

CHAPTER VII: CAREGIVER AND INTERVIEWER VIEWS—STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, SERVICE NEEDS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter we summarize two sources of data: (1) caregivers views of the child's strengths and challenges, their own strengths and challenges, their service needs and their comments and recommendations about kinship care; and (2) interviewers reactions and views regarding these same topics. We remind the reader that we did not audio tape caregiver interviews so although interviewers often tried to write down exactly what caregivers' said, most often what is written is not a direct quote but the interviewer's summary of the caregivers' statements or the interviewers' interpretations of what the caregiver said. Also, at the end of each interview, interviewers were asked to write down their own comments and reactions. Some of the interviewers wrote a summary of the caregiver's story and other's included their own observations and perceptions of the caregiver, the child, the parent and/or their situation. All of these sources of data make valuable contributions to our understanding of the strengths, challenges, service needs, and experiences of kinship caregiving families.

Children's Strengths

Although not directly asked to do so, several caregivers identified strengths of the children in their care. Some focused on the temperament of the children while others focused on behavioral or academic improvements.

Loving, Easy Going Temperament

Some relative caregivers indicated that the relative's children in their care were very loving. One caregiver stated, "Because he's who he is; very loving kid." Another caregiver attributed the ease with which she cares for her relative's child to the child's adjustment to the situation and his temperament. She states, "He fits right in with my kids. He's always willing to try new things." Interviewers often commented about the temperament of some children and the

way this contributed to their adjustment to their living situations and to the caregiver's enjoyment of the caregiving experience. For example, one interviewer commented:

Caregiver seemed to enjoy having grandchildren in her home. Grandchildren are very friendly. Three year old boy hugged me when I came in the house. Seven year old girl told me that she did not want me to leave.

Understanding, Gracious, Grateful, Forgiving

Others described the children as understanding, gracious, and/or forgiving. Despite frequently being disappointed by their biological parents, some relative caregivers indicated that the children in their care love their parents and appear to be very understanding. One caregiver described this type of situation for the child she is caring for: "The fact that he loves her very much, even though she's not available."

Two caregivers described the related children in their care as content, grateful for what they have, and learning to do without some things:

He gets what comes to him and he understands how to live without a lot of material things.

She accepts it when I tell her I don't have enough money for what she needs. She doesn't complain. She desperately wants an apartment, house, backyard.

Positive or Improving Behavior and Academic Success

Some interviewers identified the child's behavior, academic success or improvement as strengths:

[Focus child] (9 years old) has been doing well in school and behavior is ok.

[Focus child] has improved in school. He can read and write. He is about to attend kindergarten.

One interviewer attributed the child's academic success to the caregiver's efforts to access community supports and services. The interviewer, who also interviewed the child, shared the child's response to the caregiver getting her enrolled in school for the first time at age 10:

She did reach out to the community for help and services, especially with regard to the focus child. The focus child is 10 years old and this is her first year attending school. She is involved in a mentoring program and an after school reading program at the school...In response to interviewing this focus child, the child spoke about school enthusiastically. She remarked that her favorite thing about school was that she gets to learn and she can become smart. It was refreshing to hear her speak!

Children's Challenges

Throughout the interviews caregivers gave descriptions of the focus child's functioning. They mentioned various academic, emotional/mental health, physical health, and behavioral challenges that the children in their care endured.

Academic Challenges

One caregiver talked about how the child in her care experienced some academic delays, indicating, "for one thing, we learned that [focus child] goes at his own pace." The caregiver pointed out that the child had been "...kept back in kindergarten..." One interviewer summarized another caregiver's account of her granddaughter's academic challenges:

The caregiver has advocated for her granddaughter in her Chicago Public School. Her granddaughter was held back last year to repeat the 3rd grade and continues to lag behind academically. The caregiver continues to advocate that her granddaughter be evaluated ... to determine if any disabilities interfere with her learning.

Emotional/Mental Health Challenges

Several caregivers discussed emotional challenges the children experienced that may be related to their past histories and inability to live with their biological parents:

My niece is a joy, but she has emotional issues deep inside. Sometimes I wonder if she will ever feel comfortable enough to talk about her early childhood.

It's a lot of work and depending on the child's background (mom is a drug addict) will determine what happens. He has grown out of most of it. It is emotional for him to not know who he belongs to.

Some interviewers attributed the emotional and interpersonal challenges children experienced at least in part to not being able to live with their parents:

This child seems to be crying out for help. He is withdrawn, lacks self-esteem, dislikes school and has difficulty making friends. The caregiver expressed how she worries about him and that the child runs home from school daily so that he avoids getting teased and bullied. The situation with his biological mother is particularly difficult because there isn't an obvious apparent reason for why the child isn't with her. The caregiver describes the biological mother as an educated, successful, woman but one who isn't able to bond with children, and therefore, one who didn't want her son. It is all very sad.

The children want to be with their bio parents, causes frustration. Child sees the caregiver as more of a parent even though she calls biological mother - "mom". The caregiver took care of needs and child knows this. Therapist/psychologist is needed because being separated from a parent is trauma. Child needs to process information with a neutral party.

One interviewer restated the caregiver's concerns about her granddaughter's experiences with a teacher at school and earlier experiences when she lived with the biological mother. The caregiver was concerned that her granddaughter might have emotional challenges due to these experiences:

This caregiver seemed overwhelmed with responsibilities. It is obvious that she is very concerned about her granddaughter and all she has been through. Her granddaughter was allegedly "touched in a bad way" by a male teacher at the school. The case was unfounded but this caregiver removed the child from that school anyway. Also, she worries that the daughter may have emotional problems from witnessing her mother have sex with many random men. I think it was clear that this caregiver really needed help with services. Thankfully, she was already in touch with [staff person] at [community agency].

According to the interviewer, one caregiver was particularly concerned about the mental health functioning of her grandson and asked the interviewer for advice:

The caregiver asked this interviewer for advice. She said her seven-year-old grandson told her he was hearing voices. He would hear the caregiver's or his father's voice in class. She wondered if she should take some type of action. I told her to make sure the school counselor and teacher were notified and that a psych eval should be done ASAP. She commented that the children's mother was bi-polar. The caregiver also said that her six-year-old grandson used to bite

himself and scratch himself until he would bleed. She said he is receiving counseling at the school and has reduced his behavior significantly.

Physical Health Challenges

Some interviewers highlighted the focus child's medical challenges as described by the caregiver. Some caregivers also report difficulty getting accurate diagnoses of the children's health problems.

Bio-mother was negligent in caring for her son who was born with fetal alcohol syndrome and later diagnosed with failure to thrive. Caregiver had been buying PediaSure so baby would gain weight but mother was feeding him Kool-aid instead. Caregiver said when she questioned mom's ability to care for child she was told to take care of him herself if she was that concerned. They agreed to go through probate court and get legal custody of the baby. Caregiver has had child for six years. This child had had numerous surgeries since he has been in caregiver's home. Caregiver has gotten disability check for him about three months ago. Is in the process of having dental work done. His first set of teeth never came out and the others came in causing him to have a double set of teeth. The child is currently seeing a psychiatrist for mental health issues...has multiple health issues, ...asthma, sleep apnea, chronic depression, has had many surgeries... [Child] has angina and the ADHD pills have decreased his appetite... Child has a heart murmur and currently has a urinary infection.

Caregiver's greatest concern was the health of her grandchild. The little girl has been told she is fine by some doctor and then told she is not okay by the family doctor. Caregiver believes something is wrong with the child's health and is determined to find her an expert opinion.

Behavioral Functioning

Some caregivers described the serious behavioral problems displayed by the related children in their care. For example, one caregiver said, "My nephew is hyperactive and on Ritalin." Also, a number of interviewers summarized the children's behavioral challenges that caregivers described. Other interviewers described behavior problems that they witnessed during the interview:

The ten-year-old girl, who is the subject of CBCL, looks and acts like a teenager. Per caregiver she has been in the detention home a few times, she is in counseling but caregiver says it's not helping her any. I observed her being mean to the other children by hitting on them and lying about it... [Child] been in counseling

ever since she was 6 or 7...School called DCFS hotline in January due to [Child] threatening her brother. [Child] has been hospitalized in the past.

[Focus child] is a screamer and says unkind things... [Child] is in a therapeutic day school. The caregiver does not believe that he is being taught anything because he has made no progress, regarding the learning disability. The school reports that [child] is doing well. The caregiver has scheduled a meeting with the school and plans to write the school district.

...This child is more than a handful and is allowed to do pretty much what she wants to do because caregiver gets tired of trying to stop her. Caregiver has this child in an early intervention program where a therapist visits every Thursday...

The child had gotten out the house and was running loose. Caregiver said she had taken him to the grocery store earlier in the day and the security officer found him in the parking lot and held him 'til she claimed him. When I got into the house this child was destroying everything, his toys, except the plastic knife that he told me he was going to cut my head off with. He stabbed his grandmother with it and the only thing she said was, I'm going to find my belt after a while. The child tried to take her shirt off of her. He also kept hitting her on her head and slapped her face.

Caregivers' Strengths

Although caregivers were not asked during the interview to identify or describe their personal strengths, several caregivers described what appears to be remarkable dedication to the children in their care, as well as triumphs over the challenges they face as relative caregivers. Interviewers also shared their observations and views of caregivers' strengths.

