

# TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES (TIPS) FOR SUPPORTING CAREGIVERS OF NATIVE YOUTH IN OUT-OF-HOME CARE

Trauma and healing experiences have a ripple effect on youth who are living in an out-of-home placement, whether that placement is with kinship\* caregivers or nonrelative caregivers. The trauma and healing experiences also impact caregivers and can directly impact the youth's placement stability. Equipping these caregivers with the knowledge and skills to understand and respond to the impacts of trauma supports a safe and stable out-of-home placement experience. Equally important is out-of-home placement caregivers intentionally and consistently ensuring a youth's ability to have meaningful and authentic connections with their tribe and culture. When tribal child welfare program staff use trauma-informed practices to support caregivers to help youth remain connected to their tribes and cultures, they encourage healthy relationships that teach, offer support, and facilitate healing for youth in tribal out-of-home placement care. The following TIPS refer to caregivers who are kinship and nonrelative caregiver placements actively managed by tribal child welfare programs. As program staff consider these trauma-informed practice strategies, they should continue to comply with the tribal child welfare program's policies and local tribal code.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE STRATEGIES (TIPS)

A trauma-informed approach provides space for tribal child welfare program staff to realize how common and prevalent trauma experiences are, recognize various ways in which experiences can be traumatic, respond appropriately to a person's need for support, and resist re-traumatizing others by being aware and proactive in preventing future trauma experiences. Many of these practices will look familiar, but when taken as a whole, they provide a strong foundation of support for youth, their caregivers, and staff. The programmatic and caseworker tips listed on the following pages align with the six principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- SAFETY
- TRUST
- CULTURE AND HISTORY
- EMPOWERMENT
- PEER SUPPORT
- COLLABORATION

## PRE-PLACEMENT: PROVIDING TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT TO KINSHIP AND NON-RELATIVE CAREGIVERS

There are many opportunities and actions to support youth, kinship caregivers, and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers within every tribal child welfare program. Youth need to be connected to their relatives and respective tribal cultures. Caseworkers, youth, and out-of-home placement caregivers benefit from making meaningful connections, building trusting relationships, and minimizing additional trauma experiences. These efforts support placement stability and family preservation. So, how can tribal child welfare caseworkers support stability prior to a child even being placed with an out-of-home caregiver? Start by offering clear and objective information tailored to the needs of their community. Serving as a knowledgeable and trusted resource is a key component in helping prepare caregivers to use the tools and knowledge they need to successfully support both reunification efforts and youth on their paths to healing.

### What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Talk with the local tribal government and leaders if your tribe is not currently Title IV-B or IV-E funded and is interested in learning more about becoming a IV-B or IV-E tribe. [Titles IV-B and IV-E](#) funds provide federal funding for tribal child welfare programs to enhance family preservation efforts through increased funding and service reimbursement.
- Review the tribal child welfare program's current process and practices for kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver recruitment. You and your program can use [The Diligent Recruitment Planning Tool for Tribes](#) to help adapt, build, or plan a strong program to recruit resource families (e.g., kinship, nonrelative, guardianship, and adoptive). If your program is collaborating with a state agency on recruitment efforts, explore the [Foster Parent Recruitment: Strategies for Successfully Recruiting and Retaining Preferred-Placement Foster Homes for American Indian Children](#).
- Consider partnering with another program or agency in the community that can enhance kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver recruitment efforts by offering ongoing opportunities for peer connection, learning, and support. If interested in or curious about an innovative community approach to out-of-home placement care, explore the [MOCKINGBIRD FAMILY™ model \(MFM\)](#), or read about it at the [Center for Native Child and Family Resilience](#).
- Tailor the licensing process to the community served by the tribal child welfare program. Check out the [Tribal Information Exchange](#) for tribal-specific examples of out-of-home placement caregiver applications, home-study checklists, and licensing standards. Another resource is the [Development and Implementation of Foster Care Standards](#) by the National Indian Child Welfare Association (NICWA).
- Review the [Native American Children's Safety Act](#) to ensure program compliance with required background checks for out-of-home caregiver placements.

