‘It’s just like another home, just another family, so it’s nae different’.

‘Children’s Voices in Kinship Care’: the report of a research study about the experience of children in kinship care

Cheryl Burgess, Froya Rossvoll, Bruce Wallace and Brigid Daniel
October 2008

A collaborative study between CHILDREN 1ST and The University of Stirling
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the people who helped us with this study. Firstly, Aberdeenshire Council which very helpfully agreed to fund the research. Also, David O’Niel, Social Work Team Manager, who was instrumental in contacting young people to participate in the study and Jackie Hothersall, Assistant Director CHILDREN 1ST, for contacting other participants.

Special thanks are due to Rachel Thomson and Marleen Hardy of CHILDREN 1ST for their unstinting support in the technical work of the research.

Most of all we would like to thank all the young people who gave their time to talk with us so openly and honestly about their experiences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page No:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER FOUR: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

Appendices
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research context

In December 2007 the Scottish Government published the National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy with the aim of delivering a child-centred approach to kinship and foster care and developing services to support those who were providing this care. There was a growing recognition of the scope for strengthening the role of kinship care in looking after children who could not be cared for by their parents. The strategy outlines a number of key areas for policy and practice development, including the need to enhance the support available for those extended family members and friends who were taking on this role, which in the past had often been minimal.

There are a number of ways in which kinship care can be both described and defined. It has been variously referred to as relative care, family and friends care and, most usually, kinship care. In the UK a broad definition used by the Family Rights Group to describe those children in kinship care is as follows:

Children who cannot live with or be cared for by a parent and who are living with a relative or family friend who is responsible for their upbringing (Tapsfield, 2003)

A further distinction is often made between children who live in ‘formal kinship care’, an arrangement which may have been initiated by the local authority and is at least known to it and which involves some sort of assistance or legal Order and those in ‘informal kinship care’ which is an arrangement made unofficially within the family.

The recent legislative background to the operation of kinship care policy in the UK falls within the framework of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995, the Children Act (1989) in England and Wales and the Children (Northern Ireland) Order, although the care of children by family and friends has taken place both formally and informally for many hundreds of years. There is a range of legal and non-statutory options by which children are looked after by kinship carers; these complexities lead to challenges in developing policies which include all young people who are cared for within formal and informal kinship care systems (Aldgate & McIntosh, 2006).

The development in the UK of legal and policy frameworks with regard to kinship care would seem to reflect the international trend for its greater use and consequently the need for procedures and practice in this area to be formalised. Increasing interest in the area has led to its greater political visibility and the production of briefings and consultation documents which examine its practical and financial implications (Kidner, 2008). The policy strategy for the development of kinship care in Scotland has been placed firmly within the wider Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) framework (2008) which outlines the key well-being indicators that agencies should aim to help children achieve through their work with them.

As of March 2007 there were 14,060 children and young people being looked after in Scotland, with 57% being accommodated away from home; of these young people, 29% lived with non-kinship foster carers and 15% (just over 2,000) lived with relatives and friends (Scottish Government Statistics 2007). This number applies only to children who are known to social work services with the numbers in informal kinship arrangements being largely unknown. The percentage of looked after children...
living in kinship care in the UK is lower than in many other countries with New Zealand and Poland having a particular high percentage. However, local authorities in the UK are reporting an upward trend in the placement of children with kinship carers and this is set to increase further as policies in this area are strengthened. It has been noted that it is increasing in popularity as a care option in countries where the legislative framework facilitates partnership between the family and the state (Broad, 2004).

There is an increasing body of research and literature into many of the policy and practice aspects of kinship care (Broad and Skinner, 2005; Hunt et al, 2007; Farmer and Moyers, 2008). A small number of studies have laid the foundations for exploring the child’s perspective of being cared for by family members (Broad, 2001; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Altshuler, 1999). However, children’s lived experience of kinship care as the main focus of research is generally underrepresented a point which has been noted in a number of studies (for example Broad, 2007). The National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy places a clear emphasis on the aim of delivering a child-centred approach to kinship care arrangements and it is therefore important that those planning, managing and providing services are able to access research evidence which places the child’s perspective at the fore. It is the aim of this short qualitative study to begin to address this gap in the research.

CHILDREN 1ST have a particular interest in children’s experiences of kinship care stemming from the organisation’s involvement in Family Group Conferencing across Scotland and in developing innovative services for relative carers and young people in kinship care. An example is the pilot Kinship Care Support service in The Highland Council area. This is in keeping with the organisation’s mission statement which states that ‘by working with, and listening to children, young people, their families and communities, and by influencing public policy and opinion, we help to change the lives of vulnerable children and young people for the better’. CHILDREN 1ST identified the need for research in this area and commissioned this small scale study focusing on young people’s views of the day-to-day experience of living with kinship carers. The young people who were interviewed were all living in the North East of Scotland, from both urban and rural areas. The study was undertaken by a small team of practitioners from CHILDREN 1ST and academic researchers from Stirling University, working together on all aspects of the study. This report gives an overview of that study and identifies key themes and findings from the interviews conducted with the young people.

**Research aims and methods**

The overall aim of the study was to:

- develop understanding of children’s experiences of living with kinship carers by offering them an opportunity to express their views about any aspects of their living situation which they felt were important;
- disseminate the findings from the research to inform local and national policy and practice.

This was a small research project, using qualitative methods. The study was a collaborative one undertaken by two practitioners from CHILDREN 1ST and an academic researcher who worked closely in designing and conducting most areas of
the research. This included devising the interview schedule and materials, interviewing young people, analysing the findings and contributing to the research report. All the team had previously undertaken research with young people and had experience of working with young people in a social work setting. The practitioners facilitated access to the young people, outlined below, and the researcher took the lead role in writing the report. The overall process was supervised by a Senior Researcher at the University of Stirling.

A consultation exercise took place with one young person at an early stage to gage his views about the content and wording of interview questions. All the interviews were undertaken on an individual, face-to-face basis and a semi-structured interview format was used to allow for questions to be explored in depth and for emerging themes to be identified. Interviews took place either at young people’s homes or at the offices of CHILDREN 1ST, depending on young people’s own preference. Interviews were set up in a way that enabled young people to have access to a supportive adult, given the potentially sensitive nature of the interview content. Music vouchers were given to young people as a thank you gift for giving their time and sharing their experiences. Findings were analysed by identifying main themes and sub-themes from across all the interviews and then by undertaking a Mind Mapping Exercise (Buzan and Buzan, 2001) to categorize the themes. The involvement of all three research team members in analysing the themes contributed to the robustness and validity of the research findings.

The young people

Twelve young people were interviewed. They were accessed through a local support group for kinship carers and their children and through a social work department team manager in a rural area, who wrote out to young people and carers on behalf of the research team. Three of the young people were known to the practitioners through their involvement either with other CHILDREN 1ST staff or through attendance at the kinship carer’s support group. The young people ranged from 11 to 17 years old; this age group had been specifically targeted in the hope that their relative maturity would mean that they were more able to reflect on their experiences in the interviews. Five males and seven females took part in the research; for the most part they had experienced difficult circumstances at some stage of their lives, including separation and loss, in some cases the effects of living with problematic substance using parents and for some physical and emotional abuse. Most had had social work involvement at the time of being placed or taken in by their relatives, and at least six were living with relatives by way of a Court Order such as a Joint Custody Order or a Children (Scotland) Act 1995 Parental Responsibility Order. Four young people had on-going involvement with statutory social work agencies.

Clearly, the sample of young people interviewed has limitations and can not be taken to be representative of all those cared for by kinship carers. The study findings reflect the fact that young people in kinship care each have different circumstances and cannot be viewed as a homogenous group, nor could any given sample really be considered as representative of the whole.
Ethical considerations

The study was guided by the British Sociological Association’s Statement of Ethical Practice (1993) and, in accordance with the University of Stirling ethical approval procedures, was approved by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee.

Young people participated in the research on the basis of informed consent and every effort was made to ensure that young people understood what taking part in the research entailed, that agreement to participate could be reviewed and that deciding not to participate would not have implications for any service received.

Assurances were given to young people that their contributions would be treated confidentially and researchers would not discuss what they said with anyone unless a situation arose which concerned their safety or that of another young or vulnerable person. If concerns needed to be passed on, interviewees were advised of this and CHILDREN 1st procedures used as the most appropriate way to proceed.

