



# Informal Kinship Care

## Definitions & Research



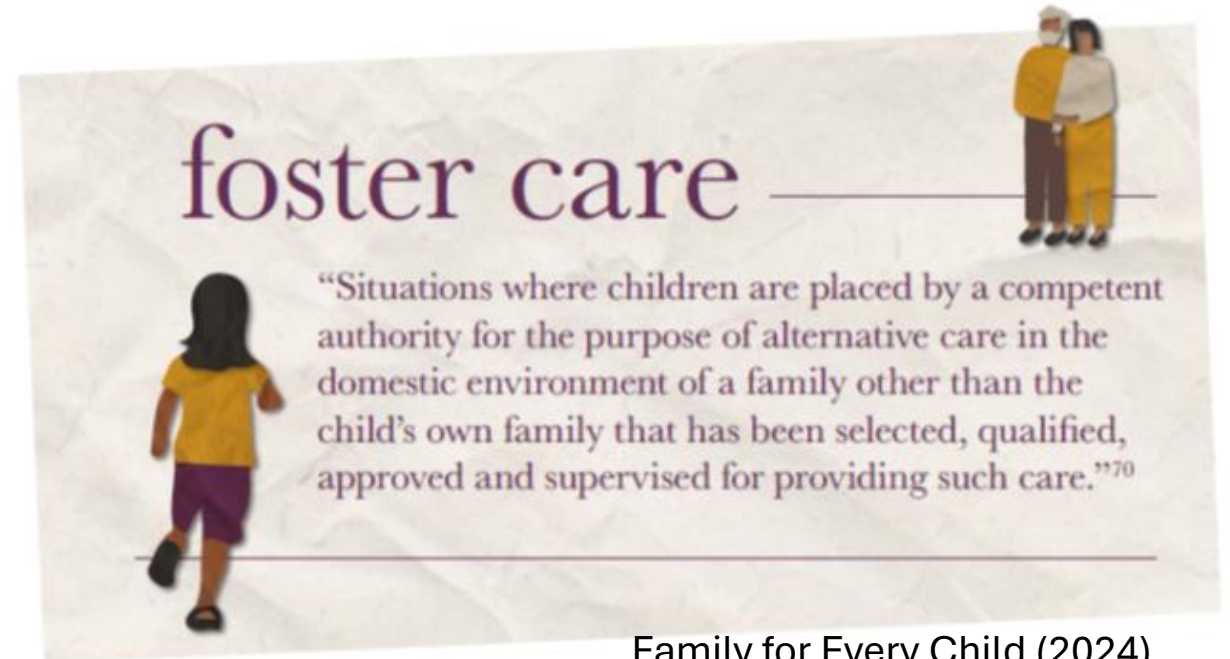
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# Definitions

- What do we mean by informal kinship care?
- Which families does this term include?
- Distinct from kinship foster care



Family for Every Child (2024)

# UN Guidelines

- **Article 29**

- ( b) Alternative care may take the form of:

- (i) **Informal care:** any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby the child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives or friends (informal kinship care)... without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body;

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- (ii) **Formal care:** all care provided in a family environment which has been ordered by a competent administrative body or judicial authority...

- ( c) alternative care may be:

- (i) Kinship care: 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

- United Nations General Assembly (2009) Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/673583?ln=en&v=pdf>

# Kinship care in Northern Ireland

## IF A CHILD OR YOUNG PERSON NEEDS TO COME INTO CARE

When a child or young person needs to be looked after, the Trust will ask the parent/s if there is a relative or friend who the child already knows and has a relationship with who may be able to care for them. If there is, the Trust will speak to them and if arrangements are suitable the child or young person will be placed with them.

Where it is not possible for the child or young person to stay with a relative or friend (known as a kinship foster carer), the Trust will then consider a Trust foster placement. This placement is referred to as short-term foster care. During this time, the Trust will work with the parent/s, the child or young person and the foster carer to see if the child or young person can return home or if a longer term care arrangement is needed.



