



## Kinship & Alternate Care Awareness Week 2023: Day 3

### Organizations

On Day 3, we hear the voices and experiences of kin to understand what approaches are helpful, as we look at best practices for child welfare engagement and kinship services.

Family & Children's Services of St. Thomas and Elgin County offered an interview with a kinship grandmother, who generously shared her story with her three-year-old granddaughter, to educate workers and others. Excerpts of this interview have been transcribed and anonymized with permission.

#### **Can you share a good news story in your role as a kin caregiver?**

There are many moments of great. For example, recently at bedtime we rock, and she asked me if I want to be her best friend. So, there are moments of sweetness like that. The trajectory we have [my granddaughter] on, providing safe space, loving home, stability, is being proven in how she is responding at daycare, for example. She is starting to print the first letter of her name and she just turned three the beginning of July. She is well adapted to me dropping her off. There is a bit of a window there where she needs to know it is a safe space and she can leave me. Nine times out of ten, we don't have any issues at drop off. You can see that pattern of I'm stable, I'm ok. We are pleased with her progress, and she has always exceeded her milestones. So that tells me, "job well done [gramma and papa]."

#### **How long have you had her in your care?**

Basically, her whole life. There were four months leading up to the first court order granting us temporary custody. That period of her first four months of life, she was in her parent's care. We contacted the agency after 2 weeks of her birth. We suspected drug use, and there is a level of mental health issues with both parents. My concern was [my granddaughter's] safety. Those four months, [she] bounced back and forth between them and us. That was a voluntary plan with the agency and the parents and us. Let the baby come to gramma and papa, give the parents a break, let them have some time to themselves, let them work on some stuff. Those

four months were really difficult. It was tough with a brand-new baby. So, the short answer she was basically with us her whole life.

**Can you talk a bit about your ability to work through the placement phases, from the time she was with you voluntarily until custody, and how that was for you changing your roles from grandma to caregiver?**

This is like peeling back an onion. There are a lot of layers to this one question, so I think it's best to talk about who I was prior to this role. I was a full-time worker. I was a wife. I had full grown kids. Grandbabies were exciting. I had already had one prior to [my granddaughter], and I was enjoying that weekend "gramma-ing." You know, cuddles and snuggles and kisses and hugs, and send them home to a safe home. I worked full time, so when this progressed with my daughter, and I knew there was potential with this child coming into our care, I had to address the full-time job issue, and that's a big one. Not a lot of people can just take off of full-time work, and I was fortunate. We have a family business, so it was easier for me to take time off or not come in. In the early days, it was like let's leave [her] with grandma for two days, that then turned into a week or two. So, I had to switch working in my office to setting up my work at home. There is a cost to that, and it was difficult to navigate, but again obviously I did it. Also, the piece of my identity. What do you mean I am a full-time mom? I'm 51 and my husband is 59. I'm driving a minivan again. Car seats, baby swings, diaper bags, formula, clothing, all of it. So that adjustment, we did it in pieces, steps. We were able to because of how it started in those first four months. I always had a pack of diapers and a can of formula, and some clothes stashed in the car and ready. And my job was flexible, thank heavens. I didn't become unemployed because of this – a lot of grandparents do. So that's how we emerged into this. We didn't get the 2am phone call where the baby has to come now to us, and we are not prepared. We walked into it with our eyes wide open, and luckily, we were financially prepared. We just stepped through this step by step. We were lucky. My husband was fully supported. That's how we navigated.

**What about your feelings around transitioning your role?**

It was an easy transition for me. Once I found out my daughter was pregnant and there was drug use, I knew the role I had to step into. It was that simple and that quick of a switch for me. I've heard lots that have said "not so easy," but not for me. For me it was natural. I knew I had to step up. I knew that I had to do it for the unborn grandchild, and once she was born, she needed protection, and she needed a safe

place to land. In my childhood there was some trauma, and that's what made me passionate about this. She needs security, she needs so much, all of her needs to be met. Right from day one. I did not want [my granddaughter] to bounce all over the place. I wanted her to stay with me, so I made the decision swiftly and easily. I had no problem leaving my old life and stepping in. Now three years later, I still feel strongly about having her, and I love her and want her. Don't get me wrong, but now three years later, the resentment and anger has surfaced. You know, three years into this, I am watching my friends retire and travel. I'm watching them spend lazy days around their pool, or friends asking me, "do you want to do shopping in Port Huron for the weekend?" Nope, I can't. Or "I'm having a get together, want to come?" Sure, with a 3-year-old? So, I wasn't aware of that. I was so caught up with what was happening at the moment of kinship and all these changes and the grandbaby coming to live with us. I didn't look down the road. I was unaware, I'm going to raise her. Well, you are in crisis mode. I thought, how do I minimize the damage? You are literally just looking at that moment. My husband and I were not able to look long-term. There is a huge commitment – financial, heavy work.

