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 enrich the relationships between all involved, but there may also be some challenges and mixed feelings. In this tip sheet, we'll discuss some situations you may encounter as a relative caregiver and 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 you never thought you'd be in, and you might feel a wide range of emotions—anger, resentment, shame, sadness, guilt. While none of these emotions feel good, they are pretty common and normal to experience. They are not really about the child but have more to do with the situations you may find yourself in now that you play this different role in the child's life.

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. However, now you have to ensure 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 your "title" before this child entered your care, you are probably also concerned about the child and sad for their situation; you want to make it better for them in whatever way you can.

All of these feelings are entirely 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 helpful for both of you.

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 you love and care about. They, too, are most likely experiencing similar feelings. This is new territory for both

Continued on page 2

of you, and the change in your relationship may be for the better or the worse. As hard as it can be, relationships sometimes go sour before getting 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 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 another overall.

If a child welfare agency or case worker is involved in your family's case, you will be responsible for following the case plan and communicating with the agency and workers involved. A visitation plan will probably be in place, and it will be important to follow it closely. Be sure to seek permission before making any changes to the plan. You may feel that you and the parent can work out any changes between yourselves, which is a positive step! Being flexible and working together is great; however, it is always best to keep the child's case worker(s) in the loop and seek direction when situations arise 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 others involved. That could be 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 do so, it may be required. For example, the child's parent may tell the child that he can spend the night at a new friend's home. 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, focusing on staying in compliance with the child's case and care plan, as well as ensuring the child's safety.

You are doing the day-to-day parenting while the child is in your care. 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–including both the positive and the not-so-positive
- Consult with the parent(s) on parenting decisions when possible

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 the details about what goes on in your home. Or, perhaps you are the child's grandparent, and your other children are upset with the child's parent for putting you in this situation. All sorts of similar circumstances could come up—and could result in loyalties being divided between family members.

Open communication and transparency about confidentiality upfront are essential. As the caregiver, you must maintain confidentiality for both the child and the child's parent. This

Continued on page 3

may become challenging when extended family gets 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 most important. The child may not want all of their aunts, uncles, or cousins to know why they are living with Grandma and Grandpa. There may be some painful experiences associated with why they came into care, and the child may not feel comfortable answering questions or explaining to extended family members, even well-meaning ones.

It may feel very backward to share family experiences and goings-on with a social worker or case manager, not your own family. If you are working with a social worker, they can help you prepare for and discuss boundaries and confidentiality with your extended family. Letting them know upfront 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 guidance, and help them feel "normal."

You and your partner

While "in it together," you and your partner 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 other caregivers like you are able and willing to give you support to help you navigate these changing relationships. And remember that you can always contact the Wisconsin Family Connections Center. You'll find additional tip sheets and resources with more information for relative caregivers below.

Resources on page 4

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 Resource 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 From Champion Classrooms
- Relative Caregiver Series: Navigating the Change in Roles
- Understanding the Courts: CHIPS, Guardianship, and TPR
- Resources for Ages 55+ Relative Caregivers of Children
- Supporting the Caregiver to Help Youth Thrive

Inspiration & Hope From No Matter What Families
- Everyone Needs Support: A Birth Mom's Story
- Kinship Brings Change
- The Complexities of Caring

Additional WiFCC Resources
- Resources for Relative Caregivers

Additional Resource
- Kinship Care Resource Center