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A Home Remedy For Day Care

Jessica Sager and Janna Wagner train home-based child care providers for the poor neighborhoods that need them most.

ELIZABETH FAIR has been taking care of children since she was 14. Now a grandmother many times over, Fair shows off her newly established child care center, complete with the usual, bright trappings — cubbies, blocks, tiny furniture. What's unusual is the location. The center is in Dwight, a New Haven, Conn., neighborhood where 40 percent of the residents live below the federal poverty level. It's also in Fair's living and dining rooms. (Peek past the colorful weather chart on the wall, and you'll see the owner's adult son making himself breakfast in the kitchen.)

Fair is operating a "family child care" — that is, a day care center in a home. Fair is getting help in setting up her business, as well as training in early childhood education, from the non-profit All Our Kin. The organization opened as a reaction to the Clinton administration's overhaul of welfare, which set time limits on benefits and aimed to move recipients into employment. Founders Jessica Sager and Janna Wagner say that mothers who could no longer stay home on public assistance were forced to put their own children into poor-quality care. The pair set out to help women on welfare become child care providers, allowing them to stay with their own children while also raising the standard of early childhood programs in their communities.

Today, circumstances are different, and most All Our Kin clients are not coming off public assistance. Like Elizabeth Fair, they are trying to bring high-quality child care to neighborhoods where it's desperately needed.

Though the numbers on center-based versus home-based care nationally are ambiguous, in the community that All Our Kin serves, family child care is cheaper. It also is an option for working parents with infants, an age group many child care centers will not take. And it's often more flexible than conventional day care centers, an important advantage for low-income communities where 9-to-5 jobs are by no means the norm.

There are 400,000 licensed family child cares in the country, according to the National Association for Family Child Care, and no one knows how many more are operating off the books. By the most conservative estimate, millions of young children spend time in these environments. Standards vary widely from state to state, however, and tend to focus on safety, with less attention paid to early education. "There's a huge focus on quality in center-based care. The implicit assumption is that you can't have quality (in family care)," Sager explains. That's not an assumption the women at All Our Kin are willing to accept.

Fair's long experience shows as she nestles a 3-year-old in her lap. Three more toddlers sit at her feet. Miracle, a 2-year-old dynamo in pink and denim, calls out answers as Fair shows flash cards. The duck says *Quack Quack!* The cat says *Meeeeooooow!* Jay, the 3-year-old, is shy in the presence of a visitor and snuggles in closer to Fair.

"Jay, it's really OK," Fair says calmly. "You don't want to talk — it's OK. You don't have to."

A few minutes later, Fair asks who likes to ride the bus. Jay raises his hand and offers, "Me?" When circle time is over, she gives him a squeeze.



All Our Kin founders Jessica Sager (facing left) and Janna Wagner at the home day care of Yanerys Aziz (at rear).

"I'm so proud of you," she says.

Fair explains why, after a lifetime caring for children, she is hungry to get formal training. "I need to go to school in order to learn to help them learn better," she says. With All Our Kin's help, Fair has already obtained a state license that makes the operation legal and allows



her to charge a higher rate. She is taking classes through AOK to become a child development associate, a national credential for child care providers. A consultant from All Our Kin is helping her incorporate new curriculum ideas into her daily routine and offering suggestions as Fair plans an addition to her house, so she can expand the child care business. “I’m looking to grow,” she says.

The same could be said for All Our Kin.

JESSICA SAGER was a student at Yale Law School in 1996, when welfare reform legislation passed. Before law school, Sager, who also has an acting background, had worked as an artist-in-residence in New York Public Schools. She was “passionate about early literacy,” she says, and began doing research for a children’s advocacy group about unintended consequences of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,

or welfare reform. “Children were going to end up in programs that would not be supporting their development,” Sager says. “Parents would be taking jobs that would keep them away from their children for long hours. And the end result would be that families would be fractured. Parents would be choosing between their children’s cognitive development and their economic survival.”

