



Training Kin to be Foster Parents: Best Practices from the Field

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Prepared by:

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Dr. Joseph Crumbley, Kim Fordham, *Idaho Department of Health and Welfare*, Dr. Sharon Lowe, *A Second Chance, Inc.*, Sharon Simms, *Catholic Charities Hawaii* and Karla Venkataraman, *Louisiana Department of Social Services*.

INTRODUCTION

State and local child welfare agencies are increasingly giving preference to kin when placing children in out-of-home care, a priority that is supported by both federal and state legislation. As states and localities place more and more children with relatives, however, they face special challenges in developing programs and policies that respond effectively to the unique needs of relative caregivers. As the practice of kinship care expands, so too does the need to adapt child welfare systems in ways that ensure the safety of children, provide the appropriate level of monitoring and oversight, and provide needed supports to kinship caregivers and their children.

One issue that demands more attention is the subject of this issue brief: structuring foster parent training for kinship caregivers in ways that provide needed information while respecting existing family relationships. While traditional training programs for foster parents can provide relevant information, both caregivers and administrators report that kin may also require specialized training to address their unique needs and provide them with a forum to talk about sensitive issues with others experiencing similar challenges.

This issue brief provides an overview of efforts to adapt foster parent training to the unique needs and circumstances of kinship caregivers. The following topics are addressed:

- ❖ federal licensing requirements, including requirements for foster care training as a condition of licensing;
- ❖ limitations of traditional foster parent training for kinship caregivers;
- ❖ state and county efforts to develop foster parent training programs tailored specifically for kin;
- ❖ common themes related to kin-specific training; and
- ❖ questions that states and localities should consider as they develop kin-specific training.

OVERVIEW OF FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR LICENSING

In order for states to receive federal reimbursement for a child's placement in foster care, children must be placed in a home that is fully licensed. Licensing standards are determined by the state in accordance with federal requirements. Relative foster parents or "kinship caregivers" must meet the same standards as traditional foster parents. States are permitted to make narrow exceptions to licensing standards for relatives on a case-by-case basis, as long as they do not waive any safety-related requirements.

Basic requirements for foster parent licensure include:

- ❖ home assessment to ensure that minimum fire, safety and sanitary standards are met;
- ❖ criminal background check;
- ❖ child abuse and neglect registry check; and
- ❖ pre-service training.

Licensing kinship caregivers ensures that kin and the children in their care are eligible to receive the same level of financial and supportive services as non-kin. When kin do not meet the same licensure requirements, they typically are not eligible for the same level of payment or services that traditional foster families receive. Instead, unlicensed kin caregivers are referred to welfare agencies to apply for benefits which are usually far less than foster care payments.

Although states have broad discretion in developing foster care licensing standards, they must meet the above minimum requirements in order to receive federal reimbursement (Jantz, et al., 2002). There is agreement across the board that the safety of children is paramount and cannot be compromised in any placement type – whether with a birth parent, kin or non-kin foster parent. As a result, training for kin must, at a minimum, address safety related issues.

Some states have interpreted the licensing requirements to mean that the same training must be provided for kin and non-kin. These states fear that any variation in training for kin may put them at risk of losing federal reimbursement or facing financial penalties for kinship placements. Federal guidelines address this issue by making

a distinction between licensing standards that are procedural in nature and those that are intended to achieve a particular training outcome. The example provided in a 2001 Information Memorandum provides specific guidance in relation to training as follows:

If a state requires that prospective foster parents receive 50 hours of classroom training in subjects x,y, and z, there is little flexibility to develop a training curriculum that is responsive to a particular foster parent's strengths and weaknesses. However, if prospective foster parents are required to receive training that will provide them with appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of the children in their care, the state has more discretion to tailor specific training curricula to the variety of foster parent needs.

- ACYF-CB-IM-01-05, Issued July 3, 2001

States interested in providing kinship-specific training will need to review their state licensing requirements to ensure that new training falls within the standards they have set for traditional foster parent training. In general, licensing standards that define results to be achieved through training provide more flexibility than those that require specific courses, hours or subjects. As always, states are encouraged to work with their regional Department of Health and Human Services offices to determine if licensing and training requirements fall within federal guidelines and state training standards.

LIMITATIONS OF TRADITIONAL FOSTER PARENT TRAINING FOR KIN

New and prospective foster parents need training in order to prepare for their new caregiving roles. From a systemic perspective, child welfare agencies have a responsibility to ensure the safety, permanency and well-being of children who are under their legal custody. It is also the agency's responsibility to orient prospective foster parents and kinship caregivers to understand their rights and responsibilities, legal options, permanency planning, developmental and special needs of the children, and available services. This information is important for any caregiver – kin and non-kin alike.

However, there are some important differences between traditional foster parents and kinship caregivers that may impact their training experiences. Traditional foster parents have made a conscious decision to provide care to vulnerable children, many of whom have suffered physical and/or emotional abuse. They generally have

made preparations to be foster parents, have become familiar with the child welfare agency and its requirements as they made the decision to take on this role, and are eager for information about how they can be most effective as foster parents. They also understand and accept that training is one of the major requirements to become a foster parent and begin caring for a child.

