



ALL OUR KIN INC.

A SAFE AND LOVING PLACE WHERE PARENTS AND CHILDREN CAN LEARN

Mental Health Services Working Group Public Hearing
January 29, 2013
Testimony of All Our Kin, Inc.

All Our Kin is a nationally-recognized, Connecticut-based nonprofit organization that trains, supports, and sustains community child care providers in order to ensure that children and families have the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life. We train and support over 250 parents and educators each year, who in turn serve over 1,500 children. Our educational consultants work intensively with family child care providers, helping providers raise the quality of their care and become early childhood professionals.

All Our Kin works with a diverse group of primarily low-income parents and providers from a range of neighborhoods and towns, primarily in greater New Haven and Bridgeport. We work directly with the providers serving our lowest-income children: 72% of the children in their care qualify for Care4Kids subsidies, state funding only available to low-income working families and families on public assistance.

We cannot emphasize enough the role of early care and education as a preventive measure. Research has shown that a child's brain is not fully developed when he/she is born and that early experiences, especially between birth and three years old, dramatically impact a child's ability to control impulses and regulate emotion. If these early experiences are negative, a child is likely to need dramatic intervention later in life. If these early experiences are high quality and positive, a child is much more likely to be successful as a student in elementary school and as member of society.

A critical component of positive early experiences are healthy, nurturing relationships. Social and emotional development and wellness begin in infancy through trusting relationships with responsive, caring, and nurturing adults. These early relationships are so important to developing infants that experts have concluded that, in the early years, "nurturing, stable and consistent relationships are the key to healthy growth, development and learning." As greater attention is given to children's access to mental health services, we encourage you to keep in mind the variety of settings in which children are cared for outside of their own home, such as family child care settings, and the importance of supporting all caregivers in forming positive relationships with their children. By supporting the development of healthy relationships between children and their caregivers—both parents and teachers—we promote children's mental health and well-being and lay a strong foundation that will last for the rest of their lives.

There are many ways we can support providers as they build healthy relationships with their children. For one, we can help them with their own self-care by creating spaces where providers can share their experiences, learn from one another, support each other, and learn new skills. We can also support providers by educating about and modeling responsive caregiving—where providers pay close attention to and respond to children's behaviors and cues. When we support providers in learning and practicing this technique, we further support the well being of the children in their care.

Finally, we can help caregivers and child care providers by breaking down barriers between child care settings and mental health service settings. By connecting parents, providers and mental health professionals with each other and encouraging dialogue and relationships among them, we begin to create a comprehensive network of care and support that meaningfully addresses the whole child. In doing so, we give children and families the foundation they need to succeed in school and in life.