Permanently Progressing?
Building secure futures for children in Scotland

Perspectives on kinship care, foster care and adoption: the voices of children, carers and adoptive parents

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Key messages

- For a child, moving to live with carers and adoptive parents is a time of anxiety, uncertainty and change. Professionals sometimes focused largely on legal processes, but children, carers and adoptive parents need them to also engage with the practical and emotional impact of change.

- Moving to live with carers or adoptive parents could mean other changes for children in nursery, school, location and relationships; children in kinship care also had to adjust to changes in relationships with other family members.

- Children needed nursery and education staff to be flexible. Carers and adoptive parents sometimes had to advocate on behalf of the child.

- Carers and adoptive parents have an important role to play in helping children to understand transitions and acknowledge the feelings involved. The complex network of people in children's lives was not easy to manage and could be a source of anxiety and conflict. Support available to carers and adoptive parents varied substantially.

- Carers and adoptive parents need accurate information about the child and their history so they can prepare for the child, understand the impact and adapt their responses.

- Children's accounts demonstrated their familiarity with family practices. These ranged from talking about small daily habits and routines (who does what, and when), to knowing what happens on holidays and special occasions. Familiarity with family routines and rituals appeared to help children develop a sense of security and belonging.

- Food was used to celebrate special occasions (such as the anniversary of when the child joined the family) and to create routines within the family. For some children, the availability and types of food also marked a difference between their lives before and after joining their carers or adoptive parents.

- The importance of developing a sense of belonging and security linked to how that particular family 'does family'. Children and adults' accounts suggested a broad range of signifiers of belonging. These included everyday conversations, and predictable and stable routines.

- While not underestimating the challenges faced by children, their carers and adoptive parents, the value of everyday acts which demonstrate love, kindness and reliability is a core message.

Introduction

Permanently Progressing? Building secure futures for children in Scotland is the first study in Scotland to investigate decision making, permanence, progress, outcomes and belonging for children who became 'looked after' when they were aged five and under. The study included the analysis of local authority administrative data and the linkage of two national datasets (children looked after statistics and data held about the same children by Scottish Children's Reporter's Administration). It also analysed data from questionnaires completed by social workers, carers or adoptive parents, interviews and focus groups with decision makers, interviews with carers and adoptive parents, and 'play and talk' sessions with children.

Why is the issue important?

Many children in the care system may be 'legally' secure in their placements with permanent carers or adoptive parents. Being legally secure and feeling secure, however, are not the same thing. Factors which contribute to children feeling secure include predictable routines and rituals in which children take part (Gilligan, 2009[1]) and 'feeling' part of a family (Schofield and Beek, 2009[2]). Being able to express views about choices and feeling listened to is part of the process of building self-worth and feeling secure. Legislation in Scotland underpinning social work practice makes it clear that children should be enabled to express a view in decision making dependent on age and understanding. In practice, children's views are not always sought, particularly those of younger children (Whincup, 2011[3]; Winter, 2011[4]; Porter, 2017[5]), or are sometimes mediated and changed by adults (Bruce, 2014[6]). This research provides an opportunity to hear about children's experiences in their own words: *"it is valuable to try to understand children's perceptions in their own language. To do otherwise risks obscuring children's views with too much adult comment and interpretation"* (Thomas et al, 1999, p.130[7]).

What does the research tell us?

This briefing is based on qualitative data from 'play and talk' sessions with ten children and semi-structured interviews with 20 kinship carers, foster carers and adoptive parents. The children were aged between three and eight at the time of participation. Two were living with kinship carers, three with foster carers, which had started as short-term placements but were now permanent, and five children had been adopted.

The 'play and talk' sessions explored the children's notions of what helped them feel secure in their families. The interviewer and child started an activity together or the child chose something to play with. Conversations moved between the immediate activity and discussing topics such as family, school and holidays. Most play and talk sessions involved less talking and more 'doing'. The interviewers were guided by the children and did not probe about issues such as loss and identity

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[1] Gilligan, R. (2009) *Promoting Resilience: Supporting children and young people who are in care, adopted or in need.* London: BAAF.

