

KINSHIP CARE RESOURCE KIT

for Community and Faith-Based Organizations



Helping Grandparents and
Other Relatives Raising Children

Children's Defense Fund
LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND

Understanding Kinship Care: What You Need to Know About Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children

“The most difficult thing for me out of all this has been trying to find some peace and happiness for my grandchildren and myself. To look at the broader scope of what all this will mean ... My job is to do the best for them I know how and thank God for them.”

— Grandparent caregiver, Washington, D.C.

Kinship care families are everywhere. Across the country, millions of grandparents and other relatives have stepped forward to care for children whose parents are unable or unwilling to raise them. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, more than 2.4 million grandparents reported that they were responsible for meeting the basic needs of their grandchildren. Great-grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and siblings also are taking on the role of substitute parents to many children in our local communities.

“The greatest joy in my life is watching my grandson grow from a scared, withdrawn toddler who never smiled into an active, intelligent and curious six-year-old who loves to laugh and makes me laugh. The pain and heartache of his past fade with his laughter.”

— Grandparent caregiver, Milton, Vt.

Kinship care is not new. Family members and close friends have raised other’s children from the beginning of time, but the challenges facing these families have changed significantly over the past two decades. Like all families, kinship care families need the support of their extended family members and communities to ensure that they Leave No Child Behind.

The following introduction to kinship care is designed to help you and others understand the unique challenges kinship caregivers face and what needs to be done to help them.

What is “kinship care”?

“Kinship care” describes a family situation in which a grandparent or other extended family member is raising a child whose parents cannot. “Informal kinship

“He is the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Señor C. has never questioned his decision to raise his grandson. The child’s parents were troubled and never really wanted to be a part of his life. From the beginning, Señor C. and his wife, both natives of Puerto Rico, believed that their grandson was a gift from God. He belonged to them. Since his wife died five years ago, Señor C. and his grandson find solace and support in each other. Señor C. says his grandson’s local school and the after-school programs it offers have been lifesavers for the family. They provide meals, recreational activities, and, most importantly, other adults to help watch over his grandson. “Family is the key,” he says, but the understanding and support of his neighbors, his grandson’s teachers, and his Spanish-speaking community are important, too.

care” commonly refers to relatives raising children who are not in the foster care system. “Formal kinship care” is used to refer to relatives who are raising children the state has removed from their parents’ homes.

How many children are being raised by kinship caregivers?

- According to the 2000 Census, more than 6 million children (or one in 12) were living in households headed by grandparents and other relatives.

“Sometimes you have to learn how to help.”

“Many pastors know that members of their congregations are grandparents and other relatives raising children, but that’s different from knowing what kind of help they need the most. You’ve got to identify who is in this situation, sit them down, and ask them what your organization can do to make their lives better. Then you have to do it.”

— Reverend Clifford Barnett, Brighton Rock AME Zion Church, Portsmouth, Va.

“If love runs deep, you’ll do whatever it takes.”

When Charlotte H. lost her second daughter in a plane crash, she and her husband immediately began raising their 9-month-old grandson. When they started out, times were hard. Even though they were eligible, they were told they couldn’t get any financial assistance or support services for the baby. Their friends tried to be helpful but did not really understand what it was like to be parenting a young child so late in life. Things began to improve with the help of a local support group that gave Ms. H. and her husband a chance to share their difficulties with others and find out about available services. Thanks to her community support group, she says, “someone is always there to help.”

- More than 2.5 million children living in relative-headed households live there without either parent present.
- Nationwide, more than 2.4 million grandparents reported that they were responsible for the basic needs of grandchildren under the age of 18 living in their households and about one-third of those were caring for children without either parent present.
- More than one in five children living in relative-headed households (nearly 1.3 million children) live in poverty.
- Over the last decade, child welfare agencies have become increasingly reliant on relatives as the first option when a foster care placement is needed for an abused or neglected child. It is estimated that states typically place 20 to 40 percent of children in foster care with members of the extended family.¹

Why are there so many grandparents and other relatives raising children?

Many grandparents and other relatives have taken over the care of children whose parents are unable to do so because of increases in substance abuse,

incarceration, domestic violence, unemployment, divorce, illnesses such as HIV/AIDS, and other crises facing families and communities.

Are there kinship care families in my community?

“There are more of us than you think,” said one grandparent caregiver. Keep in mind that many grandparents and other relative caregivers may not identify themselves because they don’t want to share personal information about their families. They also may be afraid that if they talk about the problems they are having raising the children, the state might decide to take the children from them.

Do most kinship caregivers have legal custody or guardianship of the children they are raising?

While some kinship caregivers have obtained court-ordered legal authority over the children they are raising, many have not. Unfortunately, kinship caregivers who do not have legal custody or guardianship often have trouble accessing the same benefits and services that are available to parents. They are also not likely to be able to continue to raise the children if the children’s parents want them back. In most cases, children in foster care are in the legal custody of the state, even if they are living with relatives.

“Don’t let anyone keep you from doing what’s right.”

At first, Terry L. didn’t feel she could care properly for her two grandchildren, ages 3 and 6. Terry’s husband was unemployed and receiving disability benefits. Her youngest granddaughter suffered from epilepsy and pulmonary problems and needed constant care and attention. Faced with the possibility that the girls would be put in foster care, Terry and her husband decided to raise them, although she still hopes that one day her daughter might be ready to parent again. “It’s been our belief in God that has helped us make such hard decisions,” she says.



Let's Talk About It!

