Kinship Care: The History of a Name

During the past two decades, the child welfare field has given much attention to research, policies, programs and practices concerning the care of children by relatives, typically known as "kinship care." Just as children often are eager to know how they were named and, as adults, we seek family history concerning our names, here is how "kinship care" was named.

In 1990, the Child Welfare League of America convened the National Commission on Family Foster Care in collaboration with the National Foster Parent Association. Its mission was to focus national attention on strengthening family foster care as an essential service option for at-risk children, youths and their families. The 49-member commission included two congressmen, the president of the National Foster Parent Association, public agency administrators and managers, private agency executives, foundation representatives, university-based educators and researchers, national advocacy groups, and two young people from the foster care system. CWLA staff and an intern with a masters degree in social work provided support. One of the first decisions of the commission was to commit to the term "family foster care" instead of the historical "foster family care," to emphasize the importance of putting family first.

As the commission struggled with a definition of family foster care as well as issues and recommendations, it also was challenged to have some kind of shared terminology for the "relative" part, but what? As the commission members came from across the United States, they shared their local perspectives. How about "relative foster care?" OK, but relative to what? How about "home of relative?" OK, but the acronym could be a problem. How about "de facto foster care?" No, not clear. As CWLA's national program director for family foster care and adoption, and the commission's staff director, I was charged with the task of recommending a name that would be child- and family-friendly.

When in doubt, go to history. I remembered that in my social work doctoral program one of the required readings was Carol Stack's "All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community," published by Harper and Row in 1974. A young white anthropologist with a preschool son and national funding from the then DHEW, now Health and Human Services, Stack lived for some time in a poor black community in a large urban mid-west city. Her book highlighted the strength of kinship networks. Many of the commission members remembered this book from their own educational programs. I proposed the name: kinship care. In 1991, CWLA published the commission's report in "A Blueprint for Fostering Infants, Children, and Youths in the 1990's" with a special chapter titled "The Significance of Kinship Care." CWLA added kinship care as one of its major program areas, and I had the privilege of becoming CWLA's first national program director for kinship care.

In 1997, CWLA convened the first national conference on kinship care in San Francisco. Stack, then a professor at the University of California at Berkeley, was a guest speaker. She autographed my copy of "All Our Kin."  

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Knowledge is Power

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elatives taking care of their younger family members when parents cannot is a centuries-old, long established tradition in most countries and cultures. Family foster care: finding and keeping unrelated parents to protect and nurture children, is the newer government-created intervention when relatives aren’t available. But it has only been in the past 20 years or so that the child welfare field has begun writing about the social, economic and even legislative reasons that have led to an increased number of children being cared for by relatives, especially grandparents.

This arrangement, typically known now as kinship care (see the article in this issue, “How Kinship Care Got Its Name”), means the full time care and protection of children by relatives, or perhaps members of a tribe or clan, godparents, perhaps stepparents, extended family members, or really anyone who has a family-like relationship with a child. The growth of kinship care has led to more specific definitions. For example, when the kinship care arrangement is under the supervision of a public child welfare agency because of abuse and neglect, then that is known as “formal kinship care.”

But, in most cases, about six times that number — there is “informal kinship care” which means that families have made some kind of agreement that grandparents’ or other relatives or family friends will take care of the children. Those circumstances usually happen because of factors that don’t come to the attention of child protective services: parents may be in the military and deployed, they may need to go to another location to work, they may be deceased, some are incarcerated, and others may have...
Kinship Care Resources


- Grandmothers as kinship caregivers: Informal arrangements compared to formal child welfare oversight. By C. Goodman, M. Potts, E.M. Pasztor, and Scorzo in the 2004 issue of Children and Youth Services Review


- National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers


- True ambivalence: Child welfare workers' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about kinship foster care. By J. Peters in the 2005 issue of Children and Youth Services Review

A decline in the number of available foster parents has inspired a turn to kin, as well as endeavors to maintain children's cultural and family identity. According to the Child Welfare League of America, in the United States, of the approximately 500,000 children in out of home care, about one-third are living with kin.