Kinship caregivers, on the other hand, have usually been the primary or secondary caregiver of the child for an extended period of time before the child welfare system ever became involved with the family. As such, many kinship caregivers feel they already know the child intimately and that they don't need to be "trained" to continue providing care. Some kin see the requirement for foster parent training as an intrusion. Others may be intimidated by the idea of training or believe it is unfair to have to complete a training course in order to receive the same level of support and financial assistance afforded to a 'stranger' caring for the child.

"I raised both my daughters' kids. My oldest grandbaby just started college this year. Now my son and his girlfriend can't take care of their little 2 year old and the state took him. I went down there to get the baby, but they are trying to make me go through some training. What can they tell me about raising these kids? I've been taking care of them all their life."

- Grandparent Caregiver

All kinship caregivers need some level of training when they take on a more formal caregiving role for children in state custody. Many kinship caregivers had not planned to care for their related children for extended periods of time, and find themselves quickly thrown into this role. In these cases, there may be a lack of understanding about the child welfare system or a general mistrust or fear of the government. In addition, some relatives need support to manage the complex family dynamics that arise as they take on a more formal caregiving role. As one expert put it:

"Relative caregivers may have an initial attachment and loyalty to the birth parents, whereas non-related foster parents' initial attachment and loyalty is to the child. This pre-existing relationship, if not addressed appropriately, may lead to the caregiver experiencing feelings of guilt, denial, betrayal and disloyalty to the birth parent when they place the needs of the child before those of the birth parent. The caregiver's dilemma and divided loyalties could jeopardize their ability to provide the child adequate safety, protection and permanency."

- Dr. Joseph Crumbley

For child welfare agencies, the question becomes how does the child welfare system strike a balance between helping kinship caregivers understand the relevance of training, while still acknowledging the unique strengths and needs of kin families?

Overview of Foster Parent Training

Most jurisdictions require kin to complete the same training curriculum as non-kin. The two most widely used curricula are MAPP (Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting) and PRIDE (Parenting Resources Information Development Education). The amount of training required varies greatly across jurisdictions, but the objectives for prospective foster parents are similar.

States interested in adapting existing training for kinship caregivers can do so within the basic framework of either MAPP or PRIDE.

MAPP Objectives for Prospective Foster Parents:

- Learn what to expect and what services are available.
- Look at one's own strengths and needs.
- Develop skills in giving love and attention to a troubled child.
- Learn about stages of child development.
- Help children manage behavior.
- Understand the roles and responsibilities of teamwork.
- Help foster parents develop a good understanding of the child's parents.

PRIDE Objectives for Prospective Foster Parents:

- Protect and nurture children.
- Meet children's developmental needs and address developmental delays.
- Support relationships between children and their families.
- Connect children to safe, nurturing relationships intended to last a lifetime.
- Work as a member of a professional team.

KIN-SPECIFIC TRAINING CURRICULA

The Child Welfare League of America, in its *Standards of Excellence for Kinship Care Services* (2000), outlines the specific issues that should be addressed differently in kinship-specific training. They include:

- ❖ recognizing issues specific to the stresses and dynamics of full-time parenting for the second time;
- ❖ being an active participant in permanency planning;
- ❖ attending to the relationships among kinship siblings and other children in the household;
- ❖ resolving family conflict, including mediation approaches;
- ❖ understanding and managing the effects of chemical dependency, parental incarceration, and HIV/AIDS;
- ❖ addressing children's specific medical, educational, emotional and sexuality needs;
- ❖ accessing and addressing financial and resource issues;
- ❖ addressing cultural, ethnic, and religious orientations as appropriate; and
- ❖ working as a member of a team, including participating in case reviews, court involvement, counseling sessions, medical services, school meetings, and agency team meetings, as appropriate.

EXAMPLES OF KIN SPECIFIC TRAINING

ChildFocus™ reviewed the experiences of three (3) states and one (1) county that have developed a specialized curriculum for kin (Hawaii, Louisiana, Idaho, and Allegheny County in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania). It should be noted that this was not an exhaustive search and there may be other counties or local jurisdictions that have or are in the process of developing training curriculum specific to kin. (If you are aware of other kinship specific curricula, please email jennifer@childfocuspartners.com.)

Hawaii

PRIDE curriculum is used to train both kin and non-kin. Pre-service training is 18.0 hours. Trainers have separate pre-service classes for kin and non-kin.

Kin are required to complete the training if they care for children who are in the custody of the state. The same level of support and financial assistance is offered to kin and non-kin. Kinship families participate in the PRIDE Pre-Service Training, but the language is modified from the original curriculum in order to make it specific to the needs of kin and reflect the reality that kin are not prospective caregivers but are actively caring for children at the time of the training. The class is taught in a support group format as compared to traditional classroom-style foster parent training.

Topics include: grief and loss, family issues around reunification, role changes and family strengths. Hawaii has been using this format for one year and plans to utilize a new curriculum in the upcoming year that seeks to better meet the needs of both kin and non-kin families.

Contact: Sharon Simms, Training Coordinator, Catholic Charities Hawaii, simmss@catholiccharitieshawaii.org.

