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Introduction to Family Child Care Marketing

The Profession of Family Child Care

Family child care is a profession. It is a unique profession that requires a wide variety of skills: teacher, protector, cook, chauffeur, bookkeeper, organizer, and much, much more. It is a job that hundreds of thousands of women and men perform because they love children and they want to support their own family. When we talk about a family child care professional, we are not referring to a babysitter. A babysitter is someone who watches children (usually from just one family) for a few hours in the evening while the parents are away from home at a movie or social event. A family child care provider is someone who is in the business of teaching and nurturing young children to reach their highest potential, usually for more than 50 hours a week, year-round. A provider is intentional about planning activities and helping meet the individual, changing needs of the children in care. This is no easy job.

At its heart, family child care is about the very personal relationship between a caregiver, a child, and the child's family. This home-centered, personal relationship is what makes family child care so special. At the same time, providers must also care for their own physical and emotional needs in order to be able to continue offering this unique service. In the long run, providers must learn to balance the personal and business side of their profession to be successful.

Being a family child care professional means being in control of your business. You are responsible for setting your own rates and hours, and deciding who your customers will be and what type of curriculum you will offer. Before you care for your first child, you should decide what kind of business you want to have. This is one of the best parts of being self-employed. You are the boss! You are free to set your own rules (with the narrow exception of illegal-discrimination laws) and change them

whenever you want. Because of this, you should make choices that will make you happy. It doesn't make sense to set up your business, successfully market it to customers, and then quit a year later because you were unhappy with how little you made, or because you didn't like the fact that you had no paid vacation time. If you have been in business for a few years and haven't thought carefully about what you want, it is never too late to do so. Once you have defined what you want as a business, marketing becomes a very powerful ally for you. If you are not in control of your business, marketing it will not make things better.

This book focuses on family child care marketing. Although it discusses marketing in business language (**finder's fee**, promotions, competition, and so on), providers should understand that there is no contradiction between offering a high-quality home-based program and marketing it as a business. In fact, a comprehensive national study about the quality of family child care concluded that providers are more likely to rank higher on objective measures of quality if they follow standard business practices and charge higher rates! (See "The Study of Children in Family Child Care and Relative Care" as cited in the Appendix.)

Nothing in this book should be taken to mean that to be successful marketers of their businesses, providers must adopt negative business trappings such as cutthroat competition, high-pressure sales tactics, the worship of bigger and bigger profits, or a win-lose mentality. We believe that all providers can achieve success in marketing their business while keeping the casual, homey, friendly, warm, and professional aspects of their program.

We recognize that for some providers, marketing their business presents special challenges. We live in a society where discrimination based on race, sex, religion, class, disability, sexual orientation, and ethnic background still exists. In addition, a limited educational background or lack of access to support agencies and community services can sometimes, but not always, create barriers to success for providers. This book does not attempt to offer answers to how providers can overcome these barriers of discrimination and lack of opportunity. We do believe that all family child care providers can exercise a measure of pride and control over how they run their own business by following some of the ideas presented in this book.

What Is Family Child Care Marketing?

Simply stated, family child care marketing is how you communicate the benefits of your program to parents who might use your services. Many family child care providers think that marketing is advertising. It is much more. Marketing is

- Defining your service (How is my program meeting the needs of children and parents?)

- Pricing your service (What is my time worth?)
- Promoting your service (How do I tell others about my program?)

This book will cover all of these points and more.

The goal of marketing is to reach parents and compel them to purchase your services. To do this you need to focus on meeting the needs of parents and their children. Parents want a safe, high-quality provider for their children that will enable them to work and support their family. Providers must keep the needs of parents and children foremost in their minds. This book will help you identify the needs of parents and children and how you can meet them.

Many providers think about marketing only when they have an opening to fill. Marketing is not something to do just when you're starting your business or when you have an opening. It is not something to stop doing once you have a waiting list, because one or more of your families could leave without notice. It should be conducted every year you are in business. Successful marketing is about keeping your current clients happy and offering the kind of care your future clients will want.

