



PARTNERS

THE NEWSLETTER FOR WISCONSIN'S ADOPTIVE & FOSTER FAMILIES

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FROM THE CORNER OFFICE

Welcome to our fall issue of *Partners*!

We are dedicating this issue to all the wonderful relatives who step up and care for their kin. Over the past five or more years, a greater emphasis has been placed on keeping children connected to their birth families. And we know that many grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older siblings have answered the call to help, at times with little or no warning.

In our last issue, we discussed forgiveness and I shared some of my personal journey in 2016. You may recall from part of my story that I was personally impacted by informal relative care. Losing my grandmother shortly after my mother was very difficult. She and my grandfather stepped up many times and, I now know, as an adult, that there were times when they may have felt they did not know what to do. The most important thing they ever did is put us before them and let us know that no matter what they were there – whether we were living directly under their roof or not. For this, I am forever grateful.

So we dedicate this issue to all the relatives and “like” relatives who have stepped to help. We wish you blessings of love, forgiveness, understanding, endurance, and extra doses of laughter.

Please know we are here to listen, research, and work to find answers. We don’t have all the answers for you, but we are here to help you in your path.

Thanks for giving your hearts and homes to children!

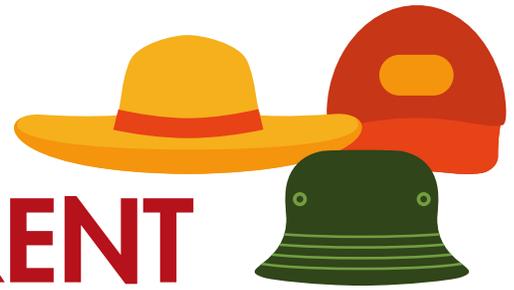
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CHANGING HATS FROM KIN TO PARENT



Choosing to adopt a relative's child can come with a whole lot of emotions and questions. It is a big commitment and will be a different experience than parenting your own, biological children.

As a relative caregiver, and now adoptive parent, you serve a unique role for your child and are a bridge to his birth parent and their history together. You may be able to offer unique support and insight that your child may not have gotten otherwise. One change that you probably noticed as soon as the child came into your care, was the altered role that you assumed in his life. Where you were once Grandma or Aunt Jane, you suddenly found yourself in a day-to-day, full-time parenting role; attending school meetings, planning meals and lunches, and dealing with bedtime routines. At that time, you went from being an occasional babysitter to the person in charge of discipline and guidance. Now, having become an adoptive parent, you are no longer Grandma and Grandpa—you are Mom and Dad. Keep in mind that, even though the child has been living with you for a while, it may take time for both you and your child to adjust to the now permanent changes post adoption. Be gentle and forgiving with yourself and practice an extra measure of patient empathy with your child.

It may be helpful to remind yourself of the wealth of knowledge you already have – especially if you have parented before. Reflect back on your previous experiences – what still applies and what might you wish to do differently? Who do you have around you as your support network? Are there tools, resources, or other information that you need to learn or brush up on in order to meet all of your child's needs? This may be especially important for those who last parented before social media and technology became so prevalent in all of our lives!

Now that you have adopted, you may need or want to take stock of your family's financial situation. Are there financial assistance resources that you could use in order to help you care for your child? Do you need to update any important documents or paperwork, such as retirement plan beneficiaries or wills?

If you were already parenting when your child came to join your family, this time after the adoption has been finalized may be a good opportunity to check in with the other children in your family. How are they feeling and adjusting now that there is a new, permanent member of their family? Does everyone feel as though their needs are being met? How will you ensure privacy for all members of the household?

We all know how schedules can easily get out of control. Now, with another person to take to school, extracurricular activities, doctor appointments, play dates, and more, you may feel as though your schedule is running away with you! Establishing routines—and sticking to them—not only helps children know what to expect, but can also provide you with a feeling that everything is under control. You may want to consider if there are carpools that you might join, or seek input from friends and family members about how they tackle homework time, family fun time, bedtime routines, and more.

Whether you are a new parent, a parent rejoining the parenting role, or a parent who added another child to your family through this relative adoption, there is no doubt that you are navigating new waters. Be sure to seek guidance when needed and know you are not alone. There are several tools and resources that have been developed to help support those who, like you, have completed a kinship adoption, including:

- Support groups, both in-person and online. Support groups help unite people with shared experiences; others who understand what you are going through and can lend an ear and give advice and help you to know that you are not alone.
- The Coalition has created a tip sheet, [Changing Role of Caregivers: Grandparents](#), where you can find additional information, resources, and support.
- Additionally, there are many books and online resources out there for you.

