

# Relative Experience

Issues and challenges for kinship carers





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## Issues and challenges for kinship carers

This briefing has been produced for the Relative Experience: North East Pilot project. The project is being delivered in partnership between Grandparents Plus, Family Lives, and the Family and Parenting Institute. It is funded by the Big Lottery Fund Silver Dreams Fund. Its author is Sarah Wellard of Grandparents Plus.

*February 2013*

### Who are kinship carers?

Kinship carers are family members – grandparents, older brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles – who have stepped in to bring up a child because their parents cannot look after them. It is estimated that there are around 200,000 kinship carers in the UK bringing up 200,000-300,000 children because of serious family difficulties such as parental death, drug or alcohol misuse, severe illness or disability, domestic violence, child abuse or neglect, or imprisonment. Many of these children would be in local authority care if their relative had not stepped in.

Children in kinship care have suffered similar difficulties in their early lives as children in local authority care. Many have experienced neglect or trauma, and may have emotional and behavioural problems or special educational needs.

Kinship carers often face huge challenges – including poverty, isolation and lack of support. Most receive little or no support from children's services. A high proportion of kinship carers have a long term illness or disability. They may have multiple caring responsibilities, for example caring for an older partner or the parent of the child they are bringing up. Many kinship carers give up work when they take on the care of a vulnerable child, and often end up on benefits as a result.

This briefing paper provides information on the challenges experienced by kinship carers and their support needs, and on the children they are raising.

### About the Relative Experience project

We are a new project based in the North East providing peer to peer support from trained volunteers for older kinship carers (aged 50 plus) who are bringing up a relative's child. The project aims to respond to kinship carers who may be experiencing isolation and stress or who are having particular challenges with the children they are raising. We are funded by the Big Lottery Fund Silver Dreams Fund and run by Grandparents Plus in partnership with Family Lives and the Family and Parenting Institute.

## How people become kinship carers

Kinship carers often take on the care of children following a family emergency such as the death of a parent, a parent abandoning the child or a parent being admitted to hospital or prison. Children’s services may contact the carer without warning saying that unless they take the child in they will be taken into care. Sometimes the carer has been closely involved with supporting the family through difficulties for a long period of time, or they may have had little previous contact. Often children’s services have been involved with the family, and the child may have been on the child protection register or in council care.

No-one plans to become a kinship carer; it is a step people take to provide a safe home for a vulnerable child. For most kinship carers it results in enormous stress and upheaval in their lives. They are often responding to their own bereavement or distress at what has happened in their family as well as looking after the child.



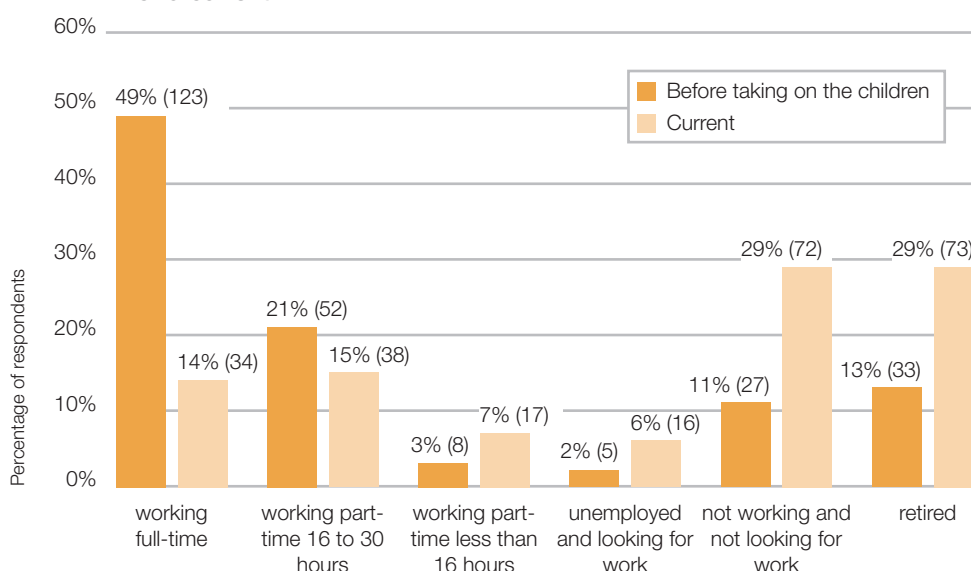
*A high proportion of kinship carers live in poverty or on very low incomes – 60% are on incomes below £300 a week.*



## Kinship carers and poverty

A high proportion of kinship carers live in poverty or on very low incomes – 60% are on incomes below £300 a week. Many are dependent on benefits as a result of giving up work to take on the care of children.

