it [EYLF] well and to outshine other services'. However, since the service was assessed quite early in 2012, there was some apprehension about the process:

We approached it in the most simple of ways because we did it so early on in the process. We couldn't do it any other way. We just had to, in a very simple way, explore it with our educators and start to do it with our educators. (Manager)

The manager was passionate about the idea that the EYLF can be implemented in creative yet simple ways in family day care settings, and she believed other settings could learn from family day care practices. Reflecting on the 'excellent' ratings by the Australian Children's Education

and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), she said:

It was so gratifying to recognise that simplicity was quality [...] I'm also so proud of the fact that the simplicity of family day care shone with quality and I think that's something that our colleagues [in other settings] can learn from. (Manager)

While the EYLF on its own was talked about very positively, some educators also attributed this flexibility and interpretation to the approach taken by their coordination unit. One educator explained this was part of the reason she wanted to work with her service, because 'They were a bit more flexible in their interpretations of what I could and couldn't do and so I was really eager [to work with them], give the children back what they needed to have'.

Quality family day care practices included the provision of adequate guidance on regulations and procedures, but also support for educators to do things their own way. Reflecting on the support provided by the coordination unit, one educator said:

We've got that opportunity, there's nothing holding us back. I think the regulations are there when we need them, but you can challenge those as well as to how you achieve [them]. (Educator)

The findings described in this section demonstrate the strength of the EYLF in educators' abilities to be flexible and adaptable in their programming. They also identify another central feature of high quality practice, which is the educators' autonomy from the coordination unit.

6.3.5 Conclusion

Among the services that participated in this study, flexibility in family day care extended beyond the ability for educators to offer non-standard or irregular hours of care. Flexible hours can help a service respond to the needs of families that might not be well catered for in other ECEC environments. As will be discussed in Sections 6.5, this is particularly important with regard to the diversity of families engaged in a service and the social support that some services offer.

The family day care model additionally allows for flexible approaches to programming and activities. The flexible provision of family day care is evident in the adaptability as they respond to the needs and interests of children throughout the day and from week to week. It is also evident in the flexible use of community resources and public spaces which gives children access to a range of different environments. This flexibility is encouraged by the coordination unit and through educator peer networks.

6.4 Autonomy

Autonomy was talked about in different ways by coordination units, educators and families. In some services, educators' independence from the coordination unit was central to their ability to have ownership over their service, to take risks, and to try new things. Educators and families also talked, implicitly and explicitly, about autonomy in relation to children's independence and their ability to foster their interests in the family day care setting.

6.4.1 Educators' independence from the coordination unit

Educators and coordinators alike described the importance of relationships in family day care. As discussed earlier, trust, respect and communication were central to establishing good relationships. Strong and stable relationships between educators and the coordination unit allowed for a sense of autonomy among educators. The coordination units perceived autonomy as a strength, which contributed to the diversity of family day care. Coordinators supported educators to 'do their own thing' and 'to put their own stamp on their service'. Even in the case of less experienced educators, coordinators talked about the need to support them to learn on their

own:

I really rely on the educators to work it out for themselves [...] we're not the kind of service that says to educators, 'you can't have any more than two children under 18 months' [...] We give them a little bit of training to understand what is going on and what they're doing and what they're hoping to build up, you know, to get better at, and then we just send them out there to go and do it because that's really the only way you're going to get better at it. (Manager)

In another service, a coordinator who had previously been an educator said:

They've got to do it their own way. They've got to find their own strengths [to find] their own way of doing it because it's in their own home. I would have hated someone coming into my house and saying, 'Okay, you can't have that bit there, you're got to have it here. You need to do it this and this way and this way. You can only work these days.' I couldn't have done it that way.

So everyone's different, so it's about finding their strengths and finding their passion. And helping them to understand the importance of it as well. (Coordination unit staff member)

In some of the sites, coordination units gave educators the autonomy to make risk management decisions about participation in different activities. As described in Practice Highlight 6, educators at Greater Hume Children Services were participating in 'bush playgroups', where educators would meet at various bush locations to do nature activities. The coordination unit explained that it was up to the educators whether they felt comfortable taking the children there. The systems and processes were in place for educators to participate (e.g. excursion waivers from parents), but they made sure the educators carried out their own risk management analysis to weigh up the risks and benefits of an activity.

This approach to risk management was also evident in other services. One educator explained the service's approach to risk management:

When I was with the other scheme we were told you weren't allowed to go near water, which I think was a real shame because we go paddling in the creek and it is always, always well-supervised. We've always done risk management, a risk-benefit, and the benefits always outweigh the risk. We go down to [the creek] and the children are told they're not allowed to paddle deeper than their ankles, which basically means their knees because they can't help themselves. So there's always an adult there watching them all the time and the children aren't allowed near the water until there's at least one adult there. [...] And we've informed the parents. We have their permission. So I actually really like the risk management, risk benefit. I think it's a really good concept. (Educator)

In all sites, educators talked about having positive and trusting relationships with the coordination unit, which was based on respect and partnerships between the educators and coordination unit. Many educators expressed how this trust provided them with a sense of ownership over their service. They felt empowered to make decisions. They were encouraged and supported to try new activities, and if an idea was unsuccessful, this was not an issue. This sense of autonomy was often described as having control of decisions, but also knowing that the coordinators were there to support them if needed. In one service, an educator talked about how the coordination unit 'really empowers people'. They achieved a balance between support and providing space to 'do their own thing':

[The coordination unit gets] the person to think of the answer themselves, rather than being directive. They respect that it's your home, and how you want to do it. The individual thing, they really want to keep that. (Educator)

This sense of empowerment was especially evident in Greater Hume Children Services and Camden Family Day Care (see Practice Highlight 7).