Marketing your child care program is a never-ending process. As time passes, the needs of parents change. Twenty years ago, few parents were seeking care for their infants because they stayed home to care for them. Today infant care is in great demand because of the tremendous increase in single-parent and dual-career families. It is important to keep up with changing needs in the child care field so your program will be successful in the future. This means asking a lot of questions of other individuals and organizations that can help you market your program. We will show you how to work with other organizations and individuals such as **Child Care Resource and Referral agencies, child care regulators, competitors**, employers, and more in chapter 7.

Marketing and the Quality of Child Care

Operating a high-quality child care program is the foundation of all your marketing efforts. You may be able to attract parents to your program through your promotional efforts, but without a quality program you won't be able to keep them. Many family child care providers go out of business each year, in large part because they weren't offering high-quality care. Providers who use this book should always keep in mind that what they are marketing is their high-quality program, not their house, their backyard, or their computer. A high-quality program means child-centered activities, nutritious meals, individual care, and a safe, homey environment run by a trained caregiver. Part of your marketing job is to help educate parents about what high-quality child care looks like. (See the Skills list in the Appendix.) Chapter 2 describes how to identify and communicate the benefits of your program so parents will understand why they should enroll their child with you.

Providers should understand that a high-quality program also includes paying attention to your work environment and what you need to be able to run a stable business that can offer the consistent care children need. Work environment issues include your income, paid vacations, holidays, and sick days, backup help, regular professional development training, written contracts and policies, and more. The Center for the Child Care Workforce has developed model work standards for family child care providers. See Other Resources in the Appendix.

Future Trends in the Child Care Field

The child care field has experienced tremendous change in the last 20 years, and it will likely undergo significant changes in the future. In the last few years studies have shown that the percentage of children enrolling in regulated family child care homes has declined slowly while the percentage of children enrolling in child care centers, as well as in unregulated in-home care, is growing. In part, this is due to the failure of providers to use the power of marketing to promote their profession. What are some trends we might expect to see? Although it is largely a matter of guesswork, here are some possible trends that will affect your program:

- Competition from other child care programs will continue to increase. There will be more regulated family child care homes, child care centers, nursery schools, employer-sponsored centers, school-age programs, and other competitors.
- There will be more competition from providers who are exempt from state regulations. These providers tend to charge lower fees.
- There will be more competition from large child care centers. These centers, often part of larger corporations or for-profit chains, will have money to spend on mass media advertising and expensive facilities.
- With expanded child care choices, parents will demand more and more from their caregivers, such as longer hours, more flexible schedules, more individual attention for their child, or access to new technology. If one program won't meet their needs, parents will be more likely to leave and enroll in another program.
- There will be a greater demand for more specialized child care services: sick care, drop-in care, weekend and evening care, care for children with a wide range of physical and mental abilities, and more. It will become harder and harder to operate a program that serves only preschoolers, Monday through Friday, 7 A.M. to 6 P.M.
- As competition grows, more child care programs will close down because of financial pressures. Most family child care providers operate with a very small profit. With few expenses to cut, any loss of enrollment will quickly create a financial emergency. Providers will have to learn how to plan for the ups and downs of enrollment.

- It will take longer to fill child care openings. This means providers will have to spend more time and money on advertising and promoting their program.
- Child care programs that have good business skills and the ability to communicate with parents will be more likely to succeed.
- Although the overall demand for child care will continue to grow slowly, the greatest growth in the population of children under the age of six will be from children of non-Caucasian origin.
- There will be more children in child care from single-parent households.
- There will be an increase in the number of family child care associations, networks, and support groups. Those not a part of these groups will find it more difficult to be visible to potential customers.
- More parents will be looking for objective standards of quality when they are choosing a child care program. They will want programs that can demonstrate that they are educating their children.
- Welfare reform is here to stay. Its impact on family child care could be contradictory. In some states it will mean more government regulations such as training requirements. In other states it may undermine existing regulations.

These trends indicate why marketing is so important to family child care providers. Because providers operate out of private homes and are largely invisible to parents, they have a special challenge when they try to market their program. Child care centers and school-age programs operate out of clearly identifiable buildings and storefronts that are easy to find. This book will help providers to be a little more creative than their competition and thus become more visible to parents.