[2] Schofield, G. and Beek, M. (2009) Growing up in foster care: Providing a secure base through adolescence. *Child & Family Social Work,* 14 (3), pp. 255-266.

[3] Whincup, H. (2011) *Involving children and young people in assessment and decision making.* Scottish Child Care and Protection Network/WithScotland.

[4] Winter, K. (2011) *Building relationships and communicating with young children: a practical guide for social workers.* London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

[5] Porter, R. (2017) *Contact Decisions in the Children's Hearings System.* Glasgow: CELCIS. www.celcis.org

[6] Bruce, M. (2014) The Voice of the Child in Child Protection: Whose Voice? *Social Sciences,* 3 (3), pp. 514-526.

[7] Thomas, C., Beckford, V., Lowe, N.V. and Murch, M. (1999) *Adopted children speaking.* London: BAAF.

unless raised by the child. The semi-structured interviews with carers and adoptive parents focused on the processes involved in the child moving to live with them, what information about the child's history they had been given, the child's progress, what contact (if any) the child had with their birth family, and the kinds of support they and the child had been offered. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

Becoming a family

Children's experiences of becoming 'this family' were varied; some children were too young to remember having moved. For children in kinship care, the transition from living with parent(s) was more gradual. Consequently, their experiences of 'becoming' a family differed from those children who described initial meetings and then moving to live with their long-term foster carers or adoptive parents. For some children, the transition had meant a change of nursery or school; important aspects of their lives had changed simultaneously.

Arran talked about visiting his adoptive parents for the first time. In advance of the visit he had been shown an album containing photographs of them, their family and friends, and the house. Subsequent to moving, photographs of him, his adoptive parents and other extended family members had been included in the same album. For others, the details of the move were hazy, but children could describe a specific image or feeling. Skye remembered her first day positively, but Ann, her long-term foster carer, gently suggested that maybe that was not quite the case:

Skye:	Yes, and then, we walked in, I gave Ann a hug …
Ann:	Oh, did you? I don't think so!
Skye:	No?
Ann:	You can't remember that well because you went…
Skye:	Oh, yes.
	[Laughter from Ann and Skye]
Interviewer:	What did you do?
Ann:	What did you do, Skye?
Skye:	Well, she was going to give me a hug and then, I just slipped right past her.

Skye's version may be closer to what she would have liked to have happened or she may simply have mis-remembered, but Ann's gentle reminder recognised this was a difficult time. Most children's descriptions focused on practical, tangible evidence of becoming part of a new family and the feelings involved rather than on legal processes.

All the kinship carers knew the child before becoming their carers and their primary motivation in looking after the child was to ensure the child remained within their family network. Most had an existing emotional bond with the child. One couple expressed hope that the parents' capacity might change over time and that a shared care arrangement might develop before their granddaughter reached adulthood. While some kinship carers had been aware of social work involvement for a long period, this was not always the case:

> It was a big shock to us. [He] came to live with us when he was six weeks old … [H]is mum, has got special needs, learning difficulties. She's [in her 30s] and led a chaotic lifestyle. Flits from here to here and boyfriend to boyfriend, house to house, that sort of thing, so personally they have done the right thing. It was devastating at the time, but we're dealing with it.
>
> Kim, kinship carer

Carers and adoptive parents had access to different information about children's histories at different times from already knowing the child (kinship carers), to getting to know the child between placement and making the decision to put themselves forward as permanent carers (foster carers), to relying almost entirely on information from social workers until well into the matching stage (adoptive parents). It took time for the implication of some information to become clear and for carers and adoptive parents to start to understand the impact of children's early experiences and their genetic histories. Some carers described that the full extent of the neglect and abuse children had experienced did not come to light until the child moved to live with them and there was a dissonance between the information held by social workers, other professionals and the child.

There was often less information about birth fathers than birth mothers. One adoptive parent indicated that some recorded information about the child was out of date and that written and verbal reports from social workers had minimised the full extent of their child's difficulties. In contrast, another couple, who had adopted a child, recalled the information provided as quite detailed: information about family history; circumstances of the birth; birth parents; current contact arrangements; the foster family he had lived with since birth; and social work involvement.

