

# United States: How do we change the future? By teaching the next generation <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

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## EXCERPTS

Childcare, especially for infants and toddlers, is in short supply. For many, it is also tremendously expensive, and few childcare settings meet quality standards for supporting children's healthy development.

In response to the need for flexible, affordable childcare programs, family childcare providers operate small, home-based programs that are the primary source of childcare for infants and toddlers in low-income neighborhoods. All Our Kin co-founder Jessica Sager says that these caregivers come to the work out of a love for children and families and a dedication to the well-being of their communities. But they often lack materials, equipment, and formal training in early care and education.

Ashoka's Alex Vesey caught up with Sager to learn more about her efforts to transform and professionalize the field of family childcare in the U.S.

Alex Vesey: Jessica, first, what are some things about your issue that people don't get?

Jessica Sager: Adults who don't spend a lot of time with infants and toddlers often don't get that babies are really and truly learning all the time, every single moment of every day. Why does this matter? Because we end up directing a lot of energy and resources to support learning later on via school when in fact these early months and years are the most important to get right—by far. Recent brain science is very clear on this point. It's our perceptions and policies and investments that need to catch up, and quickly.

Another thing that is surprising to me is how all kinds of people—including policy makers, researchers, educators—devalue childcare providers, particularly home-based childcare providers. This happens in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Caregivers are overwhelmingly poor women of color in this country and I have come to believe that ideas about race, gender, and socioeconomic status are the undercurrents. What caregivers contribute every day—this should be one of our top priorities and yet most people don't see it, don't see them.

Vesey: What is the premise then of All Our Kin that you started in New Haven?

Sager: We thought: instead of building an institutionalized system that takes agency away from parents and the caregivers who are present in every neighborhood, let's create a system that truly works for everyone. And let's do it by looking at what we have already and valuing it. I'm talking about the tremendous capacity, dedication, knowledge, and love that parents and home-based caregivers—the women and in some cases men in your neighborhood, on your street—bring to children day after day, year after year. Let's build up that and invest in it and give caregivers and parents ways to see their roles differently.

Vesey: Besides parents and caregivers, who else does All Our Kin engage and how?

Sager: When we go to a new city, or a new neighborhood, we figure out all the people and groups who are involved in nurturing and serving children. So that means pediatric clinics, mental health programs, libraries, museums, the K-12 school system. We say, "Have you thought about family childcare?" And it's always a process of relationship building, and opening a channel that often times people never really thought about before. People may respond, "How should I think about involving childcare providers in my work? I hadn't considered it." And then they see the huge potential and benefit. We end up being bridge builders a lot of the time between different agencies and family childcare providers that are operating in silos.

Vesey: If you are successful, how will things look different?

Sager: Our goal is to transform the childcare system in the U.S. So, our work is trying to change the hearts and minds of those who shape how our childcare system is funded, how we set it up, how we regulate it.

In 25 years, we want to look across the country and see that everywhere there are wonderful childcare programs, and parents and children have access to high-quality childcare choices. We want to see that caregivers are central and valued players and that they are

owning and creating the solution alongside parents and others.

There's another thing, too. At its best, early childhood education fosters a spirit of curiosity and learning and innovation in our youngest learners that we'd like to see ripple up through the system. Some of what's happening in our family childcare programs should be helpful for K-12.

Vesey: Why is now an important moment for this solution?

Sager: Brain science makes very clear that the earliest years are critical to children's development: their cognitive and social-emotional development, and their overall health and wellbeing. That's creating a new focus on early childhood, which is very exciting. At the same time, we're at a critical moment in our society as a whole. This is a time of deep divisiveness, racism, and violence. We change the future by changing what we teach the next generation.

At its core, our work at All Our Kin is about changing the way we think about and value children and their caregivers. Our caregivers are changing the life chances of children who deserve better. They are teaching empathy, compassion, and justice to the children who will grow up to be our police officers, teachers, and leaders. In some cases, they may even be inoculating children against their parents' hate. This is what gives me hope for the future.

Jessica Sager was just announced as a 2017 North American Ashoka Fellow.

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