

Helping Caregivers Address a Parent's Absence

Navigating a child's relationship with their parents can be one of the most difficult aspects of being a kin caregiver. Parents may be absent for reasons that are hard to talk about and they may be unpredictable even when present. Kin caregivers' responses to a child's questions may be complicated by their own unresolved feelings of anger, resentment, shame, and/or guilt. You can provide support by validating caregivers' feelings and experiences and helping them explore how they want to respond to tough questions.

Make sure to emphasize the importance of avoiding blame and addressing questions only in small doses and only as the children ask them. Note that, by following the child's lead, sticking to simple facts, and staying away from a lot of details, the caregiver can answer the child and keep the lines of communication open for the future. See below for additional tips.

- ▶ Remind kin caregivers that there are **three keys** to responding when a child asks questions after being disappointed by a parent.
 1. **Validate** the child's feelings of disappointment while making sure to avoid expressing blame or fault. *I know how much you were looking forward to this, and I know it feels bad when your mom can't make the visit/attend your school event/etc.*
 2. **Explain** to the child that the circumstance that made it hard for their parent to take care of them also makes it hard to follow through on plans that they made. *Dad is having trouble taking care of himself right now and that also can make it hard for him to remember visits/events/etc. He is having a hard time, but he loves you. It is not your fault.*
 3. **Reaffirm** your love for the child. If appropriate, reaffirm the parent's love, too. *You're such a great kid and I love you [and they love you]. I'm sorry they're missing this time with you.*
- ▶ Advise kin caregivers to avoid saying negative things about a child's parent and to take opportunities to connect a parent's positive attributes with skills or characteristics they see in the child (for example, a love of reading, a favorite food, or persistence in sports). When adults tell a child that they're "nothing like" their parent, it can make the child feel disconnected from the very people they miss deeply and want to feel attached to. When children are told (in a negative way) that they are "just like" their parents, they may feel shamed.
- ▶ Encourage kin caregivers to deal with questions related to how long the child will be staying with them by reaffirming their commitment to caring for the child and by trying to establish predictable routines that make children feel safe, like regular mealtimes and bedtimes. *I know that the last few months with Mom and Dad have been very hard, but you are safe here. I am here for you while your parents take care of the things they need to do in order to be better parents. I love you and I will take care of you.*
- ▶ Older children and teens may wonder what will happen if their kin caregiver dies or becomes unable to care for them. If this question comes up, encourage kin caregivers to share their plans for the child.

- ▶ Help kin caregivers give the child a safe space to express their feelings about the situation. Connect families to local pediatric mental health services or therapeutic playgroups to explore and cope with their feelings. The [federal government](#) and the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) both offer additional information and resources that may be useful, including helplines and ways to find community mental health services.
- ▶ Consider recommending that caregivers read relevant books with the children they are raising. For example, *A Grandfamily for Sullivan*, written by psychotherapist Beth Winkler Tyson and illustrated by Adam Walker-Parker, tells the story of Sullivan the koala bear, who suddenly finds himself living with his grandmother and wants to know why. Although it is not specific to grandfamilies, another appropriate book might be *The Invisible String*, written by Patrice Karst and illustrated by Joanne Lew-Vriethoff, which seeks to help children navigate loss.
- ▶ If possible, see if the kin caregiver can enlist the parent's support in explaining the kin caregiver's role: *I know you are loved, safe, and will be well cared for by your aunt/ grandparents/sister/etc. while I'm away.*

Finally, remind grandfamilies that children may express themselves through their actions when they have difficulty expressing themselves through words. When living circumstances change (even for the better), young children might be cranky, fearful, or clingy. There may be changes in their eating and sleeping habits. Children of any age may have changes in mood, becoming aggressive or withdrawn. Tweens and teens may challenge a caregiver's authority, do poorly in school, or make questionable decisions. You can serve as a sounding board, helping grandfamilies distinguish between age-appropriate and concerning behavior and making referrals to individual or family counseling as needed.

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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