

<http://www.cwla.org/programs/kinship/bestpractice.htm>

Kinship Care

Best Practice Guidance

As the number of children in kinship care increase child welfare agencies are seeking policies, programs and practice guidance to help develop and implement effective kinship care policies and programs. Child welfare agencies are taking a new look at the nature of kinship care, the role of kinship care as a child welfare service, and the relationship among kinship care family preservation and out-of-home care. Many agencies are beginning to address a number of policy and practice issues.

Providing Financial Support and Information to Kinship Families

Whenever possible, and when requested by the family, child welfare agencies should provide financial benefits to support the ongoing care of vulnerable children. Beyond providing direct support, child welfare agencies also should ensure that kinship families providing both formal and informal kinship care have knowledge and access to the benefits for which they are eligible under other federally-supported programs, including TANF, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and child support.

To address inequities in support to kinship caregivers, the child welfare agency should:

- Implement policies and procedures that establish a uniform level of child welfare benefits for all children in the legal custody of the public agency;
- Develop a clear statement of the financial support that is available to children in formal and informal care;
- Clearly define the rights and responsibilities of kinship caregivers upon approval or licensing of their homes, including access to financial support for children for whom they are caring;
- Develop and implement procedures to ensure that children in kinship care receive Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), child support payments, and other benefits for which they are eligible;
- Provide assistance and support to kinship caregivers in applying for benefits for their kin children; and
- Develop and/or provide informational literature to informal kinship caregivers on applying for and accessing Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), child support

payments, and other federal and state income support/financial programs which can assist them in caring for their kin.

- Attend community meetings and be prepared to provide informational literature that describes the services and financial benefits provided by government programs or agencies.

Family Centered Assessments

Family centered assessment is a dynamic, continuous process with basic elements of practice generic to all situations. The family assessment starts at the point of intake, provides a framework to guide professional discussion, and is the foundation upon which a plan of service should be developed with children and their families. A comprehensive assessment requires the participation of both parents, children, caregivers and other significant persons in collaboration with the social worker.

While assessment should be ongoing, there are two distinct phases in the kinship care assessment process.

1. An initial assessment focuses on safety, protection, and the immediate health, educational, developmental, and emotional needs of the child and the willingness and ability of the kinship family to meet those needs; If the child is already living with the kinship caregiver, an initial assessment should be completed immediately.
2. An in-depth assessment should be conducted within 45 days of entry into the formal child welfare system. The assessment should focus on the kinship caregiver's ability to meet the ongoing needs of the child and to engage in long-range planning for the child, including:
 - exploring quality of caregivers previous relationship/involvement with child and parents;
 - identifying the concrete service needs of both the child and the kinship family;
 - exploring permanency options for the child; and
 - clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the kinship family and the social worker in supporting and strengthening the kinship care arrangement.

Assessment with Parents

The agency should conduct a comprehensive assessment of the child, parents, and kinship caregivers. The agency should engage parents in the family assessment and treatment plan. Their involvement is crucial to the success of the overall assessment and treatment process. Including all family members gives the family the ability to recognize the problems that exist, identify strengths and resources and make decisions that can help the family to learn different ways to manage their life events.

The assessment also should explore the availability of relatives and others in the family environment, such as neighbors or religious organizations, who can be enlisted to support the parent in making needed changes.

The agency should attempt to locate the father and the child's paternal family members. They can be a valuable natural family resource for the child. Including fathers as well as paternal and maternal family members encourages positive changes that can impact all family members. If a parent is incarcerated, it is important that the agency include him or her in the decision making regarding the child's life.

Assessment of the Children

Kinship care services should support relationships that children share with their parents, siblings, caregiver and other family members. There should be respect for children's ties with their family and community. Children in kinship care experience many emotions when they are separated from their parents and siblings. Children who are able to contribute can be active participants in the assessment process. They need help understanding the family crisis that has changed their family's living arrangement and the authority within the family. Children who have been separated from their parents need an immediate comprehensive assessment.

The comprehensive assessment should reveal service and treatment intervention strategies to help the child develop appropriate competencies and skills, including the types of services needed and parental and sibling visiting schedules, if appropriate. The worker should discuss the service plan with the child and encourage the child's input, if appropriate.

Assessment of the Kinship Caregivers

The child welfare agency must assess the willingness and ability of the prospective kinship caregiver to provide a safe, stable, nurturing environment for a child for whom the agency has assumed responsibility.

The assessment should be based on an understanding of the kinship family's culture and community, child-rearing approaches, and family dynamics, and focus on the ability of the family to meet the immediate and ongoing needs of the child. The family is seen as a unit and is the primary focus of involvement and services.

