

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHILDREN PLACED WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS: PLACEMENT PATTERNS AND OUTCOMES

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The Research

There is very little research on placements with family and friends in the UK (also here referred to as 'kin') and those studies that do exist generally have small samples or are part of larger investigations of other topics. This study was undertaken to provide information about the characteristics, progress and outcomes of children placed with family and friends, to compare these with a similar group of children placed with unrelated foster carers and to consider the factors that contributed to success in family and friends placements. In addition, through interviews with participants we hoped to shed light on the needs of these children and their carers.

The research was funded by the Department for Education and Skills and was based on a sample of 270 children from four local authorities in England who were living with family and friends (142) or with unrelated foster carers (128) in July 2000. The case files of the 270 children were reviewed in 2002 to allow for a two year follow-up and interviews were undertaken in 2004 with a sub-sample of 32 family and friends carers and a number of the social workers responsible for these cases as well as with parents and children. At the time the sample was drawn, between a quarter and a third of all the children had been in their placements for up to two years, half for 2-6 years and the remainder for over six years. Just under half the children in each group were under 10 at this point and most (70%) were on care orders or interim care orders.

Two types of outcome were considered. One was placement survival and two years after the case selection date 72% of family and friends placements were continuing as compared with 55% of those with unrelated foster carers. The other was a researcher rating of placement quality and 66% of family and friends placements and 73% of those with unrelated foster carers were rated as of good quality for the children.

All comparisons between family and friends carers and unrelated foster carers refer to the case file sample. Some of the major findings follow:

THE FAMILY AND FRIENDS CARERS

Amongst the family and friend carers, grandparents were the largest group (45%), followed by aunts and uncles (32%) and friends (18%). A small number of children were cared for by other relatives such as cousins or siblings. Excluding friend carers, two thirds of the children were placed with maternal relatives and a third with those on the father's side of the family.

ETHNICITY

Significantly more black and minority ethnic children (60%) were placed with unrelated carers than were living with family and friends (40%). This is different from the situation in the United States. It may be that black and minority ethnic parents are less successful in coming to the attention of social workers when decisions about care are being made or that fewer are in a position to provide care.

However, those children who were placed with relatives or friends were significantly more likely than those in unrelated foster care to be placed with carers who had the same ethnic background

as the children. Nonetheless, 11% of kin carers and 12% of unrelated foster carers represented only part of the child's ethnic background, for example a child of mixed ethnicity placed with white grandparents.

SIBLINGS AND OTHER CHILDREN

Although it has been argued that one advantage of family and friends placements is that siblings can be placed together, in practice similar proportions of children were placed with siblings in the two groups (53% v 52%).

However, more children who went to live with family and friends (22%) than those in unrelated care (6%) were the only child in the home. The placements of these lone children in kin care were significantly more likely to end than those where there were other children in the household and the interviews revealed some loneliness amongst lone children living with elderly relatives with few other children in the locality.

MAKING THE PLACEMENTS

Children who were placed with unrelated foster carers had spent significantly more time prior to the study placement in the looked after system (mean 16.08 months) than had children cared for by family and friends (mean 10.6 months). On the other hand, two fifths (42%) of the children placed with kin had spent most of their childhood with a relative, compared with only 2% of children in unrelated care.

The placement patterns were rather different for the two groups of children. When the study placement was with a relative, the children were significantly more likely to have had previous relative placements (with this or another relative) and if the placement ended they were more likely to move to another relative. Similarly, those with unrelated foster carers were more likely to experience previous or subsequent unrelated foster placements. While this may well mean that some children have fewer available relatives, it may also mean that less effort is made for children with unrelated carers to locate relatives if the placement ends.

Most (86%) of the placements with kin were made because relatives or friends came forward to offer to look after children or were already caring for them. In addition, thirteen children initiated the placement themselves (9%), as did one parent (1%). It was interesting to note how rarely social workers appeared to have initiated kin placements when kin had not made the first contact (4%), although the case files may have under-reported their efforts.

