

Respond to the Unique Dynamics of Kinship Care

Of the children adopted from the public child welfare system in 2012, 30 percent were adopted by relatives. Additionally, 16,418 children exited to guardianship in 2012, with many of these guardianships being with kin (U.S. Department of Health, 2013). The increase in relatives obtaining legal permanency through the child welfare system makes it essential for systems to recognize the unique dynamics of kinship care. In addition to grief and loss and some of the other traditional issues that are associated with the Adoption Triangle, there are added complexities when relatives are the ones becoming the permanent caregivers. These complexities include the need to redefine familial roles, establish a new hierarchy of parenting, and resolve anger and pain that may be part of their families' generational history.

Historically, we know that informal kinship has always existed—especially among African American families. In these informal relationships, the children have almost always known their parents and the family members have informally negotiated who and how parenting decisions were made. However, when children are involved with the child welfare system, relatives often find themselves involved with a formal system that imposes institutional constraints on top of existing family dynamics.

When working with all families, especially families where the caregivers are kin, it is critical that child welfare systems recognize, accept, and support the larger family unit. This not only means support while the children are in care but also proactively helping families plan for biological parent involvement post permanency. Child welfare systems should assume that most children cared for by relatives will have some level of contact with their birth parents over time. Establishing the birth parents' role in the family and integrating them into their children's lives can present many challenges. As a result, the approach in working with these families should always include a facilitated process that helps families establish agreed-upon roles and

rules that are most beneficial to the children's health and well-being. This can best be accomplished by using a family systems approach that allows for family members, particularly the adoptive parents or guardians and birth parents, to be jointly engaged in the therapeutic/decision-making process to develop rules and boundaries, and establish a new hierarchy of the authority within the family unit (Harris & Skyles, 2008).

Listed below are guiding principles that support this approach and provide a theoretical framework for developing sound practice in working with kin who are or have obtained permanency. Under each of the guiding principles are practice implications that should be taken into consideration when designing a system that adequately meets the needs of children and families in kinship care:

Unresolved family issues must be mitigated to facilitate effective permanency planning

- Kinship care family dynamics often are complicated by unresolved issues that impact multiple generations.
- Unresolved familial issues can impede permanency planning and derail the implementation of permanency plans (Dannison & Smith, 1999).
- Child welfare agencies must assist families to mitigate the adversarial issues that led to the placement as well as other family dysfunction.
- Permanency planning should incorporate the recognition of the feelings of failure that may exist by all involved parties. Likewise, there should be recognition that some kinship caregivers may have a need to "redo" parenting to make amends for previous events that occurred within their families.



There must be a clear division of caregiving roles and responsibilities among family members

- It is critical that systems begin working with children, birth parents, adoptive parents, and kinship guardians prior to finalization. If systems accept that there will be natural connections between these parties, we can begin to establish the hierarchy of parenting power. This will diffuse adversarial roles between birth parents and kinship caregivers and help families build a united front that will provide clearer boundaries, roles, and responsibilities (Harris & Skyles, 2008).
- Children's divided loyalty between birth parents and caregivers may make respecting the parenting hierarchy difficult. Children need to be prepared and counseled on how to manage and respect the new family hierarchy.
- The division of roles becomes even more critical when multiple generations are living in one household.
- Although families may have a general understanding of hierarchy, respect, and responsibility, this can become blurred when a first generation relative is responsible for rearing a third-generation child. In these situations, more extensive work should be done with extended families prior to finalization.
- A back-up plan should be developed to determine who in the families would assume care for the children in the event the current caregivers can no longer assume such responsibilities.

Redefined family systems will be challenged and may require ongoing support

- Families often need ongoing support to contend with complicated dynamics long after the adoption or guardianship is finalized. Post-permanency counseling for the larger family unit may be critical to maintaining the "new" family dynamic.
- Disruptions in relative adoptions or guardianship situations are often the result of unresolved issues in families.

- As children approach latency and adolescence, they may engage in acting-out behaviors that their birth parents exhibited, causing a resurfacing of struggles that were addressed by caregivers in the past (Dannison, Smith & Vacha-Hasse, 1999).
- Children adopted by relatives are often placed in the middle of their adoptive/guardians and their birth parents, attempting to please both parents.

Post-permanency supports can be critical to the success of the new family dynamic

- As children reach developmental milestones, a review of the components of the subsidy needs to be revisited with the families. Doing this proactively could help to curb crises that may arise as children age.
- Caregivers/adoptive parents often become overwhelmed when their children reach adolescence, and need additional support in understanding and maintaining the behaviors (Dannison, Smith & Vacha-Hasse, 1999).
- Grandparents, especially those that are older, who adopt or assume guardianship often need a break or respite services that allow them to continue to maintain the placement (Holbert, 2010).

References

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