

Kinship Care: A New Kind of Family

By Karen J. Foli, PhD, RN, Associate Professor, Purdue University School of Nursing

Have you noticed more middle-aged and older adults parenting young children? Perhaps you've seen these families in the grocery store, at school functions, or eating in restaurants. In the United States, a growing number of adult relatives and non-relatives are parenting children. They are providing what is known as kinship care.



According to the Child Welfare League of America, kinship care is:

the full time care, nurturing and protection of children by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, stepparents, or any adult who has a kinship bond with a child. This definition is designed to be inclusive and respectful of cultural values and ties of affection. It allows a child to grow to adulthood in a family environment.

What's in a Name?

Kinship parents and families have created new names for their types of families. Many of these families have several generations in them. Some of the more common names are:

- kinship parents
- grandfamilies
- foster kinship care
- caring grandparents
- fictive kinship

Who Are Kinship Parents?

In Indiana, four percent of all children (59,000) live in public (foster) or private kinship care. Most often, it is a grandmother who is caring for a grandchild, but other adults may step in to help provide care when parents no longer can. The majority of grandparents raising grandchildren are between the ages of 55 and 64, with 20 to 25 percent being age 65 or older.

Kinship care may also be provided by other family members or close friends. Aunts, uncles, coaches, teachers, and others may step in when the birth parents are not able to fulfill the parenting role in their children's lives.

There are many reasons that birth parents may be unable to care for their children, some of which include incarceration, a mental or physical illness, and/or financial or other difficulty that prevents them from being competent caregivers to their children.

Kinship Parent Continuum of Care

Kinship families live in a wide range of living arrangements, from private agreements made within families to the kinship caregivers becoming adoptive parents (see Figure 1). Kinship care arrangements can be defined by the extent of the child welfare system's involvement with the family.

Informal Care

Many kinship parents care for children without a formal arrangement. Unlike traditional families, kinship families may have generations of family members living in the same household. For example, the birth parent may remain in the home while the grandparent provides the primary caregiving duties for the children.

Many kinship parents choose to stay in these informal arrangements, resulting in kinship parent-child relationships that remain in transition. These arrangements may last weeks, months, or years and often depend upon the presence of the birth parent in the home.

Child Welfare System Involvement

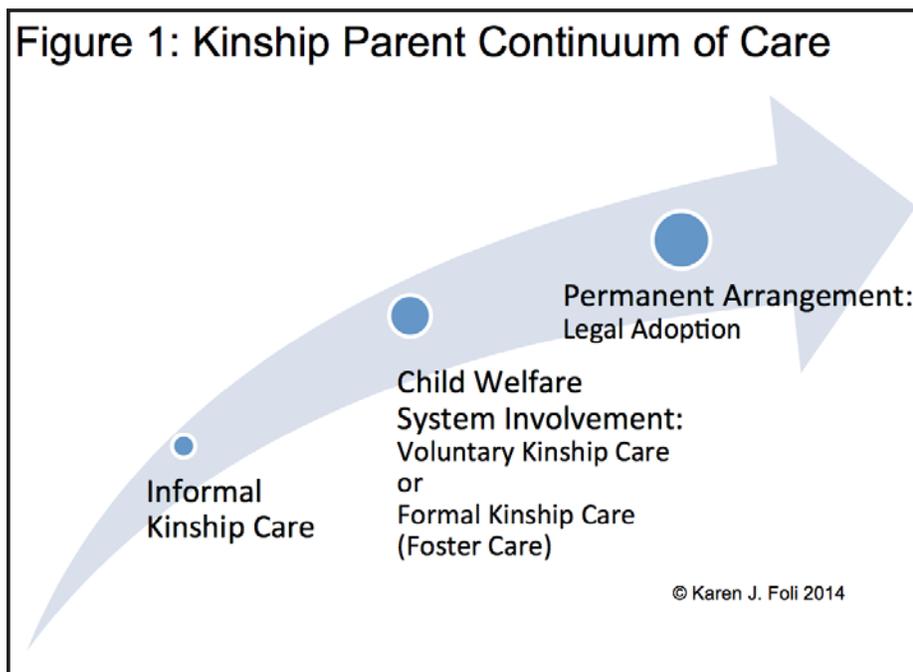
Kinship parents may care for children when parents voluntarily place their children with relatives and friends. In these cases, the child welfare involvement may be minimal, with some oversight by the state.

Other kinship caregivers have a more formal arrangement by becoming a foster parent to their children in the foster care system. The child welfare agency has more responsibilities and provides more supervision in these families.

