

Prioritize Placements with Family Members and Other Family Connections

CHAMPS, which stands for Children Need Amazing Parents, is a policy campaign focused nationally and in states to promote high quality foster parenting. CHAMPS is based on the understanding that all children need and do best in families. Foster parents, including kinship caregivers, play a primary role in ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. In fact, stable, quality foster parenting is one of the most powerful ways we can help children in foster care to heal and thrive. It is associated with a range of better outcomes for children, such as greater success in school, healthy relationships with family, and improved health and safety.

The CHAMPS policy playbook highlights six priorities for policy change, including prioritizing placements with family members and other family connections.

Why is it important to prioritize placements with family and other family connections?

Research shows that children in foster care do best when placed with someone they know and trust, especially family members. These placements have been shown to reduce the trauma of removal, maintain connections with family and community, and promote placement stability and child well-being. While federal and state policies identify relatives as the preferred placement for children removed from home, actual practice does not always reflect this policy. Policy should go further and must actively remove barriers, create incentives and facilitate placements with family and other family connections (often referred to as kin).

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- Children in kinship care experience better outcomes in regard to behavior problems, adaptive behaviors, psychiatric disorders, well-being, placement stability, number of placements, guardianship and institutional abuse than other children in foster care.¹
- Children in kinship care are less likely to experience placement disruption than children in non-kinship placements in foster care.²
- Older children in kinship care had significant lower levels of externalizing, internalizing and overall behavior problems.³
- Average number of placements children experience could be effectively reduced by placing them with relatives at entry to care, which would provide the stability of a relative's home without a subsequent change in placement.⁴

¹ Winokur, M.A., Holtan, A., & Batchelder, K. E. (2018). Systematic review of kinship care effects on safety, permanency, or well-being. *Research on Social Work Practice, 28*(1), 19-32.

² Koh, E. (2010). Permanency outcomes of children in kinship and non-kinship foster care: Testing the external validity of kinship effects. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*(3), 389-398.

³ Wu, Q., White, K.R., & Coleman, K. (2015). Effects of kinship care on behavioral problems by child age: A propensity score analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 57*, 1-8.

⁴ Zinn, A., DeCoursey, J., Goerge, R.M., & Courtney, M.E. (2006). A study of placement stability in Illinois. Chapin Hall.

STRATEGIES THAT WORK

Through policy and supportive practice, we can help prioritize kinship placements for children in foster care. Strategies that work:

- **Utilize kinship firewalls.** Some jurisdictions require staff to seek special approval to place children with non-kin, ensuring that they have taken all steps necessary to make the first placement a kinship placement.
- **Develop provisional licensing protocols.** Children and youth are typically placed with relatives prior to licensure. Once a relative has been located, policy should streamline the necessary approval process, including criminal background checks and home safety inspections and put the relative on a path to full licensure.
- **Remove licensing barriers.** State licensing policy should be more flexible regarding certain requirements in order to remove impediments to licensure of kin caregivers.
- **Require family-finding at first contact.** Policy should require that caseworkers not wait until the child is removed before seeking relatives who could support a family and, if necessary, serve as a placement resource for the child. Relative search should begin when a family is first brought to the attention of the child welfare agency and continue throughout the life of the case until permanency is achieved.

TAKING ACTION

CHAMPS calls on child welfare leaders, legislators and other decision makers to help prioritize kinship placements. Suggestions for getting started:

- **Agency and program leaders** can engage stakeholders in examining existing policies and practices for how the agency prioritizes kinship placements. Invite kinship, foster, adoptive and birth parents help review policies and discuss improvements.
- **Legislators** can hold a hearing or listening session to learn more about how to prioritize relative placements. Kinship caregivers, kinship support groups, agency leaders and caseworkers can be invited to share their experiences. Consider inviting national experts to share information about trends and best practices.
- **Advocates, families and community leaders** play an important role in calling for improvements. They can bring together kinship families, youth, and agency leaders to discuss barriers to relative placements and brainstorm solutions. Invite public officials to provide them the opportunity to learn about what's working and what challenges exist.

CHAMPS RESOURCES

- **For more information on CHAMPS,** go to www.fosteringchamps.org
- **For administrative and legislative policy examples** related to prioritizing kin placements, check out the CHAMPS policy playbook at <https://playbook.fosteringchamps.org>
- **See additional guidance on licensing and kinship** from CHAMPS partner, Generations United
 - Kinship wikiHow: <https://www.grandfamilies.org/wikiHow-for-Kinship-Foster-Care>
 - Foster Care Licensing: <http://www.grandfamilies.org/Resources/Foster-Care-Licensing>
- **Learn more about CHAMPS technical assistance options** at <http://fosteringchamps.org/champs-technical-assistance/>
- **Contact CHAMPS** at info@fosteringchamps.org