Getting Started

What if you wanted to become a family child care provider but knew absolutely nothing about running a family child care business? How would you begin to find out what you needed to know to be successful? Here are the first steps you should probably take:

- 1) Find out what parents want from their child care provider. Talk to parents who now use child care or are looking for child care.
- 2) Identify who are the best providers in your area and meet with them to learn how they do it. Ask a provider to be your mentor. Volunteer to work in another provider's home for a few days.
- 3) Approach the organizations that work with providers and ask their staff what they know about what makes a successful provider.
- 4) Get training in child development from a local school or through your **Child Care Resource and Referral agency**.

- 5) Contact your local **family child care association** and ask if you can join or at least attend the meetings.
- 6) Based on what you've learned, define the type of program you want to offer, describe how it will meet the needs of families, and start telling everyone about it!

We hope that this book will help you take these steps for your business. Whether you are just starting out or have been in business for many years, these basic steps will be helpful.

About This Book

This book contains a wealth of marketing tips and suggestions, but not all family child care providers have the same need for these ideas. If you are just starting out, you may need to fill four to six openings, whereas if you have been in business awhile you probably only need to fill one or two openings at a time. Do not attempt to try all of the marketing ideas in this book. If you are looking to fill one opening, start small. See page 112 for 10 low-cost marketing tips. It is not necessary to make extraordinary efforts at marketing. Many providers gain new clients based strictly on word-of-mouth from their current clients. Such providers should focus on marketing to current clients (see chapter 4). Other providers may need to spend much more time and money on marketing and will want to use more of the ideas in this book. Many of the marketing ideas presented here may be best carried out by family child care associations and other support networks. You may want to present some of these ideas to your group for them to implement on behalf of its members. This book is meant to be used selectively over a long period of time.

This book can help you if you are just starting out or if you have many years of experience. It discusses how to market to prospective clients (chapter 3) and current clients (chapter 4). It includes many ideas about how to promote your program if you have little money (chapter 5) or if you have a lot of money (chapter 6). It identifies the key organizations to approach that can help you market (chapter 7). It has a lengthy discussion of how to set your rates (chapter 8). It also offers some answers to questions about how to compete against a fancy new child care center and against unregulated providers (chapter 9). Finally, the Appendix contains samples of forms and checklists you can use as part of your marketing program.

Not every idea in this book will appeal to every provider. We encourage providers to think carefully about how much marketing is necessary for their business. We do not encourage providers to adopt dozens of new marketing tips at the expense of spending less time caring for children. Not every idea will work in your community. Sometimes the same marketing idea that failed this year will succeed next year. This book does not offer an in-depth marketing plan for your business. It is meant to be a

practical guide that gives you the tools you need to develop your own marketing plan. Marketing involves not so much science as common sense that everyone can apply. The lists of ideas in this book may seem overwhelming to some, at first glance. We do not expect you to follow every idea presented in this book, but we hope you will be open to trying something new. After trying out several ideas, be sure to evaluate their impact (chapter 10) so that you can refocus your next marketing plan. To help you sort through all of the ideas in this book we have included an Annual Marketing Calendar in the Appendix, which can help you plan your marketing program throughout the year.

Throughout this book we often use the words *customer* and *client* to describe the parents who use your services. We know that some providers are uncomfortable using these words in their business. We believe that, for purposes of this guide, using these words helps to keep the focus on parent needs. We are not suggesting that all providers must market their program in the same way. Far from it! It is up to you to run your business however you want. We believe that all providers can do a better job by following the suggestions in this book that make the most sense to them. The time to start marketing your program is now. You may find out that it can also be fun!

Tax Tip

The costs of all the marketing ideas listed in this book are tax-deductible expenses for your business. This includes the cost to

- Mail your newsletter.
- Take pictures of the children in your care.
- Purchase business cards.
- Buy an answering machine.
- Buy this book!
- And much more.

This book identifies over 100 business expenses. Keep the receipt for any item you buy to help you market your business. Such business marketing expenses should be entered on your IRS Form Schedule C (Profit or Loss From Your Business), under the Advertising Expense line. This is the same whether you are regulated or exempt from regulations.

For more information about what's deductible as a business expense, see *The Basic Guide to Family Child Care Record Keeping* by Tom Copeland, published by Redleaf Press, 800-423-8309.