

FOSTER/KINSHIP AND **ADOPTIVE** SUPPORT GROUPS



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**FOSTER
FRIENDLY™**

BY AMERICA'S KIDS BELONG



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**Nearly half of parents stop fostering within the first year;
many cite “a lack of community support” as a key factor.**



Why are foster, kinship and adoptive parent support groups so important?

Faith communities have a great opportunity to facilitate vital connections between foster, kinship and adoptive families in their communities by hosting support groups.

While the journey of foster care and adoption can be challenging, it shouldn't be lonely. Along with building a personal support team, foster, kinship and adoptive parents need support from others on a similar journey including:

- **Parenting and co-parenting other people's children**
- **Understanding the complexities of the child-welfare and mental-health systems**
- **Experiencing the joy of attachment followed by grief and loss as foster children transition**
- **Advocating for kids in care with schools, courts, healthcare providers, etc.**
- **Navigating the dynamics of biological, adopted and/or foster children in one family**
- **Healing wounds of abandonment, neglect, abuse, attachment and loss**
- **Celebrating big and small victories of healing in children and their biological families**

This guide will offer you tools and resources to create an environment that is rich in support, training and celebration for foster, kinship and adoptive families

Support group structure, environment and schedule

GROUP STRUCTURE

Meeting Frequency – We recommend hosting support group gatherings monthly or bimonthly, depending on your community's ability to resource them.

Ongoing Communication Support – We recommend engaging support group members to select a channel for staying in contact with one another between meetings. Some popular options include:

- Private social media group
- Group email
- WhatsApp group
- Slack channel

ENVIRONMENT MATTERS

Consider the environment where you host your group: a room small enough that people don't get lost, but large enough to spread out if needed. The best set up is to sit in circles so everyone can see each other. In the room where adults gather, you can model calm and fun, alternating as appropriate. Consider how you might appeal to all the senses for participants. This can model good self care for adults and kids in different ways.

Here are some ideas:

- Smell: diffusers
- Touch: fidgets
- See: a relaxing/inviting space
- Hear: light music as entering

SUGGESTED SCHEDULE

Here is a recommended schedule to work from to build your schedule.

5:30	Family Meal together
6:15	Child care begins
6:20	Ice breaker or mingling
6:30	Time of facilitated learning and large group discussion
7:00	Break into smaller groups with questions to answer together
7:30	Dismiss

Support group structure, environment and schedule

We recommend selecting a team of people to lead and facilitate the operation of the Support Group. Recommended team members include:



Group Leader: The leader will facilitate learning, community and support among group members during meetings and between via a private social media group. We recommend the leader bring direct experience as a foster parent, leadership ability and a passion for helping foster, kinship and adoptive families understand the impact of trauma on children and navigate the child-welfare system.



Child Care Coordinator: This coordinator is responsible for recruiting and scheduling child care workers, ensuring that they all have background checks in place and have received training to be trauma-aware. While experience as a foster parent is not imperative, the coordinators should have experience working with children and teens. Offering child care really makes a big difference and allows adult caregivers from the same home to participate together—a very important value.



Group Leader: This coordinator will help promote the small group to foster and adoptive parents, create and moderate the group's private social media page (or coordinate group communication by other means including a group email or WhatsApp group). They request registration or RSVP for meetings and coordinate meeting logistics with child care and meal coordinators. They send reminders and announcements to the group between meetings.



Meal Coordinator: This coordinator is responsible for the menu and food service logistics for the support group family meal time together at the start of meetings. This can involve coordinating catering and/or cooks and servers, as well as volunteers as needed to create freezer meals to gift families who attend meetings as an additional form of support.



Child care best practices

Both quantity and quality of child care volunteers matter when caring for children, especially children experiencing the hardships of foster care. Check your faith community's childcare policies. Also double check your state's guidelines for adult to child ratios. Childcare.gov offers additional guidance on ratios and group sizes.

- All volunteers must pass a background check before the group begins, or the church must have a completed check on record within the last 12 months.
- Having plenty of adult / teen helpers means plenty of oversight, as well as more opportunities for positive interaction and play with the children and families you are serving.
- A minimum of two adults should be present in a room of children (or one adult and one teen helper).
- No adult or teen helper should be alone with a child at any time.
- All volunteers should receive at least a moderate level of training on working with children who have experienced trauma. A brief primer on trauma awareness is key. Check out [BelongUniversity.com](https://belonguniversity.com) for a free, one-hour course for childcare volunteers.