ARRANGEMENTS FOR APPROVING AND REGULATING THE PLACEMENTS

Over half of the family and friends placements were initially made under what is now Regulation 38 of the Fostering Regulations 2002, a provision that allows emergency placements to be assessed during a period not exceeding six weeks before other placement arrangements are made. Although the intention of these provisions was to cover unforeseen circumstances, in practice only a quarter (22%) of these cases were not already known to social services departments. Moreover, after the initial six week period, no other arrangements had been made for two fifths of these cases and some were not assessed for months and even years.

When carers had been assessed as foster carers, over time social workers tried hard to persuade them to apply for Residence Orders. The effect would be to end social work visits and to move carers to a payment system that was discretionary and set at lower rates than the fostering allowances. Some carers resisted Residence Orders because they felt the need to maintain social services involvement in disputes with the children's parents and to ensure adequate financial support. For other carers the attraction of Residence Orders was that it was thought to normalise the family situation.

When carers had agreed to take on a relative's child without social services involvement, the departments generally took the view that the children were not their responsibility and refused payment if the carers later requested help.

There was considerable confusion about the legal arrangements for family and friends placements and particular variation in relation to the arrangements made for placements with friends, which might be considered as private fostering arrangements, supported under the Section 17 children in need budget or approved as foster placements. There was also variation in how local authorities used the legal provisions.

ASSESSMENT

In two thirds (65%) of the kin placements, carers were assessed when the child was already living with them. Whilst this meant that the children's progress and attachment to the carers could be assessed it could be harder to deal with shortcomings or to withhold approval from an ongoing placement. The third of cases where family and friends carers were assessed before placement included those that arose during care proceedings, when children were often placed with unrelated foster carers until kin carers had been assessed.

If the proposed carers were considered as not meeting the standards for approval as foster carers because of their past difficulties or current health problems they were sometimes advised to pursue a Residence Order. The paradox of this policy was that children placed with kin where there was greatest need or risk were further disadvantaged by Residence Orders, since social work support and monitoring ceased and payments were discretionary. Certainly, some family and friends carers with quite serious health conditions or whose past parenting had not been optimal cared for children very well.

Most family and friends carers understood the need for assessment, but some questioned the appropriateness of prolonged in-depth assessment when they had already cared for the children for considerable periods. A number of carers felt that the assessment approach for unrelated foster carers did not fit their circumstances very well and would have liked a keener appreciation of the service they were providing for the children and of their need for information about the relevant systems and services.

Further consideration needs to be given to the thresholds to be used for approving kin carers. Carers who would not have been approved as unrelated foster carers because of health, age, accommodation or past offences were nonetheless able to provide a good standard of care. Nonetheless, it is important that the quality of relationships between the child and carers is carefully considered so that lower standards are not accepted for kin placements.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CARERS AND CHILDREN

The family and friends carers were significantly more disadvantaged than the unrelated foster carers. Significantly more were lone carers (27% v 14%), the majority of whom were lone women (although 5 of the 39 were single men) and they lived, at least initially, in overcrowded conditions (35% v 4%). In addition, many more kin carers had a disability or chronic illness (31% v 17%) and experienced financial hardship (75% v 13%).

In contrast, the children in the two kinds of placements were remarkably similar in terms of their characteristics and the kinds of adversities they had experienced prior to placement. They also had similar levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties, although children in unrelated foster placements were significantly more likely to have experienced emotional difficulties, such as anxiety and depression, before the study placement. Children with multiple health problems were more often placed with unrelated foster carers (43%) than with family or friends (21%).

The parental difficulties that had led to children being cared for away from home were also very similar. Similar proportions of the children had a parent who had died (11% v 12%), experienced domestic violence (52% both), had mental health difficulties (44% v 45%) or had misused drugs or alcohol (60% v 51%). However, the children who had a parent who had been looked after by the state during childhood were more likely to be placed with unrelated foster carers than with family or friends.

CONTACT

Children who were placed with relatives had higher levels of contact with aunts, uncles and cousins and, when they were living with paternal relatives, also with their fathers. More children with unrelated carers (38%) than with kin (18%) had no contact with either parent.

