

Kinship care

Dr Julie Selwyn, September 2009

There is a long history in the UK, as in most countries, of children being cared for by relatives and other kin when their parents, for whatever reason, are unable to care for the children themselves. Most of these care-taking arrangements are made without the involvement of the child welfare system.

It is not known how many kinship carers there are in England. The only numbers known with any certainty are the 12% of children being 'looked after' by family and friends foster carers in England. This is a similar proportion to the 11% of children in care in England placed in residential care and considerably more than the 5% placed for adoption (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008). There are also unknown numbers of children living with kin carers, who are known to social workers, but where the carers are not approved as foster carers but may be supported in other ways, such as under the children in need provisions or under residence or special guardianship orders. However, it is probable that the largest group of kin carers are not known to children's services and are those where children are there as a result of a private arrangement. In England and Wales, it has been estimated that about 200-300,000 children and young people are living in temporary or permanent family and friends arrangements (Tapsfield and Richards 2003).

Simply, kinship care can be defined and described by the way the placement came about:

- Formal – placement arranged by a child welfare agency
- Informal – arranged within the family without involvement of a child welfare agency

However, the law recognises four different types of kinship care arrangements:

- Fostered with a family or friend (Part III Children Act 1989 and Regulation 23 The Fostering Regulations 1991).
- Subject to a residence order (S.8 Children Act 1989).
- Subject to a special guardianship order (S.115 and Schedule 3 Adoption and Children Act 2002, introduced in December 2005).
- Living with family or friends and being supported as a child in need (S17 CA 1989).

The increasing use of kin foster care, which in some local authorities may represent as much as 40% or more of all foster placements, has not been matched by an increase in knowledge for practitioners and policy makers about how well these placements work, what helps them to succeed or when they should not be used. In particular, we have only limited information about children's views of kinship care and especially of informal kin care, nor do we know how children view the benefits and disadvantages of kinship care as against those of stranger foster care.

Formal kinship care – placements arranged by a statutory agency

The increase in the use of *formal* kin care has been driven by many factors including: a shortage of stranger foster carers; a move away from concepts of family dysfunction to strengths-based theories; political philosophies which seek to diminish the role of and costs to the state; and theoretical ideas that kinship care promotes birth family contact, is stable, and maintains a child's identity, family culture, ethnicity and sense of belonging (Hunt 2003). Some of these factors are better evidenced than others.

Children usually (but not always) go to people they know and with whom there is a shared culture. Good management of transitions (changing home and school) is important for children but is an under-researched area. In what circumstances do kinship placements, for example, reduce the trauma of separation from birth parents and how is this experienced by children? Children placed with kin will often remain in the same neighbourhood and school. However, such continuity and proximity can have disadvantages as well as advantages. How is contact with birth parents managed, given that there is quite often conflict between parents and kin carers and (when there are contact problems) how are such difficulties offset by other positives?

This is all the more important because recent legislative changes (Children and Young Persons Bill 2007) are likely to increase the numbers of children being placed formally with kin. These changes in turn, may lead to less suitable kin placements being made (Sinclair *et al* 2005) as occurred during a similar policy push in the US. A greater understanding of children's experiences of the 'costs' and outcomes of each kind of care would help to ensure that the placements that are made are in children's best interests and are not simply driven by policy imperatives or financial considerations.

There is little evidence to support concern about the quality of formal kinship care provided in more than a minority of cases. However, since children can have such very adverse experiences in kinship and stranger care (e.g. Laming 2003, Farmer

and Moyers 2008) we need to know how children can be helped to signal their distress effectively in such situations.

Studies comparing formal kinship care and stranger foster care

There are only two UK studies (Farmer and Moyers 2008, Hunt *et al.* 2008) that have compared kinship and stranger foster care. They have found that while there are many benefits to kinship care, the benefits need to be considered alongside findings that most kinship carers are more disadvantaged: being poorer, older, less educated and with more health problems than stranger foster carers. Kin carers are also often under additional stress because relationships with the birth family and other relatives can be complex and stressful because of their shared past history. However, despite these difficulties kinship carers expressed greater commitment to the child.

What is clear, however, is that children placed with kin carers have higher levels of difficulty than children in the general population and have similar levels of emotional and behavioural difficulty as that found in the looked after population.

