

CHAPTER IX: PARENTS' VIEWS

We interviewed 30 birth parents of the children in this study, 27 mothers and 3 fathers. The parents ranged from 19 to 50 years of age. The average age was 30. Twenty-four (80%) of the parents we interviewed identified themselves as African American, 2 as Hispanic, 2 as mixed race/culture (Black/Puerto Rican/German, Puerto Rican and German), 1 as Creole, and 1 as Caucasian. Thirteen of the 30 (43%) parents we interviewed lived with their child and the kinship caregiver, although they did not function as the child's primary caregiver.⁵

Forty-one percent of the parents reported that their sources of income included financial assistance in the forms of public aid, Social Security benefits, child support and food stamps. Twenty-three percent were employed and twenty-three percent reported no sources of income. Thirteen percent report that their income came from other sources. Thirty-seven percent reported having some high school education. Thirty percent earned a high school diploma or GED and 27% reported having some college education. Six percent reported having an educational certificate or associate's degree.

Reasons Children Are Living with Relatives

Parents reported a number of reasons for their child living with relatives. Some parents reported multiple reasons that kinship care became necessary. Some parents tell a story of becoming pregnant very young and living with the child in the caregiver's home, but later leaving without the child. Lack of adequate housing and drug use were reasons stated by a number of parents. Sometimes kinship care was precipitated by parental job loss. Others

⁵ This is a considerably higher percentage than observed for the entire sample of 207 families. Sixteen percent of the parents of the 207 children in this study lived with their children and the caregiver, but were not functioning as the child's primary caregiver at the time of the initial interview with the caregiver. Most never became primary caregiver of these children during the course of this study.

indicated that they needed the relative to care for the child in order to hold a job, complete schooling, or “get myself together.” Several parents stressed that they viewed this arrangement as temporary, however, some seemed discouraged and not convinced that they would one day assume full responsibility for rearing their children. In a few cases, mental health problems, psychological trauma, or the death of the parent’s own parent or a child precipitated the distress that led to the need for kinship care. Disrupted and turbulent relationships with intimate partners also contributed to the need for kinship care in the views of several parents. One parent indicated, “...I was in a relationship and it didn’t quite work out so we ended up coming back home with my Mom.” She reported that she was back and forth with her children between the caregiver’s home (her mother) and a boyfriend and she began using drugs. Her mother offered to take care of the children while she got on her feet.

Current and Future Role in Child’s Life

The birth parents interviewed in this study reported that they had regular contact with their children. The majority of the parents saw their role in the lives of their children as important both for the children and for themselves. The parents reported contact with their children that ranged from daily to monthly. The degree to which these parents reported that they assumed parenting responsibilities also varied. Some parents stated that they helped the child with homework or read with the child. A couple indicated that they often fixed meals and participated in a full range of parenting responsibilities. Most commonly, parents described the different activities they did with their children, playing with them or accompanying them on outings to parks or museums (e.g. “Bike riding, or taking a walk, going to the park, go bowling”). Other responses from individual parents included setting limits or disciplining the child, volunteering at the child’s school, walking the child to and from school, “doing the child’s hair,” going to church

with the child and caregiver, teaching the child things, or taking the child to the library. Watching television or movies with the children was also a common response.

One parent indicated that she is a "...good mother, now..." compared to times past. One parent stated that she is actively planning for the child's return to live with her, fixing up a room for the child, etc. Several parents stressed that they are available to their children by cell phone and that they keep promises to their children, showing up when they plan to visit:

...I take care of her. I make sure she gets to school on time. I volunteer...in the morning. I return and pick her up after school and bring her home.

...we do different things. We play cards, we read, do puzzles...enjoyable, fun...it allow us time to bond.

...I think we have a good time with each other. I love to do their hair. So you know that's another girl thing, polish toes...and we like to do hair, play with dolls and all that other stuff.

Um, right now I talk to them every day and I still, you know, I take care of them. But I'm just not here every day. I come here on Friday night and stay the weekend.

...I'll cook dinner and we go to the library. So basically I'm still the mother part. I'm just not able to house them just yet.

I'm still mother. I still go check and see if she needs anything. Believe me, I'm still mother.

I play a major role in his life. In all of their lives, basically...It means getting up, feeding, cooking, answering questions...wiping noses, putting band-aids on...takin' 'em to the park, takin' 'em to the store, just being here.