Keep conversations light. When engaging with kids from hard places, avoid getting personal. Keep it light. Avoid asking about parents, where they live or where they go to school. Here are some safe and helpful conversation starters:

- **What are you doing right now? That looks fun!**
- **What do you like to do for fun? What are some of your favorite games/hobbies/sports?**
- **What is your favorite snack/movie/cartoon character/color/season/kind of music?**
- **What is your favorite subject in school? What is your least favorite?**
- **What special talent do you have or what are you the best at doing? Healing wounds of abandonment, neglect, abuse, attachment and loss**
- **Celebrating big and small victories of healing in children and their biological families**

FREE 1 HOUR | "Becoming Trauma Aware Course"
belonguniversity.com



CHILD CARE BEST PRACTICES

Avoid questions like these that may seem innocent but can bring up some difficult things for kids in foster care:

- Is that your real mom/dad/sister/brother?
- Do you get to visit your parents?
- Do you like your foster parents?
- Why are you in foster care?
- Are you going to be adopted?
- What school do you go to?
- Where did you move from?
- How long have you been in foster care?

Concerns About Children. Any concerns about a child should be addressed with the Childcare coordinator and the foster parents. This includes things they say, bruises, behavior, etc. They can help make the decision about whether or not to report it to Social Services. If you see or hear a child say something that seems like a potential mandatory reporting issue (visible injuries or comments that suggest abuse or neglect), notify the childcare coordinator and foster parents.

Reaction to Children's Comments. Stay calm; don't show surprise or alarm. Redirect conversations, if needed, like "How about we wait and talk about that when your foster parents return?"

Confidentiality is important. Do not share information outside of the support group about who attended—parents or children. This includes any type of information, topics of conversation involving children or parents on social media.

Appropriate Touch. Because of their varied backgrounds, some kids may be overly "touchy" or may prefer not to be touched at all. If you feel that a touch initiated by the child is inappropriate, redirect the child to the current activity, or if they are seeking attention, you can suggest they sit beside you, if appropriate, during the activity. Notify the Child Care Coordinator and parents if inappropriate physical touch happens between two kids.

Behavior Challenges. If a child acts out the best response is to redirect. Avoid saying "No" or "Don't do that." Instead say things like, "Let's get back to the activity" or "Why don't we stand over here and do the activity?" Another option is for two adults to take the child for a short walk to get some space. "Let's take a break for a little bit. Then we'll come back and join the others."

Bathroom Policies. Two adults take one child to the bathroom. This is to protect you and the child. Have supervised and scheduled bathroom breaks/rotations.

Name Tags and T-shirts. Please wear an official name tag so it is clear to the children and parents who the official childcare workers are. Better yet, establish a t-shirt or wear the same colored shirts. This provides a safety measure so kids can quickly spot a helpful adult within the room.



Support group planning timeline

8+ WEEKS BEFORE START

- ☐ Prayerfully decide to lead a support group and vet potential small group leaders (if applicable). Group email
- ☐ Meet and approve the semester curriculum with your faith leader.
- ☐ Talk with local foster care agencies to see if your group's meetings might count as continuing education for foster parents. And if requested, be prepared to provide the agency with the curriculum to review.

6+ WEEKS BEFORE START

- ☐ Decide who will be ordering and purchasing curriculum.
- ☐ Determine group logistics including:
 - Length of group/study, frequency of meetings and location (physical or online)
 - Day, time and duration
 - Will the group be open to the community or limited to the faith community?
- ☐ Consider a short survey to assess the best options for the group.
- ☐ Determine A/V equipment needs. Reserve room if needed.
- ☐ Set-up group and childcare registration details and determine if you need to cap registration.

4 WEEKS BEFORE START

- ☐ **Market** – Promote the support group within your community and externally if it's open to the public. Decide how best to build awareness, including email, social media, church bulletins, community-partner newsletters, etc.
- ☐ **Partners** – Enlist community partners Department of Children's Services and private Foster Care and Adoption providers to help market. Be transparent about the group if it is faith-based.
- ☐ **Registration.** Invite people to register for the group. You may want to collect the family survey and childcare RSVPs at the same time. This may be done electronically or paper.
- ☐ **Background Checks.** Make sure childcare workers have completed background checks in line with your faith community's standards.



SUPPORT GROUP PLANNING TIMELINE

- ☐ **Trauma Aware.** Encourage all childcare volunteers to take Trauma Awareness training. Check out [BelongUniversity.com](https://www.belonguniversity.com) for a free, one-hour course for childcare volunteers.
- ☐ **Meals.** Make plans for group meal (if applicable).
- ☐ **Meal Gifts.** Organize take-home freezer meals as gifts for families (if applicable).

