

Caregiver Connection

Biological Parents and Kinship Care: It's complicated!! Research and Recommendations for Grandparents

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Families in which grandparents or other relatives are raising children have many strengths, but also face some hard situations. One issue is the role of the parents in such families. Although they may not be living in the household, parents can affect all members of kincare families. Below are some research based tips to support you in how you relate to the parent of the child in your care.

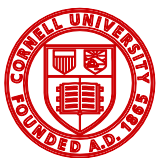
Recommendations for grandparents or other caregivers of a child whose parent is not providing primary care:

- While many caregivers feel that *any* relationship with a parent is better than no relationship at all, poor parental relationships may hurt the entire family. Although in your heart you may want the children and their parents to connect, the reality is usually more complicated and can lead to trouble if not handled carefully.
 - In particular, caregivers should think carefully before inviting parents to special events or including them in their daily lives. Depending on the situation, parental involvement may tarnish a positive activity or the absence of an invited parent might leave the child disappointed, unable to enjoy the event. Additionally, children may feel worse if a parent cycles in and out of their lives than if they hadn't seen that parent at all. Generally, parents should be invited only if they can be counted on to be reliable and not hurtful in their behavior. Caregivers may want to set up their own meetings with parents in order to find out whether this is the case before inviting parents to spend time with their children.
- Children in kincare have complicated feelings toward their parents. A positive adult role model whom they can talk privately to about their parents is critical. Children in kinship families may not always feel comfortable sharing feelings about their parents with their caregivers. Mentoring relationships, support groups and counseling for this can be excellent resources.

- It is important to be aware of how children change as they get older. Caregivers will need to revisit what they tell the children in their care as they age. For example, what is okay to tell a younger child about why they are not living with their parents may not satisfy a teen. Caregivers should expect that hard conversations about the role of the child's parent will be continue over a long time, as children get older and have more questions.
- To help feel prepared for these conversations, talk to others who have experienced similar situations, professional counselors or even try practice conversations with your spouse or a friend. Doing so will help you to approach these tricky talks with a clearer head and a better idea of what you want to say.
- It is important to separate your own emotions toward the child's parents and allow children to form their own thoughts about them. Rely on your own support system to vent your frustrations, anger, sadness, loss, grief, relief, and disappointment, but avoid sharing all of these feelings with the child in your care. Counseling and support groups are great ways to express and understand complicated family dynamics.
- Make sure children know that that the reasons that they are not living with their parents are NOT their fault, that they are loved by their family and that it is OK to miss their parents. It is important to allow children to speak positively about their parents, even if you disagree. It is also OK for children to have a realistic view of their parents' shortcomings. However, be careful not to impose your own feelings toward the parent on the child or give the child an overly negative view of their parent.
- It is common for children and especially teens to express that they want to live with a biological parent. Whether or not this is a realistic possibility, it is important for children to be heard and have opportunities to talk about how they feel. While each scenario is different, you could say something like, "I would miss you terribly, but I wish you could live with your mom or dad," "What do you think it would be like if you lived with mom or dad?" or "I understand how important that is to you." Letting teens know that they can talk to you and that you understand how they feel helps them feel supported and keeps communication honest and open.

- Letter writing can help both caregivers and children express and understand their feelings in a safe and private manner. Letters to parents, siblings, children, or caregivers can be sent or kept as a diary of their feelings.
- Whenever possible, avoid talking to children about the legal and logistical details of their custody arrangement. The details can be unnecessarily hurtful and confusing to children.

Children with multiple family members who care for them can be considered lucky to have many caring adults in their lives. Although finding a positive balance with biological parents can be tricky, the outcomes can also be very rewarding.



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