

It's All Relative

Supporting Kinship Care

Discussion Guide for Directors and Administrators



Capacity Building
CENTER FOR STATES

Children achieve better outcomes, maintain a closer connection to parents and siblings, and experience fewer disruptions when in kinship care. When parents can no longer care for a child, living with a family member or close family friend may be the least disruptive option. Yet, unlike foster parents who go through a period of training and certification in preparation for their role as a caregiver, kinship caregivers may answer an emergency call to step up for a family member with little time to prepare. The kinship caregivers featured in the video series speak candidly about the challenges they face, the support they need, and the rewards that motivate them to continue. Use this video series and discussion guide to create a more supportive environment and develop an agency culture that responds to caregivers' needs.



How to Use This Video Series and Guide

The Capacity Building Center for States (the Center) designed this video series and discussion guide for directors and administrators to spark conversations and critical thinking among agency staff. Leadership and program managers may use the resources to build positive culture and climate change to support kinship care within the agency and in community outreach.



A note to directors and administrators: Kinship care strengthens and maintains the relationship of children in care with their parents and helps to normalize their experiences. Leadership is key to creating the culture and climate to make it possible. Read the research and think about how it is reflected in the kinship caregivers' stories. Use the links in the "Additional Resources" section to help you set a clear vision and align what you measure, track, and reward. Use the kinship caregivers' authentic stories to connect and convey your message.

What Do We Know?

Kinship care has increased considerably as a method to sustain permanency planning since the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 and the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Kinship care strengthens and maintains the relationship of children in care with their parents and normalizes their experiences in foster care as much as possible. Some research finds that children placed in kinship care fare better than children placed in foster care, experiencing fewer behavioral problems and mental health disorders, better well-being, less placement disruption, fewer mental health services, and similar reunification rates (Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018). Children placed with kin have better well-being outcomes and a greater likelihood of remaining in the same neighborhood, being placed with siblings, and having consistent contact with their birth parents as compared to children in foster care (Geen, 2004; Hegar & Rosenthal, 2009; Mack, 2009). These contributing factors are believed to lead to more positive outcomes due to the fewer disruptions in the children's lives.



While the need for kinship care has increased, policies, procedures, interventions, and support services created with nonrelative foster caregivers in mind may create barriers for kinship caregivers' unique needs. Unlike foster parents who go through a period of training and certification in preparation for their role as caregivers, kinship caregivers may answer an emergency call to step up for a family member with little time to prepare. They may feel a host of negative emotions, like shame, anger, guilt, or resentment about the situation, and experience strained family dynamics that child welfare workers may be unaccustomed to working through with traditional foster parents. An informal placement with kin may not create the same access to support services as traditional foster parents have, until a crisis develops. Some research indicates that relatives receive less support, training, and supervision than nonrelative caregivers (O'Brien, 2012). Kinship caregivers, as compared to the traditional foster parent population, face greater socioeconomic and physical challenges, more limited access to needed services, and agency staff that may struggle with policy and practice to support them (Wichinsky, Thomas, DeJohn, & Turney, 2013).

Postplacement services, including both formal and informal respite care, help caregivers reduce stress and develop healthy and stable family relationships. These services should be available early and on an ongoing basis to ensure child safety and stability rather than just as an emergency intervention (Madden et al., 2016) or reserved only for formal kinship care (Eunju, Mi Jin, Yeonggeul, & Kramer, 2017).

Workers report ambivalence about kinship care, relying on caregivers to manage the connection between children and biological parents while also identifying the complex dynamics of triangulated relationships as one of the biggest difficulties (Beeman & Boisen, 1999). Increasing supportive supervision and training for staff on working with relatives has a positive effect on their perceptions of kinship caregivers' roles (McQueen, 2009).

Through the video series, kinship caregivers bring this research to life. From the descriptions of the individual stories, select several videos best suited to your intended audience. Use the stories and activities to help your staff discover how to better understand, assess, and support kinship caregivers. Use the action-planning template to move their learning into practice.

Overview: Ready, Set, Go!

“Ready, Set, Go!” instructions help you prepare, deliver, and follow through with improvements. Choose from many options to tailor activities to your agency’s needs. Select a few questions to enhance understanding by focusing attention and connecting new information to personal experience and existing knowledge. Use questions to promote dialogue among internal and external group members. Conversation starters will help you lead meaningful discussions, provide your teams with a deeper understanding of kinship caregivers, and will give you a framework for taking action to improve the support you provide.