There is a weight of evidence that formal kin carers receive less support from Children's Services than stranger foster carers than (see eg. Farmer and Moyers 2008, Hunt *et al* 2008; Hunt 2003,) and children and kin carers say they value their contact with social workers and other professionals (Farmer and Moyers 2008). We do not know how far children suffer when carers who were approved foster carers take out residence or special guardianship orders. This often reduces financial and other types of support.

Studies of informal kinship care in the UK

There are no studies in the UK comparing formal and informal kinship arrangements. There have been very few studies (Richards 2001; Selwyn and Saunders 2006) of informal kinship care in the UK partly because of the difficulties in identifying the population. Studies indicate that these kin carers experience the same difficulties as those formally caring for a child. Children reported that they worried about what would happen to them if their grandparent died but kept these fears to themselves. Richard's (2001) study of grandparents suggests very high levels of unmet need amongst informal kin carers but we do not know exactly how far children and informal carers are successful in accessing mainstream services when needed, such as CAMHS and educational support. Moreover, these issues like others, may vary by the ethnicity, gender and class of the carers.

Outcomes in Formal Kinship Care

Stability of placements

There have been mixed findings in relation to the relative stability of kinship care

placements in the UK in comparison with stranger foster care. Farmer and Moyers (2008) found similar disruption rates in formal kin and non-related foster care, but that kin placements lasted longer principally because of the greater number of planned moves to other placements from stranger foster care. In addition, in kinship care, significantly fewer placements disrupted when carers were highly committed to the children, but this was not true in stranger foster care. However, this also meant that in many continuing placements, kin carers were under considerable strain, as they struggled to look after children with high levels of behavioural and emotional difficulties. Hunt and colleagues (2008) too reported greater stability in kinship than long-term foster care, with the exception of children aged 5-12 at placement where there were more disruptions in kin (43%) than stranger foster care (35%). Overall studies found that children placed at older ages had placements that were more likely to disrupt if placed with kin than with stranger foster carers.

Other outcomes

Children with kin are generally reported to feel secure, happy and integrated into the family. (Broad *et al* 2001; 2006) However, there has been limited emphasis on the potential impact on children's well-being of being brought up by carers who are more likely than non-related carers to be in poor physical and psychological health. In addition, the 'generation gap' has received little attention and the evidence (Richards 2001; Pitcher 1999) is contradictory.

Since studies in the UK have consistently shown that kin carers often suffer economic hardship, an unanswered question is whether the risks to children's development of living in poverty are moderated by the benefits of living with a relative. Recent research in England (Farmer and Moyers 2008, Hunt *et al* 2008) suggests that on a range of dimensions related to children's well-being, such as health, school attendance and improvements in behavioural and emotional difficulties children do as well in kin as in stranger foster care.

Children's views

There is a paucity of literature examining children's views of being cared for away from home. Most studies are retrospective and reliant on adults' memories (e.g, Triseliotis 1984) with other information coming from studies that had sampled more broadly (Buchanan 2008).

Some studies have interviewed children while in care (Sinclair 2007) but only a handful have examined children's views of kinship care (Farmer and Moyers 2008, Broad *et al* 2001). Children reported that they felt safe in their placements and thought their care had improved since leaving their birth parents. Friendships, school

and consultation about contact plans with their birth parents were all issues that concerned the children and young people.

Children cited advantages of being in kinship care such as avoiding local authority care, maintaining links with family, siblings, and friends; sustaining racial and cultural heritage and getting support with their education. However, there were also disadvantages such as limitations to freedom, financial hardship and inability to access care leavers' services. Messing (2006), in the US, reported similar findings but also found that children living with kin reported less stigma and trauma. Although other research has found that kinship carers are reluctant to take legal orders (Farmer and Moyers 2008), for the children in Messing's study, legal ties were viewed as a source of comfort and belonging over and above those of the blood tie. These findings raise interesting questions about the symbolic significance for children of legal orders.

In spite of the large numbers of children living with relatives and in foster care the voices of these children and young people are under-represented in the literature. Least is known about the largest numerical group of children living with informal kin carers. Assumptions are often made about kinship care, frequently based on beliefs about the role and importance of the extended family. Yet many of these are untested, and we do not know enough about children's own experiences of the different kinds of care, how they perceive their benefits, react to their limitations and what helps or could help them to make the best of their placements.

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