Practice Highlight 7: Empowering Educators – Camden Family Day Care

Autonomy was something that many educators valued in their practice, and which they felt was achieved by the coordination unit's empowering model of support. Educators felt empowered to deliver an ECEC service that reflected their extensive professional experience and approach to working with children, while complying with regulation and enacting commitment to quality improvement. This was particularly evident at Camden Family Day Care. Co-ordinators felt empowered by their auspicing agency to deliver high quality service, and educators felt particularly empowered by co-ordinators to reach their full potential. A council representative, for example, described the approach to enabling and empowering high quality co-ordination:

They are a very stable team, and my role - I think it's most important that I just allow them as much freedom as I possibly can in terms of identifying what's needed. They've got a very experienced leader who knows the industry and Family Day Care inside out and backwards. And so I really try and empower them as much as I can for them to make decisions about what is it that the scheme needs to do, what are the priorities? What improvements do they need to make? And they really do come up with that, and I probably act as a bit of a broker to make sure it can be moulded into what the organisation requires as well in terms of council. (Council representative)

Similarly, a coordinator described their unit's approach to supporting educators:

Our educators are very autonomous we don't treat them like they're not valued or they don't know what they're doing. We all work together, and I think that's been the biggest key to our success. We don't go in there and dictate. (Coordinator)

Educators also felt the coordination unit empowered them to achieve high standards of quality. One, for example, described how she valued the warm, helpful connections with the coordinators and felt Camden's approach was not overly regimented and focused on compliance with rules. This allowed her a level of autonomy that recognised her extensive experience. She explained how Camden's approach to family day care represented quality care:

I love that I can program on a daily basis (or even hourly) and go off on tangents wherever the children take me. I love that I can program in whatever way suits me best, therefore providing the best care I can without the restraints of fitting someone else's criteria. I love that I feel empowered by my scheme to express and embrace my own interpretation of the EYLF and NQF and not worry if I'm 'doing things right'. I love that I can just sit and comfort a crying baby/child and give them my full attention while the others entertain themselves and each other, without worrying that someone may view this as me not doing my job. (Educator)

These excerpts highlight the importance of empowerment and autonomy to quality. While the service allowed educators' appropriate levels of autonomy, this occurred in a highly supportive framework, with the support of a highly capable co-ordination unit committed to quality improvement. Both the level of support and engagement between the coordination unit and the educators, as well as the careful recruitment of highly skilled educators, made this autonomy possible. While it was particularly evident at Camden, a similar sentiment was shared by educators and coordination unit staff from other quality services.

One educator was new to family day care, but had many years' experience in other ECEC settings. She used the bottom floor of her house as the family day care, setting it up 'more like a little kindergarten room'. She was unsure whether this set-up would work and was pleased that they 'were really supportive of what [she] wanted to do and how [she] wanted to do it'. She went on to say that 'it's not like they were just standing back and [saying] 'you're not doing this the right way'. You don't feel that you're being judged'. She also appreciated their approach to visits, where the educator chose how often they wanted to be visited, so 'they are not in your face' but always 'supportive and really helpful'. Another educator explained her positive experience very concisely:

The support is there when I need it, but they leave me alone to run my own business the way I want to. That's one of the greatest things about family day care, you can put your own personality on it [...] You're given the freedom to be who you are. You're not trying to be squashed into a role. (Educator)

The manner in which educators and coordinators talked about autonomy made it evident that this independence empowered educators and supported high quality practices.

Educators also talked about having autonomy and independence, compared to previous experiences working in long day care. One educator explained:

[I] was getting frustrated working in childcare centres where even procedures weren't being followed properly [...] where at least here, I know I'm doing the best I can and following the procedures, and if I don't get something done it's only me to blame. (Educator)

The sense of autonomy articulated by educators was also evident in the way many educators approached children's learning, as discussed in the next section.

6.4.2 Approach to children's learning

In the same way that family day care allowed educators to be independent from the coordination unit, many educators talked about the positive impact of family day care for children's independence and autonomy. Many educators felt it was important for children 'to do their own thing', rather than to 'be in their space all the time'. Although the children often enjoyed playing together, educators felt it was important that there 'is opportunity for one, if they want to, to have that time by themselves'.

