



STRATEGY BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

What should every child protection agency do to **ensure that children are placed with kin?**

When child protective services determines a child must be removed from the home and placed in foster care, that child deserves to be placed with kin. Those kin may be defined as relatives by blood or marriage, as well as other people who are close to the child and family to whom the relationship is treated as “chosen family,” also known as [fictive kin](#). Like all children in out-of-home care, those placed with kin are entitled to resources and supports that help protect their safety, promote their well-being, and facilitate permanency — ideally through safe reunification with their family.

Keeping children with their kin when safely possible is a core principle of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), the [gold standard of child welfare practice](#). There are other federal policies that [support kinship caregivers](#), such as the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), which provides open-ended entitlement funding for important services.

This brief describes three key principles for [prioritizing and supporting kinship placements in child welfare](#):



What should every child protection agency do to ensure that children are placed with kin?

- **Advance a kin-first culture**
- **Provide supports for children, their parents, and kinship caregivers**
- **Identify and provide community-based supports**

It offers questions for consideration to help child protection agency leaders further explore how they might apply these principles to improve the permanency and well-being of children in kinship care and their families.¹

Principle 1: Advance a kin-first culture

[Numerous studies](#) have established the benefits of kinship care. The research demonstrates that compared to non-kin foster care, kinship care yields greater placement stability, lower rates of re-abuse, better behavioral health, and a higher likelihood of permanency. Despite these findings, child protection agencies place only about one-third of children in formal out-of-home care with kin, and the rates vary significantly among jurisdictions across the country.

Accordingly, child welfare practice must shift universally to a [kin-first approach](#), in which **kinship placement is the expectation and goal** rather than a practice exception or alternative, and [all children in out-of-home care are placed safely with kin, who subsequently are provided with caregiver resources and supports](#). An agency committed to a kin-first approach is centered on the input of the children and their family, seeks to explore and engage the whole family network, and strives to make every child's first — and only — placement with kin. In instances when placement with kin is not possible, the search for kin who can provide

KINSHIP CARE BY THE NUMBERS

Nationally, about 35% of all children placed in out-of-home care are living with kin. Trends vary across the country, with state-level rates ranging from 10% to 53%.

Source: *Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data, available through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect Data. Analyzed by Casey Family Programs, June 2022.*

a safe home or connection for the child should be ongoing and include both maternal and paternal kin. A shift to a kin-first approach requires agency leadership to establish a strong vision, clear goals, and firm expectations for kinship placement — grounded in the value that children have a [moral right to be with people they know](#) — followed by concrete changes to agency policies, frontline practices, and organizational culture.

ICWA specifically promotes the rights of American Indian/Alaska Native children to be connected to their tribe and their extended family, elders, community, and culture. Consultation with tribes must occur before placement decisions are made, and tribal definitions of family relationships must be respected.

Several well-established child welfare approaches support the universal expectation and goal of placing children in out-of-home care with kin, including:

When children are not with their family, they can experience a lot of confusion about who they are and where they come from. Knowing your family and culture, and being connected to those values and traditions, provide an important sense of stability.

— ALEKS TALSKY,

ALUMNUS OF FOSTER CARE AND BOARD MEMBER FOR THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR CHILDREN'S LEGAL REPRESENTATION, WISCONSIN

What should every child protection agency do to ensure that children are placed with kin?

- a. Active engagement of families.
- b. Reducing barriers to kinship care.
- c. Creating administrative barriers for non-kin foster care placements.

Active engagement of families

- **Hold family team meetings** to meaningfully and actively engage parents, youth, and kin in strength-based safety planning. These meetings should be held as early as possible, at key decision points throughout the family's involvement with the system, and at times and in locations convenient and familiar to the family. Family team meetings are important opportunities to discuss the unique elements of kinship care, ask children questions about their identity and culture and [who they want to stay or live with](#), identify the natural and community-based supports available to the family, and inform kin about the options they have to participate in a child's care and placement (including the possibility and requirements to become a licensed foster parent). Kin who cannot provide a home still can offer children connection and a sense of belonging, and therefore should be engaged at the outset of the family's involvement with the agency. Kinship caregiver advocates or navigators should co-facilitate the team meetings to help ensure that family voice and choice are at the center of the safety planning. Family engagement should continue throughout the duration of involvement with the child welfare system, especially at key decision points.
- **Employ rigorous family finding**, using tools such as genograms, case mining, and youth and family interviews. Some agencies have [dedicated staff positions or created special units devoted to family finding](#).