Positive View of Caregiving Experience

Twenty relative caregivers made statements that indicate they clearly get some satisfaction from caring for a relative's child. Some caregivers seemed to feel that they have been given a second chance to raise children; while others simply feel that the experience of caring for a relative's child enhances their personal lives in some way. According to one caregiver:

It's all trial of faith. It's your second chance at parenting, 'cause no one tells you how to be a parent. For every mistake I made as a parent, I am not making them with [focus child]. Grandparent parenting gives you a second chance to sew into children fruit. It's looking into the mirror everyday...extension of everything I am...privileged. I want this child to bare fruit. I'm flooded with my own mistakes. When you're parenting you don't see it. When you're grandparent parenting you get to see it. I wanted my granddaughter to be structured and safe...I wanted her to be grounded in the truth about her family. I see the results of it. It's a beautiful journey.

Several caregivers seemed to feel that the rewards of being a relative caregiver far outweighed their own financial, health, social resource and emotional challenges. One caregiver described challenges that coexist with the enjoyment from raising her grandson:

I really wasn't prepared for it, but when it came along, I didn't fight it. I'm enjoying my life with him. At first, some days, I get tired. Certain times, ya need a break. I think I would be happier with him if I had what I want for him (a backyard, a basement, clothing). I guess when he get grown and become a professional basketball player he'll take care of his grandma.

Although one caregiver indicated that she was legally blind, she still felt that she could care for her relative's child. Other caregivers, who seemed to struggle emotionally, mentally, financially, and from an overall lack of support, described how their circumstances would not prevent them from caring for a relative's child.

For many caregivers, satisfaction with the caregiving experience is associated with their ability to meet the child's needs. One caregiver reported the following:

It's hard work. They make you laugh some time, they make you cry. It's a good feeling and especially when you got enough food. They have places to sleep and T.V. - no one to abuse them. That's a good feelin'.

Interviewers reported that several caregivers shared positive feelings about themselves partly because of their caregiving role. According to several interviewers, a number of caregivers celebrated their ability to raise a relative's child, the idea of being relative caregiver, their independence; all of these contributed to overall positive attitudes about themselves.

Caregiver Recognizes Progress

Three relative caregivers described some of the ways that their circumstances have improved while caring for a relative's child. Two caregivers reported a reduction in stress after learning healthier ways to cope with their ever-changing circumstances. Another caregiver indicated that she was thrilled that her daughter, the biological mother, had resumed primary caretaking responsibilities. A few interviewer reactions indicated that other caregivers also were able to recognize progress since they began caring for a relative's child.

Caregivers Willing to Make Sacrifices

Six relative caregivers discussed the amount of self-sacrifice involved when caring for a relative's child. These caregivers described how they have gained more responsibilities and given up important aspects of their lives, such as the ability to travel, jobs, homes and general freedom. One caregiver described the degree of sacrifice that was necessary for her to begin caring for a relative's child:

It changes your lifestyle and the way you live. I was totally uprooted from the life I had set up for me and my boys to come here and raise my nieces. It's funny, you think you're done as far as being a mother to small kids, something happens and you're starting over again. It's different raising boys and raising girls. I had three sons, so I'm trying to get use to buying barrettes, panties, combing hair. It's hard but I would do it all over again.

Interviewers also commented on the remarkable levels of self-sacrifice that several caregivers experienced to care for relative's children. One caregiver spent her entire retirement savings, while another works long hours, yet still finds time to care for her own children and her relative's three children.

Sense of Obligation/ Natural/ Tradition

Several caregivers described a family legacy of shared caregiving, a sense of obligation to care for other family members. In addition to feeling a sense of obligation, three relative caregivers specifically stated that they felt that caring for a relative's child was "natural".

Spirituality Source of Strength/ Support

Despite numerous challenges, two relative caregivers indicated that prayer helped them care for a relative's child. These caregivers reported that prayer seemed to help them respond more appropriately to the challenges that they face, especially with the biological parents. Based upon interviewer reactions to caregiver interviews, six caregivers specifically described a feeling that God and their spirituality provided them with an important source of strength, as well as helped them connect to the supports needed to care for a relative's child. An interviewer described one caregiver's reliance on spirituality to cope with multiple caregiving responsibilities in the following way:

The caregiver was very open and talkative. She mentioned how caring for so many relatives with special needs was difficult (uncle & daughter are mentally ill and two younger children have behavior problems). She stated...repeatedly...how God was a source of support and she felt blessed. Despite admitting to being stressed out sometimes she only had positive and loving things to say about all the family members. The caregiver told this interviewer that one of the main reasons she took her nephew was because she did not want him to end up under DCFS custody. The caregiver admitted her older children were taken away from her when she was a teen mom because she was homeless. Her experience with DCFS was very negative and for that reason she wanted to prevent her nephew from becoming involved. The Caregiver admitted that she is very resourceful and has accessed many services to ensure her family's needs are met.

Another caregiver reported that her daughter, the biological mother of the child in her care, was released from prison several months earlier. The caregiver indicates that prayer helps her cope with her daughter's drug use, developmental delay, and mental health problems which are preventing her from raising her own children:

Between you and me she's back on drugs. Um, my daughter, I thought she was bipolar, but I found out she's schizophrenia. That's been a big change. She's mentally retarded, learning disable... She's a teenager, even though she ain't no more than 6 or 9. I get down on my knees and pray. I know we cannot be here without him. That's how I make it through.

An interviewer said about another caregiver, “even though the caregiver is not linked to many services, she appears to be doing a great job of providing financially and emotionally for her brother. She is a very spiritual person and states her strength comes from God...” The interviewer captured this caregiver’s words in this way:

It is a beautiful thing because you can have an impact on someone's life. It is hard for me because I have no help from people but I do have help from the Lord above. I am happy [focus child] is in my life. I enjoy being with him all the time. Children are a blessing from above. Everyone should be involved with a child, for example as a mentor.

Some caregivers discussed ways that their spirituality helped them overcome personal challenges, which would have prevented them from raising relatives’ children. An interviewer shares one caregiver’s story:

Caregiver is a recovering drug addict (12 years). Stated that she did not go to drug treatment, but the Lord freed her from her drug habit.

Others rely on spirituality when it seems they cannot meet the basic needs of their families:

The Lord provides for my family. I sometimes worry if I can feed the family but I know the Lord provides.

Commitment to Providing Positive, Safe, and Stable Environment

Several relative caregivers described a very strong commitment to providing a positive environment for the children in their homes. Caregivers stressed their efforts to ensure a “healthy atmosphere” for the relatives’ child. One caregiver stated, “It’s more of a personal commitment from the heart, from the spirit of family that is for the child...to really guarantee a safe, happy,

healthy atmosphere to the child until other things get resolved.” Some caregivers were very proud of the child’s nicely decorated room and described child and family achievements. A few relative caregivers indicated that they were extremely dedicated providing structure and stability for the child(ren) in their care. Several interviewers observed and commented about this commitment.

In addition to describing her aspirations for the relative’s child in her care, a relative caregiver also indicated that the child trusts her judgment. This caregiver stated, “He trust me that I won’t lead him in the wrong direction. I don’t want him to go stay with anyone else. I’d let him go back with his mom if she gets better.” According to this caregiver, the child seemed to understand that she is committed to the child’s well-being and to ensuring that the child remains with her for as long as necessary, until the mother is able to care for the child.

Level of Investment and Involvement

Interviewers made comments about the extraordinary level of investment and involvement in the lives of the related children displayed by several caregivers. For instance, one interviewer reported that a caregiver spent her retirement raising her grandchildren and currently runs a daycare, full-time, out of her home and is working part-time.

Experience/Understands Child(ren)’s Needs

Interviewers specifically mentioned the insight and experience concerning the needs and challenges of the relative’s child(ren) displayed by eight caregivers. Interviewers pointed out that some caregivers were particularly insightful regarding clinical issues affecting their families, about the impact of substance abuse, parenting problems, and mental health issues on their families and particularly the children. For instance, one interviewer reported the following:

Caregiver has a lot of insight into the needs of the children. This caregiver acknowledges the challenges of raising young children, but feels it’s her

responsibility...She seemed very resourceful and motivated to engage her grandchildren and children in activities and mentoring experiences. Caregiver participated in a life review and identified a familial history of substance use/abuse, as well as her desire to not repeat the cycle with her grandchildren's generation.

Knowledgeable/Access to Support and Resources

A relative caregiver indicated that it is important to have a support system in place when caring for a relative's child. This caregiver stated, "It helps to have a strong support system which I do." Interviewers mentioned similar in-depth knowledge and access to the resources needed to care for a relative's child(ren) possessed by 25 caregivers. A couple of relative caregivers either currently or previously worked with the Department of Children and Family Services. This experience seems to have provided these caregivers with great depth of insight into how to access the resources needed to care for a relative's child(ren). A few caregivers indicated that because of their participation in the kinship care research project, they were able to gain access to a number of social services.

Interviewers pointed out six relative caregivers who diligently pursued services needed to care for a relative's child. For example, one interviewer stated:

She's attempting to get all the services she can to help [focus child] emotionally. The caregiver is aware of what services she feels will meet [focus child]'s needs. The caregiver speaks affectionately about her grandchildren and is taking all the steps she can to make sure they are well adjusted.

Caregiver Personal Aspirations/Achievements

A relative caregiver described how she and her family benefited from outside support and now she is able to focus on achieving some of her own personal goals. This caregiver stated:

[Community Agency] helped me with a lot of things. People have been so very helpful. At first it was really hard. Now it's better. I'm looking out for me now since I have them more squared away. Now it's my time now. It's time for me to do something for me.

