



Building Generations of Care

A Conversation with Annette Eberhart

by Andrea Maldonado



Andrea Maldonado is a seasoned professional with over 15 years of expertise in family child care and early childhood education.

Andrea has been a steadfast advocate for family child care educators, demonstrating a deep commitment to their professional growth as leaders and entrepreneurs. Andrea brings a wealth of experience in program development, workforce development, and leadership coaching. As the

Director of Quality Assessment and Recognition at the National

Association for Family Child Care, she champions family child care educators and leaders, and ensuring they receive the recognition they deserve for their crucial role in the child care system.

Andrea has a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology and various credentials and certifications in family child care and early childhood development. She brings a passion for elevating standards aligned with the needs of family child care educators. Andrea is not just a professional leader; she is also a wife and mother of two children who have experienced first-hand the love and warmth of a mixed-aged home-based program.



Annette Eberhart is a distinguished author and advocate in early childhood education. She has five published books and 18 years of experience as a Family Childcare Educator. Since 2011, her nationally accredited childcare program has set a standard of excellence, creating positive interactions that support children's growth and development. A leader in her field, she engages children in techniques to enhance language development in young learners.

Annette serves on the NAFCC Accreditation Council, ensuring excellence in early childhood care, and contributes to the Florida Interagency Coordinating Council for Infants and Toddlers, shaping policies that support early development. As the Provider Representative for The Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County, she supports the needs of educators and families. As Professional Development Coordinator for the Florida Family Childcare Home Association, she empowers educators through training initiatives.

Beyond her professional roles, Annette is a speaker and workshop presenter on various topics in the educational profession. She is also a dedicated advocate, consistently elevating the voices of children, educators, and families. Her commitment to excellence and innovation continues to shape the future of early childhood education.

For more than a decade, Annette Eberhart, owner of Kidds R Us Family Childcare in Tampa, Florida, has been a cornerstone of her community, providing high-quality, home-based child care that meets the needs of families with nontraditional work schedules. As a NAFCC (National Association for Family Child Care)-accredited provider, Annette is committed to fostering a nurturing, family-oriented environment where children thrive—an approach that is deeply personal, as she has cared for multiple generations within her own family, including her granddaughter.

In this Q&A, Annette shares her journey into early childhood education, the joys and challenges of running an intergenerational child care program, and how NAFCC accreditation has transformed her approach. Her story highlights the critical role of family child care educators in shaping young lives and the lasting impact they have on the families they serve.

Can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your program?

I'm Annette Eberhart, and I own Kidds R Us Family Childcare in Tampa, Florida. We're open 24/7—sometimes six days a week, depending on the need. I chose to offer these hours because I saw that there was a real need for child care that accommodates different work schedules. I used to be one of those parents who struggled to find quality care after 6p.m., so when I started my program, I wanted to make sure I could offer that flexibility for families.

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I'm originally from Stamford, Connecticut, and I'm the proud mom of three amazing kids and the grandmother to a beautiful granddaughter. And just this past Christmas, I found out I'm going to have a grandson, which is super exciting! I've always been really connected to early childhood education. My mom was a preschool teacher in Stamford for years, and my sister has been teaching elementary school in Maryland for over 25 years. Growing up, I got to see the incredible impact that quality early childhood education has on kids and families, and it's something I've always been passionate about.

What motivates you to continue in this work?

I have three kids, and at the time, my oldest was 18, so I pretty much started over when I had my youngest. With the older two, I had a lot of support from my "village," but with my youngest, I didn't have that, and I really wanted to be there for her. I didn't want to miss out on those important milestones. At the time, I was working for Capital One, but they were outsourcing, and one of my co-workers had started her own child care program. When I started working the third shift, I would get to her program around lunchtime, just before nap time, and I'd read stories to the kids to spend some quality time with them. She noticed how well I connected with the kids and said, "You're really good at this!" And you know, she was right. That's what got me thinking about starting my own program.

I had a small ranch-style home, so I converted the entire house—living room, dining room—into classrooms for the kids. I even sold all my furniture to make it work, but I was determined, and we opened our doors. What motivates me to keep going is simple: Every day, I'm not just caring for kids—I'm helping lay the foundation for their love of learning. That's what keeps me inspired.