Family members are typically not prepared for the often sudden challenges of taking on the responsibility of parenting additional children, or parenting again. In a series of focus groups of kinship caregivers and social workers in Los Angeles County conducted by social work faculty from the California State University at Long Beach, nine issues of concern were identified: legal, financial, health/mental health, child behavior, family relationships, school, fair and equal treatment, support services and the need to be able to offer recommendations. Kinship caregivers typically have insufficient knowledge about child development and current parenting strategies, legal and financial problems, feelings of grief, social isolation, health concerns, and psychological distress. They are expected to take care of children who have health and academic difficulties, as well as the behaviors that go with feeling angry, rejected, guilty, depressed and anxious.

Kinship caregivers sometimes face discrimination based on their ages and the circumstances of their relatives. It has been documented for many years that relatives receive less support than foster parents. Therefore, unfair discriminatory treatment must be addressed.

The disproportionate number of children of color in the child welfare system has implications for kinship care because of systemic challenges such as poverty and drug abuse. But it is widely accepted through child welfare research, dating back to the 1991 National Commission on Family Foster Care stating that kinship care can help maintain family ties, reduce the trauma of separation, and provides continuity within community and cultural contexts. This is especially important because there are a disproportionate number of Hispanic and African American children in kinship care.

Kinship caregivers must be embraced with adequate services and supports.

Kinship programs must reflect the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics established in 1999 that mandates competence, dignity or worth of the person, integrity, importance of human relationship, service and social justice. Kinship caregivers are “first responders” for their families and should be recognized as assets to their communities. It is essential to work with kinship caregivers toward the federally mandated Adoption and Safe Families Act goal of child safety, well-being, and permanency, or connections to safe, nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime. As one caregiver, a member of the newly created Los Angeles Kinship Advocacy/Advisory Network, stated: “knowledge is power.”

That provided the rationale to create a new program titled, KIP — Knowledge is Power. The KIP program will offer educational support groups to kinship caregivers providing inter-active activities, group discussions, informational handouts and resources. The program will follow established adult learning techniques such as being goal oriented, immediately practical, and based on participants’ strengths and life experiences. Kinship caregivers must be embraced with adequate services and supports. Programs like KIP can contribute by working with kinship caregivers toward the common goal of child safety, well-being, and connections to safe, nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime. But, for this to occur there must be empowerment gained through
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- The take-up of cash assistance among private kinship care families. By M. Sheran and A. Swann, in the 2007 issue of Children and Youth Services Review
- Capturing caregiver data: An examination of kinship care custodial arrangements By A. Strozier in the 2007 issue of Children and Youth Services Review
- Needs and issues of Latino and Native American nonparental relative caregivers: Strengths and challenges within a cultural context By K. Kopera-Frye, in the 2009 issue of Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal

( kids in waiting )

Charles, 16, loves to cook and wants to be a gourmet chef when he grows up. He is a great help to those in need and doesn't mind the challenge of a little hard work. Charles enjoys playing cards and gathering cards, likes gardening, and is a fan of playing pool. He likes horses and wouldn't mind being in a home where there are other children.

Charles is in his freshmen year. He would benefit from academically supportive parents. He is attending counseling at this time, which will need to continue after placement.

If your family is interested in this hard working young man, we urge you to inquire. Financial assistance may be available for adoption-related costs.

For Utah children, only homestudied families from all states are encouraged to inquire.

This is a LEGAL RISK ADOPTIVE PLACEMENT. In a legal risk adoptive placement, it is expected that the family will eventually adopt the child, even though the birth parent's rights have not been fully terminated at the time of placement. For more information, contact The Adoption Exchange at (800) 451-5246. Child ID 7993

FOCUS: Kinship Care — The best interest for children or a foster care alternative?