Caregivers' Challenges

As the caregivers told their stories many described the challenges that come with raising a relative's child. They mentioned the personal sacrifice, challenges with the biological parents and emotional and family challenges they experienced.

Personal Sacrifice

Several caregivers described how raising a relative's child requires significant personal sacrifice and the willingness to accept full responsibility for a child:

Be willing to sacrifice, your life almost stops. I modeled for 18 years and now I can't do that anymore.

It takes a lot of sacrifice. It is a very demanding thing for someone my age to take... a child, especially a child with ADHD.

While caregivers were willing to take on the responsibility of raising their relative's child, some had mixed feelings given that they had already raised their children and were not expecting to have to raise someone else's children:

It's tough, really, really tough. I struggle with the time commitment, the fairness ... Why? I have raised my children. It's like starting all over. To be honest it's not what I want to do. But life deals you a hand but none of that is taken out on [her]. She is the love of my life. She is only girl... It is a huge sacrifice in terms of time and money. If I had had a choice, I would not have done it. When I say choice, I mean other alternative relative safe placements. It is a great responsibility.

Well, if a kid can have his mother and father, that's the best thing. If not, then it's best to be with the next closest relative. But, it's hard when you've raised your kids and you thought you'd be able to travel and now I've lost that. But just to be able to live your life. You've got mixed emotions, 'cause you're glad you're here for him...

Several caregivers discussed how they have had to put their lives on hold to care for their relative's child:

I wonder if it is going to get harder or better. I wonder if I will have a life. I need the fathers to take care of their kids so I can have a life. The older kids don't help out with the younger ones. Take it one day at a time... It's very difficult. I'm doing the best I can. This is something I never thought I'd have to do. I'm gonna deal

with it as long as I have to. I'd like to get married; yet I don't see it happening. I have a lot of pressure from that. I can't settle down with someone right now. I wish my sister was still here. It's hard. I wish I could spend more time with my kids. It's a whole lot. I try to take it one day at a time. I get frustrated sometimes and want to leave and not come back.

I've never been on vacation. I have no boyfriend cause the kids are around. I want to be part of life again. I want my freedom...Stressful... A very stressful... I've had people to tell me that I was a good mom. It is almost being a parent all over again. When you are sick along with it, it is very stressful. That is the only way I can describe it. Stressful. You have to have a lot of love. If you did not love them, you wouldn't make it through it... It's very stressful. It's not an easy job to raise grandkids. Things are more expensive. One grandparent doin' it all...If I had a good man...I have not enjoyed my life. I feel that I'm bein' used...It's different, it's stressful...the feeling. I'll be glad when she can get her house and can be a mom. I can't wait for the time when my... I love 'em, but I can't wait 'til my life starts. I give too much to the kids and not enough to me.

It's, ya know, it's not that your life stops, but there's more responsibility. You just want to protect them so much. I feel like I'm the only one she has. I don't think anyone will love her as much as I do. I had to put a lot of things on hold, like traveling.

Sometimes I wish I had my freedom and privacy back.

Challenges with Biological Parent(s)

Caregivers discussed the challenges they've encountered when dealing with the biological parents of the children in their care. In some cases, the biological parents are a source of stress and anxiety rather than a help to the caregiver:

It's been fun. Just when you think it's getting easy, it's not. It would be easier if we didn't have to deal with the parents. We don't know if when he goes with her (biological mother) if she'll bring him back... Sometimes it's not easy at all; sometimes it's a breeze. This is a lot of ups and downs. My greatest fear was when the mother comes, will she bring him back.

The child is no problem, it's the parent.

...She's being like a thorn in my side. I don't have anybody to help me...I just do the best I can. She refuses to help. Has a neighbor that helps...that part of the family has deteriorated.

The thing is, you fall in love with this child and it's not right when the relatives wanna come back and take them back after they get themselves together. I don't think it's right that once the kids are 4, 5, 6, they can take 'em back. Having to let her go, after raising her, would be hard... There is ambivalence about the future. Who are her parents—the mom or us (caregivers)? We don't know if our daughter will be able to get and stay clean. If not, then we want to adopt her, we want resolution.

Interviewers' summarized the difficulties that the some of the caregivers had with the biological parents of the children in their care:

Worried that biological mother may want child back. Biological mother feels caregiver spoils child. Caregiver feels biological mother wants child back for the money: SSI disability... Caregiver seems to really enjoy caring for the child. The caregiver showed the interviewer the child's room. Caregivers seemed proud of how nicely decorated the room was. Caregiver seemed afraid that biological mother would take the child from her...

This caregiver expressed the difficulty of having a daughter addicted to drugs. She has taken her daughter in, again, and can only hope for the best. She stated it is hard for the children to witness their mother go back and forth...This caregiver spoke of her daughter's battle with drugs over the years. She dropped her daughter off on this very day at the woman's treatment center. She prays this time it will work...

Emotional Challenges

Many caregivers said that caring for a relative's child is emotionally challenging. Meeting all the emotional, physical, and educational needs of the child in their care can take a toll on the caregiver. However, despite the emotional hardships that come with caring for a relative's child, caregivers expressed love and affection for the children in their care:

Emotionally it is hard because it is so much responsibility. What if something happens to one of them, what would I tell their mother? And what if she says it is all my fault? Sometimes my grandson gets so angry because he is old enough to understand his mother is not here and she should be. I don't know how to comfort him...At first, I did not think about whether it would be hard or easy. But with time I realized it is hard. There are a lot of rewards but there are times when they get you angry. But you have to understand that they will have behavior problems because of their situation.

The emotional impact is not limited to the kinship caregiver; other family members are also affected. For example, the same caregiver described the ambivalence of her own children and grandchildren, including their jealous feelings toward the related children in her care:

Sometimes you love them more than your own kids, maybe because they are more helpless since their parents are not around. My older kids and grandkids get jealous sometimes but they also feel good that we can help them.

This caregiver and several others expressed a rather common worry, the fear that biological parents will take their children back once the caregiver becomes even more attached to them:

And there is always the knowledge that these are not really your kids...There's always the possibility that the kids can be taken away too at anytime. I don't think me or my husband could handle that. One time my daughter said she was moving to [another state] and was going to take the kids. There's no way I would allow that to happen unless the police were involved. It would kill me and my husband. Not that my daughter isn't a good mother, it's just these are my kids. I know she had them but she gave them to me and now they are mine. So, it's not as easy as it looks...

Sometimes it can be hard because you form this bond and the relative wants the child back. It's gonna hurt like hell. Also, make sure the parent is stable before the child goes back.

And emotionally, you worry about developing this bond and then the parent comes back. I'm worried about that.

In addition, the children may remind the caregiver of this fact that the caregiver is not their parent:

When you are raising a relative's child you have to understand that they are not yours. You can't use the same type of discipline; you have to be careful. If you're discipline is too strict they will tell you out of anger, "You are not my mom," or "I don't want to be here." These comments hurt a lot, you feel like what you are doing is not appreciated...As much love as you have for the children, there is always the question. There's always that void. Why wasn't Mom there? You could never take the place of Mom; you know 100% that Mom will always be first.

Several caregivers emphasized that caring for a relative's child is very hard, stressful, and sometimes depressing:

People should not forget the stress you have to deal with when caring for grandkids. Especially when situation is forced and not voluntary...

It is very hard and make you bitter sometimes.

Yes, it's hard emotionally and financially. I haven't been able to get help yet so it's hard.

Mmm...no. Sometimes it's very tiring, yet when they aren't here I'm sad, bored and lonesome.

It's very hard, it's confusing sometimes, sometimes I feel like I'm not doing a good job...like I'm not doing enough.

Sometimes it can be a little depressing... You might say, 'What did I get myself into.' You don't want the kids in foster care.

Their father does not have a job so he has nothing to offer—looking for a handout himself. No one knows how to contact mother for help. I didn't want them to go to DCFS where I wouldn't know what was going on in their lives so I took them in and I'm raising them the best I can...Nothin' that I haven't said already. It's very hard. It's not what I expected. I thought there would be more help. I never, in my wildest dreams, thought I'd do this...It is not as easy as you think. I did not realize it would be so hard... Everything concerning them school, doctors has been hard, it takes time. My kids are far apart in age, by my grandkids all are close in age so it has been different, it's more hectic. Dealing with DHS & CEDA has been stressful because they give you the run around. It has been hard for me because all my relatives are out of state... It is hard and time consuming.

More Difficult Raising Grandchildren than Own Children

Grandparents who were raising their grandchildren discussed how much more difficult this is compared to raising their biological children because times have changed and children are different today than they were when the grandparents were raising their own children. They also felt it was more difficult because of their age:

I love the children, but it is not as easy raising your grandchildren as it was raising your own children, because things have changed so much.

It is a very hard task. I don't think people know what they are getting into. It is a lot harder at 55 than 25.

It's hard because I feel that grandparent's role is one that I am supposed to be able to spoil them and I can't. It is very different when the total responsibility of raising the kids is all mine.

Mine are grown and now I find myself raisin' kids again. You gotta do what you gotta do. I always tell God, I need the patience and the tolerance. They are so loving and caring - they can be challenging sometimes. I'm just glad I was able to step up. It can be challenging sometimes. It can even be stressful. That constantly talkin' can get stressful. Why do I gotta repeat the same things over and over?

It's stressful. I didn't think I'd get to 45 and be takin' care of nobody's child. I want her (Daughter/Biological mother) to have her child.

