

## **Is Kinship Care Good for Kids?**

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*More than 2.5 million children are being raised by grandparents and other relatives because their parents are unable—for a variety of reasons—to care for them.<sup>1</sup> These relative caregivers are willing to care for the children—but they may require financial help in order to meet the children’s needs. A number of states have utilized subsidized guardianship programs as a way of supporting such families, often called “kinship families.” Such placements help the child to, among other things, maintain family—and oftentimes community—connections. These programs provide subsidies to relatives and, in some cases, other interested, non-relative adults who are caring for and have a close emotional bond with children who are not biologically their own.*

*Subsidized guardianship is consistent with national policy preferences espoused in both the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997,<sup>2</sup> and there is considerable evidence of the value of subsidized guardianship programs. Still, some wonder whether kinship care is a good thing—and how we know this. This fact sheet addresses these often unasked but crucial questions.*

### **Children in kinship care experience greater stability.**

- Children in kinship foster care have been found to experience fewer placement changes than children placed with non-kin foster parents do.<sup>3</sup>
- Multiple studies indicate the value of placing siblings together, when safe and appropriate.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps equally as important, children in foster care consistently express the desire to be with their siblings. Research has shown that children in foster care are more likely to live with their siblings if they are placed with kin.<sup>5</sup>
- Fewer children in kinship care report having changed schools (63 percent) than do children in non-relative foster care (80 percent) or those in group care (93 percent).<sup>6</sup>
- Children who reunify with their birth parent(s) after kinship care are less likely to re-enter foster care than those who had been in non-relative foster placements or in group care facilities.<sup>7</sup>
- The Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) are designed to ensure that states are achieving safety, permanency, and child and family well-being. Kinship care bolsters states’ ability to comply with federal requirements by providing children with stability and permanency.<sup>8</sup>

### **Children in kinship care report more positive perceptions of their placements and have fewer behavioral problems.**

- Compared to children in non-relative foster care and those in group care, children in kinship care are:
  - ✓ More likely to report liking those with whom they live (93 percent vs. 79 percent [non-relative foster care] and 51 percent [group care])
  - ✓ More likely to report wanting their current placement to be their permanent home (61 percent vs. 27 percent and 2 percent)<sup>9</sup>
  - ✓ Less likely to report having tried to leave or run away (6 percent vs. 16 percent and 35 percent)<sup>10</sup>
  - ✓ More likely to report that they “always felt loved” (94 percent vs. 82 percent [non-relative foster care])<sup>11</sup>

- In terms of scores in physical, cognitive, emotional, and skill-based domains, children in kinship care have scores more like those of children who are able to remain at home following a child abuse and neglect investigation than do children in foster or group care.<sup>12</sup>
- Both teachers and caregivers tend to rate children in kinship care as having fewer behavioral problems than do their peers in other out-of-home placement settings.<sup>13</sup>

**Kinship care respects cultural traditions and may reduce racial disparities in a variety of outcomes.**

In a number of cultures—including many communities of color—the family and home are understood to include the extended family, and in some cases the community. Kinship care represents an opportunity for states to provide federally required safety and permanency to a greater number of children who come into contact with the child welfare system, while enhancing their well-being by providing them with access to their ethnic, racial, and cultural traditions.<sup>14</sup>

**Kinship caregivers provide stability to children and youth with incarcerated parents.**

According to a 2000 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, over 75 percent of mothers and about 18 percent of fathers incarcerated in state prisons in 1997 reported that their children were being cared for by a grandparent or other relative.<sup>15</sup> The incarceration of a parent is often traumatic on a variety of levels for children, and living with family members can provide some measure of stability.

**In spite of the numerous benefits associated with kinship care, myths remain.**

**Myth: “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”**

In fact, research shows that children living with relatives are no more likely—and are perhaps less likely—than children living with non-kin foster parents to experience abuse or neglect after being removed from their homes. A 1997 study found that non-kin foster parents were twice as likely as licensed kinship foster parents to have a confirmed report of maltreatment.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Illinois found that children in kinship foster care are at lower risk for maltreatment than are children in either specialized or non-relative foster care.<sup>17</sup>

**Myth: “It’s your moral responsibility.”**

Clearly, kinship caregivers agree. They take the responsibility of raising their grandchildren, nieces, and nephews when the children’s parents, for a variety of reasons, cannot. These caregivers lack neither morals nor a sense of responsibility; they do, however, lack resources. They may be living on a fixed income or be retired; whatever the reason, it is highly unlikely that they planned financially for raising a relative’s child.<sup>18</sup>

