



Questions and Answers: Kinship Foster Care in California

Q: What is “kinship care”?

A: Kinship care is any living arrangement in which a child is cared for by a relative rather than a parent.

Q: What is “kinship foster care”?

A: The term “kinship foster care,” also referred to as “relative foster care,” describes the caretaking arrangement when children are in foster care and placed with a relative. Children in kinship foster care have been removed from their parent(s) due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment and are under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court. This set of questions and answers focuses on kinship foster care.

Q: Are there other types of “kinship care”?

A: Yes. There are two other types of kinship care. “Private kinship care” occurs when a child is living with a relative because of decisions made within the family. Children in private kinship care have never come to the attention of the child welfare system. (i.e., CPS/foster care). “Voluntary kinship care” occurs when a child comes to live with a relative because of intervention by the child welfare system, but there is not a formal foster care case.

Q: Are many foster children placed with relatives in California?

A: Yes. In fact, relative foster parents are the most utilized foster placement in California. Currently, over 36% of California’s foster youth are placed with relatives. Additionally, relative placements are the preferred placement for foster youth under federal and state laws, which require that preferential consideration be given, whenever possible, to placing a child with a relative over a non-relative.

Q: What other kinds of placements are available for foster children?

A: In addition to relative foster placements, children in foster care may be placed with non-relative foster parents. When children cannot be placed in a foster home with a family, they are most frequently placed in group homes. Other settings, such as residential treatment facilities are also available to youth who require intensive treatment to address mental health needs or substance abuse issues.

Q: What are the benefits of placing foster children with relatives?

A: Research regarding outcomes for children placed in kinship foster care is still emerging. However, studies suggest that children placed in relative foster care experience less trauma and disruption, have fewer negative emotions about being placed in foster care, maintain stronger bonds to siblings and extended family members, have stronger connections to their communities, and are less likely to experience multiple placements than children placed with non-relatives.

Q: Do relatives have to be approved or licensed to become foster parents?

A: Yes. In California, relative foster parents must be “approved.” Although the approval process is different from the licensure process that non-relative foster parents must go through, the ***exact same requirements*** that apply to licensure apply to approval. Just like non-relative foster parents, relative foster parents must undergo background checks, meet home approval requirements, and participate in monthly social worker visits and reviews in court every six months.

Q: Do relative foster parents receive the same financial support to help care for foster children in their homes that non-relative foster parents receive?

A: *Sometimes.* A relative foster parent will receive the same level of financial support as a non-relative foster parent if the foster child they are caring for has been found eligible for *federal* foster care benefits. In California, the current “basic rate” for a 15-year-old foster youth is \$836 per month. However, if the child is “federally ineligible,” a relative foster parent will receive ***substantially less*** financial support than a non-relative receives for the same “federally ineligible” child. Currently, the relative foster parent will receive a maximum of \$ 387 dollars a month through CalWORKs, while the non-relative foster parent will receive a minimum of \$836 a month through a “state-only” foster care benefit, and more if the child has special needs.

Q: Why do children who are not eligible for federal foster care benefits get less financial support if they are placed with a relative foster parent?

A: States have broad discretion over how to spend “state-only” child welfare dollars when children are not eligible for federal foster care benefits. **The state of California has decided to provide “state-only” foster care benefits to all children who are not eligible for federal foster care benefits *unless they are placed with a relative.*** This means that a federally ineligible foster child who is placed with a non-relative will receive a minimum of \$836 a month, but that same foster child will only receive a maximum of \$387 dollars a month if placed with a relative.

Q: Are most foster children eligible to receive federal foster care benefits?

A: No. In fact, the majority of foster children in California (56%) are *ineligible* for federal foster care benefits. What’s more, the number of children who are ineligible is increasing each year. This is because under federal eligibility rules, a foster child must be removed from a home in which the household income meets the 1996 eligibility criteria for the, now defunct, AFDC public assistance program. In 1996, the income limit for a family

of 3 to qualify for AFDC was \$723. Today, the income limit for a family of 3 for CalWORKs is \$1,169. This means that a child can be removed from a home that is poor enough to qualify for CalWORKs benefits but is not “poor enough” to qualify for federal foster care benefits.

Q: Are the income limits for federal eligibility adjusted for inflation?

A: No. The income limits for federal foster care benefits are based on the 1996 AFDC public assistance program rules and have never been adjusted for inflation.

Q: What does CalWORKs have to do with foster care?

A: CalWORKs (or TANF) is a public financial assistance program that is available generally to low-income families with children. Children do not need to be in foster care to receive this benefit and any child being cared for by a relative, including those in private kinship care, are eligible to receive this benefit. Because the state of California has chosen not to make state-only foster care benefits available to federally ineligible foster children placed with relatives, relative foster parents must look to CalWORKs for financial support to cover the costs of the foster child’s basic needs.