You know, I want them to know that I'm available for them at any time...I don't care if I have to leave my job...to see what's going on. That's what I do; they already know that no matter what the situation is I will be there.

Most parents described the desire to overcome their own struggles and assume full responsibility for their children. Several parents talked about supporting the child although the child may continue to grow up in the care of a relative. More than one parent indicated that they wanted to teach the child, help the child make good decisions, and help the child avoid the

parent's mistakes. One mother who reported regular weekly involvement with her children, taking them bowling every weekend and to church stated "...they need me as much as I need them...I'm thankful that my mother is able to help me but I see us now still bowling but we'll be together on our own maybe by the year 2003." (Interview conducted in November of 2002). Others made the following statements when asked to describe the role they want to have in their children's lives in the future:

I would like to be ... a stand-up mother. I want to be able to take full responsibility for him myself...where I buy all their clothes, and buy the food and take them back and forth to school, take full responsibility.

I want to be there for her...I want to be her mother. That's more to me than being her friend, because you know you can pick your friends, but you know you can't always pick your parents. So I want her to know that you know I want her to be able to learn from my mistakes.

I would like to play his friend, his mom. Someone he can confide in...to be, uh, you know, I want him to be able to come to me and talk to me, talk to me about anything.

I wanna be a better mother; someone that they could look up [to] and say, 'I wanna be like my mamma when I get older.'

I wanna be there for her forever. I wanna be her father...I wanna be someone that she can talk to about anything you know.

One mother shared this dream about future relationships with her daughters once they are adults:

...I could see all of us intertwining and becoming real good girlfriends later on in the future as they get older and be able to go shopping and sit around and talk and all that.

Feelings When With Child and Away From Child

Parents expressed feelings of loneliness when separated from their children and feelings of joy and happiness when they were with their children. Most parents described how much they enjoyed spending time with their children, the warm feelings and feelings of love that they

experienced. One parent indicated that it is also stressful to spend time with her child because of the child's behavioral problems and the parent's temper and impatience. Others described spending time with their children as "enlightening" or "inspiring."

Joy, laughter, fun, and it's a learning experience for me.

Enlightening...I feel a warm feeling...and all the things I miss, all, the feelings I didn't know I had, from not spending the time with my other children.

I enjoy being with her...she's very smart...and uh, she has a, a funny sense of humor. So you know that I can honestly say I like being around her because of her sense of humor, 'cause she, she has a, a way of making me laugh.

It be a happy feeling, joyful. She's an inspiring little girl. Anything she says makes you laugh. She has that inner glow in her.

...when I finally got to start spending time with 'em it felt good. You know I was thinking, you know this is what you should be doing. This is what you should [have] been doing all along you know...

Parents reported feelings of sadness, sometimes overwhelming sadness, when they are not with their children. One parent described feelings of guilt. Another indicated always wondering what the child is doing. Another described the fun she has spending time with her child, but misses not being there all of the time. Her child is growing up and she is missing out.

I feel like he's missing me...because I be missing him. I'm always thinking about him and I feel, 'cause he's a lot like me. He's sensitive. He's a Cancer like me. Um, I feel he's be missing, I think that, let me see, he's depressed. Because sometimes he would just cry and say don't nobody love him and stuff like that. And I'll be doing the same thing.

...a ball of feelings...I miss her, her new steps, her calling me mommy and everything like that...because my kids are my world and I want them to know that. They know that I made some mistakes in the past or whatever the case may have been. But I love them dearly, no matter what.

I'm missing all my babies. When I see her I feel all right. Then when I get home, I miss her.

Confused. Sad. Pretty much just, it's not a good thing knowing you let your children down.

Mixed emotions...I feel good when I'm with her. Then when I do be with her, I feel sad 'cause I should be with her more.

...sometimes they're sad feelings when I see other little girls and they mom fixin' to comb their hair and stuff like that and I get to the point where I be wishing I was able to you know take care of my daughter and my son the way that I want to and we had our own place to stay and you know stuff like that.

Positive and Negative Views of Kinship Care

Positive feelings expressed by birth parents included knowing that love was in the home of the kinship caregiver and having the child in a home where the child would learn more than the parent could teach. Parents reported feeling comforted that the child is safe, doing well in school, and has a spiritual influence. Some parents stressed the benefits of the child living with relatives, getting to know them and having regular contact with them:

I know that he's in a safe, caring environment. I don't have to worry about where his next meal is gonna come from or will he have shoes or clothes; will he um, be able to get to the doctor? I know that she's gonna take care of him and do all that she can to make sure he's okay.

