



# When Support Isn't Cash: *In-Kind Child Support Policies and Practices*

CENTER FOR POLICY RESEARCH

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## Introduction

In federal fiscal year 2024, the child support program collected \$29.5 billion, 97% of which went directly to families.<sup>1</sup> Most families served by the child support program are low-income, and this monthly cash payment provides critical support to families.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the formal child support program is estimated to lift roughly 500,000 children out of poverty.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to formal cash support, research shows that a majority of families also receive some type of informal cash support or in-kind child support, which is defined as “non-cash support payments provided to a custodial parent or child,” such as food, clothing, or services.<sup>4</sup> Despite its widespread use, little is known about the scale, benefits, and challenges associated with the provision and receipt of informal cash or in-kind support, and the issue has been targeted for future study by both the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE).<sup>5</sup>

To address the lack of knowledge on in-kind child support payments, this brief summarizes the limited literature available on in-kind child support, provides examples of its use in selected tribal, state, and county child support programs, and identifies the information needed to facilitate its broader incorporation in the formal child support program.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Child Support Enforcement, “FY 2024 Preliminary Data Report and Tables” (Washington, DC, July 17, 2025), <https://acf.gov/css/policy-guidance/fy-2024-preliminary-data-report-and-tables>.

<sup>2</sup> Congressional Research Service, *The Child Support Enforcement (CSE) Program*, IF10113 (Washington, DC, updated 2026), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF10113> (

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Poverty in the United States: 50-Year Trends and Safety Net Impacts* (Washington, DC, March 2016), <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/private/pdf/154286/50YearTrends.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Valle, Liza C. “Custodial Parents and Their Child Support: 2022.” *Current Population Reports*, P60-285, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2025. Based on the Child Support Supplement to the April 2023 Current Population Survey (CPS-CSS), covering 2022 calendar year data.

<sup>5</sup> Selekmán, Rebekah, Alex Bauer, Shannon Weaver, Pamela Holcomb, and Heather Zaveri. (2023) “Child Support Learning Agenda: A Brief Synthesis of Select Child Support Literature.” OPRE brief 2023-213. Washington, DC. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/Formatted-literature-synthesis-brief-508-compliant.pdf>

## Background and Benefits of In-Kind Support

Established in 1975, the Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program is a federal-state program that is financed, in part, by the federal government (and subject to federal rules and regulations) and operated and partially financed by the states. In addition, 63 tribal nations operate CSE programs. The federal CSE program focuses exclusively on the collection and distribution of cash support via state disbursement units operated by state child support programs—federal law does not expressly allow for informal cash or in-kind child support. However, the federal OCSE does allow tribal child support programs to create and implement in-kind child support policies, although its use and value are not tracked or reported by the federal OCSE.

Even though state and county programs do not generally allow in-kind support, many noncustodial parents still provide it. Studies find that over half (with estimates ranging from 25% to 80%) of custodial parents report receiving some form of in-kind support in a given year.<sup>6</sup> Further, custodial parents report that in-kind child support is more commonly provided than formal child support, with 58% and 55% reporting that they received it in 2017 and 2022, respectively.

In-kind child support is not only common, but often exceeds the dollar value of formal cash support. Noncustodial parents, who are typically fathers,<sup>7</sup> provide an average estimated value of \$59 per child per month in in-kind support, and, on average, nearly 60% of all child support provided comes in the form of in-kind support.<sup>8</sup> The most common types of in-kind support are gifts for birthdays or holidays (49.2%), clothes, diapers, or shoes (39.8%), food or groceries (32.6%), medical expenses (20.9%), and payments for childcare or summer camp (15.3%).<sup>9</sup>

In-kind support is often a complement to, rather than a substitute for, cash child support. Recent research shows that 45 percent of interviewed noncustodial fathers who provided in-kind support also paid formal child support.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, a 2010 study found that enforcement of formal child support orders slightly reduced the provision of in-kind child support,<sup>11</sup> and automatic wage withholding through a formal child support order decreased the amount of in-kind contributions made by parents subject to that procedure by four to five percent.<sup>12</sup> These findings suggest that in-kind and formal cash support coexist for many families, though automated enforcement actions may limit its use.