- Consider creating a specialized position for a caseworker dedicated to working with kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. This person can serve as the licensing expert as well as a skilled advocate for the caregivers.
- Use and maintain consistent messaging with kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers about the temporary nature of out-of-home placement care, the importance of supporting reunification efforts, and the significance of maintaining the youth's relative and cultural connections.
- Incorporate a bill of rights for youth, as well as one for out-of-home placement caregivers. If the tribal child welfare program does not have these documents, refer to the tribal code the program operates under and review examples of [Foster Care Bill of Rights](#) for ideas on how to develop one.
- Provide potential and current out-of-home placement caregivers with easily accessible information about pre-placement, placement, and post-placement processes, procedures, and resources. Include information about every adult involved in the youth's case and each adult's role, responsibilities, and expectations of out-of-home placement caregivers. Describe any breaks for out-of-home placement caregivers (e.g., respite care providers), requirements, timelines, and financial resources (e.g., childcare assistance, clothing allowances, diaper allowances, formula allowances, gas cards, or any type of temporary assistance).
- Establish and communicate a process for how potential and current out-of-home placement caregivers can connect with someone at the tribal child welfare program regarding any questions, concerns, or support needs.
- There is a lot of information to learn whether someone is a kinship caregiver or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver! If your tribe's website includes pages dedicated to tribal child welfare and you want to learn how other tribes organize their information and resources, check out the websites for [Cherokee Nation](#) and [Muscogee Nation](#).
- Provide staff and kinship caregivers with training that addresses the unique challenges kinship caregivers may face within their role. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has a [five-module video training series and discussion guide](#) on engaging kinship caregivers. The topics include guilt; loss and ambivalence; projection and transference; hope, fantasy, and denial; and loyalty issues.
- Provide opportunities for staff, kinship caregivers, and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers to reflect on their own attitudes and feelings toward birth parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) involved in the child welfare system. Consider using the discussion guides linked in the previous bullet, as well as the resources below, to design your own activities, exercises, or discussion points to challenge biases and assumptions about birth parents and/or caregivers.
  - [Family Assessment: Understanding Bias](#)
  - [How to Overcome Bias](#)
- Establish protocols, and regularly review with staff what case information they can share with kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. It is especially important to consider information that gives insight into ways the caregiver can provide a safe and nurturing environment that meets the youth's social and emotional needs, as well as their physical and psychological safety.



## What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Utilize a team approach with kinship caregivers and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. Be clear from the start and throughout the placement about any expectations, processes, procedures, requirements, supports, resources, timelines, restrictions, or any other pertinent information that caregivers need to be aware of.
- Continue to emphasize the temporary nature of out-of-home placement care and that the tribal child welfare program's primary goal is reunification
- Provide as much information as possible specific to the youth's trauma history and discuss with the caregiver about how they might respond to any of the youth's disclosures, challenges, or behaviors. Be prepared to think creatively and provide suggestions if the caregiver needs ideas or strategies to try.
- Encourage positive and empathetic attitudes toward the birth parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) when interacting with kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. One way to do this is to speak openly about individual and family strengths.
- As permitted within local policy and code, include kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers in the various aspects of ongoing casework such as team meetings, case reviews, court appearances, permanency hearings, and foster care review meetings.
- Have conversations with out-of-home placement caregivers and any other professional support providers that the youth has in place about case decisions before the youth is informed (or with the youth present if the topic/content is age- and developmentally appropriate). Partner with the placement caregivers and any other professional support providers about how they can inform or include the youth in any next steps in their case.
- Clearly communicate with out-of-home caregivers about the pre-placement processes and procedures. Provide the information in various formats (e.g., verbally, written, and electronic). Include information on applicable roles, responsibilities, timelines, expectations, requirements, financial support, and community resources.
- Co-develop youth safety plans alongside the kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver prior to placement in the event the youth has immediate, anticipated, or upcoming safety needs due to a history of mental health challenges, substance use challenges, or other concerns. When age- and developmentally appropriate, include the youth in the conversation and development of the safety plan. See [page 4 of the Trauma-Informed Language in Tribal Child Welfare Documentation](#) for questions to support the safety planning process.
- Include plans for natural disasters that may occur in the area, medical emergencies, medication safety and storage, fire safety, etc. Develop these plans with the out-of-home caregivers prior to placement if possible.

