

It's All Relative: Supporting Kinship Connections

His, Hers, and Other People's Children

My name is Erika, and I am a licensed foster parent from Puyallup, WA. My husband Brent and I are raising a family of what I call “his, hers, and other people’s” children. Our journey began with the misperception that if a parent had a kid in foster care, they were a horrible person. This changed over time as we met and worked closely with birth parents. We got to know their struggles and their hopes and dreams for their children. Stereotypes faded away and a new reality emerged. Each parent we worked with had a story, and each parent loved their child. We were able to see how the children thrived when they saw us working together. We had 91 placements come through our home. Outcomes varied, and we experienced the gamut from multiple reunifications to a parent who asked us to adopt their child. We got to know the system well. I became a foster care liaison who helped other foster parents. Our own children were enriched from the experience of having foster siblings. And then our 92nd placement was our niece.



I was unprepared for the avalanche of feelings I experienced when my sister’s baby came into care. Everything from intense grief for my sister, my parents, and our family, to a strong desire to protect my niece, growing attachment to her, and absolute fear of what would happen if she were to return to my sister if things did not change. My interactions with the child welfare system I thought I knew so well were colored by these feelings, and I did not feel they were acknowledged or supported to the degree that would have been helpful. The saving grace was my knowledge of how to navigate the system, which is something most relatives who enter into the journey of placement don't have. Washington added a kinship care program in November 2016, as almost half of the children in Washington state’s child welfare system are placed with relatives or other suitable persons. I have been able to work with the program manager to develop a PowerPoint presentation for social workers on the unique benefits and challenges of kinship care and how to support kinship caregivers. I share my story. It is my hope that partnering with the state in this way will increase supports for kinship caregivers and ease their journey. The outcome for our niece—adoption by us—was bittersweet. We continue to revel in her safety and growth, as well as to hurt for my sister who is still struggling. I hope to continue to reach out to other kinship caregivers as they take this journey.

Supports for relative caregivers within the child welfare system in Washington State are available online at <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/CA/fos/relatives-caring-for-kids>.



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