Social workers have to assess whether relatives can protect children from their parents when necessary, and it is often assumed that this is a considerable challenge for kin. We found cause for concern about this in just 9 cases (6%). In most cases, relatives managed the tricky business of putting the children's needs first very well.

However, difficult relationships between kin carers and the children's parents or other family members emerged for over half (54%) of the family and friends carers but for far fewer (16%) unrelated foster carers. Some parents were resentful that a relative had taken over the care of their children, other parents were actively hostile to the kin carers and made threats or actually attacked them, whilst others made false allegations against the carers or undermined the placement in other ways. Occasionally, two sides of the extended family were in conflict about who should be caring for the children.

In such situations of conflict, family and friends carers often wanted the protection of care orders and the involvement of social services in order to maintain adequate boundaries around contact between the children, their parents and/or other members of the family. In practice, social work staff supervised contact in far fewer kin carer placements (27%) than was the case in unrelated care (45%). Instead, family and friends carers supervised contact in almost half of these placements, something that unrelated foster carers undertook more rarely. They managed this difficult task very well and with considerable sensitivity to how parents were feeling. In many cases more active management of contact by social workers was needed so that children did not receive confusing messages from parents about their ability to care for them and so that placements were not undermined.

THE IMPACT OF THE CHILDREN ON THE CARERS

Many of the carers in both groups had the satisfaction of seeing children flourish and thrive in their care. However, the positives in caring for these children were bought at a high cost for many family and friends carers.

Whilst unrelated foster carers plan to foster and this suits their life stage, for kin the idea of looking after someone else's children is neither planned nor expected. As a result, they made sacrifices and incurred losses to take the children. Several relatives gave up their jobs to look after the children, reducing their income and their pension entitlement. Ten per cent of the couple carers found that their marriages came under severe strain as a result of these abrupt changes in their circumstances, with all but two of these breaking down.

Moreover, older relative carers could feel socially dislocated as they did not fit with parents of the child's age or with their own friends who no longer looked after dependent children. Many found looking after children tiring when they were older, had less energy and had limited financial resources. Some too had other caring responsibilities for their own elderly parents or a sick partner. They also lost out on the pleasures of being grandparents as they had to take on the parenting role with its requirement to be the disciplinarian.

Grandparent carers were sometimes struggling with feelings of loss and guilt about the difficulties of their adult children which had necessitated the children being removed from them or because they had been unable to take on a full sibling group. Others were still grieving for the death of the children's parents. In addition, tensions with the children's parents and members of the extended family made caring for the children considerably more difficult.

SERVICES

Social work visits to the children and the carers in family and friends placements were at slightly but not significantly lower levels than in unrelated foster care. In terms of overall levels of support, however, significantly more kin carers had little or no social work support (69%) as compared with unrelated foster carers (47%). Particularly high levels of support had sometimes been needed at the start of the kin placements. Kin placements were significantly more likely to survive during follow-up if there was an allocated social worker for the child.

Mental health services (28% kin v 29% unrelated foster care) and statements of special educational need (22% kin v 26% unrelated foster care) were provided for similar proportions of children in each group, whilst additional educational help was provided at only a slightly higher rate for children with unrelated foster carers (31% kin v 38% unrelated foster care).

Two thirds of the children in each group had emotional and behavioural difficulties that ranged from minor to severe. For kin carers this presented particular challenges as they had neither been prepared nor trained to cope with children with such severe difficulties. Many kin carers struggled valiantly to bring order to these children's fragmented lives. Two fifths of the children who showed any emotional or behavioural problems received some assistance, with similar levels of help provided to the children in the two groups. However, between a third (38% in unrelated care) and almost half (47% with kin) of the children with the most serious difficulties were not receiving any intervention.

Both groups of carers therefore lacked services. However, a major difference between the two groups was that only four of the kin carers had a family placement worker, whilst almost all the unrelated foster carers had the benefit of this second worker (96%). In addition, few had access to training or to foster carer groups, which enable unrelated foster carers to give individual support and advice to each other.