## DURING PLACEMENT: WAYS TO PROVIDE TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT TO KINSHIP AND NON-RELATIVE CAREGIVERS

Like a roller coaster with all the ups, downs, fears, excitement, and anticipation of what is coming next, youth and kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers make many adjustments as they get to know each other, work through challenges, and develop mutual trust and respect. Youth need to know and feel that they are safe and cared for, and kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers need to know they have the support of the caseworker as well as the resources and tools from the tribal child welfare program to be successful caregivers. Equipping caregivers with the necessary knowledge to understand the impacts of trauma, as well as the skills to adapt caregiving responses to meet the needs of each youth, is key to placement stability and supporting youth on their long journeys of healing from trauma.

### What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Provide ongoing training to staff and out-of-home placement caregivers about the various ways [trauma, toxic stress, and adversity can impact health and development](#) across the lifespan. By understanding the various impacts trauma can have on youth, the program can build empathy and understanding for any challenges or behaviors youth experience in out-of-home care.
- Utilize an on-call system for after hours, holidays, and weekends that caregivers can use for support when needed (e.g., challenges related to mental health, behavioral issues, running away, and medical concerns).
- Regularly check in with the caregivers and, if available, provide any vouchers needed for clothes, shoes, diapers, formula, food, gas, and household furniture or additional supplies needed to care for the youth.
- Create a newsletter for out-of-home caregivers that highlights relevant information such as new caseworkers hired, community outreach events, information about respite care, a quick recipe kids would enjoy, and upcoming local and national trainings.
- Advocate for kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers to be involved in court hearings. If needed, they can be asked to leave during discussions about specific birth parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) reports that include protected information.
- Coordinate regular community gatherings to celebrate and engage the youth. These planned events are opportunities for peers and their families (birth and out-of-home placement caregivers) to connect over shared activities designed to build and enhance tribal values, culture, and traditional practices.
- Provide consistent and structured opportunities during supervision or team meetings for staff to discuss placement challenges. Focus on understanding the impact of trauma and building strategies to support engagement and healing to increase placement stability. Consider prompts such as:
  - How might what has happened to the child be contributing to their placement challenges?
  - How might what has happened to this family contribute to their struggles to communicate with each other?
  - What strategies have others used with families who are resistant to engaging with their caseworker?

- What strengths and services exist within the community to support this youth?
- Develop, enhance, and/or review the process, policy, and procedure for grievances made against kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. Ensure that you create ample evaluation and feedback opportunities for caregivers to have their voices heard.

