

Kinnections

A newsletter of the Kinship Care Resource Center

Michelle's Story

The Kinship Care Resource Center had the privilege of gaining some insight from Michelle Martin and her husband, Sebastian, who have been raising their granddaughter for 7 years. Michelle works at Adoptive Family Support Network (AFSN), a post adoption service agency that has been servicing the adoption community for 20 years. She's an Adoptive Parent Consultant which allows her to reach out and support other families like hers. Michelle and Sebastian note that there were several difficult challenges they have faced as kinship caregivers. They talked about how difficult the transition was from preparing for an empty nest to suddenly trying to keep up with raising a young child. They were not sure if it would be ongoing or how to prepare for so many undetermined factors. Their granddaughter also had

medical challenges, it also provides opportunity for rewards. Michelle and Sebastian enjoy watching their granddaughter grow up, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh, and watching her become healthy again. They both remembered how they could tell in her eyes after being in foster care for 5 months that she was not happy. Seeing her life and joy return and knowing they played a part in being her parents and helping her get better has been an experience that made the hardships well worth it.

Kinship caregiving is often misunderstood. Michelle says she wishes people would be more understanding of people in kinship situations. She noted that while kinship care is often more healing for children, it should not discredit the significant trauma these children and families have experienced. Kinship kids face the same problems as foster care and non-kinship adoptive families do, but that is often forgotten. Kinship caregivers have financial and emotional struggles, including changing family dynamics and family tension that people often do not consider. The weight of a child removal situation is as heavy on kinship families as it is on non-kinship families. Some of the unique needs kinship families have that Michelle noted are financial needs, child care needs, needs related to cir-

cumstantial issues, and knowing how to balance biological parent involvement. Often times, kinship caregivers are grandparents, which can present financial, employment, and health concerns. Michelle said that she and Sebastian were young when they started caring for their granddaughter, but still had to find day-care assistance since they were both working. But this is not always the case. Some caregivers are single or retired which can be a difficult life stage to raise a child in. There may also be complex legal issues. Michelle mentioned how it difficult it is when the biological parents want to come in and out of their child's life, and kinship caregivers have to decide when they need to cut ties, even with their own children. As mentioned, Michelle works at AFSN (www.afsn.org). Through her work, she has been able to reach out to more kinship families and provide support based on what she herself has experienced.

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medical challenges that made it very tough, and their relationship with their son created significant emotional trials. They had to choose to break ties with him because of lifestyle choices he made and that break was painful. Although caring for their granddaughter full time presents chal-

What is an IEP and who needs one?

An Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a document that is created by parents, teachers, other paraprofessionals, and the child (if appropriate) when the child is deemed to have specialized needs at school. The IEP will identify education-related goals for the child as well as provide a step-by-step action plan for the child and the pro-

fessionals working with them in order to meet the goals. Each IEP is individually created in order to address the specific needs of the child; focusing on particular areas that will need to be modified in a teacher's curriculum, offering alternative teaching styles, or implementing any accommodations of specialized



services a child may require in order to receive the most successful education.

What does an IEP entail?

Once a child is identified as having special education needs, an IEP will be scheduled. The first IEP meeting will be used to focus on assessing the child's needs as it relates to their education and figuring out a way to meet those needs. As the child continues, IEP meetings will be held once a year and focus on assessing the progress the child

Reevaluations are considered every three years and a meeting is held to discuss whether or not a reevaluation is necessary. Sometimes the school may suggest that the evaluation be skipped as they feel the child is doing well, but as the caregiver, you can request it be completed.

- ✦ annual goals written very specifically for the student
- ✦ an overview of the program and services that the student will receive
- ✦ an overview of the methods to determine progress and to monitor progress
- ✦ assessment data
- ✦ name, age, exceptionality or medical conditions
- ✦ transitional plans (for older students)



made as well as planning for the upcoming year.

IEPs will usually contain:

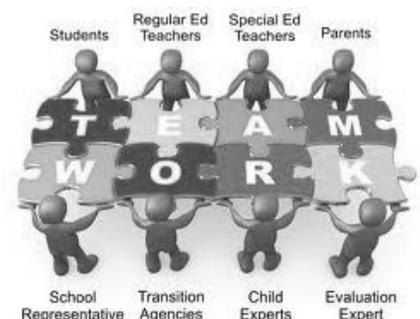
- ✦ an overview of the Student's strengths and areas of need
- ✦ the current level of the student's functioning or achievement

Who is involved in the IEP process?