In reporting the study findings, every care has been taken to ensure that individuals can not be identified, particularly given the small numbers of young people who were interviewed. Pseudonyms are used to replace real names referred to by young people, where used in direct quotations. Young people whose quotations are used are identified as either younger or older male or female interviewees; younger males are under 14 years of age and younger females are under 13 years of age. The interviews have been transcribed verbatim in the local dialect to preserve the accurate voice of young people. A glossary of Scottish pronunciation can be found at Appendix B.

Terminology

The young people who were interviewed for the study and the relatives who were caring for them did not generally make use of the formal term ‘placement’ to describe their living situation. In writing up the study, we have used the word ‘placement’ in the context of the literature review, being the term most commonly used; however, it is not used when referring to the findings of the study. Similarly, some of the young people interviewed did not think of their relatives as ‘carers’; this term has however been used throughout the report as it was a description used by the interviewers when speaking with young people.

In reporting the findings of the study, the following terms were used and can be defined as follows:

- ‘most’, ‘many’, ‘the majority of’ and ‘for the main part’ refer to seven or more young people;
- ‘some’ or ‘in some cases’ refer to four to six young people;
- ‘a small number of’ refers to three or less than three young people.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The last ten years has seen the greater use of kinship care as a placement option for children; this has in turn led to an increase of research studies, policy documents and academic articles on the subject from practitioners and academics. As a result there are a number of useful and comprehensive literature reviews available which offer an overview of the development of kinship care within the UK (for example Broad, 2007) and, additionally, from other countries such as the USA (Cuddeback, 2004, Flynn, 2002) or within a wider international context (Paxman, 2006; Bromfield et al, 2005). The aim of this review is not to repeat what has previously been covered but, given the focus of the research study itself, to concentrate on studies which have included or, in a very small number of cases, been solely undertaken, to explore the views of children and young people about their experiences of kinship care.

Firstly, however, in order to set the context for this perspective, the review will outline key messages from studies of non-kinship foster care and offer an overview of the main themes from recent literature about kinship care. This will focus mainly on the perceived benefits and difficulties for young people living with family and friends, and on attempts to measure outcomes for these young people compared with those living in non-kinship foster care. The studies which highlight the views of young people will then form the main part of the review and the key points from these will be summarized in the conclusion.

Non-kinship foster care: key messages

There is a growing body of literature which examines the wider spectrum of foster care, with a number of studies including, or in some cases focusing on, the experiences and views of young people themselves, particularly those who have ceased to be accommodated (McGinley and Sanders, 2002; Caulfield-Dow, 2000; Dixon and Stein, 2002). These studies show that, on the whole, a majority of young people value the time they spent in foster care; many young people feel fully included as a member of the foster family and feel nurtured and encouraged (Skuse and Ward, 2003). However, some young people’s experiences are not so positive (McNeish and Newman, 2002; Howe, 2005). Some of the difficulties identified by young people include:

- Experiencing disruption from living in multiple placements;
- Feeling different from their peers and experiencing stigmatization, due in part to the requirements of the procedures of the Looked after Children system;
- Having a negative experience at school and achieving poor educational attainment levels,
- Wishing they had had more contact with their birth families;
- Not being well prepared for leaving foster care and living independently, with a lack of on-going contact and support from foster carers.

It is recognised that the shortage of foster placements often results in difficulties in matching children to appropriate placements, with an increased likelihood of
placement disruption and children moving between placements. While foster carers have, on the whole, become better trained, supported and remunerated over the last ten years it is clear that there is still a place for support to be improved as some struggle to care for children with complex difficulties. In 2006-2007 in Scotland 30% of children who were living away from home had been accommodated for between two and five years and only 38% of these children were still living in their original placement; in total, 14% had lived in three to five placements and 7% in six or more. In relation to education, only 34% of all looked after children (living at home and away) had English and Maths at SQCF Level 3 (Scottish Government Statistics 2007).

The messages from children and young people themselves about what they require from carers are very clear and have remained fairly consistent over the last ten years. They want to feel cared for and respected, they want to belong, they want their lives to feel normal, they would like rules and expectations to be clear, they would like some say in the plans that are made for them and they want opportunities to help them develop and fulfil their aspirations (Berridge, 1997; Sellick and Thoburn, 2002; Sinclair, 2005).

Kinship care

There is limited published information about the use of kinship care within Europe, the literature relating to its use in the USA, Australia and New Zealand is more developed. However, there is increasing research interest in the UK which reflects the growing use of kinship care placements.

The research evidence that is available is generally supportive of kinship care as a viable placement option for children and young people with the indications being that it should be more widely used (Hunt, 2007). A number of benefits of kinship care have been identified by research studies; these include children feeling loved and valued, having a sense of belonging and identity through strong, continuing family ties and having more stable and lasting placements than children placed in non-kinship foster care (Broad et al, 2001; Harden et al, 2004). However, some research studies clearly advise caution in giving too much weight to some of the perceived benefits (Greef, 2001) and point out the difficulties in drawing firm conclusions from the evidence available (Cossar, 2004; Broad, 2004). It has been suggested that here is a lack of evidence to confirm that the reality matches some of the theoretical advantages claimed (Cuddeback, 2004). It has been suggested that even continuity of placement can be questioned with longer-term studies indicating that stability may diminish over time (Paxman, 2006). In addition, it has been pointed out that absence of placement breakdown does not equate to absence of unhappiness (Sinclair, 2005).

A study in the USA drawing on national data highlighted the fact that children living in kinship care generally suffered more environmental hardships that those in non-kinship care and that these needed to be addressed or weighed against the recognised benefits, such as continuity of placement (Ehrle and Geen, 2002). A longitudinal study of 270 children placed in kinship care across four English local authority areas highlighted that, over a two year period at least, placement stability was nearly 20% higher for those cared by kinship carers rather than non-kinship carers; however, using quality indicators defined by the researchers, there were 7% fewer good quality kinship care placements (66%) than non-kinship care ones (73%) (Farmer and
Moyers, 2005). In addition, this study found that more kinship than non-kinship carers were struggling with children’s behaviour and persevering with them for a longer period, often with little support from social workers.

The majority of research studies which have aimed to compare outcomes for young people in kinship care with those in non-kinship foster care have concluded that the former has resulted in at least comparable and at best, better outcomes (Broad, 2004; Winuker et al 2008). Some studies have taken a more cautious line by referring rather to the absence of evidence of negative outcomes for children in relative care (Hunt 2008). Certainly, it is widely acknowledged that the placement of children in kinship care is far from an easy option (Hunt, 2007). Indeed, here in Scotland some professional concern about the growing use of relative care has been reported (Triseliotis, 2000). This probably reflects the increased awareness of the complexity of many kinship care placements and the need for such placements to have at least as much, if not greater support than non-kinship ones (Waterhouse, 2001).

The potential difficulties within some kinship care situations are now being acknowledged and include problematic family dynamics and role confusion (Greef, 2001), inter-generational conflict leading to difficulties with contact (Farmer & Moyers, 2005; Sykes et al, 2002; Broad, 2006; Geen, 2003) and a reduced likelihood of children returning to live with a birth parent (O’Brien 1999; Harden et al, 2004; Farmer and Moyers, 2005). A study in the USA suggested that some social workers have an ambivalent attitude towards kinship care placements, mainly because they felt they lacked the appropriate skills to work through complicated family dynamics (Peters, 2005). A UK study for BAAF made the point that kinship care required a different kind of engagement by social workers, a family-centred rather than systems orientated one (Broad and Skinner, 2005).

There is increasing recognition of some of the risks which may result from the greater use of potentially inappropriate kinship care placements due to a lack of other fostering alternatives and pressure on local authority budgets (Broad 2008). Most studies which address practice issues argue strongly for the need for better resourcing of kinship care services to enable tailored and appropriate assessment of carers to take place, placements to be better monitored and supported and higher financial remuneration to be offered to carers (Sinclair, 2005).

