Kith and Kim: Kinship care and family contact research project - early findings

Meredith Kiraly and Professor Cathy Humphreys
University of Melbourne Alfred Felton Research Program

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“I never thought it as a form of care. I just thought I was going to stay with Nana or Grandad for this long time and that’s it. It didn’t seem weird or strange to me anyway… I still went to the same school, the same sort of things. Still had that same sense of stability, constancy. It was just a different location that you lived, a different person you lived with.”
Research Questions

• Demographics of families
• Patterns - Who has contact, where, how often?
• How well does it work out?
• Safety issues in family contact?
• Problems and solutions
• Support needs?
Stage 1: Survey

- Sent to all kinship carers receiving payments from Dept Human Services

- Quite extensive data collected regarding demographics and family contact information
Stage 2: Interviews and Focus Groups

Focus Groups:
- Kinship carers (8, several rural)
- 3 Aboriginal staff/carer groups, 2 rural.
- 4 groups of experienced kinship workers.

Interviews
- 20 Children/young people 10-18; and young adults 19-40 ex kin care
- 21 Parents of children/young people in and ex kin care
- 9 kinship carers including “kith” carers.
Till death us do part

“There’s no choice. They need the stability”

- Grandparents see their care of the children as an imperative.
- Gut-wrenching stories of huge pain for all parties.
- Strength within families even when dealing with huge problems & issues. Parents who gave up children may subsequently give care to others.
- Carers feel that they experience little respect and do not get a good hearing anywhere.
We are family

Family members see themselves simply as (normal) family, not a “care” situation.

“A different lifestyle doesn’t make you a different person.” (Russell)

“Don’t treat us as different from other kids.” (Daniel)
Aboriginal feedback

“The differences between our family and non-indigenous families is our family is everybody. It's not just the immediate family, Mum and Dad and siblings. You had the whole works and jerks of a Koori family. From a toddler right up to the elder. Baby, newborn, toddler, youth, middle aged, right up until... That's our kinship from that child. It's not Mum and Dad and brothers and sisters, it's everybody. That's the way we've been brought up.
“At least they know people loved them and they weren’t given away.”

“My mum and my father have set a precedent within our family that, no matter what is going on in your life, you have to make special exception of the children. Because if you don't, there is a system that will take them.”
Early qualitative findings on family contact

• Wide family connections are simply part of a family’s life.
• Carers – both “kith” and “kin” – often strongly support parental contact except when they see it as damaging.
• Safety tends to be is paramount in carers’ minds, as is the well-being of the children.
• …but sometimes young people feel their carers take support for contact too far for their well-being.
• Grandparents often tell of hugely stressful experiences with their own children/the parents of the grandchildren.
• System threats to children’s safety and well-being in contact arrangements
He ain’t heavy, he’s m’brother

- Children and young people greatly miss their siblings when away, lean on them when together.
- Young people sometimes worry about the well-being of younger children from whom they are separated, especially if they are with their parents.
- Children of all ages want to be in contact with their brothers and sisters living elsewhere.
Contact with parents – a perspective from young people

• Children and young people generally want to see their parents unless there are big issues.

• However multiple disappointments mean they may want to stop visits.

• They feel strongly that their wishes need to be taken more into consideration and they should not be forced to see their parents or others if they don’t want to.

• They want to be heard even when young and to have a say in contact arrangements.
Contact with Mum - Angela

She said, “Oh come on, give your mother a hug” and I’m like, “No, I don’t want to touch you”. Then I just said to her, “I don’t have a mother” and I walked away. I was composed the whole time, and as soon as the door closed I’ve never cried so hard in my whole life. But I was so glad that I finally got to say it. Like I was in grade 6 – like what 13-year-old says to their Mum, “I don’t have a mother”.
Feedback from parents

• Capacity for insight often dependent upon substance dependency. May have huge remorse in relation to impact on the children, & the challenge of rebuilding relationships.

• Appreciation of their own parents stepping in to help

• Resent it that the carer, often their own mother, is placed in policing role re visits, so further tensions in family relationships.

• Hate it when they have to have “access” in DHS offices – small, unfriendly environments with close surveillance.
A mother’s comment…

“I broke their hearts many times, promising them I’d come and then just now showing up because I got too off my head… I don’t want to hurt them like that. They still love me, and I know if it keeps going on, I’m going to lose their faith. I already did lose a bit of it, but I’ve been able to work it back, now.”
Kith (what is that?)

“She may not be blood family, but who says blood is needed to make a family? They say friends come and go but family’s there forever. If you’ve had friends who have stuck by you through the worst then in my eyes they are family.”

Russell
Kith (what is that?)

But we are hearing a lot of stories of huge neglect of “kith” carers who feel like it’s dump and run.
All in the family

Children and young people and their carers report that they are in contact with cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, family friends, cats and dogs...usually with less difficulty.
“[My paternal grandfather] never actually met me. He'd only heard my voice and interactions through phone calls, letters and photos that I sent him. But he was still willing to open his heart and his life to me. To somebody he probably had absolutely no knowledge even existed before. But that is a good memory.”

Kinship care is family care.
Kinship carers and parental contact

- Sometimes parent-child contact works well in informal arrangements & the family home, often it does not. Effects on children vary greatly.
- Carers hate seeing children forced into traumatic contact.
- Particular issues for grandparents (own children as dysfunctional parents)
Support for contact?

Carers tell us:

- Huge gap in support
- A good caseworker makes a big difference
- Help with family meetings as needed; follow through on undertakings
- Listen to the carers, listen to the kids
Support for contact?

Carers tell us:

• Endless court cases cause great distress to children, family conflict and trouble during contact visits.

• Contact orders need to be realistic, reflect the needs of children and carers and the readiness of parents.

• Children need resolution and certainty.
Support for contact?

Carers tell us:

• Transport assistance is needed for long distances
• Supervising contact visits is often a great strain
• Contact centres are a popular idea for problematic contact arrangements.
Summing up so far

• Kinship is family, extending beyond house walls & enduring, providing critical support for as young people grow up.

• Families need much more support with the difficult contact arrangements than is currently available.

• Support may include empowering and realistic court orders; counselling and mediation; family-friendly contact centres; continuity of workers to listen & respect all family members.

• Safety remains paramount in the eyes of carers and young.

• Forcing family relationships can only damage children and young people.
Results of the research

Available via our website in early 2011:
http://research.cwav.asn.au/AFRP/OOHC/default.aspx

Contact me at:
Meredith Kiraly
0400-913659
mkiraly@unimelb.edu.au
In the house there is Lucy my cousin, auntie Kylie, uncle Vic, my other cousin Nick, and a little doggie… I just like staying here because it’s nice and relaxing.
Now we want your feedback!

Please add to our knowledge of what support is needed to improve the experience of family contact in kinship care.