

FACT SHEET

African American Grandfamilies: Helping Children Thrive Through Connection to Family and Culture



Summary

When children cannot remain with their parents, they do best when they are raised by relatives. African-American children are more likely to be removed from their families and placed in foster care than white children. When placed in foster care, they often lose connections to their cultural identity and experience poor outcomes. Prioritizing and supporting relatives for children who cannot remain with their parents benefit children in three ways: Improved Well-Being, Preserved Cultural Identity, Reduced Disproportionality of African-American Children in traditional Foster Care.

The Importance of Family and Culture to Children

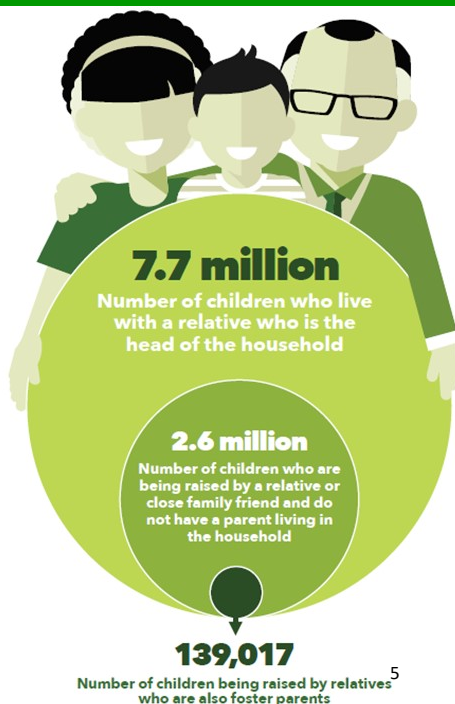
Babies, children, and youth belong in families. They want and deserve to know that they have a family who loves them, cares for them, tends to their hurts, goes to events and meetings at school, provides a respite in times of need, and celebrates their successes. They want to know their roots and where they come from. They need to feel that they belong and they deserve a forever home that provides those connections.

When a child's parents cannot care for them, they do best when they are raised by supported and caring relatives or close family friends. These families are known as "kinship" families or "grandfamilies". Compared to children in foster care with non-relatives, children with relatives have better mental health and behavioral outcomes, more stability, and a greater chance of having a permanent home. They are more likely to keep connections to brothers and sisters and their cultural identity and to report that they "always feel loved."¹

African-American History and Its Relationship to Kinship Care

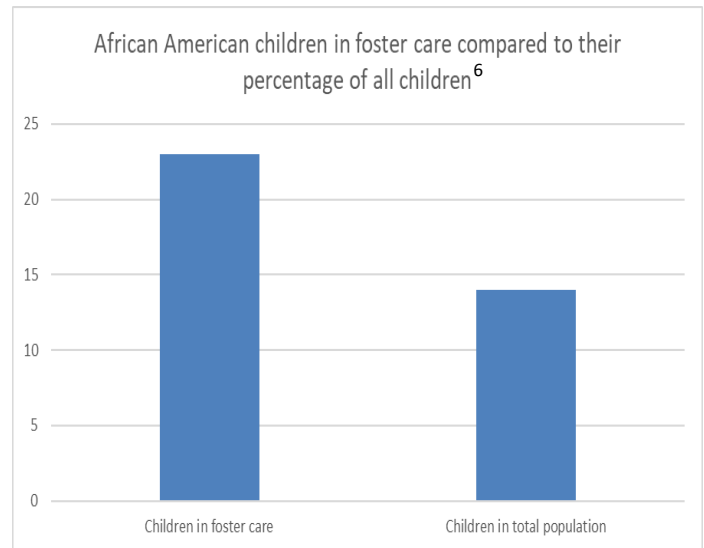
African-American families have survived and thrived despite the context of centuries of slavery; years of "Jim Crow" laws; decades of segregation, marginalization, and limited opportunities, and continued racism.² This historical trauma has deeply impacted Black families. The cultural tradition of kinship care is central to their story of strength and resilience. Kinship care builds on a proud tradition that reaches back to the African continent. In Africa, relatives, including extended family, traditionally cared for vulnerable, displaced and orphaned children.³ Often, grandmothers were the kinship connection, the stabilizers, and the family's "rock."