You might want to get together a group from your community or faith-based organization to learn more about kinship care families. The following two videos are a good way to start the discussion:

“Big Mama”: “When exactly are you too old to love your own grandchild?” asks Viola Dees, a 90-year-old caregiver raising her grandson in the Oscar®-winning documentary “Big Mama.” The film depicts a devoted kinship caregiver’s struggle to raise a troubled 9-year-old under the watchful eye of the Los Angeles child welfare system. The video can be ordered for \$49.95 plus \$10 shipping and handling at 1-877-811-7495. A discussion guide is available at www.newsreel.org/films/bigmama.htm.

“Legacy”: This 90-minute Oscar®-nominated documentary, which has aired on PBS and Cinemax, tells the compelling story of a courageous family in a low-income neighborhood in Chicago whose central figure, Dorothy, is a grandmother struggling to raise her grandchildren and transcend her community’s economic and social conditions. The video is available to high schools, public libraries, and community groups for \$49.95 by calling 1-877-811-7495 or at www.newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0054

Why don't kinship caregivers without legal authority just go to court and ask a judge for legal guardianship or custody?

Legal guardianship and custody cases can be expensive, time-consuming, and emotionally exhausting for everyone involved. Free legal services are scarce and generally available only to individuals with very low incomes. Grandparents and other relative caregivers who decide to seek legal authority against the wishes of the child’s parents are forced to take their own family members to court at a time when family cooperation is most needed. In cases where a parent cannot be located, legal requirements are especially burdensome.

What kind of special challenges do kinship care families face?

Kinship care families may face a variety of special challenges:

- **Physical problems.** Many children being raised by grandparents and other relatives have special physical problems, sometimes related to their parents’ alcohol or drug abuse. Low birth weight, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other learning disabilities, and illnesses such as HIV/AIDS are particularly common. Kinship caregivers also may have health problems of their own.
- **Emotional issues.** Children living in kinship care families also may have severe emotional scars due to a legacy of substance abuse, domestic violence, mental health problems, and abuse or neglect. Their caregivers also may be depressed and have other stress-related conditions related, at least in part, to their caregiving responsibilities.
- **Difficulties obtaining benefits and services.** Caregivers may find it difficult to enroll the children they are raising in school, authorize immunizations, get basic health and mental health care, stay in public or senior housing, or get certain government benefits for their children.

What are some of the issues facing kinship caregivers caring for children in foster care?

While foster care placements with relatives may help to preserve family and cultural bonds and offer the child a unique opportunity for permanence, there also can be great stresses on kinship foster caregivers.

- On average, kinship foster caregivers are older, poorer, more likely to be single, and less educated than their non-kin counterparts.
- Children in kinship foster care are more likely to live in a family whose income is below the poverty line than those children in non-kin foster care.
- Children in kinship foster care are more likely to live in a family that must spend half or more of its income on rent, has difficulty getting adequate food, and does not own a car.



- Studies also have found that child welfare case-workers tend to provide less information to kinship foster caregivers than to non-kin foster parents and that kinship foster caregivers receive fewer services for themselves and the children under their care than their non-kin counterparts.²

“I’d do it all over again.”

For Gloria F., a Native American grandmother raising two teen-aged grandchildren, family and community are everything. She and her husband have raised the children since they were babies. While they are still an important part of the family, the teenagers continue to have some difficulties. For help, she and her husband turned to Casey Family Programs, a local organization that provided counseling and advice on how to balance the needs of all the family members. The program also provided respite care to give the couple a break from their caregiving responsibilities and family activities, giving the family a chance to have fun together. Without Casey’s services and support, says Gloria F., “the road would have been a lot harder for us.”

What can my local organization do to help kinship care families?

- **EDUCATE members of your organization and community about the challenges facing kinship care families.** Too many people in communities across the nation do not know about the problems facing grandparents and other relative caregivers and the children they are raising. Increasing awareness of this issue is the first step in helping kinship care families get the support they need from their communities. You also can work to help make sure that kinship care families have the opportunity to raise their concerns in local school, health and mental health, child care, and other meetings in your area.
- **SEEK OUT kinship care families in your organization and community, and ask them how you can help.** Kinship care families know what they need better than anyone else. Find a sensitive and respectful way to ask the caregivers in your community what help they need.

- **PARTNER with others to set up an activity or offer other assistance to kinship care families in your organization or community.** Using the “how-to” guides included in this resource kit, gather a group of individuals or organizations to initiate or expand support for kinship care families. Individuals and community groups can reach out to the kinship caregivers in their neighborhoods, schools, and religious organizations on an individual basis by offering to help with errands, child care, and other daily tasks.
- **SHARE the information and resources provided in this resource kit with kinship care families in your organization or community.** You can copy and distribute information about national, state, and local resources that already serve kinship care families through your newsletters, Web sites, bulletins, and on your community bulletin boards. Using the resource pages included in the resource kit, you also can encourage kinship care families to collect additional information about any special concerns they may have.

Where can I get more information about ways that my community can help kinship care families?

If you want to order additional resource kits or would like more information about how your community or faith-based organization can better support kinship care families, please contact the Child Welfare and Mental Health Division of CDF by e-mailing child_welfare@childrensdefense.org or by calling 202-662-3568. You also may refer to the “National Kinship Care Resources” included in this resource kit.

¹ Geen, R., Clark, R., and Ehrle, J., *A Detailed Look at Kinship Caregiving*. Paper prepared for the 21st Annual Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Research Conference (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, July 1999).

² Geen, R., Clark, R., and Ehrle, J., *A Detailed Look at Kinship Caregiving*. Paper prepared for the 21st Annual Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management Research Conference (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, July 1999).