2-3 WEEKS BEFORE START

- ☐ **Leaders Meeting.** Meet to pray, cast vision and discuss logistics.
- ☐ **Draft Guidelines.** This will help ensure that your group and leaders are unified.

1 WEEK BEFORE START

- ☐ Assign breakout discussion leaders as applicable if group is large.
- ☐ Double check with childcare volunteers their availability and that you have enough people for children registered.

WEEK 1

- ☐ Hand out study materials or notes pages (if applicable) and welcome bag.
- ☐ Keep some with you each week in case a new attendee comes.
- ☐ Invite attendees to review and sign the group guidelines.
- ☐ Bring name tags, sharpies, pens, extra materials as needed for new attendees, kleenex

WEEKLY

- ☐ Send a weekly summary of the scheduled topic the Friday before. Also post on Foster Parent Group page on social media (if applicable).
- ☐ If the curriculum has a reading passage, break it up into small sections (e.g., verses, main passage, prayer, etc., and write it on sticky notes for attendees to pick up when they arrive to increase participation).
- ☐ If the curriculum has a lot of questions, choose a few you want to focus on each week.
- ☐ Prepare your mixer/ icebreaker before the study if you are doing one. (See list for ideas.)

LAST WEEK OF GROUP

- ☐ Send out follow-up survey (optional).
- ☐ If continuing education hours are granted for your group, make a certificate to provide to your attendees.



11 practical steps for dealing with trauma in the moment

Here are some simple—although not always easy—things you can do when those moments arise. Go over this information with volunteers right before the PNO event begins.

Remember the Big Picture. The best path to appropriate behavior is to heal the heart and rewire the brain. This long-term view is most important, not simply getting them to obey in that moment. Connecting relationally improves the chances of getting compliant behaviors!

Have Drinks & Snacks Available. Children and teens who have experienced trauma may be more sensitive to dehydration and low blood sugar levels. Be prepared to offer a drink of water or get a snack with a child if they are experiencing a difficult or stressful situation—even if their own negative behavior induced the stress.

Give Clear Expectations. Communicating expectations ahead of time is an important way to give children who have experienced trauma a chance to anticipate changes. The experiences that caused their trauma likely made them feel helpless and out of control. Giving children a sense of security and certainty is an important step toward healing their brains.

Give a Little Control. Sometimes a child will feel a need to exert control, because he or she is not in control of anything else in their life. Playing a game of Simon Says or Red Light/Green Light and letting the child be the leader can give them a sense of power and felt safety.

Give Time for Transitions. So often, transitions are hard for a child with trauma. Schedule changes or movement to a new activity can cause the fight or flight response to kick in, especially if they are in the middle of something they enjoy. Example: Johnny, we are going to play with these toys for 5 more minutes and then put them back on the shelf. Often it is helpful to have the child repeat it back to you. Example: What are we going to do in five minutes? Child: Put the toys on the shelf. Yes!



11 PRACTICAL STEPS FOR DEALING WITH TRAUMA IN THE MOMENT

Provide Sensory Stimulation. If a child in your care simply can't be still, try giving him Velcro, slime or a toy that enables him to listen and learn experientially. There is plenty of research that shows how kiddos brains are better able to regulate and learn when they are able to move their bodies! Another sensory tool is GUM! Offering a piece of sugar free gum to children over 5 years old can offer a needed distraction, reduce anxiety, or fulfill a sensory need.

Time IN Versus Time OUT. Children who have hindered attachments or relational connections are highly sensitive to messages of distance or abandonment. Rather than sending a child away to figure out their behavior, try bringing them closer to help regulate their emotions and behaviors with a time in. Kids may need extra help getting back on track and sending them away will not bring understanding of their behaviors or an ability to make better choices in the future.

Recognize the Power of a Redo. Children from difficult beginnings learn better when they are able to have a redo. It helps rewire the brain rather than just treat the symptom behavior. Redo's allow our kids to not just hear the right behavior but practice it. Eventually, the appropriate behaviors become more like "muscle memory"! Here's what a redo might look like. Child: I want a water bottle! Adult: I hear you. How about we redo that? Can you ask for the water bottle?

Identify Feelings & Use Words. Give a struggling child space to identify their own feelings and encourage them to use words. Ask the child, "What are you feeling? What do you need?" Offering a listening ear might reveal what the child is experiencing and a way to help them. Rather than reacting to emotions, teach kids to use their words to express emotions, seek connection, and get their needs met. Be Playful! Play is central to a child's well-being. Play can disarm fear and build connection. Shared laughter is a bonding agent! Whenever possible use playful language and attitude even when teaching or even correcting a child's behavior.