Individuals in which taken an active role in the child's education typically participate in the IEP process. This can include a range of individuals, depending on the child's needs; usually including

your child's teacher(s), a social worker, paraprofessional, therapists, and/or a learning specialist. As the child's caregiver and most likely the individual who knows the child the

best, you will also be involved in the IEP process.



Special Supplement

Education and Kinship Care

Note: Pull out and share with your child's school

Education is an important determining factor for a child's future, and children from kinship families can face a multitude of unique challenges in schools and learning. Because of life experiences, children from kinship care families generally get lower scores on achievement tests and exhibit cognitive, language, and behavioral challenges (Chamberlain, Price, Reid, 2008).

Kids from kinship families face unique challenges as students. Berrick and Barth (1991) found that 23% of children in kinship care have repeated a grade, and 26% were in special education. Another study found that 41% of children living with relatives were behind at least one grade level (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2003). It is important to consider the situations and emotions these children are facing. Many of these children do not have a consistent positive male role model in their family, since 93% of kinship caregivers are female (Chamberlain, Price, Reid, 2008). These children are also internalizing or externalizing a great deal of emotional pain and uncertainty which can make thriving in a school setting very challenging.

Another consideration for kinship families in education is the unique challenges faced by the caregivers. They are likely to be facing economic struggles (kinship families have higher rates of poverty than the general population), role confusion (e.g. are they "grandma" or "mom"), physical and health challenges, and a lack of understanding of the current educational system (Cooper, 2012) and what questions they need to ask, which can make interactions between teachers and caregivers strained and difficult (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2003).

Both home and classroom environments play a significant role in fostering successful learning and behavior for a child. Teachers can create a more successful environment for kinship students by being conscientious about what messages that may be inadvertently sent to children about what constitutes a family. If a child is compared to other students and feels he or she does not measure up, it can be harmful to their belief in their success.

Home environments can also greatly influence a child's success in the classroom, particularly in the way of behavior. A study by Chamberlain, Price, and Reid (2008) showed that homes that promoted environments of encouragement, positive reinforcement, mentoring, healthy boundaries and limits, and discipline void of violence (physical or verbal), restored problem behavior to normal levels in 75% percent of cases.

Though it can be challenging, a kinship caregiver's greatest asset in helping his or her child in a school setting is active communication. Communication between the school, child, and caregiver can create a lifeline in understanding challenges and formulating effective solutions. A student's chance for success can be significantly increased if teachers, school administration, and caregivers are all operating from the same foundation.

Both teachers and caregivers have a lot to offer each other in terms of information. Teachers can help caregivers understand what sort of learning challenges and behavioral issues a student has, as well as what some of their children's diagnoses may mean (Cooper, 2012). A lot of caregivers are not well educated about concepts like ADHD, IEP's, Admissions Review and Dismissal meetings, medication, and medication alternatives (Lawrence-Webb et al., 2003). Teachers can help explain what to expect and some of the best ways to help a child in the home. A teacher can also help a caregiver better understand the educational system in general. In return, caregivers often know their child better than anyone else and can fill a teacher in on the child's situation, personality, tendencies, and background (Cooper, 2012). This exchange of information can help both caregivers and teachers form a more holistic understanding of a student which can help create a plan that is catered specifically to a child's needs.

Ways That Schools Can Help Kinship Children Succeed

For many kinship caregivers it has been a long time since their own children have been in school. Schools can facilitate the success of kinship children by implementing the following:

- **Provide special orientation opportunities for kinship caregivers** to become familiar with how the school operates and what supports are available to them through both the school and the school district. Explaining discipline policies and learning philosophies can be especially helpful for someone who has not had a child in school for awhile.
- **Become educated on the challenges faced by kinship families and their children.** Sometimes families are involved with child welfare and have a caseworker but most of the time they are on their own and are dealing with issues of poverty, family conflict, and their own physical and medical challenges. Children may have experienced trauma prior to coming to live with a kinship caregiver. Being aware of issues facing kinship families will help prepare you to assist children to become good learners.
- **Facilitate prompt enrollment of children who are living with kin.** Access to a structured school environment is one of the most normalizing experiences for a child dealing with grief, loss and trauma. It is also a means for children to access supportive services and have access to regular meals. Recognize that kinship families may not have easy access to birth certificates to prove age and that it is not required for a caregiver to have guardianship to enroll a child. Also, for children with child welfare involvement, there may be eligibility under McKinney-Vento for additional supportive services.
- **Maintain high-levels of communication between teachers and caregivers** and encourage care-givers to ask questions. Use multiple communication streams (e.g. written notes, phone calls, newsletters, e-mail, social media). Many care-givers are older and possibly low-income and may not have easy access or familiarity with current technology.
- **Ensure that curriculum tied to discussing family are inclusive of all families** (e.g. family trees may need to be family “hedgies”). Help children normalize their experience. Children in kinship families may think that they are the only one in a non-traditional family experience. Helping all children to understand that there are all kinds of families will facilitate their ability to make friends.
- **Provide kinship families with resources on understanding IEP’s and other special education services available through the school district.** Many kinship caregivers did not have an experience with special education or have limited knowledge on the learning disabilities the children in their care may be struggling. The expertise of the school and teachers can go a long way to helping caregivers understand how they can facilitate the child’s learning.
- **Consider hosting or starting a support group for kinship families at the school.** Schools are natural gathering places in a community and are a perfect location for these groups because they can provide a playground or gym where children can play while caregivers talk. Under the supervision of an appropriate adult, high-schools can help engage with the children during the meeting . Support groups provide caregivers with much-needed access to a support system and information.

