

Kinship Foster Care

WHEN CHILDREN CAN'T LIVE SAFELY WITH THEIR PARENTS AND MUST ENTER THE CUSTODY OF THE STATE OR TRIBE, federal, state, and tribal child welfare policy prioritizes placement with relatives or close family friends. This is known as kinship foster care. Research confirms that children do best in kinship foster care and that family connections are critical to healthy child development and a sense of belonging. Kinship care also helps to preserve children's cultural identity and relationship to their community.

There is a growing consensus that group care is not beneficial for children except in time-limited therapeutic settings to meet specific treatment needs. Unfortunately, most communities lack a robust network of foster family homes. Given this reality, many child welfare agencies are redoubling their efforts to identify and engage kin as foster parents.

Despite the strong value of kinship foster care, major impediments still exist to finding, engaging, and placing children with kin when they must be removed from their parents' care. Efforts must be made to help children maintain important family connections and support, and to tailor services and assistance to address the unique needs of kinship foster families, while still working toward the goal of reunification with parents.

This wikiHow draws on wisdom from the field about the seven steps to creating a kin first culture – one in which child welfare systems consistently promote kinship placement, help children in foster care maintain connections with their family, and tailor services and supports to the needs of kinship foster families.

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Lead with a kin first philosophy

Leadership is a key ingredient to creating a kin first culture. Leaders can promote the belief that children belong with family, ensure that resources, tools, and training are aligned with the underlying values of a kin first culture, and hold all levels of the agency accountable for prioritizing placement with and connections to kin.

Leaders can:

- ▶ Identify champions within the agency who have the authority to implement policies and promote practices that are consistent with a kin first philosophy.
- ▶ Create the staffing structures needed to identify, engage and support kinship families.
- ▶ Advocate for a continuum of permanency options available to children in kinship care.
- ▶ Promote strategies that allow kin to support children, parents, and foster parents even if they are not placement options.
- ▶ Ensure agency staff and providers receive training on the value of kin, their unique needs, and how best to meet these needs.
- ▶ Develop benchmarks and continuously review data on children involved with the child welfare system who are living with kin, including children living with kin as an alternative to foster care. Analyze multiple data elements, including placement type, race, age, and gender, to understand the characteristics and experiences of children living with kin.

Pennsylvania has strong state law and policy that reflect their kin first philosophy. Their policies provide overarching guidance, while also allowing county leaders the flexibility to implement the policies in ways that work for them. For example:

- ▶ Under new leadership, Westmoreland County, PA sought to create high expectations and shared accountability for a kin first culture. All policies were revised to place more emphasis on the importance of kin and to remove existing barriers. They also collected key data on the experiences of children in kinship care to correct weaknesses, celebrate successes, and tailor staff training. For more on Westmoreland's approach and supporting data, see this [Powerpoint](#).

The Commissioner of Connecticut's Department of Children and Families issued an [all staff memo](#) laying out her expectations that all children be placed with kin whenever possible, and that placement in non-kin care should be the exception. The Commissioner subsequently set a target for all regions to aspire to: 40% of overall placements with kin.

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Develop written policies and protocols that reflect equity for children with kin and recognize their unique circumstances

Children in kinship foster care deserve the same attention as children placed with non-kin. Agencies that truly value kin will align their policies to ensure that children in kinship foster care have tailored services and supports and equal opportunities for permanency as other children. Whenever possible, policies should reflect the intent to serve families with respect for race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Well-drafted policies and protocols will streamline the process and make it easier to place children with kin.

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- ▶ Develop or review/adapt current written policies to ensure they reflect a priority for placing children with kin and preserving connections with kin. Ensure policies are designed with the unique needs of kin in mind.
 - ▶ Share draft policies and solicit feedback from multiple stakeholders, including kin and youth, before finalization.
 - ▶ Policies should include:
 - > Emergency placement protocols
 - > Steps to identify, notify and engage kin throughout the child welfare continuum
 - > Procedures for partnering with American Indian/Alaska Native tribes and compliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)
 - > Licensing and placement procedures with clear timelines and an appeal process
 - > National Association for Regulatory Administration (NARA) Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards and model tribal foster care standards such as those developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association, or other common sense foster home licensing standards
 - > A clear process for granting waivers and variances of licensing standards when appropriate
 - > Defined roles and expectations for all stakeholders, including agency staff, providers and family, for a team approach to helping families through the licensing process
 - > A range of permanency options for children with kin, including reunification with parents, adoption, tribal customary adoption, and guardianship
 - > Full disclosure to kin and parents on the range of permanency options and support associated with each
 - > Training targeted to kin and designed with their unique circumstances in mind
 - > Tailored services and supports for children living with kin

The Tennessee Department of Children’s Services promulgates new and revised policies approximately every six months to reflect new laws, ongoing priorities and best practices. All policies, including a **comprehensive set of kinship policies** to guide staff in identifying, approving, engaging and supporting kinship families, have been vetted by frontline staff, state and local leaders and caregivers. Policies include full disclosure policies.