**Young people’s views**

It has been noted by a number of authors that there is little evidence in studies of young people directly expressing their views and relating their experiences of living in kinship care and that this constitutes an important gap in the literature on the subject (for example Paxman, 2006; Broad, 2007). The importance of listening to young people and enabling their views to be heard is increasingly becoming enshrined in legislation, policy at all levels of government and in social work practice and research. In terms of social work policy and practice, it is clearly stated in the finalised National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy (2007) that, where possible, placement planning should be centred on the views of the child. The importance of young people being able to discuss the complex feelings they may be experiencing about moving from their parents to relatives and the opportunity for this to be embedded in social work practice is also stressed (Broad, 2004; Aldgate, 2006).
A number of studies undertaken over the last ten years have included young people’s views as part of a wider study of kinship care (for example O’Brien, 1999; Worrall, 1999; Broad et al, 2001; Farmer and Moyers, 2005; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006; Hunt, 2008; Holtan, 2008; Biehal et al, forthcoming). These have included young people from across all age groups with the numbers of young people interviewed for each study ranging from 12-30. Although there have been both qualitative and survey based research which has explored the views of kinship carers (for example Laws and Broad, 2000; Richards, 2001; Love, 2008), there is very little published work which has as its primary focus the experiences and views of young people of living in kinship care. Notable exceptions have been the research undertaken by Altshuler (1999) and by Broad et al (2001) whose interviews of young people were the main focus of the study and Messing (2006) who conducted focus groups with 40 children; both research projects took place in the USA. It is difficult to locate similar academic work within the UK although, from a practice-based perspective, the Family Rights Group has published findings from an action research project which consulted extensively with children, as well as with their carers and social workers (Doolan et al, 2004).

There are a number of themes emerging from the studies which have explored children and young people’s experiences. The majority of young people have, on the whole, confirmed the findings of broader based research studies and described themselves as feeling safe, cared for and loved (Broad et al, 2001; Broad, 04; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006). They gave clear indications that, by being cared for within their extended family or by friends, they felt that their lives were normal and ordinary, that is just the same as their peers (Hunt, 2008). Young people were very keen to avoid being accommodated in stranger foster care which they perceived as marking them out as different from their friends and carried with it a stigmatization of which they were fearful (Broad et al, 2001; Messing, 2006).

Some of the studies explored young people’s experiences of moving into the home of kinship carers and, as might be expected, their experiences varied. Some had been too young to remember and for some the transition had been easy, however, a number reported that adapting to new rules and routines had been a challenge (Worrall, 1999; Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006). Similarly, young people varied in the extent to which they felt a sense of emotional permanence and certainty about their future place within the kinship home; indeed, half of the young people interviewed in one study had not had explicit discussions with their carers about the future of their kinship placements (Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006).

Generally, young people reported having a good network of friends, although one study reported that this network was in some cases smaller than the norm for those living with a parent, especially if the young person was living with a sole grandparent (Hunt, 2008). Young people were happy with their range of leisure pursuits although financial hardship was cited by some young people in one study, in addition to some restrictions to freedom and firmer boundaries (Broad et al, 2001). Young people who were asked about their school experiences were on the whole happy with how they were getting on, although some reported experiencing bullying at school (Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006).

Contact with parents was important for many of the young people who contributed to the studies. Although it would appear that this contact is often more frequent and
more informally arranged for young people living in kinship care than those in non-kinship care, some wished that they could have more (Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006). The sense of connection many young people felt to their original family unit was important to them (Messing, 2006). However, contact was sometimes difficult for young people, with tensions and disappointments with parental behaviour being expressed. Some young people regretted losing touch with their fathers; this occurred more frequently than with their mothers and was not dependent on whether they were placed with the maternal or paternal side of the family (Hunt, 2008).

On the whole young people who were interviewed expressed the view that they belonged and they felt safe in their kinship placements; however, for some there were feelings of guilt about not living with parents or siblings and some carried emotional burdens which they felt they had not had opportunities to work through (Broad, 2007). Although in general researchers have found young people to be very open and frank in their view and experiences of kinship care (Messing, 2006: Broad, 2004) the suggestion that some young people might find their feelings about their parents too painful to discuss with others, including social workers, researchers and peers, was also raised (Holtan, 2008).

A crucial point which arose from one study was that the young people interviewed tended to be those who were doing fairly well and could not therefore be considered representative of those who made up the wider cohort of even that particular study (Hunt, 2007). In undertaking research into kinship care it is, in practical terms, likely to be easier to locate young people who are currently living with relatives and friends than those who have since moved on to alternative forms of accommodation. There is therefore likely to be a bias within this type of qualitative study towards those young people whose placements are relatively stable, unless those whose kinship care placements have disrupted are actively sought out so that a wider range of perspectives can be captured.

The majority of young people who have been consulted express great loyalty and gratitude towards their kinship carers for taking them into their families (Aldgate and McIntosh, 2006). In some cases, this may have led to anxiety about the security of their placement and a feeling that they have had to work hard to fit in and make the arrangement work (Worrall, 1999). In general, however, those interviewed have identified more benefits than difficulties in being cared for within their circle of friends or family.
Conclusion and key points

- The increased use of kinship foster placements has led to greater research interest and recognition of the potential complexities involved in placing some children and young people within extended family and friends networks.

- The views of young people as to their experience of foster care (in general) are increasingly the focus of research studies; young people are very clear about what they expect from foster care and social work services, although these expectations are not always met.

- Although research indicates that kinship care has many benefits, evidence about outcomes for young people in kinship care compared to those in stranger foster care is as yet not conclusive.

- The available research reflects some concern about the increased use of kinship care placements which are inadequately supported, given the challenges that may be present for carers and young people.

- Although research reports often include interviews with young people as part of a wider study, there is a dearth of research studies which focus on young people’s voices and experiences.

- Young people in general speak very highly of their kinship carers and value the opportunity to remain within the extended circle of family or friends.

- Some young people in kinship care do experience challenges, for example in relation to contact with parents and inter-generational conflict, and may not have the support to help them cope with emotional difficulties.

- There may be some bias within studies to consult with young people whose kinship care placements are positive and ways should be found to trace and obtain the views of those for whom this type of care has been less positive.
CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

Care-giving relationships
The young people interviewed for the study were for the main part being looked after by one or both grandparents, with the maternal and paternal sides of the family equally represented. One sibling group of two were being cared for by a maternal great-aunt and a further sibling group of two by the mother of their own mother’s ex-boyfriend. Although the relationship between the latter four young people and their care-givers appeared tenuous in theory, what clearly mattered to the young people in reality was that the carer was showing commitment to looking after them. In relation to how young people referred to their carer, in some cases the relationship name assigned by the young person to the carer had evolved over time:

‘Well, she’s nae we’re real granny but we jist think of her like that, because we’ve been here seven years. My mam and her son were going together – it’s his mam’.

Younger female interviewee

One young person referred to the grandparents who were looking after him as his mum and dad; another young person identified that, although she called her grandmother ‘nana’, she was clearly fulfilling the role of her mother as well as that of a grandparent:

‘I still have contact with my dad, but no my mum cos I just dinae speak tae her cos I dinae really classify her as my mum because my nana is my mum. I call her my nana but she’s more a mum to me than my mum. She works both ways; she works as a mum and a nana’.

Younger female interviewee

Some of the young people reported having complicated extended family networks which featured remarriages and step-aunts, uncles and cousins. This had the effect of relationships and roles within the family often not following traditional or clearly defined patterns, with generational age gaps not distinct. However, some families were openly acknowledging and addressing the potential confusion for other young family members who came to the household in relation to the role, or at least naming, of the kinship carer:

‘If you ever asked her she wouldn’t want me to call her ‘ma’. I asked her one night ‘how would you feel if I called you ‘ma’? She said she wouldn’t want that cos you’ve got a mum. She may not be a very good mum. But I can see why she wants me to call her nana cos the other kids would get mixed up and it would be better calling her nana.

Younger female interviewee
The age at which young people had moved to relatives varied across the group, with one young person having done so as a baby, a further four young people being five years old or younger and the other seven young people ranging from six to eleven years of age at the time of the change in their living situation. All the young people reported having been very familiar with their new carers and many had featured quite significantly in their lives, in some cases as part-time care-givers, prior to the move.

\[\text{‘All my baby pictures are full of her (gran)...With her cheesy grin, she used to make all my baby clothes as well and we had this sofa that was like flowery blue, yellow and green and my dress is exactly the same as it’.}\]

Older female interviewee

The young people interviewed all had some degree of understanding of the legal route by which they had come to be living with kinship carers and for most there had been some involvement by the Social Work Department and/or the Court, with approximately half the young people being subject to Guardianship, Custody or Parental Responsibilities Orders.