Today, kinship care in Africa remains an abiding practice.⁴ Despite the lack of resources, government commitment, and harsh times, the extended family system still stands in the gap to care for their own. In the U.S., the likelihood that African-American children will experience kinship care is more than double that of the overall population, with 1 in 5 Black children spending time in kinship care at some point during their childhood.



African-American Children Are Disproportionately Represented in Foster Care

The impact of historical trauma is evident in the particularly disproportionate numbers of African-American children in foster care, their poverty rates and health issues in Black communities. African-American children are removed from their families and placed in foster care at disproportionately high numbers. While African-American children only make up 14% of all children in the United States, they comprise 24% of children in foster care.⁶ Placing children with relatives when they cannot remain at home is an important approach which is culturally appropriate, reduces disproportionality of African-American children in foster care and responds to historical trauma.



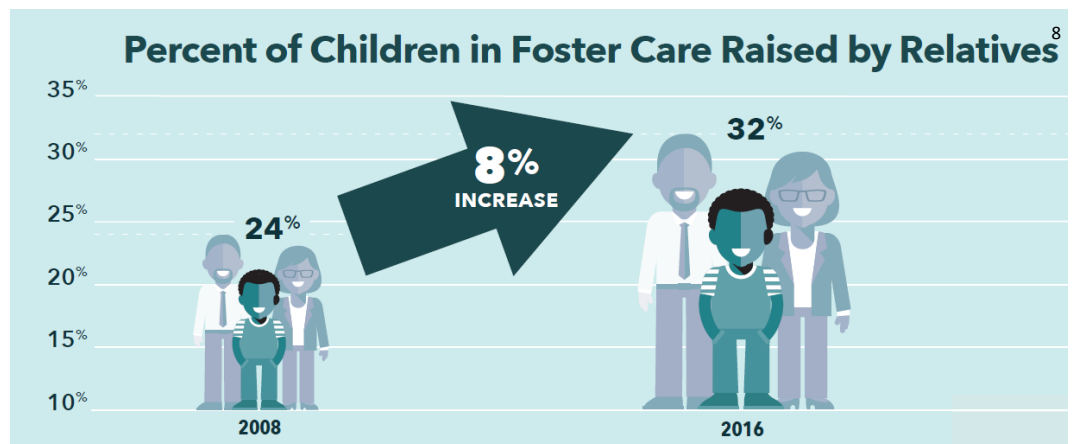
Kinship Care Reduces and Responds to Trauma

Culturally, for the African-American population, involvement in the child welfare system itself induces trauma. This can be compounded by other systematic related trauma associated with poverty, homelessness, and mental illness. Kinship care as a practice plays a significant role in both addressing and reducing the trauma for children and families in child welfare.⁷ When children are placed in the loving and nurturing homes of family, who are members of their kinship care village, they do not have the “foreign land” experiences, rather, they are simply home.

A Cultural Strength and Model Approach

Kinship Care is seen as a solution to many of the challenges faced by child welfare systems, including rising numbers in child welfare due to the opioid crisis, a need for more cultural competency in child welfare and the decline in traditional foster homes available. But for African-American families, kinship care is a strength-based cultural tradition that is not born out of a need for “substitute” parenting or a breakdown of the stereotypical nuclear family. Rather it affirms the intuitive response of extended family taking care of each other during difficult times.

Fortunately, growing research and recognition of the importance of family and cultural connections is leading child welfare agencies to place children with relatives when they cannot remain with their birth parents.⁹ This practice preserves the family and yields better outcomes for children than traditional unrelated foster care.¹⁰



“They feel comfortable being in foster care with their family. Even before being placed with family they were always spending time with their family during family cookouts, family parties and family gatherings. They enjoy still playing with their cousins that are the same age as they are and they know that their family cares and loves them and they feel the same way about their family”

In her bustling Philadelphia home, Christine Benslimen, 53, is all of these things—grandmother, aunt, cousin and foster mother—to the four children and youth who she is raising.