- The United States Department of Agriculture estimates that it costs at least \$7,000 per year to raise a child.<sup>19</sup>
- The vast majority of children living with relative caregivers are eligible for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grant. However, 70 percent of relative caregivers do not access TANF or any other public financial assistance.
- Even when caregivers access TANF child-only grants, this assistance amounts to, on average, just over \$4,000 per year—or about 57 percent of the anticipated cost of raising a child.<sup>20</sup>

**Research debunks these old fears about the risk of placing children with kin.**

In fact, the research tells us that *many children who cannot live with their parents benefit from living with grandparents and other family members*. Supporting kinship caregivers in their efforts to address the needs of these children thus provides an opportunity to improve the lives of many children who have already experienced trauma.

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- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *2000 Census American Fact Finder Advanced Query*. Calculations by Children's Defense Fund of the number of children living in relative-headed households without either parent present.
- <sup>2</sup> The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193) requires states to consider giving preference to relatives over non-related caregivers when determining a placement for a child, assuming that relative meets all relevant state child protection standards. The Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89) clearly establishes legal guardianship as an acceptable and appropriate permanency plan.
- <sup>3</sup> Testa, M. 2001. *Kinship care and permanency*. Journal of Social Service Research, Vol. 28 (1) pp. 25 – 43.; Chamberlain, P., et al. 2006. *Who disrupts from placement in foster and kinship care?* Child Abuse & Neglect, Vol. 30, pp. 409 – 424.
- <sup>4</sup> Herrick, M. & Piccus, W. 2005. *Sibling Connections: The importance of nurturing sibling bonds in the foster care system*.
- <sup>5</sup> Shlonsky, A., Webster, D., & Needell, B. 2003. *The ties that bind: A cross-sectional analysis of siblings in foster care*. Journal of Social Service Research, Vol. 29 (3) pp. 27 – 52.; Wulczyn, F. & Zimmerman, E. 2005. *Sibling placements in longitudinal perspective*. Children and Youth Services Review, Vol. 27, pp. 741-763.
- <sup>6</sup> National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) CPS Sample Component Wave 1 Data Analysis Report, April 2005. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Courtney, M. & Needell, B. "Outcomes of kinship care: Lessons from California." In *Child welfare research review*. Vol. 2. J.D. Berrick, R.P. Barth and N. Gilbert, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 130 – 149.
- <sup>8</sup> Outcome P1: Children have permanency and stability in their living situations; and, Outcome P2: The continuity of family relationships and connections is preserved for children.
- <sup>9</sup> NSCAW 2005.
- <sup>10</sup> NSCAW 2005.
- <sup>11</sup> Wilson, L. Satisfaction of 1,100 Children in Out-of-Home Care, Primarily Family Foster Care, in Illinois' Child Welfare System. Tallahassee, FL: Wilson Resources, 1996.
- <sup>12</sup> NSCAW 2005.
- <sup>13</sup> NSCAW 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> Casey Family Programs. *Commitment to Kin: Elements of a support and service system for kinship care*. 2004; CFSR Outcome S2: Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.
- <sup>15</sup> Mumola, C. *Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report: Incarcerated Parents and Their Children*. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2000).
- <sup>16</sup> Zuravin, S.J., et al. "Child Maltreatment in family foster care: Foster home correlates." In *Child welfare research review*. Vol. 2. J.D. Berrick, R.P. Barth. And N. Gilbert, eds. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 189-200.
- <sup>17</sup> *A Child Welfare Research Agenda for the State of Illinois*. 1999. Urbana, IL: The Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- <sup>18</sup> Some question whether relatives who cannot afford to care for a child without assistance are appropriate placements. CLASP believes that placements with relatives, like all placements, should be made on a case-by-case basis and that when relatives offer benefits, like greater stability and less trauma, they should be supported in caring for a child.
- <sup>19</sup> This calculation is based on the cost of raising the younger of two children in a single-parent, two-child household with a before-tax income of less than \$41,700. Lino, Mark. 2005. *Expenditures on Children by Families, 2004*. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. Miscellaneous Publication No. 1528-2004. Retrieved 12/7/06 from <http://www.cnpp.usda.gov/Publications/CRC/crc2004.pdf>
- <sup>20</sup> *Table 42, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families- Active Cases, TANF Families with no adult recipients receiving cash assistance October 2003 – September 2004*. Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance. Retrieved 12/6/06 from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov//programs/ofa/character/FY2004/tab42.htm>.