

# Contents

FOREWORD	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	xi
HOW TO USE CWLA STANDARDS	xiii
DIFFERENTIATION OF CWLA STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE, COA STANDARDS FOR ACCREDITATION, AND STATE LICENSING	xv
INTRODUCTION	1
1 KINSHIP CARE AS A DISCRETE CHILD WELFARE SERVICE	11
2 SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN KINSHIP CARE	21
3 SUPPORTS AND SERVICES FOR KINSHIP FAMILIES	53
4 ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF KINSHIP CARE SERVICES	69
5 COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT FOR KINSHIP CARE SERVICES	105
SELECTED REFERENCES	117
INDEX	129

# Introduction\*

*Kinship care* is the full time care, nurturing, and protection of children by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, or other adults who have a family relationship to a child [Child Welfare League of America 1994]. The practice of kin parenting children when their parents cannot is a time-honored tradition in most cultures. In North America, the full-time care of children by kin is prevalent in many communities and is increasing substantially in others.

Kinship support systems may comprise nuclear family, extended family, blended family, foster family, or adoptive family members, or members of tribes or clans. The involvement of kin can stabilize family situations, ensure the protection of children, preserve family relationships, and prevent the need to separate children from their families and place them in the formal child welfare system.

## Kinship Care as a Child Welfare Service

Kinship care has an essential place in child welfare services, providing an opportunity to protect children and meet their needs apart from their parents yet with their families. Kinship care arrangements vary and may be made between and among family members or, alternately, may involve child welfare agencies.

The most common type of kinship care is informal. In *informal kinship care*, the family decides that the child will live with

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\* Portions of this introduction were adapted from *Kinship Care: A Natural Bridge* [Child Welfare League of America 1994].

kin. Although a social worker may be involved in helping family members plan for the child, a child welfare agency does not assume legal custody of or responsibility for the child.

*Formal kinship care* involves the parenting of children by kin as a result of a determination by the court and the public child protective services agency that a child must be separated from his or her parents because of abuse, neglect, dependency, abandonment, or other special circumstance. In formal kinship care, the court places the child in the legal custody of the child welfare agency, and kin provide the full-time care, protection, and nurturing that the child needs.

Both informal and formal\* kinship caregivers may need a range of child welfare services. Informal kinship caregivers may need help in establishing a legally recognized status with respect to the child (e.g., temporary custody, legal guardianship). They may need services such as child day care or assistance in meeting the child's health care needs. Although children in informal kinship care are usually not eligible for the services or benefits that accompany formal placement arrangements, they may qualify for benefits under the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) programs, or for child support.

Kinship caregivers are typically subject to the same state approval or licensing requirements as unrelated caregivers. They should receive educational support or other formal preparation, and be afforded an opportunity to participate in case planning for the child. Most significantly, children in formal kinship care may receive financial assistance through state and federal out-of-home care programs such as the Title IV-E foster care program or the Title IV-B child welfare services program.

## The Growth of Kinship Care

In 1998, about 4 million children lived with their grandparents; of these children, 1.4 million had neither parent present

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\* Unless the form of kinship care is specified, the standards in this volume should be considered applicable to both formal and informal kinship care

[U.S. Bureau of the Census]. In addition to the children living with grandparents, another 1.2 million children lived with other relatives [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998]. The number of children living with relatives has continued to grow [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1998].

A number of factors have affected the development and growth of kinship care: the rising number of children in out-of-home care, the increasing agency recognition of kin as resources for children, the declining number of nonrelative foster families, and the enhanced placement stability that children in need of care often experience when placed with kin.

### **Increasing Numbers of Children in Out-of-Home Care**

Since 1986, child abuse and neglect reports have increased nearly 100%. In 1997, child welfare agencies investigated reports of child abuse and neglect involving more than three million children; 960,870 of these children were found to have been abused or neglected [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1999]. Many of these children are in need of some form of out-of-home care. At the same time, substance abuse, poverty, HIV/AIDS, and homelessness have brought increasing numbers of children into the child welfare system [Congressional Research Service 1993; Testa 1992]. As of March 1999, 547,000 children were in care, up from 280,000 in 1985, a 95% increase [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000].

Much of the growth in out-of-home care has been in formal kinship care [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Inspector General 1992]. In 1997, an estimated 150,000 children (one-third of all children in out-of-home care) were in formal kinship care [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1997]. Formal kinship care placements are rising most dramatically in Illinois, New York, California, and Maryland.

