

## Licensed Home Child Care: a Good Option for Children with Special Needs

When I speak to people about the possibility of home child care as an option for a child with special needs, I can feel their hesitation. They look at me for a moment with a puzzled expression and then ask questions such as: “Do you think he will learn anything in a home?” “Do you think the provider can handle this child?” Or even: “What will she do besides watch T.V.?” I realize that there are many misconceptions about how licensed home child care works and whether a home can be a positive learning environment. I forget that people don’t see most home child care providers the way I see them: as skilled educators who choose to develop their home as a place for young children to grow and develop in a nurturing, stimulating program.

As part of the City of Toronto Special Needs Resourcing Service (Every child belongs) I provide support and consultation to four Home Child Care agencies. I see children with many different special needs: from Autism to speech and language delays, hearing and visual impairments, social and behavioural difficulties, developmental delays, fine and gross motor difficulties. I have visited more than 60 daycare homes, and in most of them I have seen children thriving and learning in a small environment that is uniquely tailored to their needs, whatever they may be.

Licensed home child care must follow the regulations of the Day Nurseries Act. A provider can care for up to a maximum of five children, following certain ratios. A child with profound special needs is generally considered to be the equivalent of one infant spot. Most providers are required to have training in child development and programming before joining a licensed agency. Once they are working with an agency they are provided ongoing opportunities for professional development through workshops and their relationship with their home child care consultant. The consultant visits each provider on a monthly basis to ensure that the home is in compliance with government regulations but also to monitor the development of the children in the home. The provider can ask questions or raise concerns about the children in her care. The consultant is that extra set of eyes that see where extra supports might be needed.

Most providers develop a daily program schedule including a menu, which is posted in the home. School-readiness and literacy activities, arts and crafts, and outdoor play are an integral part of the home daycare routine. Many providers also take their children to early learning programs in their communities. There the children can develop the social and group interaction skills they need to get ready for school. In addition, in the four agencies I work with, the providers and consultants know I am available to visit when they require extra supports for a child.

Providers really get to know the children they care for as individuals with unique needs. The smaller number and on-going daily contact means that the provider can tailor her approach to each child. She can usually find some time during the day to provide extra one-to-one attention for the child who needs it. This is true for all the children in her home, not just for the child with special needs. One provider who has provided excellent

care for a number of children with special needs told me: “I just need a few weeks to really get to know the child. Then I will know how to best work with him (or her).

The provider also gets to know the family very well and can be flexible in adapting her program to meet their needs as well. She often acts as an additional support for parents, listening to their concerns and providing suggestions for their child. Similarity in cultural backgrounds between provider and family can be an additional basis for a trusting relationship and improved communication. Often in long-term placements, she develops close ties to the child and family. Providers have told me stories about adults whom they cared for as children returning to visit.

Children who often do well in home child care are those who are overwhelmed by busy environments and have difficulties with the number of transitions required in day-care centres. In day-care homes routines can be adapted with fewer transitions than in a day-care centre. External professionals can come into the home and provide suggestions on how to adapt daily routines. In one of the day-care homes, a physiotherapist visited on a weekly basis to provide therapy for an infant with low muscle tone. During the visit, she would also show the provider exercises to do with the child for the rest of the week.

The multi-age grouping can support role-modelling for younger children and children with developmental delays. The child can get to know the other children in the home through daily interactions in a calm, stable environment. Social skills can be practiced on a smaller, more manageable scale.

In Macaulay’s Home Child Care program, before a family is offered a placement for a child whom we know has special needs, the home child care consultant and I discuss the best possible home for this child. Then we meet the family and provider in a preplacement meeting to ensure that everyone’s needs including the provider, family and child are met. When this process occurs, the placement is almost always successful. The provider knows that she can call us when she needs help. The family is aware that we are a resource for them. And we all can work as a team to provide the best possible program for the child.

I started out by saying that I wanted to counter some misperceptions about home child care as an option for children with special needs. But as I have written this article I realize that I am making the case that home child care is a potential option for all children, regardless of their needs. The most important factor in choosing home child care is that it fits the unique needs of the child and family. Families should have options in deciding what is best for them. Licensed home child care is one option among a possible continuum of care for children. Families should be aware that they can make choices in order to best fit their needs.

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