Several studies link in-kind support to positive father-child relationships and increased parenting time, both of which are strong predictors of child well-being, especially when the children are young.<sup>13 14</sup> Fathers provide the most in-kind support in a child's early years, with levels declining as formal support

<sup>6</sup> Grall, T. (2020). *Custodial mothers and fathers and their child support: 2017* (Current Population Reports P60-269). U.S. Census Bureau.; Waller, M. R., Ha, Y., Nepomnyaschy, L., & Ziol-Guest, K. M. (2018). Money, time, or something else? Measuring nonresident fathers' informal and in-kind contributions. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(13), 3617–3641.

<sup>7</sup> Landers, P. A. (2021). *Demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of nonresident parents* (Report No. R46942). Congressional Research Service. congress.gov

<sup>8</sup> Kane, J. B., Nelson, T. J., & Edin, K. (2015). How Much In-Kind Support Do Low-Income Nonresident Fathers Provide? A Mixed-Method Analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(3), 591–611.

<sup>9</sup> Valle, Liza C. "Custodial Parents and Their Child Support: 2022." Current Population Reports, P60-285, U.S. Census Bureau, August 2025. Based on the Child Support Supplement to the April 2023 Current Population Survey (CPS-CSS).

<sup>10</sup> Waller, M. R., Emory, A. D., & Paul, E. (2018). Money, Time, or Something Else? Measuring Nonresident Fathers' Informal and In-Kind Contributions. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(13), 3612–3640. <https://journals-sagepub-com.du.idm.oclc.org/doi/pdf/10.1177/0192513X18783801>

<sup>11</sup> Nepomnyaschy, L., & Garfinkel, I. (2010). Child support enforcement and fathers' contributions to their nonmarital children. *Social Service Review*, 84(3), 341–380.

<sup>12</sup> Gunter, S. R. (2018). Child support wage withholding and father-child contact: Parental bargaining and salience effects. *Review of Economics of the Household*, 16, 427–452.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, T., & Edin, K. (2020). "Whatever they need": Helping poor children through in-kind support. In L. Tach, R. Dunifon, & D. L. Miller (Eds.), *Confronting inequality: How policies and practices shape children's opportunities* (pp. 119–140). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000187-006>

<sup>14</sup> Waller, M. R., Emory, A. D., & Paul, E. (2018). Money, time, or something else? Measuring nonresident fathers' informal and in-kind contributions. *Journal of Family Issues*, 39(13), 3612–3640.; Nepomnyaschy, L., Miller, D. P., Waller, M. R., & Emory, A. D. (2020). The role of fathers in reducing socioeconomic inequalities in adolescent behavioral outcomes. *Social Service Review*, 94(3), 521–566.

risers.<sup>15</sup> Another key benefit of in-kind support may be an improvement in the perception of paying child support by noncustodial parents, who are typically fathers. According to a 2020 study, many fathers perceive paying formal child support as “just another bill” and view in-kind support more positively than formal support.<sup>16</sup> These findings suggest that in-kind support may provide the greatest value in the child’s early years, when father involvement is most formative for child well-being, and fathers are more likely to provide in-kind support.

## In-Kind Child Support in Practice

While federal policy mandates that child support payments be made via state disbursement units, it does not prevent states from providing credits for in-kind payments. Some states use their own discretion to offer credits for in-kind support, typically as part of a settlement for past-due support for arrears. Tribal programs have broader flexibility: Federal policy explicitly authorizes the 63 tribal nations that operate child support programs to create and implement in-kind child support policies. To create and implement in-kind policies more broadly. This brief describes how tribal child support programs utilize in-kind child support, followed by more narrow examples of how some state and county programs use in-kind support credits to satisfy a child support obligation.



### Tribal Policies on In-Kind Child Support

Tribal child support programs take a broad definition of child support that is grounded in culture and community. Many tribal child support programs view the definition of child support beyond traditional cash support to include basic needs such as food, clothing, and transportation, contributing to a child’s cultural identity and community belonging, and creating meaningful parent-child interactions and memories often centered on cultural heritage. This expanded definition recognizes the non-economic value of noncustodial parent contributions to their children in a way that the formal child support program does not allow. While federal policy allows for tribes to offer in-kind support programs, there is limited information on how these approaches are operationalized. This section examines approaches to in-kind support based on interviews and information gathered from five tribal child support programs.

