



Kinship Family Search and Engagement Desk Guide

Kinship care means children grow with those who already know their story.

PURPOSE

This guide provides practical guidance, tips, and strategies to search and engage kin throughout the life of a case.

INTRODUCTION

Kinship is the self-defined relationship between two or more people based on biological, legal, and/or strong family-like ties.¹ Relative kin are those directly related to children by blood, marriage, or adoption. Non-relative kin (also known as kin-like or fictive kin) are those who have a substantial relationship with the child. Non-relative kin can also include any member of a NC state-recognized tribe or a member of a federally recognized tribe, whether or not there is a substantial relationship with the juvenile.

When children cannot remain safely with their parents, placement with kin is preferred over placement in foster care with non-kin, either licensed or unlicensed. Even if kin can't serve as a placement resource due to case or personal circumstances, they should be engaged early and often, as they may serve as part of the child and family's support network or a connection to other relatives available to be a placement resource.

BENEFITS OF KINSHIP CARE^{1 2 3}

Kinship care offers children the opportunity to grow in a familiar and supportive environment.



Minimizes Trauma

Children retain familiar connections and supports, easing the trauma of removal and aiding healing.



Preserves Cultural Identity

Children maintain and strengthen cultural identity through connections to community, language, food, holidays, clothing, and more.



Increases Placement Stability

Children are less likely to experience as many placement moves as children in traditional foster care.



Improves Behavioral and Mental Health Outcomes

Children have better behavioral and mental health outcomes.



Improves Well-Being

Children experience greater stability, with fewer placement and school changes, and less disruption.



Increases Permanency

Children are more likely to achieve permanency timely.

¹ Child Welfare Information Gateway, [Kinship Care and the Child Welfare System](#) (May 2022).

² Juvenile Law Center, [Family Preservation Matters: Why Kinship Care for Black Families, Native American Families, and Other Families of Color Is Critical to Preserve Culture and Restore Family Bonds](#) (2020).

³ American Bar Association, [Kinship Care Is Better for Children and Families](#) (2017).



LIFE OF THE CASE

Relative search and engagement establishes and maintains connections that foster a sense of belonging, promote positive outcomes for children and families, and improve the child's overall well-being.

Identifying and engaging relatives fosters lifelong connections and stability for children. Relative search and engagement begins at the point of Intake and continues through safe case closure. At no point should efforts to identify and engage relatives cease. County DSS agencies must preserve the child's relationships with their relatives and kin. If those relationships do not exist or have been disrupted, the agency must prioritize relative search and engagement efforts that will build or rebuild them. Kin are essential in supporting prevention, reunification, and permanency. Engagement should include both maternal and paternal relatives, even those unable to serve as placement options, since they offer valuable connections to other potential caregivers.



For more information, see the [Circles of Safety and Support Resource Tool](#)

INTAKE

Policy requires that from the point of Intake, identifying relatives and kin—including non-relatives or fictive kin—is essential to promoting child safety. This information must be captured under the mandatory question, “Are you aware of any relatives or kin supports for this family?” and should include individuals outside the home who can offer meaningful support.

Strategies for Search and Engagement

- Make the time, particularly at the beginning of the case, to gather as much information as possible on the existence of relatives and family support.
- It may be easier to gather relative and family support information from non-professional reporters.

Questions to Ask at Intake

- What are the names of the maternal grandparents? Paternal grandparents? Any other known family members?
- Do you have contact information for any of these people?

Considerations for Practice

- Immediate responses are more likely to become Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) placements and therefore gathering relative information is particularly critical.
- Pay attention to the collaterals identified at Intake as they may be relatives or kin to engage later on.

- Are there any family members or friends that live nearby?
- Are you aware of any relatives or kin supports for this family? (mandatory question)



CPS ASSESSMENTS

Federal and state law require county child welfare agencies to identify and notify all adult relatives and other persons with legal custody of a sibling of the child within 30 days of the child's removal from their parents or caregivers. Notifications must include maternal and paternal relatives regardless of the parents' involvement with the child.

Assessment workers must identify family members and kin as part of the safety network. This is called diligent search. Documentation of those efforts must be provided to the court as reasonable efforts to prevent removal when the agency is filing a petition for removal. The county child welfare agency must thoroughly search for relatives, and when it is safe and appropriate, children must be placed with relatives.

