

Partnering With Relatives to Promote Reunification

If you are stepping in to care for a relative's children, you play an important role in the child welfare system by helping to support the family connections that are essential to a child's health and well-being. Because kinship caregivers must navigate the often-blurred line between being a family member and assuming responsibility for a relative's children, misunderstandings may arise as they strive to adhere to court orders and agency rules. Partnerships between caregivers and parents—that include clear goals and expectations—are essential for promoting family reunification and child and family well-being.

There are high expectations for kinship caregivers. Many factors influence how family members caring for a relative's children interact with the birth parents, including the nature of their relationship and the available supports and training to help encourage communication. Ideally your agency will work with you to assess your needs and provide the training necessary for developing a healthy partnership with your relative—one that maintains appropriate boundaries and improves the odds for

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reunification. This factsheet shares the experiences and advice of families who have had relatives in kinship care arrangements to highlight the dynamics and steps that can support reunification.

Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted a series of interviews with parents and relative caregivers to help bring to light the challenges and nuances that can arise in kinship care arrangements. This factsheet shares their thoughts and advice and highlights the opportunities for partnership. The most consistent message we received was that outcomes for children and families are best when parents and kinship caregivers communicate honestly and show empathy and understanding. Names have been changed to protect identities.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS AND MINIMIZING TRAUMA

Placing children with relatives helps to maintain family connections and cultural traditions that can minimize the trauma of family separation and relieve the anxieties that come with traditional foster placements. This creates a safe space while parents get the help they need to enhance their caregiving skills. Kinship care can be a lifeline for both children and parents, as placement with a family member can create a sense of belonging for a child and comfort for a parent in knowing the child is not with strangers. Parents may feel more encouraged to seek help with the support of family members. By providing children with a familiar environment and their parents with family support, kinship care creates several protective factors that can strengthen families and keep them together (e.g., maintaining family connections, enhancing the social and emotional competence of children, and boosting resilience in parents and children).

"I was relieved because I knew [my sister] loved [my children]. They were close to her and safe with her...She was a huge support in the success of my reunification. She was hard on me but a big support too. When I was longing for my kids and she felt I was ready, she spoke up to the social workers and said I was ready."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

"[My mom/kinship caregiver] let me be a mom. She loved me as much as she loved [my children]. It put her in an incredibly difficult situation. She did a really good job of loving us all and letting me, when I was there, just be their mom. She didn't guilt me in any way, but let me come and support them however I could....[my children] were kept together and not split up into foster care. They got to stay in their schools and keep their friends...Because of the interventions we had, my children have these amazing lives...they're going to college, they're building families, buying their own homes...The success of my children is huge...we've broken the generational cycle."—Donna, birth parent reunified with her children

"No child should have to suffer their parents' behaviors if they aren't safe. As his grandmother, my standards are far higher than what the agency's standards are for family contact. I'm going to protect that child. I'm grateful I was able to protect him from the additional trauma of [my daughter's] lifestyle."—Lee, kinship caregiver/grandparent

MANAGING FAMILY DYNAMICS

Regardless of whether a kinship arrangement is formal or informal, existing family dynamics may make it difficult for some parents and relative caregivers to respect boundaries and case plan requirements. This can test family relationships as both parents and relative caregivers confront feelings of guilt, shame, anger, distrust, and loss. Caregivers often have a tough time reconciling their growing responsibility to the children involved with their existing relationship with the parents involved. It may take time for parents who have struggled to take care of their children to earn the trust of family members, and they may harbor feelings of resentment toward the relative who holds custody. Having to set aside family grievances for the sake of the children and moving things forward can be challenging.

The Child Welfare Capacity Building Collaborative Center for States features videos with real-life stories of families discussing the dynamics and various aspects of kinship care. *It's All Relative: Supporting Kinship Care Discussion Guides and Video Series* can be accessed at <https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/foster-care-permanency/kinship-care-series/videos/>.

