

Kinship care: Fostering effective family and friends placements

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Family and kinship care has a long history. It dates from times when children or young people were taken in to extended family networks or placed with relatives when birth parents or primary carers were unable, for whatever reasons, to provide them a home and developmental opportunities. Indigenous cultures – such as found amongst Maori peoples in New Zealand – commonly arranged for the eldest child to be placed with an elder aunt, uncle or grandparent who thus passed on important cultural learning and practices to the next generation. In South Africa, family and kinship care innovations are being used to support family groups where parents or primary carers have died because of HIV-AIDS. Family and kinship care has always played a significant part in child welfare systems operating everywhere.

Farmer and Moyers provide a unique glimpse into the practice realities of contemporary family and kinship care in England. A simple, yet clever research design was employed to select matched, comparative samples of 100 children and young people placed in non-relative foster care and 100 placed with family or friends, across four different local authorities, for different periods. Detailed case file reviews were carried out to compare characteristics of the young people in each type of placement. Then interviews were carried out with sub-samples of young people and kinship carers, parents, and also with social workers.

Several themes leapt out from the study as being worthy of comment. A placement with family or friends was rarely the starting point for local authority social workers tasked with duty of care responsibilities for particular looked after children or young people. Statistics showing the percentage of looked after placements with family members in different parts of the United Kingdom between 2005 and 2009 show that England has been using far fewer placements (less than 1 in 7) with family and friends than for all other parts of the United Kingdom.

Another theme to emerge from this study was the extent to which Local Authority case managers exercised Corporate Parent responsibilities through endorsing kinship care where more than a third of the Carers presented serious health problems. Several placements were never approved as foster placements!

There are real financial implications associated with providing looked after care for children and young people, and these were not always given sensitive consideration by Local Authority Corporate Parents.

Social workers were frequently encouraged to pursue a change of legal status for looked after children or young people, moving from foster care status to residence orders based on the professional argument that a residence order helped the young person to 'feel more normal'. In reality, it usually meant that the case could be closed. No further financial or corporate parenting obligations remained and the Carer family frequently suffered financial disadvantage when offering to help. In a large number of instances, kinship carers were placed in extreme financial hardship and looked after young people were prevented from gaining access to financial support for post-secondary education or employment training.

Amongst the most positive outcomes identified around placements with family and friends was the ways in which these lasted longer than placements with unrelated foster carers. When kin carers had been approved as foster carers, placements were far less likely to disrupt. The authors did note that movement from placements with unrelated foster carers often involved a planned transition to longer term alternatives. There was still very clear indication that relationships with family and friends were the more enduring relationships, even without financial commitments from the Local Authority Corporate Parent.

When children or young people presented behavioural problems or were disruptive at school, they were found to do less well in placements with family or friends, as well as with unrelated foster carers. A key issue for social workers involves learning to assess which children or young people are likely to need and benefit from which type of looked after care placement. While much greater effort needs to be given towards locating and communicating with relatives and friends of each child or young person at a much earlier stage, it is also necessary to recognise that challenging behaviour and school difficulties are likely to require greater attention than was shown to many of the children and young people participating in this study.

The results of this study were presented with great clarity, giving particular sensitivity to the voices of looked after children and young people in kinship care, and to the voices of their carers who were family and friends. This volume deserves the attention of students who are training to become the next generation of social workers and social work educators will find it a valuable teaching resource if they are truly interested in better preparing social workers for the realities of practice. Farmer and Moyers offer insights worthy of note for newly qualified social workers who find themselves managing a case load of looked after children or young people.

Supervisors and social service managers overseeing corporate parenting obligations for their local authority will find this study very informative and helpful around suggestions around legal and financial issues. Even Local Councillors assigned corporate parenting obligations will find the Farmer and Moyers study helpful with strategic planning efforts for looked after children and young people in their authority.

I commend the research design and methodology employed by Farmer and Moyers to other researchers and prospective graduate students interested in examining issues associated with children and young people in looked after care. This study found that roughly 1 in 10 children and young people who participated in this study had negative experiences of looked after care, whether with relatives and friends or with unrelated foster carers. Faced with the prospect of severe public sector cutbacks in local authority departments, including provisions for looked after care, more research is needed to examine and monitor social work outcomes and corporate parenting decision-making processes for looked after children and young people. Farmer and Moyers are to be thanked for signposting directions.

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