

The Emotional Journey of Relative Caregiving

Becoming a relative caregiver can happen in an instant. The shift from being a grandparent, aunt or uncle, cousin, brother, or sister to being a child's primary caregiver and parent is a decision no one takes lightly. Whether or not you've had time to process all the changes that come with being a relative caregiver, know that it is natural for such a monumental shift to come with a range of emotions. These feelings will continue to evolve constantly as you move through the process and will likely be different for everyone involved.

You Are Not Alone

Thousands of relatives become caregivers every week and are willing to take on a challenging and critical role to ensure positive outcomes for children. 2023 data shows that across the nation, 3% of all kids—more than 2.4 million children—are in kinship care. A further breakdown of this data shows that 20% of relative caregivers are over 60, close to 40% live on fixed incomes below the federal poverty line, and 38% of relative caregivers have a limiting health condition. You may see your own situation reflected in these statistics.

Why Do Kids Need a Relative Caregiver?

Children in need of kinship care often come to you during a crisis—the death of a parent, substance abuse, mental health issues, and

abuse or neglect. Sometimes, kids need care while a parent is ill or recovering from an injury. The question then becomes, who can care for these kids when their parents cannot? In some cases, they may be placed in foster care. However, if a relative is available, that option will be explored first. Separating children from their birth families is a traumatic experience for everyone involved. When children must be placed in



out-of-home care, most often, the best possible setting right from the start is placing children with relatives. Under a relative's care, children can remain connected to their family and community. This helps reduce the trauma associated with being separated from their parents. In most cases, children living with a

relative have the opportunity to continue family traditions, remain in the same school district, and keep the same friendship circles. Remaining a part of this network of people who love them provides a lifelong support system for the child.

The Mix of Emotions Involved

Although stepping into the role of parent was probably not part of your life plan, you can make the best of this difficult situation. Raising a grandchild, while challenging, can be incredibly rewarding as you provide them with a safe, nurturing, and structured home environment to grow and feel loved. It's important to acknowledge the range of

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positive and negative emotions you may be experiencing. It's easy to share the joy you feel in watching them learn and grow. Admitting feelings like resentment, guilt, or fear is more challenging. The following list points out the ambivalence you may feel from a situation that isn't wholly positive or negative.

- You may feel disappointment or frustration with the birth parent of the child in your care.
- Guilt and shame may surface as you question how something like this could happen in your family.
- You may feel sadness and empathy for the birth parent who might not have had a choice in their current situation.
- Stress may occur as you feel divided loyalty in your relationships with the birth parent and child.
- Anxiety and feeling overwhelmed may come with this new role in your life.
- You may grieve the loss of the role you formerly held as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or sibling and want to return to that less stressful relationship.
- If you had previously been filled with worry, you may feel relief that the child is safe in your care.
- At times, the joy you feel will be immense as you see the child grow and thrive in your care.
- Feelings of satisfaction will occur from providing the child with a safe and structured home environment.

It's important to acknowledge and accept your feelings, both positive and negative. Don't beat yourself up over your doubts and misgivings. It will take time to adjust, and you will feel differently from day to day. Give yourself permission to experience all these emotions without judgment.

Acceptance, Self-Care, and a Circle of Support

Relative caregivers may risk isolation, as

they miss opportunities to socialize when most of their time is now spent caring for children. This isolation can lead to loneliness and depression, which directly affects the well-being of children in their care. Finding someone you can talk to about what you're going through will allow you to work through your feelings and accept the situation. If you deny or ignore these feelings, they may come out in other ways and affect your relationship with the rest of your family.

Studies show that people who cope well with the added stress of raising a relative's children seek out others for support. Support groups, phone support, online resources, and therapy can be extremely helpful. Connecting with people who have "been there" can uplift your spirits, and others can give you concrete suggestions for the situations you may be dealing with.

The Department of Children and Families' Kinship Navigator Caregiver Support page is a great place to find others you can connect with. Scroll down to "Caregiver Support," and you will find a list of regions and agencies to contact about connecting with people to take care of your social and emotional needs. If you haven't checked out a support group for relative caregivers, now might be the time to make that call.

Taking an active role with other relative caregivers may awaken a drive to do more. At some point, you could be the person offering support to new relative caregivers. As time passes, you might be the one saying, "I can empathize with what you are going through," "I've been there too," or "It's tough, but it's worth it."

The Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families and the Wisconsin Family Connections Center are ongoing resource providers for all families. We are here to listen, provide support, and connect families to resources in their communities. The

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following links will help you find the support you need for your current situation. We are available to talk when you need it. Your shift in role as a relative caregiver may be challenging at times, but it's often during our most challenging moments that we learn our true strength.



Resources

Training From [Champion Classrooms](#)

- [Relative Caregiver Series](#)

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

- [Kinship & Grandfamilies Playlist](#)

Additional WiFCC Resources

- [Find Resources & Support as a Relative Caregiver](#)
- [WiFCC Support Groups](#)

Additional Resources

- [Engaging Kinship Caregivers With Joseph Crumbley](#)
- [Kinship Care in Wisconsin](#)
- [Grand Resource Part Two: Help for Grandparents and Kinship Caregivers Impacted by Opioids or Other Substance Use Disorders](#)