It's Affected Relationships with Intimate Partners and Other Family Members

Some caregivers said that caring for a relative's child has put on strain on their personal relationships with their significant others:

He caused some strain in the marriage of my husband and I - we didn't expect it [raising the focus child]... My husband and I have lost our freedom, cannot find babysitters or find time for ourselves.

We are thinking about (caregiver and fiancé) moving the girls back in with their mother within the next 2 months. Having been caring for the girls - my fiancé and I have had problems with our relationship. I was laid off over 6 months ago and haven't found work yet. We got legal guardianship for both kids.

I wasn't use to little kids for a while. Easy part is that I am still a kid at heart. I am more established now than when I had my daughter. It's hard when I want to go on a trip with my husband and I can't, it's hard. The kids keep us laughing more than anything...Sometimes it can be really hard- Especially when there is a problem, it seems to be hard.

An interviewer shared the following observation about the impact of the loss that grandparents have experienced since their grandchildren returned to their mother. This loss has affected the grandfather, his wife, as well as the grandfather's relationship with a stepdaughter:

The caregiver and his wife are very stressed out. They both have health problems and have been in the hospital a few times this year. They are very worried about their grandchildren, as they do not trust the mother's judgment. The caregiver misses the children and appeared very depressed. He said he missed taking his

granddaughter to Navy Pier to see the fire works. The caregiver and his wife hope to regain physical custody of the children and then legal custody. Once they have legal custody they plan on moving to another state as they feel Chicago is not the best place to raise children...The caregiver also admitted that besides being depressed over their health and missing and worrying about their grandchildren, they are also having a lot of interpersonal conflicts. The caregiver had an argument with his stepdaughter and she went to stay with her grandmother. The caregiver also mentioned that he wanted marriage counseling to address issues with his wife.

Financial Challenges

A number of caregivers described the financial burden of raising a relative's child:

Frustrating trying to do things for her financially. Always something that child needs.

The most important thing is for people to realize that it is more difficult when a parent walks out and leaves their children with a caregiver that is not employed. It has been so difficult financially but we are doing it and making it.

A caregiver that takes in a child usually do so because they know how they want child raised and the parents are not doing that. It is hard trying to raise children on a limited income because after bills there is no money left.

We need more money. It is very hard when you don't have enough money.

Financially, it is difficult because I am not able to work and there is not enough money coming into the house...

It's not easy at all. More of a financial strain than anything.

Several caregiver's enjoyed caring for their relative's children, but had wishes for more financial assistance:

Oh, actually, it's lovely to me. I wish I could get an income to help me out with some things.

I like it, 'cause I have my grandchild. The housing, financial part is difficult. I'm struggling to do it all by myself. I told her (child's mother), 'if I get a job, you have to be at home with [the focus child]. Gotta work together.

Interviewers also highlighted the financial struggles that caregivers described during the interviews:

Caregiver seemed frustrated about lack of housing.

This caregiver and family lived in extreme poverty. Two or three children shared a bed on a regular basis.

The caregiver is very stressed out by her financial situation. After her husband's passing she has been trying to secure employment but has not been successful. The family is surviving off public aid assistance...Caregiver's husband of 36 years died approximately 1½ years ago. This is a huge adjustment.

One interviewer shared a caregiver's story about the financial pressures she was experiencing, even though the child's father provides financial support:

The caregiver has had difficulty finding and maintaining employment...She receives \$204 a month for her nieces (TANF) and food stamps. She sells chips and soda on her front porch during the summer. She says this helps her buy some extra things like soap and dishwashing liquid. Thankfully she lives in public housing therefore she is not in danger of losing her apartment. The caregiver said that focus child's father provides financially for both girls even though the youngest is not his biological daughter. If the girls need anything she just calls him and he will get it...

Another interviewer described the worries expressed by a caregiving couple regarding the financial cost of caring for their grandson and fears about their ability to ensure this child's future. This fear is related to their own age and concerns about life expectancy, the fact that their retirement savings have been spent, and conflict with the child's parents who do not seem to be moving toward responsibly caring for the child:

Caregiver and her husband expressed concern regarding their ages, health and life expectancy associated with their ability to care for their grandson as he ages. They also expressed concern regarding having drained their pension in order to assist their son as he secured guardianship of their grandson and to provide him (grandson) with therapeutic and education services... She reported continued commitment toward providing unconditional care for her grandson, yet expressed disappointment and frustration associated with challenges and conflict within her relationships with her grandson's biological parents.

Other Hardships/Stresses

Some caregivers mentioned other losses and hardships they've endured, such as the loss of a spouse or a child or fears of violence affecting family members:

We did everything together. He was always there. I miss him a lot. It's not loss, it's gain. He's in a better place... I wish he was here.

My 22-year-old son was murdered on January 2004.

The caregiver mentioned how she has not been able to sleep for two days due to gang activity in the area. She is worried about her two young sons. She said she is happy because her sons will be moving back to Florida where they will be safer.

Some interviewers also made notes regarding the losses and hardships that caregivers suffered, including the death of family members:

Caregiver did not maintain two previously scheduled interview appointments. She has recently begun adjusting to the loss of her mother (deceased), as well as having to move into a smaller apartment after her previous apartment was damaged by a fire...

Caregiver has experienced tremendous hardship regarding...deaths in her family. She is trying to get guardianship for the two most recent children, her nephews that she has taken in.

Caregiver reported that she and her family had been adjusting to her husband's death ...

Caregiver cried, mourned the loss of her sister, and expressed anger and disbelief regarding the difficulties she encountered while pursuing guardianship and attempting to access resources for her niece and family members. Caregiver advocates for laws protecting caregivers, etc...when biological parents die.

Caregiver cried while disclosing family history. (Murder of her father's mother and brother and loyalty issues associated with providing for her 2 biological children and 2 related children)... Caregiver has emotional support from family but no financial support from those who are able (this is what is needed).

An interviewer describes other sources of stress experienced by one caregiver:

This caregiver seemed stressed not only from caring for her grandchild, but also from two other main factors. The first is that her husband (who has been separated from her for years) moved to Chicago to live with her. And secondly,

she seems to worry and stress a great deal over daughter's current drug use and reckless lifestyle.

Some interviewers elaborated on the family challenges that the caregivers described. These challenges included stress on the caregiver's relationship with her spouse, difficulties obtaining services for the children in their care, health concerns with the caregiver and the children, family conflicts and the caregiver's personal emotional struggles related to being a relative caregiver:

The caregiver talked about two adult sons who live with her. They have not been able to find jobs, because they were gang involved in the past and have criminal records. One of these sons has two children that stay with him on weekends. Their mother has had DCFS involvement in the past. These children report to their father and caregiver that their mother is abusive. The caregiver has not called DCFS because the kids have no bruises but she feels it is a matter of time before DCFS gets involved. The caregiver states that she could not take these other two grandkids in because her home is crowded, but she urges her son to "get his stuff together" so he can take his kids.

Caregiver is overwhelmed with caring for these children as indicated in CBCL. She states she never wanted to take care of this child but did not want to see him go in the system. Caregiver has adopted her daughter's two children and they were DCFS involved. So she is aware of how the system works. This child is more than a handful and is allowed to do pretty much what she wants to do because caregiver gets tired of trying to stop her. Caregiver has this child in an early intervention program where a therapist visits every Thursday. Caregiver having problems getting custody of child because of mother's failure to go to probate court with her even though she gave caregiver written consent to care for child.

Caregiver Physical Challenges

Some interviewers described caregivers' physical limitations which make caring for a child even more challenging:

Caregiver's challenge with vision makes her situation very unique. Children are instructed by others to help caregiver out ...Caregiver is legally blind, however was tremendously perceptive...

She has numerous health conditions that are monitored on an ongoing basis ... caregiver recently discharged from hospital, ongoing heart and hip concerns.

Services Received and Services Needed

Caregivers were asked to describe the services that they have received as well as services that they needed and were not receiving. These were open-ended questions. We did not provide caregivers with a list of services from which to choose. Had we provided such a list we assume that many more caregivers would have identified service needs in many of the categories listed below. Table 26 provides a list of the types of services identified by caregivers and the number of caregivers who indicated that they received or needed each of these services.

<i>Services</i>	<i>Received</i>	<i>Needed</i>
Adoption/Guardianship	18	16
Childcare/Daycare	18	37
Child Mental Health/Developmental	43	45
Family/Adult Mental Health	21	40
Clothing	22	57
Drug Treatment	0	3
Employment/Financial Assistance	25	94
Family Recreation	4	9
Food/Link Card/School Lunch	73	45
Home Furnishings	13	31
Homemaker Services	4	5
Housing/Rental Assistance	21	53
Legal Services	2	3
Medical/Dental/Vision	100	63
Parent Training	5	12
Safety Resources	0	1
School Supplement	61	77
Social Support/Respite	27	35
SSI/SSDI/SSR	43	8
TANF/Adoption Subsidy	63	25
Transportation	8	32
Utility Assistance	1	13

One hundred fifty-one caregivers described at least one service that they were receiving.

All 207 caregivers identified at least one unmet service need. Employment or financial assistance

was the need identified by the most caregivers (n=94). In addition, 33 caregivers mentioned the need for specific types of financial assistance. Eight mentioned the need for SSI, SSDI, or Social Security Retirement benefits (and 43 mentioned they received one of these) and 25 mentioned the need for TANF or an Adoption subsidy to help them support the child (while 63 indicated they received TANF). Medical, dental and vision services were mentioned as received services by the largest number of caregivers, however, this was also the third most mentioned category of need. Second highest was the need for a school supplement to help cover the costs of school supplies, etc., although 61 indicated that they received the supplement. Clothing and rental assistance were fourth and fifth most frequently mentioned.