- In their study on caseload growth in out-of-home care, Wulczyn and Goerge [1991] found that approximately 1,000 children were in New York City's kinship care programs in 1986. By 1998, 11,432 children were in kinship care, out of 38,150 children in out-of-home care [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000].

- In Illinois, 58% (19,945 of 34,650) of the children placed in out-of-home care in 1998 were placed in kinship care [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000].
- In California, two-thirds of the growth in out-of-home care from 1984 to 1989 has been attributed to the dramatic rise in kinship care [Berrick et al. 1994]. In April 2000, 49,138 welfare-supervised children were in kinship care in California, out of 107,227 children in out-of-home care [Child Welfare Research Center 2000].
- Maryland likewise has experienced significant increases in kinship care. In 1986, approximately 154 children were in kinship care, while almost 3,200 children were in out-of-home care with unrelated caregivers. By 1998, the number of children in unrelated foster care had stabilized, but the number of children in kinship care had grown to over 3,000 [Advocates for Children and Youth 1999].

### **Agency Recognition of Kin as a Resource for Children**

The use of kinship care has increased in part because of the willingness of kin to care for their relative's children and agency recognition of kin as resources. A 1986 study by the National Black Child Development Institute found that when agencies considered relatives as a resource for children needing out-of-home care, more than half of the relatives contacted offered to assist the child, usually as the child's caregiver [National Black Child Development Institute 1991]. Similarly, a study conducted at the University of California at Berkeley of 246 kinship parents and 354 unrelated foster families found that relatives often came forward to care for their kin children either voluntarily or when asked by an agency if they would care for the child [Berrick et al. 1994].

As public child welfare agencies turn to kin as placement resources, relatives are readily responding and providing care, although not without costs to caregivers. Often, relatives agree—at significant personal sacrifice—because they do not want the child to leave the family [Cinnamusti 1998; Petras 1998].

### **Declining Number of Foster Families**

The increase in the use of kinship care also is attributed to a shortage of nonrelative foster families. In 2000, the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) reported on its website that, between 1986 and 1996, the number of foster families declined by 30%, while the number of children in out-of-home care increased by 90%.

### **Length of Stay in Care and Stability of Placement**

Children entering kinship care tend to remain in care for longer periods of time than children placed with nonrelative foster parents [Courtney & Needell 1997; Wulczyn et al. 1997]. A study of children entering care in New York City in 1988 found that 88% of those who entered kinship care were still in care in June 1990, compared to 50% of those who entered family foster care [Wulczyn & Goerge 1991]. Similar patterns were found in California and Maryland [Benedict & White 1991; Berrick et al. 1994].

Research suggests that kinship care can provide a stable family arrangement for many children. Children in kinship care are less likely to experience multiple placements than their counterparts in family foster care. Of the children who entered California's foster care system in 1988, for example, only about 23% of those placed initially with kin experienced another placement, while 58% of children living with unrelated foster families experienced at least one subsequent placement during the following three and one-half years [Berrick et al. 1994].

Finally, research reports positive outcomes for children who have been reunified with their parents after staying in kinship care. Barth and colleagues [1994] found that children reunified after kinship care were less likely to re-enter care than children reunified after out-of-home care with nonrelatives.

These findings on length of stay, placement stability, and reunification have important implications in relation to the increasing number of children in out-of-home care in general and in kinship care in particular. The growth in the number of children in out-of-home care is associated with increased lengths of stay in kinship care, an issue that impacts permanency plan-

ning. Observed relationships between kinship care, placement stability, and reunification, however, suggest positive developmental benefits for children cared for by kin.

## Best Practice in Kinship Care

When appropriately assessed, planned for, and supported, kinship care is a child welfare service that reflects the principles of child-centered, family-focused casework practice, the model of practice that child welfare practitioners advocate as the unifying theme for child welfare services.

In a child-centered, family-focused system, the child's need for safety, nurturance, and family continuity drive service delivery and funding. Kinship care can meet these needs and strengthen and support families by

- enabling children to live with persons whom they know and trust;
- reducing the trauma children may experience when they are placed with persons who initially are unknown to them;
- reinforcing children's sense of identity and self-esteem, which flows from knowing their family history and culture;
- facilitating children's connections to their siblings;
- encouraging families to consider and rely on their own family members as resources;
- enhancing children's opportunities to stay connected to their own communities and promoting community responsibility for children and families; and
- strengthening the ability of families to give children the support they need.