Educators also talked about family day care as being conducive to children being able to make their own decisions about their daily routines and activities:

It's if one child wants to eat now and another one wants to eat later, that's what they can do and that's okay. So it's giving them a voice, it's giving children their own direction in their learning. So because they can make their own decisions, I believe that encourages their independence and gets them developed and more ready for school. [...] They learn to speak up and say what they want which is really good and really important. (Educator)

Another educator had a similar approach to children's learning and independence. She described her natural play environment, and explained how – in contrast to store bought toys – her set-up encouraged children to follow their own interests, to be creative and to learn by doing and trying new things:

But they do more painting and they paint the fence and they can paint whatever they like, basically. So lots of very colourful things, you know. Being allowed to pick the flowers and they mix their own paint colours. You ask the kids how do you make green, 'Blue and yellow.' They know all those things because that's what they do all the time. I think a lot of toys have one use. That's it, whereas those crates have been painted and washed and built – they've been boats and it's been endless. (Educator)

The educator said that she wanted her space to encourage the children to be ‘independent and confident’, and she explained how she thought her space promoted this:

We’re pretty laid-back and pretty relaxed and the children are able to move into the various different spaces. Even as an adult, I believe it’s important to have different spaces in your home and the same for kids. They can go around the corner here and there’s a blue water butt that fills up with rainwater, and they can chalk on the brick wall. Down there they can climb, or the sandpit is over there, or they can go and look for eggs. There’s lots of different spaces that they can choose to be. So they can either be alone if they want to or they can play in a group. They do have that freedom of choice. (Educator)

A coordinator echoed this emphasis on natural play and children’s ownership over the space when she described the building of an educator’s setting:

She wanted to have this drain coming from the natural water that comes down when it rains. And she wanted to collect that water for the mud pit [...] So every day the children were there with spades and they were building their own drain. For a person to walk in there, they would think it was a complete mess, but the relationship this educator had with these children; the children felt like it was their project. It probably took about two months for this to happen with every day the children building this drain with the assistance of the educator and it looks wonderful now. [...] But the goal was for the children to feel like it was their environment and to have ownership of this environment. It was just beautiful and that, to me, is a beautiful environment. (Coordinator)

These examples highlight some of the ways educators approached children’s learning, and illustrates how children’s autonomy and independence can be fostered in different family day care settings.

6.4.3 Conclusion

The educators and coordinators in the study were encouraged to make decisions and design programmes that reflected their own experiences and approaches to early childhood education and care. The autonomy educators described was facilitated through strong relationships with the coordination unit, and also through trusting and respectful relationships with families. Educators then felt empowered to do what they believed was right for the child and the family.

Autonomy was also apparent in the approaches to early learning by a number of educators. For these educators, it was important to encourage the child, as an individual, to develop autonomy and by giving them opportunities to make choices about their own day and their own environment.

6.5 Diversity and social support

The diversity of family day care is facilitated through the flexibility and autonomy described above. That is, the flexibility provided through family day care coordination units contributed to a diversity of educators within each service, which was valued by the coordination unit, the educators and the families.

The diversity of educators also allowed family day care to provide a range of social support to children and families. As found in Wong and Cumming’s work (2010), the inclusion of children with additional needs in family day care can be supported by coordination units, or by educators’ own principles and philosophies about inclusion. It was evident from interviews that some units provide services to many families requiring support in addition to ECEC. As one coordinator summed up, ‘It’s parenting support, it’s all sorts of things’.

Social support can also be achieved through connecting families to other services in the community. These connections to other organisations and services in the community are not all that common, either by educators or services. Williamson et al. (2011) found that educators have strong connections to their own service, but little connection with other services like preschools, long day care, schools or other organisations. This section describes how fostering strong connections outside the family day care service can deepen the level of assistance offered to families.

6.5.1 Diversity of educators within service

Family day care educators represent a diverse group of workers within the ECEC sector. While there are challenges that come with working on their own, educators' autonomy also means that they have the space to follow their own approach to learning, within their setting. As one coordinator suggested, quality programming can 'look 100 different ways'.

The diversity of educator approaches, or 'styles', allows families to choose an educator, and setting, that best suits them and their child's needs and values. The coordination units encouraged families to visit a number of educators before choosing one for their child. Coordinators at all services felt it was very important to give parents a choice between educators who may have different approaches. For example, one coordinator described their role in matching families and educators:

We're like a matchmaking service, so your idea of quality might be different to what my idea of quality is for a child. So we've got to recruit the diverse range of educators [...] because we have a diverse range of families. (Coordinator)

Educators agreed that diversity in family day care services was an important element of quality, stating that 'we are diverse and we can all offer different things to families'. Similarly, an educator in another service talked about how diversity within a service allowed families to find a place that 'they really connect with'. Educators did not feel they had to follow any prescriptive model of service delivery because they understood that families could choose educators that would fit with their own philosophies and approach to educating and caring for children. This was summarised by one educator:

I follow sort of an emerging curriculum, child centred. There's other people that would probably have a more teacher thing, and other people that would have a more relaxed, sort of, you're part of my family, and however they want to do it. You can find the right fit for your family, and your child, and for yourself in a real way. (Educator)

Similarly, in another service, the manager talked about the diversity of the educators, and the different methods coordinators use to build on their strengths and support them in areas where they may be struggling. She explained that 'it's everybody's own journey and we want it to be so individual. It's as individual as the educators and the children and the families'. This was consistent with a coordinator who commented:

There would be very few [educators] who would be doing it the same kind of way, programming [and documenting] exactly the same [...] there's many, many varieties of everything and we really encourage that variety [...] [A]s long as it is meeting the standard we're really happy for that to happen. (Coordinator)

One educator echoed this idea, stating that she was 'doing it [her] way', and 'that's what makes family day care unique [...] each educator brings their own home, personality – I'm very into craft and I love animals, so I've got chooks and birds and we've got chicks hatching'.