Seeking out support and caring for yourself is a very important part of being a caregiver; remember, “You can't pour from an empty cup,” so we strongly encourage you to practice self-care. Give yourself permission to meet your own needs; doing so helps make you better able to meet the needs of your child. Finally, please know that the Coalition and its staff are here to support you along your journey. Please reach out whenever you need a little guidance, some resources, or even just an understanding ear.

Navigating Kinship Family Relationships Post Adoption



You heard the crack of the judge's gavel and dove into the celebration of your newly enlarged family. Your niece or nephew, cousin or grandchild is now officially and legally your child. It's been an emotional journey and you might be thinking that this is the end of it. In truth, this lifelong journey of adoption is just getting started – for you, the child, and your whole family.

It can feel bittersweet to celebrate the adoption of a relative. It's a happy time for you, certainly, but can also mean a lot of sadness or even anger for other members of the family. You might notice feelings of guilt creeping in for not having helped sooner, or anger towards the biological parents. The reality of kinship care and relative adoption is that there are more opportunities for the family dynamics to get tangled than in a private or non-relative adoption. Post-adoption, you are now managing the relationships in your entire family from a different perspective, and so is your child. Your role has legally changed from grandparent to parent, or from the "fun" uncle, aunt, or cousin, to Mom or Dad. How do you manage your family relationships now?

More than likely you have already had to have some hard conversations with your family before now. If you haven't, or are not sure how to address new challenges, here is a place to start: call a family meeting without the child or children present. Share your own emotions and feelings, and encourage your family members to do so, as well. By getting these issues out in the open, you can all work towards moving forward together and can support one another. You might talk about the termination of parental rights and subsequent adoption and what it means for the family in the future. It can be helpful to openly share how you feel, and give those feelings a name, like violated, angry, sad, embarrassed, or guilty. And you could also broach the topic of how the different family member relationships have now changed.

Another topic you might discuss is what you will be called moving forward. Will you be Mom or Dad? Or will you still be Grandma or Auntie? Will your child address any other family members differently? Keep your child as the focus; what is he comfortable with that is already happening and what does he wish were different? This is a conversation to also have with the child, where you can ask about his feelings before any decisions are made. Ask your child about his emotions and thoughts about members of your extended family. He may feel comfortable with you as his parent, but may not know how to handle the other relationships in the family. Reassure him that however he feels is okay. He may feel confused about why you are now acting as a parent, or guilty for what he may see as betraying his biological parent(s).

Family gatherings can be the cornerstone of conflict. Will the biological parents be there? Can they be invited? Are they allowed to be alone with the child? These are things that need to be decided and shared with family ahead of time. Communicating boundaries will eliminate any confusion or anxiety over plans for the family, and for your child. Certain locations, holidays, or events can be triggers for kids. Try to be both mindful and flexible.

Certainly, your child's connection to his biological parents is going to be affected, as well, and may evolve further as time passes. This is another hard conversation to have, but so important. It is important to manage your own relationship with the child's biological parents, as well as talk about and set boundaries, so that the child can successfully navigate his relationship with them, too. If you have already had conversations with other family members about the new family dynamics, some of the anxiety over a conversation with the biological parents might be lowered. Have a separate meeting and try to work toward an agreement that puts the needs of the child first. Talk about how to avoid competing for attention. How will you maintain communication about the day-to-day activities in the child's life? If they hear something from another family member, make sure they know that you are available and that they can come to you for clarification. Discuss with them the same things you discussed with extended family members, such as how the child will address you and the rest of the family, and who will handle decisions and discipline when you are both present.

Especially in the early stages of your new life post-adoption, keep lines of communication open and check in often. Perhaps it would be better to start with family gatherings that are not overly important or large. Small dinners or a birthday party, instead of Christmas, for example. Talk to your child after such gatherings and ask if anything was hard, stressful, or emotional for them.

The adoption of your child shows your child and the entire family that this is your new normal. In the days, weeks, and months ahead, keep in mind that this new makeup of your family can be an emotional hurdle for many. But addressing your own emotions, keeping lines of communication open, and focusing on building or re-building family relationships will benefit everyone – and will carry the family forward.

It is important to manage your own relationship with the child's biological parents, as well as talk about and set boundaries, so that the child can successfully navigate his relationship with them, too.

