

## Personal Statement

“Success is not a place at which one arrives, but rather the spirit with which one undertakes and continues the journey.”

-Alex Nobel

With graduation in sight, I look ahead with great anticipation of the opportunities I am yet to enjoy; I am also looking back and reflecting on all the great things I have accomplished. In every way, the journey has been as important as the destination. In May, I will graduate with a Master's degree in Human Development and Family Studies from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I am excited about pursuing a doctorate in psychology and look forward to continuing my education in this field. I am enthusiastic about continuing my research on adolescent development, with a strong focus on parent-child relationships and an emphasis on the risk and protective factors in developmental processes. It is my goal to continue to conduct high-quality research with applications for policy and program development. I look forward to sharing my passions and expertise with new faculty members and students and I am inspired by the opportunity to continue my education at the University of Minnesota.

I have dedicated the last three years to finding and pursuing experiences that enhanced and focused my intellectual passions. My Master's thesis exemplifies my interests in adolescent development in a high risk population. My mentor, Dr. Julie Poehlmann, and I worked with two community-based organizations (Madison-area Urban Ministry and Big Brothers Big Sisters [BBBS] of Dane County) to develop and complete an evaluation of the Mentoring Connections program. Mentoring Connections is a DHHS-funded program designed to provide mentoring to children of incarcerated parents. For my thesis, I examined a subset of the Mentoring Connections sample and assessed older children's behavioral problems and close relationships over the first six months of their participation in the program. I was able to incorporate my strong interest in attachment theory by exploring youth's relationships with their mentors, current caregivers, and their incarcerated parent, as well as how these close relationships impact adolescents' outcomes.

For me, one of the most interesting aspects of working with children of incarcerated parents is studying risk and protective factors as they relate to developmental pathways. I am particularly interested in examining the positive influences of a high quality mentor-youth relationship on adolescents' developmental outcomes, especially in the context of sociodemographic and family-level risks. Truthfully though, studying multiple risks has been both fascinating and challenging. Through this data collection, I have been struck by the challenges that prevent researchers from accessing this population – phones are often disconnected, families move frequently, caregivers are unavailable or unresponsive. I am motivated to continue this area of study, because I believe we lack an adequate understanding of how the risk factors that prevent us from accessing these families also influence children's development.

Other research experiences have helped to further my interests in parent-child relationships and risk and protective factors as they relate to developmental pathways. As a project assistant in Dr. Poehlmann's Infant-Parent Interaction Lab, I have a substantial role in data collection for an NIH-funded, longitudinal study examining the development of self-regulation in preterm infants. This assistantship has been an invaluable learning experience. I have learned the intricacies of conducting original research with a large sample and the challenges of working with families experiencing different risk factors (e.g., medical and early developmental risks). Consistent with my interests, this project emphasizes the influence of

## Personal Statement

parent-child interaction quality and early attachment. I have been trained to administer the Strange Situation and to administer and code the Attachment Story Completion Task. The preterm study further emphasizes the development of self-regulation and behavior problems in young children. For me, these constructs are vital to our understanding of the developmental pathways that lead to delinquency and risk behavior during adolescence. This training has given me a better understanding of how we measure risk and protective factors in young children and has encouraged me to think critically about how early processes influence later development.

Through my experiences with Mentoring Connections and an evaluation research course taught by Dr. Arthur Reynolds, I developed a strong interest in community-based partnerships for program development and evaluation. These combined experiences allowed me to apply my coursework in a practical setting. Working with a large, national organization like BBBS has taught me a great deal about the challenges that exist when conducting empirical research within a community setting. I am encouraged that the process can be improved. Further, I hope to continue to build community-university partnerships in which I can conduct research that supports the needs of children, while incorporating the essential elements for program development and policy change.

Throughout my career, outreach and dissemination have also been important. I believe disseminating high-quality, accessible information is essential to the research process and I continue to devote time and energy to this endeavor. As an undergraduate, Dr. Poehlmann and I applied the current research on grandparents raising grandchildren to fact sheets on nine topics, including children's close relationships, behaviors, and contact with children's parents. The fact sheets were published through UW-Extension and were made available to grandparents and professionals working with this population throughout the state. As a first year graduate student, I pursued an opportunity to work with Dr. Karen Bogenschneider on the Wisconsin Family Impact Seminars, a series of seminars and briefing reports created to inform policymakers on research that supports family well-being initiatives. I helped with two seminar briefing reports that were also published by UW-Extension. Finally, this past year I sought out another opportunity in which I could apply my passions and expertise in the field of adolescent development. I worked with extension specialists to edit and revise 12 existing fact sheets and authored 4 additional fact sheets in the series designed for parents of adolescents.

I am fortunate my research experiences have been at an institution where teaching and outreach are emphasized. As a graduate student in Dr. Poehlmann's lab, I have supervised and trained more than 20 undergraduate research interns. I have also recruited, trained, and supervised 4 undergraduate students each semester to assist with data collection for the evaluation of Mentoring Connections. And within the last year, I have been asked to guest lecture on a number of topics, including interviewing and assessment, internalizing behavior problems, and incarceration in the family. Working with students in these capacities has been tremendously rewarding and I am inspired to continue the legacy of teaching and learning.

Throughout my last three years in graduate school, I have had the opportunity to learn from several great mentors and work on a variety of research projects. I believe my progress during this time exemplifies my great strengths as a researcher, student, and teacher. In preparing this letter, though, I was reminded of one of my greatest weaknesses. At the start of graduate school, I often took feedback from my mentors and colleagues personally. I had a tremendously difficult time seeing criticism as constructive. Today, I have been through nearly a dozen drafts of this letter and I welcomed feedback from several colleagues and friends in preparing my applications. Although I still encounter moments when I find receiving feedback

## Personal Statement

to be difficult, I recognize this as a crucial part of my professional development. I further recognize that my mentor's feedback has helped prepare me for where I am today and my future in academia.

I look forward to continuing my research and training and I am excited about the opportunities I will have to learn from future mentors. Upon completion of my Ph.D, I hope to continue conducting federally-funded research that has implications for policy and program development. I anticipate that my desire to teach will be incorporated in any career path I follow, through both formal teaching in the classroom, as well as student involvement in research projects.

The University of Minnesota and the Institute of Child Development have a strong reputation that I would like to be a part of. Considering my interests in adolescent development, community intervention, and social policy, I believe I would be well matched with a number of the faculty members at the Institute of Child Development. In particular, I believe I am well matched with Drs. Byron Egeland and Arthur Reynolds. I am enthusiastic about my progress during the last three years and look forward to research that continues to support my passion for the study of risk and protective factors in adolescent development.