

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF: TIPS FOR KINSHIP CARE PROVIDERS

Taking in a child who needs you can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life – but it can also be stressful for you and the rest of your family. Whether you are a formal kinship care provider in the child welfare system, or you informally agree to care for the child of a family member, you play a vital role. Taking care of yourself is critically important, for your own well-being and for the well-being of the child you're caring for and others in your household.

For a child, being removed from their parents and home is stressful and can be traumatic. Even when you provide loving care, a child may have difficulty adjusting. They likely miss their parents and their home. This very natural and normal reaction can make it hard for them to respond positively to you and may impact their behavior in many ways.

This tool is designed to help you:

- reflect on your experience as a kinship care provider
- identify your strengths and where you may need more support
- be aware of how traumatic experiences may affect the child in your care and how that might impact you as a caregiver
- respond to the child in a supportive way even when their behavior is challenging

If you have a caseworker, therapist or close friend you rely on for support, you may want to discuss this information with that person so they can support you as you care for this child. You may also want to share it with other family members to help you all focus on what you can do to best support the child and each other.

Please note that throughout this document, to keep it simple, we refer to a single child in your care. If you are caring for more than one child, it may be helpful to reflect on the tips and questions in relation to each child separately. Even siblings may react differently to a situation like this, depending on their ages, personalities and individual experiences.

Strengthening Families

Strengthening Families is an effort to help families give their children what they need to thrive. All families have unique strengths, and all families sometimes need help to stay strong.

Strengthening Families is built around five “protective factors.” Protective factors are strengths families rely on, especially when life gets difficult. A parallel set of protective and promotive factors, called Youth Thrive, describes what adolescents and young adults need to thrive – but for this tool, the focus is on you as a caregiver. The protective factors discussed in this tool are:

- Parental resilience: *Be strong, even when you're stressed*
- Social connections: *Get and give support*
- Knowledge of parenting and child development: *Learn more so you can parent better*
- Concrete support in times of need: *Get help when you need it*
- Children's social-emotional competence: *Help your child learn to care for themselves and others*

For more information, visit
www.strengtheningfamilies.net.

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Resilience: *Be strong, even when you're stressed*

Resilience is the process of managing stress and functioning well even when things are difficult. Being resilient as a parent or caregiver means:

- Taking care of and feeling good about yourself
- Asking for help when you need it
- Being hopeful and preparing for the future
- Planning for what you will do in situations that are challenging for you and/or the child
- Not allowing stress to get in the way of providing loving care for the child
- Taking time to really enjoy the child and doing things you like to do together

The following questions help you think about your own resilience and how you can stay strong:

1. What helps you feel calm when things are stressful in your everyday life? Please list three small actions you can take to help yourself feel strong and calm. Can you make time to do these things on a regular basis?
2. What things really get under your skin as a parent? Make a plan for the things that you know have been stressful and might happen again. Think about the things this child might do differently from your other children and how you will respond.
3. Think back to other parenting or child care experiences you have had. What were some of the things you really enjoyed? Ask the child in your care about things they enjoy doing or would like to try. Building routines together around activities that you both enjoy is an important part of building a positive nurturing relationship.

Trauma Tip: It is easier to feel resilient in a parenting role when you get positive feedback from the child that what you do matters and the child feels loved. It may be hard for this child to give you that feedback at first. Don't get discouraged—it is understandable. They are likely scared and frightened. They may feel they are betraying their birth parent(s) if they let anyone else get close to them. It is very important for you to continue to provide loving care, even when the child can't let you know they want it or appreciate it. **Please remember to take care of yourself and remind yourself you are doing your best in a difficult situation.**

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Social connections: *Get and give support*

It's easier to handle parenting challenges when you have positive relationships with family, friends and neighbors. Having a network of caring people in your life helps you feel secure, confident and empowered – and this helps us all become better parents. Your social support network is an important asset, especially while you adjust to caring for this child. You can strengthen it by:

- Focusing on relationships where you feel respected and appreciated
- Accepting help from others and looking for opportunities to help them back
- Building your skills and comfort in reaching out to others, communicating, resolving conflict and doing all the other things that help to keep a friendship strong
- Building your network so you have multiple friends and connections to turn to in different situations and needs

Take a few moments to think about your social connections:

1. Who can you turn to for emotional support? Is there anyone who can provide back-up if you need child care or other help? Write their name(s) here. It may be helpful to reach out to them now and explain your situation so they can be prepared to help you.
2. Do you know other parents with a child around the same age as the child now in your care? It can be very helpful to reach out to parents with children the same age so you can plan playdates, set up carpools and make other practical arrangements. They can also be a helpful source of information if you have parenting, school or other issues.
3. Is it hard for you to reach out and make friends? If you have a caseworker, let them know if this is the case. You can also reach out to the child's teacher or doctor, or look up a family resource center to help you find a support group for foster parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, or kinship care providers. Many communities also have activities for parents and caregivers including Parent Café or Community Café. Having people to talk to who understand your situation will make things easier.
4. The important role you are playing can place a strain on your relationship with the birth parent and in the extended family if there are conflicting opinions about the child's placement or care. When conflicts arise, try to keep the focus on the child's well-being. No one needs to "take sides" if everyone is focused on what is best for the child. You may want to ask your caseworker, clergy or other trusted person to mediate conflicts and help resolve problems in child's best interest.
5. If you are married, this transition in your family will likely put a strain on the marriage as well. Talk with your spouse about the expectations and concerns you each have. Plan for how you will manage the additional stress and continue to make time to nurture your relationship.

