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When kin aren't kind

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WHEN AN abused or neglected child is removed from parental custody, both state policy and federal law favor placement with a close relative, often a grandparent. But so-called kinship care can breed dangers all its own.

Family ties turned tragic earlier this month for 3-year-old Sophia Johnson and 14-year-old Acia Johnson, who died in a suspected arson fire in South Boston. The girls' mother, Anna Reisopoulos, and Acia's twin brother, Raymond, survived the 3 a.m. blaze. The twins had been removed from their mother's home by the state Department of Social Services in 2003 and placed with their paternal grandmother. But neighbors indicate that the children had returned to the troubled home.

DSS workers should have suspected as much. They had been summoned to the home several times since 2005, including an incident just last month when police say a knife-wielding Reisopoulos had chased son Raymond around the house. But DSS made no attempts to determine the true living arrangements of the children. This inaction is disturbingly reminiscent of a case last month when the agency failed to act after a Middleborough school nurse called DSS to report that a young boy had complained of being burned on his genitals by his mother's boyfriend.

Some DSS cases are so snarled that it is easy to see how managers or social workers might go astray. But recent cases depict an agency whose workers don't even see what is happening right in front of them.

DSS Commissioner Angelo McClain still believes that the children were living with their grandmother as ordered by a court. Their presence at the mother's home would not necessarily alarm the agency, he says, because DSS strongly encourages contact with birth parents. It was the responsibility of the guardian grandmother, he says, to set the necessary limits.

But who is responsible for ensuring that the grandmother, who receives state payments as a "subsidized guardian," does the right thing for the children?

A new protector for children

A new state Office of the Child Advocate, with the power to investigate and monitor incidents of child abuse and neglect, comes on line this month. The deaths in South Boston should guide its initial work, especially in the area of kinship care.

About half of the 8,000 children receiving foster care in Massachusetts live with relatives, including grandmothers, aunts, and cousins. Child protection agencies nationwide view such kinship care as an important way to reinforce a child's racial, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural heritage. A proposed bill in the Legislature would require DSS to seek out kinship placement, a

statutory preference that already exists in federal law.

Ideally, abused and neglected children would find temporary comfort and a permanent home, if necessary, with caring relatives. But it is hard to know whether this policy has evolved to meet the need of the child - or the need of state agencies that fail to recruit sufficient numbers of nonrelative foster families.

Better training and supervision

National studies have found that kinship foster families receive less training and support and are less qualified overall than other foster care providers. In Massachusetts, for example, nonrelative foster parents receive 24 hours of training over the course of eight weeks, according to McClain. But kin receive a "tutorial" of about four hours. DSS is also free to waive the ban on placing children with foster parents who have criminal records when dealing with relatives.

Prospective foster parents who are related to the abused or neglected child also tend to get less scrutiny and fewer prequalification visits from DSS workers, according to Marylou Sudders, president of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. As a result, DSS workers are less likely to pick up on any potential problems in the homes of these relatives. It's a particularly egregious oversight in cases where dysfunction runs in extended families.

McClain insists that DSS would not choose kinship care "at the expense of safety." But the agency's preference for placing children with relatives - combined with its failure to supervise them adequately - can lead to just such dangerous situations, as the charred wreckage in South Boston where two girls perished would attest.

DSS needs to bring the vetting, training, and support for kinship caregivers in line with that offered to nonrelative foster care providers. Grandparents might be familiar with their grandchildren's likes and dislikes. But they still need adequate training, gained in sessions that focus on how best to care for a traumatized child and how best to secure services from the state.

And DSS had better act soon. In 2001, a UMass-Boston study found that one-third of children receiving foster care resided with relatives. Now that figure is about half.

"You can't expect grandparents to do it without adequate support and oversight," warns Maureen Flatley, an MSPCC board member.

The need to protect children and the desire to keep them connected with relatives won't always align. When they don't, the state must be trusted to come down squarely on the side of child protection. ■