Can you explain how you're currently caring for your grandchild within your program?

My granddaughter, Nova, has been with us since birth, and she's 6 years old now. It's really special because I'm the first person she gets to see when she finishes school. I get to hear all about her day, and I love that I'm the one she comes to share those moments with. It's truly amazing for me to be so involved in her life and her development, especially in the environment I've created here at the program.

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How does this two-generational aspect shape your approach to early childhood education and care?

It can be a bit challenging at times because I want to make sure I'm giving the same level of attention and care to all the children, just like I do for Nova. But there are moments when she needs a little more encouragement or attention, especially when she wants to share something with "Gigi" (that's what all the kids call me). Even though I try to give everyone what they need, I also believe every child needs something different from me.

That was something I really had to work through when my youngest was in my care. We had conversations after the other children had gone home, where she'd ask, "Why do I get hugs, but the other kids don't get them?" or "Why can't I have a special treat all to myself?" I explained that we treat everyone equally. There were definitely one-on-one moments where I could be a little more lenient with her, but overall, I had to make sure the rules applied to everyone. It's all about fairness.

In our program, we're very family-oriented, and my daughters have worked with me in the past, so the children see the whole family unit working together. My youngest daughter, who's now a teacher in a different county, still brings that energy into the work she does. My son also picks up my granddaughter, and she gets to share stories with all of her friends from the program. It's really special that they all get to see how we come together as a family to support one another and care for the children.

Running a child care program out of your home must come with its own challenges. Can you talk about how your family adjusted to having the program in your living space and how it has impacted your approach to child care?

It's definitely been a big adjustment for my family. When we first started, my older kids had to sacrifice their living space. The living room and dining room were transformed into classrooms, and the kitchen area was no longer just for family meals—it was part of the program, too. I had to explain to them that this was something I really wanted to do—not only to be there for their sister but for other children in the community as well.

At first, it was tough, but as they watched me "work my magic," as I like to call it, they began to understand. They became part of the process, and it really turned into an energy exchange. There were definitely frustrating moments, though—like when they'd be woken up by a crying child or when the door was constantly opening and closing because we operate 24/7. Even my good friends who'd come to visit would get a taste of the late-night arrivals and early morning pickups. But even with those challenges, the reward of being an early educator in the family child care environment is so much greater.

One of the things I love most about this work is the opportunity to see all the different parenting styles—whether it's grandparents raising kids, fathers doing it on their own, or couples working together. It's truly amazing. And what I love most is the intentionality behind it. There are a lot of people who provide child care because they have to, but



Photo credit: Annette Eberhart



Photo credit: Annette Eberhart

when you're passionate and intentional about it, the difference it makes is huge. It's not just about caring for children—it's about creating a family-like environment that makes a real impact.

How different do you think your journey as a child care professional would have been if you did not have your daughters and now your grandchild involved in the space?

I think it would have been a lot different. I've grown so much in my profession, and honestly, I couldn't have done any of it without the support of my family. Having them be a part of my dream and vision has been essential. It wasn't something I asked permission for; I just told them what I was going to do and explained why. They've been on board from the start, and I don't always tell them enough how much I appreciate that. So, thank you, Andrea. I'll make sure to tell them that when I get home! But seriously, I don't think I could have accomplished everything I have without their support. It's made all the difference in how far I've come in this work.

You mentioned how rewarding it is to see children you have cared for now bringing their own kids to your program. Can you talk a bit more about what that means to you?

It's incredibly rewarding, and it's such a special feeling when parents bring their kids back after all these years. Sometimes, I don't even recognize them because they've grown up so much, but then they bring their own children to me, and I know they trust me to care for their little ones. When they say they don't want to go anywhere else, that's a huge badge of honor. It speaks to my integrity and the quality care I provide.

I try to be direct with parents when I need to be, but they understand that it's all coming from a place of love. I want to see the kids be their absolute best. I don't mean perfect—perfection is never the goal—but I do expect the same level of commitment from the parents. It takes a village, and I can't implement intentional learning here at the program and then have things completely different when the kids go home. We have to be on the same page, and sometimes that means having difficult conversations. Those conversations can be challenging, but they're necessary to make sure everyone is aligned for the child's well-being.