Some caregivers discussed the efforts they have made to access services for the children in their care. For example, one caregiver described her efforts to get her granddaughter evaluated by the school system:

...I had some problems in school with her. I wants her evaluated. She has a sleep problem. Now that she's been taking this medicine, she sleeps. She's doin' a whole lot better. She takes her medicine. I done put it in baby (written request for an evaluation at school)!

Some caregivers provided more information about service needs throughout the interviews. Their comments reveal service needs, barriers to meeting these needs, as well as lack of knowledge or possible misunderstanding of eligibility for services. One caregiver indicated that she needed “discounts for transportation, decent housing” but also stated, “A lot of people won't rent to you if you have children.” The same caregiver stated to the interviewer that she was told she was “not sick enough to receive a medical card for herself.”

One interviewer described financial service needs of a caregiver who adopted the relative's child in her care, resulting in loss of eligibility for the TANF child-only grant:

This caregiver loves her grandchild so much and it is obvious in the way she talks of her, talks to her, and cares for her. She adopted [focus child] [following the initial interview] and as a result, her TANF checks stopped ... along with the medical card for [focus child]. The caregiver expressed the difficulties they are experiencing financially as a result but is determined to get [focus child] insured through KidCare.

Once caregivers are able to secure services for children, there are problem coordinating appointments and transporting children to appointments. One caregiver of a child with multiple medical needs indicated that she needs help with managing all of the appointments for this child:

There is much to do when you have these children. You have to get support. The children need you. She has so many medical concerns. She has been tested for zero to three early intervention. She has so many appointments. I am very busy. The agencies say they will help, but they never do.

Discussions with some caregivers reveal that the caregiver, possibly the caregiver's entire family, or at least several members of the family may be in need of specialized services:

It appears that caregiver has some mental health issues to deal with. She reported that this is why she gets a SSI check.

Caregiver is facing many obstacles. She identified herself as being learning disabled. She said her fourteen-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Her five year old has what she described as, violent outburst. The child will hit and kick people without provocation. She said her nephew is picking up on this behavior. Currently, the family is receiving mental health services from [hospital]. Caregiver could benefit from support group for parents with mentally ill children.

Interviewers often commented informally during team meetings that some caregivers seemed to be isolated and in need of social support. A number of caregivers seemed to really enjoy participating in interviews perhaps because it provided them some small measure of support and a person who was really interested in what they had to say about their caregiving experiences. A few found some aspect of the interview process helpful. One caregiver indicated that she was sad to see the interview process come to a close because just talking about her experience helped her realize that she was not alone in her struggle as a relative caregiver. Another caregiver stated, "I would've done the interviews even without get'n paid."

Caregivers' Reflections on the Caregiving Experience: Would do it Again?

When asked if there was anything else not talked about that was important for people to understand about raising a relative's child, a number of relative caregivers described their view of the caregiving experience, reflecting on whether they would recommend that others consider caring for a relative's child or whether they would take on this responsibility again.

Would Recommend/Family Involvement Important

Despite various challenges, twelve relative caregivers recommend that relatives consider the child's needs and help raise a relative's child. The consensus of these caregivers seems to be that living with a relative is a better alternative than foster care.

If you have grandkids and you know there's a need for someone to love them, please take them in. They didn't ask to be in this world. If I could do it with seven, they could do it with one or two.

If anyone out there that feel like they can step in it's a great thing. When keep kids in the family they have a better chance. These children are like my own. I love them too. I would get sick if something happened to them.

Stay focused on the fact that it is their child and you have to put the needs of the child first. Family members should come together to work together for the best interest of the child.

I think it is better for family members to raise their relative's children if the parent is unable to do it, because a lot of children end up being abused when they are put into the system.

They need someone connected with their family. They don't need to be in the system. The grandparents need to love them, feed them, clothes, take care of them and keep them out of the system...It's not an easy job, but anything well done is not easy. Loving these kids is an easy thing. Give them love, hope... They're innocent people. It's not their fault. It's not our fault. It's just something that happens. Thank God we're here for them. Children give you a lotta love - Ya gotta return it... Just have a lotta love... We as relative caregivers have to learn how to give it back. We may not have everything we need, but who does?

... it is the best decision for the child. No child should be forced to go through the system if family is available to care for them.

Its important that family help out when they can. The children need to be with relatives.

If a child needs help, why not help. Regardless of your age, you should step up and help your family.

I think it's nice to raise a relative's child. It's a big responsibility, you know, making sure you don't treat your relative's child any differently than you treat your own. I think if a person is ready and can handle the responsibility, they should do it.

Another relative caregiver recommends that family members become involved in helping to raise a relative's child, but feels the commitment should be temporary pending the return of the biological parent:

For me, it was important that my involvement was temporary. I think every child should be with his parent (s) if it's possible. Family member should help out, but ultimately the child should return to his parents if possible.

A relative caregiver described the challenges associated with raising a relative's child, as well as the sense of loss and grief the child may feel. Nonetheless, this caregiver recommends that family members get involved:

That it's hard on everyone involved. I'm having a hard time providing for them. I need help from other family members. It's hard for the kids too. The kids know and love their mother. It's not easy for them to be without her. As hard as it is, families should still do their best to help out.

Would Do Again

One relative caregiver indicated that she was "thrilled" that the biological mother had resumed her caretaking responsibilities and that she could now "be grandma." This caregiver also said, "I would do it all over again."

I would want people to know it's important to help out and keep your family together. I am relieved my daughter is back and is being a mother. It feels good to be grandma again...My daughter is the caretaker. By the spring she should be moving out...I feel confident my daughter will be successful in her role as a mother. I'm thrilled she's doing her job as a mom and I can be grandma.

Another caregiver indicated that she felt a sense of loss following children's return to their biological mother. Nevertheless, this caregiver found the caregiving experience rewarding and stated, "If I had it to do all over again, I would."

Well, I think it's great because you get to raise this child and see how they progress. My girls progressed. It's rewarding, because you're helping a child. You're instilling values in their children. I miss them. I really do and then I feel they're with their mom. I did my part as much as I possible could...I'd take [focus child] and [a niece's child] back in a heartbeat as long as it was legal.

Would Do Again Despite Challenges

Six relative caregivers identified a number of challenges and some benefits to raising a relative's child. Because of the benefits, each caregiver indicated that they would care for a relative's child again:

A new child changes the dynamics of the family. We've learned so much from her. I would do it over; do not regret this decision. Financially, it is not a burden. There are enough resources. The only concern is space. Currently we are okay, but as the kids become teenagers-it is going to be a problem. People should educate themselves on the resources available and use them. All these kids really need a lot of love, time and attention...Be prepared for some tough times. My niece is a joy, but she has emotional issues deep inside. Sometimes I wonder if she will ever feel comfortable enough to talk about her early childhood. So people should know these kids may be deeply scarred.

Just that it's hard work, but rewarding. It's hard sometimes, especially if the child begins to have problems in school. I've taken on a lot of responsibility, but it's worth it - you know keeping the kids together and out of DCFS...

It's not really hard. The only thing bad about it is finance wise. I enjoy taking care of him. I think I'm much better now than I was before I took care of him. It's fine. I have no problem doin' it. I'd do it all again. He likes a lot of attention though...

Not Sure I'd Do This Again

Other caregivers said they were uncertain if they'd be able to take on the responsibility of caring for a relative's child again, stating that taking care of a relative's child is not an ideal situation for the caregiver, the parents or the child:

This is not easy and I don't know if I could do it again.

If I told you it was an easy thing, I'd be lying. You're doing, it for the 2nd time; you're hope you're doing it right. You wonder if you did something wrong because you're in this situation. I thank God that I'm able to take care of them. I have moments when I just want to give up.

Would Not Recommend

Referring to their own experiences, two relative caregivers do not recommend that those without parenting experience assume responsibility for a relative's child:

I wouldn't recommend it to someone who has never had a child since I was not a parent before she arrived. I had no parenting skills.

You don't wanna be in my shoes. If there was another solution, I wish I know it. I wouldn't recommend it to anyone if you're not prepared.

Due to numerous and varied challenges regarding the behavior of some children, a relative caregiver indicated that she would not care for these children again:

Kids know you receive assistance for them and they think all that money should be spent on clothes for them. This is not easy and I don't know if I could do it again... Don't expect too much. Sometimes you will have a child that does not appreciate anything you try to do for them. I know some of the behavior and attitude is a choice. I don't think I would do it again. I would let [focus child] stay with me again, but those other girls, never.

Despite her own feelings of obligation, a relative caregiver stated adamantly that she would not care for a relative's child again and would not recommend that others do it:

That gotta cover it. I do suggest no one be a relative's caregiver, 'cause I wouldn't do it again if they paid me. It's hard, but somebody got to do it.

Careful Consideration/Caregiving Should Not Be Necessary

Due to multiple challenges, a relative caregiver emphasized the importance of careful consideration prior to caring for a relative's child. This caregiver also indicated that grandparents should not have to raise their grandchildren "when they have a living mom and dad."

Grandparents shouldn't have to raise their grand kids when they have a living mom and dad. But this is not my responsibility...It is not an easy task...harder than it looks, people should think twice before taking in children...It take up so much of your time. Kids slow ya down. My mom had 15 kids (13 living). I only have one. I used to tell my daughter, 'no one had to take care of you. I raised you'. Sometimes, I think, maybe I don't have a life. I do it outta the goodness of my heart.

