

**PERSPECTIVES ON KINSHIP CARE AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE
PRACTITIONERS IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
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INTRODUCTION

In cultures throughout the world, those who we define as family, kinfolk, relatives, or members of our tribe, village or clan play a variety of roles in raising children. Kin is defined as a group of persons of common ancestry, and family relationship is defined as kinship (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). Although the roles kin play differ from family to family and culture to culture, common themes crossover cultural and generational lines. Participating in family traditions, providing child care, preparing family meals, and passing on family stories are all common examples of the part-time roles relatives may play in raising children.

However, in many cases kin play significant full-time roles in providing out-of-home care for children whose parents are unable to protect, nurture, and meet the developmental needs of children. These informal kinship care arrangements can result when parents voluntarily relinquish the parenting role and turn to great aunts, siblings, or cousins to raise children. In other cases, when the child is at risk of abuse and neglect, formal kinship care arrangements result when the Court orders Child Welfare Services (CWS) to intervene and temporarily place children with relatives, if available and appropriate. If parents are unable or unwilling to improve parenting skills so that the child is no longer at risk of abuse or neglect, parental rights may be terminated. In these cases, relatives may pursue adoption or legal guardianship. For a number of reasons, when attempts at family reunification fail, most children placed with relatives are not adopted, and subsequently remain long term dependents of the child welfare system.

In 1993, of the 80,000 children in California's foster care system, 45% were living with relatives while 43% were in non-relative foster family homes, and 9% percent were in group homes (Berrick, Research on Kinship Care in California). In the last five years alone, California's kinship care placements have increased by 40%. This increase impacts some communities of color more than Caucasians. Nationally, 70% of children in kinship care are children of color, and in large urban areas, close to 90% of children in kinship placements are children of color. As the proportion of children placed with relatives increases, many questions arise regarding the experience of children living in kinship placements, issues and concerns facing relative caregivers, cultural considerations within kinship care, and the implications for policy-makers and child welfare practitioners.

OBJECTIVE OF CASE STUDY

Through my BASSC internship in Contra Costa County, I explored kinship care by participating in a local conference and a state-wide Policy Summit.

The goals of both conferences were to:

- Describe the characteristics of kinship care;
- Explore implications of kinship care for case level decisions; and

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- Make recommendations regarding policy and practice.

Conference participants acknowledged the continuum of informal and formal kinship care relationships. However, for discussion purposes, participants agreed to use a formal definition of kinship care in which the parenting of children by kin is a result of the determination by the Court and CWS that the child must be separated from their parents because of abuse or neglect.

This case study will focus on the role child welfare professionals play in supporting relatives and kin who play a formal, full-time role in raising children. By examining critical questions raised from these conferences, and applying lessons learned from Contra Costa County, I will conclude with steps my agency will take to strengthen kinship care in Santa Cruz County.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

The significant growth in relative care placements over the last decade spawned a surge in kinship care research both at the national and state level. What are the critical questions regarding kinship care? What dilemmas exist as a result of these questions, and what solutions should we seek to address these issues? Based on one's perspective, the answers to these questions may differ. Thus any comprehensive examination of kinship care must consider the unique issues and concerns facing the children; their parents; the relative caregiver; the Court; the Social Worker; and the Agency. Both the Kinship Care Planning conferences were attended by participants representing these perspectives.

In addition to providing national, state, and local overviews of Kinship Care, the conferences concentrated on six critical program and policy components. To address these components, attendees participated in the following six workgroups:

- Assessment of relatives as potential placements for children;
- The court process for kin;
- Financial resources for kin;
- Monitoring and supervising dependent children placed with kin;
- Programs and services for children and their kin caregivers; and
- Permanency options for dependent children placed with kin

As the attached workgroup summary reflects, each of these components play a significant role in shaping kin caregivers' experience of and length of stay in the Child Welfare System.

Recommendations from each workgroup will be translated into a comprehensive action plan which will be used at the State level to initiate necessary legislative changes to improve support services for kin caregivers and promote permanency options for dependent children placed with kin. In the meantime, results from the conference afford counties with an opportunity to examine aspects of kinship care which are controllable at the local level.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Over the last four years, the percentage of dependent children placed with kin in Contra Costa County has increased while the overall out-of-home placement rate has declined. In 1995, the

average number of children in out-of-home placement was 2,221 per month (down 6.5% from 1993). Ethnicity by placement type for the two largest populations suggests that in the same year, African American children represented 55% (1,201) of all children placed in out-of-home care while White children represented 34% (750) of the total placements. Children placed with relatives represented 46% (1,008) of the total out-of-home placements. Within these relative placements, African American children represented 61% (617) and White children 29% (290). These statistics reinforce national and state studies which suggest that increases in kinship care placements impact some communities of color more than Caucasians.