Strategies for Search and Engagement

- Ask **youth** about their relatives and kin.
- Review old safety plans for who was a part of the safety network.
- Use the Circles of Safety and Support Tool.
- Use the Three Houses and Safety House.
- Send correspondence to all previous addresses.
- Call all previous telephone numbers.
- Contact motor vehicle registration.
- Request a record check from local law enforcement.
- Contact prisons and state hospitals.
- Check the telephone directory.
- Contact utility and telephone companies.
- Check child support records.
- Make historical systems checks through the CPS system.

Considerations for Practice

- Ask youth and parents about their support network early, including during the CPS Assessment. If removal isn't imminent, frame this as identifying and activating the family's network to strengthen their circle of safety and support—not as exploring placement options.
- Ask about kin at every interaction. The stress and stigma of child welfare involvement may discourage people from sharing at first.
- Respect the parent, youth, and relative's opinion about their own family, culture, and diversity. At the same time, practice "trust but verify" by exploring the family's history, current situation, and concerns with empathy—and discuss any biases or judgments with your supervisor.



If a petition needs to be filed, see the [Permanency Planning Services](#) section for suggestions (p. 5)



IN-HOME SERVICES

Policy states you must inquire with parents and children about extended family members at least once a month throughout the case.

If an in-home case is open and the county files a petition for custody, relatives must be considered first when it is safe and appropriate. Family members and kin must be identified as part of the safety network.

Strategies for Search and Engagement

- Use a genogram to map the child's known relatives, identify other kin/fictive kin, and understand family dynamics.
- Ask about kin at every interaction. The stress and stigma of child welfare involvement may discourage people from sharing at first.
- Ask participants to identify other relatives during family decision-making meetings.
- Encourage parents and youth to bring their supportive relatives and kin to meetings.
- Access the services history in the child welfare record databases, like child welfare and child support.
- Review the case record to identify and document relatives, and regularly check with parents about their family connections.
- At case closure meet with safety network members, so they understand their ongoing support role moving.

Considerations for Practice

- Once identified and with parental consent, engage kin in their understanding of circumstances, giving historical insights you may not have for case and safety planning.
- Respect the parent, youth, and relative's opinion about their own family, as well as their culture and diversity.
- Make the time to learn and understand the family's past experiences, current situation, and concerns.
- Reflect on your beliefs and biases about extended family connections. Be aware of any judgments or punitive attitudes toward the parents, and discuss these with your supervisor.
- When developing a safety plan with a potential Temporary Safety Provider (TSP) and the parents:
 - Introduce yourself, your agency, and your role.
 - Explain the role of a TSP and the resources that are and are not available to TSPs.
 - Clarify the voluntary and non-legal nature of a TSP.
- At case closure, develop a crisis plan with the family and their support network to identify who will help if a future crisis arises.



PERMANENCY PLANNING SERVICES

Policy requires at least monthly inquiries with parents and children about extended family members throughout the case. Within the first 30 days of placement, diligent efforts must be made to identify and notify adult relatives and other persons with legal custody of a sibling of the child or youth in care.

Strategies for Search and Engagement

- Interview the child and the child's parents or caregivers about relatives and their preferences for placement.
- Ask about kin at every interaction. The stress and stigma of child welfare involvement may discourage people from sharing at first.
- Interview all known family members, maternal and paternal, including children, and fictive-kin and/or close friends.
- Ask participants to identify other relatives during family decision-making meetings.
- Encourage parents and youth to bring their supportive relatives and kin to meetings.
- Review the child's life book.
- Contact identified relatives to gather names of others, sharing only what's necessary to identify additional family and assess their interest in placement or connection.
- Access the services history in agency databases, like child welfare and child support.
- Review the case record to identify and document relatives, and regularly check with parents about their family connections.
- At case closure, meet with relatives and kin so they understand their supportive role in the future.
- Use a genogram to map the child's known relatives, identify other kin/fictive kin, and understand family dynamics.

Considerations for Practice

- Once identified, engage kin in their understanding of circumstances. This may provide historical insights for case and safety planning.
- Respect the parent, youth, and relative's opinion about their own family, culture, and diversity. At the same time, practice "trust but verify" by exploring the family's history, current situation, and concerns with empathy—and discuss any biases or judgments with your supervisor.
- Regularly invite parents to attend appointments, school events, and other meetings when it is safe to do so.
- Reflect on your beliefs and biases about extended family connections. Be aware of any judgments or punitive attitudes toward the parents, and discuss these with your supervisor.



Regular check-ins build trust and are critical to a case.