...to get a chance to know my mom. I didn't get a chance to get to when I was little. You know 'cause you know me and my Mom was on the outs, you know she, I want to do my own thing you know...my Mom has changed, very much so, she's not as uh, judgmental..."

Well, since she left home, she's an 'A' student. She's improved on a lot of things in school. She have the chance to be around relatives other than her mother and father. I think that's important. I didn't have a grandmother, so I don't know what that feels like. I don't want my daughter to miss out on having a grandmother.

I actually think it's pretty good...it's helpful to you know stick together as a family and...be willing to help each other out...It gives us the opportunity to really stay close in each other's lives, so...I really think it's a good thing.

...They never need or want for anything. They have that love, the discipline and respect, the understanding, communication. You know they have all that cause she make sure that the way she raised me, that's the way she raised them. And my mother has nothing for them but love. Nothing but love.

Somebody that I trusted...I knew he was going to be taken care of. I knew he was with somebody that I talk to on a regular basis and she knows the way I want him

to be; the things he should and shouldn't be doing. And just pretty much glad that it was somebody I could trust.

You know I think he's happy...That's because [he's] so attached to my mother. And that's okay too, cause I been raised by my grandmother and it's like a special bond with grandparents and they grandchilds that, you know, nobody can touch that...So, I'm kinda glad that my mother's there, not just for me, but for him too cause...I don't know what would happen if he didn't have her in his life...

Negative views about kinship care included loss of the parent role and the fear of being forgotten by the child. Some felt constrained in assuming the parenting role, since they were not able to provide housing and assume full responsibility at this time. One parent expressed concern regarding the financial and emotional burden that the caregiver had to endure. Several parents indicated that there were no negatives associated with the child living with a relative.

Being his mother, I feel like I can't exert that um, I can't exert my mother role. Because I feel like I'll be oversteppin' my bounds because I'm not, I'm his mother, but, in my eyesight I'm not what, what a mother is suppose to be because I'm not the one taking care of him.

I won't say negative, but I want the responsibility of raising them. I want to be a mother to my kids.

I prefer my kids getting to know their relatives. So they can know where they came from. There's nothing negative about it at all.

...We clash sometimes on things with the kids, on how things should be done. She's more overprotective and I'm more they have to kind of experience things, some things...

...I don't think it's only a burden on the children; it's a burden on the family. I mean my mom had to pick up a lot of responsibilities that I should have been...doing. You know, I help her with the bills and the rent...and that's why we live together because at this time we need each other's help. And she had to take on everything by herself and not only that, but she had to take on the responsibility of financially supporting my son. And emotionally, not to mention, she was probably a wreck.

Parents' Descriptions of their Relationships with Caregivers

Adequate Relationship

Parents were asked to describe their relationship with the relative caring for their child. A few parents said the relationship was “okay” – not overly positive or negative:

Um, it's alright. It's alright, I guess, but my mom always, my mom always wanted to have sons and me and my sister is the only two, two kids she got, which is girls...She really do get carried away with raisin' the boys...Uh-huh, But it's alright though.

...our relationship is...its okay. I just don't like the way she let them run over her...But she's.....she's good, she's good, yeah. It's good...

Like Best Friends

Two parents described the caregiver as their best friend:

Oh, she's like my best friend...My sister...Yeah. She's like my best friend and my sister.

We are becoming best friends again. She's the only friend I have.

Like Sisters

Two parents described their relationship with their mothers who were caring for their children to be “like sisters” more than like mother and daughter. One of these parents describes the relationship like this:

Me and my mom, we have a very close, open relationship. We can talk about anything. It would be better if I could get her to go to church. We more like sister and sister than mother and daughter. No strings attached.