For more information on how your school can support kinship caregivers please contact the Michigan State University Kinship Care Resource Center at 1-800-535-1218 or at kinship@msu.edu.

What should I expect from the IEP process?

Once a child is identified as potentially benefiting from specialized services, actions will be taken in order to assess the child's needs. Conferences with the caregivers and/or the student, observing the student, and looking at the child's performance are a few ways that will help to get a better idea of what needs the child may have. At this point in the process, some children are provided with additional resources that are implemented and do not require further assistance. Others will be tested to determine whether they have a learning disability that affects their functioning in school.

The next step after a child is determined to have a learning disability that affects their functioning in

school is to hold an IEP. In this meeting, the team (all of the individuals involved in the IEP) will come up with goals for the child to be reached throughout the school year—both short and long term goals. The team will also come up with services and support that will be put into place in order for the child to meet the specified goals.

An IEP meeting should take place annually in order to review and update the goals identified for the child and can also be updated and changed as needed. If you feel your child's IEP needs to be changed or updated you can request a meeting in order to discuss your concerns and possibly update or change the IEP.



I think my child would benefit from specialized services. What do I do next?

“you can begin the process by discussing your concerns with your child’s teacher or guidance counselor”

If you think your child has a learning disability and would benefit from an IEP and specialized services, you can begin the process by discussing your concerns with your child's teacher or guidance counselor. These individuals can explain the typical IEP

process and can help you throughout the experience. A school professional can begin the process by requesting that a child be evaluated for a learning disability. As the caregiver, you also have the ability to request that your child be

evaluated and begin the process. Your request should be in writing to the student's teacher and/or the administrative personnel (e.g. principal).

I want to learn more-Where can I find resources?

The U.S. Department of Education's website provides a lot of good information related to IEPs: <http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html>

Questions and Answers related to IEPs: <http://idea.ed.gov/explore/view/p/%2Croot%2Cdynamic%2CQaCorner%2C3%2C>

IEP Meeting Checklist: <http://www.brightfutures.org/mentalhealth/pdf/families/mc/iep.pdf>

What is IDEA?: <http://www.understandingspecialeducation.com/special-education-law.html>

Understanding an IEP: <http://www.okautism.org/documents/>

[UnderstandingTheIEPPresentation.pdf](#)

Special Education Advocacy Manual: <http://mpas.org/resources/special-education-manual>



Michelle's Story Cont'd...

She feels her ability to help others makes what she has gone through worth it. In her experience, she received various forms of support and is grateful for the opportunity to support others and currently facilitates a support group for kinship caregivers through Cherry Street Health Services in Grand Rapids. Michelle stated that one of the most important things that kinship caregivers should understand is that the way the law is currently written makes deciding to take care of a grandchild could take a large toll on their finances based on whether they choose to foster to adopt or

take guardianship. Michelle and Sebastian believe their involvement in a support group has been helpful. Talking to people who understood the dynamic of kinship situations brought them a much-needed sense of relief. She said other friends and family members were supportive but just did not understand it the way the members of the support group did. Being able to share their emotions; grief and uncertainty, even shame, with others who understood, helped them to feel less alone. When families are in the midst of their lives being turned upside down, and they are facing criticism from the sys-

tem, their neighbors, even friends and family; having people who can share and validate their feelings gives families the strength they need to succeed. Sebastian also talked about how helpful the education aspect of a support group is. They were able to talk to people who had gone through it before and knew where to go to get necessary resources. Navigating systems would have been more difficult for Michelle and Sebastian outside of the support group and they both strongly recommend that any kinship caregiver join one (check out www.kinship.msu.edu or call the Center to find a group near you).