"There's that ambivalence. That I want my kids to be the best parents they can be, and when they don't measure up, I'm stuck with 'Wow, did I do something wrong?' And how do I put their needs now secondary to my grandkids? Because that's what needs to happen. Kids need someone to be their voice and their caretaker."—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"I think it's important for relative caregivers to know that it's okay for them to still love that parent and that it's also okay to have healthy boundaries with that parent. We need those healthy boundaries in order to be able to protect those kids that have been placed with us and that can be very, very hard sometimes....I tell my grandkids all the time, 'I love your mom more than you do. She's my baby. Don't think for a moment that I don't love her, because I do. But I have to protect you guys. That's my job.'"
—Vicki, kinship caregiver/grandparent and former birth parent reunified with children

"Kinship care is the trickiest because of the baggage and the wreckage that's been created already. It comes with more doubt than anything....[My sister] kept this guarded boundary with me, but later down the road I knew she was advocating for me. She was cheering me on behind the scenes, but she wasn't coddling me."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

HEALING AND BUILDING TRUST

Kinship care can create space for reconciliation and healing within families when both sides make an effort to listen to and support each other. This can mean being honest about needs and concerns, recognizing progress, and/or expressing gratitude. A simple expression of gratitude can, for example, motivate a caregiver's continued work on behalf of a relative's children or a parent's will to meet case goals. There are several steps a caregiver can take to build bridges and earn the trust of a parent working toward reunification, including the following:

- Showing empathy regarding challenges the parent is trying to overcome
- Acknowledging that the kinship situation can be difficult for all involved
- Offering to transport a parent to a therapy or counseling session or to facilitate participation in some other way

For testimonials from caregivers and parents about how to build trust, see Child Welfare Information Gateway's *Partnering With Birth Parents to Promote Reunification* at <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-partnerships/>.

"Our relationship was very damaged [when my sister first got my children]. We didn't really talk then. But we gradually started to talk as she brought my kids for visits....The more she realized I was starting to make a life change, she started talking to me more. Today [our relationship] is great, because she even lets me watch her kids. She's my biggest support system, and she still has a close relationship with my kids."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

"[My daughter-in-law] doesn't always sound like she appreciates [my help]. But I think people should be respectful of what others are doing for them. I wish she was more appreciative....Sometimes I take the time when the children are asleep to sit down and talk with my son about how I'm feeling. And I remind him, 'Just as I am taking your feelings into consideration, you need to take mine into consideration because this isn't easy for any of us.'"—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"My mom and me had always been very close. She's always had my back. But our relationship became adversarial during this time...[My mom] had her own hassles and no help. Financially, she had [my] 5 children and a brand-new baby to care for, plus her own house. She loved me when I probably didn't deserve it. So, there was guilt and shame on my part."—Donna, birth parent reunified with her children

"When you see [the parents], give them one compliment, any compliment, because they're already feeling like a monster. And if you can be the bigger person and say something like, 'I can tell how much you love [your kids]' or, 'They really miss you,' or any compliment on their parenting, it can really shift the entire relationship. Like a shift in thinking from, 'They're not against me and think I'm a total monster and bad parent,' to feeling human again."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

MODELING POSITIVE PARENTING, POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Kinship caregivers have a unique opportunity to model positive parenting practices and healthy and constructive communication. Seeing this in practice and how children respond to it may help parents to embrace positive behaviors. It may be challenging for caregivers to mask frustration over a family member's different parenting style or behaviors, but children are better off when caregivers avoid criticizing parents and affirm a parent's love (so long as safety is not an issue). This may mean making a conscious effort to defuse anger and to steer clear of negative comments.

"Every single day I am asking myself if I am saying anything in front of the children that might alert them to the fact that I am not happy with the situation. I don't want them to think any less of their parent because of something I say or do, or even an expression I make. I'm not saying I'm 100 percent successful! I work at it all the time. Sometimes I need to think, 'Bite your tongue and walk away!'"
—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"I'm always telling my grandkids, 'Your mom loves you. Your dad loves you.' That's an important message for the kids to hear from the kin. And it's important for us to tell the parent, 'I know you love your child.'" —Vicki, kinship caregiver/grandparent and former birth parent reunified with children

"It's a balancing act of trying to role model and then understanding that we will agree to disagree. I think there needs to be a lot of conversation when the children aren't about. To be fair to everyone, you need to be able to say, 'Look, we're not always going to be able to agree on our parenting styles. In this home, this is the way we do it....' I hope [my daughter-in-law] will integrate [these parenting strategies] into some of the ways that she responds." —Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"[My sister and I] have very different parenting styles. That was so hard for me...The way she would discipline would be different than what I do. She was very strict. I really learned to parent by watching her and following her lead and learning to be a responsible parent for my kids." —Connie, birth parent who reunified with her children

BEING SUPPORTIVE TO MOTIVATE AND SUSTAIN CHANGE

Parents who are working to bring their children home will benefit when caregivers and other family members support and affirm their efforts to overcome negative behaviors. Having a supportive relative as a foster caregiver also increases the likelihood that there will be someone there to support the parent and family throughout the case and after it is closed. This can help the family move forward and prevent children from reentering care.