Why Adoption Matters, Even with Kinship Care

“Being adopted, even if it’s into your own extended family, means you belong for the rest of your life – long after the social workers and court orders are gone. No matter what. Every child deserves a ‘no matter what’ kind of family.”

~ Kinship Parent

Most of us take permanency for granted. We were born into our families and they remain the cornerstone of what we consider “home” throughout our lives. Our birth families are the foundation on which we build our own families. When reunification simply isn’t an option for a child or youth in out-of-home care, it is common for the caregiver to be asked to provide permanency. Depending on the age of the child, and the relationship of the child to the caregiver, sometimes guardianship is offered as an alternative to adoption. This can be especially true if you are a kinship provider. Parenting under the supervision of a child welfare agency can feel unnatural and intrusive for the whole family. Guardianship may seem like the fastest, easiest, least emotionally charged route to child permanency. But does adoption matter, even for relatives?

Wisconsin statutes define a guardian as someone who must provide the child with education, food, medical and dental care, and shelter. In very practical terms, the definition of guardianship hardly sounds like the care you would wish for your child if you were unable to care for him or her. Few of us think back on our childhood and revel in the memories of the shelter and dental care we were provided. That’s not to suggest that guardianship cannot also provide the love and nurturing a child needs. But does it offer the same sense of security and stability as adoption?

Just how stable a permanency option is guardianship? Although a judge may grant “permanent” guardianship, the guardianship appointment can be over-turned at any time under a variety of circumstances, including at the request of the guardian. This can be a scary thought for a child, especially a child who may already be feeling he or she was rejected by birth parents. In addition, guardianship is a “legal” relationship that dissolves when the child becomes an adult. How “permanent” does that feel for the child? Imagine living day to day knowing any kind of relationships you have will “dissolve” on a specified date. How would that impact those relationships?

Adoption, on the other hand, establishes a legal, unconditional relationship that assures your child he has a place of his own to call home. The child you are caring for may be a niece, nephew, cousin, or even grandchild. From your perspective, unconditional love and support may be a given, regardless of any legal status. Family is family, after all. But for a child who has already suffered the loss of a parent, adoption may provide much needed reassurance and security. Adoption says, “I choose to be your forever family” in a way that guardianship simply doesn’t.

A permanent home is a core source of love, protection, and security central to a child’s well-being and sense of belonging. That belonging is crucial for everything from identity development and mental health to the social skills needed in adulthood. Even when the guardian is a loving relative caregiver, the outcomes for youth who have the security of adoption are by far better than those who “age out” of guardianship orders. Belonging matters.

While the distinction between relative guardianship and adoption may seem minimal or practical for the caregiver who is committed to loving and caring for a child, it can mean so much more for a child who has suffered trauma and loss. Adoption means having a place to come home to for the holidays; having someone to walk you down the aisle or applaud when you cross the stage at graduation; having keepers of your shared memories; having no expiration date on family relationships. It means having roots and a place to belong. Adoption means having a “no matter what” kind of family.



What about Guardianship?

For some families, establishing a permanent home and relationship for the relative they are caring for doesn't mean adoption. Guardianship establishes a legal and semi-permanent relationship, while maintaining the structure of the family. Depending on the circumstances within your family, guardianship may be a better option for you.

Even in a guardianship situation, many of the challenges associated with relative adoption still exist. You may need to establish new family rules and expectations. Relationships with the child in your care and other extended family members may change. You may even have to think differently about how your family celebrates holidays and manages family gatherings.

RESOURCES

Tip Sheets

wiadopt.org/resources/tipsheets

- [The Changing Role of Caregivers: Grandparents](#)
- [Planning Ahead: Working Together for Successful Interactions](#)

Additional Resources & References

- [Kinship Adoption: Meeting the Unique Needs of a Growing Population](#). ChildFocus. Copyright © March 2010.
- [Helping Grandchildren Stay in Contact with Parents](#). [Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#). Cooperative Extension, University of Georgia.
- [Co-parenting in Kinship Families with Incarcerated Mothers: A Qualitative Study](#). Anne L. Strozier, PhD, MSW, Associate Professor, Mary Armstrong, PhD, MSW, Associate Professor, Stella Skuza, BA, Master's student, Dawn Cecil, PhD, Associate Professor, and James McHale, PhD, Professor
- [Grandparents Raising Grandchildren HelpGuide.org](#)
- [FCARC: Resources for Relative Caregivers](#) wifostercareandadoption.org
- [Giving Preference to Relatives for Out-of-Home Placements](#) [Child Welfare Information Gateway](#) (Wisconsin info begins on page 75)
- [Why Adoption and Permanency Matter](#) [Ampersand Families](#)