**Kickapoo Tribe (Oklahoma).** In the development of their in-kind policy, the Kickapoo Tribe addressed three specific operational issues: aligning policies with tribal code and federal requirements; developing procedural guidance, forms, and documentation standards for staff; and establishing internal staff processes to maintain the program in the face of staff turnover.

In the procedure they developed, in-kind agreements are facilitated by the child support agency staff and reached through a negotiation between parents. Goods and services proposed are valued through various methods, including market-based comparisons, community-informed valuation, and wage

<sup>15</sup> Sariscsany et al. (2019); Nepomnyaschy, L., Miller, D. P., Garasky, S., & Nanda, N. (2014). Nonresident fathers and child food insecurity: Evidence from longitudinal data. *Social Service Review*, 88(1), 92–133.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson & Edin, (2020).

## THE IMPORTANCE OF IN-KIND SUPPORT

The Kickapoo tribe operates an agricultural program that relies on tribal community members to plant, harvest, and distribute traditional goods such as seeds, general produce, and beef distribution. The Kickapoo child support director explained how they plan to establish in-kind credits where NCPs participate in the agricultural program or negotiate other goods and services as in-kind agreements. The importance of in-kind support was striking, as she often hears statements from custodial parents such as, *"if they could have fixed my vehicle, so I could get the kids to school, I would have loved that as opposed to getting nothing all those years..or getting this bag of food that was harvested from our ag department."*

and labor market rates for similar jobs in the area. Examples of in-kind support from the Kickapoo Tribe center around food and tribal culture: goods-based support where a noncustodial parent contributes food from a tribal agriculture program valued at local market rates, and labor-based support, in which a noncustodial parent contributes labor to a tribal or community program (e.g., planting, harvesting, food distribution) valued at market rate or a comparable labor-market wage.

**Tlingit and Haida Central Council (Alaska).** Consistent with Tlingit and Haida culture, custom, and tradition, Tlingit, and Haida Central Council tribal child support schedule permits the provision of in-kind services or goods to satisfy a current child support obligation—but only with prior court approval. The process for developing in-kind child support agreements is case-by-case, with parents negotiating agreements and presenting to the court for approval before in-kind support can be used to satisfy a child support obligation. Every order permitting non-cash payment must state the specific dollar amount of the obligation and describe the types of non-cash support permitted to satisfy it. Non-cash payments cannot satisfy "assigned" support obligations, which are child support and related debts owed to the Tribe for past public assistance that the custodial parent received on behalf of the child. The code also allows an off-set, or type of credit against the support obligation when extended family members provide food, clothing, shelter, or other basic needs for the child, but again, this requires prior court authorization.

In-kind support can present challenges related to valuation, documentation, enforcement, and equity. Programs must establish fair monetary values, verify that goods or services were provided, and address situations where promised support is not delivered. Additional concerns include administrative burden, differing perceptions of value, legal disputes, and the potential for fraud or abuse. Programs must also balance cultural respect for traditional forms of support with the need for consistent and manageable standards.

## EXAMPLES OF IN-KIND CHILD SUPPORT USED BY TRIBAL CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAMS

- Fisherman/harvester provides regular fish/meat deliveries credited at local market rates.
- NCP provides childcare hours cared for by extended family; credited at local childcare hourly rate if verifiable.
- NCP repairs or pays rent/mortgage directly for the child's residence; credited against support.
- NCP supplies school supplies, clothing, medical co-pays; receipts submitted for credit.
- Tribe includes ceremonial or cultural instruction/trip costs as allowable in-kind support.

**Oneida Nation (Wisconsin).** The Oneida Nation established its in-kind policy in 2008. It was developed through a tribal planning grant with guidance from tribal child support consultants. In-kind usage was strong in the program's first five years but has since declined, which staff attribute mainly to a declining economy and unemployment that make cash—including gift cards, which the program has streamlined its policy to accommodate—easier to arrange than in-kind goods or services. Because an arrangement requires both parents' agreement, custodial parents' reluctance to consent is also a limiting factor. Staff note that renewed outreach and promotion of in-kind options for child support payments, which has been limited in recent years, remains a priority.