Having a child removed from the home can result in feelings of betrayal, anger, shame, and hurt. When parents have someone to believe in them and encourage them, it can help enormously with the healing process; the parent's resilience; and, ultimately, family reunification. Adopting a nonjudgmental stance—based on humility and acceptance—when working with family members can go a long way.

"[Birth parents] are already so ashamed of themselves. They already feel like the most awful parent in the world and they've made a lot of mistakes. [Kinship caregivers] are in a lot more stable position coming into this, so they may have to be the bigger person to take the first step...be a part of family healing and reach out in a very human way."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

"Try not to be adversarial. I get that some grandparents in relative placement are trying to protect the kids, and they probably have had enough of the parents. Reach out and be supportive to change and be the person that believes in them."—Donna, birth parent reunified with her children

"There would be times when [my children and I] had a harder visit and my sister would talk to the kids and be like, '[Your mom's] working so hard!' Once, my daughter bit me during a visit, and my sister would [scold her]. 'Do you realize [your mom] walked on her feet to get here and it's 16 miles because she wants to see you guys?' [My sister] supported me and did not talk down to me. I feel like she was in my corner even when I did not know she was. I thought she hated me, but my worker told me she advocated for me."—Connie, birth parent reunified with children

"[My daughter-in-law] goes to treatment every day. So, when she goes on a Saturday morning, I'm the one who transports her back and forth, 25 to 35 minutes each way. During that time, I'll say things like, 'I'm really proud of you and I'm sure it's really hard to have this huge commitment to be in treatment every single day—to not be able to sleep in late or to just be there to play with your child.' It's an effort. I don't pretend to sound like it isn't."—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

LEANING ON THE CASEWORKER, AGENCY, AND SUPPORT SERVICES

Parents, caregivers, caseworkers, and related professionals working as a team can improve outcomes for children and families. A caseworker can serve as a useful go-between for the kinship caregiver-parent partnership and as someone to provide case plan guidance and direction. Accessing help outside of the formal child welfare system through kinship navigator programs, parent support groups, faith-based organizations, and community nonprofits can provide much needed support and relief.

MAKING VISITS WORK

Regular parent-child and child-sibling visit schedules help to maintain connections and hope. Visits can be tricky during kinship care as typical family dynamics may be affected by agency protocols and vice versa. Parents may resent if visits are supervised or if their relative caregivers restrict them. Open communication about case progress and expectations can enhance outcomes.

"[Agency-sponsored visits] may be helpful for the parent and child [because] somebody's supervising who is much more neutral than I am. I think that's very important for them, because I have all my judgments. They may be feeling that during that [visit] time they're more in charge. The goal is to move toward unsupervised visits. The goal is to work toward an overnight in their home and eventually reunification."—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"My sister brought my children to five visits a week. She made sure to bring them to see me...When I was longing for my kids and she felt I was ready, she spoke up to the social workers and said I was ready."—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

SECURING SUPPORT TO PROMOTE REUNIFICATION

The child welfare agency can help families and caregivers access local resources that may help with kinship care. Securing such help can make a tremendous difference in outcomes for children and families. Families can also find help through local organizations and kinship support groups that help new caregivers partner with family members and access necessary supports.

Child Welfare Information Gateway hosts a For Relative/Kinship Caregivers webpage that offers a list of resources and State and local examples for family members providing kinship care (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/promoting/parenting/relative/>). State-specific kinship care resources are available on the grandfamilies.org website, a collaboration of Casey Family Programs, the American Bar Association's Center on Children and the Law, and Generations United (<http://www.grandfamilies.org/State-Fact-Sheets>).