A mutual friend connected Sager with Janna Wagner, a New Havener

who had done a stint in the South Bronx with Teach For America and was in the process of getting a master's in education from Harvard. Wagner is a rare animal in New Haven, a townie who also holds a degree from Yale University. She did not want to be involved in the creation of yet another short-lived organization, a phenomenon that's well known in the city. "New Haven becomes a laboratory for scientists and researchers and Yale students who want to move on to bigger and better things," she explains.

If their Yale connections meant the pair would have to work harder to earn credibility in the community, they also opened doors. The law school was tremendously supportive, Sager says, and helped her with introductions to local politicians. Even so, it took Sager three months of calling the same housing authority official ev-

Sager remembers social workers warning her off applicants because they were "failures" or "program junkies." She suspected that concern for their children might be holding these women back in other programs. "I think what made them fail for you will make them succeed for us," Sager told the naysayers.

Tyree Dickey, who now works for All Our Kin as a mentor to new child care providers, was among the women who entered the program at Brookside. She has four children, two of whom have developmental delays. "They weren't getting the support they needed," Dickey recalls. "I wanted to know about my children in depth." She saw All Our Kin's training as a route to helping her own youngsters but found being in the program opened other possibilities. She's working on an associate's degree in child

while reaching a handful of children. Sager says she and Wagner saw family providers "about to fall off a cliff," as it became harder and harder for them to make a living. Family child cares around the state were closing, so All Our Kin was in danger of preparing women for a nonexistent career. They decided to put their resources into making child care both viable and high quality.

The decision was hard, Wagner says, and "brave" — hard because they missed daily interaction with children in the center, and brave because the change risked alienating funders, who loved the original idea of training welfare moms in child care. But Wagner and Sager made the case to donors that supporting existing family child care operators, most from low-income communities, was the best way to raise standards of care while also helping women build sustainable businesses.

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ery other day before she finally connected. He listened to her pitch and responded, "Would you like an apartment at Brookside?"

In 1999, Brookside was a public housing complex isolated at the western edge of the city. (It's empty now, a combustible training ground for the city's fire department, and All Our Kin has moved elsewhere in New Haven.) At first, they were a curiosity — two young white women painting and carrying in donated office furniture. When AOK opened, they had a couple of things going for them. Connecticut had a broad vision of what welfare-to-work programs could look like, so long as they fit with the federal welfare regulations. Perhaps more important, the pair was willing to take on clients whom other programs had rejected.

development and plans to go on for her bachelor's.

In those early days, the women in the program took care of children in a center run by All Our Kin, learning from experienced early childhood teachers. Graduates began opening family day cares, with ongoing assistance from All Our Kin. But there were hundreds of family day cares operating in the community that had no connection to the organization and little in the way of support or professional development. That led Wagner and Sager to start the Family Child Care Network in 2002.

IN 2008, All Our Kin stopped training women on public assistance in its own child care center. The welfare-to-work program took up a third of the organization's resources,

As licensed providers around the state were closing up shop, the ranks in New Haven rose by 27 percent between 2000 and 2007. Two AOK alumnae went on to start large centers.

Family child care providers typically work 13-hour days, one federal study found. Those who don't have health insurance through a spouse usually go without coverage, says Yvonne Collins of the National Association for Family Child Care. Their access to equipment and professional development is limited.

The Family Child Care Network connects these providers to one another, runs workshops, sends expert teachers in to model lessons, provides

Isabella looks for inspiration at Yanerys Aziz's home day care.



Aziz's Little Super Stars child care follows a meticulously planned schedule. Today's includes water play, dramatic play, a visit from the bookmobile and time on the backyard climbers and slide. Aziz, who has two deaf children of her own, also teaches the children sign language.

funding for renovation and equipment, and helps providers qualify for national accreditation. Many family care providers are eager to professionalize, Collins says. In the absence of organi-

zations like All Our Kin, she says, "It doesn't happen."