The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) reinforces the importance of kinship and tribal connections for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) children. ICWA requires placement with extended family first, then families licensed by the child’s tribe, and then other Indian families, reflecting the importance of the child’s connection and belonging to their family, culture, and tribe. The child’s tribe is a critical partner in decisions about where AI/AN children should be placed and holds the knowledge and relationships that can assist agencies in meeting ICWA requirements. For more on implementation issues associated with ICWA, see the **Indian Child Welfare Act Guide**.

3

Identify and engage kin for children at every step

Kin first states are ones that begin identifying a child’s extended family network from the moment the child comes to the attention of the child welfare system.

Agencies should explore a connection with all identified kin and assess for their capacity to protect children and help them thrive, regardless of their race, ethnicity, cultural heritage, sexual orientation or gender identity.

Kin can play multiple roles during a child’s involvement with the child welfare system. They can support children and parents with open child protection cases, provide homes for children in foster care, help children stay connected to family while in foster care, including children in group care, and support families once the children return home.

Strategies to identify and engage kin include:

- ▶ Make family search and engagement a priority at multiple stages, not only when children are first removed from parents’ care.
- ▶ Use a combination of casework and technology to identify kin.
- ▶ When engaging kin, focus on the role they can play to help children preserve healthy family connections, even when the children are not placed with them.
- ▶ Identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives.
- ▶ Use family team meetings to identify, engage, and educate kin.

- ▶ Engage tribes early in efforts to locate family placements and supports for American Indian and Alaska Native children. Be familiar with the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act and how this can shape work with kinship homes.
- ▶ Document the family connections identified so the results of family search and engagement are retained for all parties working with the family throughout the child’s involvement with the child welfare system.

Epic O’Hana, a non-profit organization in Hawaii, is guided by an overriding philosophy about the importance of family connections for children involved with the child welfare system. The use of O’Hana meetings to identify and engage extended families in a plan to help children stay safe and connected to family is central to their work with families. **Epic O’Hana’s report on Maintaining Connections** describes how they engage extended families for children involved in child welfare.

Pennsylvania state law requires family finding, a strategy to locate and engage kin for children at risk of or already in foster care. Under the Pennsylvania law, the county must initiate family finding in every case at the time of referral to the child welfare agency, and the court must inquire at each hearing whether the county agency has complied with family finding. All caseworkers receive training on the importance of placing children with kin.

Wisconsin received a federal grant to implement family finding services in six counties, which they are now expanding into several more counties. The grant allowed them to use multiple search techniques to locate and engage kin as connections, placements, and permanency options for children in foster care. The state partnered with the National Institute for Permanent Connectedness to develop a **Family Finding and Engagement Desk Guide** for caseworkers who complete the family finding training.

This **Model Sample Notification Letter** is an example of how notice letters, required by federal law to be sent within 30 days of a child’s removal from a parent, can be written in a way that can be easily understood by kin. The letter avoids using overly legalistic language that might be intimidating to family, family friends and others with a connection to a child.

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Create a sense of urgency for making the first placement a kin placement

Research shows that kinship foster care is more stable than non-kin care and can help prevent disruptions that are harmful to a child's well being. Kin first agencies invest necessary resources and align their policies, practices and staff to make the child's first placement with kin whenever possible.

Strategies include:

- ▶ Create a firewall that requires approval by a supervisor, program manager or director for all non-kin placements.
- ▶ Provide staff with tools they need to place with kin immediately including:
 - ▶ Well articulated roles and responsibilities across units for the tasks associated with making an initial kin placement
 - ▶ A well established process of teamwork within and across units to do everything it takes to make the initial placement a kin placement
- ▶ Streamlined processes for conducting background checks and fingerprinting
- ▶ Clear procedures for conducting initial home checks
- ▶ Training on the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act and how to work effectively with tribal governments and their child welfare agencies

Tennessee has a statewide form called a **Kinship Exception Request** that every case manager must complete and submit for approval before making a non-kin placement. The region's kinship coordinator is typically responsible for ensuring that all efforts have been made to locate kin.

Several jurisdictions have found that access to **Live Scan fingerprinting technology** can make the fingerprinting process easier and faster for prospective foster parents and the agency.

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Make licensing kin a priority

Kin first agencies seek to remove all barriers to licensing kin who can provide a safe and stable placement for the child. When licensing kin, caseworkers should examine the suitability of each caregiver in relation to the individual child, not just whether the caregiver can be licensed according to state or tribal licensing standards. Additionally, kin first agencies work diligently to remove barriers before allowing kin to remain unlicensed so they can have the same access to financial resources and other supports as non-kin. Many kin first agencies believe that unlicensed kinship care denies kin equal treatment.

