Kinship care navigator: help for grandparents and relatives raising children

If a child moved in with you because their parent is incarcerated, in treatment, or unable to care for them right now, you are a kinship caregiver — whether or not any paperwork says so. This guide explains what kinship care means, what help exists, and the order to ask for it in.

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WHO THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

- **For professionals**
  Use this guide to walk a relative caregiver through the first three calls: 211, the school foster/homeless liaison, and the state kinship navigator program.
- **For supporters**
  Most kinship caregivers are older relatives on fixed incomes. Sharing this guide helps them find benefits and support groups faster.

WHAT KINSHIP CARE ACTUALLY MEANS

Kinship care is any arrangement where a relative or close family friend raises a child instead of the child's parents. There are three broad forms, and the form you are in determines what help you can access.

- **Informal kinship care**
  The family arranged it privately — no court, no child welfare agency. Most kinship caregivers are here. You can usually still access food, health, and school supports, but you may need a caregiver affidavit or power of attorney to enroll the child in school or approve medical care.
- **Legal custody or guardianship**
  A court has given you decision-making authority. This makes school, medical, and benefit paperwork far simpler, and it can be arranged without the parent losing their rights permanently. Legal aid offices often help relatives file at low or no cost.
- **Formal kinship foster care**

The child is in state custody and placed with you. This is the only form that typically comes with a foster care payment, plus a caseworker, licensing steps, and required visits. Rates and rules vary by state.

FIND YOUR STATE'S KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAM

Kinship navigator programs exist to do exactly what their name says — walk relative caregivers to the right benefit, legal help, and support group. Nearly every state has one, run either by the state agency or by a nonprofit partner.

- **1. Search your state plus the phrase**
  Search "[your state] kinship navigator" or "[your state] kinship care program." You are looking for a state child-welfare page or a nonprofit contracted by the state — not a directory site full of ads.
- **2. Call 211**
  Dialing 211 anywhere in the US connects you to a local resource specialist who can name kinship programs, emergency assistance, and food help in your county. It is free and confidential.
- **3. Ask the school first if you are stuck**
  School counselors and district homeless/foster liaisons know local kinship supports and can often enroll a child immediately while paperwork catches up.
- **4. Write down who you spoke to**
  Keep one page with names, dates, phone numbers, and case or reference numbers. Caregivers who track this get faster answers when a call gets transferred or a form goes missing.

SUPPORTS WORTH ASKING ABOUT, BY NEED

Availability and names vary by state. Ask about each by name — many caregivers are never told what they qualify for.

- **Monthly money for the child**
  A child-only TANF grant (sometimes called a non-parent or kinship grant) — based on the child's income, not yours
- **Food**
  SNAP, WIC for children under five, school breakfast and lunch, and local food pantries through 211
- **Health coverage**
  Medicaid or CHIP for the child; eligibility is usually based on the child, not your household income
- **School enrollment**
  A caregiver affidavit or educational consent form, plus the district's foster/homeless liaison
- **Legal authority**
  Legal aid, a self-help court center, or a kinship navigator for guardianship or custody forms
- **Childcare**
  Child Care and Development Fund subsidies and Head Start / Early Head Start
- **Someone to talk to**
  A kinship caregiver support group through your navigator program, a local nonprofit, or MFGP

CARING FOR THE CHILD — AND FOR YOURSELF

- Name the change out loud with the child. Children in kinship care often carry loss, loyalty conflict, and relief at the same time, and silence makes all three heavier.
- Keep contact with the parent predictable when it is safe. Short and regular beats rare and long.
- Tell one trusted adult at school what is happening so absences and mood changes are met with support instead of discipline.
- Build the paperwork folder early: birth certificate, Social Security card, immunization records, insurance card, court papers, and school records.
- Protect your own health appointments and rest. Kinship caregivers are frequently older, often on fixed incomes, and the most common reason a placement destabilizes is caregiver burnout.
- Find one other kinship caregiver to talk to. Support groups exist in most counties, in person and online.

QUESTIONS FAMILIES ASK

- **What is a kinship navigator program?**
  A kinship navigator program is a state-funded or state-contracted service that helps relatives raising children find benefits, legal help, and support groups. Navigators know the local rules, can tell you what you qualify for, and often help fill out forms. Search your state's name plus 'kinship navigator,' or call 211.
- **Can grandparents raising grandchildren get financial assistance?**
  Often yes. The most common option is a child-only TANF grant, which considers the child's income rather than the grandparent's. Relatives who are licensed foster parents receive a foster care payment instead. Medicaid or CHIP, SNAP, WIC, childcare subsidies, and school meal programs may also apply. Amounts and rules vary by state, so ask your kinship navigator or 211 for local figures.
- **Do I need legal custody to enroll a child in school?**
  Usually not. Federal and state rules generally require schools to enroll a child who is living with you, and most states accept a caregiver affidavit or educational consent form. If a school pushes back, ask for the district's foster care or homeless liaison, who handles exactly these situations.
- **Will asking for help put the child at risk of being removed?**
  Asking about benefits like SNAP, Medicaid, or a child-only TANF grant is a benefits process, not a child-welfare investigation. If a child welfare case is already open, the caseworker is the person to ask about placement decisions. When you are unsure, a kinship navigator or legal aid attorney can explain what a specific application does and does not trigger.

KEEP GOING

- **Financial benefits & assistance**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/financial-benefits-for-children-of-incarcerated-parents
- **Caregiver authorization affidavit**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/caregiver-authorization-affidavit

- **Kinship navigator programs by state**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/guides/kinship-navigator-programs-by-state
- **Family Guide: Navigating Incarceration**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/navigating-incarceration
- **The #FKLM Family Blueprint**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint
- **Featured organizations serving families**
  https://www.myfairygodparents.org/featured-organizations

More guides and family resources: myfairygodparents.org/resources

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