UNMET NEEDS

When we considered the needs of family and friends carers, the most pressing was for counselling and specialist help for children with severe and persistent behavioural and emotional difficulties. They also required adequate financial payments to cover the costs of caring for the children. Some carers were in situations of severe financial hardship. In addition, a few children clearly did not understand why they were living with family and friends and not with their parents, some did not know the plans for their future or how to explain to their friends that they lived with kin; whilst a considerable number of parents had not accepted that they would not be able to resume care of the children. These are areas of routine practice with family and friends that might benefit from attention.

A range of services would have assisted kin carers. There was a clear need for:

- Assistance with contact issues when there were high levels of conflict with parents or other relatives.
- Individual help or training to understand and manage children's behaviour.
- Respite care to provide a break for the carers who were under strain or caring for particularly challenging children. Only 8% (11) of the kin carers received regular respite care.

- Financial help for activities for the children, for school uniforms and for child sitting to allow for occasional evenings out.
- Access to groups of kin carers would have been welcomed by some carers and might have lessened their sense of isolation and enabled links to be made with other kin carers.
- A few kin carers needed counselling in their own right, especially in coming to terms with unresolved issues of loss and guilt.
- Carers with health problems or who had caring responsibilities for their elderly relatives sometimes needed help from adult services.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL WORKERS AND KIN CARERS AND CHILDREN

Some kin carers praised the children's social workers highly and many were anxious to retain their involvement. Others were concerned about the lack of priority given to their cases. Some kin carers resented the specific restrictions that accompanied fostering children. In a small number of cases the family dynamics served to keep the social worker on the periphery of events. For example, in a few kin cases the parents and carers formed a hostile alliance against the social worker. At other times, extended family members colluded with the parents against the caring relatives.

Whilst some practitioners were very aware of the needs of kin carers and their reluctance to ask for help, there was also an attitude on the part of some managers that kin should be able to manage without help. This may be fuelled by attempts to contain the costs of these placements and a reluctance to assist family members to do what many think should be done out of a sense of kinship obligation. These attitudes are in need of wider debate since it seems unlikely that adequate services will be provided to family and friends without a change in such attitudes.

PROGRESS AND DURATION OF THE PLACEMENTS

Children showed similar levels of general health and school attendance in the two types of placement and more than three quarters of the children (77%) in both types of placement also showed improved behaviour in their placements. Ratings on the other Looking After Children dimensions of well-being were also very similar, as was the overall rating of the quality of the placements.

A major difference, however, was that by follow-up the placements with kin had lasted on average longer (4 years 9 months) than those with unrelated foster carers (3 years 11 months). The higher rate of placement endings from unrelated foster care was principally because of planned moves to other placements, reflecting the much higher numbers of unrelated foster placements that were from the outset intended to be short-term. Disruption rates as a proportion of all the placements were the same in the two types of placement (13%). Only five of the kin and two of the unrelated placements ended because of the carer's poor health or death.

POOR STANDARDS IN PLACEMENT

In most cases family and friends carers, like unrelated foster carers, provided excellent care for the children. The files contained many accounts of children with difficult backgrounds thriving once they had moved to these placements. There were, however, 10% of cases (14) with family and friends and 6% (7) in unrelated foster placements where the children's care was of a very poor standard. They included children who were singled out for rejection, bullied, beaten and neglected. There was no significant difference between the rates of poor placements in the two kinds of care. However, the very unsatisfactory placements with family and friends lasted significantly *longer* than those in unrelated care. Some placements continued because there was little social work monitoring and any referrals about difficulty (often from family members) were disregarded. In other situations, social workers had allowed standards to fall considerably below those that would have been accepted for other children.

Allegations that appeared well founded were made against similar proportions of carers in both groups (4%). However, kin carers experienced more unsubstantiated allegations (4%) than unrelated carers (1%), most of which appeared to have been made by parents who were intent on undermining the placements. This could make it difficult for practitioners to distinguish between malicious allegations from family members and those which expressed well founded concerns about children's care.

These findings suggest that there needs to be better review and monitoring of kin placements so that earlier more decisive action can be taken in those few placements where care is clearly unsatisfactory for the child.

