

Professor Elaine Farmer

Study of Children Placed with Relatives and Friends: Placement Patterns and Outcomes

How do placements with relatives and friends compare with unrelated foster care placements?



School for **Policy Studies**

UNIVERSITY
of **BRISTOL**

Study Aims

- **1. To compare the characteristics and outcomes of placements with relatives and friends with those with unrelated foster carers**
- **2. To examine the issues for the placed children, their birth parents, the caregivers and social workers**

Methods

- **Review of case files of 270 children in 4 local authorities in England:**
 - of whom–**
 - 53% (142) were with relatives or friends**
 - 47% (128) were with unrelated foster carers**
- **Interviews with 32 relative/friend carers and with children, social workers and some parents**

The Children in the Case File Sample

- **54% were girls and 46% were boys**
- **20% were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds**
- **69% of all the children were on Care (court) Orders
(similar proportions in relative/friend care and unrelated foster care)**

Relative Carers

Grandparents	64	45%
Aunts + uncles	46	32%
Friends	25	18%
Sister	5	4%
Cousin	2	1%

Lone or couple carers

	Lone carers	Couple carers
Relatives	27%	73%
Foster carers	14%	86%

No significant difference

Health Difficulties

- **31% of kin carers had a chronic illness of disability as compared with 17% of unrelated foster carers**
- **Some of the health conditions of kin carers were severe**

Financial hardship

	Financial hardship	No financial hardship
Relatives	75%	25%
Foster carers	13%	87%

Significant at $p=.001$ Fisher's exact test

Overcrowding

	Overcrowded	No crowding
Relatives	35%	65%
Foster carers	4%	96%

Significaant at $p < .001$ Chi Square

Age at the start of the study placement

Age groups	Relatives	Foster carers
Under 5	37%	37%
5-10 years	34%	30%
10-15 years	23%	30%
15+	6%	3%

Placements of children from minority ethnic backgrounds

	Relative	Foster carer
Minority	40%	60%
White British	56%	44%

* Significant at $p=.049$ Fisher's exact test

Matched ethnicity

	Same	Similar	No similarity
Relative	88%	11%	1%
Foster carer	78%	12%	10%

Significant at $p < .005$ Chi Square

Sibling Groups

- Similar proportions of children were placed with sibling groups (53% with kin and 52% with unrelated foster carers).
- More children with kin were the only child in the family (22%) than with unrelated carers (6%)

Our study: significant differences between the children in kin care and unrelated care

- The children with unrelated foster carers more often had multiple health conditions, whilst those with ADHD, autism or asthma more often lived with kin
- The children with unrelated foster carers had spent more time in care before their current placement
- Children whose parents had been in care were more often placed with unrelated foster carers than kin

Movement between types of placement

- 50% of children in relative care had previously lived with unrelated foster carers
- 20% of children in foster care had previously lived with a relative
- But most children stayed in one form of care of the other eg most children in relative care had previous and subsequent placements with relatives. The same was true for unrelated foster care

Parental drug and alcohol misuse

	<u>Relatives/Friends</u>	<u>Unrelated</u>
Drug misuse	60%	50%
Alcohol misuse	44%	44%
Mental health problems	44%	44%

Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties

- Children in unrelated foster care had more often experienced emotional problems, such as anxiety or depression, before the study placement
- Conduct disorders, hyperactivity, sexually inappropriate behaviours at the same rate in the two kinds of placement

Differences between groups [1]

- **Compared with those with unrelated foster carers, children with relatives or friends :**
 - **Had spent less time in care before moving to this relative**
 - **Were more likely to have experienced both types of placement (ie unrelated foster and kin care)**
 - **Were less often from a black or minority ethnic group**
 - **Their main carer so far had more often been a relative**

Differences (2)

- **Compared with those with unrelated foster carers, children with relatives or friends :**
 - **Were less likely to have shown emotional difficulties before the index placement**
 - **Were less likely to have multiple health difficulties but more likely to have ADHD or asthma**
 - **Less likely to have parents who had been in care themselves as children**

Differences (3)

- **Compared with unrelated foster carers, kin carers more often :**
 - **Had the same ethnic background as the children**
 - **Had financial difficulties**
 - **Had a chronic illness or disability**
 - **Lived in overcrowded conditions**

How the Placements were Made

- Relative/friend placements initiated by:
 - The relative/friend (86%)
 - The child (9%)
 - The parent (1%)
 - The social worker (4%)

A Relative/friend placement had not been considered for 57% of the children placed with unrelated carers

Assessment of Relative/Friend Carers

- In 2/3 of the relative/friend placements the carers were assessed when the child was already living there
- If the social worker did not feel able to approve the family as foster carers they sometimes suggested a Residence Order instead – variability in practice

Payments

- 67% (95) of the relatives/friends approved as foster carers and received foster care allowance
- In 16 of 19 cases where Residence Order made a Residence Order Allowance was paid
- Section 17 payments - 4 cases
- Other financial support - 18 cases
- Financial support unclear - 9 cases
- Financial difficulties in 75% of relative/friend placements but in only 13% of unrelated placements

Plans for the Placements

	<u>Rel/Friend</u> %	<u>Unrelated</u> %
Long-term home	93%	62%
Short-term	4%	21%
Preparation for adoption	1%	12%
Preparation indep living	-	3%
Reunify with parent/s	2%	2%

Social Work Services

- Social workers visited the carers and the children in kin/friend placements less often than in those with unrelated carers
- Significantly more relative/friend carers had little or no social work support (70% v 47%)
- Yet very few relatives/friends had a family placement worker (6%) or had had training
- Mental health (27%) and educational services (31% kin v 38% FC) to the children were at similar levels

Contact with Family Members

- 2/3 of the relative/friend placements were close to the child's parents (cp 46% FCs)
- Children with relatives/friends had significantly more contact with their fathers (43% v 26%) and with aunts, uncles and cousins (55% v 26%)
- Supervised contact for 1/2 children in both groups with the carers supervising in 43% of relative/friend placements (but only 16% FC)
- Social work supervision to 25% rel/friend placements (but 55% FC)

Contact with Family Members

- Most relative/friend carers were able to protect children from their parents – only 6% did not
- Difficulties between carers and family members in significantly more relative/friend placements (54% v 16%)
 $p=0.000$.