Q: So relative foster parents are *never* eligible to receive “state-only” foster care benefits?

A: That is correct. Relative foster parents will receive a federal foster care benefit of at least \$836 a month if the child they are caring for is federally eligible and will receive a CalWORKs benefit of no more than \$387 a month if the child they are caring for is not federally eligible.

Q: But, non-relative foster parents *always* receive a foster care benefit?

A: That is correct. Non-relative foster parents will receive a *federal* foster care benefit of \$836 a month if the child they are caring for is federally eligible and will receive a *state-only* foster care benefit of \$836 a month if the child they are caring for is not federally eligible.

Q: Does a federally ineligible child become federally eligible when she moves from the home of a relative to the home of a non-relative or to a group home?

A: No. Federal eligibility is a one-time determination made at the time the child enters foster care. Federal eligibility is not re-determined when a change of placement occurs. This means a youth who is not federally eligible in the home of a relative, is also not federally eligible in the home of a non-relative or in a group home. For this reason, it makes little fiscal sense that California denies state foster care benefits to relative foster parents. Denying foster care benefits to relatives increases placement instability and makes it more likely that the child will end up in a group home, which is exponentially more expensive and, for children who are not federally eligible, paid for entirely out of state and county funds.

Q: Do CalWORKs benefits vary based on the age of the child?

A: No. CalWORKs benefits are not adjusted based on the age of the child. A 3-year-old child will receive the same amount as a 15-year-old youth. Foster care benefits, however, increase as the child grows older. The current range in the basic rate is between \$657 for children under 4 and \$836 for children over age 15.

Q: Are CalWORKs benefits calculated on a per child basis?

A: No. CalWORKs benefits are determined based on the size of the household or “assistance unit”. The payment provided decreases with each additional child added to the assistance unit. For example, a relative foster parent caring for a federally ineligible foster child receives a CalWORKs payment of no more than \$387 dollars a month, and it can be less depending on the region where the child lives. However, if that relative is instead caring for a sibling group of 3 federally ineligible foster children, the CalWORKs payment is no more than \$788, not \$1,101 (\$387 x 3). Foster care benefits, on the other hand, are provided on a per child basis. For example, a non-relative foster parent will receive a foster care benefit of at least \$836 dollars a month to care for the same federally ineligible 15-year-old foster youth and \$2,508 (\$836 x 3) a month to care for the same sibling set of 3 *federally ineligible* foster youth.

	<i>Federally Ineligible Foster Youth (age 15)</i>	<i>Federally Ineligible Sibling set of 3 (ages 15, 16, and 17)</i>
Non-Relative Foster Parent (state only foster care benefit)	\$836	\$2,508
Relative Foster Parent (maximum CalWORKs benefit)	\$387	\$788

Q: Are CalWORKs benefits higher for children with special needs?

A: No. CalWORKs benefits do not vary based on the needs of the child. The CalWORKs payment for a child in foster care is always the same regardless of any special needs or disabilities the child may have. For example, the current CalWORKs payment for a child with autism who is placed with a relative is no more than \$387, the same amount provided to a typically developing child. However, if that same child were placed with a non-relative, and therefore eligible for state-only foster care benefits, he would receive the dual agency rate of \$2,162 and be eligible for additional supplements up to \$1,000.

Q: How much does it cost to care for a foster child in a group home?

A: Group home placements are costly. The annual cost of placement in a level 12 group home for one child is \$102,348. (Note: 52% of California’s foster youth who are placed in group homes are placed at this level.) This compares to an annual cost of \$10,032 for placement in a non-relative foster home and just \$4,404 annually (at most) in a relative foster home if the child is not federally eligible.

Q: What needs to happen to ensure that children in relative foster placements are supported equally by the state?

A: It is within the state of California's power to change the way it supports foster children who are placed with relatives. California is choosing to deny equal benefits to children in relative foster care and it can choose to fix the problem. An important opportunity for change is happening right now. In 2012, prompted by concerns about overreliance on costly group home placements, the California legislature directed the Department of Social Services to create a workgroup to reform the state's continuum of care for foster youth. In order to reduce group home placements, there must be adequate numbers of foster homes willing and able to care for these young people. The most likely source of support comes from our relative foster parents. It is incumbent on the Continuum of Care Reform workgroup to rethink the way the state supports children in relative foster placements—those placements that are preferred by law and where we know children thrive – if we are serious about reducing the number of children placed in group care. Advocates for foster children and foster parents are participating in the work group and urging the Department of Social Services to recommend equal support to foster children in relative care as part of the reform initiative.