

# Supporting Family Child Care

## *It's Essential*

by Dana Holahan and Erica Phillips

At 8:00 a.m., Emily Mingia Lewis is full of energy as she greets children and families at her child care program, Mingalew Family Daycare, which she and her mother run from her home in Bridgeport, Connecticut. As each parent drops off their child, she checks in on both. One parent is looking for a new job, so while Lewis' mother ushers in her child to begin their daily routines, Lewis asks about the parent's progress and provides any leads. As



Dana Holahan is the director of professional development at All Our Kin, Inc. and enjoys all aspects of organizing high-quality learning experiences for its networks of family child care educators. She is especially passionate about racial equity, access to resources for Spanish speakers, early literacy, and outdoor education. She lives in New Haven, Connecticut.



Erica Phillips is the incoming Executive Director of the National Association for Family Child Care. Previously, she served as President and Chief Impact Officer at All Our Kin, Inc. She is a passionate advocate for family child care educators across the country. She currently lives in New York with her partner and daughter.

Lewis often says, “We care for the entire family.”

Six years ago, Lewis decided to follow her passions for working with children and opened a child care program in her home. She wanted to provide the best environment possible for her families, so despite working over 60 hours per week, Lewis participated in workshops with All Our Kin, a national nonprofit that supports and sustains family child care educators. She also attended evening classes to earn her Child Development Associate and successfully achieved national accreditation through the National Association of Family Child Care. Lewis ends every day feeling confident that the children in her program benefited from a safe and nurturing environment and strong foundation for continued learning and development.

Lewis is one of an estimated 100,000 licensed family child care educators doing this work across the country (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2020). Family child care, also known as home daycare or family daycare, involves an adult

caring for a small group of children in her own home, and is one of the most relied-upon forms of care for younger children in the United States—especially those living in under-resourced communities. Family child care is an attractive option for many parents. Programs are small, usually serving between six and 12 children, and, as the name suggests, feel like an extension of the family. Care is personalized, which promotes communication between parents and educators. This makes family child care programs especially suited for infants and toddlers, because of their need for individualized attention and deep attachments developed in the earliest years.

Family child care is often run by women who speak different languages and come from many different cultures, which families seek when they want their child to be cared for in a cultural and linguistic environment that is the same as the home, or because they want their child to be exposed to new languages and cultures. Educators have training to care for children of mixed ages, which can allow for siblings to be cared for in

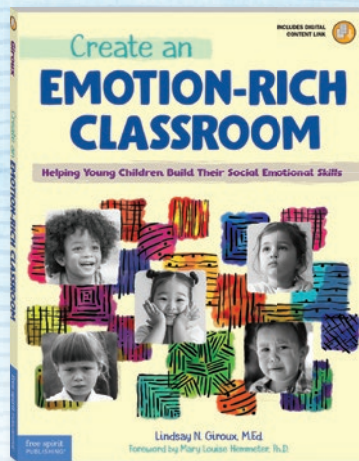
the same space, and younger children to learn from older ones.

There are often many family child care programs in a given geographic area, and the wide range of approaches, personalities, and spaces gives families the flexibility to visit several and choose the one that feels right to them. Family child care programs are located in residential neighborhoods (including urban, suburban, and rural), and are often in the same neighborhoods where their families live, meaning the location is convenient and children can attend consistently without excessive travel.

In the current economy, more and more families have needed to seek employment with non-traditional hours or hours that vary from one week to the next. Family child care acknowledges this reality, and offers flexibility so that children can be cared for whenever their parents are working. In a 2015 national survey of family child care programs, 34 percent reported offering care during non-traditional hours (Administration for Children and Families, 2015). In a similar survey conducted by All Our Kin of its Connecticut and New York-affiliated educators, 46 percent of respondents said they offer non-traditional hour care.

But the biggest strength of family child care, and perhaps the most overlooked, is quality. Family child care's comparative lack of visibility has led to assumptions that home-based programs do not offer quality care. This could not be further from the truth. All Our Kin works with over 1,000 family child care programs. Close to 100 of the educators we work with are NAFCC accredited or are working toward accreditation, which is the gold standard of quality for family child care. And, we have observed the same level of quality in many of the other programs we work with.