Louisiana

MAPP curriculum was adapted to specifically address the training needs of kin. The modified training for kin is shorter. Kin are only required to attend twelve (12) hours, as opposed to the thirty (30) hours of training required of non-kin. Kin who will be caring for related children only do not have to attend the extended training and will receive the same level of support and financial assistance as non-kin. However, if kin wish to provide care to non-kin children, they are required to complete the regular MAPP training and take any sessions that they did not receive during their twelve (12) hour kin specific training. Topics may vary by regions, but typically include the following: the grieving process, shifting gears from spoiling to parenting, dealing with multiple losses, role conflict and working with the child welfare system. Louisiana is in the process of revamping its kinship training curriculum so that all regions present the same topics and use the same model.

Contact: Karla Venkataraman, Louisiana Department of Social Services, kvenkata@dss.state.la.us.

Idaho

Kin and non-kin foster caregivers are required to take 27 hours of PRIDE training. Kinship caregivers may opt to take an extra 3-hour session that is specialized to address their unique needs. Topics include: working with the child welfare system, loss and grief, role conflict, change in legal status, difficulties around visitation and having to deny access, available supports, family group decision making, how to navigate the system and permanency planning. Caregivers can access a waiver which allows them six months to complete the training.

Contact: Kim Fordham, Statewide Foster/Pre-Adoption Training Coordinator, FordhamK@dhw.idaho.gov.

Allegheny County (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) is a private agency that has been providing training and other specialized services for kin in Allegheny County for over a decade. ASCI provides “educational enrichment opportunities” through a curriculum they have developed called the SARKS Model (Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths). Kin are required to complete 24 hours of pre-service training provided through a series of workshops and structured in a support group format.

Topics include: strengths of kinship; remaining within the family triad; sexual abuse; cultural diversity; visitation within the triad; birth family connections; roles and expectations of caregivers; roles and responsibilities of Allegheny County ASCI staff; developmental, mental and behavioral health; educational, social and legal issues.

Upon completion of the enrichment workshops, kin receive the same level of financial and supportive services as non-kin, as well as the specialized services provided through ASCI. Kin are required to complete 15 hours annually to maintain certification status. A calendar of the scheduled enrichment workshops is mailed monthly.

More information regarding this program may be gained by viewing www.asecondchance-kinship.com or contacting Dr. Sharon Lowe, Executive Director, A Second Chance, Inc., SharonM@asecondchance-kinship.com.

MOVING FORWARD: A CHECKLIST FOR MAKING TRAINING RELEVANT TO KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

Child welfare agencies can develop new approaches to encourage kin to participate in training. By making the training a positive and helpful experience for kinship caregivers, agencies can help kin become more effective partners in permanency. The following questions are designed to help agencies assess whether existing foster parent training approaches are relevant for kin and, if not, how current training might be adapted to better meet relative caregiver needs:

- Does training present topics that are relevant to the kinship care experience, such as:
 - Grief and loss
 - Family issues around reunification
 - Shifting gears from spoiling to parenting
 - Role conflict
 - Boundary issues
 - Working with the child welfare system
 - Visitation within the kinship triad (birth parent, caregiver and child)
 - Responsibilities in permanency planning
 - Legal status
- Does the agency use the phrase “educational support” to convey the idea that kinship caregivers will be provided with useful information, as opposed to “training,” which can be intimidating to some kin caregivers and cause resentment among others?
- Does the agency share information that kin caregivers need, as opposed to giving them information they already know, such as information on challenges that are unique to kin caregiving arrangements, including family dynamics and boundaries?

- Is training flexible enough so that caregivers who need more information about child development can get it, either from traditional foster parent training or other forums?
- Do kin have opportunities to be in educational programs separate from non-kin so that their unique needs can be addressed in a more comfortable setting?
- Is training presented in a support group format to create a more relaxing, flexible and supportive environment than a traditional classroom setting?
- Do current and /or former kinship caregivers assist in education programs so that new kinship foster parents can hear from someone who has shared similar experiences?
- Is education conducted at a convenient time and location? Are child care and transportation provided?
- Are training hours sufficient to convey information caregivers need, rather than being set at exactly the same hours as training for non-kin?
- Are caregivers provided with an opportunity to move flexibly between workshops or training modules so that they can access a full range of educational support options without fear that they will be penalized if they do not complete sessions in a specified order?

CONCLUSION

Training provides prospective foster parents with essential information to help them meet the many needs of the children in their care. It also, however, sets the tone for the ongoing relationship between the caregiver and the agency. If the training meets the needs of kinship caregivers, it sends a message of cooperation and partnership. If the curriculum fails to recognize the unique contributions and challenges of relatives, it suggests that the agency lacks a fundamental understanding of what families need to provide adequate care for children. By developing new and innovative approaches to meeting the specific needs of kinship caregivers – and acknowledging their fundamental differences from traditional foster parents – states and localities are finding more effective ways to ensure child safety in a way that builds on the strengths and differences of each family.

If you have additional information about unique training approaches states and localities are developing specifically for kin, please contact ChildFocus™ by e-mailing Jennifer@childfocuspartners.com.

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