



## TOOLKIT TIPS

# AFRICAN AMERICAN GRANDFAMILIES:

HELPING CHILDREN THRIVE THROUGH  
CONNECTION TO FAMILY AND CULTURE

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# Introduction

About 2.5 million children in the United States live in grandfamilies or kinship families, which are families in which children are being raised by grandparents, other extended family members, or adults with whom they have a close family-like relationship, such as godparents. A disproportionate number of children in grandfamilies are African American. While African American children comprise 14 percent of all children in the United States, they make up over 25 percent of all children in grandfamilies and 23 percent of all children in foster care. The long history in the United States of enslavement, segregation, economic injustice, and institutional racism contributes to this overrepresentation in the foster care system, and likely also contributes to the larger percentage of African American children in informal grandfamilies.



This resource is designed as a quick reference tool for kinship care service providers and advocates, meant to help them design and provide culturally sensitive services to grandfamilies and kinship families who identify as “Black” and “African American.” It also serves as a guide for staff orientation/training to work in this community. This tip sheet contains highlights from Generations United’s [complementary toolkit](#), which provides detailed information, resources, and infographics. The terms Black and African American are often used interchangeably. In this tip sheet, we generally use the terms “Black” and “African American” as they are used in the sources that are being quoted. The toolkit also includes definitions and explanations of key terms used in this resource.



# Understanding African American Values

Kinship care is an age-old and traditional practice in African American families. What is new is the creation of institutional support systems to assist such caregivers. African American grandparents have had a caregiving role from the era of enslavement to the current day. Indeed, they have consistently provided the emotional and financial support needed to ensure the well-being of their grandchildren when parents are working or absent.

Cultural values are generally those identified and embraced by members of a specific cultural group. It is important to keep in mind that African Americans are heterogeneous, and it is essential to avoid sweeping generalizations about their needs and histories. Like other U.S. ethnic groups, African Americans have various social, economic, historical, geographical, political, and cultural differences. At the same time, certain aspects of African American history and life assist in creating a shared background that influences values and culture across this community. The following text highlights background information about African American communities' cultural values and provides examples to promote better understanding and recognition of African American communities' strengths and challenges. The goal of this information is to improve service design and utilization, outreach, engagement, and resource materials.

**For more information,  
see the complementary toolkit.**



*Black people are expected by the white world to be strong but not angry. Pain must be hidden. Daily slights are to be borne with grace, humility, even gratitude. Weakness is intolerable. Vulnerability must wait until the day is done and the mask can come off in the privacy of our own homes. And by then we are too tired or too stiff to feel it.*

— **Nadia Owusu, Aftershocks**



**Extended Family:** The extended family is an African American cultural norm in which grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents, and close friends are thought of as part of the family. Family supports tend to extend beyond the nuclear family and are inclusive of non-biological members. With the authorization of the designated caregiver, consideration should be given to including identified extended family members in outreach, appointments, and events to facilitate decision-making around kinship care roles and support needs. The African American family reunion often demonstrates how much extended family is valued, as extended family members and friends are included and recognized.

*It Takes a Whole Village  
to Raise a Child*

— African Proverb



**Engagement:** It is essential to recruit, mentor, and recognize staff who can demonstrate cultural awareness. Feedback from caregivers on staff can provide a service assessment lens. New hire staff interviews should include questions regarding cultural sensitivity about African American kinship families. Strong consideration should be given to hiring staff from the community to help with engagement and outreach. Peer advocate staff can help engage other kinship family members, become a critical part of staff training, and review the agency's materials for cultural appropriateness.

*When meeting with African American grandfamilies and adding the understanding of culture, it helps the reality of the situation. Hearing and seeing someone that looks like them gives them relief and hope that they can survive. Trust is built almost immediately.*

— Mrs. Victoria Gray, Arizona GRAND Voice caregiver advocate



**Respect for Elders:** Generally, Black and African American families place a strong emphasis on showing respect to elders, but they are not necessarily patriarchal. Grandparents hold a special status in the family unit. Their wisdom and prominence in the family give them special status and recognition. Identify the best engagement practices for greeting, addressing, and acknowledging older caregivers. Do not call the kinship caregiver by their first name when you first meet them. Ask them how they would like to be addressed (e.g., Ms., Mrs., Mr., Dr., or other titles).