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While this kind of care has existed for centuries, states' involvement and oversight are relatively new; the development of regulation in the 20th century has ebbed and flowed in line with changing federal laws and differing societal and political views of the role of women and whether the government should be involved in families' lives.

There has also been a lack of investment. Since 2005, the overall number of family child care programs has declined precipitously, because educators cannot afford to stay in business (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance, 2020). Some states pay very low subsidy rates to family child care programs, and these programs have had limited opportunities to access public and private funding. The median annual income of child care educators before the pandemic was \$24,230, or around \$11.65 per hour, leaving many of these

women straddling the federal poverty line. And for educators who care for children in their homes for over 60 hours per week, their income is far below minimum wage, just \$6.10 per hour.

Sacrifices are not new to child care educators, who are disproportionately women of color. In family child care, the vast majority of educators are women of color who have faced racial, class, gender, and ethnic discrimination. While the entire child care sector for years has been under-recognized and underpaid, this is especially true for the women (and men) who own family child care programs. This country's racial reckoning is providing the context for certain commitments to improve family child care funding and support, and current legislative initiatives have an explicit commitment to equity, which will greatly benefit family child care.

Until then, the burden remains on these educators. In early 2020, as the pandemic raged across the country, licensed family child care educators were offering to support our health care professionals and emergency responders. While almost half of all small businesses temporarily or permanently closed as a result of the pandemic, two-thirds of all licensed family child care businesses remained open, while placing their own health and the health of other family members at risk (Bartik et al., 2020).

“The government asked us to step up and support the essential workers, not realizing for months that we are essential workers,” asserted Rhonda Knowles, owner of Hide and Seek Family Child Care in West Haven, Connecticut.

Just because most family child care businesses remained open did not mean they were not at risk. When the pandemic began, all of the families in Lewis’ program immediately withdrew, leaving her with no income and mounting debt. She scraped by using any available financial assistance, including child care stabilization grants; however, after months of unstable income, she may be forced to close her child care program and secure another job.

Lewis is not alone. One in three family child care educators has experienced at least one material hardship (related to food, housing, utilities, and more) during the pandemic. And 26 percent of these educators reported they did not have enough money to pay for food (RAPID-EC et al., 2021). In this climate, most educators cannot withstand enrollment loss and closure related to COVID-19.

The good news is that there are solutions to bolster family child care educators. First, we need to allocate federal, state, and local resources to

ensure family child care educators can be paid at the true cost of providing high quality care, which is often much higher than the market rate they are currently paid. Their overall compensation needs to allow them to have a living wage, strong health benefits, retirement savings and the ability to build wealth.

Second, we need to invest in family child care educators by providing tailored professional development and peer networking opportunities. Professional development needs to be accessible—offered in the evening or on weekends and in multiple languages—address their dual role as teacher and business owner, incorporate strategies for mixed age groups in a home-based setting, and offer networking and wellness opportunities in light of the isolation educators face in their homes.

For over 22 years, All Our Kin has trained, supported and sustained more than 1,100 family child care educators, including Lewis and Knowles, providing avenues for licensure, early childhood education workshops, and a series on running small businesses. The educators in our networks are incredibly passionate, resourceful, and dedicated, and have built strong, sustainable, small businesses that are pillars in their neighborhoods. Communities can leverage staffed family child care networks to meet the needs of family child care educators, children, and families.

Finally, as the child care field is further professionalized, we need to recognize family child care educator experience and provide accessible options for pursuing higher education. Family child care educators should be included in any systems offering early education and care to children and families. They should have seamless access to contracted slots for early care and education, nurse consultations, mental

and behavioral health supports, and any other resources and services for early childhood educators.

Family child care is a triple win: when family child care thrives, so do children, families, and the economy. When our public policies support a robust, mixed-delivery child care sector that fully includes family child care, parents can go to work with peace of mind, children are safe and learning, and the economy benefits from a reliable workforce, increased tax revenue, and decreased reliance on public assistance. Family child care educators will continue to be there for our youngest children and families. As we build an equitable child care system, family child care must be intentionally included. Otherwise, we risk leaving behind the women who have carried our communities and country for years.

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