The diversity of educators was acknowledged as being important for families' decision making. One educator commended the coordination unit:

[They] understand that every educator works differently and I say that to families when they come, if they've got two or three educators to visit, 'Remember we all work differently and you'll have to choose what's right for you'. (Educator)

Another educator in the service agreed:

We all have a different style of a different way that we like to document about learning, and we all think differently [...] so that quality is going to look different in every setting [...] but we're all doing it. (Educator)

Many families agreed that one strength of family day care was that it allowed them to find an educator that matched their own philosophies about childrearing. For parents and educators, this was difficult to achieve in long day care because of staff changeovers. A parent explained that values were very important to her, and so she visited a number of 'good' educators until she found one who she believed matched her own parenting values:

She [coordinator] was fantastic at listening to what it was that was meaningful to me and finding that right family because that is really important to get the right fit. When I met with several other people, you know, it was crucial to me that I found the right people, and so I wasn't going to compromise on that. (Family)

Educators' settings are often shaped by the needs and wants of specific communities and cultures. For example, in one site, many educators provided the outdoor space that appealed to farmer families in the area. As the manager explained:

Families are used to being on the land and don't want to be cooped up in a little centre with a little yard. There [are] a lot of services out there that are in that rural community who do have rural settings for their family day care service. I think they're able to match the families' needs more than what a long day care centre may be able to. (Manager, auspicing organisation)

The diversity of educators within a service depended on the needs of the broader community it serviced, but also on the individual needs of children and families.

6.5.2 Meeting the needs of all children

A number of educators talked about the diversity of educators' approaches, skills and experiences, which enhanced the service's capacity to meet families' needs. This included flexibility in terms of educators being willing to do extra or irregular hours to suit families in special circumstances, especially parental health or mental health issues (as discussed earlier).

Some services we visited had educators particularly experienced in working with children with disabilities or with behavioural issues. These are considered important skills as family day care educators work with diverse groups of children. In their analysis of LSAC data, Williamson et al. (2011) found that 33 per cent of family day care educators worked with children with disability, 27 per cent with children from non-English speaking backgrounds, and 16 per cent with Indigenous children. For some families, family day care was the best place to support their child's particular needs:

A family will come to us in family day care that often needs some extra support. Family day care tends to attract those children that are too high-needs for a long day care services. (Manager)

My son was actually born with cleft palette, so she had to special-feed him. I don't think a centre would have the time or the means to sit with that baby to feed the way that he needed to be fed. There's a special art to it [...] He had a special bottle, had to have special formula, all those sorts of things and [my educator] was willing to try that and she did. And it worked. (Family)

It provides a small group environment which is sometimes really important for children with special needs, because for instance children with autism don't like to have that over-stimulus, and a lot of noise, and a lot of activity. In family day care you can keep quite subdued and quite soft and calm. (Coordination unit staff member)

Educators described developing individualised approaches for children with additional needs or disabilities. Some children were eligible for extra support in family day care through the Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS). Coordinators helped 'the parents navigate the medical system as well and access funding'.

There's two ways our children can come into the ISS program. They may have already had a diagnosed disability when they came into the service, in which case Zeb, who does the placements, we would work really closely together to talk about, 'Let's narrow down some educators who would really be able to include this child in their program really well and meet the parents' expectations and our expectations.' So we just did that last week. We had a big conversation. So that's one way.

Another way is that they could just come in as any other child and then it may be picked up along the way that there's some developmental concerns, so through Child Development Initiatives. So that's another way into ISS. So depending on which way they come in does change a little bit how you manage things, not much, but just how we talk to the parents and whether everyone is on board all at once or sometimes if parents didn't realise there was something going on, that's a bit more sensitive. (Coordinator)

In several of the services, the coordination units and educators helped families to access the additional support needed. The Child Development Initiative mentioned in the above quote was established by Wynnum Family Day Care to ensure that all children got the support they needed (see Practice Highlight 8).

Other services also used other local services to connect families to the resources they need. In many cases, social support was offered by connecting families to other health and social services and local community resources. Coordinators viewed connections and referrals to local community as working in two directions. For example, one coordinator believed they gained a good reputation in their community because of the positive connection they had with other services, such as disability services, maternal health services, and local TAFE. This led to other services referring families to family day care. Educators in one service were very well connected to other local services. This meant that, in addition to having support from the coordination unit and other educators, some educators also sought advice and support from local services. As one coordinator explained:

They're very well connected in their communities too, so they don't have us or another educator, but they might have the local playgroup, or child care centre, or something like that that they go to. (Coordinator)

Some services saw themselves as a hub for information. Services tried to link families to other services and resources they would need, including transition to school supports:

We've got a website and we try and be professional in the way that we have information for families [...] We connect them with the other agencies they need. They've got a link to the Family Assistance Office, the Australian Immunisation. (Coordination unit staff member)

So when they come through here we're starting that journey. So I then put to the parent that I think they would really benefit [from support to] transition them through to mainstreaming school [...] So it's really good when everyone works together. (Coordinator)

Practice Highlight 8: Child Development Initiative (CDI) – Wynnum Family Day Care

Wynnum Family Day Care has established an initiative to help identify developmental issues in children early, and to connect children and parents to services and resources to assist them. A coordinator explained that the need for the CDI program became evident when co-ordinators, educators and parents realised that they faced lengthy waiting times for appointments with health professionals. This meant that valuable opportunities for early intervention were missed.