Co-parenting Relationship

Another parent described the relationship with her mother as a *co-parenting* relationship. The grandmother is the primary caregiver for the child at this time. Ideally this parent would have liked to raise her child on her own, but she needs the help her mother is providing:

Well, when we first, when I first had my baby, I used to didn't want to umm, want my momma to raise my baby. I told my baby's father the same thing that I didn't want my momma to raise my baby. I wanted to raise my baby...Know wha' sayin',

I wanted, okay, its fine that he can go to daycare whatever whi' I'm in school, but I didn't wanna do everything by myself, like go to school and work, he still not seeing me. I wanted him to atleast have one of his parents there. If it what'n gone be his father, I wanted him to have me there...I'm there, but I'm not there, its like its kinda hard, I don't want my momma to do it, but at the same time it's a blessin'. I'm glad I have her in my life because if she wasn't there I couldn't do what I'm doing. I wouldn't be able to work and I wouldn't be able to go to school, cause I wouldn't have nobody to help me take care of him....So she wa' actually like the father, the missin' father that's in his life.

Positive Relationship

Twenty parents said that their relationship with the relative caring for their child was positive or loving. Parents also described how the relationship with the caregiver had improved from the past. They also talked about how the relationship was overall positive, but there were ups and downs, good times and bad times.

Other than that you know I keep the line of communication open. Keep, you know I talk to her everyday while I'm at work to ask her was there any grandmamma drama this morning when they got ready for school. Or how was the morning. Some days it's drama some days it's not. You know. I just, you know, I'm thankful that she's able to help me out.

Me and my momma have a good relationship. I guess our relationship is like most mothers and daughters. We have our days when we get on each other's nerves, but that's my mother and she will always be my mother.

Uh, I have respect for [my mom], love, consideration.

Um, good relationship. Very loving. Um, mother is a, um, very good teacher (laughter). Uh, I think I might be, you know, be teachin' her some things too...you learn from one another. Just, you know, about ourselves.

It's good. I wish, you know, I wish it was at its best, but it is good.

...me and my mom we got a good relationship you know she tends to get on my nerves sometimes but that's only for the goodness.

Me and my mom have a pretty good relationship. We're more open as me and a, as an adult than it was as a child...

Oh, shoot we just alike. We get along and we don't get along...We talk like, I would talk, talk to my girlfriend...We got the same relationship my, I had with my mother. We're real close. She's just so evil, but she wants to be the

mom...Sometimes, she'll cuss me out if I don't let her have her way...But other than that, we get along...good.

It's, it's alright. My aunt is more like my mother, 'cause she raised me, so, we, we have a pretty good, we, we have a good relationship. Every relationship has its ups and downs.

Um, I love my mom to death, you know without my mom, I wouldn't, there's a lot of stuff that wouldn't be happenin' for me right now so, utmost respect...

Negative Relationship

Some parents touched on negative elements of the relationship with the relative caring for their child both presently and in the past.

Well for the most part like I said back when I was really using drugs it wasn't good because it was always animosity.

My mother. Um, we...ok, you know, we are argue a lot. We don't agree.

I, I don't like her at times. Ya know, um, she has done a lot for me in the past...I could not have done anything without my mom, that I have accomplished today. Even though, in, in the long run, it seems like everything that she's done for me has cost me double in return to her. So, it's like, if there, there've been times to where, ya know, if she asks me... I need ya to do something, if I can't do it for her, if I can't give her something at that very particular moment, she figures out a way to screw me over ...So, it's either her way or no way. And... that's why I, I ended up pretty much giving her the kids, so I can work on getting away from her. ...I needed her to get away from her. I, I love her. She really tries. She has the best intentions, but sometimes the best intentions aren't always what's needed.

Um, when I was out there and usin' and I didn't wanna hear what she had to say, I wouldn't listen.

We got a funny relationship me and my mom. We've uh, we love each other but then you know, she always says that she, 'I love you but sometimes I just don't like you.' Which I can understand because sometimes I, I act like an idiot you know things I've done and I put her through a lot you know, cause like I said when I wa, since I turned fourteen she had no control over me you know...But uh, so I put her thorough a lot but you know I, we were close me and my mom. You know cause she had me at an early age so we were like cut off actually like me and [my daughter] are. Where we were like friends you know what I'm saying but then I hurt her by things that I've done you know but you know, I know she still loves me and I love her to death cause she's been there for me you know but...It's like it's a funny relationship it's the love hate type of thing you know.

Future Goals and Dreams for Child

Parents described their future dreams and goals for their children. Nearly uniformly, parents stressed that they wanted their children to be educationally successful (e.g. graduating from grade school and high school, some stated college or graduate school). Some stressed that they want their children to be responsible and make good choices, to exercise self-control, to avoid gang involvement, or to become good parents. Others stated that they want their children to be happy, to fulfill their dreams. One parent specified that she wants her child to be a better parent than she has been.

