

**Support in kith and kin care
... caring for young people who
are relatives, neighbours,
friends or refugees**

Literature

- There is a large body of literature in the area of kinship care
- There is very little literature in the area of kith care

Definitions

- Kinship care – care by relatives
- Kith care – care by friends, neighbours, concerned others

Both kinds of care are relatively invisible in terms of government statistics, policy and practice

Support in kith and kin care

- 64 adult participants, 11 young people
- Grandparents, aunts/uncles, older siblings and young people in kinship care
- Neighbours, friends, concerned strangers and young people in kith care – both those born in Australia and refugees

Carers interviewed	Children involved	Maternal grandparent carers²	Paternal grandparent carers²	Maternal/paternal grandparent carer³	Maternal aunt/uncle carers	Paternal aunt/uncle carers	Maternal great aunt/uncle carers	Other relative carers	Kith carers (neighbours, friends etc)
50 female 14 male Average age 52 years Range = 37>67 years	Average age at placement 14 months Range = infants > teenagers							1 sister, 1 stepmother (separated from child's father)	2 godparents, 2 refugee carers 7 neighbours/friends/acquaintances
64¹	93	36	7	2	3	1	3	2	13

1.Three of the carers (one maternal grandparent, one paternal grandparent and one maternal/paternal grandparent) are/have also been kith carers.

1.In two of these situations, the child is a half-sibling of the grandchild/ren in care (i.e. unrelated to the grandparent).

2.Includes step-parents who are living with/married to the grandparents.

3. These carers are caring for children of both a son and a daughter.

Support in Kith and Kin Care Young people interviews

Young people interviewed	Maternal grandparent carers	Paternal grandparent carers	Maternal/paternal grandparent carer	Maternal aunt/uncle	Paternal aunt/uncle	Maternal great aunt/uncle	Other relatives	Kith carers (neighbours, friends etc)
11 7 female 4 male	5				1		2 (sister, stepsister)	3
11	5				1		2	3

Issues for kinship carers (mostly grandparents)

- **Becoming full time carers (once again) – out of synch with their peers, tired, sometimes ill, very anxious about the future**
- **Concerns about further pregnancies – how many more to come?**
- **Grandparents' relationships with their adult children (the birth parents) – complicated by anger and guilt, together with drugs, violence, mental health, chaotic lifestyles**
- **Contact between children, birth parents and grandparents – usually unpredictable, sometimes frightening, nowhere to hide**
- **Finances – always an issue, even when there is plenty of money**
- **Relationships with government agencies – grandparents report feeling judged by what their children have done**
- **Other family members miss out – especially siblings of the birth parents and other grandchildren**
- **Respite – rarely available through foster care agencies and is potentially complex within the extended family**
- **Peer support – very welcome, needs to be provided generously (with child care, food etc)**

Kinship care

- For grandparents, there is often guilt – ‘where did I go wrong?’
This can be exacerbated by community attitudes
- For aunts, uncles, older siblings – usually no guilt – ‘it’s family ... that’s what you do’.
However, there is little community understanding and support. Older siblings find it hard to be a sibling and a parent!

Support in Kinship Care

Grandparents becoming full time carers (once again) describe the experience as:-

- **Tiring**
- **Isolating - 'there's a kind of isolation you feel if you're in a situation that none of your friends are in ... I can't talk to even my close friends about my daughter's addiction, because no one understands it ... they either feel ill, or they're judgemental or they give you a theory ...similarly with the grandparenting situation'**
- **Joyful - 'this is what has happened in our family ... if you can accept that, you do find the energy and space in your life ...the experience has been enormously enriching'**
- **Financially stressful (for many)**
- **A chance to do it better the second time round**

Support in Kinship Care

The children may have:

- **Been drug affected at birth**
- **Foetal alcohol syndrome**
- **Been malnourished**
- **Experienced disruption and neglect**
- **Learning and other disabilities**
- **Challenging behaviours**

- **They will need expensive services such as:**
 - **Counselling**
 - **Tutoring**
 - **Speech therapy**

Support in Kinship Care

Grandparents' relationships with their own children

- They have coped for many years when their child was absent, violent, erratic and in danger of dying
'If you have a drug using child, you have their death in your mind all the time'
- They may have reported their children to Child Protection, although this is a hard decision to make
'(If you do this) you destroy the relationship with your own child, which then probably exacerbates their drug behaviour'
- They have usually supported their children through numerous court appearances for theft and violent crimes
- They have often been threatened with violence, or even assaulted, by their children or their children's partners

Support in Kinship Care

Grandparents' relationships with their own children (cont)

- **Custody battles are sometimes an issue and many grandparents strongly believe that Courts favour parents**
- **Their children want their support, yet resent needing it - and often blame their parents**
- **'I don't regret having him, but I regret the situation and there's days I actually hate my daughter ... this is not what I had envisaged for myself ... my life's come to a standstill'**
- **The child may become a pawn between parents and grandparents**