It was notable that when talking about birth parents and the reasons children had come to be looked after, some carers and adoptive parents' language reflected terms used by social work professionals; for example, 'chaotic lifestyle'. Sometimes particular words were used as shorthand for factors which impacted on parenting capacity and on the child with the risk that this lack of specificity may not fully recognise the child's lived experience.

In around a third of cases, carers' or adoptive parents' could not recall the specific steps in social work and legal processes – for example, the particular legal order under which the child joined the family. Given the variety of routes to permanent placements in Scotland, this is not surprising. The carers or adoptive parents descriptions of social work and legal processes indicated that confusion arose at times in relation to specific technical terms. In addition, carers' and adoptive parents' priorities and emotions could feel at odds with the needs of professionals to gather and analyse the evidence necessary for social work, Children's Hearings and court processes to secure permanence for the child.

One adoptive mother recalled feeling frustrated with the lack of information from social workers and that there *'wasn't enough transparency'* about how long different stages of the process would take. Few carers or adoptive parents had direct experience of attending formal decision making meetings associated with all three parts of the system. One kinship carer described how difficult it had been for her and her family to attend Children's Hearings panels:

> *When you go to these Children's Hearings you feel as if you're defending yourself. You've done nothing wrong, the only thing you have done is to say that you'll help out a family member but you feel as if you're having to defend yourself when you're there. Even though you have no criminal record, you've never done anything bad but to protect the children you have to go on the offensive and be prepared to defend yourself against what their legal representatives say.*
>
> Annie, kinship carer

Court processes can also feel removed from the day-to-day experience of family life. An adoptive parent recalled her experience of attending court on the day the adoption order was granted. While adopting her child had been an extremely positive experience, the moment of hearing the order granted felt *"very strange".* As her son had joined the family more than a year earlier, it felt that "*for somebody who didn't know us at all to say, he is now your son, it was like, well, he's already my son!".* Several participants highlighted the uncertainty about not knowing timescales, and the impact emotionally and practically of not knowing what arrangements to put in place.

Being a family

Children's descriptions of being a family suggested a range of 'signifiers' of belonging – these were different events or experiences that appeared to contribute to them feeling that they had a permanent place within this family. Children's responses to questions about 'who does what' and 'what usually happens' often focused on familiarity with family practices, how adults looked after them and knowing what was likely to happen on holidays or special days, such as getting a new dressing gown every Christmas. The children's descriptions underlined the importance of small acts of day-to-day care by adults and other children in the home, which can support children's feelings of belonging as full members of their permanent families and of life being predictable (Schofield and Beek, 2014[8]). These day-to-day acts are not exclusive to children who have moved to permanent alternative carers, but may carry additional meaning where children have previously experienced uncertainty and instability.

Names were important signifiers of identity and of roles and relationships within families. All children had retained their given first names, but some surnames had been changed depending on their legal status. For some younger children, the 'decision' about what to call their carers or adoptive parents was not something which they or their carer debated as they had always been known as 'mummy' or 'daddy' or 'nana'. Moving from calling Jane and John to 'mum' and 'dad' appeared to be one way in which children signalled to their carers and to others that they were a family.

For both children and adults in our study, food emerged as important. Some older children contrasted the food they ate now to their earlier experiences when food was not consistently available or was limited. One child commented that previously he "didn't have vegetables" whereas now they were a regular, if not always welcome, feature of his diet. For several children, food was part of the ritual which marked special days linked to their placement:

> Like we … on the [date of my adoption] we celebrate and on the day I got adopted we went to the Highland Hotel … it's a really nice hotel and it does big portions.
>
> Logan, age eight

Some children had moved to a new nursery or school when they moved to live with their carers or adoptive parents. Children's experiences at nursery and school varied and more detail emerged from the interviews with adults rather than children. When talking about school and breaktime, one boy said that he "had problems with football", whereas his carers described the impact they thought his early experiences had on his current capacity to make and sustain friendships with peers at school. This included difficulties in being able to share, to be part of a team and pass a football.