I hope I'll be able to make it that old, to be able to see her grow up...I just want to be able to say Lord if you let me make it, allow me to get that old. Let me see my kids grow up and have they own family...I think she'll be a good mother though.

I don't want him to be a drop out. I don't want him to be in gangs but that's hard not to do.

I want all of them to fulfill their dreams because I didn't get to fulfill mine. My daughter wants to sing and dance. That's what I wanted to do. So I help her with dance steps and learning a song. I want her to do all of the things I couldn't do. I couldn't do them because I got pregnant and kept having babies. So, I support her dreams.

I want him to finish school...and I want him to make something of himself.

Children are gonna do what they're gonna do and I just really hope he's successful and he's stays out of trouble and... he has a happy life. I want him to be happy with his choices.

Parents indicated that they planned to support their children's success in a variety of ways, from encouraging educational success, helping them with homework, reading with them and loving them. Others stated that they wanted to encourage development of all of their children's talents and interests whatever they may be. A couple of parents indicated that they wanted to advocate for their children and ensure that they get the appropriate services or

educational programs that meet their particular needs. More than one parent stressed that getting their lives together and becoming better role models for their children supported the children in achieving their goals and dreams. One parent stated that she would counsel her child to delay romantic relationships, putting school and achievement first.

I want to—I feel that if I better myself and if he sees me get on my feet and stand up and be a better mother; then hopefully it will be a positive example for him...maybe he'll get past resentment. 'Cause I know he has you know anger and stuff towards me for not being there for him like I should. So, maybe you know when I do better, he'll feel better.

I want him to be the best he can be and I'm gonna try and be there for him.

...I want her to be able to say, 'Well my Mom supports me regardless.' You know what I'm saying? I think that's the most, I think kids nowadays are lacking that support...as well as that time. You know, sometimes parents need to get off their behinds and really, you know what I'm saying? It's a sacrifice having kids. I have five of them. It's a sacrifice. And I see the sacrifices my Mom made for me...I know I have to sacrifice myself a little bit more...for the five that I have. So you know, it's all about sacrificing your personal self.

Parents' Descriptions of Their Relations with Their Child

Relationship Could Be Improved

Parents were asked to describe their relationship with their child who was being cared for by relatives. Some parents said the relationship was good but that it could be improved:

Mmm, it's pretty good right now. It could be better but it's good.

Its...its good, but its rocky cause, its not, I'm not there like I need to be, like I wanna be, like he needs me to be cause, you know, I'm seein' em every day, but I'm sleepin' when I'm seein' em...I come home, you know, just get'n off work, just get'n off school, you know, its, its not like, you know, we both, I go to work, he go to school, we come home, I fix him dinner or playin' on the, lettin', help'n him do his homework. It's not like that...and I want it like that, but it's goin' take some time for me to git it like that.

Very good. It could be better, but it's good. It's very good.

Strained Relationship

A small number of parents (4) talked about the difficulties in their relationships with their children. Some parents had a hard time being around their children and talked about a lack of connection with their children. One parent described her relationship with her son this way:

Lot of times when I'm around him it's being around him that's beneficiary to him, because I've been in my moods I don't even want to be, I don't even want to talk to him. I don't want him in the same room with me or whatever. I'll leave the house.

The interviewer followed up and asked this parent what words she would use to describe her relationship with her son. The parent responded, "Cold."

One parent described a high level of frustration and violent thoughts toward the children:

You know I, I do say this, that's what lil' kids do...but you got to stop'em though...Uh uh (no), I don't like it...And then you know, it makes me so mad at'em. I jus' a be wan'n be just pop his lil' bones...you know...and all the rest a'em. He's not the only one. All the rest of'em. From the big one to the small one. You know because, it seem like...they like ta' to git on...they like to get on my nerve...Um hm...like that's they job...I do my job as the 'timidator (slurred and very animated).

Other parents described relationships with their children that are sometimes good and sometimes strained in the following ways:

Good. At times...At times. Then I think sometimes he'll look at me and be like, "Damn why you leave me and...?" ...You know, it's kind-a, it's kind-a hard sometimes. You know.