FACTORS THAT WERE RELATED TO PLACEMENTS ENDING

Children placed with grandparents were the most likely to remain in the family by follow-up (86%), followed by those with aunts and uncles (65%). The proportion of children placed with other family or friends whose placements were continuing at follow-up (59%) was similar to that of those with unrelated foster carers (55%). In addition, those family and friends carers who had been approved at the outset as foster carers were more likely to be continuing at follow-up than those who had not been approved. This could be because the approval process had excluded kin carers with greater difficulties and/or because approved kin carers received more support.

Kin carers were much more likely than unrelated foster carers to be struggling to cope with the children (45% kin v 30% unrelated carers). There were many reports on file of family and friends who were close to breaking point. Yet significantly more placements ended when *unrelated* carers were struggling to cope than when kin carers were. Similarly, the placements of children with particularly high levels of previous adverse experiences, current behavioural difficulty or worsening behaviour significantly more often survived in kin than in unrelated foster care.

As might be expected, the family and friends carers showed considerably higher levels of commitment (65% v 31%) to the children they were looking after and high commitment was related to placement survival. These findings suggest that kin carers were more likely to persevere beyond the point at which unrelated carers conceded defeat, even when they were under considerable strain.

CONCLUSION

Kinship care occupies an uneasy position on the boundary between the public and private spheres of caring and this leads to a situation where some kin carers struggle to care for needy children with low levels of support and financial help. The introduction of Special Guardianship appears to offer both opportunities and risks. Local authorities committed to enabling practice with kin carers may use it well. However, it could also be used to restrict services for kin carers.

At present kin carers' commitment and willingness to continue against the odds benefits the children they look after, but the good outcomes for these children are sometimes achieved at the expense of the kin carers themselves.

POLICY RECOMMENATIONS

- There may be scope for making more family and friends placements than at present, but it would be very important to ensure that the quality of these placements is maintained. The highest using authority in the study had the most placements of poor quality.
- There is a need for more research on how placements are made and the organisational arrangements that would best initiate and sustain family and friends placements. There may be a built-in disincentive to make such placements if the burden of locating and approving caregivers falls on overworked field workers rather than family placement workers or specialist kin workers.

- Family and friends carers would benefit from full written information about the legal and financial options available to them when they take on caring for children.
- Further work is needed to develop a suitable assessment approach for family and friends carers that addresses their particular circumstances and considers what supports would be needed to enable them to care without compromising on assessing risk. Placement panels may need some training about the distinctive features of kinship care if they are to facilitate placements and not exclude satisfactory placements that do not conform to the model for unrelated foster care.
- Further consideration needs to be given to the thresholds to be used for approving kin carers. The study found that carers who would not have been approved by some panels as unrelated foster carers because of health, age, accommodation or past offences were nonetheless able to provide a good standard of care. Greater levels of difficulty should not lead to less assistance, as occurs, for example, when Residence Orders are used in place of approval as foster carers.
- Family and friends carers require adequate financial assistance to enable them to care for children, based on the children's needs. At present they are often paid at lower rates than unrelated carers.
- A range of services are needed, in particular to assist with children's behavioural difficulties, contact problems and to provide occasional financial payments and respite care.
- Better review and monitoring of kin placements is required so that earlier more decisive action can be taken in those few placements where care is clearly unsatisfactory for the child.
- More attention needs to be given to family and friends care in social work education and in-service training to highlight the contribution and particular needs of kinship carers and the approaches to them that are most beneficial.
- There is much that authorities could learn from each other about policy and about arrangements that appear to facilitate good practice but such developments are only likely to have an impact if family and friends care is steered and prioritised at the highest levels within the authority.
- There is a need for an authoritative national policy framework and guidance to improve the situation of family and friends carers and the children they look after and a national initiative to encourage and monitor the development of good policy and practice throughout the country.

Elaine Farmer and Sue Moyers (2005) 'Children Placed with Family and Friends: Placement Patterns and Outcomes', Report to the Department for Education and Skills, School for Policy Studies, University of Bristol. This report will be published in book form in 2007. For further information on the dissemination of the research findings see:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/fpcw/default.shtml>