

Am I Really Qualified?

by Alison Neugebauer

"How old are you, Alison?" is often one of the first questions asked of me when I arrive for a visit in my role as home visitor for the Early Head Start program in central Chicago. Like many young single women who work with children as teachers and social workers, my credibility is often challenged. I used to answer quickly and change the subject, or even lie and make myself older. But I am no longer embarrassed or uncomfortable to be a 24-year-old Caucasian female without children, working as a family support worker with mothers between the ages of 15 and 33.

I am confident in my abilities as a support worker, not because of the knowledge I possess or the advice I have to give, but because of what I have learned about my role. Even though I do not know what it means to be a parent, I can be a listener, a partner in problem solving, a resource, and a positive influence in their lives. I can help them see their strengths as women and families.

A few months ago, I was in a discussion at a conference on early care and education where the topic of staff training was

raised. A debate began over the qualities a child care provider must have to effectively work with parents. One man asserted that people in their early twenties, with no life experience, were not capable of working with parents. I immediately took offense to this comment which called into question whether I could effectively do my job.

It took an inner pep talk to empower me to challenge his opinions and explain my point of view. We discussed how often child care professionals without



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

children make assumptions about parents which results in a relationship without respect on either side.

In the Early Head Start Program in which I work, the staff is fairly equally divided between women who are mothers, some of them young, some with limited resources, and women like me who are not familiar with what it is like to be a mother, but may have more education or related work experience. It would be impossible to make a statement about which experience is more valuable. We all have strengths and weaknesses that allow us to create unique relationships with the families in our program. The most important

thing we all possess is the attitude we bring to our work.

I don't go on a home visit with the agenda of teaching parenting skills or giving the impression that I know what their life is like. Rather, I go as a learner seeking to understand. One cannot be a teacher without being a learner and vice versa. In my work with parents, we are all learning from each other — parents, children, staff, and community.

The goal of our Early Head Start program is to create a community of support and sharing of ideas. Beyond the support system we have created among staff, we include families in this community. Through weekly support groups mothers meet and share concerns and ideas with each other. Frequently, I am not able to provide a solution for a family problem, but I am able to connect a parent with another staff person or parent who has encountered a similar situation. Through this team effort, everyone becomes connected and a whole community becomes involved in the lives of these children.

When I tell people what my job is, they often respond by asking what it is like working with families when I am so young, don't have children, and basically don't have much in common with them. I tell them that it's not really an issue. I am honest and respectful with the families in the program. I don't try to be someone I'm not, and I believe they respect me for that. Because this is my profession, and I am able to spend time learning about child development, nutrition, and other topics centered around children, I am able to share the knowledge I possess, but it is quite different from hands-on experience. This is why I use my team of coworkers and parents as well. Strength is built from humility and willingness to learn. I believe parents do not care about our differences in life experience because they see that I am here and I truly care about their children.

Alison Neugebauer is currently working as a family support worker with an Early Head Start Program in Chicago. She began working with this program just as it was being created at this site and has been able to help shape the program and see it develop from a grant to a staff of seven working with over 50 families. The goal of the program is to support families that are overburdened and help teach them to be their child's first teacher. They do this through intensive home visiting to families with children under three. She is attending the University of Chicago part-time for her masters in social work.