CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1. Introduction to family and friends care

Family and friends carers (also known as kinship carers) are typically grandparents, aunts or uncles, who are raising a child(ren) who is unable to live at home because of parental difficulties, mental or physical ill health, domestic abuse, alcohol or substance misuse, imprisonment or bereavement. Local authority children’s services may be involved in the placement, but not necessarily, particularly if the relative steps in at an early stage, when things are going wrong. Chapter 2 explains the legal framework and the consequences for support.

There is no official government data on the number of children living in family and friends care, although it is estimated that there are 200-300,0001 children living in such arrangements in the UK.

2. The case for family and friends care

Despite a documented lack of adequate support for such placements, there are well evidenced advantages2 for children who cannot live with their parents being raised by family and friends:

- Children feel loved and report high levels of satisfaction.
- Children in family and friends care tend to be in more stable placements than those placed with unrelated foster carers.
- Children placed within their family can more easily maintain a sense of family and cultural identity.
- Contact with family members is more likely to be maintained than when children are with unrelated foster carers.
- Children placed with family and friends carers appear to be as safe and their behaviour is perceived to be less of a problem when compared to children with unrelated foster carers.

It is therefore not surprising that government policy is to explore wider family placements for children on the edge of care, wherever possible and safe to do so3.

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1 Richards A and Tapsfield R (2003) Funding Family and Friends Care: The Way Forward (Family Rights Group)
http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/doc/n/improving%20outcomes%20for%20children%20young%20people%20and%20families%20%20%20national%20prospectus.doc
3. The importance of contact with other family members

Research carried out in the 1980s strongly suggested that it was very important for children in the care system who were living away from home to maintain contact with their families, and that the pattern of contact which is established at the outset can have a substantial influence on the child’s future. For those children who have a realistic chance of being able to return to live with their family, maintaining contact is the key to early discharge from care. Indeed, the arrangements during the first few weeks of separation from the family are crucial to the level of future contact between the child and parents.

The position is no different when a child lives with family and friends carers, whatever the legal status of the placement: keeping in contact with parents, siblings and other important members of their family and friends network is very important for continuity and their general well-being as well as being consistent with their right to respect for family life. Moreover it is generally what children want. Jane Aldgate (2009) reported that, although a small number of children in her study of family and friends care in Scotland did not have or want contact with parents, “the issue that most concerned [the majority of] children, and top of their wish list, was to have more contact with their parents.” Nixon’s review of 32 research studies on kinship care concurred with this, finding that children and kinship carers want contact with parents and other family members in most cases. Further he found that contact with parents and other family members occurs more ‘naturally’ and is far more frequent in kinship than non-kinship care. It can improve placement stability, provide continuity for children and generally kinship carers can go to great lengths to make contact happen and take responsibility more often for supervising arrangements than is the case with non-kinship carers.

However, although the benefits of family and friends care are very clear, the close relationship between the child and the carer can mean that the child’s contact with their parents and others in the family can be problematic, not least because of the impact on existing family relationships and the fact that the carer may be required to place restrictions on contact which can cause tensions with other members of the family. Hence it is not surprising that Nixon also found in his review that a significant number of contact arrangements are problematic and place stress on children and carers and therefore may need a more differentiated response to other unrelated placements.

Elaine Farmer (2009) also identified some of the specific difficulties that she had found to be present during her research into family and friends care placements: “difficult relationships between kin carers and the children’s parents emerged for over half (54%) of the family and friends carers … Some parents were resentful that a relative had taken over the care of their children. Other parents were actively hostile to the kin carers and a few made threats or actually attacked them, while others made false allegations against the carers or undermined the placement in other ways.”

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4 Millham et al, Lost in care; DHSS, Social work decisions in child care, HMSO, London 1985
5 Milham et al, ibid
6 Department of Health, Children Act Guidance and Regulations, volume 4: Residential Care, para.4.10 (HMSO, London, 1991b);
8 Article 8 ECHR
10 Nixon P (2008) Relatively speaking: developments in research and practice in kinship care. Darlington: Research Practice. This is discussed further in chapter 3
Hunt et al’s study (2008)\textsuperscript{12} of children placed with family and friends carers through care proceedings found that in 47% of cases children were continuing to be exposed to negative experiences through contact. However, social workers’ predictions about which cases would present difficulties with contact were often not very accurate. Difficulties typically related to conflicts between the parents and the carers, and this could be the case whether or not parents had appeared to accept the placement with family and friends at the end of proceedings. There were also some instances of problematic contact between siblings who had been placed separately.

Funding from the Department for Education (previously known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families) Children, Young People and Families Grant has enabled us to explore the issue of contact in family and friends placements further. This report draws together this work including:

- an analysis of the legal context and in particular who decides about contact arrangements in the variety of legal statuses which underpin such family and friends care arrangements;
- an international literature review;
- a report on FRG’s action research study, which involved interviewing parents, carers and practitioners about contact and taking account of the views of children and young people; and
- an internet survey of carers’ views.

The report concludes with recommendations about how contact for children in these placements can be better supported and promoted to improve the wellbeing and experiences of all participants, but most importantly that of the child.

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\textsuperscript{12} Hunt, Waterhouse & Lutman (2008) Keeping them in the family: Outcomes for children placed in kinship placements through care proceedings London, BAAF