**Care-giving relationships: key points**

- Although the family relationship between the young person and their carer was not always a direct one, the commitment of the carer was the most important factor for young people.
- The kinship carers were effectively fulfilling the role of mother and/or father.
- Complex family networks and indistinct generational age gaps in some families helped young people feel that their situation was not abnormal.
- Familiarity with relative carers prior to the move greatly assisted with relationship bonding.

**Transition**

The ways in which young people made the move to live with their new carers varied across the group but many of the changes of living arrangements were notable for being evolving or fluid in nature. In some cases young people moved back and forth between their mothers and/or fathers and the relative carer or had stayed for short periods with the carer prior to moving in, other young people lived with their parents and relatives together for a period of time following which the parent had left the household and the young person had stayed; it was sometimes quite difficult for young people to distinguish exactly when the new arrangement came into being. Two young people had stayed with other relatives from time to time before moving permanently to their current home; others had moved initially on a temporary basis and had ended up staying permanently:

**Young person:** ‘Well, to start with we were just going to be in for about a weekend until Jamie tidied his hoose and we could get back haim, but he’d nae tidied his hoose so we had to bide here, like for ages’
Interviewer: ‘So is there a plan to move back?’

Young person: ‘No, dinae think so’. Older female interviewee

The familiarity with the new carers and the ‘overlapping’ care arrangements appeared to ease the transition period for most of the young people interviewed and meant that there was an existing and usually fairly strong foundation on which to build the new caring relationship. However, one young person described her move (and that of her sibling) as clearly delineated and quite traumatic, as it involved a sudden move followed by secrecy during the aftermath, to avoid difficulties with their mother:

‘My mate lived across the wall bit and we had to cross and climb the wall and we managed to get across to her house and she phoned my Grunny. And she came round to check we were okay and she took us round to her hoose cause we already had a room here. And it was hectic cause we had to like try and get round to the other hoose to get all our stuff while my mum was oot or she would’ve hid a go at us, so it was like trying to manoeuvre stuff while she wasn’t there…’

Older female interviewee

While some of the young people had been too young at the time of the move to fully understand why they had moved from their parents, all were now clear about the reasons. Most of those who, at the time of the move, were of sufficient age to comprehend could remember how things used to be at home and the events that had led to the need for a change of primary carer:

‘Well eh, were mam used to go away for a few days or weeks or something, just come back and one time she went away and dinae come back. We were living with Moira for a few, two weeks and then social work found out so then we got put in here’.

Younger male interviewee

A third of the young people interviewed stated that they remembered being consulted about who they wanted to live with or at least asked if they wished to live with the carers to whom they had already moved; a further third couldn’t remember due to their age at the time, two others felt they had no choice and that their carer had ‘taken over’. One young person, who was just a baby when she went to live with her grandparent, felt that she had made her wishes very clear through the ways in which she responded to her carers; later on, at the point where a Guardianship Order was being sought, she felt again that it was clear, without being asked, who she wanted to live with:
‘When I was a baby I lived with my mum and dad but my nana always used to take me and I never wanted to go back to my mum and dad. It sort of became a sort of permanent thing with my nana. When I was about four or five she got Guardianship of me; I did have people coming in to speak to me but I was in Primary One and I didn’t know who it was. I was just playing with my dolls and watching TV but nobody really asked but I remember just always wanting to stay here with my nana so they kinda didn’t ask just knew I wanted to stay’.

Older female interviewee

Many of the young people had moved just a short distance to stay with new carers, some remaining within the same town, the same street or even as close as next door and this appeared to have assisted them in making an easy transition to their new living situation. People and places around them were familiar and most had not had to change schools and had been able to retain their friends.

‘We went to a school that was just around the corner from our old house and we moved and I was in Primary Six and my grunny didn’t want us moving school and have to make new pals, so we just stayed at that school’.

Older female interviewee

**Transition: key points**

- For most of the young people the move to kinship carers was an evolving process, with some having been looked after by the carers for shorter periods of time on previous occasions.
- All the young people now fully understood the reasons for the move and some could remember being consulted at the time about where they were to live.
- Many of the young people had moved just a short distance and not had to change schools or make new friends; this appeared to assist greatly with the transition between carers.

**Adapting to new carers**

The idea of being cared for by someone other than a mother or father was something that young people appeared to adapt to fairly easily. Most young people did not have strong recollections of the ways in which their relationship with their new carer changed from being that of an extended family member to the person providing the main parenting role. One young person was able to articulate some ways in which there were differences:

Young person: *Well it just kinda felt weird cause she (gran) would like treat us differently, you know cause when she used to come round at week-ends, she would treat us differently cause we’re here all the time.*
Interviewer: *What was the difference was it because at week-ends you were spoiled?*

Young person: *Yeah (laughs). When we moved here full-time she would just care about us mare and make sure we were okay.*

Older female interviewee

Another young person felt she would have had a better relationship with her grandmother if she had continued to be a grandmother rather than become her carer, as their relationship had at times been quite volatile; another young person had just substituted a grandparent figure from the previous generation:

Interviewer: *What about not having a gran? Do you think you're missing something?*

Young person: *I used to but she passed away a few years ago. My other gran but I mean my great gran, she was a gran to me.*

Older male interviewee

The young people who had moved to live with kinship carers at an age, at which they could make comparisons with the care they had previously received, were able to identify some differences and on the whole these differences were positive ones. At least half of the young people had been living with parents who had issues with problematic alcohol or other substance use and this had affected the care they had received. Young people were, in general, expected to conform to stricter, or at least clearer, rules and routines in relation to home, school and being out with friends. In the case of one sibling group, it appeared that the older sibling (sister) had been undertaking the parenting role for both young people, and also caring for their mother:

Interviewer: *So living here, do you think that's a good thing for you for your future?*

Young person: *Mmm, cause when we lived next door we didn’t go to school every day and here we are made to (laughs)*

Younger female interviewee

Young person: *Our mam…she wid jist come in and sit and dee nuthin and tell us t’dee stuff, my sister like looked aefter her.*

Interviewer: *Your sister cooked? Or looked after you, did you say?*

Young person: *Aye, both.*

Younger male interviewee

Three of the young people interviewed described occasions when there were arguments with their new carers, but felt that this was a feature of normal family life and did not feel that the level of disagreement threatened their future in the home. One young person had clearly had severe difficulties in adapting to boundaries within his new home once he reached his teenage years and had spent a period of several months living in residential units, although he had since returned to his relative’s care.
Although the age or generation gap between young people and carers was not generally seen as a major difficulty, one young person identified this as a major issue:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewer: Do you think there’s a big generation gap?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young person: Very big</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interviewer: Has that become harder for you over the years?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Young person: Yeah, cos she always tends to treat the girls worse than the boys. So like the girls will do all the housework as it was in World War Two type thing and the boys would just go off and do whatever.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older female interviewee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another young person talked about the need to compromise and work through setting rules which were acceptable to herself and her carer:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Aye, there’s boundaries but we just try and adjust to them and make a mid point and work it from there’.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older female interviewee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Adapting to new carers: key points**

- Most young people had strong memories about what it was like to live with their parents; in some cases there had been significant difficulties and young people could see clear benefits when comparing the two living situations.
- Young people adapted to different parenting styles in a range of ways with some preferring the relative carers’ approach, some finding it a challenge and others finding a compromise position with their carers.
- A small number of young people indicated that they would have had a better relationship with their grandmother if she had remained as a grandmother rather than become the primary carer.
Difference and stigma

None of the young people who were interviewed reported feeling different from their peers as a result of living with relatives and were very matter of fact about the way in which they saw their living situation:

‘Well, it’s just like another home, just another family, so it’s nae different’.

Older female interviewee

‘All my pals are like really tight, more like family to me. They’re like friends but they are really close. We’re always seeing each other, always having sleep-overs. Going round to each other’s houses and you know I din’ae see myself different to them. They all know about why I bide with my nana and they’ve accepted that and they din’ae reject me’.

Older female interviewee

‘I know three people, about one in eleven, who live with their grandma. You can’t tell when you look at people who they live with so that’s why I don’t feel any different; I don’t look any different – I don’t have a green face or anything, I would feel different if I had a green face’.