Transitions raised anxiety for several foster carers and adoptive parents. Drop-off at school and nursery, in particular, could cause anxiety for children. Even for children who are 'legally secure', their previous experiences may mean that they not always 'feel secure'. Susan, an adoptive parent, noted that not all staff understand why children who live with carers or have been adopted may feel particularly anxious about the beginning and end of the day, or about the transition from nursery to school. Bringing a familiar toy or object from home helped her son feel more settled, but it did not need to be anything large: for example, one day she asked him to 'look after my bus ticket for me' until she came to pick him up.

There were a number of examples of careful negotiations with schools and local authorities about education including where parents had to press for a degree of flexibility. One adoptive parent, whose child attended the same private nursery as an older sibling, described it as 'brilliant'.

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[8] Schofield, G. and Beek, M. (2014) *The Secure Base Model: Promoting attachment and resilience in foster care and adoption*. London: BAAF.

Another carer recalled the calm way nursery staff had dealt with a situation where the birth father had turned up unexpectedly. Carers and adoptive parents whose children were anticipating the move to school had, in most cases, discussed plans with nursery and school. Most seemed relatively comfortable with the plans, although some raised concerns about potentially large class sizes or inflexible arrangements, which did not meet the child's particular needs. Carers often needed to explain to staff why the child might react in certain ways.

Carers and adoptive parents reported a wide range of experiences of the child's peer relationships from some having a wide range of friends to finding this an emotive and fraught area of the child's life. Several commented on the joy felt when watching children enjoying playing with others. Some carers and adoptive parents worried about how children's health problems or disabilities might make it more difficult to make friendships. For example, one young girl had difficulty reading facial expressions and her carer was concerned about whether this would impact on the child's ability to make friends. Some parents and carers had put particular effort into finding opportunities to encourage and maintain the child's friendships. One challenge for parents and carers was knowing how much and when to share information with other children's parents and finding a balance between not over-sharing sensitive information while explaining why the child may respond in particular ways.

Across all placements, carers and adoptive parents spoke about a range of ways they thought children had been affected by their early childhood experiences. The impact – or potential future impact – of abuse or trauma was explicitly described as a concern by around half interviewed. Several participants talked about not knowing whether certain behaviours or reactions were related to early experiences, the child's individual characteristics or a combination of both. There was also a direct emotional impact on adults of being aware of children's experiences. As one kinship carer explained, the child's fear or distress raised strong emotions in herself.

Carers and adoptive parents gave numerous illustrations of pride in children's development and progress and, when describing their daily routine, there were examples of highly sensitive, reparative care attuned to individual children's needs. One adoptive parent explained that his child had significant difficulties with emotional regulation, including in peer relationships, and built in support so their child could engage in activities, particularly where there were less formal boundaries.

Carers across placement types described different forms of support from financial support, to services for them or the child, and links to other carers and adoptive parents. One long-term foster carer described the enduring support provided by the child's social worker who is '*at the end of the phone*' and who will be there '*until she retires*'. Others indicated that at certain times it would have been helpful if more professional support had been available. The benefits of having someone to 'listen' or 'mediate' were highlighted, especially where there were complex relationship and dynamics. Kinship carers accessed less support than foster carers and adoptive parents, and one kinship carer indicated that professional support may have helped resolve difficulties in relation to contact arrangements.

Some carers highlighted the part played by family, friends, and neighbours in supporting them and the child. For others, concerns about not disclosing sensitive information about the child's history militated against them seeking support from their informal networks. Several foster carers and adoptive parents mentioned the value they experienced from having contact with others in a similar role.

Contact with birth family and important others

Levels of contact with birth parents or other important adults depended on placement type. No adopted child saw their birth parents, while some had contact with previous foster carers. Some children who were in kinship care saw their parents regularly including visits to their homes, while for others contact was less predictable. Nine children had ongoing direct contact with at least one birth family member including siblings, parents and grandparents. In six families, indirect contact was maintained with at least one birth family member and was mostly limited to one or two letters per year.

