

No Matter What Caregiving: *Relatives Caring for Children*

Aida hadn't talked to her sister in weeks when she received the call. "Your niece and nephew were found alone in the apartment again. Would you be willing to take the kids temporarily?"

A version of this scenario plays out for millions of American families each year, with the opioid crisis contributing to an ever-increasing number of children entering foster care. Child welfare practice prioritizes placing children with relatives wherever possible, resulting in over 2.5 million children in the U.S. being raised by a relative without a birth parent in the home.

While relative placements maintain crucial family/cultural connections and produce the best possible outcomes for children needing out of home care, relative caregiving can have a dramatic impact on the daily life of caregivers. For this issue of *Fostering Across Wisconsin*, we talked to some caregivers about how becoming and being a relative caregiver has impacted their lives.

Rethinking My "Golden Years"

"I love seeing people's expressions when my four-year-old granddaughter calls me 'Mom' and not 'Grandma,'" one caregiver told us. "She's been

with me since she was two days old and I'm the only mom she knows. I just tell people, 'What can I say? I was a late bloomer!'" Although JoAnn makes light of it, she admits that caring for her granddaughter has meant rethinking her "golden years." She says that while her friends are enjoying the freedom of retirement, she's "parenting for the second time around, with more wisdom but much less energy."



Grieving and Loving at the Same Time

JoAnn was just one of many caregivers who are nearing retirement and caring for very young children. One of the presenters at this fall's Families Like Mine relative caregiver conference shared the story of how her daughter died during childbirth, due to complications of heroin addiction. Jean found

herself starting over as mom to an infant and toddler while mourning the loss of her own child. "I was dealing with the worst thing a parent could ever experience, having to bury my child. But there was no time to grieve. The children needed me." Although there have been major changes to nearly every aspect of her life, including relocating and going back to work, she says she'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. "I often see my daughter in my

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grandchildren's eyes or in things they say or do. I'm going to be there for them, no matter what."

Leaving Behind—or Leaving Out—Those I Love

Another couple shared that they have cared for several relative children while the parents are struggling with addiction. "We get it because we've been there. We can't ever take back what our kids went through, but we can help prevent other kids from having to go through it." They agreed that one of the hardest parts of being relative caregivers is not allowing parents access to the children when it isn't safe to do so. "It breaks my heart to see the kids cry because they miss their mom so much. But their safety comes first. We will fully support her in getting clean. But until then, it's our job to keep them safe." When asked if it has been difficult taking on extra responsibility and expenses, they look at each other and smile. "Knowing we're making a difference makes it all worthwhile. When someone says they're striving to be like us... that's a long way from where we were. We're blessed to be doing what we're doing, and we know it!"

Needing to Broaden My Circles of Support

One of the most notable takeaways from both the Families Like Mine conference and from the stories caregivers shared was that parents often find comfort and inspiration in knowing they aren't alone. One woman commented that despite all the resources and workshops, what was most powerful for her was meeting and talking with other caregivers who were, "in the same boat." She confessed there have been times when she seriously doubted she was up to the task and felt like "the boat was sinking." The group nodded as another woman remarked, "That's pretty much parenting for everyone, isn't it?"

If you're in need of support, please contact the Coalition at 414-475-1246 or 800-947-8074.



We are always here for additional information, resources, and support. You can contact us toll-free at **800-947-8074** or via email at [**info@wifostercareandadoption.org**](mailto:info@wifostercareandadoption.org).

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From Relative to Primary Parent: Navigating the Changes and Helping Children Heal

The bonds between a parent and child are very different from the bonds between a child and other family members. Grandpa and Grandma's house may be a sanctuary for sleepovers, sharing special secrets, extra bedtime stories, fresh baked cookies, and building magical childhood memories. Visiting with the "fun aunt" or "fun uncle" may be a carefree time when the rules can be bent or stretched a little. But what happens with Grandma's role changes to the primary

caregiver? Or when an aunt or uncle or older sibling is now the primary parent? In many cases, not only are family members shifting their role, they are also faced with helping the child now in their care heal from trauma. How do you navigate all of these changes?