Younger female interviewee

Some of the young people compared their circumstances with those of friends who were living with a single parent or were not part of what is seen as the ‘normal nuclear family’ arrangement and they thus took the view that living with grandparents or other relatives was just one of a wide range of family compositions which constitutes the norm in contemporary society. One young person reported that most of her friends lived with her grandparents or had what she described as ‘similar family problems’ thus, within her particular peer group, this was more normal than living with parents and having a problem-free life. However, there was also a suggestion from others that what they now had with their kinship carers was a good deal more normal than their lives had been before, whilst living with their parents:

Interviewer: Do you think that being in kinship care has given you a good foundation for the future?

Young person: Yeah, cause its shown me how a proper family works...

Older female interviewee

‘She (carer) jist goes on about normal stuff, like folk are bound to go on about. It’s just better’.

Older female interviewee

Although most young people, when specifically asked, expressed the view that their lives were normal and that they didn’t feel that they were missing out in any way,
there was a hint from one or two that some differences did exist and that their situations were not the same as those young people who were living with parents. One young man referred to those in kinship care as ‘the unlucky ones’:

> ‘Most of my friends live with their parents, so you can’t really compare it, I’m not complaining but it can be difficult’.  
> Older male interviewee

> ‘I don’t really feel different, but I really hate it when my friends fall out with their parents and say they hate them and I say how lucky you actually are, and then they’re like oh sorry and I’m like – you better be!’  
> Older female interviewee

Perhaps as a result of not feeling very different from their peers, young people were on the whole quite open with other people about the fact that they lived with relatives, although for those who were resident in a small town telling people was not an issue as their perception was that everyone knew anyway. It may also be the case that in a small town other people whose lives are ‘different’ in some way are more visible, thus aiding the process for others in this situation.

Interviewer: Do you tell other people what your living situation is?

Young person: Most of them cain, even though I’ve nae really told them. Abody just cains in a small village.

Younger male interviewee

However, young people expressed a wider range of attitudes towards telling people the reasons for their move to kinship carers with some feeling that it was their own business and others that it was just too complicated to go into. One young person had written her family history in a Personal Essay at school and then given it to her friends to read; they had been very sympathetic but taken their lead from her in terms of their reaction. She explained that because she was ‘still smiling’, even though she had ‘been through so much’, they were now ‘fine with it’.

Young person: Everybody knows I stay with my nana. They don’t know why. I would rather nae tell them.

Interviewer: Has anybody ever asked?

Young person: A lot of folk ask but I say ‘cos I prefer to stay with my nana. I just don’t go there with them; it’s my business. My closest friends know but I wouldn’t tell my class or friends at school.

Older female interviewee
Interviewer: *Are you quite open with people that you live with your gran or do you feel you have to make up some reasons for it?*

Young person: *Not really, it just depends what way people say the question. It just depends whether I can say directly or it takes quite a while to explain. If people ask further questions it’s like go speak to her (gran)! Which some of them have actually done...*

Older female interviewee

Sharing personal details with friends, and also sometimes their parents, was a common experience with one young man expressing the view that he ‘had nothing to hide’. There was some caution about who to confide in; one young person had experienced a negative reaction from friends at primary school once they knew she had moved to live with her grandmother.

Two young people mentioned that they had offered or received support from peers who had found themselves in similar circumstances and who could be considered ‘kindred spirits’:

*We were in the same group and I asked why he lived with his granny and he said ‘because my mum and dad died in a car crash’ and anyway I told him why I live with my nana and he understands that because, you know, it’s similar’.*

Older female interviewee

Most of the young people who were interviewed were asked if they had been accommodated by the local authority at any stage of their lives or knew anyone who had. Those who had any knowledge of this had very negative opinions about foster or residential care and expressed the view that this was to be avoided at all costs. The young people’s views were based on what peers who had been in foster care had to say and, in the case of two young people, on first hand experience. The young people who had direct experience of foster care considered that there was a fundamental difference between that and kinship care in relation to commitment and being cared about. Speaking about her sister’s experience of foster care one young woman said:

*‘She knew the people (foster carers) but she wasn’t loved and that. Some people can make you feel loved and others just don’t, you know? So she didn’t like that part of it’.*

Older female interviewee

The sister of whom she was speaking, who was also interviewed, summed up the experience of foster care in two words – that it was ‘quite horrible’.
A major reason for wishing to avoid becoming accommodated was the fear of being moved around; one young man stated that if his grandparents had not agreed to raise him he’d ‘have been in foster carers all round Scotland’. And again used the word ‘horrible’ to describe how this would have been. Another young person had friends who had experienced foster care:

Interviewer: *What do your friends who are in foster care say about it?*

Young person: *Well...they say like how they are fed up of moving around and that they wish they had like one permanent family instead of getting used to like all these people and like different surroundings.*

Older female interviewee

Living in kinship care was clearly seen as preferable to being in stranger foster care; this was the case even for the young people who had experienced some difficulties while being cared for by relatives. Four of the young people had on-going social work involvement in their lives; however, with the exception of one of these young people, none of them referred to the formal aspects of social work procedures, such as the need to attend Child Care Reviews and Children’s Panel meetings which young people in ‘stranger’ foster care often consider onerous and intrusive.

**Difference and stigma: key points**

- Young people did not see themselves as different from their peers and thought that living with relatives was just one of a range of family compositions in modern society with lone parenthood and step-families now the norm.
- For some young people, life with kinship carers was more normal than the problematic lives they had experienced before.
- Young people living in a rural or small town setting expected everyone to know who they lived with but they were more cautious about who they spoke to about the reasons behind their move.
- Young people were very fearful of having to live with foster carers mainly because they had heard that this would entail moving around between carers.

**Identity and belonging**

The majority of the young people interviewed clearly felt emotionally attached to their relative carers and appeared to have stronger bonds with them, as their primary carers, than with their mothers or fathers. There was a strong sense from most of the young people that the relatives they currently stayed with were their family now and that they felt closer in terms of a sense of identity and in values with this new family. One young person expressed her feelings of identity and belonging very succinctly:
‘I never felt like I belonged there (with her mum and dad), do you know what I mean? I just feel like I wasn’t like them. I was more like my nana and a more polite person than my mum and dad and I felt I was more wanted here than I was with my mum and dad’.

Younger female interviewee

‘Well, I’ve always never really liked my mam awfa much, she was always awfa moody and a that…’

Older female interviewee

The majority of young people had no wish to return to the care of their parents and felt that their lives had vastly improved as a result of the move, in ways which are outlined in the sections below. There were a small number of exceptions; one young person was still experiencing feelings of loss and sometimes wished to be back with her parent. She had lived with her parent for a longer period than her sister, who was clear that she felt no such feelings of loss. One young person was wistful about how things might have been had he stayed with his parent and one young person felt that she would be happier living with her parent, as she believed that they shared a view of life that was closer than that with her kinship carer. This young person was fairly emphatic that she did not belong with her relative’s family:

Interviewer: Do you feel that you belong with your relative, in that family?

Young person: NO! If I could I would actually disown her, I really really, well not hate her, that’s kinda horrible, but we have nothing in common at all.

Older female interviewee

This young person appeared to have unresolved feelings of anger about the break-up of her family and blamed her relative for this. She described a long history of family conflict and disagreements.

However, most young people believed that their kinship carer understood them very well, took time to talk to them about their feelings and that this helped them to feel that they were wanted and were full members of the family.

‘I talk with my nana. We have a very open relationship and we can talk about anything. She’s always asking me to tell her things and I can ask her things. You know she’s great. She’s the person I tell everything’.

Younger female interviewee

And in some cases, as would be the case with any family, one carer was easier to talk to than others but circumstances had temporarily changed:
Interviewer: Do you think your gran understands you and knows what you like?

Young person: Emm...in some circumstances yeah (laughs) like the basics and things like that. I used to sit and talk to her about how things are and what was going on but since... I canna really open up to her, I just confide in my friends instead...

Older female interviewee

A number of young people remarked that one of the benefits of being cared for by their relatives was that they were given more attention. One young person also remarked on the importance she placed on living with people who were able to help her preserve her past:

‘My grandma is important to me, then granddad and all my family and friends and then it’s like stuff I got when I was a baby, pictures an that and my first pair of shoes. Me an grandma painted a big rainbow and stuck all the stuff on it that was important to me from when I was a baby’.