The coordination unit identified a gap in the health services for young children with a developmental delay. Before the Child Development Initiative commenced, some children waited 12 to 18 months to be assessed by a specialist. Wynnum believed that more could be done during this time to support children and families. Wynnum Family Day Care entered into a partnership with consultant clinicians for both speech and occupational therapies. Educators are visited by a specialist Learning Support and Early Intervention Co-ordinator to conduct initial diagnostic screens. Parents are then contacted, and offered a free assessment with the appropriate clinician for their child in the familiar environment of the educator's home.

So it came about because coordinators would go out and visit educators and the educator would say, 'You know, this little boy is three years old but he doesn't really talk, or if he does it's more like a grunt.' Then the coordinators would come back here and, well, they didn't have that knowledge of what to do. So they would refer them to the GP in the hope that they would get referred on to the speech pathologist. (Coordinator)

A coordinator at the service believed the program was effective because of the trust gained with families from the beginning. When children are first placed with the service, their families are told about the Child Development Initiative. Families are encouraged to call the service to have their child observed by a professional if they have any concerns or questions with regard to their child's development or behaviour.

Under the Child Development Initiative, a coordinator with a strong background in children's development goes to the educator's home to do an assessment with the child. If the service feels it needs to discuss children's development with their families, coordinators are sensitive to families' reactions. Often this might be the first time that a family has reflected on their child's development and the conversation requires careful consideration. Families are not compelled to undertake an assessment, but the service has found that most families accept the offer.

If the family agrees that professional involvement might be useful, the coordinator explained:

I have the conversation with mum or dad or both and we set up the time for the clinician to go out and she's a paediatric - both - all of them are paediatric clinicians. They go out. They do their assessment. They write their report all funded by us. Now, once the report's done we then invite the parent to come in and have an interview after hours. So I normally start about 5.30, six o'clock, because these families are working. They get to have a private interview with the clinician to go through the report and the recommendations, you know. Some of the recommendations are quite severe in terms of there may be a cognitive delay; they're being referred on to a paediatrician for a full assessment. (Coordinator)

During the interview with families, the clinician might recommend further intervention and explain how to access further information or support through the public health system.

A mother talked about how the Child Development Initiative worked for her and her child:

I could phone any of those people [service coordinator, therapists] at any time and talk through in detail any concerns or any areas I wanted worked on. In fact, [my son] had a speech delay due to a hearing problem that wasn't diagnosed and so we were having speech therapy and the speech therapist would then give me homework for each session. I would give that to [educator] and [...] she was so interested in the process and in his development.

I was worried about the way that he was walking and so I was able through one of their programs to get an assessment with a child physio, and brilliant. Brilliant. I got a thorough assessment, I got some tips on what to do and I got some tips as to what to look for. At the start also when I was new to the area, they were helpful in where to go for certain checks and stuff like that. (Family)

The description of the Child Development Initiative demonstrates the value that this type of service can provide. Initiatives such as this, which support early intervention and support, enhance the quality of service to children and families.

In a small rural community, the educator had very close ties with the local hospital and community nurse. The educator organised for the nurses to come to her home when two of the school-aged children were due for an eye test:

Because my two schoolies had to have their eye test, they actually came here and did their eye tests here. So I've got that back up [and] I can go and see [the nurse] if I need any information about that. I can find out information about who I can find that information from to help me. (Educator)

In two sites in particular, the coordination unit was passionate about a more integrated and holistic approach to delivering services for children and families. They imagined a 'hub and spoke' model that incorporated various ECEC types, as well as broader health and social supports for families:

We for many years had this dream of the hub and spoke model. And I know it's happening in other areas, but having your whole childcare-maternal health system. And what that comprised of might be OOSH [Out of School Hours Care], long day care, occasional family day care, in-home care, maternal health. (Coordination unit staff member)

For years and years and years we dreamt of being a part of a community hub, we want to be a part of the community because we're a community based organisation. So we've always wanted to have a hub [...] How good would it be if you've got a family that comes in here, a family that's in need and they may need to see the legal services, they may need to see child protection, they're child probably needs to see an occupational therapist or a speech therapist, they may need to have counselling, to have it all in the one premises, how ideal is that, that we can do everything and place their child in the care all at the same time? To be able to support the whole family, not just the child but support the whole family and that's what we're about. We're about relationships and supporting the entire family. So it's just a dream coming true. (Coordination unit staff member)

Practice Highlight 9: Supporting children and families through hardship – Gin Gin Family Day Care

Some coordination units and educators went above and beyond what is often seen as 'early childhood education and care'. Particularly in regional communities, family day care services provided broader social support to children and families. This is illustrated through examples of educators caring for foster children and children in out-of-home care, as well as children and families experiencing short-term hardship and disadvantage.

This was apparent in Gin Gin where some educators were committed to ensuring the care and wellbeing of specific children and families.

