

- April: Welcome to the NTDC Right Time podcast on kinship. I'm your host, April Dinwoodie. This podcast works in conjunction with the classroom-based training on kinship, providing an introduction to the material that will be covered in the classroom. The podcast will also be a resource for parents to go back to as children in their home transition through different developmental stages. In this episode, we welcome Kathleen Asad. Kathleen is a parent liaison for Lilliput Families' Kinship Support Services Program. Kathleen's primary role is facilitator of four monthly caregiver support groups for kinship caregivers. Kinship care has played an important part in her life. In 1997, after the birth of their first child, Kathleen and her husband began taking care of, and eventually, adopting four nieces who had been placed into emergency foster care. So often, the best way to learn is to hear directly from those who have experienced it firsthand. Before we jump right in, I want to thank you, Kathleen, for being so willing to share your personal experiences. And with that, what circumstances led you to your great-nieces coming to live with you?
- Kathleen: Yes. Hello. My niece was a habitual drug user and was experiencing domestic violence and financial instability. One day, my father showed up at her home to find her four small children were alone and the house in disarray. It was unclear how long she had been gone, only that she had left during the night. CPS was involved and the call to the sheriff was made. My great-nieces were placed in protective custody, and I spent the next several days trying to find out where the children were and what steps needed to be taken to have them placed with our family. At the time, my great-nieces were ages six, three, and twins who were two. Initially, the two oldest children were placed with my husband and I and the twins with my sister. Given I worked and had a newborn, we thought this was the best solution for all involved. My sister and her family were very close to us, so the children were together often. Not long after, the twins also came to live with us.
- April: Kathleen, I'm certain there were many adjustments and changes that needed to take place as you figured out how to manage this new reality. What were some of the things you experienced when they came to live with you?
- Kathleen: Huge adjustments had to be made to accommodate our expanding family. We put my car up for sale and purchased the van and squeezed the children into our tiny home. My husband went from working during the day to working at night to assist with childcare. As a working mom, my day was extremely busy. Going from having one small infant to having four other children was daunting. I also had to put my education on hold. Until we were in it, we really didn't know what an impact kinship care would have on our lives. Every aspect of our lives, every goal we made as a couple, and almost every relationship we had changed.
- April: What were two or three of the changes that you maybe struggled with or were the most challenging?
- Kathleen: My husband and I were parents to a newborn before the girls were placed with us. She was our first child. We had waited years to start our family and were relishing in being new parents. We had a beautiful little home and enjoyed our time together with family

and friends. In taking the girls into our home, we struggled with the adjustment of raising older children, two of them school age, and giving up our family time with our baby. I questioned whether we were doing our daughter a disservice. I felt guilty for wanting to spend time alone with my husband and baby and for not accommodating visitations, if they interfered with our daily life, and for being so limited in my time with each of the children. These feelings of guilt were surprising.

Questioning our ability to parent was a struggle. I was a new mom. Could I parent five children successfully? It was imperative, but challenging to put everyone on a tight schedule, homework, baths, laundry, meals, bedtime. We also had to manage this scheduled visitation with my niece. She had been given weekly visits, which encroached into our weekends. At times, I resented having to accommodate her. Her anger towards me took me off guard. I was trying to help her and her children. She didn't see it that way. To her, we became the reason her children were taken away from her. We were the enemy. Also, going from a family of three to a family of seven stretched our finances to the brink.

April: Kathleen, you mentioned being surprised by your guilt, as well as the feelings of anger towards you from your niece. Were there other things that surprised you?

Kathleen: Yes. I was surprised by the changes in relationships we had with our extended family members. For example, my parents and my siblings, because they had been so involved with the children prior to placement, they had difficulty with boundaries we had set. It was important to us that we parented the children. Decisions we made were often questioned. Our relationships with my family became strained.

April: Thank you for sharing, Kathleen. This is all so important. When did you first realize that you needed to make long-term plans for the children?

Kathleen: During the reunification process, the two oldest children were returned to their mom on a trial basis. The twins remained in our care. My parents had purchased her a home to help her get the children back, and we were hopeful. Mom was going through drug testing, taking parenting classes, and seemed to be doing better. That was in January '99. By June, things had changed. She had tested positive for drugs. The girls were returned to our care and the question of adoption was brought up by the county. We immediately said yes and started the process. We sold our home. We bought one that would accommodate all of us. I cut back on my hours at work, took time off from school. My husband changed jobs to cut travel time and his hours. I think the one thing that made this such an easy decision was our daughter. She was now two and talking. And when we would point to the girls and ask who they were, she would say, "My sisters." It was all the confirmation we needed. We were a family.

April: What a beautiful example of your family, Kathleen. I'd love to know if you or the children experienced divided loyalties, and if so, how?

Kathleen: Divided loyalty can be a huge issue in Kinship Care. The loyalty issue was most pervasive with our oldest daughter. I believe it was because they were the two that spent most

time with their mom. From birth, the twins spent much more time with other family members. Even today, they have almost no memory of their mother. We went from being auntie and uncle to mommy and daddy very quickly with them. But with the older two, however, it was a struggle. Visitations were difficult. This is when it came up most. I found them very guarded around their mom. They were very careful not to address my husband or I, refer to our home or our life in any way. During the reunification process, we often had family gatherings or school outings. The two older children would make great efforts to sit next to her, hold her hand, and include her in activities.

April: How did things shift and change over time?

Kathleen: Once our adoption was granted, I find my oldest daughter still struggling with our new role in her life. The younger children immediately accepted us as mommy and daddy. It took our oldest daughter longer to do so. She continued to refer to us as auntie and uncle, and we were okay with that. She understood the adoption and agreed to it wholeheartedly. It was this transition to mom and dad she struggled with. It wasn't until one day, months into the adoption, that she kind of quietly called me mom. I think she was trying it out. My heart soared, but I knew I had to make sure she was okay with it. I asked her if that was what she really wanted to do and her answer was yes.

April: Again, these examples are so poignant, and we appreciate you sharing so openly with us today, Kathleen. What are some of the supports that you found helpful or necessary as you navigated the challenges of kinship care?

Kathleen: Our guardianship was nearly 22 years ago. Again, we had issues with extended family members and their interference in our parenting. I had to figure out a support system outside of my family. I had a friend who also had a kinship family. We discussed issues at times, but for the most part, we were doing this alone. There was very little talk about kinship care at the time. We navigated the kinship process blind. I read everything I could on guardianship and raising adopted children. It was a challenge. It's extremely important for caregivers to find their support. Peer-to-peer groups are vital to kinship success. Who better to understand what a caregiver is going through than another caregiver? It's amazing how alike our stories are, regardless of the circumstances that brought about the kinship care.

Churches, community services, and organizations can be a resource that offer support groups, parenting classes, trauma education, as well as family activities. Another source of support comes from your child's school. Teachers, administration, and other parents can play a key part in understanding the educational system and forging bonds. With a clear understanding of kinship care and your role as a caregiver, family and friends can also play an important role in raising happy, healthy children. With that said, a number one necessity to kinship care is self-care, physically and mentally. Caregivers must put their health and wellbeing first. They need to be able to recognize when they are struggling and ask for help. It's vital.

April: I hope everyone listening heard that, but just in case you missed it, "The number one necessity to kinship care is self-care, physical and mentally. Caregivers must put their

health and wellbeing first." I'm going to close this podcast the same way Oma did with a heartfelt thank you to you, Kathleen. I know so many people will benefit from what you shared so openly today.

Kathleen: Thank you.

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