

KIN CAREGIVERS & RELATIVE CONNECTIONS

OVERVIEW

Maintaining familial connections is one of the most impactful things we can do for children in care. Family bonds offer a greater sense of belonging, preserve cultural identity and traditions, and serve as a powerful buffer against toxic stress (prolonged adversity that disrupts healthy development), complex trauma, and maltreatment.

Relative bonds are uniquely resilient. They persist unconditionally and have a remarkable capacity to support healing. Existing bonds are a source of stability, and kin are more likely to work through trauma-responsive behaviors and weather challenges that might otherwise disrupt a placement.

Federal law requires states to identify and notify adult relatives in writing within 30 days of a child entering care and to place siblings together whenever possible. Georgia law and policy give preference to kin placements at most stages of the proceedings.

Even when a relative or fictive kin cannot serve as a placement or permanency resource, they should still be engaged and encouraged to maintain a relationship with the child. As advocates, we must prioritize building a lifelong, supportive network around every child and recognize that relational permanency is paramount.



As advocates, we must prioritize building a lifelong, supportive network around every child and recognize that relational permanency is paramount.

FAMILY FINDING

Identifying and engaging family connections require persistence and creativity. Search efforts must be expansive, and the duty to search does not expire. Cast a wide net and think beyond biological relatives to include fictive kin.



PRACTICE POINTS

Interview the child: Framing questions in a storytelling manner can help children open up about their history and connections.

► Resource: CASA Activity Book

- *Who do you love? Who loves you? Who has been good to you? Who makes your favorite food?*
- *Where do you go for holidays? Who is there with you?*
- *Tell me more about (your aunt, mom, sister, etc.)*
- *Who is important in your life? Who do you spend most of your time with?*
- *Who do you think of that you may not see or connect to regularly? Is there anyone else important in your life that I didn't ask you about?*
- *What groups or activities do you belong to?*

Engage in Mobility Mapping: This is a technique for learning about places of significance in a child's life and the people connected to them.

► Resource: Mobility Mapping Video

- *Where were you born? What was the first place you remember living? Can you draw that for me?*
- *Who lived there with you? Where did you go next?*
- *Who is the first person you remember? What did you like about them?*

Gather information from multiple sources.

- Interview parents and identified relatives. Speak with any person likely to have information about other potential connections. Parents may be hesitant to share information about relatives if they do not wish for their child to be placed with them. Ask about all relatives and take note of who they may feel is inappropriate and why.
- Consider non-biological individuals regarded as family, such as family friends, church members, neighbors, coaches, or mentors and any adult who has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the child.
- Mine the case file. Review all documents in the case file and database searches available through DFCS. Key sources include CLEAR results, Family Team Meeting notes, CCFA, and genograms.
- Search online through social media, Google, the putative father registry, and other online resources.
- Collaborate with DFCS. Share your search findings and advocate for relative caregiver assessments to be completed as early as possible for potential placements.
- Use your CASA report. Encourage the court's inquiry into identifying adult relatives and others who have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the child.

Notify DFCS immediately of any identified relative or fictive kin.

- Refrain from sharing identifying information until after DFCS has made contact or provided notice to the relative.

PLACEMENT

Where a child is placed can significantly shape their permanency outcomes. Kin placement is associated with better outcomes both during a child's time in foster care and beyond. Children placed with relatives are more likely to maintain consistent contact with their parents and achieve permanency through reunification or guardianship, experience fewer placement moves and be placed with their siblings, remain in their home communities and schools with stronger educational outcomes, and exhibit fewer behavioral problems.



PRACTICE POINTS

- Visit prospective relative placement homes. Share your observations and impressions with the court and all parties.
- Advocate for timely placement approvals. Once a relative is identified, push for assessments to move quickly so that placement is not unnecessarily delayed.
- Monitor sibling placements. If siblings are not placed together, document the reasons and advocate for sibling contact and visitation. DFCS is required to make weekly face-to-face sibling visits happen except when siblings are placed or reside in another state or when visitation is against the safety or well-being of any of the siblings due to unresolved, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse among them when therapy and a safety plan are not effective or appropriate as documented by a therapist and approved by DFCS.
- Use outcome research in your reports. Kin placement data can strengthen your court report and recommendations when advocating for a relative placement.

ENGAGING AND SUPPORTING KIN

CASA volunteers are uniquely positioned to engage and empower kin in ways that can shape a child's entire trajectory. By building trust with relatives over time, volunteers can help them understand their role, access resources, and stay meaningfully connected to the child.

Assess both willingness and capacity. A relative may genuinely want to help but may need training, financial assistance, or community resources to safely and successfully care for the child or remain connected. Volunteers should help identify barriers and advocate for appropriate supports rather than assume lack of capacity means lack of commitment.



PRACTICE POINTS

Ask whether the relative:

- Has been informed about the process to become a placement
- Has concerns or barriers regarding placement or maintaining connection
- Is aware of and able to access programs and services available to them, including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)¹, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP/food stamps), Childcare Assistance Program (CAPS), Medicaid, respite care, and consultation with a Kinship Navigator.

¹ TANF eligibility and Enhanced Relative Rate (ERR) eligibility are based on the degree of relationship between the child and caregiver. Qualifying relationships include parents, grandparents (up to great-great-great), siblings, aunts/uncles (up to great-great), nieces/nephews, first cousins, first cousins once removed, legal guardians, adoptive family, and their spouses. *DFCS Policy 22.8.*

- Has access to financial support through Enhanced Relative Rate or is willing to become a foster parent to obtain the per diem

Encourage the relative to:

- Connect to formal and informal support systems, such as Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and Kinship Navigators
- Visit the child regularly

Assist by:

- Supporting early identification of service needs for both relatives and the children, such as therapy, counseling, Babies Can't Wait, or Intensive Family Intervention (IFI)
- Helping relatives understand the purpose and scope of the home evaluation process

- Is willing to offer support outside of serving as a placement, such as transportation, visit supervision, or respite care

- Consider other ways to maintain contact even if they cannot serve as a placement, including providing transportation, supervising family time, and offering extended visits for weekends, school breaks, or holidays as permitted by court order

- Advocating for meetings that include CASA, relatives, and DFCS to ensure everyone has a complete understanding of the case, next steps needed, and the timeline to obtain any financial assistance

KEY PRACTICE NOTES

CONFIDENTIALITY

The volunteer's role is not to share information with relatives but to learn what information they have and advocate for the appropriate party to fill any gaps. Be careful not to breach confidentiality with non-parties.

ACCURACY

Verify information with DFCS before acting on it. When discussing potential financial supports with kin, be transparent but note that programs vary, availability can change, eligibility can be complicated, and benefits are not guaranteed.

URGENCY

Identify and engage relatives early in the case. Contact anyone identified as soon as possible, even if they are believed to be uninterested or unable to take placement. Document all contacts, including details of conversations, and note both strengths and barriers.

DOCUMENTATION

Record all family finding efforts and contacts with kin in your case notes and court reports. Include who was contacted, when, what information was shared or gathered, any strengths or barriers identified, and follow-up plans.

TIMELINE

Once identified and notified, kin have six months to demonstrate interest and willingness to provide a permanent home. After that window, the court may excuse DFCS from considering them as a placement resource.

FOLLOW UP

Circumstances change. Relatives who initially decline placement or connection may reconsider — check in regularly.

BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD

Use best interest factors to ground your analysis and support your recommendations throughout the case.