For example, one educator had a background of work and education in the disability field, and provided support to children with highly complex needs. This included children in foster care, many of whom had disabilities, and for whom the high level of need meant alternative placements were difficult to find. Through family day care, she provided respite for foster carers, as well as opportunities for children. The educator described how the approach she took worked well with children with complex needs:

We treat them as part of our family. We don't sit them separate. They sit and have a meal with us. Whatever we do they do. If I need groceries, they'd come with me, if I need to whip into pay a bill we do [...] They're part of the family". She explained the particular progress made by a nine year old child whose independence she had sought to nurture: "Alice is the most high needs, she's in at the special school. She's got the alcohol syndrome [...] When she first came she couldn't hold a fork, she couldn't hold a spoon, she couldn't hold cups. [...] there's not a drop of rice when she has rice now. (Educator)

Another educator described the role she played in providing emotional support for siblings who did not have a close relationship with one of their parents:

Yes. Emotional security I think is one of the most important things because the likes of those of children, I feel I gave them a lot of emotional security. They'd had a hard time. The youngest one was [very young] when she first came to me, she was not going to school. Their [parent] walked out on them when she was about six weeks old. But because of the law situation, they had to go home to their [parent] every second weekend and they hated going. But they could come and they could unwind and talk to me. ...So those children could talk to me and I taught them all sorts of things. (Educator)

Educators across all services sought to deliver the best care and education to meet the needs of their children and families. As the excerpts above illustrate, in Gin Gin, this sometimes involved providing a broad range of practical and emotional support required by local families.

The additional support provided to appropriately support all children demonstrated how some educators and coordinators went above and beyond what is often thought about as ECEC. There were various examples where educators and coordinators provided a range of social support to assist children and families in complex and difficult circumstances.

6.5.3 Support for families experiencing hardship

Social support involved educators and services making concerted efforts to offer individualised care, counselling and resources to families experiencing short- or long-term hardship in their lives. One parent described their educator as her 'life line'. Having experienced health issues, the mother had to travel long distances for her appointments and operation:

It's like having a support network that you didn't have. I don't have any family. My family is 18 hours' drive away [...] I had to go to hospital and that was a really big family issue. We were like, how do we get five hours to hospital, get an operation done which potentially could be seven hours, come back five hours, have to stay the night with a toddler, [my partner] trying to look after me. [The educator] took him and she's taken him twice overnight where I've had to go in for operations. (Family)

Social support was often provided implicitly, as educators sought to deliver flexible and adaptable services to meet the needs of the diverse groups of children and families they served. In particular, social support was enabled through the flexible and diverse practices that family day care offers.

One coordinator talked about the support that one educator provided to a dad, where the mum had committed suicide from post-natal depression:

She's been a rock to that father. She said, 'He doesn't talk about anything, just about stuff. But he doesn't seem to want to go home.' She said, 'I'm fine with that. He just sits and plays and we just chat.' But he's moved on from that and not so much clinging to her, I think. [...] But, yeah, it's been just lovely to watch the support she's given that family; the little boy and the dad. (Coordinator)

In other cases, however, services and educators intentionally and thoughtfully sought to offer the support families needed. This reflected their own understandings about what good quality family day care should look like. Examples of such practices were especially evident for foster children, and for children in separated families. An educator described her approach to caring for siblings whose mother had left the family:

Three of them were doing music as well and I used to do the music lessons and all of that here. So I taught them to knit, I taught them to sew, sew on buttons, do all those sorts of things that will be life skills that they would not have got, I feel, had they not been in that situation. (Educator)

In another site, an educator explained that she was given permission to care for an extra child because she was the only educator in the area, and there was a child in out-of-home care:

I still have five children, because I have an extra child – because I'm in a rural [area] we've been given special permission to have that extra child because he's a ward of the State at the moment and his grandmother is looking after him, so that's my fifth child. (Educator)

The educator was very invested in the child's circumstances and outcomes. Both she and the service manager worked together to ensure the process was professional:

When I was organising care for the little fella who is now a State ward, [service manager] was really good keeping in contact with me about that and giving me information that I needed. When I had Family Services I'd let Hazel know. So whatever information I got, I passed on to Hazel and whatever information she got she passed onto me. So we knew the whole story. (Educator)

Some educators go to great lengths to provide support to children and families in difficult circumstances. A coordinator gave an example of one of the educators at her service:

There's just that extra support, I think, in place that some educators almost become social workers [...] I see that so often. [But] I've got one educator I'm working with and she does too much. I said, 'Well, have you adopted this family? Have you become their foster parent?' She said, 'I feel like that.' I said, 'Well, there's going to be a point where you're going to be overused and burnt out.' She did get to that point. I said, 'Well, now you have to hand it back to mum. You've been wonderful.' I mean, the parent was amazing.

She's [mum] studying at uni, has a little one in care with some learning issues, and then she had a baby in the mix of that and nobody; no family, no one. So I did send her to that educator because I knew she would be a good support for her. They've become like family. I know that educator went and sat at the hospital with her in the middle of the night with the baby for four hours or something. The husband cared for the other little one at home while they were at the hospital with the baby. I mean, how many - you would never find that in a child care centre, you know. (Coordinator)

In another example, the team of coordinators at the service went out of their way to provide support to vulnerable parents in order to help the child have the best outcomes. A coordinator explained that they would collect food from emergency relief for a particular family, making sure it was available when they knew the mother was visiting another service nearby. In this way, the service provided food for the family and also had opportunities to discuss the child's needs:

So she would come here, pick the food up and then come in here and sign documents for me so that I could give the clinician access to help her child. So it all worked out in the end. We're all about the best outcome for the child. (Coordinator)

Some services were particularly involved with families who had experienced hardship. These educators, and the service more broadly, provided considerable support to these families during these periods.

