

These briefings are intended to support all practitioners and managers taking forward the *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* agenda.

Every Child Matters
Change For Children

Children cared for by members of their extended families or social networks in general appear to do at least as well as those in traditional foster care. This form of care has been marginalised and poorly supported. Harnessing the resources within the child's network more effectively could contribute to the achievement of the government's objectives for children.

FAMILY AND FRIENDS CARE SINCE THE CHILDREN ACT 1989

The Children Act 1989 clearly prioritises family and friends placements, directing that, when a child is looked-after away from home, the local authority: 'Shall make arrangements to enable him to live with a relative, friend, or other person connected with him, unless that would not be reasonably practical or consistent with his welfare'. The accompanying guidance underlines the message: 'If young people cannot remain at home, placement with relatives or friends should be explored before other forms of placement are considered'. The Act thus attempted to reverse a long decline in the use of such placements which appeared to have unjustly fallen out of favour. Progress has been slow and patchy but there are now indications of growing interest which should be given impetus by the promotion of kinship care in the recent government White Paper – *Care Matters: Time for Change*.

TERMINOLOGY

'Family and Friends Care' is the official term used to denote care of a 'looked after' child within the extended family or social network. In this paper, which looks more broadly at the subject, the term should be understood to apply to any arrangement in which a child is cared for full-time in such an arrangement irrespective of legal status or the involvement of Children's Services in facilitating or supporting the placement. 'Family and friends foster care' will be used when referring only to the more restricted group.

PROFILE OF CHILDREN AND CARERS

The evidence is mixed as to whether children placed with family and friends carers are substantially different from those entering non-related foster care. Recent UK research, however, suggests the two groups are broadly the same, with children being exposed to multiple adversities and most manifesting problems, especially emotional and behavioural difficulties, prior to placement, and that they present higher levels of difficulty than children in the general population

UK research suggests fewer differences between family and friends and non-related foster carers than reported in the American literature, in which carers are typically lone females (mainly maternal grandparents or aunts) from ethnic minority groups; older and less well-educated than non-related carers, with high levels of health difficulties and incomes below poverty levels. Grandparents and aunts/uncles, usually on the maternal side, are the principal providers of family and friends foster care in the UK too and carers

are similarly reported to be less well-educated, more disadvantaged, less likely to have a partner in employment, more likely to experience financial hardship and overcrowding and have higher levels of health problems. However they are no older on average than non-related carers and are just as likely or only marginally less likely to live with a partner. It also appears that family and friends foster placements in the UK are not disproportionately used for children from ethnic minority groups: indeed one study found that such children were more likely to be placed with non-related carers. It is important to bear in mind, however, that these findings relate primarily to carers who are approved foster carers and that the profile of carers in arrangements not sanctioned by Children's Services, which US data suggests may be more numerous, may be rather different.

THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS CARE FOR CHILDREN

Attachment and placement stability

Security of attachment and continuity of care are recognised to be important factors in children's long-term well-being. The capacity of family and friends placements to deliver these is a strong theme in the research. Children are generally reported to feel secure, happy and integrated into the family, with most studies reporting that this is more common than for children placed with stranger carers. One UK study found that children were more likely to feel close to the carers' children and there was less likely to be tension in relationships with either carers or children.

Much of the research also highlights the high levels of commitment demonstrated by carers, their strong bonds with the children, the pleasure they find in the children themselves and the satisfaction they derive from caring. Indeed according to one study they were twice as likely to be highly committed to the child as stranger foster-carers.

The emerging evidence on placement stability suggests a more complex picture than previously thought when family and friends placements fared better than stranger care no matter how stability was measured. The weight of the evidence still supports that conclusion. Placements last longer. Children have fewer moves both overall and before entering placement.

It is the evidence on disruption which is now less clear-cut. Reported rates in UK research range from less than 10% to around a third, the rate most commonly found in the international literature. Few studies suggest rates are higher than for non-related foster-care; and the perception was that they were lower. Recent UK studies, however, suggest that rates may be very similar. Farmer and Moyers found that while a higher proportion of stranger foster placements ended, the majority did so for positive reasons (eg. return home or a planned move). Breakdown rates were almost identical (18 & 17%). This is much lower than Hunt et al.'s follow-up of children placed through care proceedings which reports a 28% disruption rate. Both studies, however, highlight the importance of behavioural difficulties in placement breakdown.