- Relative notifications must include the following:
 - That the child has been removed from the custody of the parent.
 - The options the relative has under federal, state, and local law to participate in the care and placement of the child.
 - The options that may be lost by failing to respond to the notice.
 - The requirements to become a family foster home.
 - The services and support that are available for children in a foster home.
 - How relative guardians may receive kinship guardianship assistance payments.

Considerations for Practice continued on page 6



PERMANENCY PLANNING SERVICES

Considerations for Practice Continued

- The following are required to be contacted within 30 days:
 - Adult relatives and kin suggested by parents.
 - Adult maternal and paternal grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, great-grandparents, nieces, and nephews.
 - All parents of a sibling where the parent has legal custody of the sibling.
 - Relatives and other persons with legal custody of a sibling.
- Initial relative and kin talking points:
 - Introduce yourself, your agency, and your role.
 - Follow up on the Relative Notification and explain you are working with the child and the goal is to learn more about the child's family.
 - Explain the need to find connections for the child.
 - Ask for their questions and concerns and give time for the relative to process the information.
 - Ask for information, other relative contacts, family photos and letters, and anything else important to the child and their family.
 - Provide your agency's contact information.
- Routine casework includes checking in with previously identified relatives, as their willingness for contact or circumstances may have changed.
- Create a life book to document a youth's milestones and relationships. It should stay with them during and after care, helping preserve and strengthen kin connections.
- Considerations about the following impacts of connecting with new or renewed kin:
 - Families have a primary need to know what happened to "lost" relatives.
 - Identifying and locating extended family alone won't address the emotional challenges children in foster care may face.
 - Engaging family members may reopen old wounds and revive past conflicts related to the child's birth or removal.
 - Permanency is more than a legal outcome—it's about stable, lasting relationships that matter to the child.
- Monthly conversations about relatives include:
 - Knowledge of names and when they were last seen.
 - Location, including addresses and contact information.
 - Any contacts that were made through telephone, texting, or social media.
 - Information about their relationship, such as their history with the relative and support the relative may provide.
- At case closure:
 - Celebrate case closure with relatives and kin.
 - Develop a crisis plan with the family and their support network to identify who will help if a future crisis arises.
 - Recognize that this can be a difficult transition for parents. Ask relatives and kin how they can support the family during this time.
 - Identify the types of visits and frequency that can happen with relatives and kin after permanency.



LICENSURE FOR KINSHIP CAREGIVERS

Kinship caregivers should be informed early about the option to become licensed. Licensure offers meaningful benefits that strengthen support for both the child and the caregiver.

While it is the responsibility of county child welfare permanency workers to initially find and explore kinship families for placement of children who are in foster care, county and private licensing agencies can play a key role in helping kin become licensed.

Benefits of Licensure

- Monthly stipend to help cover essentials like food, clothing, and housing.
- Access to training and resources on trauma-informed care, child development, and navigating the child welfare system.
- Connection to a network of licensed families for support and respite.

Focus on identifying and supporting kinship families who can be licensed, rather than excluding them based on initial barriers.



Shift the approach from ruling out to ruling in, by exploring flexible pathways, offering guidance, and addressing challenges that may prevent licensure.

Considerations for Practice

- Clearly explain the benefits of licensure and the option to pursue it through public or private agencies. When possible, have licensing workers, not permanency planning staff, lead these conversations to ensure kin receive accurate, timely information.
- Offer licensing courses at varied times to accommodate kin caregivers, many of whom already have children in their homes. Help them develop a plan to attend and identify supports needed to complete requirements.
- Discuss the Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KinGAP) early with caregivers whose children may exit care to guardianship, to support informed decision-making.
- Explore whether your county or partner agencies offer the National Training and Development Curriculum (NTDC) as a pre-service option. Kin related by blood, marriage, or adoption may qualify for the reduced 15-hour NTDC training.
- Identify any waivers that may help the family move forward with licensure. If you are unsure if a specific rule requirement is eligible for a waiver, contact the NC DHHS Regulatory and Licensing team at NC.Licensing@dhhs.nc.gov for guidance.



STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE NON-PLACEMENT KIN



**Regular communication
with key members of the
safety network**



Modeling parenting



**Add to call lists for
emergency contacts**



Transportation



**Child and Family
Team (CFT) Meetings**



**Taking to
appointments**



**Substitute
caregiver**



**Supervised
visits**



Check in on parents



**Holiday or birthday
events**



**School
events/extracurricular**



Sibling visits

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Exploring social, relative, and kin connections is a crucial part of casework and should continue throughout the life of the case. These conversations can be sensitive, so caseworkers must use sound judgment and critical thinking when gathering this information.