As the number of children cared for by kin continues to rise, CWLA member agencies and the child welfare field as a whole can benefit from policy, program, and practice guidance if they are to develop and implement effective kinship care policies and programs. The phenomenon of children living with kin for full-time protection, nurturing, and care has prompted child welfare agencies to take a new look at the nature of kinship

care, the role of kinship care as a child welfare service, and the relationships among kinship care, family preservation, and out-of-home care. Agencies have begun to address a number of policy and practice issues including

- providing supports and services for children, kinship caregivers, and parents;
- developing and delivering kinship care services.
- assessing, monitoring, and supervising kinship homes;
- planning for permanency for children in kinship care; and
- determining the appropriate level and means of providing financial support for children living with kin

CWLA's *Standards of Excellence for Kinship Care Services* are intended to provide guidance to child welfare agencies and the field as a whole as they develop and implement kinship care policies and programs. The standards in this volume speak to the continuum of services needed to keep children safe, ensure family connectedness, and achieve permanency for children cared for by kin when parents are unable to do so.

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# Index\*

## A

- Abuse. *See* Child abuse and neglect
- Administrators: qualifications and responsibilities of, 4.12
- Adoption: as permanency option, 2.30
- American Indians: tribal community and, 3.14, 5.12
- Assessment, 2.10–2.19. *See also* Comprehensive assessment; Initial assessment; children in, 2.11–2.13, 2.14, 2.17; family-centered, 2.10; general principles in, 2.10; kinship caregivers in, 2.12–2.13, 2.14, 3.13; parents in, 2.12–2.13, 2.14, 2.16

## C

- Child abuse and neglect: assessment of allegations, 2.40; child protective services investigating, 2.9; child welfare agency and, 1.10; increase in, 3; in kinship care, 2.41, 2.42
- Child protective services (CPS) investigation, 2.9
- Children: abused in kinship care, 2.42; adoption of, 2.30; agency recognition of kin as resource for, 4; in comprehensive assessment, 2.14, 2.17; coping with caregiver's multiple roles, 3.16; in development of service plan, 2.22; emancipation of, 2.30; financial support for, 3.19–3.20; financing services for, 4.45; in initial assessment, 2.11–2.13; in kinship care vs. in foster care, 5; legal guardianship of, 2.30; in need of separation from parents, 2.8–2.9; needs of, 1.6; in out-of-home care, 3–4; permanency planning for, 2.25–2.34; remaining in kinship

---

\* Reference locators in **bold type** indicate page numbers. All other reference locators indicate standard sections.

- care after child abuse, 2.41; services to, 3.10–3.12; subsidized guardianship of, 2.30
- Child welfare agencies: approval/licensing and supervision of kinship homes, 2.35–2.43; assessment capabilities of, 2.19; assisting children, 4.45; assisting community, 5.2; assisting kinship caregivers, 2.19, 3.15, 3.16, 4.45; assisting kinship families, 3.1–3.6, 5.2; assisting parents, 2.16, 2.20, 4.45; collaborating with community agencies, 5.3; considering kinship caregivers as partners, 3.14; deciding on kinship care, 2.9; defining roles, rights and responsibilities in kinship care, 1.9–1.12; developing and maintaining policies and procedures of, 4.5; developing kinship care manual, 4.8; engaging informal family support during and after termination of formal child welfare services, 2.34; fiscal planning and management, 4.44; and formal kinship care, 1.10; and informal kinship care, 1.9, 2.6, 2.7; initial assessment and, 2.13; involved in social work practice, 2.2; liability of, 4.23; mission statement of, 4.4; recognition of kin as resource for children, 4; record keeping, 4.36–4.38; research conducted by, 4.43; role of, in building support for kinship families, 5.2; service planning and implementation, 2.20–2.24
- Child welfare services. *See also* Kinship care services: concluding, 2.43; governance structure for, 4.2; kinship care as, 1–2, 1.4–1.8; termination of, family support after, 2.34
- Community, 5.1–5.15; assisting kinship families, 3.1, 3.6, 3.17; child welfare agencies collaborating with, 5.3; help of, in training, 4.33; involved in social work practice, 2.2; tribal, 3.14, 5.12
- Comprehensive assessment: of child, 2.17; with kinship caregivers, 2.18; parents' role in, 2.16; participants in, 2.14; time frame for, 2.15
- Concurrent planning: with kinship families, 2.31
- Confidentiality, 4.38
- Criminal record check: of kinship caregivers, 2.38; of kinship care staff, 4.17
- Cross-system training, 4.35
- Cultural competence: in kinship care service design, 3.2; of kinship care staff, 4.16
- ## D
- Data systems, 4.36–4.38
- Discussion groups, 4.26
- Documentation, 4.36–4.38