Ready . . .



Plan for Your Team Meeting.

As you prepare to use the learning tools with internal staff or external partners, think about your team and the agency’s capacity building goals. Do you want to discuss changing the organizational culture towards initial relative placement? Do you want to increase workforce capacity in working with relative caregivers? Do you want to build more knowledge about the complex family dynamics of kinship caregivers? Do you want staff to understand how kin caregivers can support permanency and reunification for children and youth? Do you want to raise awareness around paternal family engagement? Do you want to improve culturally responsive services? Plan a series of team meetings to examine current climate, assess underlying cause, and develop action plans for change. Read through the video descriptions (pages 6–10) and select three or more videos that will drive conversation relevant to your staff and related to your goals. Select a few of the discussion starters to add to the questions paired with each video description.

Prepare Your Staff.

Meaningful images chosen by kinship caregivers illustrate the stories. In addition to the questions associated with each video, assign one or two of these “Ready” questions to focus viewer attention on the kinship caregiver’s perspective and to stimulate critical thinking about common needs and support. Ask viewers to make notes as they watch.

- ◆ **A picture tells a thousand words.** As you watch the videos and listen to the kinship caregivers tell their stories, which images resonate the most with you?
- ◆ **Follow your heart.** As you watch several videos, you will notice many images of hearts. What different meanings does the heart represent in different stories?
- ◆ **Everybody needs a helping hand.** How do caregivers use images to illustrate the support they received?
- ◆ **It’s complicated.** How do caregivers use images to illustrate the complex dynamics of relationships?
- ◆ **It takes a village.** By building bridges with birth parents and reaching out to people in the agency, community, extended family, and peer support networks, children have better outcomes. What images do the kinship caregivers use to illustrate their connections with others?

Make Time for Individual Thought.

After each video, allow a few quiet moments for people to jot down responses and prepare to share what they have discovered.

Set . . .



Facilitate a group discussion.

Use questions and a few of these conversation starters to facilitate a group discussion, leading to a deeper understanding of caregiver motivations, challenges, and needs and how their role supports positive outcomes for children in their care.

- ◆ Describe images you found meaningful. What did the pictures represent?
- ◆ How did these stories change perceptions you had about kinship caregivers before viewing the videos?
- ◆ With whom would you share these stories? What do you hope the individual would get from watching the videos?
- ◆ What story moved you and why? What did you learn from the stories?
- ◆ Did you notice any similarities about how people became kinship caregivers? Compare this to the traditional resource parent. How was the decision-making process similar or different?
- ◆ What did you notice about differing permanency options chosen by kinship caregivers? What contributed to the different decisions to adopt or to choose guardianship?
- ◆ What did kinship caregivers do to contribute to the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children in their care?
- ◆ How did kinship care affect connections between siblings? With birth parents?
- ◆ What struck you as the most difficult challenges? What did kinship caregivers need to help them meet those challenges? Where did they get the support they needed?
- ◆ How did kinship caregivers manage the complex relationships with birth families and with children?
- ◆ Ask people to role play conversations:
 - ◆ What would you tell somebody who is contemplating becoming a kinship caregiver?
 - ◆ What advice would you give to an agency caseworker to help support kinship caregivers?
 - ◆ What would you include in a conversation about permanency options?
 - ◆ How would you talk about both the rewards of becoming a kinship caregiver and the complex family dynamics involved?

Go!



Plan to Act.

Set aside some time for the group to plan next steps so participants leave energized, with a plan of action. After the group discussion, assign the planning questions and a few of the conversation starters suited to your meeting goals. Give participants a few moments to make notes individually, and then answer the questions as a group.

- ◆ What did you learn that you can use to improve practice immediately?
- ◆ How can you improve the supports you provide to kinship caregivers?
- ◆ What are our agency's shared beliefs, values, and attitudes about kinship care?
- ◆ What policies and practices in our agency create barriers for kinship caregivers?
- ◆ What policies and practices in our agency are supportive of kinship caregivers?
- ◆ What does our agency expect, track, and reward related to kinship care?
- ◆ What messages does that send about what the agency considers important?
- ◆ What messages do we currently send about relative caregivers?
- ◆ What do we need to change to shape our messages differently?
- ◆ Where in your community can you do outreach to ensure the diversity of caregivers and of those providing support to caregivers matches the cultural needs of the children in care?
- ◆ What do we need to develop in our workforce to support relative caregivers?