Younger female interviewee

Identity and belonging: key points

- The bonds between young people and their carers were in most cases very strong and young people appeared to identify themselves as a full member of the new family group.
- The majority of young people expressed no wish to return to the care of their parent(s).
- Most young people thought that their carers understood them well and had time to listen to their feelings and worries.
- There were indications that a small number of young people were experiencing unresolved feelings of anger or loss.

Safety and security

Without exception, those young people interviewed who were able to remember their previous living situation felt safer in the kinship care home in which they now lived. Some young people spoke about ways in which their parents’ lifestyles made them feel unsafe and uneasy and some of them were clearly relieved that their situation had changed:
Life with kinship carers was generally seen as quieter and less chaotic; there was a feeling that the relative carers were putting the young people first and making their care a priority as well as, in some cases, making sacrifices. Two young people’s comments about this reflect the fact that, while this made them feel good about themselves, it also engendered a feeling of gratitude. It would be unusual for a young person being cared for by parents to express overt gratitude which perhaps hints at a heightened vulnerability flowing from a feeling of being indebted to carers:

‘They are actually my grandparents and they have sacrificed a few more of their own years to raise me after they raised their own children. So I feel really good about that as they did that out of real love. So I feel really really good and grateful for them doing that’.

Older male interviewee

‘I worry about her that she’s had two children and looked after two children and I don’t want her looking after me as well. So I try to help her as much as I can’.

Younger female interviewee

A small number of young people talked about arguments in the kinship care home but for the most part these were seen as being part of normal family life. Two young people did feel that the arguments were unsettling and that their sense of security was affected by disputes:

‘My (sibling) and my (relative) used to have really, really, really big arguments that used to lead to physical fights as well, and I used to try to stay away, quite away, so I did feel like I was in quite an insecure household’.

Older female interviewee

For a small number this insecurity was compounded by the carer having reportedly threatened, during the heat of an argument, to have the young people removed and by talking about what life could be like without caring responsibilities.

However, most of the young people felt secure with their carers and felt there was no uncertainty about the fact that they would be able to continue to live within them to
adulthood and beyond. In some cases this had not been openly discussed, although there was no sense from young people that this conversation needed to take place. Many of the young people, however, did express worries about their carer’s health, especially those being cared for by older relatives.

‘Aye, I do worry, because if both of them was to die or get ill, then me and Jack would be officially abandoned and it would just kinda be hard on all of us...’.

Older female interviewee

Some young people were aware of contingency plans, or at least could think of alternative relative carers who would step in if current arrangements came to an end. Other young people admitted that they just preferred not to think about it:

‘Aye, sometimes I do worry; she’s got a few stuff wrang with her like arthritis. I try nae to think about it’.

Older female interviewee

I think about something happening to her all the time but I’ve just got to think 99% it won’t happen, she’s a really good driver and I doubt she would crash and she’s not ill. Auntie and Uncle would look after me if it came to anything’.

Younger female interviewee

Safety and security: key points

- Most young people stated that they felt safer living with their kinship carers than they had with their parent(s), particularly those whose parents had had unpredictable or risky lifestyles.
- The gratitude expressed by one young person towards his carers may reflect a feeling of vulnerability for young people in this situation.
- Young people felt that their futures were secure and that they could remain with their carers, although this was often not openly discussed with them.
- Some young people worried about their older carers’ health and what would happen to them if they could no longer care for them.

Other benefits: emotional and material

In general, the young people interviewed for this study indicated that they were materially better off in kinship care and, while not very affluent, that their carers were able to provide money for material goods and for young people to take part in activities and to develop their interests. In a small number of cases the social work department were providing funds for specific hobbies, such as horse riding. For some young people the contrast between material conditions in their parent’s home and in the kinship home was quite stark, although this may have been partly due to parents having other priorities in terms of spending money or in a lack of organisational skills, as much as about lack of finances:
Four young people talked about not doing interesting things or being taken on outings or holidays while living in their previous home; they commented that this aspect of their life was quite different now. One young person on the other hand said that their grandmother did not have a car so the family were not able to go to visit places or have holidays, but that ‘the social’ were providing some money for activities.

Well, I jist remember we weren’t allowed to do anything, we just had to sit doon and colour...

Younger female interviewee

They (parents) never did anything or took us anywhere.

Younger male interviewee

However, most young people were now engaged in a range of activities, which included Sea Cadets, Church-based activities, playing for a football team, staying with friends, majorettes, singing, drama and dancing. Other physical benefits which some young people were experiencing and appreciating now that they were living with kinship carers related to the basic requirements of healthy living:

Well, dunna ken, it’s like better cause you can eat whenever you need and you get a shower every day.

Younger female interviewee

All the young people felt that they were encouraged by their kinship carers to go to school more regularly and to do well at school. In addition to giving young people the opportunity to take part in leisure interests and activities, which increased their confidence, kinship carers appeared to be instilling in young people a feeling of self-belief and supporting them in striving towards their aspirations and ambitions. Almost all the young people were able to identify career ambitions, many of which were professional in nature and included policing, teaching, joining the Navy, engineering and marine biology. Some young people mentioned that their carers had given them advice but that they hadn’t always taken it. One young man reported that his carer thought he was not aiming high enough:
‘I wanted to be a joiner but Helen (carer) says I’m too brainy for that…but I’d still like to be a joiner. Or a lawyer would be alright’.

Younger male interviewee

It was interesting that these young people had clear ideas about their future careers and were being encouraged to think positively; this would seem to be less often the case for looked after young people many of whom leave school as soon as they are able.

Other benefits: key points

- Most of the young people appeared to be materially better off in kinship care and enjoyed healthier lifestyles and a range of interests and leisure pursuits.
- Young people were encouraged to attend and do well at school.
- Young people felt more confident in their abilities to achieve their aspirations for the future.
- All the young people had career ambitions and knew how to work towards them.

Family contact

Most of the young people clearly positioned themselves as belonging to their new family and only a small number overtly expressed or even hinted at feelings of loss at having been separated from their parents. It was notable that only a small number of young people referred to seeing their parent by using the term ‘contact’, and these were young people for whom this was arranged by the local authority. Four young people did not see either of their parents because of the death of a parent or estrangement from them. Two young people had recently started meeting one of their parents and a third was seeing a parent on a regular and informal basis. One young person was having ‘contact’ with both parents separately, one of which was supervised by social workers. She reported that she did worry about her mother sometimes as she had a problem with drug use. A further four of the young people were coping with quite uncomfortable circumstances in relation to seeing their parents.

Interviewer: When you see your mum and dad on the street do you speak to them?

Young person: Well, they speak to me but I don’t speak to them.

Interviewer: How often would you say you bump into them?

Young person: Sometimes two or three times a week...

Younger female interviewee
Living in a small community all four young people were regularly seeing one or both parent in the street and had devised strategies for dealing with this or gave the impression, at least, of having learned how to cope:

‘I sometimes see her doon the street and stuff, but like my mates ken fit happened, so they help make sure she doesn’t notice me…’

Older female interviewee

‘Well, sometimes like, we used to go roond, but it wasn’t really that good so we da go roond anymair. Now I might see my mum now and again, walking doon, but she doesn’t recognise me’.

Younger male interviewee

It was notable that more young people in the study were having positive contact with their fathers than with their mothers, even though they were living in equal numbers on the maternal and paternal sides of the family.

‘Well, I see ma dad. I like my dad because he’s trying to get back on track. He’s on methadone and he’s trying to get better and he’s going on his course, and he is getting much better and getting rehabilitated. I’m no in a relationship with my mum’.

Older female interviewee

Some young people were clearly dealing with feelings of disappointment and being let-down by parents. One young man talked about wanting to live with his father but that ‘he’s busy so I wouldn’t want to bother him with that’. Another young woman described how she packed her suitcase and left to stay with her grandmother and her mum ‘never even noticed that I’d gone’. There were also a small number of examples of intergenerational conflict:

‘If my dad knew I wasn’t allowed to go out he’d come up to the house and that’d be an explosion’.

Older female interviewee

This appeared to be having some influence on young people’s experience of their placements with relatives and was a factor in young people feeling that they would prefer to return to their parent, although they were generally realistic that ‘the grass might not be greener’. There was some suggestion of divided loyalties for a small number of the young people. One young person had reached the point at which she could no longer cope with further contact:
‘I sat down with her when she was not on drink or drugs, really clean, and I said to her when no-one else was about, just in a room like this and I spoke to her for about four hours just saying I’m finished with if you don’t quit drugs. If you don’t get yourself sorted out that’s it cause I’m a kid, I’ve got to have my kid years and I’ll be an adult soon. I don’t want to waste my kids years worrying about you’.