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Sample child care volunteer application

Date:

Full Name:

Address:

Birthdate:

Sex:

Phone:

Email Address:

Do you have previous training or background dealing with abused, neglected or abandoned children or youth? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please Describe

Do you have previous experience working with children or teens?

Please Describe

Tell us a little bit about yourself – what are 2 strengths and 2 weaknesses

Please describe why you wish to be a volunteer for PNO

Have you ever been arrested for a criminal offense? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever been arrested for sexual misconduct? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever been convicted of sexual misconduct? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever taken drugs other than prescription? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Please PNO that a background check, an interview and { hours} of training are necessary to volunteer for any PNO volunteer position

If you answered “yes” to any of the above

Please Explain



Story of success: Kings and queens/ foster/kinship/adopt support and good news community church

What started as a small clothing and supply closet for foster, kinship and adoptive families at Good News Community Church in Okoboji, Iowa has grown into a vibrant nonprofit ministry called Kings and Queens Local (KQL). It gives support to over 302 adults and 150 children from multiple counties. And if you ask the families served by this organization and church, they will tell you the most valuable part goes beyond clothes and car seats—it's the connection they have to one another on their unique parenting journeys.

In_____ Tina VandeHoef saw the need for foster, kinship, and adoptive parents, like herself, to have more community and personal support. Her missional community (a type of small group coordinated through her church, Good News, inspired her to act and begin leading their own group, focused on meeting those needs.

Tina and her husband, Brett, started a new missional community with the purpose of serving foster and adoptive families. The missional community consisted of around 10 families who were interested or already involved in foster/kinship adoptive parenting as well as families who were simply interested in serving kids and families impacted by foster care.

Along with bible study, worship and prayer, the group researched and planned how to help families. The idea for a clothing and supply closet was born and Good News Community Church allowed the group to transform an unused classroom into a beautiful free "shopping" space for foster parents and case workers. But beyond meeting the physical needs, Tina knew that foster/kinship/adoptive parents have unique challenges in parenting—especially parenting children that have experienced especially hard and traumatic times. From her own years of longing for community, the idea to start a nonprofit and support group was born and her church, Good News Community Church, hosts the group.

KINGS & QUEENS *local*



STORY OF SUCCESS: KINGS AND QUEENS FOSTER/KINSHIP/ADOPT SUPPORT MINISTRY AND GOOD NEWS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Today, KQL offers a safe space with applicable education for foster/adoptive families, once a month. Their educational support group provides a free evening of:

- family snacks/drinks
- DHS approved adult education
- child care and teen nurture group
- individual freezer meals to take home and/or grocery cards
- an opportunity to “shop” (free) KADENS KLOSET: OKOBOJI for a clothing needs and/or wants.

The group averages 22 parents and 19 kids monthly, but can see up to 40 parents and 48 kids for special events like parent date nights. In the first few years, the support group asked Darcie Van Voorst to facilitate Trust Based Relational Intervention training as part of their learning together. This was vital in creating a common language and learning among the group so they could encourage one another in their parenting kids from hard places with both nurture and structure. Today, the group has broadened their scope of learning by often bringing in various experts in different fields– from child welfare to theraplay, to victims advocacy and more.

On their first night of the 2021-2022 KQL Support Group, a local therapist shared with parents and caregivers the significant impact that food stress can have on kids. As parents and caregivers better understand the root issues behind food challenges, they can

better provide stability, safety, and nurturing in our homes. One foster mom took to social media to express her gratitude for the group:

“I can’t express just how much I needed tonight and how grateful I am for you and everyone at KQL. I feel refreshed, valued, and not alone in the journey. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

The most important part of the support group is always the connection parents have with one another. You can often hear group members exchanging phone numbers, making plans to watch either other’s kids or have playdates together and sharing resources, encouragement and advice. After their famous Christmas party—where the parents have just as much fun as the kids, one parent shared,

“Food was delicious and being waited on was so fun and relaxing. Loved it. Can we do it again next week? Girls had fun too!! The balloons brought home are still blown up and being played with. Thanks for opening the closet for them. They got lots of clothes. You all are truly amazing when it comes to gratitude to us and we appreciate you also.”

Though KQL is not specifically faith-based in their support group setting, wanting to help all foster, kinship and adoptive parents and kids feel welcome and supported, they have launched several mom’s Bible studies. These studies have provided deeper connections for the mom’s and taught the mom’s how to be dependent on God during tough times.