Children anticipated how contact arrangements might change as they grew older. One girl in kinship care described how when she 'was seven' she would be able to have a 'sleepover' with her father. It was not clear whether this was actually the case or whether *'when you are older'* might shift over time.

In some families there were photographs in the room – on walls, coffee tables and mantelpieces – which the child and interviewer went to when talking about the family. These photographs appeared a tangible way in which a connection was made to people who had a role in the child's life. In some instances, these involved siblings with whom the child was not currently living or extended family members. Sometimes the absence of photos of particular family members, including birth parents, seemed noteworthy.

Some children lived with a sibling, while for others their siblings remained with parents or other carers (see Jones and Henderson 2017[9]). Logan was able to map out his birth family in some detail and was clear that he wanted contact with his younger sister, but he explained that her adoptive parents were hesitant and worried that seeing Logan might elicit painful feelings for his sister. Although Logan understood their rationale, the decisions made on behalf of Logan's sister by her adoptive parents did not align with Logan's desire to see her and maintain a relationship. There is evidence that with the right support at the right time maintaining sibling relationships over time can be achieved in a way which is sensitive to each child's needs, that these relationship can improve feelings of self-esteem and security and are important over the child's life course (Neil et al, 2015[10]; Monk and Macvarish, 2018[11]).

Carers and adoptive parents discussed maintaining some form of connection with birth families and other significant people in a child's life through direct or indirect contact, including previous foster carers. For some children, previous foster carers may have been their primary attachment relationship and maintaining these connections helped the transition process including the losses experienced. Kinship carers reported more contact with parents, and more complex contact arrangements than foster carers because of the nature and quality of pre-existing relationships; for example, managing contact with their own child when caring for a grandchild.

Across all placement types, parents or carers reported that children sometimes felt worried about contact with their birth family. Contact could be both the catalyst and the solution for dealing with such worries. The adoptive parents of one boy described the emotions their son experienced each time he was due to see his sister:

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[9] Jones, C. and Henderson, G. (2017) *Supporting Sibling Relationships of Children in Permanent Fostering and Adoptive Families, School of Social Work and Social Policy Research Briefing, No 1*. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde. Available at: www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofsocialworksocialpolicy/

[10] Neil, E., Beek, M. and Ward, E. (2015) *Contact after Adoption: A longitudinal study of post adoption contact arrangements*. London: Coram BAAF.

[11] Monk, D. and Macvarish, J. (2018) *Siblings, Contact and the Law: An Overlooked Relationship, Summary Report*. London: Birkbeck. Available at: http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/siblings-contact-and-law-overlooked-relationship

> *We see her at least every school holidays, and yes, he's very keen to find out how she's doing and meet up with her. … In the build up to holidays he can generally get quite anxious at that time. Whether he's tired as well through school term, but it could be a case of – he's quite – he's really worried, he's not heard from [sister] for a while. … He knows it's daft, he knows he doesn't need to worry, because her foster carers are great.*
>
> Dan, adoptive parent

In a minority of cases, and particularly where contact was more extended, carers reported more negative overt changes in the child's behaviour. One carer described how the child's anxiety seemed to have reduced as she became settled into her home, but was often reignited following contact. For this carer, the long-term benefits of maintaining contact was balanced with the more temporary anxiety it might elicit for the child (and the adults).

Carers and adoptive parents also described how direct contact with one member of the birth family could sometimes lead to unplanned 'secondary contact' with other family members. Inconsistency in contact arrangements was one of the biggest challenges and were more common in kinship care and, to a lesser degree, in foster placements where contact was more frequent. There was a sense that arrangements were not settled and might change in the future.

Although indirect contact was generally more straightforward than direct contact, knowing how much information to exchange and what to include could prove challenging. One adoptive parent described the first time she and her husband had written to their child's birth mother. They were not allowed to send photographs, but spent much time thinking about what to say.