Action-Planning Questions

Now that you have a deeper understanding of what kinship caregivers need, how can we build a more supportive community to meet relative caregivers' needs? As a group, identify the next steps for the team.

1. Based on what you have observed in the videos, identify up to three actions that would improve kinship caregiver support in your area.
2. What are the barriers to taking each action?
3. What resources within reach would help make a change for the better? Who is your ally in accessing this resource?
4. What would be the benefits of the changes?
5. When will you start? What one step can you take immediately?
6. How will you measure success? How will you ensure accountability for next steps?

Video Descriptions and Questions

1 Angela's Story



"Without the help of the agency, I don't know how I could survive."

When Angela's niece became pregnant at age 16, she moved into a group home, visiting Angela and Angela's husband on weekends. Angela's niece eventually moved into their home with her daughter. When challenges arose, Angela and her family made the difficult decision to become full-time caregivers to their great-niece. She is now 9 years old, and, with help from agency resources, Angela's niece and her family are thriving.

Keywords: kinship, foster, family, caregivers, children and youth, kinship parents

Questions:

- ◆ What factors contributed to Angela's decision to become a kinship caregiver?
- ◆ How did collaboration between Angela and the agency contribute to creating safety, permanency, and well-being for the child and youth?

2 Jen's Story



"We felt so supported and well cared for by the agency at this time that we decided to continue to be a foster family and have now been for 10 years."

Jen's foster care specialist told her family what to expect each step of the way when they welcomed their first child into their care. The care they received from the agency encouraged the family to continue fostering. They have adopted two of the children they fostered and remain in contact with the children's birth families. Agency support had a significant impact on their decision to foster, and, a decade into the experience, they are thankful for the journey.

Keywords: foster, kinship, adoption, placement, permanency, agency support, foster parents, foster care specialist, fictive kin

Questions:

- ◆ How did Jen become a kinship caregiver?
- ◆ How do communication, support, and encouragement between Jen, the agency, and the biological families impact the safety, permanency, and well-being of children and youth in her care?

3 Loraine's Story



"I struggle with my dual role of being mother and grandmother."

Although Loraine's family had fostered for 18 years and adopted eight children, they worried about the impact fostering their grandson would have on their relationship with their daughter. Through their kinship experience, their compassion for their daughter grew. Their youngest daughter, a toddler, had difficulty adjusting to her new brother, but advice and encouragement from their foster care specialist smoothed the transition for their new family dynamics.

Keywords: foster care specialist, kinship, placement, permanency, adoption, family dynamics, foster, adjustment

Questions:

- ◆ What were Loraine's unique needs for support?
- ◆ How does the support Loraine's family receives connect to the safety, permanency, and well-being of the children in her care?

4 Pat's Story



"Our lives have been impacted in ways we never could have imagined."

Pat and her husband became kinship parents to their son's friend Marcus in 1999 after completing the kinship training program. When challenges arose, they received in-home and outside resources through the program and achieved the support of Marcus' mother, who moved in to help raise Marcus. They developed a friendship and together went on to co-parent Marcus' sister's newborn twins, whom Pat and her family adopted in 2011.

Keywords: kinship training program, in-home resources, co-parent, adoption, kinship family, family engagement

Questions:

- ♦ How did the agency support Pat's family through difficult challenges?
- ♦ How did the support contribute to creating safety, permanency, and well-being for the children and youth in her care?

5 Tamara's Story



"This journey has been rewarding; even though there were mountains and valleys, we don't count our journey lightly."

Tamara and her family reached out to York County Children and Youth Services in May 2014 to adopt their great-niece, Abrea, who was 2 years older than their daughter. With their transition came the need for resources such as camp, daycare, and added space for housing two daughters, as well as an introduction to learning about raising a child with special needs. Tamara's family found the support they needed through York County, their church, and family, and they consider their journey a blessing.

Keywords: kinship, children and youth, family, adoption, transition, special needs

Questions:

- ♦ How would you describe Tamara's support network?
- ♦ What supports does the agency provide to Tamara to help her care for a youth with special needs?

6 Kathy's Story



"The girl's mother was going through a difficult time. I offered to take her daughter on the weekends to give Mom a break."