STORY OF SUCCESS: KINGS AND QUEENS FOSTER/KINSHIP/ADOPT SUPPORT MINISTRY AND GOOD NEWS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Jonna Ebel, foster and adoptive mom shares this about KQL:

“As a mom to multiple kids, both biological and adopted, and a family that is involved with foster care; I am both blessed and challenged each day. While there are so many days I feel lucky, there are equally as many days that are just plain hard, chaotic, and lonely. I believe it is by the grace of God that as a new foster parent, I was invited to attend a support group for foster and adoptive parents. Little did I know that by saying yes to this group-God was actually sending me a gift in the form of love and connections I did not know I so desperately needed! I am speaking of KQL! KQL came into my life as a way to gain knowledge, and talk with others with similar experiences...but for me it has blossomed into a community of love, support, and guidance on how to walk through good and bad times as parents! The lifegiving conversations I have had with friends in this community have reminded me that we need to stay grounded in God and have faith; we need to support and pray for one another; it's okay to ask for help and let our guards down; and we all deserve some grace in our life! I have not only learned a lot through the meetings, but I have also laughed a lot too. What a fun community to be a part of! I am forever changed by and grateful to belong to KQL!”





Support group ice breakers

Laughter and getting to know each other is an important ingredient to a successful Support Group, especially for foster and adoptive parents who might be experiencing a lot of stress or challenges. Here are some ways to break the ice and really get to know one another:

WOULD YOU RATHER? Ask which one they prefer: Eat pizza or fish and chips? Skydive or bungee jump? Marvel or DC? Read the book or watch the movie? Drink coke or lemonade? Save money or spend it?

2 TRUTHS and A LIE. This one is exactly that- 2 truths and 1 lie. Each person has a turn to share 3 facts about themselves, 2 of which are true and 1 of which is a lie. The rest of the group has to guess which fact is in fact not a fact!

GOOD, BAD, and GOD. This one is good for digging a bit deeper and finding out how someone's week has really gone. Everyone shares something good that's happened, something bad that's happened, and something God did or spoke to them about during the week.

FUN FACTS. Have everyone share the same fun fact about themselves. What was the first CD you ever bought? Favorite movie? If you were an animal what would you be? Dream job? Role model?

IF YOUR LIFE WAS A MUSICAL.....which celebrity would play you?

What 3 songs would feature? Which actor would play your love interest?

PASS IT ON. In this ice breaker you pass a ball between each other. The person throwing asks a question and the person catching answers before passing it on to someone else, asking them a question. Questions could be about anything from family to school to future plans.

FUNNY STORY. Share a funny comment or story through your journey. Could be something a child said, something someone in public said, or something you misunderstood.

Sample foster/adoptive parent questionnaire/registration

We recommend making your own paper or electronic questionnaire. Many churches have a data collecting system and can make forms through theirs system to make your ministry sustainable and unified. We recommend making the ones with * required. Please personalize as appropriate.

Please complete this survey so we can get to know your family and best meet your needs:

Full Name*	DOB*
Spouse's Name (if applicable)	Spouse's DOB (if applicable)
Anniversary (if applicable)	Phone*
Preferred form of communication*	Email*

Are you a member at (church name)?* ☐ Yes ☐ No

Are you in a (small group through (church name)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Full Name*	If so, what campus? (as applicable)
Leader's Email.	

Children* For each child, please list their first name only, gender, dob, any special needs you would like us to be aware of, specific trigger ie scents, words, food, etc; and whether they are biological, foster, guardianship/ kinship or adopted (Domestic, International, Foster, or Kinship/ Guardianship).

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Sample foster/adoptive parent questionnaire/registration (Cont)

Does your family have any food or other severe allergies?* ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, specify who and what

Family Make-Up (select all that apply)*

- ☐ Foster Family (active) ☐ Foster Family (on hold) ☐ Kinship Family
- ☐ Pre-adoptive Family ☐ Post-adoptive Family

If fostering or kinship family, what county?

How long have you been a foster parent?

What agency?

End of group survey

We recommend making your own paper or electronic survey. Many churches have a data collecting system and can make forms through their system to make your ministry sustainable and unified. You may want to collect these once a semester or after finishing certain study material.

Please personalize as appropriate.

This information will be used to improve future groups. Please be honest and thorough in your answers:

Full Name*

Best part of the group

Quality of Course Content (rate 1 (poor) to 10 (fabulous))

Hardest part of the group

Next semester, I am interested in... (select all that apply)

- ☐ Starting a new support group at my church (where applicable)
- ☐ Being a co-leader or volunteer in this group
- ☐ Attend this support group again
- ☐ Take the semester off
- ☐ Pray more about it

Ideal location

Ideal day

Future curriculum ideas?

Other Comments?

Ideal time

☐

Mornings

☐

Evenings

Thank you for sharing with us!

We will use what you shared to improve the support and training given to foster and adoptive parents. Thank you again for opening your heart and home!