What is the McKinney-Vento Act?

The McKinney-Vento Act is a federal law that provides protection to homeless children. The Act defines homeless children as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" and provides examples of the children that would be protected by the Act as:

(a) Children sharing housing due to economic hardship or loss of housing;

(b) Children living in "motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camp grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations"

(c) Children living in "emergency or transitional shelters"

(d) Children "awaiting foster care placement"

(e) Children whose primary nighttime residence is not ordi-

narily used as a regular sleeping accommodation (e.g. park benches, etc.)

(f) Children living in "cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations..."

What protections does the Act offer to homeless children?

If your child fits the specifications described above, they may be eligible to benefit from the provisions of the McKinney-Vento Act. The Act provides protection to homeless children in a number of ways. One of the areas in which this Act focuses on is in that of education. It ensures that children who are determined to be homeless receive the opportunity (and access to services and resources) in order to meet the same academic standards that all

students are expected to achieve. The Act requires schools to register students even if they do not have the required paperwork (immunization records, proof of residence, etc.) Additionally, it requires that children who are determined to be homeless are provided with transportation to and from school so that they are able to attend their school of origin (the last school they attended before becoming "homeless"). The McKinney-Vento Act ensures a

number of rights and protections to homeless children; use the resources listed on the next page to learn more about the Act.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Program



Where can I learn more about the McKinney-Vento Act?

Frequently Asked Questions: http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/M-V_FAQ_-_MI_REV_Jan_2010_312278_7.pdf

At A Glance: <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/reauthorization.pdf>

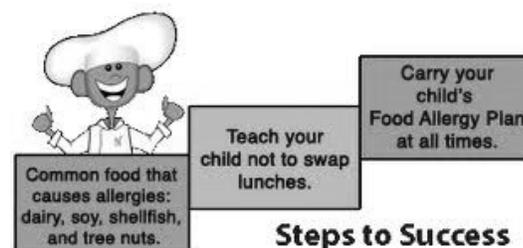
Q&A: <http://www.nlchp.org/content/pubs/100%20Most%20Frequently%20Asked.pdf>

School for children with allergies

With so many Americans having food allergies as well as other forms of allergies, it's likely that you may be sending a child to school with special concerns related to an allergy. Regardless of the severity or likelihood of your child's allergies, sending them to school may be a stressful and worried time for you as a caregiver. There are a few things that you can do to help make sure

your child is safe at school and to ease your mind. PBS.org encourages caregivers to remain in contact with their child's school in order to keep their child's allergy-needs updated. They offer seven great tips for caregivers to consider and implement when they have a student with allergies. To read more about the tips, visit:

<http://www.pbs.org/parents/education/going-to-school/starting-school/allergies/>



your child

Back to school separation anxiety

“A lot of children (and caregivers) experience separation anxiety when starting a new school year”

Starting a new school year can be a difficult time for both caregivers and children. A lot of children (and caregivers) experience separation anxiety when starting a new school year. Finding ways to calm the anxiety for both the child and the caregiver can help the year go smoothly. Partners and Parents discuss in their article the topic of back to school separation anxiety and give some tips on how to make the transition into a new school year as easy as possible. Check out their tips by visiting:

parents-suffer-separation-anxiety-too-a286350

<http://suite101.com/article/back-to-school->



First day of school checklist

Preparing for your child's first day of a new school year can be a stressful time for caregivers. Making sure all of the paperwork is filled out, sorting out transportation, making sure your child has all of the supplies they will need, and alleviating the child's stress and anxiety are just a few of

the things that caregivers have to think about before a new school year. The American Academy of Pediatrics has released a back to school checklist. In the checklist, they provide a list of things for caregivers to think about and to make sure they prepare for their student's first day of a new school

year. To find the checklist, visit: <http://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/school/pages/Checklist-for-the-First-Day-of-School.aspx>



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We're on the web!

Kinship.msu.edu

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newsletter with a
kinship caregiver
you know!!!**

The Kinship Care Resource Center is a non-profit statewide organization through the School of Social Work at Michigan State University. The mission of the Kinship Care Resource Center is to support Michigan's kinship families by utilizing research to provide education and outreach to communities and agencies supporting kinship families and offer information, referral and case advocacy services to relatives raising relative children.

If you would like additional information about the MSU Kinship Care Resource Center, call (800) 535-1218 or e-mail us at kinship@msu.edu

You can also find us on Facebook—Michigan Kinship Care Resource Center at MSU and Twitter @KinshipCareMI!