Due to the impending burden to relatives, a relative caregiver encouraged future biological parents to consider their willingness or ability to care for their own children before deciding to have them:

I have the fact that I was able to be here, but if you're out here and you not able to be here, think about it before you bring these babies into the world...Now we gotta start all over a lot of us are up there in age. Just don't throw 'em out there and leave 'em.

Current Caregivers' Advice to Potential Caregivers

Many of the kinship caregivers we interviewed shared advice that they would like to pass along to persons considering whether to care for a relative's child. We categorized this advice by several major themes. Each theme and some of the quotes that we believe reflect the themes are presented in this section.

Understand that Caring for a Relative's Child Requires Personal Sacrifice

Several relative caregivers indicated that anyone who is considering caring for a relative's child should understand that considerable personal sacrifice will be necessary. Here are examples of some of their comments:

People should understand it is a huge commitment and a sacrifice and not to be taken lightly. And that you do it out of concern and love for the child and their well-being.

Your goals and plans for retirement will have to be put on hold while raising your grandchildren...The children usually feel abandoned and has a lot of resentment.

It's like, well, it means that you're giving up your entire life. I don't know how someone else would treat my grandkids.

Uh yeah...to be a caregiver and you do it out of love, not because there's a need or financial gain, it requires a great deal of discipline because your life is on hold for this child. It's a tremendous sacrifice. Your way of thinking is no longer important, it's how it should be and sometimes you don't know how to do it. God has given me this opportunity. A life that's well lived is a life that's been given away. You have not loved until you have given away. She's teaching me...I otherwise may have died. She keeps me alert on my toes.

It's important to have realistic expectations, to be conscious of the fact that you may be on your own raising a relative's child. May create problems with spouse or partner - spouse may feel like the caregiver chose child over them - spouse may resent child. Caregiver must be willing to sacrifice relationships. You'll still have many challenges.

Well, it takes a lot out of you. You have to be willing to sacrifice a lot (time, money)...and sometimes I say, this is not my job. Why am I doing this? That's where it all comes back to be patient.

Caregiver must be willing to give up their time for their regular activities to take total care of children. Have to learn how to help children with schoolwork; things have changed, as far as school. Work is done and there is new math and other assignments. That has to be learned in order to help the children. It is just like going back to school yourself.

Take Care of Yourself and Be Aware of Your Limitations

Due to the numerous and varied challenges associated with raising a relative's child, relative caregivers stressed the importance of self-care and awareness of personal limitations:

I think that people should understand that when you take it upon yourself to raise children that aren't yours, people should realize that is very hard and stressful.

People should know they should be in the position to help themselves before they take on the responsibility of helping someone else. It's a joy, but there are so many things you need. I need a lot of help.

Think long and hard before you decide to raise children. Take the ones that you can handle.

It is good to be there for the children, but when you are in your 60's think about not only your financial responsibility but also realize that physically you can't do everything.

One thing, when you get to be 58 years old, you need to have energy. She wants to play, ride her bike and she needs to get out of the house. I am the only grandmother she has ever known. I have nice relatives and they help.

When you make the decision to do it, you must make sure you are looking at the total picture. Think about the responsibilities and the effects it has on everyone. You do it in love...It's more than a notion to take on that responsibility; you have to make sure it's what you want to do. Think about the long term effects on the caregiver not just on the child.

I think that if you're not up for the challenge you shouldn't do it. Its not gonna be easy. It's going to hard on your mom and your other children. If you think you're getting a child to make you happy, you're wrong. You are going to have a hard time...It's just going to be a difficult time, but you can make it though it...Without God, I could not make it though all this.

Other than that people should know it takes a lot of prayer and faith to get through this...

It takes a lot of love and patience. Plus a person got to know their limits and don't over do it.

Some stressed that caregivers themselves need social support, care, love and understanding as well:

We need a lot of care, love, understanding...You need social support. Don't take them for social gain or money gain, you won't get it.

Be Prepared—Be Committed

A number of caregivers stressed the need to be prepared for their lives to change and for the challenges associated with raising a relative's child. Several caregivers also stressed that caring for a relative's child requires a very high level of commitment to the child that may last a very long time:

So I would tell people to accept the fact their life will be different if they take on this responsibility. If they're told it's only temporary, be prepared for permanency.

If they are not really into it, then don't do it. It is a lot of work. I was looking forward to not having kids in the home, now I have to start over...Unless the

people really have a heart to raise the kids, then they shouldn't be raising them because it is not easy ...

You have to be committed to child. A long-term and love, if not don't take child. When young, it's easy but when grow up there are problems. Be committed for long haul.

You have to have your whole heart and soul in it and be in it for the long haul. My mother thinks it's too much for me. But I said no. It's not time to send her back. I haven't given up totally. You have to want to go all the way with it. I didn't know it would be this challenging. You have to be committed and devoted to it...Patience, patience, patience. It is very important to have the time/patience to be able to focus on the child from all aspects. Sometimes I feel guilty I am not doing more with her educationally, but at the same time it is not always easy to do so. It is important you just love ... as much as you...You must have the desire and motivation and have the patience so it doesn't get to where it wears you down.

One caregiver indicated that caring for one relative's child is more difficult than her experience raising seven of her own biological children and stressed the level of commitment needed:

If you not going to put your whole self into it don't do it. I had seven, it was easy-One is hard, spend a lot of time with them. If you don't want to do it, don't do it.

Two other caregivers stress the importance of the relationship between the caregiver and the child. One indicated that the love for a relative's child is pre-existing, while the other caregiver acknowledges that sometimes related children entering the home do not really know the other members of the household so relationships need to be developed:

You don't have to learn to love a relative's child because you already love them before taking them into your home...If you are going to take a child, treat them like your child or don't do it. Think long and hard.

I think a relationship should be in place before you take the children in. It makes it harder when children have to move into a household with people they don't know.

One current caregiver pointed out that people considering caring for a relative's child need to be prepared not only for the responsibility but also for becoming attached to the child and experiencing a sense of loss if and when the child returns to live with the parent:

When you take responsibility of someone else's child you need to think about it, because it is a big responsibility. You also have to understand that you get attached to the child quickly and once they go back with the parents you are left with a void.

Some stressed that it is important to be prepared to confront many situations that were unknown to the individual when first deciding whether to be the primary caregiver of a relative's child.

Yes, even though these are my grandchildren, there are some things I'm still in the dark about. I'm not 100% sure about everything they've been through. I know some, but not all. So, if you take on a relative child, be prepared for the unknown. I don't regret my decision, but it's a bit more than I was expecting.

It is harder than expected. Many situations - you have to be very prepared for it.

One caregiver pointed out that, although it is difficult, the bottom line is that caregivers step up to care for children because they are better able to care for the child than the parent is at the time. It is their commitment to the well-being of the child that brings them forward and keeps them parenting the child:

Raising a child that is not your own is not because you feel sorry for him, but because you want to help him. We (husband and I) know we can care for child better than his own parents right now. It is very hard. Every time or everywhere I go, he comes with me.

It all depends on the relative giving the care. You have to wanna parent, 'cause everybody can't parent. You don't do it sometimes. You're always a parent. It's more than just feeding them, clothing them and making sure they have a roof over their head. Constant teach mode and listen mode.

Get Involved in Support Groups

Some caregivers recommended that caregivers become involved in support groups, for a variety of reasons:

I really wish care providers would really get involved in support groups. Gives you a new set of friends.

I think that every child is unique and dynamic but the dynamics of every situation they are in is unique. So, when I had the oldest two by themselves I was in a grandparents' group and that was helpful for me and the children.

Treat Them Like Your Own, But Raise Them Differently

Several caregivers indicated that children should be raised just like your own children and some of these caregivers also indicated that a firm approach is needed.

If you take on the responsibility, be ready to love and accept the child as if was your own... just you need to have an open heart and home.

It is important to start with the child young so they obey and respect you. When they get big, you have to let them know who the boss is. Teach them how to keep a home - clean up...it is just like raising your kids (as opposed to your grandkids). Kids this generation are much different than my kids were. Kids now are much more hard-headed and you must be much more stern with them...My advice to others is to go to church. Teach the kids to pray. This has helped me a lot.

Show them love, be firm. Spend time with them. Give attention to them. Discipline them, tell them about rules and regulations, show them how to assume responsibilities.

You just have to be firm with the children, but ya gotta show them love and let them know you care.

That you raise the child like it's your own. He's my grandchild and I love him.

It's just like raising your own kids all over again. It's not a piece of cake. I don't mix up the reality that I'm grandma and not mom...I think you have to be careful how you deal with them, 'cause just because they're relative, you tend to be easier on them. That's about all. My daughter handles her the same way. We don't always be right, but we're adults.

Other caregivers stressed the need to understand that raising relatives' children is different from raising your own, particularly when it comes to approaches to discipline. These caregivers recommended avoiding harsh discipline and being more understanding.

It is different from raising own child. Certain constraints you put on yourself. Don't discipline as harsh, because other people give their opinion. When it is your own child you don't care what people say. Get other people's opinion more when you are raising a relatives child. Important to set good example for child. Have to communicate more with others helping raise child...Children need to go at own pace. They should not be talked about or called names. They need to have chores, small chores. You have to remind them of their chores. They pick up on it eventually. They need to know what to say, appropriate them regarding language and profanity...

You have to have a lot of patience - that's the one thing I would want people to know.

His feelings must be considered when you discipline him. I'm in a bind. I want him to know he must be disciplined, but I let him know that I am concerned about his feelings. The children tease him because of his size and because of his color (black) so I must be considerate of his feeling and must show him love and discipline.

Must let a child talk about how they feel and express themselves. They go through a lot of things. Listen to what the kids say.

Children come with their own set of problems and we don't always know how to deal with them...Some children keep a lot of anger bottled up inside. You have to listen and talk to them and let them know you are there for them.

Only kids are different today than when my children were young. It takes a lot of energy and there's so much new stuff to learn and keep up with.

The children all differ and have different needs. [Focus child] needs much less than my 11 year old that I am caring for. Regardless of age, children have different needs.

Understand the Unique Developmental Needs of Children in Kinship Care

Several caregivers stressed the need to understand that the behavior of children in kinship care is often related to their experiences with their birth parent or their reactions to not being able to live with their parents.

Important to remember that kids will have behavioral problems from living with parents. Be patient when they act out. It's not their fault.

The kids have different emotions, feelings and attitudes. The adult has to learn to deal with their parents, their emotions. When kids are not with their parents their hearts are torn out because they want to be with their parents...

The child want their parents even if you are a close relative it doesn't matter, they feel indifferent or some kind of void in their lives and you can't fill that void and I believe that this can possibly stunt their growth in some areas of their lives...The children bring a lot of psychological baggage with them. They feel misplaced and you have to learn to be patient with them.

Be Ready for a Roller Coaster Ride — Regarding Relationship with Parent

A number of caregivers warned future caregivers of the potentially stressful relationship with the parents of the children for whom they assume caregiving responsibility. One caregiver describes this relationship as a roller coaster ride that can be expensive for the caregivers, particularly when legal battles ensue:

Financially, caregivers feel abandoned and may contact DCFS for support and assistance...She's [child's mother] able to get us in court on a whim. It doesn't cost her a penny, but we have to pay for an attorney. I don't know why she's able to do this to us. We are alone and are at the point of being unable to continue the fight. People should know it's not easy and it can be almost impossible if you have a daughter like ours...It's a never-ending roller coaster. We're doing better now that we were 6 months ago. People should understand that the courts will always favor a child's mother and give her chance after chance to get her act together. It doesn't matter how screwed up she may be—I guess they have hope. So if other grandparents decide to take in their grandchildren they should be prepared for a long, long terrible roller coaster ride.

Several caregivers stressed the importance of remaining focused on the children's needs and not letting frustration with the parents affect relationships with the children. For example, one caregiver advises:

Always know your position with the child, the child's parent. Always put the child's needs first.

Get Custody of the Children—Maybe?

Some caregivers recommended that anyone caring for a relative's child get legal custody of the child and possibly consider a court order to prevent parents from taking the children:

I would recommend anyone considering doing this get a court order or something to prevent the parent from returning at anytime and taking the child away. My daughter did not do any of the things she said she would do in the year I had my granddaughter. But, there wasn't anything I could do to stop her from taking her daughter back. So, informal care is risky - going through the legal system may be the best thing for the child.

A couple of caregivers advised that some type of legal authorization for raising the child is important in order to get access to resources and services:

You need legal authority so that mom cannot use child to get money from state and for housing. Cannot raise a relative's child just for the money, you have to want to do it for the right reason, because it's in your heart.

Important to get custody of child, because it helps you out with financial support and for child to be stable; so mom will not come and take the child. Helps child feel part of the family and take responsibility for the family. If you don't have custody, child never feels at peace.

Others suggest that assuming legal guardianship of the child may actually make it more difficult to access services and financial supports that caregivers may need to raise the child. One caregiving couple felt deceived and tricked by the child welfare system and cautioned that assuming guardianship of children excludes children and families from resources and services that children in the legal custody of the child welfare system routinely receive:

We didn't plan this but we enjoy doing it - we feel it is our responsibility to care for the kids in the circumstances. We were asked to seek legal guardianship when the children's mother passed. The state assisted us in getting guardianship and we feel that may have not been in our best interests. Because of the lack of services associated with legal guardianship...People think that those who are raising relatives don't need help/assistance because they are related to them. I don't think that it's fair.

Support Children's Relationships with their Parents

Some caregivers stressed the importance of not “putting biological parents down” and teaching children “to respect their parents, regardless of what they do.” A few made strong statements about the importance of not saying negative things about the children's parents, teaching the children to love their parents, yet being honest with the children about their parents:

I think people should treat each child individually and be careful of what you say about the parents to the children because they love their parents and do not understand why they are not with them...Love them, listen to what they have to say and try to understand what they are going through. The children are not responsible for the actions of their parents and teach them to love their parents.

You should never talk negative to a child about their parent. Regardless of the parents' problems let the child make up their own mind. Instill positive thoughts and hope; like that the parent can change...never talk bad about the parent because it will confuse the child.

Give the children plenty love and care, be there for them and teach them to love their parents...I don't know. Just give 'em your love and be there for them and keep a good relationship with each other.

Be truthful and understanding with family and always think of God and stay in touch with God and keep him active in lives of family...My advice to others would be to try to get along with the parents and do the best they can...I think they should be open with their kids (parent of child)....stay in church a lot. Be thankful for what you got.

It's hard...Important to establish a great relationship with the biological parents...Good to be honest with the children about the situation.

Caregiver should tell children about how it was growing up with bio-parent, what their lives were like and the things they went through...

It requires lots of patience, faith in God, love. I have to ask God to help me everyday...Any person, grandparent who talks bad about the kids parents in front of them is less than a person. You should release your feelings about the parents to God but not to the children.

Do not talk against the bio parent. Help the child to understand that her situation could be worse. The mother put her in a nurturing environment. We don't pick, judge our parents...We make sure we stay in school and make sure that child doesn't make same mistakes. Nurturing is not just the child but also for the biological mother. It was a must for the biological mother to have a relationship with the child when we said we would keep her.

However, one of these caregivers demonstrated how challenging it can be to continue to support the parent-child relationship in some situations. While at an early interview this caregiver stressed "...you don't talk against the kids' parents no matter what," during a subsequent interview she said she would no longer allow the children's father into her home. "I can't go through it no more - he's not welcome in my home." Another caregiver described the challenge of supporting the child's relationship with the parents in this way:

It is hard but you have to treat them like they are your children and do not say anything negative about their parents to the children. You have to deal with the constant interruptions of the mother being in and out of the child's life. After you have put a lot of time and energy into raising the child, there is always the fear that the mother will come back and take him away...Give them love and understanding.

Give the Child a Stable Life and a Good Future

Some caregivers emphasized the importance of ensuring that the child has a stable life, a good foundation, and roots:

It is very important when raising a relative's child that they have a stable life/roots. Important for a good foundation with love and discipline.

Make sure you provide them with the necessary things they need. That is what I am trying to do with these children now. They need much.

...Also, make sure the parent is stable before the child goes back.

The reason why you are raising that child. You are trying to assure that child's future-a good future. Some people don't understand that I am raising her for stability. Her parents use drugs. She needs a sense of family and security...It's expensive.

It's hard to be a caregiver if you don't have a stable set-up, but never give up. That's the key. Never give up. Always believe that there is help.

... have to be extra strong. Remember the mistakes you made the first time.

A number of caregivers recommended spending time getting to know children, talking with them, listening to them. Some caregivers stressed the importance of building up the children's self esteem and helping them realize that "they didn't do anything wrong to cause the situation." In addition, a number of caregivers stressed the importance of being a positive role model for the children. Several caregivers stressed teaching the children about God and taking them to church:

I think people should have a good understanding of the child and be there for them. Grandparents should be role models for the kids...You must teach them right from wrong. Teach them about God. Don't cuss in front of kids. Child and parent should have an understanding. They should feel free to talk to you. You should take them to church. You should read with them; help with homework... We need to know how to know them, respect them, to see how the child feels. We need to have one-on-one talks to see what he thinks.

The most important thing that we didn't talk about is love. Love is the key. Don't take a child if you don't love them. Instore some Christianity in her and help your future and love them- that's most important...People have to understand that first of all you have Christ in your life to deal with our children who are born with drugs in their system. You got to be patient, kind, humble, loving and understanding, and willing to sacrifice your time and love for them. Because they gonna be #1! Raise them with Christian love and always put em' in church activities and let them know God.

You should have a relationship with a child first. They don't need rhetoric - they need a relationship. Once you do that, its easy sailing. You not gone have too much complications wit'em. You need a loving relationship. You need to admit your faults to that child...your errors. And...it's okay to cry in front of that kid. And the last things...always insist on the rules. Keep your word...make him take responsibility. Don't lie to him - they'll lose they respect.

One caregiver stressed the importance of resolving conflicts within the family and suggested that the entire family may benefit from counseling:

When family members are raising relatives I think it important to have open communication and patch up what needs patched. I think the whole family needs counseling.

Be Loving, Patient, Understanding, and Honest

Several caregivers stressed the importance of loving children if one is to raise them. Here are some examples of the advice they provided to other caregivers:

First is love, if you don't love the child you can't raise him. Love conquers all. Church is important, it helps structure his life. It is important to realize that where you shape...the little people. They grow up and become part of society. What you put in, you get out. It's important to maintain a relationship with that child. Spend time and love. Talk to a child, don't yell at them. Treat children how you want to be treated.

Like I always say— you have to really love them and really love kids in order to treat them like your own.

You have to have a lot of love. If you did not love them, you wouldn't make it through it.

No, just love them and they will love you.