**Graph 1:** Employment status of kinship carers, before taking on the children and current



Source: Gautier, A. and Wellard, S. (2012) *Giving up the Day Job? London: Grandparents Plus.*

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## Older kinship carers

Around half of kinship carers are grandparents, of whom an estimated 60% are aged 55 or older. Around 25,000 are aged over 65. Older kinship carers may face particular challenges in terms of isolation, health difficulties and struggling to look after a vulnerable child.

## Wellbeing and health needs

Around six in ten grandparent carers report that they have a disability or chronic health condition, with arthritis the most commonly reported health condition followed by high blood pressure:

*“There’s things I can’t do with him, I can’t go and kick a ball about. I mean I tried and he said, ‘You’re rubbish Nanny, but then you’re old aren’t you?’”*

Kinship carers may neglect their health needs because of their caring responsibilities, or they may seek to hide ill health from children:

*“I used to rest in the day so I could be up when he came in from school. It is a worry for them if we are ill, they rely on us so much.”*

A significant proportion of kinship carers have a mental health condition such as depression or anxiety, and more than half describe themselves as stressed or depressed:

*“I get very tired and I get very stressed sometimes. A lot of people who know me say, ‘You must take some rest, make some time for yourself,’ but where? When?”*

But some older kinship carers feel that raising children keeps them fit and active:

*“There’s an upside to having these children, it keeps you young, it keeps you active... I’m not too stressed.”*

## Caring responsibilities

Around three in ten kinship carers are providing care and support for an older or disabled family member, friend or relative as well as bringing up the kinship child. Some kinship carers also have their own children living at home with them.

## Children in kinship care

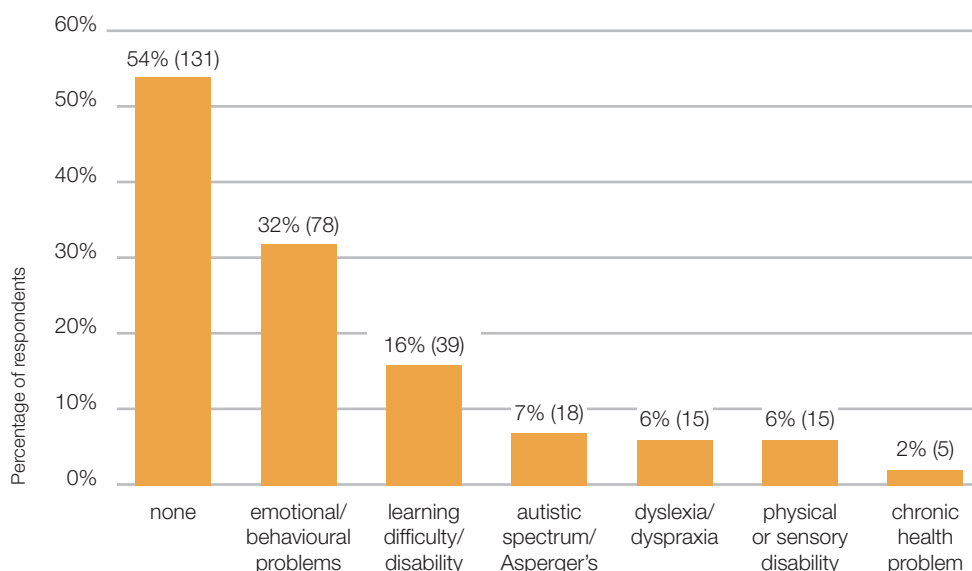
It is estimated that there are between 8,000 and 12,000 children in the North East living in kinship care. Almost half of children in kinship care have special needs or a disability, much higher than other children in the population. A high proportion also have difficulties at school of some kind, ranging from learning difficulties to behavioural problems and difficulties making friends with other children.

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**Graph 2:** Special needs/disability of children in family and friends care



Source: Wellard, S. and Wheatley, B. (2010) *What if we said no?* London: Grandparents Plus.

## Specific challenges in raising kinship children

Kinship carers often find parenting kinship children very challenging, much more so than raising their own children. The kinds of challenges they commonly face include helping children cope with contact with their parents or difficulties at school and dealing with children's emotional and behavioural problems and the effects of early traumatic experiences. In some cases children may be profoundly damaged. Children often display difficulties when they first move in, but usually settle down. However, problems may resurface at any time especially during the teenage years. Many children have been harmed by the disruption of the relationship with their birth parents, as well as other adverse experiences they suffered:

*"People don't always realise how damaged the children are. Social workers and GPs say they are not children in need, but they have emotional problems and behaviour problems. They don't appreciate the lasting impact of their experiences."*

