



## STRENGTH-BASED WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

**By Eshale Williams, PsyD, LMFT; Brittany Oliver, LCSW;  
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*The series focuses on words or expressions considered “strength-based” to help foster or resource, adoptive, and kinship parents and child welfare agency staff describe and discuss children and families from a positive and person-first perspective. So for those of us who are taking care of children born to someone else, what is a kinship caregiver? A foster parent? A resource parent? An adoptive parent? What’s the difference between being parents and being families? What does it mean to policymakers? What does it mean to those of us who have these identities or roles? What do these labels mean to children? Here’s a brief history of how these names came to be and some issues to consider with the privilege of having them.*

### **Kinship Caregiver**

Every day in villages, neighborhoods and cities around the world, when parents cannot take care of their children — for a few hours, days, weeks or longer — relatives step in. In most cultures, families take care of their own — both children as well as dependent elders. Relatives come forward to raise children when parents have financial, medical or other crises, when they go to other locations in search of work, when they are deployed, and when there are tragedies, including death.

In 1991, the National Commission on Family Foster Care — convened by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the National Foster Parent Association (NFPA) — gave the name “kinship care” to the policy and practice of relatives taking care of their younger family members. The name came from a book published in 1974 by Dr. Carol Stack, “All Our Kin — Strategies for Survival in Black Community.” It described how families under extraordinary stress do an extraordinary job raising their children through the strength of kinship networks. Kinship care was defined as the full-time protecting and nurturing of children

by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, or whoever claimed the child — and, so important, who the children claimed they identified as kin. So for the last 30 years those relatives have been known as kinship caregivers.

You may have heard the expression “kinship care” and “traditional foster care.” Actually, it is kinship care that is traditional dating back centuries — especially in families of color. We should be mindful, however, that some kinship caregivers are part of the formal child welfare system. Their younger family members — grandchildren, nieces, nephews, siblings or extended family — are in the custody of child protective services. In many jurisdictions, kinship caregivers are licensed, certified or approved with the same criteria as foster parents who are unrelated to the children and receive the same preservice training. However, there are significant differences between the inherited role of being a relative, and the acquired role of applying to be a foster or adoptive parent. Sensitivity to those differences is essential.

Kinship caregivers should be certain



that the agencies with which they affiliate — public or private — respect the complexities of being a relative when it comes to supporting relationships between children and their parents as well as plans for permanence. So if you are caring for your younger family members as a grandparent, older sibling, uncle or aunt — what is the name for your role? Be certain to tell your agency the respectful name or label you wish to be called. Are you Nana or Auntie, are you Pops or Uncle? Are you Tia or your first name? Be certain that the children are asked, if old enough, what name is best for your relationship.

#### **Adoptive Parent**

According to The Adoption History Project ([www.childwelfare.gov/top-](http://www.childwelfare.gov/top-)

ics/adoption/intro/history/), “since ancient times and in all human cultures, children have been transferred from adults who would not or could not be parents to adults who wanted them for love, labor, and property.” Beginning with the Massachusetts Adoption of Children Act in 1851, adoption became the legal, social and emotional way to become parents for children we did not birth. Until the mid-1960s, adoption was primarily a service for white infertile couples. With the civil rights movement came the women’s movement, and then the children’s movement. After almost 100 years, we realized that adoption was a service to identify parents for children, not children for adults who wanted to be parents. But not all children.

About the same time, the concept of “permanency” was promoted. By the 1970s, through the efforts of what was known as the Oregon Project, it was evidenced that children not only had the need — they had the right — to a family who would provide “continuity, a commitment, and the legal and social status” that comes from having a family of one’s own. Research also showed that the most stable of adoptive families were foster families — we knew the children’s behaviors and often their birth parents. Agencies began changing policies so adoptive families could begin with foster families.

#### **Foster Parent or Resource Parent**

Foster parents were created when private charities sent orphaned or

impoverished European immigrant children from the tenements of New York to settlers in the West (now the Midwest), through Orphan Train, watch Orphan Trains — An American Experience by Public Broadcasting System on YouTube. Foster means “to promote the growth of” and those 19th century foster parents were expected to provide what was then known as “three hots and cot.” They were expected to teach children who

for years. One of the co-founders of the NFPA, Helen Stone from CWLA, helped create the first national foster parent training program. It was titled Parenting Plus. By then we knew that foster parents had to do more than parent. Children with special needs required parents with special skills.

By the 1980s, a new curriculum was advanced — Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP).

a lot of words to keep writing and stating “foster parent and adoptive parent” or “foster and adoptive parent.” How about resource parent? In fact, the PRIDE Model of Practice went further — promoting the name and advocating for foster and adoptive parents — or resource parents — as team members in child protection and trauma-informed care of children.