### What the Caseworker Can Do:

- As much as possible, level the power dynamic that caseworkers have over out-of-home placement caregivers by honoring them as a frontline expert who knows the youth. Remember and value that caregivers have more hands-on experience and knowledge of the child's daily activities and life than a caseworker does.
- After a child is placed in the home, it's easy for a caregiver to forget some of the information shared in training. Clearly reshare the processes and procedures they need to be aware of while caring for the youth. As mentioned, provide the information in various formats (e.g., verbally, written, and electronic). Include information on applicable roles, responsibilities, timelines, expectations, requirements, financial support, and community resources. Highlight the process for out-of-home caregivers to reach out to someone at the tribal child welfare program with any questions, concerns, or need for support.
  - Maintain regularly scheduled phone, email, and in-person contact with kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers.
  - Maintain regularly scheduled home visits with youth. Ensure there are also one-on-one meetings with youth, so they have opportunities to ask questions about their case and have them answered directly by the caseworker.
  - Coordinate with the out-of-home placement caregiver before scheduling any appointments. When possible, have the caregiver make the appointments that work with their schedule and the youth's schedule.
  - Think through transportation barriers caregivers may be experiencing. In the event that another tribal child welfare staff member is going to help with transportation, be sure to inform the youth ahead of time to avoid re-traumatizing experiences.
  - As appropriate, encourage contact and connection between the out-of-home placement caregiver and the birth parent(s) and/or caregiver(s) when the youth have visitation. This relationship-building approach can provide reassurance that their child is in safe hands and being cared for.
  - Review and regularly update youth safety plans based on additional strengths, skills, resources, relationships, and any new providers.
- Talk to out-of-home caregivers about how they can [actively support reunification efforts](#) within their role.
- Encourage kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers to help the youth document their time in care and share their history. This personal documentation can include drawings and photographs, accomplishments, favorite things to do, names of friends and pets, favorite new foods or recipes, new friends, etc. Documenting experiences can facilitate connection and attachment between the youth and their out-of-home placement caregiver as well as preserve their memories.

## POST-PLACEMENT: WAYS TO PROVIDE TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT TO KINSHIP AND NON-RELATIVE CAREGIVERS

Placement changes, whether due to reunification or other reasons, have an impact on youth and their kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers. Being transparent and thoughtful about next steps, as well as gathering feedback from caregivers, youth, and the youth's birth parent(s), are crucial actions to continually improve trauma-informed tribal child welfare processes and procedures.

### What the Tribal Child Welfare Program Can Do:

- Establish opportunities for kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers to reflect and share their experiences with the tribal child welfare program. These can take the form of surveys, focus groups, written feedback, and/or verbal reflections. The program can use the information they collect to improve training and adjust program and casework practices. The following questions may provide some of this helpful information:
  - What did the tribal child welfare program do that was most helpful to you as a kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver?
  - What did the caseworker do that was most helpful to you as a kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver?
  - What do you wish you had been better prepared for as a kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregiver?
  - How can the tribal child welfare program support new kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers?
  - What suggestions for improvement do you have?
- Incorporate skilled kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers into the onboarding/training process for new out-of-home placement providers. Consider asking them if they would want to participate in the training process, serve as mentors, or coordinate support groups.
- Let kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement providers know that the tribal child welfare program staff value their caregiving. Acknowledge and celebrate out-of-home placement caregivers.





### What the Caseworker Can Do:

- Include kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers in the transition planning whenever a youth is returning home or moving to a new placement. For more trauma-informed practice strategies to support successful transitions for youth, check out these additional [TIPS](#).
- Whenever possible, provide ample time for youth and kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers to prepare for a change in placement. Avoid written or short notice of an upcoming placement change as these practices can be re-traumatizing, negatively impacting the youth and the caregivers.
- Assess kinship and nonrelative out-of-home placement caregivers' interests and ability to continue to support the youth after they leave their home. Are they willing to have continued contact? Provide ongoing support? Respite? Can they continue to offer logistical support and help the youth get to appointments and/or extracurricular activities?
- Work to maintain healthy connections the youth has made. In addition to the kinship or nonrelative out-of-home placement providers, what supportive relationships did the youth establish while in out-of-home care? How did those relationships support the youth's well-being? When possible, encourage continued contact with teachers, mentors, friends, coaches, and other important relationships the youth built.





## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### [Tribal Home Study Guide: The Basics and Beyond](#)

Kendra Lowden, Ghost Thunder Child Welfare Consulting

### [BIA Training Certificate](#)

Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development

### [Resource Family Training](#)

Center for Children, Families and Workforce Development

### [Partnering With Relatives to Promote Reunification](#)

Child Welfare Information Gateway

### [Equipping Foster Parents to Actively Support Reunification](#)

AdoptUSKids

### [Resource Families Supporting Reunification](#)

Center on Children and the Law

### [Post Reunification Supports](#)

CASA for Children