*The youth walks faster than  
the elderly, but the elderly  
knows the road.*

— African Proverb





**Religion and Spirituality:** The expression of spirituality and religion was critical to the survival of enslaved people and remains an essential component in the lives of many African American kinship caregivers, often used to cope with adversity. Current-day African Americans express their faith through participation in various religious and spiritual groups, including African Methodist Episcopal churches, Roman Catholic churches, Lutheran churches, Presbyterian churches, Baptist churches, Episcopal churches, non-denominational groups, varied Islamic sects, varied Jewish denominational groups, Pentecostal churches, Jehovah's Witness groups, Seventh-day Adventist churches, and Buddhist temples. African American religious affiliations and spiritual practices require significant attention because they often impact many aspects of their community and family life.

*The importance of the role of the Black Church at its best cannot be gainsaid in the history of the African American people. Nor can it be underestimated.*

— Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Kinship care service providers need to recognize that many kinship caregivers view their role through their spiritual lens and abide by limitations that their religion may place upon how they live their daily life (e.g., food preferences, clothing selection, celebrations, counseling, marriage, child discipline, gender roles, health choices, workday exclusions). Religious affiliations also provide a strong support network for supporting grandfamilies.

**Community Support Networks:** To provide supports outside of mainstream white America, African Americans developed social clubs, sororities, fraternities, and institutions focused on reducing discrimination. These groups include such notables as the NAACP, Urban League, Black Masons, Eastern Stars, and Elks. These networks offered and still provide a haven for socialization, affirmation, and free expression of celebrations and challenges. The community of support frequently also includes peer advocates that have a unique understanding of grandfamilies' situations and neighborhood groups, such as block associations. Practitioners should use these support networks that promote cultural traditions, serve as access points, and provide resources.

*That's why I'm so eager to use the GRAND Voices platform. 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.*

— Ms. Christine Benslimen, Pennsylvania GRAND Voice

**Institutional Racism:** Essential in the helping process is the recognition that African American kin caregivers' cultural context, assets, challenges, needs, and values are deeply influenced by a discriminatory history of institutional racism that impacts their role as caregivers. From enslavement to now, African Americans have developed adaptive survival behaviors to address racial disparities in the United States.

African American kinship families reflect the history of enslavement, racism, discrimination, segregation, disenfranchisement, racial profiling, and over-incarceration that remain part of American culture. Kinship service providers and kinship caregivers who are not themselves African American and are raising African American children must learn about the impact of racism and be active participants in supporting each child's strong cultural identity. Kinship service providers must also understand the role of institutional racism in caregivers' distrust of formal systems.

*No, no, my friend. You are kind, and you mean well, but you can never understand these things as I do. You've never been oppressed.*

— S. Alice Callahan, *Wynema: A Child of the Forest*, Native American author

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# Seven Ways to Promote Culturally Responsive Services

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- 1. Offer Flexibility:** Provide African American clients with flexibility and accommodation in engaging them in meetings and events. Accommodations for participants are paramount to building a trusting relationship between provider and client and are in alignment with creating an atmosphere of personalism and respect.
- 2. Build Trust:** It may take time to build trust given the history of systemic racism experienced by many African Americans. Trust can be built by demonstrating authenticity, patience, warmth, and kindness, and by offering small courtesies. Using peer advocates or supports for outreach facilitates trust-building because they recognize and can empathize with the grandfamily's journey.
- 3. Use a Strengths-Based Approach:** Offer clients a respectful chance to share their beliefs and needs and acknowledge their resilience.
- 4. Recognize the Significance of Religion and Spirituality:** Consider working with faith-based organizations and religious leaders to assist in engaging grandfamilies and building trust with caregivers.
- 5. Decrease Systematic Barriers and Stigma:** Individuals who experience poverty are affected by contextual stressors such as unemployment, lack of economic power, lack of childcare, poor housing, neighborhood stressors, disparaging language, and cultural barriers. Practitioners should aim to reduce social/systemic stressors by providing relevant resources that are easily and readily accessible and culturally sensitive.
- 6. Use Inclusive Language and Images in Outreach Materials.** Use images of African American grandfamilies in materials and reach out through trusted community-based and faith-based organizations. Do not limit materials to “parents” when other caregivers are included too.
- 7. Organize Support Groups** for caregivers in African American communities and ensure that they are led by peers who have first-hand experience with the caregivers' strengths and challenges. Younger and older caregivers often have different issues, as do those from different socioeconomic groups. Consider breaking the groups up into topical areas that address the diverse issues that may affect the diverse members of the African American community.

For more information and resources for serving grandfamilies, visit [gu.org](http://gu.org), [grandfamilies.org](http://grandfamilies.org), and [gksnetwork.org](http://gksnetwork.org).





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