"I just love all of my babies," gushes Benslimen whose home and big heart is always open and willing to welcome in one more child or relative if it means keeping them connected to family and out of the system, and in a safe nurturing environment. Her story is much like theirs. At just 10 months old, Benslimen, who is African American, was placed with kin when her young mother couldn't care for her. The doting, older couple raised Benslimen as their own. When she turned five, Benslimen's biological mother took her back. The caregivers that she called aunt and uncle, "taught me everything I know about loving, nurturing and disciplining children," and the power of kinship care. Over the years, she's stepped up to "care for plenty of relatives, without any financial or other support."

But being connected to agencies like A Second Chance, Inc., has taught caregivers like Benslimen that they aren't alone on the journey. "That's why I'm so eager to use the GrAND Voices platform," explains Benslimen who recently joined the GrAND Voices network of kinship caregivers who share their stories and wisdom to improve policies and services for kin. "I want to tell other African-American caregivers don't be ashamed to ask for the help that they need, or fear losing their grandchildren to the system because they are struggling." Whether it is meal planning, medical assistance, finding Pampers, clothes, or car seats, help is available for kinship caregivers.



Courtesy of Christine Benslimen

Inadequate Supports and Services for Kinship Families

Despite research on the benefits of kinship care for children, children and caregivers in kinship families are less likely to get access to supports and services than those in traditional unrelated foster care.¹¹ Although 32 percent of the foster care system is made up of children being raised by relatives, many of these relatives are not licensed foster parents and do not receive monthly maintenance payments for the children in their care. Relatives are often unlicensed either because the state does not offer licensing as an option or because the caregivers face system barriers to meeting family foster care licensing standards.

Research shows that many state licensing standards include arbitrary requirements that have more to do with litigation and socioeconomic biases than with what is safe and appropriate for children.¹² Licensed foster parents and children have access to a wide range of services that are not available to unlicensed kinship families. They range from case management and mental health services to in-home support and training. Even those relatives who are licensed may find the training and supports available to them were not designed with relatives in mind and/or are not thoughtful about cultural and familial differences between African American families and other families.

Addressing problems in foster care licensing is only the tip of the iceberg in better supporting kinship families. The vast majority of children in kinship families are raised outside the formal child welfare system. In fact, for every child in foster care with relatives, there are 20 children raised by relatives outside the foster care system.¹³ The challenges for these families are even more difficult. Without a human service or community support worker to help connect them to services, relatives may face challenges navigating complex systems to get help for the children and themselves. Some relatives may lack a legal relationship to the child such as guardianship or legal custody. These families may also have trouble accessing health care or educational services for the children.

Model Practices for Supporting Kinship Care

Fortunately, pockets of model programs and supports for kinship families are developing across the country. A Second Chance, Inc. (ASCI) in Pennsylvania is one such model that provides culturally appropriate services to African-American children. In 1994, recognizing that kinship families needed an approach that was different from the way traditional foster care is provided, ASCI, a licensed foster care agency designed to meet the unique needs of kinship care families, stepped up. It remains the only agency in the country that specializes in child welfare-involved kinship families, ASCI is able to license 93 percent of its families so that they have access to needed financial support, while providing parents with services to help them regain custody of their children. ASCI also assigns different social workers to work with the caregiver and the parent to ensure that immediate service needs, as well as longer-term reunification and permanency goals, are being met. The Department of Human Services in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania now places more than 60 percent of the children in foster care with kin and achieves permanence in 89 percent of its cases.

Policies to Prioritize and Support Relative and Cultural Connections for Children

While model programs are evolving across the nation, child welfare practice has largely been slow to keep pace with research that shows the benefits of prioritizing relatives and preserving cultural connections. Fortunately, public policies are increasingly directed at improving supports and services to kinship families.