**ONEIDA NATION'S CHILD SUPPORT DIRECTOR ON  
MAKING IN-KIND POLICIES MORE FRIENDLY TO NCPS:**

*"...We also changed our policy to make it a little bit easier, to include gift cards. I know one of the things that NCPS would say all the time is, 'Well, I don't want to pay child support because I don't know where that money is going.' ... So again, we're trying to make it easier to say, hey, okay, we understand that. But if you want, you can pay it via gift card, knowing that she's going to buy necessities for the household or necessities for the child ... so that they know things are coming in."*

**Ho-Chunk Nation (Wisconsin).** The Ho-Chunk Nation permits in-kind child support services when both parties agree on the type of service and its dollar value. To date, the program has used this option only once: when a child turned sixteen, the noncustodial parent purchased a car for the teenager and helped with repairs, and that contribution was credited toward the formal child support obligation.

**Nez Perce Tribe (Idaho).** The Nez Perce tribe has an in-kind policy that allows in-kind payments to satisfy a child support obligation if the court order states the specific dollar amount of the obligation and describes the type of in-kind payment that is allowed. As with other state and tribal child support agencies, in-kind support cannot be used to satisfy any assigned support obligation or child support owed to the state for public assistance paid to children in the past. The program is described and offered through the child support program's brochure, which details the eligible goods and services that may be considered as in-kind support. Examples include goods such as wood, fish, game meat, roots, and berries, while services allowed can include childcare, car or home repairs, tutoring, transportation to activities, and teaching children about cultural knowledge such as the language of the Nez Perce Tribe, Nimiipuu timpt. In practice, however, in-kind support is a tool that is rarely used.

## State and County Examples

As described above, federal law allows states to approve credits for in-kind support under a narrow set of circumstances.



### Alaska

Alaska's Child Support Enforcement Division (CSED) has the administrative authority to grant in-kind credits toward a noncustodial parent's child support obligation following a completed administrative review process.<sup>17</sup> As with many tribal examples mentioned above, Alaska law also requires that both parties agree in writing to allow credit for the in-kind contribution, and both parties agree in writing to the dollar value of the in-kind contribution. Importantly, the in-kind credit has other notable restrictions. In-kind credits are:

- Only allowed if the support obligation is listed in the formal child support order. To obtain an in-kind credit, the noncustodial parent must provide "clear and convincing evidence of its availability and dollar value," the custodial parent has 30 days to respond, and CSED must make an administrative decision granting or denying the request.
- Only allowed one time on a child support case, unless referenced in a court order.
- Not allowed during a time period when the child received public assistance or was in foster care.

Given this policy restriction, parents often seek traditional court orders for child support that outline the ongoing or recurring in-kind arrangements to be reliably credited. In an effort to make in-kind credits more accessible, CSED allows parents to request in-kind child support credits online through their updated child support portal. This feature was made possible in 2025 following the implementation of their automated child support system.



### North Dakota

North Dakota's child support program allows for in-kind child support payments through a credit process where agreed upon in-kind payments are used to satisfy child support arrears balances through a ledger adjustment. North Dakota also allows for non-cash payments to be credited towards a current child support obligation under a very narrow set of circumstances.

<sup>17</sup> Alaska Administrative Code (15 AAC 125.470). [www.akrules.elaws.us](http://www.akrules.elaws.us)

Rather than accepting and agreeing to a formal in-kind child support order amount, North Dakota allows for these ledger credits through direct payment credits when:

- Parents make payments to each other *before* a formal support order was entered, and both parties agree on the dates and amounts of the in-kind support provided, and/or
- The noncustodial parent transfers assets, and both parties agree to the fair market value of the asset provided as in-kind support.

As with Alaska, North Dakota's process is designed to be initiated by the parents and is limited to a one-time credit. When initiated, the agency sends form letters confirming the type of in-kind support provided and the agreed-upon amount of credit to each parent and notifies parents that this is a one-time credit not to be repeated. With the exception of credit for in-kind payments made before a formal child support order is entered, North Dakota's in-kind child support program is rarely used, granting fewer than 25 true in-kind credits annually. Requiring parents to reach an agreement before submitting a formal request for in-kind credits keeps the burden of negotiating agreements off child support agency staff; however, it also limits the program's reach to parents who are unaware or unable to reach agreements on their own.



