

Outline for Kinship Care: Special Issues

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Jeanette Willis is the Executive Director of Advantage Adoptions - One Church One Child in Fort Worth, TX and has over 25 years of experience in adoption, and her agency has helped hundreds of grandparents, aunts, and uncles adopt their kin. Jeanette is a former kinship child herself and is now a kinship parent as well as a mom to adopted and biological children.

Kinship adoption and other forms of caregiving encompass the situation of grandparents raising grandkids, but also aunts, uncles, and cousins raising their nieces, nephews, and cousins. This type of parenting brings joy and its own unique sets of challenges. But we don't want to overlook the joy.

Kinship adoption and other forms of care can happen with both domestic and international adoption. Many of the issues are the same, but there are some differences.

Millions of grandparents in the US are raising their grandchildren. Approximately 30-35% of children in foster care are in the care of a family member.

Advantages of kinship adoption and kinship care: (these are not always the case)

- Child already knows you; therefore, less disruption and less disrupted attachment.
- Child maintains ties with their extended family and culture.
- Shared history and family legacy. Ready access to family information.
- This is what family is for.

In addition to the joys of parenting a child full time there are some challenges that are unique to relatives who are parenting their grandkids, nieces, nephews, etc.. We'll break them down by emotions.

Shame:

The feeling that you failed as a parent or even as a sister.

Other people judging you because of the actions of your child. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

Fear (often projecting into the future):

Fear that the child will go into foster care.

Now that child protective services are involved fear of messing up and having the child removed into foster care.

Fear of being judged by "authorities" as too old, too poor, too small of a house, etc.

Fear of the impact on my relationship with my child or relative. (They will hate or resent me for stepping in to parent their child.)

Will I live long enough to fully raise this child?

Fear of going through the rebellious teen years again.

Money. "I saved enough for my retirement, not necessarily enough for retirement and raising a child."

Fear that the child will turn out like their parent. "The apple doesn't far fall from the tree."

Fear of the impact on this child caused by prenatal exposure.

Fear of the unknown.

Guilt:

Lack of time for your other grandchildren or your other children or your spouse.

Guilt that your spouse or partner, if a second marriage or partnership, didn't sign up for this.

Anger:

At your child or relative that put you in this place. Angry at their decisions.

Divided Loyalties:

Divided loyalties between mom and dad's side.

Reconciling the love you feel for your child and the desire you have for them to not be hurt with what is best for the child.

Handling the anger of the child's parent toward you.

Whose needs do you put first if your child wants something that you are not sure is in the best interest of the child?

Lack of Preparation:

As one grandmother told us: This is a totally different type of parenting partly because I didn't choose it. It's kind of like an accidental pregnancy but we weren't the one who made the mistake.

Usually stepping up because of an emergency and there is little time to prepare.

Not recognizing the need for specific education to parent this child.

Not recognizing the impact of trauma on a child and on how we need to parent.

Shifting Roles:

What should the child call you? What should they call their birth parent?

The role shift from grandparent or aunt to mother. And for the child the shift from grandchild or nephew to child.

How to handle the child's parents wanting to maintain their role as parent and make certain decisions for the child.

Special Issues when bringing a child into a family that already has children living in the house:

Rivalry

The new child doesn't behave as do your other children.

Fear that the new child's behavior will wear off on your existing children.

Tips for Kinship Care Providers:

- The child's needs and best interest always comes first.
- Work with a social worker or therapist to set very clear roles about who does what.
- Ditch the self-blame. You did the best you could when you were raising your child. Now you have learned things. "When you know better you will do better." (Paraphrase from Maya Angelou)
- Set firm rules with the child's parent. If alcohol or drugs are involved start attending Al-Anon or Nar-Anon. If the child is old enough, encourage their attendance at Al-Anon or Nar-Anon Family Groups.
- Don't say negative things about the child's parents.
- Don't force the child to take sides between you and their parents.
- Ask for help from other family members for a respite weekend.
- Talk with your other family members about who would care for the child if you become unable.
- Talk with a family law attorney to set up legal protections for the child.
- Find support (Kinship Navigator Programs).