Creating a Community Where All Families Belong

Grandfamily caregivers tell us that one of the hardest things about caring for a grandchild, niece, nephew, or other kin child is the feeling of isolation this role often brings.

When institutions and government agencies that support families don't specifically invite grandfamily participation, it reinforces their sense of isolation. Here's how community organizations can create a space where all families know they belong.

- **Use language that includes, rather than excludes.** Ensure registration forms and program materials describe all types of family relationships. Considerations:
  - Most kinship families are not part of the child welfare system. Programs advertised as "for foster families" might be overlooked by most families who would benefit.
  - Not all caregivers are grandparents. Aunts, uncles, siblings, and other kin caregivers might assume a program described as "for grandfamilies" is not for them.
  - Many caregivers don't recognize themselves in names like "grandfamilies" or "kin caregivers." Sarah Smalls, a kinship family consultant for Formed Families Forward in Virginia and a subject matter expert for the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, describes her experience.
  - Children being raised in kinship/grandfamilies may be confused, triggered, or traumatized when teachers, coaches, and others only talk about "parents." Consider using more expansive language. Replacing "your parents" with "the adult responsible for you" could make a world of difference. For example, "Ask the adult responsible for you to sign your permission slip." As Gracie Cowan, who is raising her granddaughter in Texas, explains, "Include those other words than 'parents' because that's a very sensitive, touchy thing for kids."
- **Think carefully about planning projects or events that focus on specific family members or family relationships.** Father-daughter dances. Mother's and Father's Day observations. Celebrations like these may leave organizers and families scrambling for workarounds to ensure kids and their caregivers don't feel left out, unwelcome, and "less than." (Kinship families aren't the only ones who struggle with events and assignments that don't reflect their family structure. Being sensitive here will help many families.)
- **Encourage kin caregivers to make their voices heard.** Recruit grandfamilies for family councils or leadership committees. Include images of many types of families in marketing materials. Reach out directly to engage grandfamilies or kin caregivers in your community. Gail Engel, founder and executive director of Grand Family Coalition in Colorado, describes the importance of amplifying grandparent voices here.

- **Connect kin caregivers to respite care.** Kin caregivers are so busy that time away from caregiving often falls to the bottom of a crowded to-do list, as GRAND Voices Keith Lowhorne and Kris Magstadt explain.
    - Gail notes that support groups can provide respite when they include separate activities for children. These group meetings are often the only time kin caregivers get to connect with other adults. One caregiver of three boys between ages 7 and 10 describes her support group as "the only two hours a week that I'm not chasing after kids."
    - Some organizations offer a respite day in recognition of Grandparents Day in September.
    - In Colorado, Easter Seals hosts a weekend retreat for families, with separate programs for children and caregivers. The name and mission of the program has expanded from foster/adoption to include kinship.
- **Coach your team in "best practices" for serving grandfamilies.** Agencies and organizations that exist to serve a wide constituency with specific needs, like housing or food, might easily overlook the particular needs of the grandfamilies they serve. These agencies can better support kin caregivers if they are prepared to connect them with additional resources they might need. The Network offers a suite of free professional development materials, Grandfamilies 101, to help staff understand the legal, educational, and financial challenges kinship families face.

For more information, see our toolkit, Five Actions for Supporting Students and Caregivers in Kinship/Grandfamilies, as well as these other resources, both from institutions in Ohio: Guide to Creating Kinship-Friendly Schools and School Family Engagement with Grandfamilies in Mind.

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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