Nationally, 27 percent of children who are in the foster care system will be cared for by kinship parents. In Indiana, approximately one-third, or 31 percent, of children in foster care are parented by kin.

Permanent Placement: Adoption

The court system can also issue an adoption decree to the kinship parent(s). When a child is adopted, a permanent and legal relationship is formed. Preliminary research has shown that formal legal arrangements can benefit the child.



What Are the Challenges Faced by Kinship Families?

Emotional/Social

- *Parents:* When suddenly faced with caring for children, kinship parents may experience a range of emotions, including fear, sadness, anger, and guilt. Indeed, many grandparents experience apprehension about their new parenting role. Their peers may be retired and enjoying the freedoms that are limited when raising children. Kinship parents may feel they are different and isolated.

They may also feel a sense of shame about having to raise children when the birth parents cannot. They may believe they failed to successfully raise their own children. They may have doubts about parenting grandchildren, even as they try their best to be responsible and loving parents to those children.

- *Children:* Children who are being raised by kinship parents may have had bad things happen to them. In fact, relative parents reported that their children were more likely to have been emotionally and physically hurt or ignored than non-relative parents. The children's past experiences influence how to parent them effectively.

Children may also have academic and behavioral issues that make caregiving challenging at times. Finding the right resources for their children may be a challenge for kinship parents.

Physical

- The physical and emotional stamina required in parenting may become a challenge for older adults. Also, older kinship parents need to effectively manage their own healthcare needs. Chronic illnesses may require the kinship parents to balance their own physical needs with their children's needs.

Financial and Legal

- Because kinship parents tend to be older than the typical parent, they often have fewer financial resources. Relative caregivers are more likely to be single and have less education with fewer social resources than traditional foster parents.
- Kinship parents may not be aware of or may have difficulty accessing services that are available to them, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy

Families (TANF). In the United States, only 12 percent of these families receive TANF, despite nearly 100 percent of them qualifying for these funds.

As part of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, the federal Title IV-E, Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP), may be of help. This program gives individual states *the option* of providing ongoing financial assistance for children who leave foster care for guardianship with a relative caregiver. Kinship families should be encouraged to seek out resources for which they may be eligible.

- Since the legal arrangements vary with kinship families, parents need to be aware of the protections and risks with each arrangement. Specific kinship care policies and regulations in their state may also vary.

What Are the Benefits of Kinship Care?

Despite the challenges, kinship care provides many benefits to both children and parents. Overall, there is a connection to the child's family and social/emotional network. This connection may be absent or more difficult to obtain in typical foster care situations.

Often children in kinship families are able to have more stability and security than children placed in foster care with non-kin parents. Brothers and sisters can remain together more often when cared for by kinship parents. Specifically, kinship parenting offers children the benefits of:

- familiar caregivers,
- continuity of family and cultural traditions,
- decreased trauma from separation,
- reinforced identity and self-esteem,
- reduction of racial disparities,
- increased placement stability,
- less stigma with foster care, and
- preservation of sibling relationships.

Kinship parents are "real" parents in that they provide full-time care for their children. A child views a kinship parent as the person who will meet his or her needs and provide a safe and secure home, and loving family.

Helpful Internet Resources

Information on the Internet can be helpful to kinship families. Below are just a few of the websites related to kinship care. These provide information about resources and offer parenting ideas to explore.

- **AARP: GrandFacts** — The GrandFacts fact sheets for grandparents and other relatives raising children offer national and state-specific information, articles, and groups that provide support for kinship families. www.aarp.org/relationships/friends-family/grandfacts-sheets/
- **Casey Family Programs** — This foundation is committed to reducing the need for foster care in the nation. www.casey.org/
- **Child Welfare Information Gateway (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services)** — This link contains tips for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. www.childwelfare.gov/preventing/supporting/resources/grandparents.cfm
- **eXtension.org** — This organization provides information across a wide variety of topics and is from land-grant universities across the United States. See the section on “Family Caregiving Grandparents Raising Grandchildren.” www.extension.org/category/family_caregiving_grandparents_raising_grandchildren
- **Generations United** — The purpose of this organization is to strengthen lives through intergenerational collaboration. www.gu.org/OURWORK/Grandfamilies.aspx
- **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (USA.gov)** — This website provides links to a variety of useful resources for grandparents who are caring for their grandchildren. www.usa.gov/Topics/Grandparents.shtml
- **Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families** — This website offers helpful tip sheets in both English and Spanish to address some of the most common challenging situations for grandparents raising young grandchildren. www.zerotothree.org/child-development/grandparents/

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