

Navigating Family Relationships as a Relative Caregiver

Anytime a new person joins a household, there will be changes in the family dynamic. These changes can be positive and can enrich the relationships between all involved, but there may also be some challenges and mixed feelings, too. In this tip sheet, we'll discuss some of the possible situations you may encounter as a relative caregiver, as well as some ideas to help you and your whole family navigate the changing roles.

You and the child

Where once you were the aunt or uncle, cousin, sibling, grandparent, etc., you are now the primary caregiver to this child. Your role is now to be the parent. This may be a situation that you never thought you'd be in, and you might be feeling myriad emotions—anger, resentment, shame, sadness, guilt. While none of these emotions feel good, they are quite common and normal to experience. They are not really about the child, but rather have more to do with the situations you may find yourself in now that you are playing this different role in the life of the child.

For example, as a grandparent, you may have viewed your role as the one who could “spoil” your grandchild. Your interactions may have been focused on the fun and carefree, without enforcing rules or handing out consequences. Now, however, you have to be the one ensuring household rules are followed and boundaries are set. Or, perhaps, as the aunt or uncle of the child, you now find yourself caring for another person full time and you may

worry about how the new circumstances will affect your biological children. Regardless of what your “title” was before this child entered your care, you are probably also feeling worried about the child and sad for the situation they are in; you want to make it better for them in whatever way you can.

All of these feelings are completely normal to experience. You may find that it helps to talk openly and often with the child about how you both are feeling. You might also discuss the changes that have or will be happening

between the two of you.

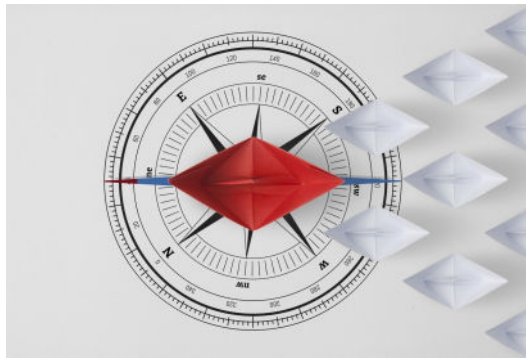
There will be new rules, routines, and dynamics for everyone in your home.

Being open about those changes can help you and the child navigate the road ahead together. Be flexible with and understanding of the child (and yourself!) as everyone gets used to the new living situation. You might also

find the support of an experienced counselor a useful resource for both of you as well.

You and the child's parent(s)

Whether the parent of the child in your care is your own child, your sibling, or another relative, this change in your role will impact your relationship with them. You may find yourself experiencing some complicated feelings about this person whom you love and care about. They, too, are most likely experiencing similar feelings. This is new territory for both of you, and the change in your relationship may be for the better or for the worse. As hard as it can be, sometimes relationships do go sour before they can get



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better.

As the caregiver in the role of parent, you have your own rules and boundaries for the child, and there may be times when the child's biological parent doesn't like or agree with those decisions. This can be a tricky and uncomfortable situation. Do your best to keep lines of communication open and focus your attentions on what is best for the child. This can give you and the child's parent a better chance at having a successful co-parenting relationship, and more positive interactions with one other overall.



parent may tell the child that he can spend the night at the home of a new friend. However, you may have a rule in your home that no one spends the night at a friend's house if you don't know that friend or the friend's parents.

It's a tricky spot to be in. Be firm and gentle in your communication, keeping the focus on staying in compliance with the child's case and care plan, as well as ensuring the safety of the child.

While the child is in your care, you are doing the day-to-day parenting. Your decisions are certainly important. It is also important to involve the child's biological parent as much as possible. Here are a few ways you might include the birth parent in the child's everyday life:

- Invite the parent(s) to school meetings
- Invite the parent(s) to extracurricular events for the child
- Invite the parent(s) to counseling and medical appointments
- Have the parent(s) over for a meal in your home
- Talk with the parent(s) about what's happening in the child's life – include both the positive and the not-so-positive
- Consult with the parent(s) on parenting decisions when possible

You will be responsible for following the case plan and having ongoing communication with the agency and social workers involved. There will probably be a visitation plan in place and it will be important to follow that plan closely. Be sure to seek permission before making any changes to the plan. You may feel that you and the parent are able to work out any changes between yourselves, which is a positive step! Being flexible and working together are great; however, it is always best to keep the child's case worker(s) in the loop and seek direction when situations come up that you may feel uncertain about.

