

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

TO GIVE CHILDREN A HOME FROM HOME

The media can focus on working mothers and the pressure they are under. But what about the people they depend on to help give their child a home from home while they're at work? We spoke to childminder **Linda Fallon** about bonding with the children she cares for, addressing the cost of childcare in Ireland and having her profession taken seriously

Words: Róisín Healy | Photography: Philip Doyle



It's a huge decision for any parent. Should, or can, a family member help care for your child while you work, or will you opt for a crèche or a childminder? There are so many factors to consider when choosing the right solution for your family, and the costs involved play a huge part in that. This month the Government is making a non means-tested childcare subsidy of €1,040 per year available to parents for each child aged between six months and three years. But many parents will be unable to avail of this payment, which works out at €20 per week. It is only available for children who are enrolled in TUSLA-registered childcare facilities, with about 4,200 centres qualifying. Only childminders who are looking after more than four children full-time are required to register with TUSLA, and the regulations and standards for the scheme were designed with centre-based care in mind, ruling out up to 20,000 childminders who are caring for two to three children in their home.

For a parent who wants their child brought up in a homely environment, or who doesn't live close enough to a crèche, leaving their children with a childminder can be the best option. Having someone who will welcome a child into their home and treat them as their own can be a wonderful way to grow up, with one-to-one attention, flexibility and relaxed surroundings. Linda Fallon from Carlow has been working as a childminder since 2010, having worked in accounts before that.

"I currently work for three separate families. I mind two small



Linda with Eoin and Jerry

children (Eoin and Jerry) aged two and three all day, and two girls I take after school. I've looked after the girls and Jerry since they were infants," she says. There is no doubt that this is not just a job for Linda, as the children have become a huge part of her life.

"My husband and our three children have formed very close bonds with the children. It is of mutual benefit all around. My daughter Órlaith who is 11 looks on the two girls like sisters as she has no recollection of life without them, and the boys have taken a special place in our hearts," she says. "I've always looked on the children I mind as part of my own family, and treated them as my own. I reckon going forward we will never lose touch and always have that special bond."

When building their new family home two years ago, Linda had the architect take her business into consideration, and so there is a designated playroom built to the back of the home. It has access to the garden, where Linda has set up a fenced-in play area, with a trampoline, slides, swings and toys. She also takes the kids to activities locally. "We tend to go out and about as much as possible. I make full use of local amenities, like Oak Park Woods, planting bulbs in our local garden centre and trips to play parks," Linda says. "We have a local facility called the Baby Room with classes such as music, dance, baby yoga and toddler group. I feel that the children in my care benefit from life experience and get to see the wider community on a daily basis and parents appreciate this aspect of my work, and can see the direct benefits to their child both developmentally and socially."

To know their child is receiving this standard of care is a huge comfort to parents. Linda believes trust is key. "The mums need to be fully confident that their precious children will receive the best of care in their absence. It's important to foster a feeling of trust and confidence in me from the very beginning," she says. Linda has particular empathy for first time mothers. "It can be difficult for them and understandably so. You have to understand the perspective of a parent making contact with you for the first time. They sometimes may have references or perhaps heard about my services through word of mouth, but very often they have little to go on and so have to trust their own instincts. They are trusting me to mind their own child – I don't think trust comes any greater than this." With the pressures working mothers are under, Linda is glad that she can be a support to them.

"It is satisfying to know that they can follow their career paths and ambitions in confidence, without being concerned that their children are missing out in any way," she says. "They have stressful and demanding jobs, one is a school principal for example. But likewise they are aware that minding children all day is no easy task, and they remain grateful on a daily basis. I consider them good friends now."

There's no doubt that Linda takes her role seriously and does her best to provide the best possible care for the children. She cannot take on more children and provide that same standard of care, but she gets calls every week from parents looking for childminders. "Demand is definitely greater than supply. I have received phone calls from parents of two or three children looking for childcare, I couldn't accommodate that." Linda is registered with Childminding Ireland, a national body for childminders with insurance, Garda vetting and the vast majority, Linda included, have formal training. "Parents' choice is very limited for childminders in the Carlow region, currently only about 10 Childminding Ireland-registered childminders practice in this region, and indeed this is the case countrywide," Linda says. There are 49 TUSLA-registered facilities in Carlow, only one of which is a childminder. "Parents



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may prefer having a childminder as their child would benefit from continuity of care from the same individual. The childminder's home is a replica of the family home and children within such a setting will develop a close bond."

According to Early Childhood Ireland, Irish parents are paying 35% of their income on childcare, higher than anywhere else in Europe. Linda hopes that the Affordable Childcare Scheme will be changed to take childminders like herself into account. The subsidy is to be paid to the childcare provider, who would then discount it from the parent's bill. "The incentive is to send children to a crèche at present as they are what meets the funding guidelines. This is restricting parental choice," Linda says.

"We cannot currently avail of the grants for the TUSLA-registered childcare centres and we would ask to be valued as equals." ✨

www.childminding.ie | www.tusla.ie | www.affordablechildcare.ie