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“Job Training, Child Care Under One Roof”

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By Emily Bazelon

TO move from welfare to work, Tyree Dickey took a job at Southern New England Telephone and then one at St. Raphael's Hospital in New Haven, but left them both because she didn't have reliable day care for her 2-year-old son.

Then with her time on welfare running out, she found a way to get job training and look after her child at the same time. "Coming here was like 'Yes!' " Ms. Dickey said. "I was desperate."

Ms. Dickey, 28, is a member of the first class of All Our Kin, a small pilot program that instructs women about early childhood development while they take care of their own children. This month, the program expects to graduate four women, all of them once unemployed. Each will have spent nine months earning a Child Development Associate credential, a prerequisite to a job at a day care center or a pre-school program like Head Start.

By attending to the needs of parents and children, All Our Kin makes a connection missed by most welfare-to-work efforts, experts said.

"The state has been very industrious about getting mothers to work, but not about taking care of the children," said Edward Zigler, a psychology professor at Yale University and one of the founders of Head Start. "It's obvious that to have successful welfare reform, you have to have child care reform. All Our Kin, while small in numbers, is a very good model."

State officials also said the All Our Kin approach has potential, though they cautioned against assuming that child care training is the answer for larger-scale welfare-to-work programs.

"This kind of training is worthwhile for some people, but it's not a panacea for everyone on welfare," said Nancy Wiggett, director of Welfare to Work at the Connecticut Department of Labor. "Not everyone should be a child care worker. I think we need to be careful of that. But for some people, who have that natural talent or ability, this program is a first step in that career. Compared to just sending people to work as waitresses, it offers an opportunity to get a credential and for growth."

To address the need for child care where it's sharpest, the founder of All Our Kin, Jessica Sager, located the program in an apartment at the Brookside housing project, home to about 200 families in New Haven's West Rock neighborhood. Boarded-up apartments line the streets. For years, the city's housing authority has been vacating the project because of its isolated location.

There is only one convenience store and one bus line within walking distance. And Brookside has no organized child care.

That means Brookside is like a lot of poor neighborhoods in the city. According to a recent study

by researchers at Yale and the University of California at Berkeley, New Haven neighborhoods where welfare families live have less than half as many day care programs as comparable neighborhoods in California and Florida cities, for example.

New Haven's scarcity of local child care programs has been felt acutely since the 1996 advent of welfare reform, when the state's new work requirements and 21-month time limit for state benefits began pushing more mothers into the work force. The Yale-Berkeley study found that about three-fourths of welfare mothers in Connecticut leave their children with relatives rather than at day care centers or pre-schools, compared with about half in California and one-fourth in Florida.

Relatives can be lifesavers, but they often provide poor care. Children cared for by relatives watch television more and read less than children who go to day care, the researchers found. Connecticut does not regulate family settings, though it pays up to \$315 a month for them. "There is no quality control," said Professor Zigler. "This is a huge disservice. We're spending tax dollars to buy negligent child care."

All Our Kin, on the other hand, has state approval to provide both child care and job training. And the program teaches the mothers how children learn. "We are not baby sitters. We are professionals," said Janna Wagner, the programs' early childhood development teacher.

The women in All Our Kin spend half the day taking classes and the other half putting theory into practice while tending the six children in the program, ages 11 months to four years. On a recent morning, Ms. Dickey and Maryann Williams, 24, monitored the play of four children (two others were out sick for the day) at All Our Kin's home base. In a room freshly painted yellow and decorated with children's drawings and collages, the children moved from reciting parts of books they had memorized to playing with a child-sized kitchen set. When two kids threatened to tangle over a toy, Ms. Williams deftly separated them.

"I was raised that you spank a child if you want them to know something is wrong, or you make them sit down," Ms. Dickey explained. "But 1- and 2-year-olds won't sit -- they don't understand! There are a lot of underage mothers in my family. What I'm learning, I can pass on to them."

Ms. Sager sketched a small-scale model of the program in a law school paper. She named the project after a book by the sociologist Carol Stack about the importance of family networks for poor urban African-Americans. To put the idea into practice, she needed a partner who was expert in working with young children and in poor communities. Ms. Wagner had taught third grade in the South Bronx and then earned a master's in education at Harvard. She was also a New Haven native eager to return.

Together, the pair looked for applicants who had the staying power to complete nine months of full-day training and the potential to be community leaders. "We're looking for women on public assistance who have been having children from an early age," Ms. Sager said. "They are the backbone of their families, and they've failed to enter the work force because the jobs they could get conflicted too much with their responsibilities."

To select the first group, they posted flyers and attended tenant meetings at Brookside and two neighboring projects, and recruited parents at the local elementary school. They asked for written applications, conducted interviews, and observed applicants playing with their children. The

written samples measured literacy skills. At the interviews, Ms. Wagner tried to scare off the faint-hearted by stressing the program's workload and schedule. Eight women out of 25 original applicants completed the process. Six were selected for All Our Kin. One dropped out a few weeks into the program, another near the end, leaving the current four.

There has been some tension with other Brookside tenants who have wondered why so many resources have been devoted to only a handful of children. "Everybody is ready to bring their kids here," said Maria Coardes, 31. "People knock on the door, and it's hard to say no." In response, All Our Kin started a twice-a-week after-school program open to all Brookside children.

When their training is complete, the All Our Kin graduates will face a low-paying job market. Child care workers make starting wages of \$6 or \$7 an hour.

Ms. Sager said that rising demand for child care may mean the All Our Kin graduates will be able to get benefits like health insurance and access to more education. Eventually, she hopes that the program's graduates will go on to college (the All Our Kin credential counts for some credits), open their own day care programs, or work their way up to direct a larger center.

All Our Kin also plans to open another site for six trainees and six children in Quinpiac Terrace, another New Haven housing project. The program's annual budget will increase from \$87,000 this year to about \$200,000 to staff the second site, most of it coming from private grants. Costs are relatively low because the New Haven Housing Authority gave All Our Kin its Brookside apartment rent-free and the state has allowed the women to continue receiving welfare benefits while they train. Most of the program's books, toys, and furniture have been donated.

As graduation approaches, the women are lining up work for next year. Ms. Coardes and Ms. Williams are choosing between job offers from area day care centers. Ms. Dickey has been hired to help staff All Our Kin's expansion. Ms. Young plans to open a home-based child care program in Brookside and has nearly completed the state's licensing process.

"I get phone calls every day from people asking me when I'm opening up," Ms. Young said. "If I had a place, I could fill it 24 hours a day."

GRAPHIC: Photos: Tyree Dickey, above left, and Maryann Williams during class at All Our Kin. As part of the program, Ms. Williams, left, works with her daughter, Lexus.; Jessica Sager, the founder of All Our Kin, looks at a ladybug with some of the children outside of the apartment where the program is held. (Photographs by C. M. Glover for *The New York Times*)

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