## Relationships with children's parents

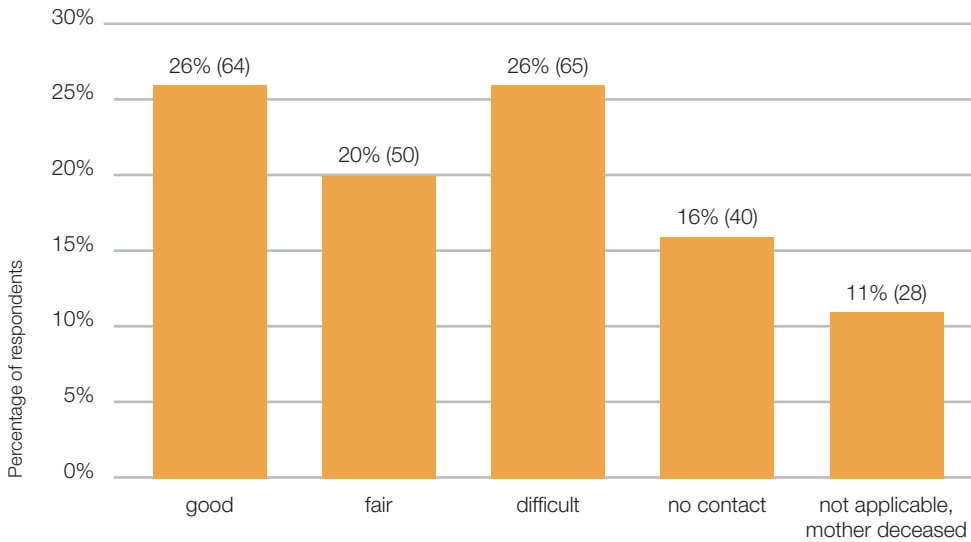
For many kinship carers, relationships with children's parents are a source of ongoing stress and difficulty. A recent survey found that one in four grandparent carers described the relationship with the mother as 'difficult', and the same proportion described it as 'good'.



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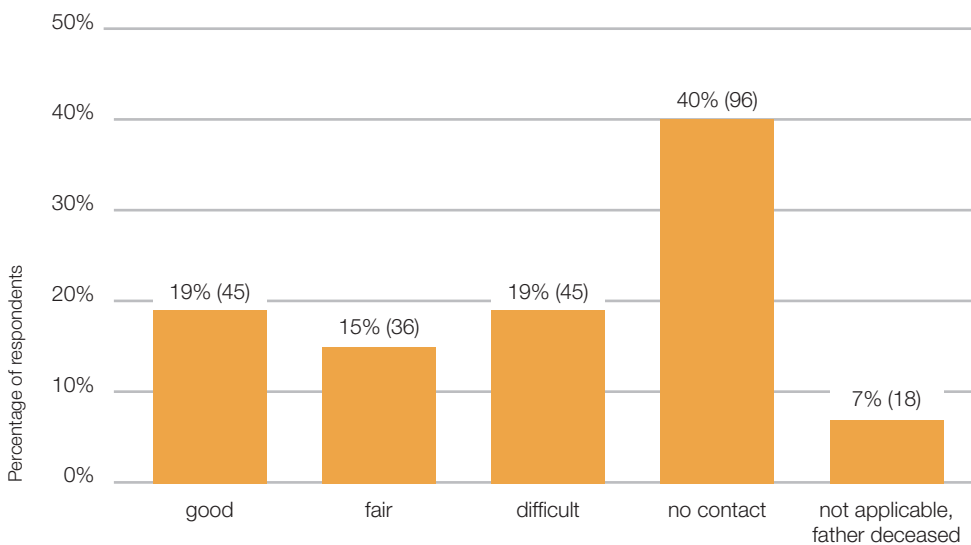
**Graph 3:** How would you describe your relationship with the child's/children's mother?



Source: Wellard, S. and Wheatley, B. (2010) *What if we said no?* London: Grandparents Plus.

One in five found the relationship with the father 'difficult', and the same proportion described it as 'good'.

**Graph 4:** How would you describe your relationship with the child's/children's father?



Source: Wellard, S. and Wheatley, B. (2010) *What if we said no?* London: Grandparents Plus.

