

KINSHIP: TIES THAT BIND

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Adoption expands our understanding about families and connections. We know we do not need biology or blood to create strong, loving permanent relationships among adults and children. We call these associations kinship.

The key ingredient of kinship is the connection—a tie that binds. Kinship relationships in our society have traditionally been based on connections among persons tied by blood or marriage. Only children born into a family were considered in the lineage and in some cases, adopted persons did not inherit property from their birth or adoptive relatives. Those of us involved in adoptive and foster care relationships, however, have come to view kinship in a broader context, recognizing the interdependent connections among all people based on mutual caring, rather than exclusively by blood or marital ties.

Kinship, therefore, has many facets: a loving family; adults who care; permanence and predictability; roots to strengthen one's attachment to life; an opportunity for each child to have a fair chance at life; ties that bind; community that cares and protects; maintaining connections; and an individual's birthright. Kinship is creating ever-expanding circles of connectedness.

DEFINITION OF FAMILY

The definition of family and relatedness in our society has been changing rapidly, particularly in this century. Less than half of America's children will spend their childhood with both of their biological parents. Blended families through divorce and remarriage, gay or lesbian parenting partnerships, single-parent families, adoptive and foster families are all forms of modern family life. In total, there are now 28 ways to create human life—including donor insemination, surrogacy, and in-vitro fertilization.

We see the growing evidence of nuclear family limitations in the 500,000 children in foster care nationally; the escalation of violence on our streets and in our schools; the uncounted

faceless, nameless people who are homeless; and the lamentable phenomenon of adolescent children who are becoming biological mothers and fathers, but not creating families. Public bureaucracies serving children reinvented "kinship placements" to imply use of extended biological relatives as an alternative to non-relative foster care, but often this means leaving young children with their poor and elderly single grandmothers without major services or support.

A unique example of how kinship can be based on blood ties or affinity comes from a young anthropologist friend of ours who has been living with and studying an African tribal community for two years. Todd was assigned to an intra-tribal kinship group in order to have a defined place where he would be welcome to eat, socialize and sleep. Because he is not a permanent kin and he is racially different, he has been assigned the relationship of "grandson" to a prior anthropologist known to this tribe.

Although the forms of the family have changed, people are still trying to fit the new, sometimes called "alternative" family into the traditional model of the two-parent nuclear family as the only "right" kind of family. For example, single-parent families are not considered traditional families. Roles, responsibilities, goals and expectations are dramatically different in traditional and alternative family forms. Yet children can be well cared for, protected, and raised successfully to adulthood in each. If single-parent families attempt to imitate two-parent biological families, they may ultimately undervalue themselves or restrict their creativity and flexibility.

Attempting to function under the assumptions inherent in the two-parent biological family creates a falsehood that may lead alternative families to feelings of disconnection, shame, isolation, identity confusion, or alienation. Alternative families need new paradigms of support and kinship to add strength and dimension to their unique family model.



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CARING CONNECTIONS

Recognizing the truth and beauty of the old African proverb—*It takes a village to raise a child*—we can insert our own new paradigm: *It takes the commitment of many caring people dedicated to the well-being of a child to bring him or her safely into responsible adulthood.* The essence of kinship captured the truth of connections. Children, of course, are not the property of adults; rather it is adults who belong to their children. In adoption and through fostering, we understand that we can and must provide family, extended family, and community support to all. No one need be alone.

Kinship is a safe haven with someone who cares about what happens to you. If a child is to thrive with joy, adventure, creativity, and love of life, loving and committed kin are a necessity. And, if the spirit of kinship is to be a signal for health in a community, all aspects of community governance and social systems must demonstrate support for the child in his family.

Kinship Alliance founding member LaVonne Stiffler, Texas-based author, therapist, educator, and birthmother, says, “My idea of a kinship system expanded after the 1986 reunion with our firstborn daughter, after nearly 32 years of separation. Though her adoptive parents and brother were thousands of miles away, they became part of our conscious thoughts and activity (instead of phantoms lurking in some unconscious realm). We wrote, hesitantly at first, and visited. Each member of the adoptive family has passed away since our reunion. I am very thankful to have known them, to be able to share our daughter, and to encourage one another on the rest of life’s journey.”

Whatever we have or have not learned from adoption, for the sake of all children, it is imperative that we expand our vision of family and kinship.

All three authors are founding members of Kinship Alliance. Sharon Kaplan Roszia, M.S., is an internationally respected author and lecturer, parent by birth, adoption and fostering. She is founding Director of Kinship Alliance. Carol Biddle, M.S.W., is Executive Director of Kinship Center®, a licensed adoption and treatment foster family agency, and co-producer of “A Family Album-Stories of Adoption”, an award winning documentary video about special needs adoptive families. Kinship Center hosted the formation of Kinship Alliance. Deborah Silverstein, L.C.S.W., is a respected child therapist, adoption practitioner, author, lecturer, and parent by adoption. She is also a social worker for Kinship Center’s Southern California program.

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