Carers' Parenting Abilities and Coping

- Significantly more of the relative/friend carers were struggling to cope with the child/ren (45% v 30%)
- Main difficulties were dealing with the child's behaviour
- Relative/friend carers had more difficulty re: difficulties with child's parents and problems of health and age

Carers' Parenting Abilities and Coping

- Significantly more of the relative/friend carers were **highly committed** to the child (63% v 31%)



Relationships in the Study Placement

- **Most children in both groups were close to at least one carer**
- **Slightly more tension between the child and unrelated carers**
- **Allegations made against 8% RC and 5% FC [of these more of RC were unsubstantiated ie 4% v 1%]**

Placement Outcomes

	<u>Relative/Friend</u>	<u>Unrelated</u>
Normally well	91%	86%
School attendance	78%	84%
Performing below ability	36%	35%
Children had positive view of themselves	68%	63%
Close to a significant adult	97%	93%

Placement Outcomes

	<u>Relative/Friend</u>	<u>Unrelated</u>
Mix of casual and close friends	64%	65%
Emot/behavioural problems	52%	52%
Improvement in emot/behavioural problems	78%	77%

Poor Standards in Placement

- 10% (14) of the kin placements and 6% (7) of the unrelated foster placements were judged to be detrimental to the children
- These very unsatisfactory placements lasted significantly LONGER when they were with kin
 - Partly because of lack of social work monitoring
 - Partly because different standards were applied to kin placements

Placement Endings

- At follow-up 72% relative/friend placements still continuing (v 54% FC): of kin highest rates of continuation were those with grandparents
- Placements with relatives/friends lasted somewhat longer (mean 4 years 9 months v 3 year 11 months with unrelated carers)
- Breakdown rate similar - 20% relative/friend placements v 22% FC
- Fewer relative/friend placements had a planned ending (7% v 23% FC)

Reasons for Placement Ending

	<u>Relative/Friend</u>	<u>Unrelated</u>
Returned to a parent	23%	27%
Child's behaviour/relationship with carer	38%	23%
Planned move	4%	24%
Carer no longer able to care /died	13%	4%
Child removed	10%	5%
Other	12%	17%

Judgement of the Quality of the Placement for the Child

	<u>Relative/Friend</u>	<u>Unrelated</u>
Positive	70%	79%
Adequate	12%	9%
Poor	8%	6%
Detrimental	10%	6%

The Personal Costs of Becoming a Kin Carer

- Relative/friend carers often incur personal losses in order to look after the children eg give up work, postpone retirement
- Isolation - for older relative carers there may be a dislocation with their friends
- Many carers rarely go out in the evenings

The Additional Burden of Being a Kin Carer

- Relative/friend carers may have loyalty to the child's parent as well as the children
- Being a relative/friend carer is *harder* than being an ordinary foster carer:
 - changes to life plans; parallel pain; issues arising from health and age; resentment and threats from parents and other relatives -
- They need social workers to deal with some of these issues, esp **contact**

Financial Difficulties

- Some carers incur debt in applying for a Residence Order, being represented in care proceedings or until they receive payment
- Payments are lower than to unrelated foster carers
- Many could not afford holidays, school uniform or activities for the children

Difficulties between Relative Carers and Family Members:

- 1. The mother objects to the relative placement. Sometimes this involves allegations against the carers, threats or assaults on them
- 2. Relative carer is hostile to child's parents
- 3. Conflict between different parts of the extended family about who should care for the child

Services for Kin Carers and Children

- GAPS IN SERVICES TO CHILDREN
- 1. Specialist help and counselling for disturbed children (Only 20% of the children had no difficulties)
- 2. Help in understanding why they could not live with their parents including Life Story Work

Services for Kin Carers and Children

- GAPS IN SERVICES FOR KIN CARERS
- 1. Practical help including
 - More respite care
 - Help with child sitting
 - Occasional help from a family support worker during school holidays to provide a break
- 2. Intervention over contact difficulties or conflicts with parents or other relatives
- 3. Some carers needed help with behaviour management/because disability or poor health made caring hard/ help with unresolved issues re the parents' difficulties
- 4. Kin carer groups

Commitment to the Child

- Relative/friend carers treat the child like their own
- They persevere well beyond the point at which unrelated foster carers give up
- This means a significant number of kin carers are under severe strain

Policy Implications 1

- Ensure that standards for approval of kin as foster carers are sufficiently flexible for inclusion of those with some health or other background difficulties but do not compromise standards
- Make financial parity between unrelated and kin carers a reality

Policy Implications 2

- Increase services for children and kin carers to fill the gaps
- Assistance with contact and intervention in conflicts between kin carers and other family members
- - FOR SOCIAL WORKERS training about kin carers' needs and how to work with them

Policy Implications 3

- Better monitoring and review of kin placements and decisive action when standards are poor
- CONCLUSION
 - Placements with relatives and friends offer greater stability to children than comparable placements