All Our Kin encourages clients to apply for accreditation from the National Association for Family Child

Care as a way to raise professionalism. The accreditation process recognizes there are many right ways to run family child care, according to Collins. Some providers emphasize early childhood education, while others take on "that grandmother role," she says. "What makes a difference is the relationships, and that can happen in either kind of care."

Proponents say that the continuity of care — a child conceivably staying with a single provider from infancy on — is a key advantage of family child care. W. Steven Barnett, executive director of the National Institute for Early Education Research, says that good family child care can provide "a safe, nurturing environment." But Barnett is skeptical about the quality of education in these settings. A 2007 study by the federal Department of Health and Human Services found that family child care providers generally had attentive and encouraging relationships with children, and parents voiced a high level of satisfaction with that care. But family child cares featured fewer activities that supported early learning in reading, math and science than child care centers. In nearly every home the researchers visited, the television was on.

In AOK's internal surveys, however, affiliated providers report dramatic increases in time spent reading to children and in their efforts to assess and document children's development. An independent checklist from the National Association for Family Child Care also saw All Our Kin providers improve on multiple measures.

David works on a construction project at Aziz's Little Super Stars.



PAULA SIMPSON was director of the Yale Divinity Nursery School before she began serving as a consultant to women in the All Our Kin network. She believes that family child care can offer high-quality early education, and more. She talks about a provider who takes her first child at 4 a.m. to accommodate the mother's job at a bakery. Others have cared for children overnight or on weekends when single parents were faced with fires, illnesses or other emergencies. "That's why they call it *family child care*," she says.

Today, Simpson is visiting Yanerys Aziz, who cares for children in her tidy Cape Cod-style home. Simpson demonstrates a lesson in water play, during

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which children mix colors, practice measuring and pouring, and learn to make guesses about quantities. Simpson and Aziz keep up an encouraging patter, talking with the children about what happens when blue and yellow mix, giggling over the increasingly soggy state of the children's T-shirts.

Aziz says that she's been working toward this job all her life. Even as a little girl in the Dominican Republic, her favorite thing to do was play teacher. "Now look what I'm doing," she says with a broad smile. Aziz always refers to herself as a teacher, never a baby sitter.

Recently a doctor and his wife who had been sending their son to Aziz enrolled him in a suburban preschool because they wanted him in an environment where he'd be more challenged. Within a month, they asked to come back to Aziz, where they said the boy was doing essentially the same activities and getting more individual attention. "That makes me proud," Aziz says.

Many All Our Kin clients rely on families who receive state subsidies for child care and thus pay a lower rate than private clients. But Wagner and Sager agree that appealing to more affluent families won't lead most of the providers they're

training to reduce access to children from less privileged homes. "Many of them are truly mission-driven," Sager says.

Aziz's Little Super Stars child care follows a meticulously planned schedule. Today's includes, in addition to water play, dramatic play, a visit from the bookmobile and time on the backyard climbers and slide. Aziz, who has two deaf children of her own, also teaches the children sign language. That schedule keeps her toddlers engaged and happy, and helps Aziz stay relaxed through her 10-hour day, she says.

"You need to have a passion for this job and patience, too. And you need to love it," she says. "You need to have a knowledge of early childhood education."

Aziz is working toward her associate's degree in early childhood education and getting her business ready to apply for certification. One of her proudest accomplishments is working with a father who was frustrated as he tried to manage his active son's behavior at home. A career soldier, the man had been giving orders to a toddler, with little success. Aziz talked with him about more gentle and effective ways to get the boy's cooperation at home. Dad came around, and dinners and bedtimes grew more peaceful.

That's an illustration of the strong connection between family care providers and parents, many of whom see the providers as a conduit to a wide variety of nonprofit and government-provided services. Exploiting that connection to

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make a comprehensive impact on the lives of low-income families is the next frontier for All Our Kin, its founders say. "Family child cares are serving parents that nobody else is reaching," Sager says. "We feel that there's enormous untapped potential to reach those families in all kinds of deep ways." **M2**

Colleen Shaddox's work has appeared on *National Public Radio* and in *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times*.

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