Continuity of experience and the maintenance of relationships

Family and friends care is also likely to contribute to children's sense of security and personal identity through minimising the degree of disruption they experience in other ways. Children usually go to people they know, with whom there is a shared culture. They are more likely to remain in the

same neighbourhood and school. Many studies report children are more likely to be placed with siblings and to have contact with siblings living elsewhere some of whom may be with other relatives. Links with other family members may be facilitated - although usually only on the carer's side of the family. Although carer attitudes towards parents are not necessarily favourable and relationship difficulties are more common than in stranger placements, studies typically report that contact is more likely, though not necessarily with both parents. Most research also highlights the high level of commitment carers have to contact, taking responsibility for organising it and persisting despite difficulties, which are more likely than in stranger placements. Nonetheless contact usually diminishes over time.

Finally, there is some evidence that if the initial placement cannot continue children are likely to move to another relative, thus minimising discontinuity and that the original carer will remain in touch, thus preserving attachments.

Quality of care and child safety

Sadly, as evidenced in the death of Victoria Climbié, relatives can abuse children. There is little research specifically focusing on safety issues and international research is contradictory as to whether rates are higher or lower than in non-related foster care. Recent UK research suggests an incidence of between 2% and 10%, with one study reporting a 4% rate of substantiated abuse in both forms of placement although kinship placements were more vulnerable to unsubstantiated allegations.

Inquiry reports also show that carers can expose children to risk through breach of contact restrictions and concerns about this are a key theme in the literature. In one American study 36% of carers disregarded contact restrictions because they did not believe parents presented a risk while another found that half a sample of drug-exposed infants were actually being cared for by their mothers. In the UK Farmer and Moyers report concerns in 39% of cases although Hunt et al. found a much lower incidence of breaches where children were placed through care proceedings than previously reported (6% compared with 18%). It is clearly crucial that carers are helped to fully understand any concerns about contact, particularly since where contact has to be supervised the carer will typically be responsible.

There is little evidence to support concern about the quality of care provided in more than a minority of cases. Standards may be variable and lower than the average stranger foster home and carers may be more inclined to use physical punishment. However a US government investigation reported that in more than 90% of either type almost all parenting tasks were carried out adequately. UK research has generally been quite positive, although Farmer and Moyers found that family and friends carers were more likely to have poor parenting skills and substantially more were struggling to cope. Nonetheless the vast majority of placements were judged to be either positive for the child (73%) or adequate (14%), only 10% being considered to be detrimental. Hunt et al. found that while few placements were entirely free of concerns about quality only 20% raised major issues.

Child well-being

The evidence about child functioning, although quite limited and mixed, is broadly positive. On a range of measures – health, education, emotional and behavioural development - children appear to do about as well as those in stranger foster care with some studies suggesting they may do better and only a few worse. Farmer and Moyers' findings are remarkably similar for the two groups with the same proportion, for example, (52%) displaying emotional and behavioural problems. Hunt et al. report that most children in family and friends placements were doing reasonably well with 47% displaying no problems in any area of functioning and only 19% having difficulties in more than two.

There is little evidence as yet as to how children fare as adults although the only known (U.S) study challenges an excessively optimistic view of the benefits of kinship care. Although the children had displayed higher levels of functioning than those placed with stranger foster carers before and during placement outcomes were broadly similar and there was a higher incidence of criminal convictions, heroin use and prostitution. This may well relate to levels of deprivation and social problems in the areas where the families lived rather than indicating any inherent deficiencies in care.

what helps

MAXIMISING THE APPROPRIATE USE OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS CARE

The research evidence, although not conclusive, is broadly supportive of family and friends care as a viable option and suggests scope for greater use. Farmer and Moyers found that only 4% of placements were instigated by social workers and that in 57% of stranger placements it had not even been considered. Cases still reach court before the extended family has been explored. As the White Paper recognises, policies and structures are needed which prioritise this form of caring and embed it into decision-making processes. Family group conferences, endorsed in the White Paper, are an effective means of mobilising networks and more likely to divert children from stranger placements than traditional forms of decision-making. Network mapping at an early stage in contact with a family would help to ensure potential carers are identified. Practitioners may need to examine their own attitudes in the light of the research evidence and improve their skills in engaging with family networks.

ASSESSMENT

Family and friends care is not appropriate for every child and professional skill is needed in making what may be finely balanced decisions. This is a complex area of practice which can be uncomfortable for worker and family and more time-consuming and challenging than the assessment of traditional foster carers. There are some clues as to risk and protective factors although these are best regarded as indicative of potentially vulnerable placements needing targeted support rather than barriers to placement. Hunt et al. emphasise the need to focus on parenting capacity rather than specific concerns, which often fail to materialise.

