Getting Started as a Relative or Kinship Caregiver

It can be very distressing and confusing to learn that a child you are related to or have a close, family-like relationship with has entered foster care due to a situation of abuse or neglect in their home. You likely have many questions right now about the child's safety, who they are with, what led up to this, and how you can get involved and advocate for the child(ren). Knowing where to start and who to ask for answers and information can be confusing, especially in an emotional situation like this.

First Things First

You may already have some information about the child's whereabouts, such as the name of the foster care agency or county department involved in their case, or even the name and contact information for the social worker. On the other hand, you may have only heard limited information—maybe only that the child was removed from their home. In Wisconsin, to find out who the local contact person is, you need to know the county where the child lives and then contact that county's Foster Care Coordinator. You can find **a list of Foster Care Coordinators by county** on our website.

When contacting an agency, it's helpful to understand that the social worker you speak with cannot initially provide any information. You can share your name, contact information, and details about your relationship with the child, but due to confidentiality concerns and to protect the child, they cannot confirm whether the child is in out-of-home care. If the child is in foster care, the social worker will ensure your information is shared with the individual handling the child's case. The social worker will have to follow a process to gain consent to speak with you.

This can be challenging as you wait and hope to hear back. You may feel like your hands are tied, but you can do something in the meantime: try talking with your family members, perhaps the child's parent(s), to see if they can give you the name and phone number of the child's social worker. If you get this information, you will have a more direct way to ensure your information reaches the right person. You can also ask the child's parent to ask the social worker to contact you. If the child's parents are comfortable doing so, they can also tell the worker they would prefer the child be placed with you or have visitation with you.

If you don't hear back, or you feel the child's team isn't fairly considering you as a placement option, you can hire an attorney to represent you and advocate for the child to be placed with you.

Even as a relative, you must become licensed and follow particular requirements to care for the child while they are in foster care. You can learn more about this process on the Wisconsin Department of

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Children & Families (DCF) website. You will be assigned a licensing worker as you complete the training and meet other requirements. Sometimes, this is the same person as the child's social worker.

We are often asked, "Should I proactively get licensed as a foster parent now?" when a person is waiting to hear back from a social worker and hopes to be in better standing to be considered a placement option. You can contact your county's human services department to get started with general foster care licensure. However, becoming licensed as a relative for a specific child has slightly different requirements than general foster parent licensing when you go through the agency associated with the child.

When You and the Child are in Different States

If you live in a different state than the child, social workers must carry out an additional set of processes through the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC). The ICPC applies to foster care placements as well as adoption placements. It provides checks and balances so that, if a child is placed in another state, parties are responsible for overseeing the child's well-being. For more information on the ICPC, see the ICPC Basics for Caregivers brochure on our website.

Why Relatives and Like-Kin Matter

When a child cannot safely remain at home, child welfare priorities, including the federal Family First Prevention Services Act, emphasize keeping children connected to family. That includes relatives and like-kin: people who are not related by blood or marriage but have a close, family-like relationship with the child, such as a family friend, neighbor, or mentor. Being asked "yes" or "not right now" about caring for a child is a big decision, and you are not alone. To learn more about how Wisconsin is putting this into practice, see the DCF page, Putting Families First.

Anticipating Becoming a Child's Caregiver

As you think about caring for a relative child, it's helpful to prepare yourself. You may know the child(ren) well or have had a more distant relationship with them up to this point. You may have a lot to consider about how you might need to adapt your life to meet their needs. You can learn more about the child by talking to their parent(s) and social workers.

A child who has experienced the trauma of removal from their home may exhibit trauma behaviors, such as difficulty concentrating, sexualized behaviors, developmental delays, learning disabilities, health issues, and more. You may want to use this time to learn more about trauma and trauma-informed care. (Our team of Resource Specialists can help point you in the right direction.)

The adjustment from home to home and caregiver to caregiver can cause confusion and emotional disconnect for the child. If you wish to read more about attachment in foster care and adoption or attachment disorders, you will find some resources in our tip sheet knowledge bank.

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Co-parenting and Healthy Boundaries

Co-parenting in kinship care means sharing the care of a child with people who may also be your family, including the child's parent(s). It does not mean anyone is making decisions alone. Contact and decisions follow the child's case plan, and the caseworker and court guide what is safe. Within those limits, many caregivers find it helps to keep conversations focused on the child, keep routines predictable, speak respectfully about the child's parents in front of the child, and ask the social worker for support when emotions run high.

You may have to set boundaries with others in ways you haven't before. You might find yourself in uncomfortable positions, at times, as these roles shift. It can help to connect with others in similar situations or contact a close friend or relative you can count on to listen.

You may have difficulty understanding how the child's parent contributed to the child's pain and perhaps continues to endure it in their relationship with the parent. You may notice anger and tension between you and the parent(s). These are normal feelings. As you process these feelings, remember that any relationship the child can maintain with the parent is often in the child's best interest, as long as it is safe and monitored. This may mean that you have some emotions and judgments to overcome. Remember that you control setting boundaries. You can work closely with the child's social worker to navigate these challenging relationships with the child's best interest in mind while also honoring court-ordered family interaction and contacts.

Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption

Reunification is always the goal when it can be done safely. When the child's team deems reunification in the child's best interest, relatives and kinship caregivers are expected to support it. If reunification cannot happen within a reasonable timeframe, a judge may consider guardianship or adoption. Our "Is Adoption or Guardianship a Better Fit?" tip sheet provides additional in-depth information on this topic.

Caregivers Need Care, Too!

Caregiver fatigue is all too common, and kinship caregiving can add extra layers of stress. Remember to care for yourself so you can bring your best self to your role as a caregiver. Caring for others doesn't always feel intuitive, but it's essential. We see that caregivers who nourish themselves, engage in re-centering activities, and use social outlets are better able to stay present and thoughtful when navigating the day-to-day challenges of parenting. Community care can look different for everyone, but it often takes the form of social support, date nights, an exercise routine, recreation, classes, time spent outdoors, restful activities, counseling, and/or nutrition. Even just keeping up with your routine or appointments and striving for a decent night's sleep are good places to start. For more community care ideas and information on why your well-being matters, please see our tip sheet, "The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Kids."

To take time out to care for yourself, ask your social worker about respite care and browse our list of

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caregiver support groups. You can also ask your agency if any additional groups exist locally or start one of your own!

Caring for a relative child and navigating the child welfare system, as well as changing roles and dynamics within your family, may not have been a journey you anticipated in life. However, you are an integral part of helping your young relative heal and flourish in a setting and in relationships that are most natural to them. It is a journey that requires patience, understanding, and perseverance, but being prepared with information, asking questions, and having strong support around you are key to success.

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Resources

From the Resource Library

- Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care, by Dr. Joseph Crumbley & Robert L. Little
- The Kinship Parenting Toolbox, edited by Kim Phagan Hansel
- Shared Parenting - Putting the Needs of Children First
- The Journey of Forgiveness - Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness
- Navigating Family Relationships as a Relative Caregiver
- Support Group Kits
- Virtual Resource Kit: Relative Caregiving

Learn in the Champion Classrooms

- Relative Caregiver Series

Families Like Mine Conference Training

- 2020 Conference
- 2022 Conference
- 2023 Conference
- 2024 Conference
- 2025 Conference

Inspiration & Hope from No Matter What Families

- How Parenting Again Changed Our Lives

Additional Resources

- Kids Matter, Inc.

Phone: (414) 344-1220

- When Fostering Family Members Changes Your Life –For Better or Worse
- Wisconsin Kinship Navigator Portal
- Wisconsin Kinship Navigator Guide
- Five Tips for New Relative Caregivers

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