



## *What is Kin-First Culture?*

Kin-first Culture refers to an organization's unwavering commitment to nurturing and supporting relationships between parents, children, and their family members (including relatives, extended family, community, and Tribes). It prioritizes the preservation and permanency of these important connections, such that children remain rooted in their care and love. Kin-first culture gives parents, families, and communities the opportunity to heal from trauma together. Moreover, a kin-first culture values cultural identity, recognizing that "there is no more culturally relevant resource than family" (Washington Catholic Community Services, 2023).

## *What is Kinship Placement?*

When children can't live safely with their parents and must enter foster care, child welfare policy prioritizes placement with relatives or close family friends, also known as kinship foster care. *Research confirms that children do best in kinship foster care and that family connections are critical to healthy child development and a sense of belonging.* Kinship care also helps to preserve children's cultural identity and relationship to their community.

## *Benefits/Impact of Kinship Placements:*

### *Minimizes Trauma:*

Children in foster care have experienced traumatic events, including both the neglect or abuse that brought them into care and the experience of emergency removal from their caregivers. When children live with kin, they are able to maintain connections with safe familiar supports, friends, school, and faith or cultural communities which can help children heal from the trauma they have experienced.

### ***Preserves Cultural Identity:***

Having a strong cultural identity can lead to greater self-esteem, higher education levels, improved coping abilities, and decreased levels of loneliness and depression. Living with kin helps children preserve and strengthen their cultural identities by maintaining connections to their communities and culture, including language, food, holidays, clothing, and more.

### ***Increased Placement Stability:***

*Children who are first placed with a non relative are 4 times more likely to have experienced 4 or more placement changes in their first 12 months when compared to youth initially placed in a relative placement.* Youth who experience minimized placement changes are more likely to experience fewer school changes, less trauma and distress, less mental health and behavioral problems, increased probabilities for academic achievement, and experience a lasting positive relationship with an adult.

### ***Promotes Sibling Ties:***

*70% of youth placed with relatives are also with their entire sibling set, compared to 44% of youth placed with non-relatives.* Positive ties with siblings can mitigate negative effects of maltreatment and entry into foster care. Separation from a sibling can result in feelings of worry and confusion, loss of identity, and decreased self-esteem and sense of belonging. Placing siblings in the same foster home is associated with higher rates of reunification, adoption, and guardianship, and fostering positive sibling relations has been identified as a protective factor for children's mental health.

### ***Improves Behavioral Outcomes:***

As the impact of the trauma they have experienced unfolds, youth in foster care often experience chronic health concerns, including physical, mental, and behavioral challenges. However, *youth in kinship care are 14% less likely to experience many of these challenges three years after placement,* compared to youth placed in a non-relative placement. Relatives are more likely to support the child through difficult times and less likely to request a placement change when challenges arise. The children themselves generally express more positive feelings about their placements and are less likely to run away when placed with relatives. This allows for continued access to consistent therapeutic and behavioral treatment and support.

# How can CASAs help?

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs) can have a significant impact on promoting and supporting a kin first culture within the child welfare system. Here's how:

1. **Advocating for Kinship Placements:** CASAs are often deeply involved in advocating for the best interests of children within the child welfare system. They can play a crucial role in identifying and assessing potential kinship placements for children who are involved in court proceedings. By actively seeking out and advocating for kinship placements, CASAs contribute to a culture that prioritizes placing children with relatives or kin whenever possible, in alignment with the principles of a kin first approach.
2. **Supporting Kinship Caregivers:** CASAs provide support not only to the children they advocate for but also to their caregivers, including kinship caregivers. They can help kinship caregivers navigate the complexities of the child welfare system, understand their rights and responsibilities, access necessary resources and support services, and advocate for the needs of the children in their care. By supporting and empowering kinship caregivers, CASAs strengthen the network of familial support available to children and reinforce the importance of kinship placements within the child welfare system.
3. **Highlighting the Importance of Family Connections:** CASAs often work closely with children and families to understand their unique circumstances, relationships, and support networks. Through their advocacy work, CASAs can highlight the importance of maintaining and strengthening family connections, including relationships with extended family members and kin. They can emphasize the value of preserving children's connections to their families and communities whenever possible, promoting a culture that recognizes and prioritizes these connections in decision-making processes.
4. **Advocating for Culturally Responsive Practices:** CASAs are trained to advocate for the best interests of the children they serve while also considering their cultural backgrounds, identities, and needs. In the context of a kin first culture, CASAs can advocate for culturally responsive practices that respect and honor the cultural traditions, values, and preferences of children and their families, including kinship caregivers. By promoting culturally competent approaches to child welfare, CASAs contribute to creating an inclusive and supportive environment that recognizes the importance of cultural continuity and identity in children's lives.

Overall, CASAs can play a vital role in shaping and reinforcing a kin first culture within the child welfare system by advocating for kinship placements, supporting kinship caregivers, highlighting the importance of family connections, and advocating for culturally responsive practices. Their dedication to the well-being of children and families helps to strengthen and preserve familial bonds, promote stability and permanency, and ultimately enhance outcomes for children in need of care and protection.