6.5.4 Conclusion

This section illustrates the variety of approaches and philosophies that family day care services and educators practiced on a day to day basis, and also at the bigger picture level of service delivery. The services were characterised by a diversity of educators, who were supported in their autonomy. This diversity better enabled the services to match family values and needs with particular educators. It also meant services were well placed to support children with additional needs or children whose family environment was more complicated than others'. Some services sought to enact a more holistic approach to delivering family day care within a broader children and family service model. They viewed their role in children and families' lives as a form of social support that was more than early education and care.

7. Conclusion

This report has detailed the findings of research with six high quality family day care services in Australia. Interviews with 52 families, educators, coordination unit staff members and representatives from managing organisations revealed a strong and passionate commitment to high quality ECEC within these services.

Reflecting on the practices at all of the services the research team visited, five elements that supported high quality ECEC in family day care emerged:

Professional practice – a determination within the service to provide a high quality service by supporting new ideas and new approaches, recruiting the best educators and inducting them into the high standards of the service. Services promoted strong leadership through mentoring and support networks for educators. There was also an expectation of continual professional development and an unswerving commitment to regulatory compliance.

Relationships – strong relationships at multiple levels of the service, between educators and children, educators and families, educators and their peers, educators and the coordination unit and within the coordination unit team. These relationships were characterised by good communication, trust and reciprocity. Coordination units and educators worked hard to develop and maintain relationships at all levels. Some services implemented particular programs to ensure that relationships were strong, for example by creating peer connections between educators, or improved communication between educators and the coordination unit. The capacity for educators to communicate frequently and in detail about children with families was widely regarded as a key strength of family day care.

Flexibility – educators provided family day care in a manner that accommodated a range of scheduling needs among families, for example, extended hours or very early or very late starts, or additional hours on occasions. In addition, educators in these services demonstrated flexibility in their day to day practice, adapting to accommodate the changing needs of the children throughout the day, making use of community resources and flexible approaches to children's learning. Initiatives across the services illustrated the range of activities that children in family day care are exposed to, and the richness of learning opportunities that are supported through flexible programming.

Autonomy – the trusting relationships and high standards of these services allowed educators autonomy in their approach to providing early education and care. Educators felt empowered to try new ideas and learning approaches in their day to day practice with children. This was supported by a closely involved coordination unit always available to provide leadership, suggestions and direction. Some educators particularly encouraged the autonomy of children by involving them in decisions about their activities for the day or even how to modify the family day care environment.

Diversity and social support – educators’ autonomy meant that each educator offered a unique service in a distinct environment. This allowed services to match families with educators that particularly suited the needs and values of the child and the family. Educators also provided ECEC to a diverse group of children, which were adapted to support each child. Some services offered more than family day care, working hard to extend their connections to the local community and specialist services. This meant that children and families experiencing hardship could be especially well-supported by the educator, the service and the community beyond.

The elements of good practices that were evident among the services participating in this study were interlinked. In most cases, successful family day care provision in one element depended on several other elements. A commitment to high quality and professionalism meant that services recruited the best educators they could, these educators wanted to remain engaged in professional development and also wanted to deliver a high quality service. When coordination units and educators had strong relationships, the coordination unit could encourage autonomy among educators, knowing that they could trust educators’ professionalism and that educators would seek support when they needed it.

Professional leadership and the development of innovative programs and initiatives also encouraged flexible models of service delivery and exposure to different activities. Flexible programming and activities were sometimes implemented by the coordination unit, and sometimes educators themselves initiated new ideas to enhance the quality of the service for children and families. Peer networks among educators provided an additional layer of support and an extra source of inspiration for innovation. Strong relationships between educators and families also promoted trust. This meant that when educators sought permission to take children into new environments families were confident and allowed this.

Autonomy among educators supported a diversity of approaches and interests, as did flexibility among educators in their daily practice. Overall this leads to a sense of family day care as responsive and elastic, able to provide ECEC for children in a wide range of circumstances. In some instances, particular services or key educators provide a level of social support beyond the usual ECEC.

While demonstrating considerable commonalities, these services also took different approaches to providing family day care. Some placed particular emphasis on compliance, others on supportive relationships to ensure compliance. For some, the relationship between the coordination unit and families was an important area to develop, for others it was fitting that families were primarily connected with educators. Some services implemented particular programs and schemes to support quality and guide the work of the coordination unit and educators. Other services relied more on leadership and high expectations. These differences were partly due to the particular people working in each of the services, partly due to the different contexts in which they operated, and partly because they had access to different resources. Nevertheless all the services had experienced staff who were strongly committed to providing high quality family day care.

Many in this study bemoaned the lack of understanding and poor reputation of family day care in the wider community. At the same time, there is a tendency for educators to be well connected to their own service, but not always to other organisations in their community (Williamson, et al., 2011). Yet the services in this research who sought collaboration with other community organisations were able to provide a level of social support that they felt exceeded support offered in most mainstream ECEC settings. Better connecting family day care to other ECEC, community services and early intervention services could help educators and services quickly refer children and families for further assistance when it is needed. It could also have the advantage of promoting family day care beyond the family day care sector. Greater collaboration could improve community understanding of family day care and the services it provides.