In recent years, additional child welfare laws have been enacted that recognize the importance of preserving family connections and require child welfare agencies to first look for relatives for children who must be placed in foster care. Federal support for guardianship assistance programs became widely available in 2008, offering ongoing financial support for relatives who secure guardianship for children when adoption and reunification with parents are not appropriate. Guardianship respects the cultural tradition of kinship care and is an important option for children who prefer their birth parents' rights not be terminated while giving them reassurance they will be cared for permanently by relatives.

Most recently, the Family First Preventions Services Act provided federal help to children and caregivers in kinship families in three major ways:

- **Federal support for prevention services to help children at imminent risk of entering foster care:** States can receive federal funds to offer birth parents, children and kinship caregivers of children at imminent risk of entering foster care access to mental health, substance use treatment and prevention, and in-home skill-based training.
- **Federal support for kinship navigator programs:** These programs connect kinship families to supports and services to help them.
- **Addressing barriers to licensing relatives as foster parents:** States must measure their licensing standards against model family foster care standards with a special eye toward addressing unnecessary barriers to licensing relatives.

These policies mark significant steps toward providing needed support for children and caregivers in kinship families, but more is needed. State, local, and tribal child welfare agencies must implement the policies and additional federal support is needed to ensure families have adequate supports.

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Generations United (www.gu.org) and A Second Chance, Inc. (www.asecondchance-kinship.com)

Recommendations

Supporting and prioritizing relatives for African-American children who cannot remain with their parents will benefit children by improving their well-being, preserving their cultural identity and reducing disproportionality. Policymakers and advocates can help by:

- Providing prevention and post-permanency services to grandfamilies such as those available through the Family First Prevention Services Act
- Providing kinship navigation services
- Addressing barriers to licensing relatives as foster parents
- Offering financial and other support to grandfamilies in need
- Implementing Guardianship Assistance Programs
- Offering programs to promote culture diversity and awareness, and address racism
- Providing a training/enrichment curriculum that is kin specific and a pure model of kinship, not an adapted version.
- Ensuring agencies hire staff that value and support kinship families.
- Continuing to collect data that evaluates the effectiveness of current operating model of kinship care.
- Coordinating one-stop shops for caregivers outside of the child welfare system where the needs of the triad can be met and maintained.
- Providing tangible and flexible resources for the everyday needs of the family (e.g., beds smoke detectors, foods, clothing)..

ENDNOTES:

¹ Generations United. (2016) Children Thrive in Grandfamilies. Retrieved from <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Portals/0/16-Children-Thrive-in-Grandfamilies.pdf>.

² Hildreth, G. et al. (2000). Review of Literature and Resiliency in Black Families: Implications for the 21st Century. African American Research Perspectives, 6(1). Retrieved from <http://www.rcgd.isr.umich.edu/prba/perspectives/winter2000/gchildreth.pdf>.

³ Assim, U.M. (2013). Understanding Kinship Care of Children in Africa: A family environment or alternative care option? Retrieved from <https://etd.uwc.ac.za/handle/11394/3476>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. 2016 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates. Retrieved from https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_16_1YR_S0901&prodType=table&pid=ACS_16_1YR_S0901&prodType=table.

Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. 2014-2016 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC). Children in Kinship Care. Estimates represent a three-year average. Retrieved from <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/7172-children-in-kinship-care?loc=1&loc=1#detailed/1/any/false/1564/any/14207,14208>. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. The AFCARS Report No. 24. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>

⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. The AFCARS Report No. 24.

⁷ Generations United. (2017). In Loving Arms: The Protective Role of Grandparents and Other Relatives in Raising Children Exposed to Trauma.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau. The AFCARS Report No. 24.

⁹ Generations United. (2017)

¹⁰ Generations United. (2016)

¹¹ Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). Stepping Up for Kids: What government and communities should do to support kinship families. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/resources/stepping-up-for-kids/>

¹² Beltran, A. & Epstein, H. (2013). Improving Foster Care Licensing Around the United States: Using Research Findings to Effect Change. Retrieved from https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/child_law/FC_Licensing_Standards.authcheckdam.pdf

¹³ Generations United calculated this figure based on the following two data sources: Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. 2014-2016 Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC). Annie E. Casey Foundation Kids Count Data Center. Child Trends analysis of data from Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) made available through the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN).