

## CHAPTER VIII: CHILDREN'S VIEWS

In this chapter we summarize the results of interviews with 56 children who were at least eight years old and were also the focus of the CBCL and PSI during the caregiver interviews. We audio taped the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The few quotes that are included in this chapter represent the children's words exactly as they stated them.

### **Characteristics of the Children Interviewed**

The 56 children we interviewed were fairly representative of the 207 children who were the focus of the CBCL and PSI during caregiver interviews, with the exception of their ages. While children in the overall sample were as young as 18 months of age at the time of the initial caregiver interview, the children that we interviewed ranged in age from six years and eight months to eleven years of age when their caregiver was first interviewed. Mean and median ages at that time were slightly older than 9 years. However, we did not interview any of the children until they reached 8 years of age. Twenty nine (51.8%) of the children we interviewed were male and 27 (48.2%) were female. Fifty-three (94.6%) were African American, two were Caucasian and one was Latino. Thirty-six (64.3%) were living with a grandmother, 11 (19.6%) with an aunt or uncle, 3 (5.4%) with a great aunt or uncle, 4 (7.1%) with an older sibling, and 2 (3.6%) with cousins. Forty-eight (85.7%) of these caregivers were the children's maternal relatives. The relative caregiver had legal guardianship of 34 (60.7%) of these children. According to their caregivers, 11 of the children (19.6%) had no contact with their mothers and the same number had daily contact with their mothers. Three (5.4%) children had contact with their mothers on a yearly basis, 7 (12.5%) several times a year, 15 (26.8%) monthly, and 9 (16.1%) at least weekly. Half of the children we interviewed (N=28) had no contact with their fathers, 4 (7.1%) had daily

contact with their fathers, 4 had yearly contact, and another 4 contact several times a year. Ten children (17.9%) had at least monthly contact and 5 (8.9%) had at least weekly contact with their fathers.

The CBCL internalizing behavior problems t-scores for these children at the first interview with the caregiver ranged from 33 to 81, with a mean t-score of 54.71 and median of 55. CBCL externalizing behavior problems t-scores ranged from 40 to 81, with a mean of 59.86 and a median of 58. The CBCL total behavior problems t-score ranged from 32 to 81, with a mean of 58.05 and a median score of 58. Their caregivers' scores on the Parenting Stress Index at the initial caregiver interview ranged from a very low 5<sup>th</sup> percentile to a very high 95<sup>th</sup> percentile, with a mean just below the 67<sup>th</sup> percentile and a median score just below the 73<sup>rd</sup> percentile.

### **Child's Conception of Family/Feeling Part of a Family**

To determine children's conception of family and degree to which they felt part of a family we asked children to draw a family tree (figure 2). The concept of the family tree is similar to that of a genogram but we consider it to be more child-friendly. The family tree allows the child to be creative, literally drawing a tree with colored markers, and indicating the names of family members on the branches of the tree. We instructed children to include anyone in the family tree that they considered a member of their family. Children defined family broadly, including nuclear and extended maternal and paternal family living in and outside of the household, godparents, deceased relatives, as well as pets, friends and teachers. The number of members on each child's family tree ranged from 8 to 33 members.

We also asked children to identify persons in the family tree to whom they felt closest. Many children reported feeling closest to their current caregivers. Others indicated that they felt

closest to their mothers or fathers. Yet others indicated that they felt closest to other relatives, including aunts or grandparents living in other households. Several children mentioned that they were particularly close to siblings or cousins who lived with them or in the households of other relatives. When asked whom of his eleven nuclear and extended family members he felt closed to, one child responded, “all of them”. It was clear from the responses of most of the 56 children, that they felt connected to large and supportive extended families.

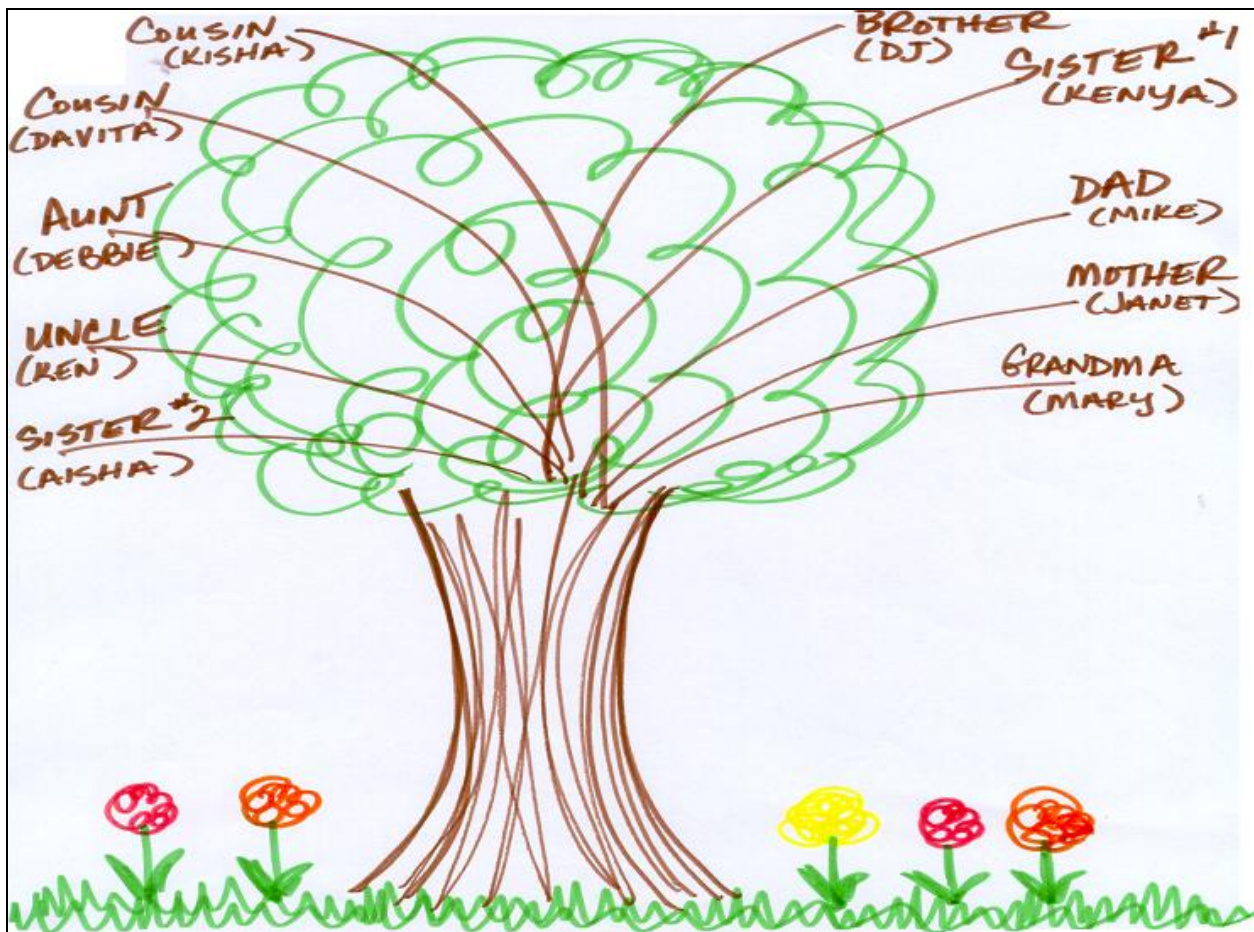


Figure 2: Fictitious Example of a Family Tree

## **Child's Sense of Belonging**

While the children's construction of family trees and identification of family members to whom they felt close communicated a great deal about the degree to which they felt as if they belong to a family, we were also interested in whether the children felt welcome in the caregiver's home. We asked children to tell us about some of the things that relative caregivers can do to help children feel welcome in their home. Five themes emerged from the data on the specific things that caregivers can do: (1) meet child's physical and material needs, (2) meet child's emotional needs, (3) teach and support child, (4) respect child, and (5) do activities with the child. Most of the children gave multiple responses.

### ***Meet Physical and Material Needs***

Forty-four children stated that caregivers should meet their physical and material needs in order for children to feel welcome in the home. Children thought that caregivers should provide food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for the child to feel welcome. Caring for the children by washing their clothes, giving them bathes, dressing them warmly, caring for them when they are sick and even disciplining them appropriately makes children feel welcome. Additionally, several children commented that protecting the child from harm, buying them things and giving them allowances make them feel welcome.

### ***Emotional Needs***

Fifteen children indicated that meeting the child's emotional needs is something caregivers can do to make the child feel welcome in the caregiver's home. Children stated that caregivers should listen to children and show affection to them by kissing and hugging them. Children also said that caregivers should comfort the children in their home and help them feel cared for.

### ***Teach and Support Child***

Fourteen children stated that caregivers should support and teach children in order to make them feel welcome in their home. Helping children with their homework and supporting their education by making sure they attend school and are doing well in school makes children feel welcome. Additionally, teaching children to respect their elders, orienting them to household rules and where things go in the home also makes the child feel welcome. The children we interviewed also indicated that teaching them about things that have happened in their lives, about responsibility, the Bible, and the difference between right and wrong makes them feel welcome. Some of the children also said that caregivers can also help children feel welcome in indirect ways by encouraging others to make the child feel welcome (e.g. others living in the caregiver's home). One child stated it this way: "Show us where certain stuff is at. Help us with stuff that we don't know...help us with stuff that we don't know that happened in our life."

### ***Respect Child/Be Proud to Care for Child***

Fifteen children stated caregivers can make children feel welcome in their home by showing them respect. The children told us that they felt welcome when caregivers treated them nicely and as part of the family. They said children feel welcome in caregivers' homes when it is clear that caregivers are proud to care for the children and do not yell at them. When asked to describe what relatives can do to make children feel welcome in their home, one child said, "That they can be proud that they have to get those children safe."

### ***Activities***

Nineteen children stated that caregivers could make children feel welcome in their homes by participating in activities with them. Children suggested that caregiver's take the children places like the water park, Disney World, church, out to dinner, shopping, and to the movies.

Children indicated that caregivers should take children places to have fun together. Caregivers should also draw, sing, dance, and play with the children to help them feel welcome in the caregiver's home. Here is one child's perspective: "They would take me anywhere, and they would help you out, and they would be very, very happy to have you living with them."

### **Place Child Feels Most At Home**

We asked children to describe the one place they felt most at home and to tell us the things they like best about that place. Thirty children said they felt most at home with their current caregiver. Three children stated that they felt most at home with their current caregiver and in the homes of other family members (father, mother, aunt). Four children stated that they felt most at home in their rooms (in the caregiver's home). Twelve children indicated that they felt most at home in the home of a different relative (father, mother, aunt, sister, grandmother). Five children indicated that they felt most at home in a different location other than with their current caregiver or another relative. These locations were with friends (playing with video games and watching TV), everywhere or anywhere the child is (playing with others & going places), playing in the park (has fun), a prior living arrangement (child's personal possessions), or at the child's "old house" (friends). One child said that he felt at home "at home" but did not elaborate. One child stated that he did not want to answer the question.

Five themes emerged from the explanations 23 children provided regarding why they felt most at home with their current caregiver: (1) activities, (2) home atmosphere, (3) family, (4) gifts and (5) food. Many children's comments fit into multiple themes. Ten children stated that the activities they participate in at the caregiver's home help them feel most at home there. Children stated that watching television, playing in and outside, riding their bikes, and reading books make them feel at home. Eight children indicated that the home environment was the

reason they felt most at home in the caregiver's home. These children discussed feeling supported by the caregiver, living in a safe neighborhood, feeling comfortable and at peace, or residing in a nice home that has "lots of stuff". In the following example, a child said that a feeling of safety contributes to feeling at home in his current caregiver's home: "...I feel comfortable here. I know that nobody won't hurt me; I can usually go to sleep..."

Eight children indicated that they felt most at home in their caregiver's home because they live with or have family in the area. Children commented that they like having family present, and being around people who love them. The children stated that playing with their siblings and cousins made them feel at home, as well as spending time with their elder relatives.

One child commented that receiving gifts for her birthday made her feel at home. Three children indicated that they felt most at home at the caregiver's home because of the food the caregiver provided for them. The children enjoyed eating popcorn and pizza, and commented that the food was good.

Of the four children who stated that they felt most at home in their rooms, two themes emerged from the data: (1) activities and (2) personal possessions. Two children felt that playing with their games, watching TV; sleeping and personal possessions made them feel at home. Two children said that their beds and books made them feel at home.

Of the twelve children who indicated that they felt most at home in the home of a different relative, six themes emerged from the data. They are (1) family (2) activities, (3) home atmosphere, (4) personal possessions, (5) gifts and (6) food. Several of the children's comments fit into more than one theme. Five children reported that playing with siblings, cousins, and having a lot of family around and spending time with family members were reasons they felt most at home with these relatives. Four children commented that doing activities at the home of

other relatives is what made them feel most at home. Playing and watching movies and going places made these children feel at home. Three children indicated that they felt most at home at a relative's home because of the home environment. Children stated that their relative's home environment made them feel safe, that someone was watching over them, that they felt loved there and because the environment was clean. A child explains why she feels most at home at her father's home: "I feel safer ...cause a lot a my cousins...be there...and a lot a...a lot a my family live around ner'...and er'body know me since I was lil' baby...I born in that house. Cause when I go outside, I know somebody watchin' over me. Somebody grown. I see'em er'where I go."

One child stated that her personal possessions at their relative's home made her feel most at home there, mentioning her stuffed animals in particular. Two children stated that they felt at home because their relative buys them things. One child commented that the relative buying him chips was the reason he felt most at home there. One child mentioned that the food at the relative's home made her feel most at home there.

### **What Children Like About Living with Caregiver**

We also asked children what they liked best about living with their relative. Four themes emerged from the data on the things that children liked about living with caregivers. The themes are: (1) the activities the child engages in, (2) interaction with caregivers and other family members, (3) the way in which the caregiver provides for the child, and (4) the household atmosphere.

#### ***Activities***

Thirty children stated engaging in activities is what they liked best about living with their caregiver. The children discussed going fun places like shopping, to the park, to the museum and

to church. They enjoy playing games and listening to music with their caregiver and other family members. Three children responded this way to the question:

*Sometimes, my, sometimes my grandma plays jazz sometimes and I like some of the jazz that she has. And I like to spend time with my grandma.*

*I get to have fun with them.*

*Hmmmmmm...he let us go, across the border. Yeah he let us across the border to Canada...*

### ***Interaction with Family Members/Caregiver***

Twenty-one children indicated that their interaction with their caregiver and other family members is what they liked best about living with a relative. Children commented that their caregivers are nice, sweet and love them. These children felt cared for, supported and loved by their caregiver. Several children mentioned that they are able to have more contact with their mother, siblings, cousins or other relatives than if they lived somewhere else. Living with caregiver, children learn about things that have happened in their past and they learn about their ancestors and family history. Several children mentioned that they enjoy living with someone who they know loves them. Others described feeling protected by family members and that they also appreciate knowing how family members are doing:

*They tell me about stuff that happened in my past. And they tell me how certain people in my family that I didn't know died and how they had pictured of them and I can see them, even though they're dead.*

*It's kind of like a normal house. It's not like, how do I put it? It's not like you, like you like say for most kids like maybe most kids think about it that like they're sad because like their grandma has custody of 'em. I mean like I'm not really sad because then I get to spend more time with her. 'Cause if I was livin' in a house and she was like, maybe she was um, like say I was livin' in Kentucky, I wouldn't get to see her anymore. So it's pretty easy livin' here.*

*That I'm living with somebody that I love.*

*Um, I like best that I'm with my sister, my aunt and like. I can still see my mom and my baby brother and stuff.*

*Cause, I'm not that lonely like I am with my brother and sister. Cause I got my cousins and stuff over there.*

*Um, I have somebody on my side.*

*Well, the best thing is she get to take us all the places and she's a comfort to us and... Well, when I was a little child she use to always take care of me while my momma was sick.*

*That she loves me.*

*That I get supported good.*

*That she loves me and takes care of me.*

### ***Child Feels Provided For***

When asked what they liked best about living with their relative caregiver, 11 children responded in ways that demonstrated that they felt that the relative ensured that their needs were met. Some indicated that the caregiver gave them candy or other food. Others talked about their bedroom furniture, own room, clothes, money, medical care. Some children just stated that the relative takes care of them or does things for them:

*And I get food and I get a doctor. And I got a doctor.*

*My toys, my clothes and my food.*

*Mm, I li-, I like, I like they hotdogs. And I like they tacos...I like my, and I like what they bought me... Okay, your clothes and... Yeah, and my bed.*

*His love, he puts clothes on [me] and stuff, a roof over my head and stuff like that.*

### ***Household Atmosphere***

Seven children described the atmosphere of the caregiver's home when asked what they liked best. They described a "peaceful, normal home" that is "easy to live in," with a "fun

atmosphere”. Some children described the fact that they have chores and must help clean the house as things they like best. Others described the home atmosphere as safe and comfortable:

*That it's safe and comfortable.*

*It's peaceful.*

*She, uh, she makes us clean our rooms and stuff. And when umm, she...and that's all. She let's us clean our rooms. And uh, do the bathroom.*

*I like best cleaning up the house. I like clean up, helping clean, wash the dishes...the front room...cook.*

### **What Children Dislike About Living with Caregiver**

While half of the children (n=23) stated that there was nothing that they disliked about living with their caregiver and 12 did not respond to the question, 21 children identified at least one thing they disliked. Five themes emerged from the responses. They are: (1) absence of parents, (2) relationship issues with household members, (3) household environmental issues, (4) discipline issues, and (5) unpleasant activities.

Two children stated that the one thing they disliked about living with their current caregiver was that they were unable to see their parents on a regular basis. Six children indicated that they disliked their interaction with the caregiver and others in the caregiver's home. Children commented that they felt the caregiver was “hard on them” and made them angry. They also did not like how caregivers conducted themselves when they gossiped about others or got angry in certain situations. Additionally, a few children did not like how other children in the home treated them, stating that their siblings or others in the home bossed them around or the caregiver treated other children in the home better than them.

Five children stated that they disliked the environment in which they lived. Children were unhappy about the conditions within the household, as well as in the community. Some children

felt unsafe because of community violence. For example, a child stated that he did not like the neighborhood because “there’s a lot of shooting out here.” Additionally, several children did not like the condition of the caregiver’s home. A couple of children commented that the home smelled, had roaches, mice, or boarded up windows. One child complained that he did not have friends living in the area, and a few children disliked sharing a room with their siblings.

Four children dislike being punished by the caregiver. Children commented that they often did not get allowance or were unable to go places when they misbehave. One child stated that he did not like being hit by the caregiver when he misbehaved. Six children stated that they disliked participating in certain activities at the caregiver’s home. Children commented that they did not enjoy watching the news on television, reading a book daily, staying in the house, cleaning, and going certain places with caregiver. One child did not like being alone when the caregiver would leave the home for extended periods of time in order to go to the store.

### **Children’s Sense of Stability and Permanence**

To determine their sense of stability and permanence in their caregivers’ homes, children were asked to tell us where they were living on their last birthday and where they expect to be living on their next birthday. Forty-two children (75%) were residing with their current caregiver on their last birthday. Three children (5%) were living with a different relative on their last birthday. Information is missing for eleven children (20%), either because the interviewer did not ask the question or we were unable to determine where the child was living based on the child’s response to the question.

Twenty-seven (48%) children felt that they would still be living with their current relative on their next birthday. Two of the 27 children said they would be living with their current caregiver but in a new location. One of the 27 children stated that his parents would join the

caregiver's household. One child stated that she wanted her mother to move into the home because she had never spent a birthday with her mother. Five children indicated that they would be living in a different location on their next birthday but did not indicate who their caregiver would be. One child indicated she wanted to live anywhere as long as there was a family member there.

Eight children felt that they would be living with a different relative at the time of their next birthday. Six of those eight thought they would be living with their biological mother. One child thought she would be living with an aunt and one child thought he would be living with his sister. Six children indicated that they were uncertain with whom they would be living on their next birthday. Information is missing for nine of the children, either because the interviewer did not ask the question or we were unable to determine where the children felt they would be living based on their response to the question.

We also asked children where and with whom they would like to be living in the future. Twenty-three of the children (41%) indicated that they prefer to live with their current caregivers, however, 15 of these children specified others they wished would also be living in the home with the caregiver: 3 (5.4%) children indicated they wanted to live with their current caregiver and mother; 3 (5.4%) said they wanted to live with the current caregiver and their siblings; 1 (1.8%) indicated a preference for living with the current caregiver and mother and father; 1 (1.8%) with the caregiver and father, and 1 (1.8%) with the caregiver, mother and siblings; and 5 stated they wanted to live with the current caregiver and a variety of others, including relatives and friends. For example, one of these children indicated the desire to live in a mansion and said, "Everybody that I'm living with now and more people like my relatives, my

family. If it's if the mansion is really big and has a whole lot of rooms I'd bring, if I could, I bring my whole family there.”

Sixteen children (28.6%) said they wanted to live with one or more of their parents: 6 children (10.7%) indicated that they prefer to live with their mother; 3 (5.4%) with their mother and father; 2 (3.6%) with their mother and siblings; 2 (3.6%) with mother, father and siblings; 1 (1.8%) with mother, father and grandmother (not the current caregiver); 2 children (3.6%) preferred to live with their fathers; and one child specified a preference for living with the father and great-grandmother. Two children (3.6%) preferred to live with their siblings; Five children (8.9%) indicated that they wanted to live with a variety of other relatives (e.g. aunts, uncles, other than current caregiver). Three children (5.4%) indicated that they wanted to live with “family” without specifying the family members. Most children seemed to have a feeling of security and a belief that they would have a place to live in the future that included family. One of the children (1.8%) was clearly less certain of the future but wanted to live with the current caregiver or mother. This child indicated, “My grandma said she is going to kick me out at eighteen, so really, really my mom or my grandmother.”

Six children (10.7%) either did not specify who they would like to live with but described something about the living environment (e.g. “I would like to live in a good place where there there's no fights, no gangs, no shooting, no nothing...and I would like to live with uh, good people”) or mentioned a preference for living with someone other than family (e.g. teacher, friends, etc).

Several of these children elaborated further when they described their preferred future living arrangements. Some who indicated a preference for living with the current caregiver stated that they would like to live with their current caregiver but in better housing accommodations

and with other relatives. Several children responded to this question in a way we did not anticipate, focusing on the type of house or neighborhood the child desired. For example, when asked where they would like to be living in the future, one child said “I want to live in white people’s neighborhoods where ya got a big ole back yard, something to play around in with your dog...ya, ya, ya have tea parties with your friends.” Another child stated that she would like to live with the current caregiver along with her mother so that her mother would have a better life. One child stated, “I would like to live with my mother and to move to Disney World.” One child stated that he wanted to grow up and become famous in order to take care of his entire family.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Interviews were conducted with 56 children who were living with the kinship caregivers in this study. These children were the focus of the CBCL and PSI in the caregiver interviews and were at least eight years old at the time they were interviewed. The interviews were semi-structured, guided by a number of open-ended questions. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using Atlas.ti software and a grounded theory framework. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the children’s views of family; their sense of safety, belonging, stability and permanence; and their views about living with a relative other than a parent.

To understand how children viewed “family” we asked them to draw a family tree and to list the names of each person in their family on limbs of the tree. Children defined family broadly, listing between 8 and 33 members including nuclear and extended maternal and paternal family members living in and outside of the caregiver’s household, fictive kin, and sometimes pets, friends and teachers. The majority of children appeared to feel that they were part of a large and loving extended family. Children described things that caregivers did that made them feel

welcome in their homes: (1) meeting their physical and material needs, (2) meeting their emotional needs for affection and recognition, (3) teaching and supporting them, (4) respecting the children and being proud to care for them, and (5) participating in activities with the children and taking them on outings.

We asked children to describe the place they felt most at home. The majority of children felt most at home with the current caregiver but more than 20% of the children indicated that they felt most at home with another relative they were not currently living with such as their mother, father, aunt, sister or grandmother. A few children indicated that they felt most at home with a parent and the current caregiver. When asked what made them feel at home, children described activities, the safe and comfortable atmosphere of the home, contact with many family members, gifts they receive on birthdays, the food that is provided, or their personal possessions. We also asked children what they liked and disliked about living with the current caregiver. Children indicated that they liked activities they engaged in, interaction with the caregiver and other extended family members, the way the caregiver provides for the child, and the atmosphere of the home. Twenty-one of the children were able to identify at least one thing they did not like about living with the current caregiver. These dislikes fell into five categories: (1) absence of the parents, (2) conflicts with household members, (3) the community or household environment, (4) discipline issues, and (5) activities that they disliked.

To determine their sense of stability and permanence in their caregivers' homes, children were asked to tell us where they were living on their last birthday and where they expect to be living on their next birthday. Three quarters of the children were residing with their current caregiver on their last birthday. Three children (5%) were living with a different relative on their last birthday. Information is missing for eleven children (20%), either because the interviewer

did not ask the question or we were unable to determine where the child was living based on the child's response to the question. Nearly half (48%) of the children expected to be living with their current relative on their next birthday, five children indicated that they would be living in a different location on their next birthday but did not indicate who their caregiver would be, and one child indicated she wanted to live anywhere as long as there was a family member there. Eight children felt that they would be living with a different relative at the time of their next birthday, six with their biological mother, one with an aunt and one child thought he would be living with his sister. Six children indicated that they were uncertain with whom they would be living on their next birthday. Information is missing for nine of the children, because the interviewer did not ask the question or we were unable to determine where the children felt they would be living based on their response to the question.

We also asked children where and with whom they would like to be living in the future. Forty-one percent of the children indicated that they prefer to live with their current caregivers, 28.6% said they wanted to live with one or more of their parents and other children indicated that they wanted to live with their siblings, a variety of other relatives, or "family" without specifying the family members. Most children seemed to have a feeling of security and a belief that they would have a place to live in the future that included family.

Interviews with children suggest that a sense of belonging to a large and caring extended family is a protective factor that helps to buffer the risks that children experience when their birth parents are unable to care for them. Many of these children value not only the relationship with their current caregiver, but the relationship with their parents, siblings, cousins and other relatives as well. Responses from many of these children reveal that that they recognize and value the way that their current kinship caregiver ensures that their basic needs are met and

makes the children feel valued. These responses often reveal memories of a less stable time in their life and fears that they may not be able to fully depend on their birth parents if they returned to live with them in the future.