An anxiety reported by kinship and foster carers in relation to the Children's Hearings system was that a Hearing might change contact arrangements or put contact directions in place which were inflexible and did not meet the changing needs of the child. More generally, while contact *per se* is not a reliable measure of placement difficulties (Schofield and Stevenson, 2009[12]), contact can become the 'site' where some highly charged aspects of kinship care, fostering and adoption are played out.

Birth parents were not interviewed in this phase of the study and we cannot know their views and feelings. However, it has been identified in previous research that birth parents are likely to benefit from support with contact to ensure it is a positive experience (Neil et al, 2015).

Sharing information with the child about their birth family will be significant for the children over time. In addition to using everyday opportunities, where appropriate, to mention the child's birth family, some carers and adoptive parents had sought out particular resources. One adoptive parent noted it can be hard to get books that cover the range of experiences children may have had before joining their adoptive, foster or kinship families. Some carers and adoptive parents had evidently taken care to describe birth parents in nuanced ways. One long term foster carer who was caring for a child whose mother had died several years earlier described how they remembered her on special occasions like birthdays, Mother's Day and Christmas. They made cards and marked her birthday by lighting candles and sending a 'firework to heaven'.

Some children had life story books and there were several examples of children returning repeatedly to their life story books without necessarily asking further questions at this stage. Photographs displayed around the house sometimes were a starting point for conversations. One family kept a photograph in their child's memory box of the adoptive parents' meeting with one of the birth parents. Carers and adoptive parents were at different stages with sharing

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[12] Schofield, G. and Stevenson, O. (2009) Contact and relationships between fostered children and their birth families. In: G. Schofield and J. Simmonds eds. *The child placement handbook: research, policy and practice*. London: BAAF.

information with children about their early lives. This was partly linked to children's ages and developmental ages, but also seemed to vary according to adult's own attitudes and decisions. For some older kinship carers, a particular focus was offering children reassurance and contingency plans, and anticipating children's questions about where they would live if something happened to their carers.

Implications for policy and practice

This briefing has explored a range of different aspects of children, and carer and parents' experiences, primarily in relation to: becoming a family; being a family and connections with birth family. The research was exploratory, and while the sample size was limited, the play and talk sessions and interviews offer important insights into kinship, fostering and adoptive family life:

- The process of the child moving to live with carers or adoptive parents can be a time of anxiety, uncertainty and change alongside hope and anticipation. Children's needs should shape the arrangements and timescales with their feelings central throughout. It is essential that carers and adoptive parents have as much accurate information as early as possible to understand the child's experiences and respond effectively. This is within the context that some information is unavailable and not all developments can be predicted.

- Sometimes, the primary focus of professionals could be on navigating important complex legal processes, while carers and adoptive parents wanted professionals to also engage with the practical and emotional impacts of the changes for them and the child.

- Children had a complex network of people in their life. Navigating these relationships and maintaining connections is not simple, and can cause anxiety and conflict for all. It needs to be recognised that contact is dynamic and transactional and likely to change over time in response to factors related to the child, birth family and carer or adoptive family.

- Children who are looked after in kinship, fostering and adoptive families, share the common experience of separation from their birth parents, and growing up with alternative carers or parents. Most had experienced some form of maltreatment or neglect and some had lived with several carers before joining their permanent family. Working with nursery staff and teachers is essential in managing key points such as nursery or school drop-off, transitions and building friendships.

- Adults often hold information about children's lives that can help them make sense of their experiences, however painful. The process of 'story-telling' lasts a lifetime. The stories we chose to tell and re-tell become 'self-defining memories' that help us hold together a coherent sense of self. Children need to be helped to develop these skills through clear and sensitive communication.

- For children across placement types, our findings underline the need for support that recognises their early experiences and how these may affect them at later stages. In addition, carers and adoptive parents may need specific support to help children deal with traumatic memories and create coherent identities that take account of both past and present experiences.

- Easy access to sensitive, flexible support could be a valuable resource for children, carers and adoptive parents and might enable some children to maintain or re-establish contact with important people from their life.

- Local authorities need to consider what additional strategies can put in place to ensure flexible and responsive services, and accessible support for carers, adoptive parents and the children in their care.

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