

Getting Started as a Relative or Kinship Caregiver

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

First Things First

If you are looking to become a caregiver for the child, here is where to begin. You may already have some information about the child's whereabouts, such as the name of the foster care agency or county department that is involved in his case, or maybe even the name and contact information for the social worker involved. On the other hand, you may have only heard limited information - maybe only that the child was removed from his home. In Wisconsin, if you are looking to find out who the local contact person would be, you just need to know the county in which 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 reaching out to an agency, it's helpful

to understand that the social worker you talk with cannot give you any information at first. You can share your name, contact information, and details about your relationship to the child with them but, due to confidentiality concerns and to protect the child, they will not be able to confirm if the child is in out-of-home care or not. If the

child is in foster care, the social worker will make sure that your information is given to the individual who is handling the child's case. There is a process that the social worker will have to go through in order to gain consent to speak with you.

This can be a challenging time as you wait and hope to hear back from someone. You may feel like your hands are tied, but there is something you can do in the meantime: try to talk 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 have a more direct link to be sure your information is getting to 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 even share with the worker that they would prefer that the child be placed with you or have visitation with you.



Continued on page 2

If you don't hear anything back, or you feel like the child's team is not fairly considering you as a placement option, you do have the option to hire an attorney who will represent you and advocate for the child to be placed with you.

Even as a relative, to care for the child while they are in foster care, you must become licensed and follow particular requirements. You can [find out more information about this process on the Department of Children and Families' website](#). You will have a licensing worker assigned to you as you complete the training and work on meeting other requirements. At times, this is the same person as the child's social worker.

We often field the question, "Should I proactively get licensed as a foster parent now?" when a person is eagerly waiting to hear back from a social worker, and hoping to be in better standing to be considered as a placement option. You are free to contact the human services department of your county to get started with general foster care licensure. However, becoming licensed as a relative, specific to a 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, an additional set of processes must be carried out by social workers through the Interstate Compact for the Placement of Children (ICPC). The ICPC applies to foster care placements, in addition to adoption placements. It ensures a system of checks and balances so that, if a child is placed in another state, there are parties responsible for overseeing the child's wellbeing. For more information on the ICPC, see our tip sheet entitled, "[Adopting a Child from](#)

[Another State](#)."

Anticipating becoming a Child's Caregiver

As you think about caring for a relative child, it's good to try to prepare yourself. You may know the child(ren) well, or have had more of a distant relationship with him or her 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 their social worker.

Children who have experienced abuse, neglect, or chaotic households and relationships with primary caregivers often display emotional and physical symptoms that present challenges in daily life – behavior at home or school, difficulty concentrating, sexualized behaviors, developmental delays, learning disabilities, health issues, and more. You can ask the child's social worker if certain assessments can be completed so that you can learn as much as possible about how to best support the child going forward. There may be issues that you will want the child's new teachers to know about at school, and you may need to advocate for the child to have an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) at school to promote their best opportunity for learning, healing, and socialization. (Our tip sheet, [Fostering a Child with an IEP](#), may provide additional and useful information for you.)

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 the topics of attachment in foster care and adoption, or attachment disorders, you will find some resources in [our tip sheet knowledge bank](#).

Continued on page 3



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Co-parenting and Healthy Boundaries

When a non-parent cares for a child of a relative, family roles and dynamics are shifting, which can cause discomfort along the way. More than likely, you will need to provide honest, straightforward, and clear communication with the child's parent(s) and other relatives. Misunderstandings may very well occur; however, it is helpful to remember that your job is to act in accordance with the child's best interest, not in ways that appease other adults in the family. 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. When you feel this way, it can help to connect with others who have been in similar situations, or contact a close friend or relative you can count on to listen when you need to blow off some steam.

You may have a difficult time understanding how the child's parent was able to contribute to the pain the child has endured, and perhaps continues to endure in their relationship with the parent, and you may notice anger and tension between you and the parent(s). These are absolutely 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 can be safe and monitored. This may mean that you have some emotions and judgments to overcome. Remember that you are in control of setting boundaries. You can



work closely with the child's social worker to navigate these challenging relationships with the best interest of the child in mind, while also honoring court-ordered family interaction and contacts.

Reunification, Guardianship, Adoption

It is the court's aim to support reunification of children with their primary caregivers/biological parents whenever possible, and to at least keep a child remaining with kin or like-kin caregivers when reunification is not an option. As any foster parent is, you are tasked with being supportive of reunification while social workers and the courts work with biological parents to get to a place where they can provide a safe and healthy life for their child in their care again. At times, this does not happen within a reasonable timeframe and a judge has to make a decision about what long-term option may be best for the child. Often, the next option is adoption, or sometimes guardianship. You

may be asked to consider adopting the child in your care. Our tip sheet entitled "[Is Guardianship or Adoption a Better Fit?](#)" will provide additional in-depth information about this particular topic.

Caregivers Need Care, Too!

Something we hear often from veteran foster parents and caregivers is that they wish that it had occurred to them sooner how very important it is to make a pointed effort to care for themselves

Continued on page 4



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and their partner relationships. Caregiver fatigue is an all-too-common phenomenon, and kinship caregiving can add a few extra layers of stress at times. Remember to care for you, and give yourself the boosts you need to bring your best self to your role as caregiver. This doesn't always feel intuitive when caring for others, but it's absolutely essential. We see that caregivers who provide themselves with nourishment, re-centering activities, and social outlets, are more able to be present and thoughtful when navigating day-to-day challenges that childcare entails. Self-care can look different for everyone, but often comes in 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 own routine or appointments and striving for a decent night's sleep are good places to start. For more self-care ideas, and information on why your wellbeing matters, please see our tip sheets entitled "[Self Care for Families](#)" and "[The Balance Beam: Caring for Yourself While Caring for Your Kids](#)."

In order to be able to take time out to care for yourself, be sure to ask your social worker about respite care and feel free to browse our list of [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. But you are an integral part of helping your young relative to heal and flourish in a setting and relationships that are most natural to him or her. It is a journey that requires a lot of patience, understanding, and perseverance, but being prepared with information, asking a lot of questions, and having strong supports around you, are the keys to success.

Resources

- [Kids Matter, Inc.](#)
Phone: (414) 344-1220
- Tip Sheet: [Shared Parenting - Putting the Needs of Children First](#)
- Tip Sheet: [The Journey of Forgiveness - Learning to Live a Life of Forgiveness](#)
- [When Fostering Family Members Changes Your Life - For Better or Worse](#), Foster and Adoptive Family Services of New Jersey

From our [Lending Library](#)

- *Kinship Care: Relative Caregivers Speak Out*, by Dr. Joseph Crumbley (DVD)
- *Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care*, by Joseph Crumbley & Robert L. Little (Book)
- *The Kinship Parenting Toolbox*, edited by Kim Phagan Hansel (Book)



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