Reducing barriers to kinship care

- **Reimagine a universal approach to licensing that prioritizes safe placement with kin, with any other form of placement considered the exception.** This approach should recognize and acknowledge the child's relationship with kin as the primary item to assess in approving a kinship

caregiver for licensure, and efforts should be made to [waive or uphold a process for waiving non-safety related standards](#) for kin.² Child protection agency routine processes for foster home studies and licensing, however, are based on non-kin caregivers as applicants. Kinship caregivers, who often are called on to help a child suddenly and more likely to have fewer caregiver resources at their disposal than traditional foster parents, experience significantly more barriers to licensing. Ultimately, the philosophy and goal of a kin-first agency is to approve licensure of kinship caregiver families, not rule them out. (See: [How can we prioritize kin in the home study and licensure process, and make placement with relatives the norm?](#) and [How did A Second Chance Inc. transform kinship care in Allegheny County?](#)) Retrofitting a process currently designed for non-kin caregivers is not sufficient. The licensure process must be tailored to kinship care³ and include the full participation and diverse perspectives of families and kinship caregivers with lived experience in the child welfare system.

- **Reduce logistical and financial barriers.** Providing financial supports, emergency child care, and transportation of children to their school are examples of ways to reduce barriers to placement of children with kin. Engaging kinship families is the best way to understand the barriers they face and develop strategies to address those barriers. Agencies can work with experienced kinship caregivers to design a process that supports the financial needs and logistical concerns that they identify.
- **Develop border agreements to support timely placement with kin living in another state.** Child protection agencies can [create border agreements](#) to allow for voluntary placement with kin, including developing a safety plan, while ensuring that the requirements of the [Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children](#) are met.
- **Review and revisit existing policies.** Often, jurisdictional policies unnecessarily restrict the approval of kin to serve as caregivers. The pressure to locate immediate placements for children also can result in the rejection of kinship homes,

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particularly those that require modification to meet current certification standards. Fortunately, states are allowed to exempt kinship care providers from compliance with non-safety-related requirements and should exercise that flexibility when reasonable. Utilizing waivers, offering grace periods, and providing other forms of flexibility in meeting non-safety-related licensing standards (which should be evaluated and not considered presumptive) are critical strategies in facilitating placement with kin.

Creating administrative barriers for non-kin foster care placements

- **Establish additional burdens or other checks and balances** to make non-kin foster care placements more challenging to approve. Concurrently, to ensure placement with kin is the presumptive placement type, create a [kin-first firewall](#). Agency leadership can increase the burden on staff seeking non-kin foster care placements (such as requiring additional paperwork/permission), or institute a [director-level approval process](#) for non-kin placements. While these technical strategies are insufficient on their own, they may help shift practice to focusing on kin first.

Questions to consider:

- What is standing in the way of placing most children in out-of-home care with kin?
- What policies and programs are in place to ensure children's first and only foster care placement is with kin?
- How can our agency measure success and ensure accountability to practices that require and/or prioritize first placement with kin?
- What formal onboarding processes are in place to ensure that new staff can immediately follow our agency's kin-first approach?
- How could our jurisdiction reassess existing home study and licensing criteria to place more children safely with kin, in keeping with national licensing standards?

- In what ways do our placement priorities and approval policies align with ICWA by prioritizing placement for all children in foster care within their extended families and existing communities?
- How does our agency honor families' own definitions of kin and "chosen family"?
- How does our agency support kin as they navigate relationships within the family and the system itself?
- How are family finding, family team meetings, and other strategies being used to engage parents and kin in decision-making about placement?
- How are kinship caregivers with lived experience engaged so that our agency can better understand and address the needs of kin who are asked to care for a child?

Principle 2: Provide supports for children, their parents, and kinship caregivers

If the child protection agency determines that a child cannot safely remain at home and must be placed into foster care, then the agency should assess and provide needed services to the caregiver, the parent(s), and the child throughout the entire time the child remains in out-of-home care. All children in foster care deserve to have caretakers who are provided with the same set of available financial supports and other resources, regardless of whether the caregiver family is kin or non-kin.⁴

It is the responsibility of the agency, not the kinship family, to develop solutions to provide the appropriate supports in ways that are acceptable to the family and within the family's comfort zone. **Initial reticence from a kinship caregiver family to accept support is never an excuse not to provide support.**

Longstanding disparities in the treatment of Black and American Indian/Alaska Native families have had devastating impacts and continue to this day. As a result, some kin may be wary of any involvement by the child protection agency, even if the sincere intention is to provide support. Child protection agencies have an obligation to acknowledge, address, and seek to heal the harm of individual biases, institutional policies and practices, and systemic approaches that

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have contributed to current disparities. [Adequately supporting family members](#) and providing a range of options to those who are caring for — or considering caring for — their kin is part of this process.

Financial resources are one of the most challenging barriers for kinship caregivers. [Poverty rates among kinship caregivers](#) are almost twice the U.S. average, according to Pew Research Center. Research consistently has shown that compared to caregivers who are not kin, kinship caregivers have more limited social networks and resources.⁵ Depending on their income, kinship caregivers who are not licensed foster parents [may be eligible for increased levels of support through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families](#) (TANF), which typically provides less than half of the monthly support offered to licensed foster caregivers, as well as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and others benefits, depending on their income.

