

Promoting Reunification as a Kin Caregiver

As a kin caregiver, you play an important role in the child welfare system by helping support the family connections that are essential to a child's health and well-being. Because kin 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.

Child Welfare Information Gateway conducted interviews with parents and relative caregivers involved in kinship care arrangements. This factsheet shares their experiences and advice to highlight the dynamics and steps that can support reunification. Interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identities.

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Informal vs. Formal Kinship Care

If you are caring for a relative's child who is not in foster care, you are an informal kin caregiver. Even if the parents have initiated your involvement, without legal custody, you likely will face challenges seeking medical or mental health care for the child, and you may be unable to enroll the child in school or educational programs without parental consent. In cases of informal kinship care, reunification may or may not be the goal.

If you are caring for a relative's child who has been placed in foster care, you are considered a formal kinship foster parent. In most cases of formal kinship care, reunification is the primary goal. As a kinship foster parent, you will be required to work with your local or State child welfare agency to meet the child's needs and support the agency's efforts to reunify the child with their parents.

Learn more on Information Gateway's [Kinship Care webpage](#).

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS AND MINIMIZING TRAUMA

All children belong with their families, and family separation is a traumatic experience for children and parents. Because of its [many benefits](#), including minimized trauma, increased stability, and improved overall well-being, kinship care is the preferred option for children who enter foster care. When children can be cared for by relatives, they have the chance to learn about their family's history and traditions, which helps preserve family bonds and their sense of identity.

Being cared for by a family member can create a sense of belonging for a child and provide comfort for parents since the child is not with strangers. This helps create a safe space while parents connect to the tailored, concrete supports they need to thrive. Parents may also feel more encouraged to work toward reunification with the support of family members. In many cases, kinship care provides children with an opportunity to maintain their usual routines in a familiar community environment. Children living with relatives may be able to remain in the same school, participate in the same extracurricular activities, and keep connections to their friends. This reduces stress for children as their everyday routines are less disrupted.

"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/kin 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

MODELING POSITIVE PARENTING, POSITIVE COMMUNICATION

As a kin caregiver, you 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 birth parents embrace more positive behaviors. It may be challenging to hide frustration over your family member's different parenting styles, choices, or behaviors. However, it is important that kin caregivers provide positive affirmation to children and parents to support family reunification.

Reminding children and their parents of their successes (no matter how small) in the reunification process may be helpful. Kin caregivers should also avoid comparing their parenting to that of birth parents, as this can lead to animosity. Maintaining a positive dialogue about the changes parents are making and how they can benefit during the reunification process is best.

"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, kin caregiver and 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, kin caregiver and grandparent and former birth parent reunified with children

HEALING AND BUILDING TRUST

Kinship care can create space for reconciliation and healing within families when parents and caregivers listen to and support each other. This can include being honest about needs and concerns, recognizing progress, or expressing gratitude. There are several steps you can take to build bridges and earn the trust of a birth parent working toward reunification, including the following:

- Show empathy regarding challenges the parent is trying to overcome
- Acknowledge that the kinship situation can be difficult for all involved
- Maintain the child's usual routines, activities, and hobbies as much as possible
- Offer to transport a parent to a therapy or counseling session or to facilitate participation in other ways
- Keep a journal and note successes for the child, parents, and other family members (Defer to this written list of accomplishments whenever conversations get tough and use it to add positive feedback to difficult discussions.)

"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 mom and I 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

MANAGING FAMILY DYNAMICS

As family roles and responsibilities shift, the relationship between you, the child, and the child's parents may evolve. Parents and kin caregivers may experience a wide range of emotions during this transition, and it's natural for these feelings to surface as everyone adjusts.

Families are encouraged to explore resources such as family therapy or counseling services to promote positive collaboration and communication. These tools can provide a neutral space for open dialogue and understanding, allowing kin caregivers and birth parents to focus on their shared goal of supporting the child's well-being and successful reunification.

The following resources share more information on challenges faced by kinship families and ways to overcome them:

- [Kinship/Grandfamilies: Strengths and Challenges](#)
- [Navigating Family Dynamics in Kinship Families: Tips for Service Providers](#)

"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, kin caregiver and 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

BEING SUPPORTIVE TO MOTIVATE AND SUSTAIN CHANGE

Parents working to bring their children home will benefit when caregivers and other family members support and affirm their efforts to change. When possible, reinforce your commitment to the birth parents and children, not just in the kinship care process but in the reunification process and beyond. Birth parents who are working to reunify with their children may experience 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 parents' resilience, and family reunification. Adopting a nonjudgmental stance—based on humility and acceptance—when working with family members can go a long way.

