

Caregiver Connection

Biological Parents and Kinship Care: It's complicated!! Research and Recommendations for Biological Parent(s)

By Emi DiSciullo and Rachel Dunifon

Families in which grandparents or other relatives are raising children have many strengths, but also face some very difficult situations. One complicated issue is the role of the parents in such families. Although they may not be living in the household, parents can affect all members of kinship care families. As caregivers must adjust their roles, parents often need to rethink their own relationships with their children. Finding the correct balance to meet the needs of your family looks different for everyone, however below are some research based tips to help understand the issue of parenting from outside the home.

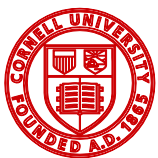
Recommendations for a biological parent who is not providing primary care of their child:

- Educational programs that coach and support parents, such as parenting classes, can be very helpful. Take part in these programs even if your children are not living with you every day. Your local Cooperative Extension or Social Services office will be able to point you toward some programs.
- Be sure that your children know that you love them. Their living situation can be very confusing. Often children think the worst and may question your love for them; be open with them about your positive feelings toward them.
- Make sure children know that the reasons why they are not living with you are NOT their fault, that they are loved by their family and that it is OK to miss you. It is important to allow children to express their feelings about their living situation, even if nothing will change as a result. Also, be careful not to impose your own negative feelings toward the caregiver on the child. Remember, the caregiver is raising your child the best way they know how for reasons outside of their control.
- Communicate with your child's caregiver. When children get mixed messages from the adults in their lives it can be very stressful. Try to be on

the same page about important things like rules, expectations and schedules. It is best if these conversations take place away from the child so that you and the caregiver can come to agreement on your approach to parenting before involving the child.

- Know your limitations and do not make promises you cannot keep. It is better to make fewer commitments with your child than to make plans and have to back out last minute. Developing a trusting relationship with a child is more important than the things you do with them.
- If you are not able to see your child regularly, use other ways to stay involved in his/her life. Phone calls, email, and letter writing can be great ways to keep in touch and help your child feel connected.
- Be aware that your child may have very complicated and changing feelings toward you. The fact that you are ready to be involved in your child's life does not mean they are ready to see you. Be patient and think of ways to interact with your child that are comfortable to both of you.
- Be aware that siblings often compare the types of interactions children have with their parents. Make every effort to treat all of your children fairly so that no one child feels left out or excluded. This is especially important if you are living with some of your children, but not living with others.

Children with multiple family members who care for them can be considered lucky to have many caring adults in their lives. Although finding a positive balance with biological parents can be tricky, the outcomes can also be very rewarding. The bottom line is making sure that *all* family members have the child's best interest at heart.



Cornell University
Cooperative Extension

Visit the Parenting Project website at
<https://www.human.cornell.edu/engagement/parenting-project>

©2012 Cornell Cooperative Extension
Cornell University offers equal program and employment
opportunities.