## E

- Educational support programs for kinship caregivers: characteristics of, 4.26; content of, 4.27; enhancing, through ongoing information, 4.28
- Emancipation, 2.30
- Evaluation in kinship care services, 4.39–4.43; of administrative functions and operations, 4.41; importance of, 4.39; of performance, 4.40

## F

- Faith organizations, 5.10
- Family-centered assessment, 2.10
- Family-centered casework, 2.3
- Family-centered system, 1.6
- Family records: in kinship care, 4.36
- Family violence service providers: supporting kinship families, 5.6
- Father. *See also* Parents: in comprehensive assessment, 2.16
- Financial support: in formal and informal kinship care, 3.19–3.20; for kinship care services, 4.44–4.45
- Formal kinship care: child welfare agency and, 1.10; as child welfare service, 1.4; definition of, 1.3, 2; family records in, 4.36; financial support for children in, 3.19–3.20; goal of,

1.7; growth of, 3–4; services to children in, 3.10–3.12; services to kinship caregivers in, 3.13–3.18; services to parents in, 3.7–3.9; social work practice in, 2.8–2.9; vs. out-of-home care, 1.8

Foster care. *See also* Out-of-home care: vs. kinship care, 5

Foster families: decline in number of, 5

## G

Grandparents: as kinship caregivers, 2–3, 3.16

## H

Health standards for kinship homes, 2.36

## I

Indian Child Welfare Act (1978), 5.12

Informal kinship care: child welfare agency and, 1.9, 2.6, 2.7; definition of, 1.2, 1–2; family records in, 4.36; financial support for children in, 3.19–3.20; recognition and support of, 2.5; social work practice in, 2.5–2.7

Informal supports, 2.34; ensuring access to, 3.3, 3.6; role of, 5.14

Initial assessment: process of, 2.12; purpose of, 2.11; service planning based on, 2.13

Inservice training, 4.33

## K

- Kinship care. *See also* Formal kinship care; Informal kinship care: assessment in, 2.10–2.19; best practice in, 6–7; children remaining in, after child abuse, 2.41; as child welfare service, 1–2, 1.4–1.8; confidentiality in, 4.38; deciding on, 2.9; defining and measuring outcomes in, 4.7; definition of, 1, 1.1; as family-centered practice, 1.6; family records in, 4.36; growth of, 2–6; guiding principles for, 1.5; as integral part of community, 5.1; length of stay in, 5; media and, 5.13; permanency planning in, 2.25–2.34; roles, rights and responsibilities in, 1.9–1.12; service planning in, 2.20–2.24; social work practice in, 2.1–2.43; stability of placement in, 5; vs. foster care, 5
- Kinship caregivers: as active community partners, 5.15; agency recognition of, 4; in assessment, 2.14, 2.12–2.13, 3.13; assisting, 2.19, 3.15; in comprehensive assessment, 2.14, 2.18; concrete service needs of, 3.17; in concurrent planning, 2.31; criminal record check of, 2.38; in development of service plan, 2.22; educational support programs for, 4.26–4.28; financing services for, 4.45; grandparents as, 2–3, 3.16; in initial assessment, 2.12–2.13; in legal guardianship, 2.30; multiple roles of, 3.16; parents and, 3.15; as partners of child welfare agency, 3.14; in permanency planning, 2.26; roles, rights and responsibilities of, 1.12; services to, 3.13–3.18; in subsidized guardianship, 2.30; training for, 4.24–4.25; working with, toward reunification, 2.29
- Kinship care manual, 4.8
- Kinship care services. *See also* Child welfare services: casework and management information system for, 4.37; community-based support for, 5.1–5.15; components of organizational framework for, 4.3; defining roles and responsibilities in delivery of, 4.6; evaluation in, 4.39–4.42; financial support for, 4.44–4.45; governance structure for, 4.2; legal and policy environment for, 4.1; organizational framework for delivering, 4.1–4.8; organizational support for delivery of, 4.18–4.23; research in, 4.43
- Kinship care staff, 4.9–4.17. *See also* specific positions; caseload standards for, 4.20; criminal record