To promote intentional engagement, consider the following:

- **Stage of case development:** Newly established relationships that have not built rapport require different context than established relationships where trust has been built.
- **Preparation:** When families have a clear understanding of the purpose behind inquiries about support, relatives, and kin, they are able to engage in the conversations with a sense of autonomy. Respecting the family's desires is a key element of partnership.
- **Timing:** Times of emergency and crisis require different engagement than times when more stability is present.
- **Environment:** Holding sensitive conversations in settings where there is privacy can be more welcoming than public settings with less privacy.
- **Tone and body language:** Being mindful of non-verbal cues is essential during engagement. Approach interactions with genuine curiosity, and remain attentive and responsive to any signs of discomfort.
- **Age and developmental stage for children and youth:** Questions should be adapted for the age and stage of development for the children and youth. Remember that children and youth are a crucial resource for this information.



QUESTIONS TO ASK

Questions for Children

- Would it help to review where you have lived in the past to help you recall important adults in your life?
- Would you share your life book with me and point out the important adults in your life?
- Who from your past or present do you want to stay connected to? How? Why?
- Who are your [grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.]?
- Who really understands you? Who do you feel connected to?
- Who are three people in your life who you have the best relationship with?
- What is your favorite gift you've ever received? Who gave it to you?
- Who lives in your Safety House? Did anyone else use to?
- Who cared for you in the past when your parents could not?
- Who pays attention to you and cares about what happens to you?
- Who believes in you? Stands by you?
- Who can you count on?
- Who are your trusted adults? Who do you call when you are upset or scared?
- Who would you call if you wanted to share good news? Bad news?
- Who do you spend time with regularly, or on weekends?
- [After a disclosure] Who else knows about this incident?
- [At closure] Who is your support moving forward?
- Who do you feel comfortable reaching out to if you don't feel safe?

Questions for Adults

- Have family members identified any barriers to maintaining a positive relationship and connection after permanency has been achieved?
- Who from your past or present do you want to stay connected to? How? Why?
- What kind of support have family members been providing to the child?
- Who are your [parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.]?
- Does the child have any siblings, half-siblings, or step-siblings?
- Who are the close friends of the family? What are their names and contact information?
- Who do you call when you are upset or had a bad day?
- Who comes over on holidays or birthdays?
- Who are the most important people in your child's life, outside of yourself? What is their relationship to the child?
- Do you have any family members who live nearby or are willing to provide support?
- Can you describe the relationship between the child and their relatives?



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Use the following resources to help identify relatives and kin. Partner with children, parents, and families when using these tools. Ongoing efforts to find and engage kin are both best practice and a policy requirement.

- Inform the family about the ongoing requirement to assess for relatives and kin, the tools and searches used, potential outcomes, and why it's important.
- Whenever possible, review search results with the family to gather insights, update information, correct errors, and make informed decisions about next steps.

This collaborative approach fosters transparency, builds trust, and honors the family's autonomy and culture—laying the groundwork for lasting, meaningful connections for children.

- Safety circles: [Resource Using-Circles-of-Safety-and-Support-to-Build-Safety-Networks June2024.pdf](#)
- Genograms
- Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn)
- Child welfare history or criminal record databases
 - NC Department of Correction Criminal Offender Searches: www.dac.nc.gov/dac-services/criminal-offender-searches
- Free People Searches
 - www.truepeoplesearch.com
 - www.fastpeoplesearch.com/names
 - www.thatsthem.com
- Obituaries to identify other family members related to the deceased
 - www.legacy.com
 - www.findagrave.com
- Paid search engines (Accurant, CLEAR, Lexis Nexis, Connect Our Kids)
Even if agencies have limited accounts for paid search engines, the investment is worthwhile.
- Use Google or Bing to search names, social media profiles, addresses, phone numbers, or emails.
- www.whitepages.com
- Don't overlook incarcerated relatives—they may not be placement options, but can help identify other kin
 - www.vinelink.com
 - www.BOP.gov
 - www.locator.ice.gov
 - Local jail website (county or city)
- NC Court Calendar: www.nccourts.gov/court-dates
- Local personal property searches: Use county assessor websites for personal property searches to find or verify addresses and conduct reverse lookups to locate individuals.
- Social Security Death Index: https://support.ancestry.com/s/article/The-Social-Security-Death-Index?language=en_US