



RICHARD GIRARD and LISA GREAVES

## Co-operative, Non-profit and Participatory: How Parents and Child Care Support Each Other

**W**hen we think about moving to another city the thing that keeps us in Ottawa isn't that we can walk everywhere, the culture, our friends, the great jobs we have or our proximity to Gatineau Park. It's our daycare.

Our son started at the Glebe Parents Day Care when he was 15 months old. Our daughter started at nine months. We feel incredibly lucky to have access to a daycare that feels like a second home, not just for our kids, but for us as well.

The Glebe Parents Day Care started in the 1970s as a parent-operated daycare in the basement of a local community center. As the daycare grew it moved into its own building where it remains today. It now has over 10 programs with 230 children ranging in age from infant up to school-aged. The Glebe Parents Day Care is a non-profit center governed by a committee structure that involves parent and staff volunteers. This cooperative structure requires parents to be involved in the daycare at many levels.

Numerous committees deal with the daycare's finances, policy and procedures, personnel and health and safety issues as well as fundraising and political action initiatives. These committees — which report directly to a board of directors made of parents, staff and members of the community — have regular

## OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

monthly meetings to discuss important decisions regarding the direction of the daycare. The board considers recommendations from the committee representatives and makes decisions using a consensus-based model. Over 30 staff members manage the day-to-day operations of the centre.

While any cooperatively-run organization has its share of challenges, the model used by the Glebe Parents Day Care encourages parents to participate in the decision making process and to take ownership over their child's daycare. We leave the

caregiving to the experts and help out when and where we can.

Parent participation is key to the daycare's success and our roles at the daycare play an important role.

**Knowing that our children are being cared for by incredibly talented and experienced workers with high job satisfaction assures us that we are getting the best care available.**

Over the years we have held positions of Treasurer, Personnel committee chair and Chair of the Board. Our experiences in these positions have been at times challenging and time-consuming, but have always been personally rewarding. We feel that this structure allows parents to actively work toward making the daycare a great environment for our children and a vibrant place to work.

The staff at our daycare, on average, has been there for over 20 years. They are unionized and work in a non-hierarchical environment. Given the complete lack of a well-defined, regulated and publicly-funded child care system in this country, we are lucky that our children are cared for by people who make a living wage. Knowing that our children are being cared for by incredibly talented and experienced workers with high job satisfaction assures us that we are getting the best care available. This is one of the things that non-profit unionized child care brings — peace of mind.

In addition, interaction with our children's caregivers through our day-to-day interactions and working relationships on committees creates a real sense that a community of people is helping us raise our children. The men and women who work with our kids have helped us to be better parents. They provide the wisdom of years of education and experience to help us figure out why our kids are behaving in funny ways. They offer us sugges-

tions on how to modify our behaviour to support our kids through difficult times.

These people have become our friends. We are privileged to know the workers at the Glebe Parents Day Care and to know that they care for and love our kids in a way that can only be called like “family”. The opportunity to volunteer at the daycare and collaborate with the staff creates a strong sense of family that is incredibly positive. They encourage us when we feel like we are failing; they cheer our successes and cry with us when times are tough.

For example, we were worried that kids in the preschool room were saying to each other “you’re my friend and you’re my friend”, and not saying it to our son. When we expressed concern the staff assured us that it was a stage that they all go through in the room, and that it would go away. They say to the kids “we are all friends here”. Now that our daughter is in the preschool room, we are hearing it again, but this time we don’t worry.

And when one of the families’ newborn kids had to have emergency surgery, Wendy who works in the toddler room didn’t hesitate to take his older sister home until her parents could pick her up.

Potty training, hitting, biting, whining, baby talk, sleep deprivation — all the things we struggled with as first-time parents — our friends at the daycare have helped us through, ultimately making us better parents.

It is with this spirit of mutual help and respect that our daycare operates and succeeds in providing high quality care. Our involvement in the cooperative structure of the daycare provides us with the opportunity to not only give back, but to participate in the warm, friendly and participatory governance of our child care provider. We see it as a gift to be able to be so closely involved in the most important stages of development in the lives of our son and daughter.

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**Lisa Greaves** owns *Octopus Books* ([www.octopusbooks.org](http://www.octopusbooks.org)), a progressive bookstore. **Richard Girard** is a researcher at the *Polaris Institute* ([www.polarisinstitute.org](http://www.polarisinstitute.org)). They live in Ottawa with their son and daughter and spend a lot of time at the *Glebe Parents Day Care*.