Uhm, it's, I don't know it's kinda hard to say right now 'cause you know, I mean I always thought we were so close but now with everything that's happened I, you know it' like I kinda wanna hurry up and get back together because I wanna find out where I stand with them you know. Cause right now it's kinda like you know she tells me one thing and then the next day I hear she doesn't wanna talk to me you know and my ma will say, 'Well she doesn't wanna see you or talk to you.' So, I'm just like, 'Well she was just fine the other day.' You know she...so I, I don't, I don't know it's hard to say, you know.

Some parents talked about how their relationship with their child was difficult at times but now it is a more positive relationship:

Uh, pretty good. Ah, it, it kinda got dim for a minute there because, ya know, I, I, I messed up and I was, ya know, he would ask me for stuff and I would promise it to him, that I would try and take him certain places and then that was without me realizing how much stuff I had to do or how little money I was working with and then I couldn't do all the things that said for him...So, we were having a lot of problems there for a minute because it was like, ya know, he was like well you're always tellin' me, you're go, if I do this you're gonna gimme that and you never come through, so why should I? So, now, when he asks me, I just tell him no.

I think we have a good relationship but uh, I, like I, it's that patience. She wants to play when I don't want, want to play, I, I you know it's just I got this cancer and I have mood swings...you know. And I'm working on them mood swings you know. But other than that, we got a good relationship. She tells me I'm mean sometimes that's because I don't want to play with her when she wants me to play with her...So, no we got a good relationship.

...She's very open. I'm glad that we have that relationship, since I know that she's here with my mom, ya know. So, it makes me feel kinda good that she's still willing to communicate with me...And she's not bitter because she's here, ya know, so...I think me and [my daughter] have a pretty good relationship, now.

I don't know, me and, me and [my son's] relationship (pause) we, we real tight. He, he always wants to be with me and be around me and do things with me...It's, we're, I, I consider us close...We're a lot closer, closer than we was, I think we're real close.

Loving Relationship

A number of parents described the relationship with their child as loving:

It's beautiful. My son love me unconditionally. And, and I love him the same.

Positive...Loving...that's about it.

No matter what hug and kisses and you know, and she always say, "Mommy I love you." And I love you too you know, so I know I'm being blessed you know I just have work, work with her.

I would say uh, I think it's great, I think it's great. Every time he sees me, you know, like he's definitely head over heels in love with me so...I think he's, I think he loves me to death.

A lot of [parents] don't get that opportunity [to spend time with their child] and I'm blessed to have it. And I'm not going and I'm not going to let it go. You know and it is a blessing to me just to have that and just to have them. And I love and I love excuse my French I love the hell out of them. You know I wish I could

do more but I'm only can do what I can do for them right now. But as long as they know I'm here for them. That is the main thing that I that I need right now.

A Relationship like Friends

A couple of parents felt like their relationship with their child is a friendship, although some recognized that they could not always be their child's friend:

It's close, we're very close. Um, we're almost best friends, ...I have to draw the line between mom and friend, you know what I mean? ...We, we can play and we can do things together and stuff but, they're not gonna come to me and tell me the things that they'd go and tell their friend, you know? Even though I try to make them feel as comfortable as they can, they don't have to hide nothing from me, there still secrets kids keep. Other than that I think we're good. We're pretty good.

It's good. It's good. Like a mother-daughter relationship. But we like best friends, cause she talk to me and I talk to her...You know, we real close...Only difference is my mom got custody of her...It ain't no difference. We were never separated or nothing like this.

Good. We be having so much fun, we be like, we friends, instead of momma and daughter... But then sometimes I be having to tell like [my daughter] I'm your momma. I'm not your friend.

Positive Relationship

A majority of parents (77%) said the relationship with their child was positive. They talked about feeling close with their children and stated that their children could talk to them about anything.

Me and her have a perfect relationship. She can tell me anything and she does. She always have something to tell me. I can answer questions for her and she really listens to me. We are very close. I have all my kids every weekend to keep that bond.

Good, very good... I couldn't've asked for anything better, I mean...I'm amazed (laughter). He's like a little robot...and I really never really had too many problems outta him, so he jus' been wonderful. I don't know what I did, you know... to create that, or what this combination has done, but it's, you know... it's been great.

Pretty good...Sometimes I feel like I could have been her older sister...But, to me in a way that's good, so that when she gets older she'll be able to talk to me about anything and everything, just like I do with my parents.

