



Adrienne Briggs

Licensed Family Child Care Provider
and Owner/Operator of Lil' Bits Family Child
Care in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania Can't Work Without Her

"I've been doing this for 31 years. I've gone from being a person who just wanted to take care of my children to getting a master's degree in early childhood education. Now I'm a business woman, an accountant, a social worker, a counselor, an organizer, a leader, and 900 other things that a professional home-based provider has to be in order to succeed." – Adrienne Briggs

Morning is playtime and learning time at Lil' Bits Family Child Care where Adrienne Briggs circles up four children ranging in age from 6 months to 5 years, the littlest one on her lap. Briggs has been honing her profession since the early '90s. In fact, some of the parents who entrust their children to her for up to 60 hours per week are former students. "The families I serve are my partners in raising their kids," she says. "They know I am here for them as well as their children. What we have is like a family bond, strengthened by memories, a lot of history, and love for our kids."

One of the real benefits of home-based childcare according to Briggs is the family atmosphere in which children learn to get along and help each other. "I cannot imagine working with just one age group. With a mix of ages, each child learns empathy and compassion and responsibility for others. They develop into leaders. They learn to cooperate, be patient and wait their turn. Something as simple as getting the baby's bottle or picking up trash is a way for them to learn how to be a valuable member of a community."

Adrienne loves her work and the impact she has on kids and their families, but says the child care business is also isolating, burdened with regulation, and underpaid. She's experienced this firsthand and also hears it from many other home-based providers who look to her as a mentor. "I've been doing this for 31 years. I've gone from being a person who just wanted to take care of my children to getting a master's degree in early childhood education. Now I'm a business woman, an accountant, a social worker, a counselor, an organizer, a leader, and 900 other things that a professional home-based provider has to be in order to succeed."

One of the many hats Briggs wears is cofounder and co-leader of [Quality Influential Professionals](#), a network of more than 80 licensed home-based caregivers who provide crucial peer support to one another and advocate for improvements in state regulations that would enhance the viability, stability, and professionalism of home-based child care. In that role, she hears from many providers who tell her the costs and complexity of meeting some requirements can be a challenge, even when they acknowledge their importance in keeping kids safe. For example, Briggs notes that when she first opened, the state covered the cost of testing her home for lead exposure, but in the last few years the regulation has changed so that lead tests are required more often and at the provider's own expense—more than \$150 per test. The test costs as much as a full day's income, and remediation, if a problem is found, costs a great deal more. If the state assisted providers in paying these costs, the testing requirements would have less impact on providers' fiscal bottom line.

"State regulations for home-based programs should be different from those that regulate large, institutionalized child care centers," Briggs explains. For example, Pennsylvania regulations require that caregivers provide materials for dramatic role playing, cognitive, visual, auditory, tactile, large muscle, and emotional development, which might lead a new provider to feel she needs to purchase (and have space for) the same variety and types of equipment often found in a center. But Briggs says, "You can give a child a cardboard box and she will be

happier than she is with a room full of expensive stuff." The cardboard box can actually serve many of the child's learning needs if the teacher fuels the child's imagination and sense of play. "My definition of quality," says Briggs, "would be all about children's happiness. I want to see the smiles they show when a caregiver is attentive and engaged and keeps the children both safe and learning."

The number and cost of requirements to achieve licensure and participate in the state's quality improvement system overwhelm many informal caregivers, preventing them from getting licensed or squeezing them out of the business prematurely. Briggs regularly fields phone calls from providers who fear they will have to close their programs because even when providers comply with all the regulations, state subsidies and what they can charge parents for their service aren't keeping up with their expenses.

Parents in Briggs' program receive a subsidy from the Federal Child Care Development Block Grant (administered by Early Learning Resource Center) based on their income, and Briggs is reimbursed for a portion of the cost for meals and snacks she prepares for children each day through the federal CACFP program, but neither of these inputs covers the whole cost of care. After all the accounting, she has just enough left over to pay herself minimum wage.

"Every business owner has to weigh the costs and benefits," she explains. "In child care, sometimes they just don't add up." Still, Adrienne is proud of the care and education she has provided for hundreds of children over the years and to the many families her program and her leadership continues to keep afloat.

"If there's one message I'd like lawmakers to hear, it's this: We truly are professionals working with the most vulnerable population. We are essential to the families we serve and to their employers. We should be treated as such, with access to all the same benefits and supports that other professionals have—accruing paid time off, health insurance, sick days, retirement. There must be a way to compensate child care providers for these things."