From Our Library

- *The Kinship Parenting Toolbox*, edited by Kim Phagan Hansel
- *Listening to Birth Families: Forming Kinship Groups*, by Vera Fahlberg (DVD)
- *Kinship Care: Relative Caregivers Speak Out*, by Dr. Joseph Crumbley (DVD)
- *Kinship Care: Teens and Young Adults Speak Out*, by Dr. Joseph Crumbley (DVD)
- *Kinship Care: Birth Mothers Speak Out*, by Dr. Joseph Crumbley (DVD)



HOME TO STAY: NEVER GIVE UP

Michelle Thomas always knew she wanted to make an impact helping people. This is what motivated her as she considered her career choice as a young adult. While in school studying to become a Physical Therapy Assistant, crisis hit Michelle's family, and her niece Treonie, and nephew Gerron (now ages 15 and 14) were placed in out-of-home care. At the time, as a college student, she was not in a position to care for, support, and raise two children, but she made it her longer-range goal to get Treonie and Gerron out of foster care and into her home, keeping them in their own family. Michelle was placed in foster care herself as a child – around the same age as Treonie and Gerron were. She says, "What I had to go through was hard, so if I could help them, that's what I wanted to do."

As soon as Michelle got a steady job post-graduation, she contacted Treonie and Gerron's social worker to ask that she be considered as a placement resource. Michelle was diligent and committed; she even hired an attorney to advocate for her and the children to be together. When it came time to go to court, the judge in their case favored Michelle as the adoptive resource for the children. Finally, Treonie and Gerron would be coming home.

Throughout her journey, Michelle learned a lot about persistence; lessons that she is happy to share with others who seek out her advice today. She says she was lucky enough to adopt Treonie and Gerron because she was prepared with a stable job and a house, and she never gave up. She says that she couldn't stand by and wait for others to help her out, and she had to take it upon herself to make things come together for her family. Michelle adds, "I felt that God sent me here for a purpose - to have them. I've always been a hard worker, ever since I was little, and I took care of things for the family. I was determined to do better than what I had, and to help people."

Persistence is still a virtue that Michelle calls upon today. As she juggles three jobs with parenting two teens who are often on the go, this part of her DNA comes in handy. She manages to coordinate Treonie and Gerron's activities, cook a few meals with them each week, spend quality time together, and replenish herself. She doesn't take all the credit, though. Michelle reflects on all of the emotional support she's received over the years, especially throughout the child welfare process, from her mom, Marian, sisters Ramika and Shaunika, and friends Robin, Robby and Dave, Conni, Anna, and Stephanie. These

friends and family members were those who came to all of the children's court dates, and today they continue to help with transporting the kids for appointments, outings, ball games, shopping, and band/choir concerts. These are the people to whom she turns to revive from a hectic lifestyle. Michelle looks forward to regular sushi and movie dates with her friends and gets some time to herself when the kids visit their biological parents and brothers on weekends.

Michelle strives to work cooperatively with Treonie and Gerron's biological parents (her brother is their biological father). The kids spend time with them regularly and, if glitches arise, she finds that calm, honest, straightforward communication works to address them. "In the beginning, I had to talk to my brother directly and tell him we had to communicate or it wasn't going to work," she says. She feels fortunate that her brother expresses his appreciation for all that she has done for the children.

As she reflects back on the road her family has traveled together, Michelle hopes for opportunities to share her story with child welfare workers so she can encourage

them to look at biological families the same way as other foster parents, and with open minds. "The kids come from horrible situations, and though they're trying to keep them from going back to that, some family members aren't like that."

As Treonie and Gerron grow closer to adulthood, Michelle finds herself contemplating becoming a foster parent again. That drive to help others itches inside her. "I never planned on having kids myself so I always thought I'd help out that way. The kids like the idea but I plan to wait until they're done with high school."

A special thanks to Michelle for sharing her story with us, and continued well-wishes as her family grows.

Michelle took part in our Jockey Being Family® Home to Stay™ program. If you have recently completed an adoption from the child welfare system and would like to take part in the Home to Stay program, please contact us at 414-475-1246 or 800-762-8063.



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An umbrella of services over foster care and adoption; information and referral; recruitment; training, education and support for families and professionals.