Younger female interviewee

The young people were all in contact with non-resident siblings and almost all with extended family members, usually on the side of the family within which they were living. A small number wished they could see more of family members from the other side of the family.

Family contact: key points

- Some of the young people living in a small town environment were meeting their parents informally on the street and for some this was uncomfortable.
- A small number of young people were experiencing inter-generational conflict and divided loyalties.
- More young people enjoyed seeing their fathers than their mothers; in general fathers did not seem to have disappeared from young people’s lives as is often the case.
- Young people were in contact with non-resident siblings; some would have liked to have seen more of extended family from the side with whom they were not resident.

Support

In answer to questions about where they derived support and help, most of the young people named their kinship carers and their immediate family members as the main source. Others mentioned extended family members who lived elsewhere. In relation to other informal support networks, friends were clearly very important to young people and all of them appeared to have close friends with whom they were able to share confidences and who knew all about their home circumstances. And, as might be expected with teenagers, some young people felt closer to their friends in some respects than to their family:

Interviewer: Who checks out that you’re okay?

Young person: Emm...probably my best friend cause when I’m quiet and stuff she takes me away and makes sure I’m alright and makes sure everyone asks if I’m alright.

Interviewer: Where does your granny and granddad fit into that?

Young person: They probably come like a second (laughs) cause I’ve gotten closer to my best friend and my brother...I’ve kinda drifted away from my family and that...they come a close second.

Older female interviewee
A small number of interviewees were involved with a support group for young people living in kinship care and while they enjoyed this group, they reported that they did not often discuss what it was like being looked after by relatives. Three others expressed an interest in joining such a group in order to share feelings and experiences:

‘Probably be good to make new friends, cause I like to meet new folk and they’d be mair understanding cause they’ve been through the same thing’.

Older female interviewee

Other informal sources of support included Church-based contacts and adults and peers involved with other activity-based organisations.

In relation to formal supports, only four of the twelve young people had on-going social work involvement and the frequency with which they saw their social workers and the support they derived from them was mixed. Two young people saw their social worker very regularly and named her as one of their supports; one young person had social work supervised or assisted contact with her mother, but the relationship with the social work staff member did not appear to be significant. A fourth young person had what he described as a ‘state of the art social work package’ which included a social worker and a youth justice worker but the relationships appeared not to be close:

Interviewer: How often do you see your social worker and youth justice worker?

Young person: One comes once every three months, my youth justice worker and my social worker comes every twenty years –well, I’m joking!

Interviewer: Well, I mean, really how often do you see them?

Young person: Only at meetings like reviews, progress meetings, Panels.

Older male interviewee

One young person mentioned their Guidance Teacher at school who had offered counselling at school if she had any problems.
**Support: key points**

- Young people derived support primarily from their kinship carers and other family members.
- All the young people appeared to have close friends to whom they turned when they needed emotional support.
- Those young people who attended the kinship care support group enjoyed the experience but did not use it to discuss feelings.
- The extent to which social workers provided support varied; support was also derived from sources such as teachers and Church leaders.

**Advice to other young people**

Young people were asked whether they had any advice to offer other young people who were going to live with relative carers. One young person felt that everyone’s situation would be different and that this would be difficult, making the important point that young people who live with kinship carers should not be regarded as a homogenous group:

‘This is a hard answer to give. Because it would be very, very varied and it would just be what other people thought was the right thing to say. It would have to be exactly the same sort of experience they had lived through for me to give advice’.

Older male interviewee

Others did have advice to offer:

‘I they think it’s hard, da give up hope cause it gives you more things to look forward to, and set yourself goals cause then it gives you something to look forward to’.

Older female interviewee

‘Just treat them nicely cause they know what they are doing and make the right choices’.

Older male interviewee

‘Be positive. Din’ae be sad. if you know them and love them you’re gonna be fine. you’re gonna be okay. They’re gonna look after you. Be positive, keep a smile on your face and look to the future’.

Older female interviewee
CHAPTER FOUR: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Summary

The young people who were interviewed for the study on the whole reported a positive experience of living in kinship care and in most cases young people had formed a strong bond with their carers. Most felt they belonged within their new family and had no wish to return to their parents. Young people did not see themselves as different from their peers and all felt that living with relatives was infinitely preferable to being in foster care. With a small number of exceptions, young people felt that their carers understood them, supported and encouraged them. Most felt that living with their carers offered them safety and security and, apart from worries about their carers’ health, felt assured that they would be able to remain with their carers into adulthood and beyond.

It was possible to identify a number of factors which young people felt had made the move to, and then being in, kinship care easier:

- Their relative carers being very familiar to them, usually over a number of years and in some cases young people having stayed with their carers for shorter periods before the move;
- For some young people, the move having taken place incrementally over a significant period of time;
- Many of the young people had moved just a short distance and had not had to change schools or make new friends;
- Most of the young people had strong memories about what it was like to live with their parents; they were able to compare the two living situations, and for most the new arrangement was preferable;
- The fact that young people did not see themselves as different from their peers; living with relatives was just one of a range of family compositions within which they considered that young people now live.
- Most young people did not have a yearning to return to their parents; only a few appeared to be experiencing some degree of divided loyalty.

Most young people were clearly able to identify significant benefits in being in kinship care:

- For these young people, life with kinship carers was more settled and predictable than when they stayed with their parents, especially those for whom parental substance use, neglect or abuse had been a feature;
- Young people thought that their carers understood them well and had time to listen to their feelings and worries;
- Young people felt safer, and felt that their future within the kinship carer’s home was secure;
- Young people appeared to be materially better off in kinship care and enjoyed healthier lifestyles and a range of interests and leisure pursuits;
- Young people were encouraged to attend and do well at school and they had career ambitions;
- Young people felt more confident in their abilities to achieve their aspirations;
- All the young people felt supported by family, friends or by professionals.
There was, however, evidence of difficulties in some young people’s lives:

- For some there were challenges in adapting to new parenting styles or issues stemming from the generation gap between themselves and their carers;
- A small number of young people were experiencing unresolved feelings of anger or loss;
- Some young people were coping with the experience of frequent unplanned and uncomfortable meetings with their parents in the street;
- Some young people worried about their older carers’ health and what would happen to them if their carers could no longer look after them.
- A small number of young people were experiencing inter-generational conflict and divided loyalties.
- Some young people would have liked to have seen more of extended family from the side with whom they were not resident.

**Similarities and differences from previous research**

This study confirms many of the findings from previous research, detailed in the literature review, which has asked young people their views about living with kinship carers, both in relation to the benefits which they identified and the difficulties which some were able to acknowledge.

However, there were also some differences in the experiences of young people in this study compared with those who participated in previous studies:

- More young people said that they had adapted to their new home without difficulty than in some other studies;
- Most young people in the study said they were materially better off than when they lived with their parents; this appeared to be less often the case in previous studies;
- More young people in the study appeared to have regular and positive contact with their fathers;
- More young people in the study did not want increased contact with their parents or return home to live;
- Most of the young people in the study felt certain that they could stay with their carers for as long as they wished.

**Kinship care and Getting it Right for Every Child (including resilience promotion)**

The care that young people receive from a kinship placement can be examined in terms of the Well-being Indicators and core components of the Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) Framework which has been developed in Scotland as a way of framing and measuring outcomes for children. A resilience perspective is also included in this framework, in the form of a Resilience Matrix.

All the young people in the study could be considered to have benefited, in some cases very significantly, from living with their kinship carers in relation to at least some of the eight Well-being Indicators (Healthy, Safe, Nurtured, Included, Active,
Achieving, Responsible and Respected) and many will have derived benefits in relation to all of the indicators.

Similarly, if the 21 components of the GIRFEC Assessment Triangle are considered, the care provided for the young people in the study covers most, if not all, of the areas which young people need to grow up in a way that enables them to score well in the Well-being Indicators. Many of the components listed below featured in young people’s accounts of their lives with kinship carers.