Parents' Perceptions of the Strengths They Have That Can Benefit Their Children

During the interviews with parents they were asked to describe the strengths they had that could benefit their child. For a couple of parents it was a difficult question to answer. One parent responded:

That's a hard one (long pause) That's hard for me to answer, it really is, 'cause everything that comes to my mind is negative.

Another parent was not able to articulate her strengths and stated, "...so right now, I'm not giving him anything." Other parents stated that life experience, a sense of spirituality, independence, hard work, reliability, positive attitude and love for their children were strengths that could benefit their child. Talking about her strength and independence one mother said, "I'm very motivated, very determined, very strong and very independent and he sees his mother like that..." Another mother viewed her love for her children as a strength: "The strengths that um...it's that I... I love her unconditionally. And I love all my kids unconditionally..."

Several parents mentioned that their resiliency, inner strength and positive attitude were beneficial to their child:

Try to stay head strong you know...Just kinda like focus on the positive. And not negativity all the time. I used to be like that, think negative about everything. This gonna go wrong, that's gonna go wrong. Now I just take it one day at a time.

I'm a strong person in the sense that um, I struggled you know. I had my oldest son when I was fourteen, I had him when I was seventeen...I raised my older son, since I was fourteen by myself. Got my first job when I was fourteen, worked, went to school. And it's just, um; you keep trying to achieve that goal. You don't give up... You know, whatever it takes you have to keep going. You can't let um, you can't let your mistakes set you back. You have to learn from your mistakes and make them work for you. You know, let that make you a stronger person as far as your decisions you have to make in your future... You know and in that sense, I feel that I, I am um, that would be one of my strengths, you know I don't give up.

Um, you keep going no matter how hard you fall, you have to pick yourself up and you have to go on.

I'm a survivor...I survived a lot of things...I want her to know that she's able to survive anything. If I can do it, she can...I think that's my, my best trait that I can pass onto any one of my kids is to be a survivor.

Um, my willingness to try you know, I'm, I'm willing to, I'm willing to try my hardest that's what I'm, you know 'cause it's hard but I'm, I'm up for the challenge...

I'm strong. Know I got benefits that show her that no matter what people tell you about you, you always think better of yourself. So you strong you don't, never depend on nobody, you know, 'cause they might not be there for you then, what you gonna do then.

Another mother said that staying away from drugs and finishing her education were strengths that could benefit her child:

Staying clean...That is it, just staying clean...staying clean and trying for my GED.

The ability to be reliable and dependable and to keep promises to their children were also mentioned as strengths:

Keeping my word...If I say I'm going to do something I'm gonna do it.

Strength to get up and go to see her. When I make a promise, I keep it. Some days it's hard for me to get up and go, but if I told her, "see you tomorrow," I had better see her.

'Cause I tell her I won't make a prom, I won't answer her if she tell me, are you gonna promise. And then she know if I don't promise her, she has that doubt in her mind, well she might come back today, she might not...But she know If I promise her I'm comin' back...Bein' honest. I try not...I try my best to keep open with her. If she ask me for somethin' and I don't have it I'll just tell her well, I can't do that right now.

There were several parents who thought that being a teacher and positive role model for their children was an important strength:

I went to college two years...so I'm excellent in English and I'm excellent in Social Studies and I feel I'm, I'm also excellent teaching them about um things on the outside.

Uh, my strengths, uh, teachin' him how to pray. Ask God to keep ups strong. Basically for me to be a good role model and to have positive thoughts and feelings for him.

...the strengths that I have that would benefit Allison 'cause I teach Allison that what ever she want in life she gotta work for, an-in order to s-s-smell good you gotta wash ya se-keep ya self clean every day...You know things of that nature. Um, work hard in school and that something that she does - she does that - she-it's like when it comes to schoolwork, you don't hav'ta tell her cause she do overtime in that...

Finally, parents talked about the importance of being involved and spending time with their children and several viewed this as strengths:

Just me being with her, really. Cause she ain't really got no daddy...My boyfriend, he in jail now...But he, when he out, he, you know, be there for her whatever...But mostly about me it's just the time that we spend together...Cause she don't got nobody else...But us.

Just, listenin' to her. Playin' with her when she wants to play with her. And I just need to have patience... 'Cause she, we go to church on Sundays, I do everything I can that I didn't do when I was, when I, you know I'd come and I'd stay for a little while and then I'd leave...Now I'm here to stay.