Can you share more about the journey your career and leadership in early childhood education has taken and where you are now?

When I first started, I was in that mindset like anyone starting a new job. You get licensed, then you're told to get your CDA because that's the next step, and once you do that, opportunities open up—directorships, more responsibility, and of course, higher pay. Just like in a corporate setting, as you rise through the ranks, you feel more validated, both in terms of your skills and financially.

For me, a huge turning point came when I got involved with the NAFCC and went to their national conference. That was a game-changer. I suddenly realized that there was a whole

nation of people who shared my passion for early childhood education. Being part of that community, with an organization that truly understood the value we bring to our communities, felt empowering. That experience sparked a major shift in me, and I wanted to be involved with NAFCC in any way I could.

Beyond that, I've kept pushing myself to grow. When I started in the field, I had a degree in computer networking, which I quickly realized wasn't my passion. I'd never worked in that field, and once I discovered my true

calling as an educator, I decided to pursue my associate's and bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. Now, I'm even thinking about furthering my education, though I'm still figuring out the next step.

What's important to me is that I keep learning, and I lead by example—not just for the children, but for my peers too. I believe that as early educators, we're more than what people typically see. Because we're often home-based and working with children, we don't always get the same recognition or respect as other educators. But I think if we don't have the platform to speak up, we can let our actions do the talking. Continuing education is a big part of that—it builds the confidence to take a stand, speak up, and show people the value we bring.

As an educator who has been in the workforce for many years, can you share more about the perception of family child care educators and what people might not know about home-based education?

Before I even entered this space as an educator, I didn't know much about family child care either. I think when



Photo credit: Annette Eberhart

most people hear “child care,” they automatically think of centers, and that’s the common perception. A lot of people think that those of us who provide care in our homes are just babysitters, and that we’re not really offering quality education—but that couldn’t be further from the truth.

In reality, we have structured curriculums just like schools, and we go through a rigorous licensing process to ensure that we’re providing safe, quality care. We are accountable, and many of us also offer subsidized care through early learning coalitions to make child care more accessible.

There’s so much more to home-based education than what people often realize. And I think it’s up to us, the family child care educators, as well as the organizations that support us, to help shift that perception. We need to share what we really do—how we’re not just caring for children, but also laying the foundation for their learning, development, and future success.

How do you keep families and the broader community engaged and informed about your program and the challenges facing the child care field?

I communicate with families about everything. When they enroll in my program, I want them to know that I’m deeply involved in the community. Whether it’s through advocacy or attending meetings, I make sure they understand it’s not just about child care—it’s about making changes in the field. Even if everyone isn’t ready to speak up, showing up in numbers makes a difference. I encourage parents to attend board meetings or join virtual meetings that may impact our field.

I also engage them in the program itself. For example, we have a garden, and I invite families to be part of that. We hold parent conferences and keep them updated on any changes or issues affecting our field. Child care impacts everyone, so I make sure they understand the broader challenges we’re facing. It’s not just about us—it’s about the entire community. I remind them that we’re caring for their most precious little ones, and we need them to stand up with us.

The struggles in child care—whether it’s wages, insurance, or the closing of businesses—affect everyone. We have to speak up, and when we do it collectively, we can make a difference. Legislators sometimes don’t understand what’s happening behind closed doors, and by raising awareness, we can make real change. I see this happening through NAFCC as well. Every time I turn on LinkedIn or Facebook, there’s something new about it. That visibility and support are huge for us.

I believe true quality comes from building strong relationships with the families.

How does family support play a role in your two-generation approach, and how do you ensure you foster inclusivity and openness with the families you serve?

Family support is crucial in my two-generational approach because, without the families, I don’t have a program to serve. I’m intentional about providing high-quality care, and I believe true quality comes from building strong relationships with the families. I focus on being inclusive, ensuring that all families feel seen, heard, and valued. My program is diverse, and I naturally attract families who appreciate that inclusivity. It’s important to me to create an open environment where families feel comfortable, and I’m even willing to be vulnerable at times. Sometimes, families need that kind of openness too, and it strengthens the bond we share.