Kathy's story began at work. She met the mother of a family going through a difficult time and offered to care for one of her daughters on the weekends. Children and Youth Services later contacted Kathy and asked her to take on full-time care. Kathy's family is now in the process of adopting the girl and her sister. Resources and assistance from the agencies involved and a strong support system helped Kathy and her family adjust through changing dynamics.

Keywords: children and youth, kinship resource, agency support, foster, adoption, family dynamics

Questions:

- ♦ How did Kathy's role evolve?
- ♦ How did agency supports sustain Kathy through challenges and promote safety, permanency, and well-being for the children?

7 Terri's Story



"One day, I went from parenting one child to being a parent of five. I was numb, but I knew I had to do this."

Terri transitioned from parenting one child to parenting five in the same day when she decided to care for her biological grandson and his three siblings, all under age 3. As a single parent, she created a system of scheduling, potty training, and preparing large meals that worked for her family. Four years later, Terri added a sixth member to her family when she adopted her godson. Children and Youth Services provided the resources she needed to become a certified kinship parent, navigate the adoption process, and accommodate her growing family.

Keywords: kinship, adoption, family, kinship certification, single parent, children and youth, resources, paternal family

Questions:

- ♦ What factors contributed to Terri's decision to become a kinship caregiver to five children?
- ♦ How did the agency provide support to Terri?

8 Traci's Story



"As Nana, I have enjoyed watching my littles gain the security they missed early on."

After Traci achieved foster parent certification, she went on to become a single parent to five grandchildren. Her daughter's struggles and young age led to Traci's decision to become her grandchildren's full-time guardian. Challenges arose from her grandchildren's varying needs, but Traci received support from her family, friends, and certifier.

Keywords: foster parent certification, single parent, grandparent, grandchildren, mental health, guardian, certifier

Questions:

- ♦ What factors may have contributed to Traci's decision to seek guardianship as a permanency option?
- ♦ How would you describe Traci's support network?

9 Reba's Story



"I was emotional, crying . . . it hurt my heart that my grandbabies were put in foster care."

When Reba received a call that her granddaughters were in foster care, she moved to Bridge Meadows, an intergenerational living community that houses state-adopted families and elders, to care for them. Bridge Meadows members participated in the children's care, took them to school, and drove Reba to doctor's appointments. Her grandchildren thrived in the environment. Reba formally adopted them, but they continue to visit their former foster family and biological parents. With support from her faith, community, and the Department of Human Services, Reba received the resources needed for her family to flourish.

Keywords: Bridge Meadows, state-adopted, intergenerational, grandchildren, adopted, foster, elder, kinship

Questions:

- ♦ What measures did Reba take to ensure her grandchildren stayed connected to their parents?
- ♦ What types of unique support did Reba need to promote her grandchildren's safety, permanency and well-being?

10 Morris and Michelle's Story



"Morris and I had to learn how to get back into the parenting role and everyday routine of caregivers all over again."

Morris and Michelle were empty nesters when they became their grandson's guardians. They had to learn how to get back into parenting roles and schedule their lives around caregiving. In 2015, their certifier guided them through the state's certification process, which allowed them to care for a second grandchild full time. With the support of family, they receive respite when needed and are now in the process of adoption.

Keywords: kinship, guardians, parenting role, caregiving, certifier, certification process, grandparents, grandchildren, adoption

Questions:

- ♦ What barriers did Morris and Michelle have to overcome to become kinship caregivers?
- ♦ What types of support did the agency and family members provide and what were the benefits?

11 Maria's Story



"Switching from Yia Yia Grandma to the mother role is hard. A grandmother's heart tells you one thing, the mother's logic another. They're usually not the same."

Maria felt lost raising her 13-year-old twin grandchildren and 16-year-old grandson in a high-tech environment. As their guardian, she had to understand how to parent all over again, learning new math to help them with their homework and becoming acquainted with their world. After 3 years, and with the support of family, friends, and the Department of Human Services, Maria saw three frightened, confused, and insecure boys turn into smart, confident, and strong teenagers.

Keywords: grandparents, grandchildren, guardian, kinship, paternal family

Questions:

- ♦ What was the biggest challenge for Maria in her changing role?
- ♦ How did being in kinship care rather than traditional foster care benefit the children?

12 Jorge's Story



"When I found out they needed someone to care for the children, I told myself, 'I am that person, whatever the cost. I have to be that person.'"

Jorge became a foster parent to bring happiness to children. When he discovered the Department of Human Services' had custody of his sister's children, he felt helpless. He quickly became certified and took over their care in 2010. Jorge learned how to care for a child with special needs, provide support to his growing family, and maintain a household. Jorge continues to be part of the Department of Human Services, doing the work that makes him happy and proud.