Both practitioners and carers want an assessment format specifically designed for this form of care. Carers usually accept the need for assessment but can find the process overly intrusive and stressful. Doolan et al. found that carers resented the concentration on risk and wanted a sensitive, inclusive, respectful process that valued their skills and

knowledge. They argue that the current 'expert questioning' model should change to one based on information exchange, in which the social worker acts as a resource for families. Others emphasise ecological and systems-based approaches; looking for potential strengths rather than difficulties; and, while not shying away from assessing risk, working with the family in an empowering and collaborative way in addressing the question 'what needs to happen and what services need to be provided to enable this family to care for this child'. There is a growing literature to which practitioners can turn for guidance and FRG are piloting a set of assessment tools.

Who should carry out the assessment? Pitcher argues it should not be the child's social worker and O'Brien recommends joint assessment by the social worker and a family placement officer, which appears to happen in some areas. Another thorny issue is how much flexibility there should be in terms of standards for family and friends foster carers. Government guidance is of limited help, merely saying that all standards are relevant but there should be recognition of the particular relationship and position of family and friends carers and that mechanisms for assessing and approving should be designed in a way that encourages their consideration. A survey of English local authorities in 2003 found that less than half had specific guidelines. Practitioners may find it difficult to get assessments through fostering and adoption panels and specialised family and friends panels may be more helpful in maximising placement use, while not compromising essential safeguards.

SUPPORTING FAMILY AND FRIENDS PLACEMENTS

'It is a mountain that we are climbing; it is really, really high. We keep plugging on because of the love but you expect a bit of backing along the line'. (Grandparent carer).

Although there is only a little evidence of a link between support and outcomes in family and friends care, research on other forms of care suggests this would be a reasonable assumption. Yet there is a clear gap, across the whole spectrum of arrangements, between needs and service provision, with even those approved as foster carers generally receiving less help than stranger carers. Carers complain that social workers tend to under-estimate their needs; help may not be given sufficiently early or tail off too soon. They are uncertain as to what help is available, how to access it, reluctant to press their case, find the response variable and are frustrated by changes of worker.

What kind of help do carers want? *Help with costs*: Farmer and Moyers found evidence of financial difficulty in 75% of cases and research consistently highlights this issue: *Practical help*: equipment; child care – respite care, child-minding; baby-sitting; holiday clubs; transport; accommodation. *Information and advice*: to navigate legal, benefits, education and Children's Services systems. *Opportunities to meet with other carers*: perhaps through support groups or mentoring. *Access to services*, both broadly based ones such as Sure Start and more specialised ones such as therapy and counselling. *Help to help the child*: assisting with unfamiliar school work; dealing with their feelings about their situation; managing behaviour – 23% of carers in Farmer and Moyers' study were struggling with this. *Help for parents*: to get their life together again. *Help with parents*: managing strained relationships and coping with contact, a major area of difficulty. Finally, at least for some, *access to social work support*: ranging from their own social

worker and more visits from the child's worker to occasional calls and access to a named social worker in a crisis. Carers' attitudes to social work help appear to be mixed. Some studies report it is valued, sometimes more than by regular foster carers; others suggest a more ambivalent or negative picture.

The level and nature of need, of course, will depend on individual circumstances: family and friends carers are a heterogeneous group and needs will change over time. The evidence suggests, however, that working with carers and children to identify needs and create an appropriate service package should be central to the assessment and thereafter review and planning processes. The issue of carer education also needs to be addressed from the beginning. Although the notion of 'training' may be alien and that offered to stranger carers inappropriate, it should be possible to engage with many carers' desire to develop their skills and knowledge. One training package, based on supported individual-study and aimed at foster carers, has been produced by NFCA (now Fostering Network) and another, more broadly targeted, based on facilitated support groups, has been developed by the Family Rights Group.

WORKING WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS PLACEMENTS

Family and friends care is a challenging and relatively unfamiliar area of work, which is different from and potentially more difficult to work with, than traditional foster-care. Practitioners may feel less in control, uncertain of their role, and lack confidence in their skills, knowledge and ability to supervise. Nearly all the social workers interviewed in one UK study expressed concern about incorporating family and friends care into their practice. Practitioners are likely to need training and support to understand the unique features of this form of care and develop the special skills and knowledge it demands. Few local authorities appear to provide specific training and nationally organised events have been infrequent, although increasing. However there is a growing literature on ways of working and the NFCA (now Fostering Network) has produced learning materials intended to be used for joint training of family placement and social workers and their managers. BAAF and Family Rights Group have produced good practice guides.