Providing Supports and Services for Children, Kinship Caregivers and Parents

Providing supports and services that are child centered, family focused, culturally responsive and tailored to the needs of kinship families is essential. Child welfare agencies should establish policies and procedures that reflect a strong commitment to strengthening and supporting kinship families in their efforts to provide a safe and nurturing environment for the children in their care and to achieve a permanent legal living arrangement for the child.

Children in kinship care may need a variety of supports and services, including mental health

evaluations, as well as preventive health care, including dental, vision, hearing screenings and counseling services.

Kinship caregivers may need a range of services such as legal assistance, parenting support, housing assistance, health care, child care, respite care, counseling, support and help with understanding and dealing with adult children who are involved in alcohol and other drug use.

Parents may need services related to the problems that led to the placement of their children with a kin and in planning for reunification or another permanency option for their children.

A full range of services and supports that address the factors that place families at risk of separation should be available from the community and the child welfare agency. The relationships of these agencies and individuals should be cooperative, complementary, and based on a shared vision that the basic rights and needs of all children and their families will be met. Supports and services should be accessible and respond to the needs of kinship children and families.

Children in the legal custody of the public child welfare agencies and in informal kinship care living arrangements have a range of needs for which financial support is essential. State policies governing the payment of foster care maintenance for children in formal kinship care vary widely. In most states, financial support is provided for children who are living with kin only if the kinship caregivers are officially approved or licensed as foster parents.

Some states are developing innovative funding which offers a subsidy payment and medical assistance for children for whom the kinship caregiver has obtained guardianship. Usually, federal funds and matching state funds are used to support the care of Title IV-E eligible children by kin under the foster care program. However, in some states, the only available form of public support is Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). If the child is not eligible for TANF, no public support may be available, and kinship families must rely entirely on their own financial resources to meet the needs of children in their care.

Development and Implementation of the Service and Permanency Plan

The social worker should develop and implement the service plan jointly with the family and with other service providers, as needed. This partnership of all individuals helps to ensure that service interventions are relevant, well-coordinated, and integrated. The service plan is essential because it documents the agreed upon action plan, and serves as an agreement that guides the worker, family, and other providers as they work toward their common goals.

Workers should assist parents and children in being active participants in setting goals for the case plan. When parents are involved in developing the case plan, they are usually more willing to actively participate in meeting the goals.

Roles, Rights and Responsibilities in Kinship Care

Parents

Parents and families have the primary responsibility to ensure that their children are cared for and protected. To meet this obligation, parents:

- should provide adequate care and supervision of their children;
- should learn and apply consistent, appropriate and non-punitive disciplinary techniques;
- should seek support from family, friends and the community, whenever appropriate, in protecting their children;
- should involve themselves in a constructive way in the activities of agencies serving their children; and
- when necessary, should participate in the development, implementation and completion of a service plan that will result in safety, permanency, and well being for their child.

Parents who have children living with their relatives have rights that should be respected. To the greatest extent possible, the agency should ensure that parents:

- actively participate in family assessment and decision-making process;
- are assisted in making the changes necessary to prevent the unnecessary separation of their child from their care;
- have the opportunity to suggest what relative is available to provide care for their child on a temporary basis when separation is necessary; and,
- have the right to regular contact with their child.

The Kinship Caregiver

The child welfare agency should encourage kinship caregivers to be active partners with the agency and the child's parents. Their role and responsibilities should be defined as:

- Protecting, nurturing, and caring for their young kin for a temporary or extended period of time;
- Assuring that the child's needs are met;
- Helping children to return to their parents whenever possible;
- Helping parents to make the changes necessary to resume parenting; and

- When children are unable to return to their parents, becoming actively involved in establishing and achieving a permanent plan for the child.

The Child Welfare Agency

Child welfare agencies should respond to requests from kinship families in order to assist them in providing care and protection for their children. The role of the agency will vary, depending upon the nature of the request and the needs of the child and family. When the child is already living with kin and assistance is requested, the agency should provide information and referral, help the family to access needed services or offer direct assistance, such as a family assessment or family services, if appropriate.

If the child is in state custody and living with kin, the child welfare agency should work with the kinship caregiver to ensure that children in care are protected and cared for and that they receive the services they need. The agency should also ensure that the parents of children in kinship care receive services directed toward reunification with the child or, if reunification is not possible, another permanency goal.

Kinship Care Best Practice Guidance was gathered from CWLA Kinship Care Standards. More detailed information pertaining to best practice standards can be found in the CWLA Kinship Care Standards.

Order! *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Kinship Care Services*



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