Strategies for prioritizing licensing for kin include:

- ▶ Adopt the National Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards or model tribal foster care standards, such as those developed by the National Indian Child Welfare Association for a common sense approach to licensing all foster parents, including kin.
- ▶ Implement a clear process for requesting and granting waivers and variances for non-safety licensing standards that will not adversely affect the child and are barriers to placement of the child with kin.
- ▶ Develop written licensing procedures with clear timelines and processes, as well as an appeal process for kin who are denied licensure.
- ▶ Facilitate the licensing process by providing kin with assistance to complete necessary paperwork, obtain items that are required for licensing, make home modifications, etc.
- ▶ Provide kin with all necessary information about the licensing process. In jurisdictions that provide the option to care for the child as an alternative to foster care, fully educate kin on the differences between caring for a child as a licensed foster parent versus as an alternative to foster care so they can make an informed decision about which is best for their family.
- ▶ Implement kinship specific training aimed at educating kin about their unique role and the expectations of the agency. Trainings should be culturally appropriate and trauma informed, recognize the unique family dynamics associated with kin care, and include examples that reflect the life circumstances of the kin participating.

Connecticut requires a **Placement Waiver Request Form** for every waiver granted to kin and non-kin foster parents. The form provides guidance on which entities must approve the waiver before it can be granted, with criminal and child protection background waivers requiring a higher level of approval than other types of waivers.

The District of Columbia has a **Temporary Licensing of Foster Home for Kin policy** that includes a List of Potentially Waivable Requirements. Caseworkers must complete a Request for Waiver of Licensing Requirements for Temporary License in DC that explains why the waiver will not impact safety for the child.

Model Family Foster Home Licensing Standards developed by the National Association for Regulatory Administration, Generations United, and the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law are included in a free package of materials that include common sense licensing standards, a guide states can use to implement the standards, and a tool for states to compare and align their laws and/or regulations with the model standards.

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Support permanent families for children

The ultimate goal for children in foster care is to safely return home in a timely manner. Kin should support the goal of a safe return home, but remain willing to provide a permanent home if that goal cannot be met. Kin can assist families by providing safe, loving environments for the children, being positive role models for the parents, and generally supporting the families through difficult times. It is important to honor families by taking time to understand their dynamics and relationships, and explain the legal process and options. This family-centered problem solving will lead to the best possible decision about the most appropriate permanent families for children.

- ▶ Offer all options for legal permanence for the child, including reunification with the parents and subsidized adoption, tribal customary adoption, or guardianship by kin.
- ▶ Provide kin families with quality services and supports after the child has become a permanent part of their family through adoption or guardianship.
- ▶ Use family-centered team meetings to help families make the best decision about a permanent family for the child, including team decision-making meetings, permanency roundtables, multidisciplinary team meetings, etc.
- ▶ Afford the same level of effort, supports and services to parents as provided to kin caregivers and non-kin foster parents.

Hawaii uses a **chart of permanency options** to help families understand the legal options available and the financial, service, and legal implications of each.

The federal Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP) is an important permanency option for children who can't return home or be adopted. For a detailed description of the program and resources to support implementation, see **Subsidized Guardianship**. For more on how states have implemented this federal option, see **Making it Work: Using the Guardianship Assistance Program to Close the Permanency Gap for Children in Foster Care**.

In most tribal communities, adoption has historically been practiced through custom and ceremony and in general, tribes did not practice termination of parental rights (TPR). Given this tradition, conventional adoption and TPR have been viewed by tribes as a tool to destroy Indian families and culture consistent with other forced assimilation policies. Today, tribes are healing their historical trauma by reclaiming their positive tradition for “making relatives,” through customary adoption, which allows tribes to meet their children’s need for permanent families while honoring their own tribal values and beliefs. To be successful with Indian families, child welfare agencies should seek to understand these cultural influences. For more information on customary adoption, contact the National Indian Child Welfare Association at info@nicwa.org.

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Create a strong community network to support kin families

Community based organizations and other public systems can often be a child welfare agency's best allies in achieving positive outcomes for children in kinship care. Community partnerships can ensure that kin have access to the tailored services and supports they need for the child.

- ▶ Engage other public systems, such as schools, early care and education, economic security, and aging services to support children, parents and kin.
- ▶ Involve legal stakeholders, including the judiciary, attorneys, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), tribal courts, in supporting the agency's priority for kinship placement and connections.
- ▶ Provide opportunities for kinship families to network with each other through mentoring, support groups and leadership development opportunities.
- ▶ Develop strong relationships and referral processes with community-based organizations, including tribal child welfare programs, that can provide tailored, culturally appropriate and relevant services to children, parents and kin.
- ▶ Partner with private providers to meet the therapeutic and other needs of children, parents and kin.
- ▶ Partner with kinship foster parents, youth, and other community stakeholders on the development of child welfare policies and protocols.

Washington State has a strong infrastructure of support for kinship families at the state and local level. A legislatively mandated kinship care oversight committee coordinates resources for kinship families across departments, while a kinship workgroup of public agency staff works to remove barriers to supporting kin. The State also has a kinship navigator program and supports partnerships with community providers through almost full use of the National Family Caregiver Support Program's 10 percent for grandparents and other relatives age 55 and over who are raising children. For more, visit www.dshs.wa.gov.

Washington State has a fairly extensive **set of policies and procedures** around working with Native families that emphasizes kinship care efforts.

Kinship navigator programs provide information, referral, and follow-up services to grandparents and other relatives raising children to link them to the benefits and supports that they or the children need. To learn more about states with kinship navigator programs and state laws and policies that support them, visit grandfamilies.org.