A number of caregivers just stressed the need for patience and understanding to accompany the love in a variety of ways:

They need to be patient and do all they can. Remember they are just kids and they desire a chance like you had...Children need special love and need to know they are special and loved no matter what, everything else falls into place. Let child know he is most important person on earth.

Need lots of love and patience to raise children especially when yours are grown and out of the home. Some children have many problems and need counseling which means you have to be willing to give more of yourself to get what they need.

You need to be able to understand them, make them feel loved. They should know that they will be cared for, and be same way mother and father will care for you.

Caregiver must maintain consistency in all they say or do so as not to confuse child. They must have patience and willing to go that extra mile in finding funding for children. Raising children is a job and can be challenging but it can be fun...It is an experience. You are ready [to] travel and lay in the sun...and then you are chasing five year old twins. So, it becomes an experience and a mission to meet their needs instead of your own.

It takes understanding, love. Be considerate of the child's feelings. I'm not saying break your back, but do whatever you can to help the child. It's not the child's fault their parents haven't gotten their act together...These kids are easy to fall in love with...Give them love. Listen and try not to be hard on them. Don't be angry with child because of their situation. Love them back.

Basically, patience is very important. We, as the family helping to care for the girls, need to have patience...It's more than a notion to do it. It takes dedication. Just like you would do your own. By them not having their parents around you have to do more. You have to do more because it affects them mentally. You have to be more sympathetic to their needs.

Caregivers must have patience with children in their care. Must be able to communicate with each other. Caregivers should listen to what children have to say...You have to have patience, talk and explain why they are with you and let them know they are not alone.

Well, ya just need a lotta patience, a lotta time, a lotta understanding and a lotta readjusting...

You must be patient with the child that you are caring for. As a caregiver you are used to having your own space and time but you must be patient with the children. You are starting all over again with WIC, shots, etc. I must make sacrifices and changes in my life. I do not want him in the system...You have to be patient with your grandson because you don't know what they've been through...It is not easy and it is scary because you don't know what to expect. You have to be a strong person for the kids.

Caregivers' Recommendations to Policy Makers

At the end of the interview, when caregivers were asked if they had any final thoughts or things that they wanted people to know about caring for a relative's child, many caregivers took this opportunity to make suggestions for necessary changes in policy or to express their struggles and their dissatisfaction with current policies that impact informal kinship caregivers.

Provide Financial Support for Relative Caregivers and Their Families

Many caregivers expressed a desire for more financial resources for themselves and their families. They talked about the lack of financial support and how this makes it even more difficult to care for their relatives' children:

When people are taken by storm and have to take children immediately, they are not financially stable. There should be something for relatives.

I think the system should help the relative and not penalize them financially. They should provide some type of assistance to help provide for these children.

Well, relative caregivers need a lot of support from outside agencies when they don't know how to get resources. The little money that they do get is so little that they can barely support themselves. I think the children should also have someone to instruct them and the parents on how to get those outside activities and respite.

The main thing is being financially able to support them. Like some of the kids were involved or exposed to drugs. We need to be able to get the resources for these children. They need free camp and other summer activities. I have to pay for it. It went up (camp) from \$50 to \$100 this year from last year.

If they have support that is good. Need as much support as possible. If you don't have the support it is difficult. You need finances. There is a need for money, if you want to raise children right. It takes money to raise them and feed them. That doesn't include concerts, the symphony, or cultural exposure. We do the best we can without the money. The church substitutes with activities for the children.

Caregivers need financial help to raise kids. Agencies should help you care for the kids until they can go back with the parents.

That's a strange question to ask. I didn't want this responsibility, but I was afraid something would happen to him. I guess he's the son I didn't have. I just wish these laws would realize how hard it is to raise a child on little or no money. I really wanna move somewhere where he can play safely.

Well, I probably done said it before: It's not that people don't want to take their relative's kids. I think they should get recognition for that. It's like, oh well... A lot of times, they've raised their own families. Give alternative services to help when you've taken the child off the state. There's so much red tape. When you get into it, they play on your emotions and don't tell you the ins and outs. I need an after school program - that's not in my budget. You could say, 'I done raised mine!' It's so many closed doors. It is really frustrating.

Some caregivers stated that they wanted the same kinds of services and financial support that families involved with DCFS receive:

I feel that regardless who the children belong with, the people caring for the children should receive some help, whether they are involved with DCFS or not.

Ensure Access to Services for Relative Caregivers and Their Families

Other caregivers mentioned the need for more support services, such as counseling, clothing, respite services, and support groups for themselves and their families. Caregivers also called for more outreach to help relative caregivers get in touch with the appropriate resources for their family. They found it difficult to obtain services to meet the needs of their family. They voiced frustration and dissatisfaction with the government systems that are supposed to support them. Some felt that the system is hard to navigate and that TANF, Section 8 and other services are inadequate in meeting the needs of caregivers and their families.

As a grandmother raising my grandchild I think I should be able to pick up the phone and get some help, I don't find help accessible at all...there isn't enough help out there and there is very little knowledge about what help is out there.... Need more programs for grandparents to help raise children.

... Help would be good. Once I have guardianship, who do I call when I need something? I don't know of any formal organizations that help people in my situation specifically.

Some caregivers stressed the need for services to support the caregiver, including support groups and classes to help caregivers understand what the children in their care might be experiencing. As one caregiver stated, "Provide some classes to help caregiver understand how kids feel." Another caregiver indicated that the caregiver might actually need more support than the children if they are going to be able to care for these children:

It can be very stressful, but when you decide to care for other people's children, you have to be sympathetic to the need of the children. There is a lot of stress, time and effort that goes into it and meshing two families together. We now need more support than the children, like more outreach programs.

Focus on the Needs of Children—and Support Caregivers

Several caregivers spoke as advocates on behalf of the children, stating that children deserve to be with people who will love and care for them. They stated that there is a need for more supportive services for the children who are living with relatives and are not able to live with their parents. Several caregivers also stated that policies and programs were needed to support relative caregivers so they can meet the needs of the children—but public support for relative caregivers is lacking:

You have to give the kids all the help you can especially if their parent died. Also, you should get as much help as you can when taking on such a huge responsibility.

When you raising other's people children, you'll have people remind you that these really are not your kids. But these are my kids. So, I guess I want people to know they should be supportive of people raising relatives' children.

Summary and Conclusions

Kinship caregivers described a number of strengths as well as challenges faced by the related children in their care. Strengths of children included having an easy going temperament and being a loving child as well as being grateful to the caregiver and understanding and forgiving toward their parents. Some caregivers identified strengths that children displayed through improving behavior or academic success. Children's challenges included academic problems, emotional/mental health issues, physical health problems, and behavior problems for some children.

Caregivers also identified their own strengths and challenges. Strengths included a positive view of the caregiving experience, the ability to recognize progress, willingness to make sacrifices, a natural helping tradition in their families, spirituality that serves as a source of strength and support, and commitment to providing a positive, safe, and stable environment for

the child. Other strengths included a high level of involvement and investment in the child's life, experience with children and an understanding of children's needs. A few caregivers identified their knowledge of resources and how to access them as strengths, and some caregivers identified their own aspirations and achievements as strengths.

Caregivers also identified a number of challenges that they experienced. These included personal sacrifices they have had to make to care for a relative's child, challenges with the child's biological parent, and emotional challenges that accompany caring for a relative's child. Some caregivers indicated that they have given up too much. Some stressed that it is more difficult raising grandchildren or other relatives than it was raising their own children and that it has had an impact on relationships with intimate partners and other family members. Many caregivers described the financial challenges as well as other hardships, stress, and physical health challenges that complicate the task of raising a relative's child.

One hundred fifty-one caregivers identified at least one service that they or their family members received. All 207 caregivers identified at least one service that they or their family members needed and were not receiving. Many caregivers indicated that they lacked knowledge of services and supports that might exist or how to access them.

When reflecting on their own experience, kinship caregivers fell into a number of categories: those who would recommend that families care for their kin, those who indicate that they would do it again, those who would do it again despite the challenges, those who are not unsure whether they would do it again, and those who indicate they definitely would not care for a relative's child again. Another group of caregivers indicated that they would give it careful consideration before caring for a relative's child because they do not believe that it should be necessary—believing that parents should be able to raise their own children.

The caregivers in this study provided a great deal of advice to those who might consider becoming a kinship caregiver. They stressed that potential caregivers should understand that caring for a relative's child requires a high degree of personal sacrifice. They recommended that potential caregivers take care of themselves and be aware of their own limitations, be prepared for a variety of difficulties they will encounter, and be committed to the child—since this may be a very long-term arrangement. Some caregivers recommended participation in support groups. Some caregivers warned of the roller coaster ride that is the relationship with some parents of children in kinship care. Some caregivers recommended getting legal custody of the children while others cautioned against this, indicating that taking guardianship makes families ineligible for some services. A number of caregivers emphasized supporting children's relationships with their parents and not saying anything bad about the parents to the children. Many caregivers stressed that the role of the caregiver is to give the child a stable life and a good future and recommended being loving, patient, understanding and honest in interactions with the relative's children.

Caregivers also made recommendations to policy makers. First and foremost caregivers recommended financial support for kinship caregivers and their families. Caregivers also recommended that policy makers find a way to ensure that relative caregivers know about services and supports that might be available and that kinship caregivers can access these services. Finally, caregivers stressed that policy makers and the general public need to keep the focus on the needs of children who live with relatives, and that they support kinship caregivers so they can support the children.