## California

Several counties in California—including Contra Costa County, San Joaquin County, and the City and County of San Francisco—have applied for a waiver from the OCSE to test the use of in-kind policies in each of their county child support programs. Modeled after the Yurok Tribe's child support model, the counties' goals are to implement and test a more flexible means for parents to support their children "in ways beyond monetary support."<sup>18</sup>

Developed by the San Francisco Department of Child Support Services, the pilot involves a partnership among the child support agency, the Unified Family Court, Division of the Superior Court, and the Office of the Family Law Facilitator. Families seeking child support services where both parties agree to participate in the in-kind pilot identify potential goods and services that may serve as a non-cash means of child support. Both parents must agree on the monetary value of the in-kind support identified, and the court must approve the amount. The multi-step process involves both parents completing a questionnaire to identify goods and services eligible for in-kind support consideration, an initial court hearing at the Superior Court, mediation to discuss and agree upon the in-kind order, a return to court to approve (or revert to cash order), and post-decree case monitoring and compliance tracking. While the process is lengthy and time-intensive, it is designed to be established within a few months and agreed to in a single day in court, compared to a traditional order, which is typically established within a year. While SF DCSS expects in-kind orders to achieve greater compliance than traditional orders<sup>19</sup>, those who do not comply with their in-kind child support arrangement will be converted to a traditional cash child support order. The pilot is currently in the planning phase and when implemented will require parents to use a web-based app to track and monitor in-kind contributions.

<sup>18</sup> Hahn, J., Pratt, E., and Sonoda, P. (2023). *San Francisco's In-Kind Child Support Pilot: Implementation Study*. Urban Institute. [www.urban.org](https://www.urban.org).

<sup>19</sup> Hahn, Heather, Kathryn Edin, and Lauren Abrahams. 2018. *Transforming Child Support into a Family-Building System*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute

## Challenges of In-Kind Support Policies and Programs

Developing policies and programs dealing with in-kind child support is challenging in state, county, and tribal child support settings. The following outlines common challenges consistent across child support programs implementing in-kind policies and programs.

**Eligibility criteria limit their use.** In Alaska and North Dakota, when agreements are reached, they can be provided for one-time use. Additionally, in-kind credits in both states are unavailable in cases involving child support owed to the state for public assistance or foster care payments made on behalf of the children in the past—a restriction also reflected in tribal programs: the Tlingit and Haida Central Council (Alaska) and the Nez Perce Tribe (Idaho) both specify that non-cash payments cannot satisfy assigned support obligations owed to the state for past public assistance received by the child.

**In-kind arrangements are parent-driven, which inhibits their use and can pose safety risks.** State and tribal child support programs alike require that in-kind credits be negotiated and agreed to by both parents. In Alaska and North Dakota, agreements must be reached through a stipulation with the agreed-upon cash value of the in-kind offer. Tribal programs similarly require mutual agreement: the Kickapoo Tribe (Oklahoma) facilitates agreements through staff-supported negotiation between parents; the Ho-Chunk Nation (Wisconsin) requires both parties to agree on the type of service and its dollar value; and the Tlingit and Haida Central Council (Alaska) requires parents to negotiate agreements and present them for court approval. As noted by the Oneida Nation (Wisconsin), because arrangements are parent-driven, custodial parents' reluctance to consent can be a significant limiting factor regardless of program design. Requiring parents to negotiate in-kind agreements can put parents at increased risk for those with a safety concern.

**Determining cash value of in-kind goods and services is a central challenge.** While programs rely on market comparisons, community-informed valuation, and market-based wages for labor to determine the monetary value of in-kind goods and services, no standardized method exists for determining the monetary value of contributions that lack clear market equivalents, including culturally significant goods and services. To operate in a wide variety of settings, child support agencies would need to develop a system that assigns consistent, fair monetary equivalents for a varied and diverse set of goods and services specific to the program's geographic area.

**Facilitating and structuring an agreement stretches staff resources.** In-kind support must be proposed and agreed upon by both parties and reviewed and approved by child support agency staff. Who develops, mediates, and finalizes these agreements remains a significant challenge for child support agencies whose staff are often stretched thin and not trained to facilitate such agreements. Agreements require reliable proof of value, frequency of the provision of proposed goods or services that are offered, and ensuring that the agreement contains receipts and statements from both parents as supporting documentation. The Kickapoo Tribal Child Support program is considering staff training in mediation, recognizing that in-kind arrangements require more individualized negotiation than guideline-based cash orders.