For answers, we spoke with Jennifer Hastings Meinholdt, Manager of the Fostering Healing and Family Connections programs at Milwaukee-based [Kids Matter Inc.](#) Kids Matter has been providing programs, community support, and advocacy for neglected and abused children for nearly two decades. In particular, the non-profit has gained a reputation as an invaluable go-to resource for extended family caregivers of children. Jennifer stresses that self-care is crucial for relative caregivers and shared some great tips on navigating the challenges of the new family dynamic.

- Take care of yourself. Make time for relationships and social outlets, no matter how difficult that might be. You can't be present for the child(ren) in your care if you're isolated and stressed out.

- Know you're not alone. Find safe outlets such as a support group for expressing how you're feeling.
- Set clear boundaries. Your first and foremost responsibility is for the safety and well-being of the children in your care.
- Avoid using degrading language when speaking about parents. Children will see themselves reflected in those comments.

Jennifer also notes that parenting a child who has experienced trauma is going to be different than what you may be used to. It requires that you utilize different parenting methods and tools to address the trauma, grief, and loss the children in your care are experiencing.

Below she shares some insights to consider for aiding children in healing during this difficult time.

- Reassure children that they are not the cause of their current situation.
- Answer questions about the parents or the situation in an honest and age-appropriate way.
- Children who come from chaotic homes may initially struggle with routine and predictability. Do it anyway.
- Understand that children grieve differently, and that grief will be expressed through their behaviors. Responding calmly will help children feel safe and aid in their healing.
- Seek out opportunities to educate yourself on trauma-informed care.
- Be prepared for children

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to revisit their traumatic experiences at different developmental stages. Healing will be an ongoing process.

- Be open to seeking out professional help for both yourself and the children in your care.
- Help children to understand their parents are good people and love them, even if they are currently unable to care for them.

Jennifer acknowledges that transitioning from relative to a primary caregiver may not be easy, but support and resources are available. For more information please contact: Kids Matter Inc., (414) 344-1220, or the Coalition for Children, Youth, and Families, (414) 475-1246 or (800) 947-8074.

Support Resources from the Coalition

The Coalition believes that every child needs a champion—someone who loves them and believes in them no matter what. And we believe that every champion needs support. As caregivers for relative children, you are most certainly champions and the Coalition has resources and staff available to support you along your journey. Here's a look at some of our key resources that you may find helpful:

- **Team of Resource Specialists:** Sometimes you just need to talk to someone who understands. If you need a listening ear, help locating services or supports, or additional information, please reach out to our team of Resource Specialists. You can call us at 414-475-1246 or 800-947-8074 or email info@coalitionforcyf.org.
- **Foster Care and Adoption Resource Center Website:** You have a heart for children. This website has what you need to make fostering, adoption, or kinship care a success! Here's a quick overview of what you'll find at wifostercareandadoption.org:
 - Family support group list
 - Resources for relative caregivers
 - Informative resources for youth in out-of-home care
 - Reliable links to foster care-related websites
 - Statewide calendar of events for training and connection

- **Champion Classrooms:** The newest tool in our training toolbox, *Champion Classrooms* is an online portal to the training opportunities and events offered by the Coalition. In addition to live webinars, you will find recorded webinars, course offerings, and resources. Check it out at <https://www.championclassrooms.org>.
- **Coalition Connection:** Want quick, easy access to the resources you need to be a champion? Our weekly email newsletter, *Coalition Connection*, contains all the latest information on programs, events, resources, tips, and more from the Coalition. [Click here to sign up](#), or simply text CCYF to 22828.
- **Free Lending Library:** Our free lending library is a collection of books, tapes, and DVDs, as well as instantly downloadable newsletters and tip sheets, about a wide variety of topics related to foster care and adoption. Wisconsin residents can check out up to four (4) items at a time for a term of three (3) weeks. Your materials are shipped directly to you and we also include a postage-paid envelope to mail them back at no cost to you. Access the free lending library online by visiting <https://wifostercareandadoption.org/library-assets/>.

No matter where you are on your journey, please know that you are not alone. We are here to be your journey partner—no matter what.



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