In 1994, as a result of a Grand Jury investigation, the Contra Costa Department of Social Services (DSS) initiated a comprehensive case review of children under the age of 12 that were in the system for over two years. Through a collaborative process with UC Berkeley's Child Welfare Research Center (CWRC), DSS has reviewed over 900 cases of children placed with relative caregivers. The guiding principle of the review process has been to identify cases that are appropriate for adoptive planning vs those who need continuing services.

By reviewing these cases, DSS staff have been able to identify a wide range of variables preventing children from exiting the system. In some cases, children remain in long term foster care with relatives because of the financial disincentive relatives face if they adopt or become a legal guardian; and other cases suggest that some relative caregivers remain in the CWS system because of the availability of support services. In addition, DSS staff discovered that administrative structural barriers such as specialized units, truncated time frames, large caseloads, and lack of adequate training impact social workers' ability to fully explore the adoption option with relatives. Through this extensive case review process, Contra Costa DSS staff have identified many of the same issues raised by Kinship Care Conference participants.

As a result of this process, Contra Costa has taken several proactive steps to promote permanency for children by strengthening kinship care. A committee has met for five months to address administrative barriers and redesign a work process so that a single worker can focus on any form of permanency planning (family reunification, adoptions, guardianship, or long-term foster care) on a concurrent vs consecutive service delivery basis. Through more careful assessment at the front end, it is expected that a "Concurrent Planning" model will identify children who are more likely candidates for kinship/relative adoption or guardianship earlier in the process, thereby reducing the number of times children are moved. Once these children are identified, DSS social worker staff need additional training on exploring permanency options with relatives. Relevant training topics include cultural sensitivity and an overview of the Adoptions Assistance Program (AAP). Initial training is scheduled tentatively for Fall 1996.

Concurrent planning presupposes that all suitable relative placements have been identified and screened. In part because of the nature of emergency response, there is often too little time to thoroughly assess relative placements or locate alternative kin placements. To address this issue, Contra Costa has implemented the Family Unity Model which emphasizes casting a much wider net for potential kinship placements at the front-end of dependency. This Australian-based model works with all available family members, kin, and service providers to identify family strengths and resources, and to develop strategies to ensure permanency for children.

Even if a wider relative net is cast and adoption options are discussed with kin earlier in the process, from the moment a child is placed in out-of-home care, many relatives still face a financial disincentive to exit the system. Currently, most relatives providing out-of-home placement are eligible to receive one of two rates: a lower non-needy relative AFDC rate of \$299 per child per month or a higher AFDC-Foster Care (FC) rate which ranges from \$345 to \$484 per child per month. The higher enhanced AFDC-FC rate exists for families caring for children with special needs. The Adoptions Assistance rate offered to relatives who adopt dependent children cannot exceed the lower AFDC-FC base rate. Recent legislation (AB 327) allows five counties to pursue a pilot project designed to eliminate this financial disincentive. As one of the pilot counties, Contra Costa County will be able to establish a more attractive rate for relatives willing to exit the system when the only barrier is financial. This new AFDC-Foster Relative rate would be established at \$363/month which is higher than the AFDC and AFDC-FC base rate and lower than the enhanced AFDC-FC. Hopefully, this pilot project will result in three successful outcomes: 1) reduce "long term foster care drift" which can result when dependent children remain in the CWS system exclusively for financial reasons; 2) create administrative cost savings which can be redirected to the front-end of the system; and 3) result in legislation which will allow other counties to implement this new AFDC-FR rate.

Central to the success of strengthening kinship care is the existence of a Caregivers Advisory Board which ensures that relatives, foster parents, and social workers continue to work together to address issues within their control and advocate for solutions requiring legislative action. At both conferences, relative caregivers spoke clearly and passionately about the importance of having relatives at the table - with both a voice and a vote on issues impacting their ability to care for children.

All of these steps have been implemented by Contra Costa County in an effort to promote permanence for children, and to acknowledge and support the critical role relatives play in providing short and long-term care to children.

SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

What do we know about our relative caregiver caseloads? Unlike Contra Costa County, during the last four years the percentage of dependent children placed with kin in Santa Cruz County has remained steady while the overall out-of-home placement rate has increased significantly. Since 1992, the out-of-home placement rate has increased approximately 52% with a projected 72% increase by 1997. In 1995, the average number of children in out-of-home placement was 312. Ethnicity by placement type reports for the two largest populations suggest that in 1995, White children represented 54% (169) of all children placed in out-of-home care, with Hispanic children representing 38% (120) of the total placements. Since 1992, the number of White children placed in out-of-home care has decreased by 6% while the number of Hispanic children has increased by 10%.

Several factors should be considered in examining this increase. The most recent census data from 1990 suggests that 31% of all children in Santa Cruz County are Latino, and in Watsonville alone, 40% of the Latinos are under the age of 18 as compared to 18% of the non-Latino population. In addition, an Assessment of Human Services Needs of the Latino Community in

Santa Cruz County which was revised and released in 1993, projected that more Latino families would utilize services as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). Under Latino Equity guidelines, non-profit organizations funded through our Community Programs have also been required to provide more information and outreach services to Latino families. Without more recent census data, these factors may suggest an explanation as to the increase in Hispanic children as a percentage of our out-of-home placements. However, other issues such as the passage of Proposition 187 and its potential impact on reporting trends also should be examined.

In 1995, children placed with relatives represented 25% (77) of the total out-of-home placements; within these relative placements, White children constituted 56% (43) and Hispanic children 39% (30). Within both ethnic groups, relative placements account for exactly 25% of all children placed in out-of-home care. With such a significant increase in the number of children entering our system, demand will necessitate expanding relative placements for all ethnic groups and increasing licensed foster care homes. Both Contra Costa County and the Kinship Care Policy Summit offer examples of strategies for strengthening kinship care in Santa Cruz County.

Rather than wait for directives from a Grand Jury, our Child Welfare Services Division will initiate a similar case review process used by Contra Costa with a goal of identifying all children under the age of 12 who have been placed with kin for at least two years. This review will group cases that are appropriate for adoptive planning. Once cases are targeted, supervisors and social workers will develop strategies to help kinship placements exit the child welfare system. Since Santa Cruz County is not participating in the AB 327 pilot project, we will not be able to immediately address financial disincentives facing relative caregivers. However, we will continue to monitor the outcome of this project, and in the meantime, provide training for social workers on relative caregiver topics such as AAP and cultural awareness.

On the front end, Santa Cruz County has implemented a concurrent planning process. With a smaller caseload and more centralized staff, all new cases are staffed on a weekly basis and alternative plans for permanence are developed. Like Contra Costa, children will benefit from a concentrated effort to implement the Family Unity Model earlier in the process so that more relative support systems are identified, and families are engaged in developing alternative strategies for permanence. If our goal is to look more to relatives as short term or long term caregivers, we must identify and address the barriers that make relatives reluctant, unavailable, or untraceable.

Another important strategy will be to work with the community to enhance alternative support systems for relatives inside and outside the child welfare system. Our CWS Program Manager has already approached a local Private Agency Certified Foster Home (FFA) to discuss the possibility of providing wrap-around services to targeted relatives who need additional support for children placed in their care. Theoretically, because FFA's receive a higher rate than the AFDC-FC rate, they should be able to provide a higher level of care for children with greater needs. Targeted FFA wraparound services may help some relatives with dependent children caught in long term foster care drift exit the system more quickly.

Once a child exits our system, another potential mechanism for relative caregiver support may exist within our Federal Family Preservation and Support Programs (FPSP) community planning process. An important component of our FPSP 5 Year Plan is to strengthen Family Resource Centers. In establishing definitions of family resource centers, important consideration should be given to the types of support services offered to extended families caring for children. Informal and formal kinship care arrangements need support services so that children remain in permanent family settings without intervention from the Child Welfare Services System.

A final lesson we can learn from Contra Costa County is the importance of providing relatives with an ongoing support group so that their concerns are voiced and their issues are addressed. Currently, we offer a Foster Care Parent Support Group which does not include relative caregivers. This group is closely linked with our licensing and foster care recruitment unit. If we are to expand our relative caregiver pool and provide the necessary training and support services to these families, we must redesign and rename our current support group to include relatives and acknowledge the important role they serve in caring for our children.