



## FACT SHEET Australia's informal kinship carers: The need for recognition and support

*We love caring for all the children and see them develop and gain confidence. It is not an easy path at times but it is not dull! Kinship care seems to be the 'Cinderella' of care, so I hope your research project might help these people. (Grandparent carer quoted in Kiraly, 2015.)*

### Background

The United Nations (2010) describes kinship care as 'family-based care within the child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child, whether formal or informal in nature'.

State child protection authorities try to limit intervention under their legislative remit as far as possible. 2011 census data suggested that over 100,000 children were in kinship care at that time. Over 80% of kinship care families were providing care on an 'informal' basis, that is, without recognition or financial support by child protection authorities (Kiraly et al, 2021; Kiraly, 2023). With population increase, the number of children in kinship care clearly now far exceeds 100,000.

It is widely believed that most kinship carers are grandparents, however current data suggests that around half of all kinship carers are other relatives or family friends. Aboriginal families are over-represented (Kiraly et al, 2021).

### Issues

#### 1. *Invisibility of informal kinship care families*

Informal kinship carers are invisible. They are not recognised as:

- Carers – in Commonwealth legislation, hence not eligible for carer services
- Parents – hence not eligible for parental leave. Lack of appropriate documentation often leads to difficulty obtaining birth certificates and Medicare cards for children in their care.
- Adoptive parents – hence not eligible for adoption leave.
- Foster carers – hence not financially supported.

#### 2. *Poverty in informal kinship care families*

Australian and international research shows this is the biggest issue for informal kinship care families (Kiraly, 2015). Many kinship carers are pensioners and renters, often in public housing. Houses are frequently overcrowded once the children arrive. Some older carers with a home of their own have found it necessary to re-mortgage their house, others to use superannuation savings for the care of children. Some younger carers have given up study and employment to provide care, threatening their own life opportunities.

### The Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers

The *Parliamentary Friends of Grandparent and Kinship Carers* provides a non-partisan forum for MPs to meet and interact with grandparent and kinship carers on matters relating to care of the kin children they are raising.

[www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Friendship/Previous\\_Parliament\\_Friendship\\_Groups](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Friendship/Previous_Parliament_Friendship_Groups)

The Friends group was re-registered in early 2023 for the 47<sup>th</sup> Parliament, with Co-Convenors Tracey Roberts MP (Labor), Senator Dean Smith (Liberal) and Senator Janet Rice (Greens). Senator Carol Brown, a previous Co-Convenor, is a continuing member of the Friends group.

## Senate Inquiries

*2014 Senate Inquiry into Grandparents raising Grandchildren*

*2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care*

Both Inquiries were chaired by Senator Rachel Siewart (Greens). Both made Recommendations to improve the lives of kinship care families. **Little progress has been made with implementation.**

## What can Federal Parliament do?

### 1. Amend the Carer Recognition Act 2010 to recognise all kinship carers

The 2012 Queensland Act recognises all grandparent carers. The Tasmanian Act recognises all informal kinship carers but not formal kinship carers. The ACT Act and the Victorian Act recognise all formal kinship carers only. It is time to be inclusive; States/Territories may follow.

### 2. Pass legislation to rename the Foster Child Health Care Card

<https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/foster-child-health-care-card>

This Health Care Card is actually available to all children in the care of grandparents and other kin. Its name is misleading, doing nothing to advise of the eligibility of children in kinship care. A possible new name might be the **Child Health Care Card (Foster & Kinship Care)**.

### 3. Establish a Commonwealth Informal Relative Caregiver Statutory Declaration

This was Recommendation 17 of the 2014 Senate Inquiry into Grandparent Care. A draft based on the **SA Informal Relative Caregiver's Statutory Declaration** is attached.

### 4. Review the Double Orphan Pension and institute an Unsupported Child's Benefit

Recommendation 34 of the *2015 Senate Inquiry into Out of Home Care* included 'increasing allowances available to relative/kinship carers'. The New Zealand Unsupported Child's Benefit provides a suitable model. <https://www.workandincome.govt.nz/products/a-z-benefits/unsupported-childs-benefit.html>

The modest Double Orphan Pension is available to children where both parents are dead, or one parent is dead and one is missing or in long-term care or incarceration. This pension has had little review since its establishment under the Whitlam Government in the 1970s. It is inappropriately named. A review should consider its name, definition, and level of payment.

### 5. Revisit other relevant recommendations of the 2014 & 2015 Senate Inquiries

The implementation of relevant recommendations would improve life circumstances of kinship carers and children in their care.

## More information

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## References

Kiraly, M. (2023). *In loco parentis*: Informal kinship care in Australia – social benefit and material poverty. *Societies* 13: 227.