And they know that and the strengths is that they know that I'm not going anywhere. They know that I'm still going to be in their life. That is my biggest strength they know I'm not going anywhere.

Parents' Perceptions of Challenges in Caring for their Children

Parents also described challenges they faced in caring for their children. Parents varied in the degree to which they recognized their own needs for improvement. For example, one parent focused on her needs to be better equipped to deal with her son's hyperactive behavior, indicating, "I'm impatient. I think I need ...to go somewhere and get some parenting skills...I need to get involved in some type of support group or something to help me cope with him, with the...hyperactive...'cause it's a struggle for me." The same parent indicated, "I need to get my

priorities together,” reflecting on some bad choices she has made rather than to care for her child, “I feel bad for that.”

Advice to Other Parents

At the conclusion of the interview, parents were asked if there were other things that people should know about parents whose children are cared for by relatives. Many parents offered words of advice to other parents who may find themselves in similar situations. They encouraged other parents to be honest with their children, to enjoy and love their children, to be involved parents and to take responsibility. Some stated it was important for parents to not take advantage of caregivers and to respect the caregiver’s decisions.

Just don’t let them be confused you know...Like when she over here she know like, she got an uncle, an auntie, you know all that. But when she out there it ain’t nobody out there but her grandma. And she be coming back getting the two of them mixed up. You know, like that’s my mama and that’s his mama. She’ll get them mixed up. So, I just say keep your kid’s head straight, you know. Let them know that that’s they mama or they auntie, grandma, whatever.

Patience, lot’s of love...You have to involve yourself with this child.

...I’d like all parents, if you ever have kids, to take care of that child because it’s not the child’s fault that they were conceived...

I mean if someone else has a child that’s being cared [for] by relatives, instead of tryin’ to jump in at every little thing that the relative does, sit back...you made your decision to give that child to your relative and [it’s] up to the person who’s raisin’ the child, who is actually doin’ the best interest of the child to decide whether or not what that child should do.

I mean there’s just some parents that do it [give children to a relative] because they want to be out there having their fun and doing what they got to do...if they’re doing that...you need to step up and take care of your responsibilities...Cause if you’re just out there just to have fun and not take care of your kid and let somebody else take care of your kid, that’s not right.

Enjoy it. Take time out with your children...You know cause you never know what may happen and ya'll not be together anymore. So enjoy yourself when you're with your kids.

Summary and Conclusions

We conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 30 birth parents of children in kinship care, 27 mothers and 3 fathers. The interviews were audio taped, transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Atlas.ti software and grounded theory. Parents described reasons that their children were living with relatives that included teen parenthood, lack of adequate housing, drug use, job loss, mental health problems, psychological trauma, and disrupted or turbulent relationships with intimate partners. A couple of parents indicated that their children were living with relatives so the parents were able to work, complete school, or just “get myself together.”

Parents described their current roles in the lives of their children. Some parents reported frequent, active involvement that included participation in a full range of parenting tasks and responsibilities. Others primarily described recreational activities. Parents also described the roles they would like to play in their children’s lives in the future. A number of parents indicated that they would assume full responsibility for raising their children, while others focused on developing a friendship or close confidant relationship with their children.

Parents described a range of feelings that they experience when they are with their children and when they are away from them. Feelings of loneliness and loss were expressed when not with their children and feelings of joy and pride when with the children. A couple of parents indicated that they were inspired or enlightened by their children. Some parents admitted to feeling frustrated with their children’s behavior and their own lack of patience at times.

We asked parents to share their positive and negative views of kinship care. Many parents indicated that they were happy that their children were living with people who loved

them, the children were safe and well cared for, they were doing better in school and they were getting the opportunity to get to know their relatives. Negative views included loss of the parent role and the fear of being forgotten by their children. Some parents indicated that they were fearful of “oversteppin’ my bounds” by asserting the parent role, possibly causing conflict with the kinship caregiver. Several parents indicated that they were thankful that the relative was caring for their children and some acknowledged the burden that the relative caregiver had assumed.

Parents described their future goals and dreams for their children which included academic success, responsible behavior, avoiding gang involvement, and having a happy life. Many parents described their plans to support their children’s success by encouraging them, advocating for them and by getting their own lives in order and providing a positive example for their children. Parents described their own strengths, limitations and challenges in caring for their children and also described a range of relationships that they have with their children and the caregivers of their children.