"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, kin caregiver and grandparent

PARTNERING WITH YOUR CASEWORKER AND AGENCY

The child welfare agency can help families and caregivers access resources that provide additional supports and services to kinship foster caregivers. This can help promote placement stability and progress toward reunification.

The caseworker is the first point of contact when additional services and supports are necessary and can provide valuable guidance and direction. You may also be able to access help outside the formal child welfare system through kinship navigator programs, which are available in several States and can help caregivers find programs and services for themselves and the children in their care. In addition, parent support groups, faith-based organizations, and community nonprofits can provide support and relief. Many of these programs offer a therapeutic component that can help families. Ask what resources are available through your local area resource providers.

The following resources provide more information about how relative caregivers can work effectively with the child welfare system:

- [Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System](#)
- [Kinship Navigator Programs Around the United States](#)

Financial Support for Kinship Foster Parents

The U.S. Administration for Children and Families published a rule on September 28, 2023, that seeks to provide formal kinship foster parents with the same financial support as children in non-kin foster homes. The Federal rule allows for separate licensing requirements for kin caregivers, removes barriers to licensing kin as foster parents, and allows families to work together to support family reunification. Before this regulation, many kin caregivers were disqualified because they did not meet income requirements or other standards for licensing or approving foster family homes. The new rule distributes equal payment for licensed or approved nonrelated and relative kinship parents and places fewer burdens on them, allowing more children to reside in kinship homes with their loved ones.

Not all States have adopted separate licensing standards. View a listing of [States and Territories](#) that have adopted separate licensing or approval standards for relative or kinship foster family homes.

MAKING THE MOST OF FAMILY TIME

Frequent and regular interactions between the child, birth parents, and other family members, also known as "family time," help to maintain connections and hope. Family time allows family members to continue to work on their relationships while preparing for reunification. Children and youth who have regular, meaningful visits with family are [more likely](#) to reunite with them.

Your child welfare agency will set the terms of visitation. As a kin caregiver, you should work closely with your family members to be sure that everyone is well-informed about where and when family time is taking place. Be sure to clearly communicate how family members should respond if any difficulties arise.

Parents may resent supervised interactions or if their relative caregivers restrict them in any way. Open communication about progress and expectations can enhance outcomes. As a kin caregiver, follow the prescribed meeting plan and attend all meetings as long as there are no safety concerns. Emphasize positive aspects of the reunification process, whether supervised or unsupervised. Highlight the parents' progress and, when possible, assist parents in meeting their goals. This could be as easy as offering a ride to an appointment or showing your support for their recovery efforts.

"[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, kin caregiver and 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 PLACEMENT STABILITY AND PROGRESS TOWARD REUNIFICATION

Caseworkers can help connect you with services and supports, including educational support, community caregiver support groups, clothing and basic needs providers, grief and loss support, and other resources available to kin caregivers. 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. Depending upon where you live, various community supports may be available. Many caregivers report finding and connecting with others walking the same path can be incredibly helpful.

State-specific kinship care resources are available on the [grandfamilies.org website](https://www.grandfamilies.org).

"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, kin caregiver and 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, kin caregiver and 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 challenges may be difficult, your family members need affirmation and support. Just as parents may need support on their reunification journey, relative caregivers may also need help adjusting to their changing roles. Children and all family members will benefit when everyone involved is willing to work together. It is important to remember that reunification likely will take time, and parents will benefit from your support and encouragement throughout the reunification process.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The [Birth and Foster Parent Partnership](#) (BFPP) supports birth parents working together with foster parents and kin caregivers to strengthen families and promote reunification. BFPP is a partnership of the Children's Trust Fund Alliance (Alliance), the Youth Law Center's Quality Parenting Initiative, and Casey Family Programs.

The Alliance's [Birth Parent National Network](#) (BPNN) promotes and champions birth parents as leaders and strategic partners in prevention and child welfare system reform.

[Generations United](#) advocates for families where children are raised by grandparents or other relatives.

[Grandfamilies.org](#) provides free access to resources that support grandfamilies and educate individuals about State kinship laws.

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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

"Be proactive. . .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, kin caregiver and grandparent

"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, kin caregiver and grandparent

"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

"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, kin caregiver and grandparent



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