**Administrative capacity and approval processes are often too slow for time-sensitive nature of in-kind contributions.** Requiring court or formal administrative approval for in-kind arrangements in state and/or tribal court settings and calendars is incompatible with the quick solutions that in-kind support potentially offers, such as urgent car repairs and seasonal food availability. Some programs recognize this and have begun to explore an administrative approval process, notarized agreements, and program-level authorization for fast-moving, in-kind arrangements. An additional challenge is balancing respect for cultural traditions in the tribal community with the administrative rules found in the formal child support program.

## Key Considerations and Practices for In-Kind Child Support Programs

In-kind child support is common, undervalued, and largely invisible to the formal system. Yet for many low-income families, it may be the most accessible form of support available. The considerations below draw on research, policy, and practice to outline what we know, who stands to benefit most, what makes in-kind support challenging to implement, and what is needed to move forward.

**In-kind support is an important benefit to families.** In-kind support is common, but invisible to the formal system. Over half of custodial parents are receiving some form of in-kind support in a given year, with estimates ranging from 25 to 80 percent and an average of 58 percent. Gifts (55%), clothing (43%), food (34%), medical expenses (22%), and childcare (12%) are the most common categories. None of it is tracked or reported through the traditional child support system. The strongest case for in-kind support is relational, not financial. Research on the benefits of in-kind support points to improved relationships between noncustodial parents, who are often fathers, and their child(ren). It is associated with more parenting time, a stronger father-child bond, and more positive parent attitudes toward the child support program with noncustodial fathers viewing formal child support as “just another bill.”

**In-kind options may engage parents with barriers to formal child support payment.** The monetary value of in-kind support is generally modest (\$23–\$75 per child per month among low-income noncustodial fathers with arrears), and it is most commonly provided by low-income noncustodial parents who are least able to pay cash. Expanding the definition of what “counts” as child support may engage parents with low-income, or those who are unemployed, underemployed, or have other barriers to supporting their children financially. For example, many parents have time, skills, or goods—but limited cash—that could be used to support their children.

**Formal child support program policy and program design do not align with the complex assessments and time-sensitive nature of in-kind child support use.** Formal child support orders are calculated using standard income-based formulas that account for the income of both parents, the costs of raising children, and extraordinary child needs. Developing in-kind arrangements involves less structured parameters and may require more skilled negotiation and mediation. At the same time, in-kind support requires different staff skills and flexible, time-sensitive settings in the child support system. State and tribal courts that are committed to ensuring parental consent to in-kind arrangements typically have calendars and procedural requirements that do not accommodate the quick turnaround needed for the transfer of time-sensitive services and goods.

**Additional resources are needed to help state and tribal child support programs define and implement in-kind support in child support programs.** Federal policy does not prevent states from treating in-kind payments as credits, and more states should test their utility. Programs considering in-kind policies and programs should start by defining what counts as in-kind support and how it will be valued—including developing a system to value goods and services in an equitable manner. Programs should also test the approach at a small scale before expanding, and track how often the option is used, whether parents comply, and the administrative costs.

**More evidence is needed on all facets of in-kind support.** There is little evidence on the value of in-kind support. Since in-kind program uptake is small-scale, it has been impossible to measure its impacts to date. Future research should assess the value of in-kind relative to cash and its effects on compliance, family stability, and child well-being. Research is also needed on the challenges and barriers of in-kind program implementation, the impacts of in-kind support on child support staff, case processing time frames, and cost-effectiveness.



## Conclusion

In-kind child support is not a replacement for formal child support. Rather, in-kind child support supplements custodial parent income and may improve parent-child contact, as well as the well-being of both fathers and children. For tribal child support programs, the emerging approaches described above demonstrate the potential of in-kind child support to create a more flexible, culturally responsive, and inclusive system. By expanding the definition of support to include goods, services, and relational contributions, this model aligns child support policy more closely with the lived experiences of families. However, particularly for small tribal programs, developing and implementing an in-kind policy poses significant challenges with gaps in federal guidance, administrative infrastructure, and research on its cost-effectiveness. As in-kind policies and practices evolve, clear definitions and valuation of goods and services, documentation and monitoring procedures, and implementation that balances equity, enforcement gaps, and administrative burden should be primary considerations. More research is needed to build the evidence to support in-kind child support policies and practices. Future research should focus on its effectiveness compared to formal cash support, compliance, and child well-being. Tribal, state, and county child support programs should pilot the implementation and use of in-kind support and document best practices and operationalized implementation guidance to share with the field to further expand its development and use.

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