- check of, 4.17; cultural diversity of, 4.16; establishing roles and responsibilities of, 4.6; liability of, 4.23; recruitment of, 4.9–4.11; seeking advance degrees, 4.34; supervision of, 4.21; supports and resources for, 4.22; as trainers, 4.25; training for, 2.19, 4.24–4.25, 4.29–4.35; workload standards for, 4.19
- Kinship families: as active community partners, 5.15; child welfare agency supporting, 3.1–3.6, 5.2; community supporting, 3.1; concluding services to, 2.43; faith organizations supporting, 5.10; family violence service providers supporting, 5.6; informal supports for, 3.3, 3.6; legal assistance providers and, 5.9; mental health professionals supporting, 5.5; schools supporting, 5.4; substance abuse treatment service providers supporting, 5.7
- Kinship foster care. *See* Formal kinship care
- Kinship homes: approval/licensing of, 2.35; assessment of child abuse allegations, 2.40; child abuse in, agency's response to, 2.42; health standards for, 2.36; monitoring and supervising, 2.39; safety standards for, 2.36
- L
- Law enforcement, 5.8
- Legal assistance providers, 5.9
- Legal guardianship: as permanency option, 2.30
- M
- Management information system: for enhancing evaluation, 4.42; for gathering and analyzing kinship care data, 4.37
- Media, 5.13
- Mental health professionals: supporting kinship care families, 5.5
- Mother. *See also* Parents: in comprehensive assessment, 2.16
- N
- Neglect. *See* Child abuse and neglect
- O
- Out-of-home care: increasing number of children in, 3–4; vs. formal kinship care, 1.8
- P
- Paraprofessionals: qualifications of, 4.15
- Parents: child welfare agencies assisting, 2.16, 2.20; in comprehensive assessment, 2.14, 2.16; in concurrent planning, 2.31; in

- development of service plan, 2.22; financing services for, 4.45; in initial assessment, 2.12–2.13; kinship caregivers and, 3.15; in permanency planning, 2.25; roles, rights and responsibilities of, 1.11; service needs of, 3.5; services to, 3.7–3.9; working with, toward reunification, 2.29
- Permanency planning, 2.25–2.34; concurrent, 2.31; court's role in, 2.32; kinship caregivers in, 2.26; options in, 2.30; parents in, 2.25; reunification in, 2.28–2.29; strengthening through multidisciplinary approaches, 2.33
- Preservice training, 4.30; for social workers, 4.31; for supervisors, 4.32
- R**
- Recordkeeping, 4.36–4.38
- Recruitment of kinship care staff, 4.9–4.11
- Research, 4.43
- Reunification: as first permanency option, 2.28; working with parents and kinship caregivers toward, 2.29
- S**
- Safety standards for kinship homes, 2.36
- Schools: supporting kinship families, 5.4
- Service plan, 2.20–2.24; based on initial assessment, 2.13; elements of, 2.23; goals of, 2.20; joint development and implementation of, 2.22; purpose of, 2.21; review of, 2.24
- Social support methods, 2.4
- Social workers: in initial assessment, 2.12; inservice training for, 4.33; preservice training for, 4.31; qualifications and responsibilities of, 4.14; supporting and strengthening kinship care arrangement, 2.18
- Social work practice, 2.1–2.43; family, agency, and community involvement of, 2.2; family-centered casework, 2.3; in formal kinship care, 2.8–2.9; in informal kinship care, 2.5–2.7
- Staff. *See* Kinship care staff
- Subsidized guardianship: as permanency option, 2.30
- Substance abuse treatment service providers: supporting kinship families, 5.7
- Supervisors: inservice training for, 4.33; preservice training for, 4.32; qualifications and responsibilities of, 4.13
- Supplemental Security Income (SSI), 3.19
- Support staff: qualifications of, 4.15

## T

- Temporary Assistance to  
Needy Families (TANF),  
3.17, 3.19, 4.27
- Training programs, 2.19,  
4.29–4.35. *See also*  
Preservice training; com-  
ponents of, 4.29; cross-  
system, 4.35; developing,  
4.25; importance of, 4.24;  
inservice, 4.33
- Tribal community, 3.14, 5.12

## V

- Volunteers: establishing roles  
and responsibilities of, 4.6