**Can you talk a bit about your relationship with [your daughter] and how that has transpired?**

Prior to [my daughter] being pregnant, I was a fix-it mom. I was the mom who fixed everything. I was the mom who had trauma responses. I was the mom who saw her in crisis because [of her mental health] and she dabbled in drugs, so I am going to fix that too. I thought we were close. After years of therapy, I see now that we both worked as well as we could have then. We were close though, yes. There was that fixing aspect, but I love her. Now I've got to say this without tears, I miss her, I'm grieving her. But I'm looking at her through a different lens now and realize she has some deep-rooted issues with addictions and mental health and that my daughter is in there somewhere. The ultimate decision to end contact with her was really difficult. We decided after an episode that happened a couple of months ago at our house not to let her into our house anymore. Two reasons for that, [my granddaughter] needs a safe place to come home to. She needs to be able to express her emotions and sometimes she is feral when she has kept it together all day at daycare. The second reason is my own mental health and wellness. I can't be [my granddaughter's] sturdy leader, and I can't be strong if I am constantly holding [my daughter] and trying to support her. She is almost 30. It's time to let her be an adult and love her from over here and let her choose her path. We had a great

relationship, and even getting into kinship there were hot moments, but it cycled around. Things would settle and she would come around. I remember having conversations with her when [my granddaughter] was an infant where she would come to me and say, "I don't even know her schedule mom. I don't know what formula she is drinking in her bottles, I don't know anything, I am glad you are here to teach me." And I thought, finally, a breakthrough, she wants this baby. And that's all I wanted was for her to parent. I wanted to be [my daughter's] sturdy leader and show her how to mother. I wanted to fill in the holes she did not know, and I could share my experiences with her. We had cycles of that, but then the addiction showed up and took over, and the mental health, and the bad decisions, and it cycled over and over. It was like insanity. I kept hoping for a different outcome, but over time with the support of the agency and my therapist, I was able to look at this from a different lens and it was hard. The grief piece will always be there. This isn't how I was to be grandma. So accepting that now three years into it, I can say now that I have accepted it. Our relationship has changed. There is now a second child involved. [Our daughter] birthed a child a couple of months ago. I'm not involved in this child's life. When my husband and I found out she was pregnant, we had many difficult, emotional conversations. We chose not to enter into kinship. That whole pregnancy caused a lot of emotions, resentment, anger: how dare you have another baby, you can't take care of the one you've got. That whole internal dialogue. Again, going back to [my granddaughter], we are so focused on [her] and her wellbeing and her ability to be independent and launch at 18, like you want for your children, I couldn't do the heavy lifting everyday with another newborn. That was a big turning point, she did not disclose to us that she was pregnant even though she was coming to the house to see [my granddaughter] at the time. She hid it. I could tell by looking at her. That was the tipping point, that she didn't feel she could come to me with that. Quite frankly, I don't know that I wanted her to come to me. Here we go again, fixing another problem. I needed to check in with my therapist. There was a lot of grief and loss to deal with. I miss her, I miss her silliness, I miss our laughter. That's a tough one, that's a hard question. This is part of kinship though: the 582 emotions that you did not know you needed to feel. On the surface, we think, "oh, we are just looking after our daughter's child, just watching our granddaughter." And it's not. I feel at times I had to choose between my daughter and my granddaughter. I feel like I am backed into a corner; I'm being asked to look after this little person who is so vulnerable, who can't look after themselves, she can't meet any of her own needs. And then I



look at my adult daughter and still see my little three-year-old. It's a whole bag of mixed crap.

**I'm impressed with your openness about your therapist and your feelings and emotions, recognizing it's a cycle of grief.**

I couldn't recognize that three years ago. The first year, I just cried every single day, every day, because I knew what was in store for this child. My heart broke. The grief piece is horrible. We are lucky. We know where [my daughter] is, she's not dead. We have so much to be thankful for. But pain is pain and the grandparents or whoever is going through it are all tied to the same stick. We all have the need to be heard and validated. We know how each other's hearts are ripped out. No one wants this. That's another piece of the grief. I don't get to visit my adult kids with their children living their happy lives. I have three grandchildren. The oldest one I do not get to see because of a breakdown in a relationship. The second one lives with me, and I have not met the third one. So, am I pissed? Yep. I don't get to grandma the way I want to. But that's ok, my story could be worse. We haven't had to cross any scary bridges yet. I'm ok.