"My friends who don't know how to get/ask for help end up losing their kids. Most people don't know help is available. So many grandparents want to take kids but end up giving them back because they don't know where to get help."—Dan, birth parent reunified with his children after his mother stepped in to provide kinship care

"I would recommend going to meetings, classes, etc.—any resources you can utilize...I didn't realize how beneficial the classes would be on grief, loss, etc. It was a big loss for [my grandson] to leave his parents. He was almost 2 when I took him in."—Susan, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"Being able to find peers [is the most important support]. No one else is going to understand this... Reach out to support groups. There are entities that can help with financial and emotional supports. You need support not only for the children but for yourself as well. It's pretty hard to take care of children if you can't take care of yourself."—Helen, kinship caregiver/grandparent

CONCLUSION

The best partnerships are built on trust and communication. While trusting a family member who has struggled with addiction, mental or behavioral health issues, or other problems may be difficult, these individuals need affirmation and support, particularly when they have taken the often difficult first steps to becoming a better parent. Just as parents may need help to improve their parenting skills, relative caregivers may also need help to adjust to their changing roles as caregivers. Children and family will benefit when both sides are willing to work together.

PARTNERSHIP RESOURCES

The resources below may provide useful information and direction.

ORGANIZATIONS

Birth and Foster Parent Partnership (BFPP) (<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/resources/#bfpp>) supports birth families working together with foster and kinship care providers to strengthen families and promote reunification. BFPP is a partnership of the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds, the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

Birth Parent National Network (BPNN) (<https://ctfalliance.org/partnering-with-parents/bpnn/>) champions birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare systems reform.

Generations United advocates for families in which children are being raised by grandparents or other family members (<https://www.gu.org/explore-our-topics/grandfamilies/>).

Grandfamilies.org provides free access to resources that support grandfamilies and educate individuals about State kinship laws (<http://grandfamilies.org/>).

PUBLICATIONS

The Grandkin Guide: Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for Relatives Raising Children explains what extended family members can expect when they are asked to step in and care for children (https://newfoundva.org/images/stories/documents/TheGrandKinGuide_lowres.pdf).

Grand Resource: Help for Grandfamilies Impacted by Opioids and Other Substance Use offers tips on how to engage with birth parents, practice self-care, address childhood trauma, etc. (<https://www.gu.org/resources/grand-resource-help-for-grandfamilies-impacted-by-opioids-and-other-substance-use/>).

Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System explains how relative caregivers can work effectively with the child welfare system (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/f-kinshi/>).

Partnering With Birth Parents to Support Reunification explores how caregivers can partner with parents to promote family reunification (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets-families-partnerships/>).

Taking Care of Yourself: Tips for Kinship Care Providers helps relative caregivers identify their strengths, understand the impacts of trauma, and avoid burnout (<https://cssp.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Self-Care-for-Kinship-Care-Providers.pdf>).

WEB RESOURCES

Help Guide: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren explores key issues about the practical and emotional challenges of assuming kinship care (<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/parenting-family/grandparents-raising-grandchildren.htm>).

The **Kinship Care** section of the Information Gateway website provides a list of resources to support kinship care (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/kinship/>).

The **Reunifying Families** section of the Information Gateway website provides a list of resources to support family reunification (<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/permanency/reunification/>).

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WORDS TO REMEMBER

Words of advice from caregivers and parents who provided support or who were supported in kinship care:

"Support parents every step of the way. Come in with good intentions, patience, and a clean heart."

—Brianna, birth parent reunified with her children

"Just be grateful, and if you can say 'thank you' or just one compliment to the person who's caring for your children—just one thing like, 'Thank you for caring for my kids while I can't'—it's going to shift things to an attitude of gratitude."

—Connie, birth parent reunified with her children

"Be sure you know what you're getting into. Ask questions. And be pushy if you need help. You can't give up on [the children involved] because they deserve to know that they matter...if you give up on them, they're going to be more likely to give up on themselves."

—Vicki, kinship caregiver/grandparent and formerly a birth parent reunified with her children

"Be proactive in the case. Go to every court hearing. Make sure that the judge sees you and knows who you are. You are the voice for that child. Make sure you are heard."

—Heather, kinship caregiver/grandparent

"You need to act and plan for the long term. If this is going to put you under too much stress, you are not going to succeed and the child is not going to succeed...."

—Lee, kinship caregiver/grandparent