**According to a 19-year-old former youth in care: “Labels are important. The name ‘foster’ is so awkward, especially for younger kids. I remember choosing to not tell anyone that I was in foster care and that I had a foster parent. At my high school graduation, everyone was confused when I introduced my ‘real’ mom. I then had to explain that the person I had been living with for many years was not my ‘real’ mom. Not everyone lives with their parents and there should be more options to use when describing these situations.”**

joined their families a trade or a skill. When girls reached puberty — about the age of 16 back then — they could marry. By the 1900s, we had learned that children needed an education and family life. Child labor was abolished, as were orphan asylums. State intervention into family life to protect children began to increase. The role of foster parents began to be redefined. Are foster parents “just glorified babysitters” or more? And foster parents were volunteers, not paid staff. So what were the expectations?

In 1941, in a scholarly journal, *Social Service Review*, there was an article titled, “Child placement and the family agency.” The author, J. Hanford, asked “Are foster parents colleagues, clients, or something in between?” Thirty years later, another journal article explained that the role of foster parents has been the subject of debate

It combined preservice training for both prospective foster AND adoptive parents. It also built on a program created in the 1970s — the Nova Model — which evidenced that using preservice training to facilitate family assessments (home studies) had positive results to prevent disruptions and increase retention. MAPP’s developers explained that foster and adoptive parents aren’t clients, they are service providers or resources. (It would take another 30 years for that “resource parent” label to resurface and be proposed by federal and state agencies.)

In the 1990s, it became clear that foster parents were adopting and adoptive parents needed to know children’s fostering histories competency-based model of practice was needed, the PRIDE Model of Practice to Develop and Support Foster and Adoptive Parents was created. It takes

### **Parent or Family?**

The U.S. Children’s Bureau, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, defines resource families as foster parents, foster-to-adopt families, and kinship caregivers — all critical partners for child welfare professionals because they provide care for children who cannot live with their parents, and they can play a supportive role in reunification. So what’s in a name? Are we kinship caregivers? Foster parents? Adoptive parents? Resource parents?

In the child welfare system, labels have been used to assign roles, hold authority, claim power and privilege, and reflect pride and esteem. Or, labels can do the opposite. Labels are multidimensional and can be felt at the intersectionality of the person, position in the child welfare system and lived experience.

Oftentimes, former youth in care have experienced the shame that is associated with the labels of having a “foster parent” and being a “foster child.” Why should that be shameful? According to a 19-year-old former youth in care: “Labels are important. The name ‘foster’ is so awkward, especially for younger kids. I remember choosing to not tell anyone that I was in foster care and that I had a foster parent. At my high school grad-

uation, everyone was confused when I introduced my 'real' mom. I then had to explain that the person I had been living with for many years was not my 'real' mom. Not everyone lives with their parents and there should be more options to use when describing these situations."

Who taught that young person to use "real mom." Referring to one's parent as a "resource parent" may take away some stigma — but why is there stigma? According to another young person, "When people hear the word "foster" they look at the name in a negative way, so changing it would be good. When people hear resource parent, they most likely wouldn't know what that is, and they might then need to know more about what a resource parent does."

Labels are like job descriptions. They define expectations, roles and responsibilities. The risk is that job descriptions outline specific role-based duties that are assigned based on the needs of the employer. On the contrary, the needs of children and families cannot be consolidated into a single set of preconceived expectations. These are real people with complex needs that exceed labels. While some foster youth wear this label with shame, some foster parents wear the label with pride.

According to a foster parent of 23 years, "I actually prefer the word 'foster.' The word in itself is positive and speaks to the work, but when linked with the words 'parents' and 'kids,' the meaning changes. Society made it that way and, because of that, it's considered negative. The title 'resource parent' seems to hide the meaning of what it really means to do this work."

Whatever label is used, however we are identified, let's be mindful that: Children, young people, and parents — all family members — must have an active role in defining who we are and how we are named. Let's clarify with conviction that we are not homes, placements, and cases. We are not tasks. As one young person said, "living with a family that told me I would be aging out made me feel like I was racing against a clock or a calendar." Why would a family put that pressure on a child?

How about a "call to reframe" labels which are experienced differently throughout the journey of family foster care, kinship care, and adoption. Anyone who has been labeled "bio-parent" or "foster child" or "resource family" actually is someone's child, mother, father, grandparent, family. What "labels" are used in your family and agency? Would that be the "label" the person wearing it would want? Look at the article in *Fostering Families Today* on "What makes an excellent foster care agency" (March/April 2019). Is this your agency? If not, find one that can make those commitments to you. Whatever labels or titles we use, let's ensure they are

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worthy of each of us, however we are respectfully identified. •

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