Kiraly, M., et al. (2021). The nature and prevalence of kinship care: Focus on young kinship carers. *Child & Family Social Work* 26: 144-152.

Kiraly, M. (2015). A review of kinship carer surveys: The 'Cinderella' of the care system? Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies <https://aifs.gov.au/resources/policy-and-practice-papers/review-kinship-carer-surveys> accessed 13 Feb 2023. CFA Paper No. 31 2015: 1-28.

*These papers and other research material are available on request.*

## Appendices

**Appendix 1: Jill's story**

**28 May 2024**

**Appendix 2: Caryn's story**

## Appendix 1: Jill's family



1 Jill with 4 of the 6 children, Nov 2021 (photo: ABC) 2 Jill with Parliamentary delegation, Nov 2019

Jill is a 63-year-old First Nations woman with six children in her care due to severe neglect at home. Jill was part of a deputation to the Parliamentary Friends in 2019. This is her story, as told by herself.

Jill receives no financial assistance, so she works full-time in Aboriginal Legal Aid. Child Protection deemed the children to be safe with her and therefore took no further action, directing her to the Family Court where she was granted parental responsibility. She describes the costs of food, clothing, education, sports and living everyday with three teenage children as a never-ending battle. Three of the children are eligible for NDIS, but she has to pay for their specialist appointments. She has no respite apart from Out of School Hours and Vacation Care, without which she would be unable to work. She has exhausted her sick leave and carers leave and now uses annual leave instead, creating problems for school holidays when Vacation Care is closed, or the children are sick. She has been sick herself, requiring hospitalisation and generating stress for the whole family. Her relationship with her other children and grandchildren is fractured because she no longer has enough time for them. She finds the loss and grief to be unexplainable, but the pain to be very real.

Jill says that she chose this life because First Nations children in the care system are often passed around from carer to carer, usually non-Indigenous, in the process losing their identity and connection to their family and mob. In her Legal Aid work she often sees a childhood like this as leading to a journey through the justice system. She says that despite the financial, health and family costs, she would do it all again to ensure her grandchildren are safe and protected in their own family.

Jill says that the lives of informal carers would be 100% better if Child Protection would assist them financially, but she knows that will never happen, because the children are safe, and the payments are tied to a 'risk status'. She hopes that our meetings lead to change for informal carers like herself soon.

## Appendix 2: Caryn's family



1 'It was just constant at the start, bottle after bottle.' 2 Finally...graduate social worker with publication

At age 25, Caryn and her husband, with two older children, a toddler (later diagnosed as autistic) and a baby, took on the care of their infant niece. A year later, their 3 week old nephew arrived. Caryn resumed her social work studies when three of the four younger children reached school age, and graduated in 2019. Her professional interests lie in the area of children and families. She was a Keynote Speaker at the 2018 National Kinship Care Forum in Sydney, and her address was published in the 2018 Special Kinship Care Issue of *Developing Practice*. She offered a unique perspective into the challenges faced by young kinship carers and their support needs. This is her story, as she told it.

Caryn commented that she somehow thought another baby would 'just slot right in', reflecting on how ridiculous this idea was – she had no idea what she was getting into. Her husband was working; for her, it was naps, bottles, nappies 'on repeat day after day'. Her niece suffered from withdrawal as a newborn and needed syringe-feeding; she cried and shook throughout the night. Specialist services for her involved a 45-minute trip each way. The family had limited family support and a lack of adequate transport. Going out with the children was sometimes more trouble than it was worth.

Caryn had no idea how extensive the physical, social, emotional and behavioural needs of kids removed from their parents can be, or that her niece would be so affected due to a poor prenatal start in life. She didn't realise how hard it would be to survive on no sleep, and with no break from so many children close in age. She had no idea the strain that would be placed on relationships with family, friends and even her marriage. She didn't know how much her life would be put on hold. She struggled to keep up with her university studies, and deferred. She reached out to a kinship carer group, but was the only non-grandparent carer there, so she never went back. She tried to enrol the kids in daycare for some respite, but was told that because she was not their parent she could not access immunisation records. Later, she succeeded by pretending to be their mother.

Despite everything, Caryn commented that she didn't know how great it would feel to teach her speech-delayed niece sign language, and watch her use it; how happy she would feel watching all the children thrive, including 'two pretty fantastic bonus kids'; or how much pride she would feel that the family somehow managed it all on their own.

She called for inclusive language, so that *all* kinship carers 'belong', both younger and older. She commented that all kinship carers need the same support as foster carers, both financial and practical, and that the children deserve the same support as children in out of home care.