Keywords: certification, foster, special needs, immigrant, Down syndrome

Questions:

- ♦ What factors contributed to Jorge's decision to become a kinship caregiver?
- ♦ What supports did he need to help him care for a youth with special needs?

13 Jilliana's Story



"Being a relative and knowing someone's life intimately brings extra complexities and emotions—more than when you're caring for a stranger's child."

Jilliana's blended family began in a courtroom in 2009 when she met Jennifer, the mother of the boy in her care, and began to supervise Jennifer's visits. As their relationship developed, Jilliana came to understand Jennifer's life and circumstances, and her compassion grew. Jilliana's family adopted the child 3 years later. Jennifer took over care for her second son, and together they became a unique blended family.

Keywords: blended family, supervised visits, adoption, foster, kinship family, kinship resource

Questions:

- ♦ What factors contributed to Jilliana's decision to become a kinship caregiver?
- ♦ How does communication, support, and encouragement between Jilliana, the biological mother, and the agency impact the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in her care?

14 Jammie's Story



"We were clueless how to navigate various systems involved and figure out what supports we needed. We are a private family and used to handling problems amongst ourselves."

Jammie's family was not accustomed to reaching out for help, but when they took on caring for her niece's two young children, they quickly realized they would need assistance to be effective kinship parents. Through Department of Human Services resources, family support, and regular self-care, Jammie and her family adjusted to their new family dynamics and are able to meet their children's unique needs.

Keywords: family dynamics, kinship parents, resources, foster, adoption, assistance

Questions:

- ♦ What factors contributed to Jammie's decision to become a kinship caregiver?
- ♦ How can the agency help Jammie navigate some of the complex issues and family dynamics she faces?

15 Gloria's Story



"My life had to be put on the back burner, and my grandchildren needed to be placed on the front burner."

Gloria was adopted into the Navajo Tribe at age 4. Her unique journey began the day she welcomed her twin grandchildren into her home. She strove to teach them the Navajo culture, and they developed a sense of belonging, stability, and self-confidence. She continues to teach her grandchildren her grandparents' stories. Support from her caseworker has given Gloria strength and hope and has lessened the challenges her family faces.

Keywords: tribe, Navajo, adoption, culture, grandchildren, caseworker, foster, kinship, grandparents, placement, family

Questions:

- ♦ What kind of support did Gloria need in her changing role?
- ♦ How did being in kinship care rather than traditional foster care benefit the children?

Additional Resources

Kinship Care – Child Welfare Information Gateway

Resources for Caseworkers in Kinship Care

Links to guides, information, and resources to support child protective services workers, ongoing case managers, supervisors, administrators, and other professionals engaged with the child welfare field in their work with kinship caregivers. Access these resources at

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/kinship/kinshipcaseworkers/>

Organizational Culture and Climate

Offers links to guides, information, publications, and resources that support child welfare agencies in examining and strengthening organizational culture and climate. Access these resources at

<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/capacity-building/organizational-capacity-guide/organizational-culture-and-climate/>

Continuous Quality Improvement

Contains links to the Center’s practical guides and tools to increase awareness of topics in continuous quality improvement (CQI), peer-networking opportunities to spread best practices, and learning experiences to build knowledge and to ensure that those skills can be applied in an agency’s day-to-day operations. The Center’s resources in this area address the functional components of CQI systems, as well as the culture and climate in which those systems perform. Access these resources at

<https://capacity.childwelfare.gov/states/focus-areas/cqi/>

How to Create a Kin First Foster Care System

Presents seven steps for leadership to create a kin-first culture—one in which child welfare stakeholders consistently promote kinship placement, help children in foster care maintain connections with their families, and tailor services and supports to the needs of kinship foster families. This resource is available at

<https://www.wikihow.com/Create-a-Kin-First-Foster-Care-System>

National Foster Care Month 2018 – It’s All Relative: Supporting Kinship Connections

Resources for Child Welfare Professionals

Links to information for child welfare workers on how to locate, recruit, and build the capacity of kinship caregivers who may be a placement option; evidence-based practice models other agencies are using with kin; and ways to improve daily caseworker visits and overall engagement. Access these resources at

<https://www.childwelfare.gov/fostercaremonth/resources/cwprofessionals/>

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