While you can never be prepared for any and everything, it doesn't hurt to talk through some scenarios with the child's worker or another kinship parent. Doing so can help you feel more prepared to handle things that may come up.

There may be times when you have to say no to the child's parent, or when you have to override something the child's parent has said. While it probably won't feel good to have to do so, it may be required. For example, the child's

You and your extended family

All families are different and have different dynamics. For example, one of your siblings may have a closer relationship with the child's parent than with you. This could result in your sibling taking on the role of a reporter to the child's parent, gathering and sharing all of the details about what goes on in your home. Or, perhaps you are the grandparent of the child and your other children are upset with the

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child’s parent for having put you in this situation. There are all sorts of similar circumstances which could come up—and could result in loyalties being divided between family members.

Open communication and transparency about confidentiality up front is essential. As the caregiver, you will need to maintain confidentiality for both the child and the child’s parent. This may become really challenging when extended family get involved. They may feel curious and want to know the details about what is going on. Your requirement to maintain confidentiality may be challenging for them to understand; after all, they’re family, not strangers. Even so, confidentiality for the child in your care is of the highest importance. The child may not want all of their aunts and uncles or cousins to know why they are living with Grandma and Grandpa right now. There may be some painful experiences associated with why they came into care and the child may not feel comfortable answering questions or giving explanations to extended family members, even well-meaning ones.



It may feel very backwards to share family experiences and goings-on with a social worker or case manager and not with your own family. Your social worker can help you prepare for and have conversations about boundaries and confidentiality with your extended family. Letting them know up front that you can’t talk about certain subjects may dissuade them from asking in the first place. You may also find support by connecting with other kinship or relative caregivers in support groups. Many caregivers who have connected in this way say that it is immensely helpful to have a place to go to be understood, listened to, seek out guidance, and to help them feel

“normal.”

You and your partner

You and your partner, while “in it together,” will likely experience this situation differently. Taking time to nurture your relationship—even amid all of the stresses, excitements, and frustrations that come along with this journey—is important and falls into the self-care category. Whether it is a weekend without kids, a regular date night, or attending a support group, make sure you take care of yourselves and each other, whatever that looks like for you.

When a relative child enters your home, remember to allow time for adjustment for everyone in the home.

Remember that there are other caregivers like you out there able and willing to give you support to help you navigate these changing relationships. And remember that you can always contact the Coalition for Children, Youth & Families, too. You’ll find additional tip sheets and resources with more information for relative caregivers below.



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Resources

Tip Sheets

- [Getting Started as a Relative or Kinship Caregiver](#)
- [The Changing Role of Caregivers: Grandparents](#)
- [The Emotional Journey of Relative Caregiving](#)
- [Caregiver Trauma & Resilience: Tips to Keep Caring](#)

From the [Lending Library](#)

- *Kinship Care: Relative Caregivers Speak Out* (DVD)
- *Sometimes It's Grandmas and Grandpas, Not Mommies and Daddies*, by Gayle Byrne
- Fostering Across Wisconsin Newsletter: [Relatives Caring for Children](#)
- *Inside Kinship Care – Understanding Family Dynamics and Providing Effective Support*, by David Pitcher
- *The Kinship Parenting Toolbox*, by Kim Phagan-Hansel

Training & Resources From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Relative Caregiver Series: Navigating the Change in Roles](#)
- [Understanding the Courts: CHIPS, Guardianship, and TPR](#)

Inspiration & Hope From [No Matter What Families](#)

- [Everyone Needs Support: A Birth Mom's Story](#)
- [Kinship Brings Change](#)
- [The Complexities of Caring](#)
- [How Parenting Again Changed Our Lives](#)

Additional Coalition Resources

- [Resources for Relative Caregivers](#)
- [Families Like Mine Conference 2020](#)

Additional Resource

- [Kinship Care Resource Center](#)