**Can you talk about navigating through this process with CAS? How many kinship workers did you have?**

I welcome answering this question. I had two workers over the three years. In the beginning there were a bunch of names I can't remember. Looking back, I think I was so naive. I thought, I'm just going to call CAS and they are going to fix this. [My daughter] will go to rehab, and she is going to get her baby back, and we are going to live happily ever after. I called CAS and I didn't think much more of it. I kept calling in with concerns. Finally, there was a child protection caseworker assigned to [my daughter] and the baby. I called her our worker. I loved her. She was part of our family. She was the pillar in this chaotic vortex of what was happening. [My daughter] liked her, I liked her, and we could share and talk to her. Early on [she brought in a second worker, a kinship worker]. I love [her] too. I don't think I could have made it through without her. Her years of experience at the agency helped us. She could see what was going to happen and what was coming next and when I couldn't see anything. For example, access was changing, and she walked us through it. She told us it was going to be uncomfortable, we have to let this happen, we have to give this a try. She was the voice of reason in my chaotic head. She was the one who would say, "I've got you, you need to let it go, we can do this. Even though we do not know

what is going to happen, we need to try.” Then I would call [our worker], and I would talk to her, and she would listen. They were our workers, and they were always available emotionally. They picked me up when I said I don’t know if I can do this. They said you can do this and you will get through to tomorrow. The agency as a whole with our situation has been very supportive. There is a level of kindness. I have met many workers since. I was invited to participate in the kin support group. I loved it. The way the agency impacted our story was a positive one. I felt I was supported. I was given the answers I needed around money, receiving the temporary care allowance, and support with the child tax credit, and the random Christmas gifts and cheques to help with winter clothing. The agency made sure we were recognized and supported. I cannot say all kin families have positive relationships with the agency, I don’t know why. I think we got along with the agency because I have a voice and I am able to speak my truth to the agency and to the workers. I was able to ask for my needs to be met. If kin families can recognize what they need then I hope the agency can assist. I know that more work needs to be done in the kin department.

**What would [your daughter] say about her work with the agency, recognizing her situation is a bit different? While maybe not agreeing with the agency decisions, did she feel respected?**

With baby number two, she is not happy with the agency being involved and does not feel they need to be in her life. I don’t think she is being difficult or angry, just a “why are they involved in my life?” When we started three years ago, [my daughter] worked well with the agency, and [our worker] responded well to her. Even if she did not agree, she felt encouraged and supported. For a while, [my daughter] worked well. Now, there is a level of resistance, I am the monster for calling the agency, and now they are taking my second child. I would hope someday she can look at that differently.

**Anything we could have done differently in kinship service?**

Speed the process up. We were two and a half years from start to finish. I understand we were navigating this through a pandemic and the courts were closed but the court piece was so frustrating and so emotional. We would get a court date and then it would be closed or moved around. Court kept getting pushed. I remember the judge saying to my daughter, this is it, we have to move this along, and there are no free passes. Then it dragged on for another 8 months or so. That piece might not be able to be changed with CAS but that would help to speed up. It

is difficult going through this because we don't know anything. We are at your mercy. So, when you say we are going to court and then it does not happen, it's frustrating. [The workers] always kept me updated and informed. They returned my calls promptly, and I always felt like I was heard. That emotional cycle is a lot. With the courts, and then my daughter. If we could shorten the timeline up. Sometimes it did not feel like the protection of the child, it felt like protection of the mother.

Children need a home. For two and a half years, [my granddaughter] did not have a permanent address. From day to day, children think where is my home? It brings a level of trauma not being stable.

The agency can bring kin families more training and understanding of a trauma lens. [My granddaughter] is a little girl with big, big emotions. Some of it is trauma. When we first got her every night, sleep was an issue. She did not sleep well, she did not settle, it was hard to make her feel safe. I think back to the nights of neglect with her mother and then to transition to my home it would have been nice to have someone inform me of trauma and what that looks like in a child [her] age. I wasn't sure what was normal. [She] starts school this year, and I want the school to be informed about the trauma she experienced so they can work with her through a trauma lens. We don't know what happened when she was with her parents as a baby.

I'm triggered by my three-year-old when she has a full blown melt down over her pony tail. For grandparents and other kin, we don't realize the impact of trauma. There is a need to educate kin families.

We need to advocate for training and more support to kin families.

Foster parents do not have the family attachment that kin has. Here is your baby and all the chaos that goes with it. I think we need more support, explaining how we are going to feel, normalizing feelings of grief. Even just to be heard and listened to. Get kin parents together, so we can share stories. Bring us out of the dark. We are doing big, big jobs.

The work that kin is asked to do is huge with very little.

We are expected to attend multiple meetings with the agency and then doctor appointments and all that without compensation. We are missing time at work because our child is sick. There is a financial aspect of support. Money is a reality for people, and it is a shame that some cannot be kin because they cannot afford to look after the child.

Another request is to help kin families navigate systems.

Who does CAS report to and how can CAS get more money for kin families? Support the grandparents who are looking after children in their later years with limited supports. I would like to see kin homes receive more supports.

Explain to families that are open to kinship the process, make them aware of the roller coaster ride that is coming. Help them understand what is coming. Help them know what to expect.

