

# Education through NATURE IMMERSION

The motto “practice creates competence” is one Ali Fleming lives by.

**A**s a Family day care educator in the suburbs of Adelaide this philosophy reflects Ali's passion to support the children in her care to grow through their own strengths and competencies, rather than in comparison to their peers. As she explains, “We know that all children develop at their own pace. One size doesn't fit all.”

In fact finding the right fit for each individual child is what inspired Ali to begin her career as a family day care educator. After working as a nanny in both South Africa and Australia, then later completing a Diploma in Children's Services and working her way up to Assistant Director in a number of child care centres, Ali began a scholarship at the University of South Australia studying a Bachelor of Education.

Juggling study and the demands of a single parent with two small children, Ali began her journey to find child care that supported their needs and her schedule. As she delved into what family day care offered, the more she learned about how family day care supports small groups of children to develop and grow, in ways that she believes are not possible when they're in a larger group.

“At kindy I would teach ninety children across the week and feel that it's impossible to know them all. As a family day care educator I realised that I could care for and

educate just twelve children across the week.”

“A secure attachment and a secure relationship in primary care for young learners especially, means that children are more likely to attempt new things because they



Ali with her children Rose and Jack.

feel they have a safe place to test their limits.”

This growth mindset informs Ali's approach to teaching, and she places emphasis on growing holistically – linking physical, social and emotional, and cognitive development.

Nature immersion is the way Ali contextualises this approach, and she and the children in her care have a conversation each day about what they would like to learn about and where that might be, passing a vote. Luckily there is a local wetland, a creek and many parks at their fingertips but Ali says that her own front and back yards are equally adaptable to the children's needs.

As Ali says, “I don't have an enormous space but it's as important for me to have a diverse and exciting learning space as it is for my children. My front yard is north facing which we enjoy in winter and we have a deck and pergola out the back for shade in summer, so we can set up activities outdoors all through the year.”

Within Ali's home environment on any given day children could be involved in learning from an ever evolving collection of loose parts, ideating and creating on a making table, interacting with Ali's family chickens, exploring the mud digging pit or cultivating the vegetable garden. Cooking with home grown vegetables is often also on the agenda to encourage children to try

new experiences and to value the food they've helped grow.

When they venture beyond the front gate a day of learning could mean counting monarch butterflies, climbing trees, mapping their journeys and monitoring the growth of tadpoles.

Ali offers age appropriate learning experiences that are contextual, with nature immersion underpinning excellence in education. Through graphing, comparing, and problem solving, both numeracy and literacy are developed with her children. In addition, by giving children different leadership roles in activities Ali sees their trust in themselves and others grow too.



Ali is focused on her role in facilitating their learning and development capacity.

“Although I am the leader of the group I want the children to be in charge of their own learning. Their growth and agency exists in attempting new things with my support and assistance.”

The competence Ali channels in the children in her care is achieved by encouraging them to reflect on their own abilities, to extend and expand on these, stretching themselves to suit their individual strengths.

## It's clear that Ali's philosophy resonates with the children in her care (and their families)...

It's clear that Ali's philosophy resonates with the children in her care and their families, who have responded overwhelmingly positively to her motto, rewarding

her with numerous nominations as Family Day Care Australia Educator of the Year.

Summing her attitude up Ali says, “It's about connection and partnerships, family day care allows me not just to connect with the children but also with their families.”

Ali's dedication and connections to children in her care and their families demonstrates a true sense of what the meaning of Belonging, Being and Becoming is all about.

**Thank you to Ali and the South Australian Department of Education for sharing this story.**

