

Presenters: Maeve Milne & Barbara Quinn, NICMA, N.Ireland.

Abstract: Children's Learning and Development Project

In Northern Ireland childminding [Family daycare/Family childcare] is the most popular form of Daycare and yet it is not recognised as a professional childcare service providing care and education to the same standard as other forms of Early Years provision in group settings. Childminders do not:

- work to common standards of practice,
- have mandatory qualifications or training requirements,
- have a regular inspection programme - inspections are, at most, once a year'

Because of this childminders are often perceived as carers rather than educators.

Modern research highlights the benefits of real life learning experiences, continuity of care, key workers and vertical learning, all features of a childminding setting; but, as yet, this has not made a difference to the status of childminders. The **Children's Learning and Development Project** was devised to raise awareness of the educational value of childminding and to identify and promote good practice.

The Project was guided throughout by an external consultant, an advisory group of relevant stakeholders and two focus groups of childminders who gave an excellent balance of both academic and practical support to the Project co-ordinator.

Initially, the consultant produced a report, based on desktop research, which outlined the case for registered childminding to be recognised as providing effective early education. This was followed by field research with the parents, the childminders and the children themselves to establish what was considered good about childminding, what needed to be improved and what the service currently provided. The parents and childminders completed questionnaires but the research with children took the form of a multi-media project where children took photos, used tape recorders and had discussions to give their views on childminding.

From this research a framework was developed, with the help of the focus groups, outlining how childminders should consult with children and observe and record information about children in order to plan effectively for their needs. A toolkit of materials was produced to help with planning and recording information. The materials were designed to focus on the learning experiences and achievements of individual children and to show how plans can be developed using the children's own interests as a starting point. Partnership with parents was emphasised. The toolkit was trialled by the focus groups in their own settings and has been reviewed and commented on by the Department of Education and Health & Social Care Early Years teams before being published.

The NICMA Training team looked at the type of training needed to support those implementing the framework and produced a course suitable for those working with children 0-6 years. They then looked at what sort of qualification this course could lead to and after discussions with the Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE) and the Sector Skills Council for Northern Ireland it was decided that the course could form a unit on the new Qualifications and Credit Framework and would be suitable for all early years workers, not just childminders. Currently CACHE is looking at accrediting the course and offering it as a stand alone unit on the Framework, with a credit value of six. It would then be available throughout the UK and Ireland.

The project has been very exciting throughout but probably the most interesting part has been the developments in the training course showing the links between childminding and other forms of Daycare and giving due recognition to the professionalism of all those working in early years.

NICMA – the Childminding Association is a membership organisation and charity working to promote and develop quality home-based childcare across the whole of Northern Ireland for the benefit of children, families and communities. It is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland with 74% of registered childminders as members.