Support in Kinship Care – Finances

- For those carers with little money, life is a huge struggle, especially for the many grandparents who do not receive state caregiver payments (and who are not even therefore counted as kinship carers - i.e. they are truly invisible)

‘The government banks on that - they hope that the grandparents will automatically take them (the children) without going to Court, so that they can get out of paying’

- It is embarrassing to ask for ‘welfare’
- When the child is 16 years old, Youth Allowance is payable. In many kinship care situations, the grandparents then need to negotiate with the child for adequate contributions to household expenses.
- For those carers with adequate money, there are other complexities:-

‘Things would have fallen apart very early on (if the support hadn’t been provided) - however, in a sense it also let her off the hook and let him off the hook ... it’s difficult to know whether we’ve actually arrested the development of (daughter) taking on full responsibility or not’

Support in Kinship Care

Relationships with government agencies - grandparents talk about:-

- **Not being informed that their grandchild is in foster care with strangers**
- **Spending weeks/months trying to see their grandchildren and/or gain custody of them**
- **Being treated as an unsuitable carer (by very young workers)**
They 'think I'm awful, because my daughter's awful - they treated me like I'm a deadset shit, because my daughter's a deadset shit'
- **Contact with workers who are 'intrusive and patronising'**

Support in Kinship Care – other issues

- **When grandparents are caregivers for their grandchildren, other family members may miss out**
'He (caregiver's son) resents the attention that (granddaughter) gets'
- **Grandparents frequently talk of the need for respite**
- **Peer support is another unmet need for many**
- **When children return to parents after some years, grandparents and children need considerable support to cope with the separation**

Young people in kinship care

Grandparents as parents

- 'I see her as a mother, a mother figure - she's still my grandmother, but she does the role of the mother ... it's almost a bit of both'.

Do they feel different to other young people?

- 'I never really felt like I regretted not having parents ... I was really just thankful for having my nan because I love her so much ... I got everything I ever needed from her, so there wasn't any gap ... she did everything that a normal parent would do'
- 'It was a bit awkward when people would ask questions about your parents - what does your dad do? ... these days if I say I don't live with my parents, I live with my grandmother, it's just normal, nothing really out of the ordinary'.

What have they gained?

- Love, consistency, education, opportunities

What has made a difference?

- Extended family and community support

Kith care

- Kith care can be seen as an extension of neighbourliness
- Kith care tends to be shorter term than kinship care
- Kith carers choose to care for children that they know – this is different to the ‘choice’ which most kinship carers make
- Kith carers may be even more invisible than kinship carers as they can be seen as simply ‘helping out’ for a period of time
- Relationships between kith carers and birth families can be very stressful
- Kith carers need the same support as kinship and foster carers

Kith care – why do it?

- **‘I took her in because I could see she was in danger ... and I didn’t want anything awful to happen to her’**
- **‘I told DHS that I wasn’t going to hand her over ... I wasn’t going to let her go into a hostel ... I said I want her here’.**
- **‘I always seem to help a lot of girls out, like I’ve had a lot of girls that have been using drugs and prostitution and I’ve tried to get them off the street ... trying to clean them up ... it’s my nature I guess ... taking every cat off the street, every stray cat ... my life wasn’t hunky dory, I had a really bad childhood’**

Relationships in kith care

- **‘I still adore her ... she pops in and out of my life ... she is part of my family ... I might see her about 2 or 3 or 4 times a year, but she is still part of my family’ (carer)**
- **She ‘is like my little sister, always part of the family’ (carer)**
- **‘She’s auntie, mother, sister, best friend, cousin - all in one’ (young person)**

Caring for refugee minors

- Highly altruistic motivation – ‘our life is rich and full ... I want to do something positive’ and ‘there’s a need here – let’s just do something about it’
- Concern about whether the young person is better off in family of same ethnicity
- Huge educational deficits
- Cultural complexity – bride price – 200 cows etc!
How much do you challenge cultural practices?
- Need to send money back to refugee camps

Support

- Recognition – formal and informal
- Financial support – particularly in kinship care
- Peer support
- Counselling which is knowledgeable about the needs of children who have experienced disruption in their lives
- Respite

Policy/Research Issues

- **Where does kinship care belong? Some foster care support groups do not welcome kinship carers due to perceptions of 'good mothers' and 'bad mothers' (in this regard kith carers are seen in the same positive light as foster carers – rescuers)**
- **Public-private dilemma - some carers see caring as an integral part of their private family business and therefore want absolutely nothing to do with government and non-government agencies**
- **Many carers appreciate caregiver payments, but do not want organisational interference in their lives**
- **The children often go back and forth between birth parents and carers. At what point does grandmotherliness and neighbourliness become kin or kith care?**
- **Kith and kin care could be seen to represent the saying 'it takes a village to raise a child'. Nevertheless, children may struggle with identity and attachment issues**
- **The concept of Mirror Families (creating and supporting an extended family for a child's lifetime as well as future generations) is well suited to kith and kin care**