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For some families, difficulties with the child's parent have a negative impact on wider family relationships:

*"The whole experience we have been through with our daughter [mother of kinship child] has been terrible and devastated the entire family. Our two sons now have a much more distant relationship with us and resent the fact that we are unable to give as much to their children."*

Often there has been a history of difficulties with the parent whose child the kinship carer is raising. Some grandparent carers are able to come to terms with the failings or difficulties of their children as parents, and focus their energies solely on their grandchildren:

*"We brought up his father and he was a nightmare. He went completely off the rails. We brought up the other two just the same – you can't understand why the other two turned out fine... We don't know where he is now."*

Many grandparents are continuing to support adult children through their difficulties at the same time as bringing up their grandchildren:

*"As a teenager my son got involved in black youth subculture and got into drugs... I had to bail him out from time to time. Now he goes to treatment and he's working – I think eventually we will be sharing the care [of the two grandchildren she is raising]."*

## Contact with children's parents

Often kinship carers are managing contact between the children they are raising and their parents. In one survey seven out of ten described helping children cope with parental contact as one of the biggest challenges they face in raising kinship children. This may involve helping children to come to terms with bitter disappointments:

*"She was seeing her dad and her nana and they just seemed to lose interest which we don't understand because she is such a lovely girl. It is very hard for her."*

They may also have concerns about the children's safety when they are with parents:

*"We've tried to keep as amicable as it can be with his mum, but the boyfriends are a worry. They have all been pretty grim, usually alcoholics or something. I used to think, 'Could he be a paedophile?'"*

In some cases the relationships with parents are extremely strained, and kinship carers may be at risk from or even suffer assaults from parents:

*"There is actually an injunction out for them being verbally or physically abusive in the street or in my home to me. So if he comes banging on my door I call the police."*

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## Support from children's services

While some kinship carers – around one in three – receive financial allowances and other support from children's services, the majority say that they fail to provide the support they need. Often, children's services are involved in placing the child but reluctant to provide support post placement:

*"If we hadn't taken the boys we were told they would be fostered then adopted – they had someone in mind for the youngest. But after we got the Residence Order we were dropped like a hot potato."*

Research from the Family Rights Group indicates that there is no relationship between the children's needs and the legal order kinship carers obtain – eg a Special Guardianship Order or Residence Order – to grant them parental responsibility, and that children with the highest levels of difficulties often receive the least support from children's services. Often at the time when children move in kinship carers lack the legal advice and information they need to enable them to make an informed choice.

Kinship carers may have a negative view of children's services and avoid contact because they fear that they will interfere or even take the children away:

*"We're a bit scared of local authority stuff because they tried to take him away in the early years. They sort of backed off, thank God, because the mental health support team [working with the child's mother] could see I was fairly competent and willing... When they come near us from time to time it's very scary because obviously we don't want him to be taken away."*

## What kinship carers need

Kinship carers tell us they need financial and practical support from local authorities in bringing up children. They have also told us they would appreciate support from volunteers from their own communities. In a recent survey more than 90% said that raising kinship children was more challenging than raising their own children:

*"(Kinship) children are far more stressful because of challenging behaviour arising out of the traumas they have suffered."*

## What people from the North East say about kinship carers

On behalf of the project partners, YouGov conducted a poll to find out the extent of support from the general public for kinship carers. The poll found that in the North East, 74% of people felt kinship carers should receive support from their local communities and 73% wanted them to receive similar support to foster carers. This is even higher than elsewhere in the UK – overall 69% wanted them to be supported by their local communities and 71% think they should get similar support to foster carers.

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## To find out more

If you are interested in a referral to or volunteering with Relative Experience, or want to find out more about the project, email [relative.experience@gmail.com](mailto:relative.experience@gmail.com) or telephone **07904 675021**.

This briefing can also be downloaded from [www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)

## Sources

Most of the statistics quoted in this briefing are from Grandparents Plus research based on surveys of Support Network Members: *What if we said no?* (2010) and *Giving up the day job?* (2012). Quotes are from kinship carers and mostly taken from *Too old to care?* (2011). All are available online at [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk).

See also

*Nandy, S. and Selwyn, J. (2011) Spotlight on kinship care. London: Buttle UK.*

*Hunt, J. and Waterhouse, S. (2012) Understanding family and friends care: the relationship between need, support and legal status. London: Family Rights Group.*

## Who we are

**Grandparents Plus** is the national organisation that champions the role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives, through the provision of advice and support, research and campaigning. We reach up to 5,000 kinship carers nationally through our peer support network and advice service. Our advice service is open Monday to Friday 10am-3pm on 0300 123 7015.

[www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk)

Reg. charity no: 1093975

The **Family and Parenting Institute** is a charity working to improve the lives of children and families now and in the future through campaigning, research and practical support. We have merged with the Daycare Trust and the new charity will be launched in April 2013.

[www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)

Reg. charity no: 1077444

**Family Lives** is a charity that has over three decades' experience in helping parents deal with the changes that are a constant part of family life through a range of national and local services including a 24 hour helpline, live chat service and local services in community venues across the country.

[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)

Reg. charity number: 1077722



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