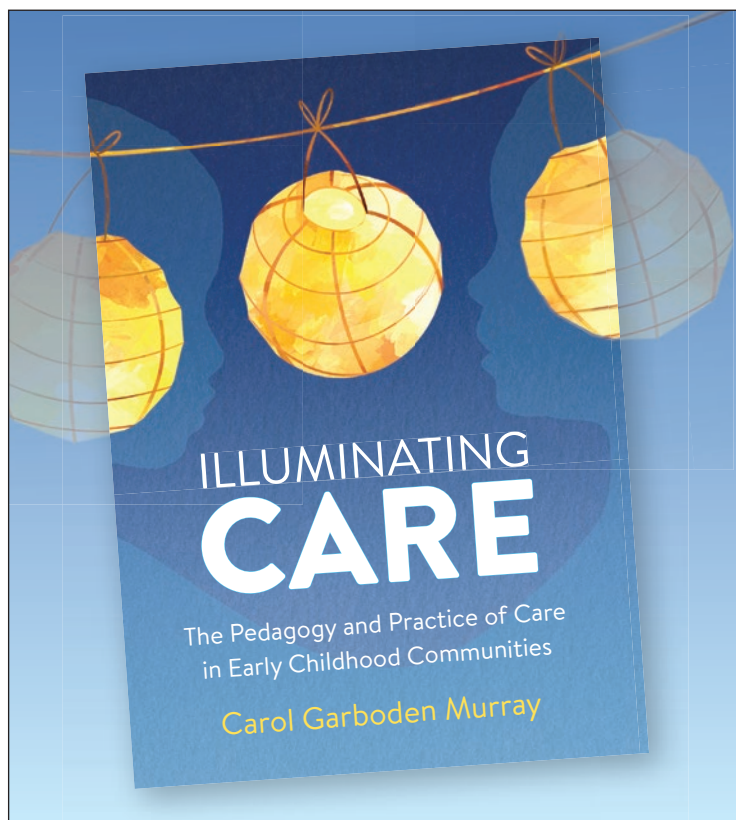
What impact do you think a family notices when they see you in your program, and do you think they perceive that as a benefit?

I do believe families see this as a benefit, especially when they notice the love and care I put into my program. Many grandparents, like “big mamas” or grandmas, know the kind of love they give to their grandchildren. When they see me offering that same level of care to their children, it brings everything full circle. Some parents even call me “Gigi,” and while I laugh, it’s a sign that they feel that deep connection. It’s incredibly rewarding.

This work began with love for children and a desire to help my community, and I think families feel that when they step into the program. They tell me they feel the good energy in the space. One of my children’s parents even mentioned at a family event that they could feel the love and energy I bring, which was such a heartwarming compliment. It’s nice to know that they see and appreciate the care we provide.

What advice would you give to an educator who’s considering creating an intergenerational program or introducing intergenerational elements into their program?

My advice would be to set clear expectations and boundaries while embracing the beauty of multiple generations learning together. Lean into the strengths that come with having a family dynamic in your program, but also ensure fairness and structure for all children. It’s about creating a balance where everyone feels valued and supported, while maintaining an organized environment.



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As both a grandparent and an educator, how do you balance your personal and professional life? What keeps you inspired to continue in this work?

I stay grounded by remembering my why. I'm passionate about early childhood education, and every day, I see the difference I'm making in children's lives. Seeing their joy, curiosity, and confidence grow keeps me inspired. I also prioritize self-care by setting aside time for myself to recharge, ensuring that I can continue giving my best to the children and families I serve. My advice would be to keep evolving, working within your means, and never give up. Keep pushing forward.

What's next in your program? Are there any new initiatives or ideas that you're interested in exploring in the coming years?

Looking ahead, I'm excited about expanding the ways I continue to support families beyond the traditional classroom setting. I want to explore more opportunities for parent

education, provide professional mentorship for new family child care educators, and find innovative ways to integrate community resources into my program. My goal is not only to continue providing high-quality care but also to be an advocate for family child care educators and help elevate the profession as a whole.

Final Thoughts

Annette Eberhart's journey highlights the power of family child care and the impact of intergenerational relationships in early childhood education. Through her dedication, she has created a program that nurtures not just children but entire families, reinforcing the invaluable role of family child care educators in shaping future generations. Her experience with NAFCC accreditation serves as a testament to the importance of continuous learning, professional development, and advocacy in ensuring high-quality care for young children.



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