Trauma Tip: Children who experience traumatic or stressful events often exhibit challenging behavior. This can be hard for you, of course, and can be particularly tough when you and the child are in social situations. It may be helpful to let those close to you know that the child is going through a stressful and traumatic time so they can join you in being supportive and non-judgmental even in the face of challenging behavior.

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Knowledge of parenting and child development: *Learn more so you can parent better*

Knowing what to expect makes taking care of a child a lot easier. Child development follows general patterns and there are many good sources of information that can help you if you are running into challenges. Providing the best care possible for this child may require you to learn and use some new techniques, because of this child's unique personality and experiences. Knowledge of parenting and child development helps you:

- Know what to expect as a child grows and develops
- Understand what children and youth need to help them learn and thrive
- Use new skills to help your child be happy and healthy
- Recognize a child's unique needs, strengths and interests
- Understand how to respond in a positive and effective way when a child misbehaves

Think about the following questions as you consider your own knowledge of parenting and child development:

1. Where can you go to get parenting information? There are many good sources of information, including your caseworker or the child's teachers or pediatrician. The web is also a good source – but the quality of online parenting information varies. Some reliable sources include: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (<http://www.cdc.gov/parents/>); for infants and toddlers, Zero to Three (<http://www.zerotothree.org/>); and, for children and youth who have had traumatic experiences, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/parents-caregivers>).
2. When you observe other parents with children the same age as the child in your care, what do you like about the way they parent? What have you observed that seems effective? What things do you want to do differently?
3. If you have parented before, what do you remember about the time when your child was this age? What were your favorite things about this age, and what did you find challenging? Make time for the positives, and start researching any challenging issues now so you can be prepared.

Trauma Tip: While it is important to understand typical behavior, it is also important to remember that when children experience stress or trauma they can also exhibit behaviors that are not typical, including regressing to earlier stages of development. It is important for you to understand trauma and how it impacts development. The following guide was written for those caring for a child who may have experienced child abuse or neglect: http://www.fosteringperspectives.org/fp_v10n1/Kennedy&Bennett.pdf.

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Concrete support in times of need: *Get help when you need it*

All families go through tough times and need help at times from their extended families, friends, faith community or other community services. This is a time when your family may need more support. Knowing where to get help in the community can make things a lot easier. It is important to be able to:

- Know what help is available
- Ask for help when you need it – such as financial help, a break from work or home responsibilities or therapy for yourself, a child or another family member
- Get what you need to keep your family healthy and safe
- Help others when possible

In terms of concrete supports:

1. Caring for an additional child can put a strain on your family budget. Are there things that already put a financial stress or burden on your family? Make sure to discuss any existing or expected financial costs and challenges with your caseworker, if you have one, or with someone you trust in the community. They may know of resources or benefits you may be eligible for. If you don't have someone to ask about these things, find out if your community has 2-1-1 service (through your local United Way) or call a local child care resource and referral agency.
2. Does the child in your care need specific types of supports or services? Find out through conversations with the birth parent (if possible), your caseworker (if you have one) and/or the child's pediatrician, child care provider or school.
3. Are you nervous about asking for help or support? You may be used to being the one who others come to for help – and you are certainly doing a lot to help the child in your care right now. But all families have times when they are the ones who need to ask for help. Think about what you can do to feel comfortable asking for support, and practice how you will ask for what you need.

Trauma Tip: Keep an eye out for whether or not the child is exhibiting signs of trauma. If you have concerns, discuss with a professional (such as your caseworker, child care provider/teacher or doctor). They may be able to connect you and the child to mental health services and other supports. Responding as soon as possible to any trauma the child experienced is the best way to help them recover.

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Children's social emotional competence: *Help your child manage feelings and relationships*

Helping children develop social-emotional competence allows them to manage their emotions and build healthy relationships throughout their lives. The things you do to model and help children learn these skills makes a huge difference. For children who have experienced stress or trauma, an intentional effort to support and nurture their social and emotional skills can be especially important. We can help children develop these skills by:

- Responding warmly and consistently to a child
- Teaching a child the words they need to express how they feel
- Allowing a child to express their emotions
- Being a role model: showing a child how to be kind and how to interact positively with other people, even when they are upset

The child you are caring for is probably trying to manage a lot of difficult emotions. Your help and support at this time is very important. Some questions to ask yourself are:

1. What are your own emotions regarding the situation? It is important to recognize when the child's behavior is triggering emotional responses from you. Your emotions are important and valid *and* it is important to give the child the space to have their own emotional response.
2. Are there emotions you are uncomfortable with? How can you prepare yourself to deal with them? What if the child is angry? Sad? Indifferent? How will you respond? It is important for the child to have freedom to express their feelings and to deal with their emotions – even if they make you uncomfortable.
3. What do you know (or can you learn) about what gives the child comfort? How can you build these things into your everyday routine with the child?
4. If the child is old enough, help them to create a plan for themselves about what they will do when they feel angry, sad or scared. These feelings can be overwhelming and it can be hard to control behavior in the moment.
5. A child's visits with a birth parent (or another significant person) can affect the child in unpredictable ways, including an escalation in problem behaviors. Plan ahead for managing your feelings about the parent, parent-child visits and conflicting emotions the child may experience.

Trauma Tip: Not surprisingly, trauma can impact a child's social emotional competence. It can be hard to remember that a child's challenging behavior may be a normal response to difficult experiences. Try to respond with empathy rather than anger and work with the child to identify better ways to express their feelings.

If you have other children in the home it can be especially important to talk with them about the challenging time the child you are caring for is going through.