IES Institute of Education Sciences
Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia

Partnering with Kinship Caregivers & Grandfamilies: Meaningful Conversations to Strengthen Student and Family Support

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When you talk and listen carefully to kinship caregivers and grandfamilies to learn about their perspectives and experiences, you convey that they are valued, welcomed at school, and play a critical role in students' learning. These conversations also help to build and nurture trusting relationships and perceptions of school staff as approachable, receptive, empathetic, and responsive to families' needs and concerns. Fostering these connections can support higher family engagement and improved educational outcomes for students.[1]

Educators can use the following three-step process to gain perspective and meaningfully support kinship caregivers and grandfamilies and the students in their care.[2]

1 Plan Perspective-Building Conversations

- Begin by letting caregivers know why you are having a conversation and how you plan to use the information.
- Start with simple "warm-up" questions to build a sense of comfort.
- Design questions that ask for stories, not solutions or a list of issues.
- Be open to new ideas. Invite families with a variety of experiences and elicit stories that stretch your current thinking and challenge your assumptions.

2 Listen with Empathy to Families' Experiences

Listen and facilitate the conversation in a way that builds trust and supports honesty and openness.

- Notice the language the caregivers use and incorporate similar wording in your responses to help the conversation feel more familiar and accessible.
- Acknowledge their skills and expertise. Show an interest in their background, beliefs, and experiences within the community.
- Be careful not to imply that a question has a right or wrong answer. Be mindful of your body language.
- Practice curiosity (rather than judgment). When you need clarification or more details, ask "Can you say more about that?" to help increase your understanding.
- Summarize your understanding of their words to make sure you're hearing them as intended.

3 Take Action to Use Learnings

Using kinship caregivers' and grandfamilies' perspectives, co-develop a student and family support plan. Think about what you could:

- **STOP doing:** such as offering only online options to complete student forms, when some caregivers may feel uncomfortable using technology or may lack access to a computer or smartphone.
- **START doing:** such as finding ways to connect caregivers with community resources that meet their needs, providing state-specific fact sheets about public benefits, and connecting families to family resource centers and kinship navigator programs.
- **CONTINUE doing:** such as using language for school events that welcomes all families (for example, "Coffee with Caregivers" instead of "Donuts with Dad" or "Muffins with Mom").[3]

Sometimes it's hard to know how to get started. We include a **sample conversation script and prompts** below as an example that may help you to build relationships and understanding with your students' caregivers.

Thank you for taking the time to sit and talk with me today. I would like to get to know you and your child(ren) a little better, so I and my co-workers can make sure that we are showing up in the most supportive ways. Anything you choose to share will stay [between us / within school leadership / within organization leadership]. We can skip any questions you're not comfortable answering.*

1. **I'll first ask just a few questions to help me understand a bit more about you and your child(ren).**
   - How many children are you caring for?
   - What are their ages?
   - How are you related to the children in your care?
   - How long have they been with you?
   - How do they feel about school?
2. **What have our schools done that has worked well for you as a caregiver?**
   - What types of communication have worked?
   - In what ways have school staff helped you feel involved and engaged?
   - How have they helped you to support the child(ren) you are caring for?
   - What information was helpful?
3. **How could our schools do better to help you support the child(ren) you are caring for?**
   - Are there any other resources that could be helpful for your family–such as housing, transportation, or food assistance? There may be some local organizations that we can suggest.
4. **What else would you like to share?**

Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences and perspectives with me. What you've shared will help us strengthen how we work with you and other families to support your child(ren)'s success, and we look forward to continued conversations in the future!

*Listen to how the caregiver refers to the child/children (e.g., "my child," "my grandchild," "my niece") and use their preferred phrase.

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[1] Garcia, M. E., Frunzi, K., Dean, C. B., Flores, N., & Miller, K. B. (2016). *Toolkit of resources for engaging families and the community as partners in education: Part 3: Building trusting relationships with families and the community through effective communication* (REL 2016-152). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Pacific. http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs

[2] Nelsestuen, K., & Smith, J. (2020). Empathy interviews. *The Learning Professional, 41*(5), pp. 59-62.

[3] Zukav, G. (2014). Exercise: Every emotion is a message. *The seat of the soul: 25th anniversary edition: Study guide* (pp. 276). Simon and Schuster, New York.

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