A review of the literature found that discussions of family day care quality often did not extend much further than the importance of qualifications and training. However, some studies show the importance of other factors for delivering high quality family day care. This study also found that qualifications are highly important, but that quality is also supported by creative approaches to ongoing professional development and leadership, good and trusting relationships, a commitment to maintaining standards and meeting guidelines, and providing a range of services and activities to meet children's changing needs.

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Appendix A

Interview topic guides

Families interviews

Tell me a bit about your child/ren. What do they really like to do? What do they like about going to this family day care educator?

Why did you choose this FDC educator/service for your child/ren?

What do you like about this educator? This service?

Is there anything about FDC that you are not happy with? Is there anything you would like done differently by the educator? By the service?

Does your educator take your children to other places? [local park, library, shopping centre etc.]
Why, what is good about those places? Anything you don't like?

Do they go to playgroups or meet with other children? Where? What is good about meeting with those groups? Anything you don't like?

What kind of learning is your child involved in?

Are there any other kinds of learning you would like your child to have access to?

If child is 4 years old – do you feel the educator is helping your child get ready to start school?

Does your educator let you know what is happening with your child from week to week? How?

Do you have any contact with the service/head office? What nature, what is it like dealing with them.

If you were telling another family about family day care, what would you tell them?

Educators interviews

Being an educator

Get to know the educator – How they came to be an educator. What they offer, what they like,

Ask to be shown around the FDC set up. What they like the best about their set up. Anything they'd like to change about the set up. how they divide space between home and work, their family members etc

Do you offer a service out of hours? When, how often, for whom?

Working with children

What spaces do you use – at home, garden, local park, library, shopping centre etc. why, what is good about those spaces?

Do you attend any playgroups? Gather with others in the community? What are the benefits? Would you like to do this more/less? Would you like other opportunities to meet educators or others in the community?

What sorts of things do you think children need to learn in FDC? How do you prepare children for school?

How do you establish good relationships with children?

How do you communicate with families about their child?

How do you establish good relationships with families?

What are the most important things an educator can do to support children's learning?

Working with coordination unit

Have you always worked with the same FDC service? Why did you choose to work with this particular FDC service? [location, supports, cost]. What do you like about this service/ coordination unit? Is there anything you'd like to be different?

How often do you have contact with the coordination unit? In person, by phone, skype, email other ways. For what purpose? Do you have a key contact person?

Some educators would prefer to work on their own, without the involvement of the coordination unit. Can you see any advantages in that? Disadvantages?

A number of FDC services have lost funding in the past year. Do you know if this has happened to your service? What affect has it had?

If you could work with the best coordination unit you can imagine, what would it be like? What kind of contact would you have? How would they support you?

Quality

How is quality monitored at your service? [by the service, by National Quality Framework]. How do you demonstrate quality when it is being assessed? Are there aspects of quality that you think the service or the NQF overlook or don't properly understand?

What message would you like to give new educators about being a high quality educator? Are there things about quality that are difficult for FDC?

Coordination Unit representatives interviews

Find out about the representative and their service. How long they've worked there. What the work involves. How long the service has operated. Why it was started. If a larger organisation, the place of family day care within that larger organisation. How many educators? Where are educators located? Has the number of educators and children grown or contracted in recent years? What fees are charged to educators and families? How many coordination unit staff?

Aspects of quality that FDC does really well? That are difficult for FDC?

What would your ideal model of support for FDC educators be like?

A number of FDC services have lost funding in the past year, has this happened to your service? What affect has it had? How is Community Support Programme funding distributed within the service? Has this changed?

Ways in which your coordination unit supports quality that you are proud of? Anything else that is innovative, new or exciting?

What kind of contact does the coordination unit have with educators? What form? How often? For what purpose? What is the ratio of coordinators to educators? Has this changed over time? Probe on how the service balances supporting educators and ensuring compliance.

What are the most important things an educator can do to support children's learning? How can coordination units support this?

What sorts of things do you think children need to learn in FDC? How do you prepare children for school?

What kind of contact does the unit have with families? What form? How often? For what purpose?

Does the service offer:

- playgroups or other spaces outside the home for educators? Toy libraries?
- training for educators? In what? How delivered?
- support educators to network with each other (or other people)
- a service out of hours? When, how often, for whom?

How do you monitor quality within the service? What do you look for when assessing quality?

How is quality in FDC monitored by the National Quality Framework? Is there anything the NQF overlooks or doesn't properly understand?

What does the day to day work of the coordination unit involve?

It might be possible to coordinate FDC without being in a unit. Are there advantages to being based together in a unit? Are there other ways coordination could be organised?

Ask for copy of annual report.

Map the coordination unit structure, how many staff, what positions they hold, how they are grouped etc.

Sponsor/auspicing organisation representatives interviews

Why does your organisation support FDC? What are the challenges of running a FDC service?

Does your organisation subsidise FDC? By how much? Is this for a particular aspect of the FDC service?

What advantages does FDC offer over other ECEC services? Disadvantages?

What kind of contact does the sponsoring organisation have with the coordination unit? What form? How often? For what purpose?

A number of FDC services have lost funding in the past year, has this happened to your service? What affect has it had?

What aspect of what quality in FDC are important for your organisation? Are there any that are difficult to realise? Are there any changes you'd like to make to improve quality?

Any innovative or creative ideas to support quality you'd like to share?