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Introduction: Perspectives on Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care

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INTRODUCTION

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I worked as an early childhood educator until the birth of my daughter, Zoë, in 1976. When Zoë turned two, I decided to resume my career. My mother offered to watch her two days a week, and my neighbor, Mary Riley, told me she would be interested in taking care of her for the other three. Although my new position was educational director of a Head Start center, I wasn't interested in center-based care for Zoë at that age, even if it had existed in my neighborhood. I wanted her to have the individual attention of caring adults whom I knew and trusted.

I was thrilled that my mother wanted to care for Zoë as the two of them already had an extremely close relationship. Mom's caregiving style was consistent with mine, and I knew she would provide my daughter with unconditional love. Mary's husband, John, owned the pub in the center of our Brooklyn neighborhood, and the family was known and respected by everyone. They had a 12-year-old daughter, Bridget, who became a surrogate older sister to Zoë. The Rileys called Zoë "princess" and treated her accordingly. I remember how hard it was to leave my toddler on the first day of work, but I felt secure that she was getting the best possible care.

Although I am a middle-class professional, my experience mirrors that of many of the low-income parents and caregivers described in this *Occasional Paper*. The naturalness of the arrangement, the parents' sense of trust, the special relationships between the caregiver and child, are reflected in these essays. Family, friend and neighbor care has frequently been characterized in the media, and even in the early care and education field, as "substandard, unregulated care," a "fall-back" position when parents can't find or afford a regulated setting. However, up until quite recently, there was virtually no research to support any claims about this type of care.

Family, friend and neighbor care (also known as kith and kin care, license-exempt care, and informal care) became a "hot" topic in the child care field with the passage of the 1996 welfare reform act. In many localities, a large portion of public child care subsidy money was expended on these arrangements, but little was known about the caregivers or the kind of care they provided. This led to research efforts, program development, and new policies. A unique aspect of work in this field is the collegiality of the individuals involved in these arenas: we have been sharing stories and strategies informally since 1997. Over the years, our numbers have grown, and we began meeting annually in 2002. Earlier in 2005, we formed the National Alliance for Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care. This volume represents all three aspects of the work: research, programs, and policy.

Porter and Kearns review the existing research on kith and kin child care. Synthesizing the results of numerous studies, most of which have been conducted in the past five years, they present findings about the parents who use it, the caregivers who offer it, and the programs that aim to support it. They also offer suggestions about assessing its quality.

New research is represented by Bromer's and by Reschke and Walker's studies. Bromer presents findings from interviews with urban African American relative caregivers, most of whom are grandmothers. Reschke and Walker present the perspectives of predominantly white, rural parents who also use grandmother care. Findings from both studies point to the special bond between the caregiver and child, and the close relationships among the three generations. Childrearing advice, discussed in both papers, can be both a help to the parent and a source of conflict.

Ocampo-Schlesinger and McCarty, and Argo and Chan describe programs for kith and kin caregivers. Ocampo-Schlesinger and McCarty are involved in a project for a Mexican American community in Phoenix, Arizona, one of the earliest efforts to reach out to kith and kin caregivers. Their program has served as a model for similar initiatives across the country. Argo and Chan work with a multi-ethnic immigrant and refugee population in Seattle, Washington. They offer nine essential "lessons" for supporting and maintaining caregivers' cultural practices and values, while helping them navigate American schools and society. Their goal is "raising bicultural children."

Policy is represented by Drake, Greenspoon, and Neville-Morgan's essay on licensing family, friend and neighbor caregivers. The common view in the early care and education field is that quality can be achieved through regulation. The authors question the universality of that assumption when applied to these child care arrangements.

For some readers, these essays will serve as an introduction to family, friend and neighbor care. Other readers may already be involved in working with this population of caregivers. Our hope is that this *Occasional Paper* will encourage greater recognition of the role that kith and kin caregivers play in the child care continuum and that it will stimulate further efforts to address this issue (Porter & Rice, 2000). At one time or another, more than half of the young children in the U. S. spend some time in child care provided by relatives, friends, or neighbors. If we are concerned about quality child care for all children, it is our responsibility as stakeholders in the field to promote understanding of kith and kin child care and to support *all* caregivers in their vital work.

Reference

Porter, T., & Rice, R. (2000). *Lessons learned: Strategies for working with kith and kin caregivers*. New York: Bank Street College of Education.