LOCAL AUTHORITY POLICIES AND STRUCTURES

A consistent theme in research is that family and friends care is a distinctive form of care which requires its own policy and practice guidance, systems, structures and services tailored to the particular needs of these families and a transparent and fair system of remuneration. Family Rights Group has recently set out a framework for developing local policy and services. Local authorities are at very different stages in the development of this area of work. A national survey in 2003 found that only 55% of those responding had a written policy, almost all focusing on family and friends foster care. Few collected data on children in other care arrangements or provided written information to carers or children.

Nonetheless this is a developing area and there is much that authorities could learn from each other. There are examples of policy documents; information leaflets, carer starter packs, assessment tools and videos. Some authorities have created specialist posts, often with a developmental remit. These can act as catalysts and through linking with colleagues elsewhere,

spread information and good practice. Some are facilitating support groups or mentoring systems for carers; tailoring training and carrying out carer surveys. A few have created family and friends panels to deal with approval and support issues; at least one has contracted out the support function to a voluntary agency.

Just as practitioners need a supportive local policy framework, local authorities urgently need a national framework which addresses standards and service entitlement and provides an equitable system of remuneration for carers. Government action to date, which includes commissioning research and development work has not been insignificant, though falling far short of what is needed. Both the Quality Protects and the Choice Protects initiatives highlighted this form of care. It is to be hoped that the White Paper reflects a step change in policy interest and that this form of care will at last get the attention it rightly deserves and manifestly needs.

KEY RESOURCES

UK literature

Grandparents Plus and Adfam (2006) *Forgotten Families. The needs and experiences of grandparents who care for children whose parents misuse drugs and alcohol.*

Grandparents Plus and Adfam

Broad, B (2001): *Kinship Care: the placement choice for children and young people.* Russell House Publishing

Broad, B., R. Hayes, et al. (2001). *Kith and kin: Kinship care for vulnerable young people.* London, National Children's Bureau

Broad, B. and Skinner, A. (2005): *Relative Benefits: Placing Children in Kinship Care.* London, BAAF

Doolan, P; Nixon, P. and Lawrence, P (2004): *Growing up in the care of relatives or friends: delivering best practice in family and friends care.* Family Rights Group

Farmer, E. and Moyers, S. (2008) *Kinship Care: Fostering Effective Family and Friends Placements.* Jessica Kingsley

Hunt, J., Waterhouse, S. and Lutman, E (2007) *Keeping them in the family: Outcomes for abused and neglected children placed with family or friends carers through care proceedings.* Report to the DfES. Oxford Centre for Family Law and Policy, University of Oxford

Laws S., and Broad, B. (2000): *Looking after Children within the Extended Family: Carer's Views.* Centre for Social Action, De Montfort University

Nixon (2008): *Relatively speaking: themes and patterns in family and friends care research and implications for policy and practice.* Research in Practice

Pitcher D (1999a): *When Grandparents Care.* Plymouth City Council Social Services Department

Richards, A. (2001): *Second Time Around: a survey of grandparents raising their grandchildren.* Family Rights Group

Sykes, J, Sinclair, I., Gibbs I and Wilson, K. (2002): *Kinship and Stranger Foster Carers: How do they compare?* Adoption and Fostering 26(2), 38-48

Useful resources

Argent, H (2005): *One of the family: a handbook for kinship carers*. London, BAAF

Argent, H. (2007) *Kinship Care: What it is and what it means: a guide for children*. BAAF

Greenfields, M. (2004): *Here We Go Again – a Support Programme for Grandparent Carers*. London: FRG

Mind the Gap resource pack. www.mentorfoundation.org/uk/mindthegap

Morgan, A (2005): *How to Survive Kinship Assessments*. London: FRG

National Foster Care Association (2000): *Family and Friends Carers: Social Workers Training Guide*. NFCA (now Fostering Network)

National Foster Care Association (2000a): *Family and Friends Carers' Handbook*. NFCA

Richards, A. (2004): *Getting Together: A Guide to setting up and running a support group*. Family Rights Group

Roskill, C. (2007) *Wider Family Matters: a guide for relatives and friends caring for children who cannot live with their parents*. Family Rights Group

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