

Kinship care providers need, deserve our support



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

It can be a frightening thought for parents: “If I can’t take care of my child, who will?”

For many, the first names that come to mind are those of relatives, such as aunts, uncles or grandparents. In reality, these types of living situations may be far more common than we realize, forming a critical cushion for children who are removed from their homes.

Many of us are familiar with the foster care network of adults who make room in their homes to bring stability and love into the lives of children whose parents may be unable or unwilling to care for them. When these caregivers are extended family or a non-relative adult who has a long-standing bond with the child, we use the term “kinship care,” and it is a structure that can bring welcome familiarity into the lives of children going through a massive change in life. Kinship

Care Month in September gives us a moment to offer thanks and support to these heroes.

Kinship care providers do everything they can to give these children a place to feel safe and secure. Moving away from a birth parent can generate feelings of loss and guilt, so placement with a family member brings hope and a sense of belonging to reduce the upheaval in the child’s life.

Kinship care providers quietly form a critical component in the national system of caring for children whose parents no longer can. Nationwide, 2.7 million children are living in kinship care situations, accounting for over a quarter of all children in the foster care system. Kinship care arrangements reduce otherwise traumatic experiences for children because family members are more likely to know and understand the child’s circumstances and needs. Keeping children within their families of origin has a positive impact on their long-term mental and physical well-being.

Kinship situations often come together with only a moment’s notice. When a parent becomes unable to care for the

child or is separated by the justice system, one of the first questions is whether there is a family member with whom the child can stay. Because these situations tend to develop quickly, kinship providers often have no time to prepare, emotionally or financially.

Being raised by a grandparent may bring comfort, but it is usually quite different from being raised by a parent. And as time passes, the challenges grow. Professional, trained kinship care support programs can provide valuable assistance. As a society, we must do a better job of educating kinship care providers about this helping hand.

At my agency, Beech Acres Parenting Center, we know the challenges kinship providers face, even when they may not fully grasp those challenges themselves. The Beech Acres approach has its foundation in our Natural Strength Parenting framework, which builds on the inherent strengths every child and adult is born with to add emotional resilience in difficult times. When professional support arrives for families in need, the impact can be powerful.

For example, trained support leads to

improvements in family function and the mental health of both children and kinship providers. Research has shown that equipping kinship parents with positive parenting and coping strategies leads to significant reductions in child behavioral problems while improving providers’ belief in their capacity to successfully raise these children through disruption.

Adding an additional seat at the dinner table also brings additional cost, so kinship providers need to know how to access the state financial support that is available in Ohio and many other states.

If you are a family member providing care for a child who is not your son or daughter, please reach out for help and know you are not alone. If you have a granddaughter, grandson, niece, nephew or other child relative who may be losing their home, I invite you to consider whether kinship care could be a good fit. It could make a world of difference at a turning point in the life of a child.

Victoria Jamison is director of prevention services with Beech Acres Parenting Center in Cincinnati, which offers more information about Kinship Care at beechacres.org.