For children unlikely to reunify with their parents, the legal relationship of relative guardianship or customary adoption is one way to ensure that children are receiving the supports they need. The Title IV-E Guardian Assistance Program (GAP) incentivizes the use of relative guardianship for children in foster care, permitting states and tribes to use federal Title IV-E child welfare funds to subsidize relative guardianship up to the same rate as the state's foster care subsidy. Kinship caregivers must be licensed to receive the support, however. As of April 2021, 40 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and 10 tribes have [approved GAP plans](#). However, [utilization of GAP](#) is uneven, even across those jurisdictions with plans.

Financial support should be offered to kinship caregivers immediately, with support including active engagement of the caregiver to assess and plan for financial needs. There are a variety of ways to [financially support kinship caregivers](#), including offering childcare subsidies, pre-licensure per diems, navigation and advocacy, and compensation parity with non-kin licensed caregivers.

[Additional support](#) for families also should include: [family time](#); support of healthy birth parent/caregiver relationships; trauma and behavioral health services (including the needs of parents of children exposed to trauma); working through permanency considerations; ongoing assessment of cultural and family identity; and education and independent living supports for older youth and young adults to minimize the risk of disruption. Other critical supports include opportunities for kin and birth parents to come together and learn to co-parent, communicate, and celebrate raising the child as a team.

Questions to consider:

- What efforts is our agency making to address any initial reticence to receiving support by kinship caregivers, particularly among Black and American Indian/Alaska Native families and other communities that may be reticent to accept support due to their distrust of the child protection agency?
- Is our agency assessing the needs of the child, parent(s), and kinship caregiver(s) during all kinship foster care placements to ensure that all three parties receive the most appropriate services for their needs?

The importance of the relationship between the caregiver and the biological parent is important. My relationship with my sister was greatly impacted by the fact that I had custody of her kids ... that created a massive rift in our relationship that I think child welfare agencies should really focus on, in addition to focusing on the safety of the child.

— ADRIAN MCLEMORE,
PROGRAM OFFICER, THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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- How does our agency support the financial needs of kinship caregivers and ensure parity with non-kin caregivers?
- Do the supports our agency provides children and their kinship caregivers equal to those provided for non-kin placements?
- How does our agency ensure family time for all children placed with kinship caregivers in settings that nurture love and connectedness?
- How does our agency ensure that children in kinship care have access to the behavioral health services they may need to address past trauma, and support their placement stability and reunification with family?

Principle 3: Identify and provide community-based supports

Community-based supports for kinship families are needed, both in partnership with and beyond the child protection agency, in order to holistically support kinship caregivers and ensure the well-being of the children in their care.

Community-based organizations can help bridge longstanding gaps in trust between child protection and families/communities, helping to mend relationships

damaged by decades of over-surveillance of families, policy and practice bias, and disproportionately high rates of child removal in some communities of color. Accordingly, community-based services are best positioned within the broader [child and family well-being system](#) to support families, including kinship caregiver families. These supports should be co-designed with people who have expertise gained through lived experience with kinship care.

Kinship care supports should include [kinship navigation](#), which provides prospective caregivers with information, referrals, and assistance applying for supports. Kinship navigator programs increase social support, improve family resources, and improve child safety and placement stability. They also can help inform the community and service providers about the needs of kinship caregivers and the children within those families. Since 2018, the federal government has provided a dedicated funding stream for kinship navigator programs through the Family First Prevention Services Act. [Other mechanisms for kinship navigator funding](#) also exist.

Other community-based services that kinship caregiver families need include support groups (including ones specific to grandparents), family therapy, and legal aid and advocacy.



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Questions to consider:

- What traditional and nontraditional supports are available to children and kinship caregivers in the communities we serve?
 - Are kinship navigator services available in our community, and are there additional services our agency can advocate for or expand to reach more families
- How can our agency partner with community-based organizations and people with lived experience of kinship care to better understand the needs of kinship caregivers, build trust, and co-create culturally appropriate services that provide families with the support they need to stay together and thrive?

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Aleks Talsky, Keith Lowhorne, Marquette King, Sonya Begay, Victoria Gray, and Ryan Young.
- 2 According to the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families in the December 2020 [Information Memorandum on the Use of Title IV-E Programmatic Options to Improve Support to Relative Caregivers and the Children in Their Care](#), commonly waived non-safety standards fall into three categories: home (i.e., physical characteristics and requirements of the home, proximity to the parents), caregiver (i.e., financial conditions, training standards, marital status, age), and children (i.e., number, ages, and sleeping arrangements). Some states are considering or have enacted legislation to further expand eligibility for kinship caregivers by expanding criminal exemptions that are unrelated to the safety of the child or home (i.e. [California Senate Bill 354](#)).
- 3 In February 2023, the Administration for Children, Youth, and Families published a [Notice of Proposed Rulemaking \(NPRM\) on Separate Licensing Standards for Relative or Kinship Foster Family Homes](#). If finalized, states would be encouraged to adopt alternative standards for kinship caregivers, as an alternative to case-by-case waivers.
- 4 If approved, the February 2023 NPRM would require equivalent financial support for kinship placements.
- 5 Lin, C.-H. (2014). Evaluating services for kinship care families: A systematic review. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 36, 36-41.

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