In relation to the promotion of resilience factors, it would seem that kinship care has much potential to help provide the protective environment that might assist young people recover from the adverse life circumstances which many of them have experienced. For example, a number of young people were taking part in activities within their community which gave them opportunities to make local links and friendships and to increase their self-esteem; these are both important ways to promote resilience.
Key points for practice

- There was a clear message from young people that they felt their living situation to be normal, that they did not feel different from their peers and that this was very important to them. If kinship care is to be regulated and proceduralised, this must be approached with caution so that young people’s feelings of normality are not jeopardised.

- Similarly, although assessment of kinship carers is important, if this becomes too stringent, for example in relation to health checks, some relatives could be prevented from undertaking the caring role, to the detriment of young people.

- The young people also stressed that their situations and circumstances were all very individual and that they did not think they could be viewed as a homogenous group.

- There is a clear need for on-going support for young people and their carers where unresolved emotional issues such as loss or on-going and damaging inter-generational conflict are a significant feature.

- Support may be required for carers in dealing with young people’s feelings of gratitude or indebtedness to them for ‘taking them in’.

- Some young people were having informal and sometimes uncomfortable ‘contact’ with parents, for example in the street - in some circumstances this could not be avoided; however, there might be a role for practitioners in offering support to young people in working through contact issues and feelings and, where contact was taking place in a more controlled way, in examining with them the purpose of contact and whether it was beneficial for the young person.

- The majority of young people in this study were clear that they did not wish to return to the care of their parents; the view that a disadvantage of kinship care is that there is a lower rate of rehabilitation home for young people should perhaps be regarded differently.

- The importance of kinship care in enabling young people to build on and continue to develop healthy attachments, particularly given the risks to attachment formation posed by multiple foster placement breakdown.

- The continuity that kinship care offers young people; this includes young people living with those who know their family history and can help them make sense of their past.

- The significance of the young people in this study having career aspirations & the confidence to try to fulfil them can not be underestimated; this is a clear way in which the experience of kinship care differs from that of many young people who are accommodated by the local authority. Young people and their carers must be supported and commended for this.

Reflections on conducting the interviews

All the young people agreed to be interviewed but some (3) gave relatively terse responses and avoided elaboration; these young people appeared a little bemused by the interest in their living arrangements and whilst willing to share their stories, seemed unsure as to why this would be of interest to the interviewer. The impression of the interviewer was that they thought the questions were obvious and why should somebody want to ask them. Non-verbal communication, facial expression and body language added to this impression.
Other (4) young people wanted to share much more and did not need any prompting at all. In some instances this tended to mirror the positive view they had of the relatives with whom they lived. If they had been with them a long time they had more to say about the dynamics of relationships within their family. There was a certain sense of resignation about past events during the interviews. Many had been through traumatic events but there was not a sense of anger in the way the young people described these experiences even when they had a negative view of their parent’s inability to care for them. One young person had a very adult approach to summing up the behaviour of her mother. This expressed a cognitive maturity that didn’t quite gel with her 11 years.

Some (4) young people talked enthusiastically about the positive aspects of their current situation and wanted to talk about what things were like now and about the future. One young person very much wanted to share her story. When she was given her token for taking part she handed it back as she thought it wasn’t right to receive a reward for doing it.

In the main, as is evident in the findings, young people view their kinship care arrangements as typical of that of other children and young people in modern society. From this it could be argued that while kinship care and its processes may be of significant interest for policy makers, practitioners and carers themselves, it is accepted as normal family life for these young people.

**A note on the collaborative research model**

The partnership model of conducting the research study, involving practitioners and academic researchers working closely together on all aspects of the study, was felt by all involved to have contributed to the quality of the study. The key factors in this were identified as follows:

- regular and clear communication;
- good planning;
- practitioners’ contacts with local agencies which aided the process of accessing young people;
- practitioners’ experience of work with children which assisted in the interview process;
- shared values and understanding of the young people’s circumstances;
- We would advocate the development of further research which could be undertaken in this way; as well as enhancing the research process it also offers opportunities for practitioners to undertake research with those who do so as the main focus of their work and increases avenues for the dissemination of research findings. For example, in this particular area, there might be scope for interviews to be undertaken in a similarly collaborative way on a pan Scotland basis.
Potential future research:

- In order to offer a wider perspective on kinship care, it would be beneficial to examine a range of young people’s care trajectories and routes both into and out of kinship care; for example, it might be instructive to include young people who have lived with kinship carers at an early stage of their lives and whose placements have broken down and those who have moved to kinship carers having experienced other forms of care.
- It would be informative to conduct a study which drew direct comparisons with ‘stranger’ foster care, for example by exploring the two forms of care in relation to the GIRFEC triangle core components.
- A longitudinal study which examined outcomes for young people, for example to what extent they were able to realise their career ambitions or which looked at their living situation as young adults, would be a useful method of evaluating the longer term benefits of kinship care.
References


APPENDIX A

Interview schedule for young people in Kinship Care study

Current and past living situation

1. Who do you live with and what is your relationship to them?

2. Who else stays there? Are there children; are you siblings, cousins? What ages are you?

3. How long have you stayed there?

4. Where did you stay before you moved?

5. Had you ever stayed in foster care (non-related); if so, how was foster care different; or do you know anyone in foster care and what it’s like?

6. What was it like to make the move? (getting used to new carers/differing parenting styles; age differences; different attitudes)

7. How well did you know your carers before you moved?

8. Do you know why you moved? Can you remember much about what it was like where you stayed before?

9. Did anyone ask you where you wanted to stay?

10. Have you had to share a room? What has this been like? Is it a busy house or quieter?

Contact with other close family members

11. Do you see your parents, or any brothers and sisters who don’t stay with you?

12. Do you see them on your own or are there others around? Which would you prefer?

13. How often do you see them? do you have a say in how often, how long for and where it takes place?

14. Has the amount you see them changed over the years?

15. What sort of things do you do with your parents, brothers and sisters?

16. Do you worry about your parents/ brothers and sisters? If so, have you got anyone to talk to about it?
17. Who tells you what to do when your parents/carers are together? any divided
loyalties i.e. is it hard when everyone’s together?

18. Do you know what your mum and/or dad thinks about you staying with relatives?

19. Do you see your grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins from the other side of the
family? If not, do you know why?

20. What are the good and bad things about seeing your parents/ brothers and sisters?

**Belonging**

21. Do you feel different from your pals because you stay with relatives?

22. Do you know other young people in your situation, with ‘different’ families?

23. What do you tell people? Do you feel you have to have a cover story?

24. Do you feel you belong to the new family? Or to two different families?

25. Does your carer feel like a parent or still a gran/aunt/ uncle? Do you miss not
having a gran/aunt/uncle any more/ in what ways?

26. Do you feel you are missing out on anything? Or having a more difficult time than
your pals?

27. Do you feel happy with how things are/ about themselves? Are there things that
could be different/better?

28. Does your carer understand you and what you like, what is important to you?

29. Does your carer seem stressed? Is there a generation gap?

30. Would you want to return to your mum/dad?

**Wider networks**

31. Did you have to make changes in schools and pals when you moved?

32. Do you do many activities? If not, would you like to do more? Is money a
problem?

33. Who are the important people in your lives?

34. Who helps you and checks out that you are okay (both informally, friends etc and
formally)? Do you have a social worker or other support worker? If so, how often do
you see them?

35. Do you need any extra help? Would you want to meet with other young people in
your situation?
**Experience of being in kinship care**

36. Do you feel good or bad about having been looked after by kinship carers?

37. Do you feel safer staying with kinship carers than you did where you stayed before?

38. Do you feel secure? Has your future been discussed with you?

39. If your carers are much older, do you worry about what would happen if the carers can’t look after you anymore?

40. What do you want for the future?

41. Has being in kinship care given you a good start in life for the future?

42. What advice would you give, or what would you want to say, to other young people who are going into kinship care?

Is there anything you’d like to add?

THANKS
APPENDIX B

Glossary of Scottish pronunciation

abody everybody
aboot about
aefter after
anymair anymore
a’ all
awfa awfully
cains knows
canna can’t
da, dunna doesn’t/don’t
dinae, did’nae didn’t
dee do
doon down
grunny granny
haim home
hoose house
jist just
mair more
nae no
oot out
roond round
tae to
we’re our
wid would
wrang wrong

CHILDREN 1ST is the working name of the Royal Scottish Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

Registered office: 83 Whitehouse Loan, Edinburgh, EH9 1AT

Registered Scottish Charity Number SC016092