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The National Quality Improvement Center – Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) Project recognizes that families formed through adoption and guardianship have unique challenges and needs. That is why QIC-AG is developing and implementing the Adoption and Guardianship Enhanced Support (AGES) Program. The program seeks to serve as an adoption and guardianship competent, trauma-informed support for families facing emerging needs post-permanence. AGES will offer families an individualized plan with specific goals, needed supports, and targeted advocacy based on the assessment of the child and family's needs and strengths. The following two-page overview details information about the target population, evaluation of the program, and expected outcomes.



OVERVIEW

The National Quality Improvement Center for Adoption and Guardianship Support and Preservation (QIC-AG) is a five-year project working with eight sites that will implement evidence-based interventions or develop and test promising practices which if proven effective can be replicated or adapted in other child welfare jurisdictions. Effective interventions are expected to achieve long-term, stable permanence in adoptive and guardianship homes for waiting children as well as children and families after adoption or guardianship has been finalized.

SITE OVERVIEW

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families (DCF) is the lead agency for the QIC-AG project in Wisconsin. With the exception of Milwaukee, Wisconsin has a state-supervised county administered child welfare system, with child welfare services delivered through a network that includes counties, private agencies, and tribal nations. Post-permanency services are delivered by Post Adoption Resource Centers throughout the state. The Wisconsin QIC-AG project will develop and implement the Adoption and Guardianship Enhanced Support (AGES) program, providing post-permanency supports to adoptive parents and guardians.

PROJECT GOAL

The overall goal of the QIC-AG Wisconsin project is to understand if families who participate in the AGES program are better able to manage family stress, to develop an increased capacity for post-permanency stability, and to achieve improved well-being. Through this project, the QIC-AG will determine whether the enhanced response to emerging needs of adoptive and guardianship families is effective in increasing the capacity of adoptive parents and guardians to address the needs of their children and equipping parents and guardians to better manage family stress. The project aims to serve all families who have adopted or assumed guardianship of children in the targeted region of the state (i.e., the 17 counties and three sovereign tribal nations in the Northeastern Region). This target population includes children adopted through the public child welfare system as well as children adopted through tribal customary adoptions, private domestic adoptions, or international adoptions.

PERMANENCY CONTINUUM INTERVAL: INDICATED

The QIC-AG Wisconsin project will implement the AGES program in the Indicated Interval of the QIC-AG Permanency Continuum Framework. Families in this interval

reach out for help because of the emergence or escalation of challenging issues or behaviors. These emerging issues might be triggered by a change in family dynamics resulting from the child's age or developmental stage such as entering the teen years, a change in family functioning, or a parent's diminished commitment to permanence. Supports provided to families in this interval are designed to reduce family stress, stabilize the placement, and increase the family's skills in managing challenging behaviors.

TARGET POPULATION

The Wisconsin QIC-AG project is focusing on the 17 counties and three sovereign tribal nations in the Northeastern Region and targeting children who have a finalized adoption or guardianship and whose family has requested services from DCF, a Post Adoption Resource Center (PARC), or the Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center (FCARC), or has requested an increase in subsidy rate because of increased child need.

INTERVENTION

The AGES intervention is being developed and tested by the Wisconsin QIC-AG team. AGES is based on similar programs serving post-adoption and guardianship families in Pennsylvania (<http://www.adoptpakids.org/CaseAdvocacy.aspx>) and North Carolina (<http://www.cssp.org/reform/child-welfare/youth-thrive/ei-profiles/Child-Wellbeing-Profile-2-27.pdf>). AGES is also informed by adoptive and guardianship families in Wisconsin who expressed that they would welcome help with the chal-

lenges they face parenting children who have histories of significant trauma and abuse. The AGES program recognizes that families formed through adoption and guardianship have unique challenges and needs that require a family-specific individualized approach. In comparison with the current services provided by PARC and FCARC, AGES will offer families individualized assessment of emerging needs and their strengths, identification of family-specific goals, personalized assistance with navigation of pre-existing resources and services, and targeted advocacy in the areas as requested by the family. The AGES' team of professionals will work with families to build supportive relationships by offering personalized skill-building and educational materials.

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND EXPECTED RESULTS

Wisconsin will participate in an evaluation specific to the AGES intervention. Since the AGES intervention is being developed as part of the QIC-AG initiative, the evaluation will focus on testing the components of the intervention, and the short-term outcomes listed below.

SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES

Short-term outcomes, unique to this site include the following:

- » decreased familial stress
- » increased family satisfaction with services
- » increased caregiver confidence



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MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the QIC-AG visit

www.qic-ag.org and

- » *search our Intervention and Program Catalog*
- » *download information about the Permanency Continuum Framework*
- » *explore details about the eight Partner Sites*

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