- Formal kinship care concerns fostering arrangements made with the involvement of Social Services. Most kinship arrangements are informal, that is, privately agreed between parents and relatives/friends, with no involvement from the State (Black, 2012)

<https://adoptionandfostercare.hscni.net/>

# Kinship care in Northern Ireland

## Formal kinship foster care

- 3999 looked after children and young people
- 3359 of these children are in foster care
  - 45% with kinship foster carers
  - 28% with HSC Trust foster carer
  - 9% with independent providers

## Informal kinship care

- 8,000-10,000 children are **estimated** to live in informal kinship care in Northern Ireland... but no-one knows for sure

- 31 March 2024

# More on definitions

Table 2: Typologies of kinship care

Type of arrangement	Geen (2004)	Winokur et al (2009)	Child Welfare Information Gateway (2012)
Without the involvement of a child welfare agency	Private kinship care	Private kinship care	Informal kinship care
Child welfare agency involved but does not have legal custody	Voluntary kinship care	Informal kinship care	Voluntary kinship care
Child welfare agency involved and has legal custody	Kinship foster care	Formal kinship care	Formal kinship care

(MacDonald, Hayes, Houston, 2018)

**In Northern Ireland**

Informal kinship care

Kinship foster care – looked after child voluntary accommodated

Kinship foster care – looked after child subject of order

Formal and informal kinship care distinguished by the payment of a care allowance (Király, 2023)

# How to categorise...

## Kin who are friends not family

- Private Fostering - arrangement made between parents and someone who is not a “relative”. If lasts over 28 days requires formal notification.

## Special Guardianship or Residence Orders

- May or may not have had involvement of social services; adjudicated by court

## Kinship Diversion

- authorities play a brief role in a child’s move to a relative or friend without formalisation... avoiding need for further statutory intervention (Kiraly, 2023)

These children not ‘looked after’ but may be ‘in need’



# Why do definitions matter?

- Thresholds for state involvement in family life
- Gateway to support & finances
- Identifying research cohorts
- Meeting the needs of an invisible population
- Distributive injustice - a two-track system for children in kinship care, with one group supported financially and with social services, and much larger groups living in poverty without any dedicated support.' (Kiraly, 2023)

# Should all kinship care be formalised?

The social service workforce does not automatically need to assess, monitor, or support all kinship care arrangements. Social work intervention in kinship care families should be determined by the same criteria which guide social work involvement in any family. These vary by context, but may include, for example, children having complex needs that require intensive and coordinated support, or children being at risk of harm.

Overall, support should always be made available to kinship carers based on their needs, and regardless of legal recognition or social services intervention. This means that access to financial support or other services should not be dependent on the type of kinship care arrangement. Kinship care families should have some choice in selecting the form of care most suitable to meet their needs. This means having information about the different kinship care arrangements available in their context.

# Child welfare principles

- Minimum interference in family life
  - Duty to intervene if child at risk of **significant** harm
  - Value family privacy
- ‘Kinship defence’ (Fox-Harding, 1997)
  - Duty to support the welfare of children **in need** and promote their upbringing by family
  - Value family cohesion & integrity



I don't want [government social workers] in my life; I don't want them to come and monitor what's happening on a daily basis for us. I think I have enough experience and know I'm doing the right things: the kids are happy.

(Kinship carer, Australia)<sup>132</sup>  
Family for Every Child (2024)

- “informal kinship placements were particularly valued by families as a way of avoiding the intrusion and bureaucracy associated with state care” (MacDonald, Hayes, Houston, 2018).
- Children should not have to become ‘looked after’ & carers should not have to become formalised just to get support

# Support for informal kinship care

- What are children and carer's circumstances and experiences?
- What support might they need?
- What is the best way to deliver that support?



Table 3: Reasons for Informal kinship placement

Study	Reason for placement (with prevalence in sample where reported)						
	Parental substance misuse	Parental incarceration	Parental physical or mental illness	Child abuse or neglect	Domestic violence	Abandonment	Parental death
Backhouse and Graham (2012)	✓ majority	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Brown et al (2002)				✓			
Bunch et al (2007)	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Burgess et al (2010)	✓ half						
Chase-Goodman et al (2004)	✓			✓			
Davis-Sowers (2012)	✓			✓		✓	
Farmer et al (2013)	✓ two-thirds				✓ one-third	✓	
Gibbons and Jones (2003)	✓	✓ 20%		✓		✓	
Gleeson et al (2009)	✓ 31%	✓ 18%	✓ 5%	✓ 32%			
Gleeson and Seryak (2010)	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Kelley et al (2000)	✓ 38%	✓ 17.5%				✓ 16%	✓ 6%
Leticq et al (2008a)	✓	✓	✓				
McKenzie et al, 2010	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
McLean and Thomas (1996)	✓ most common reason	✓		✓			
Messing (2006)		✓				✓	✓
Radel et al (2010)	✓ most common reason			✓ 2nd most common reason			
Saunders and Selwyn (2008)	✓ one-third	✓	✓ one-third mental illness		✓	✓ half to three-quarters	
Wellard and Wheatley (2010)	✓ half			✓			

- multiple stressors - poverty, ill health, emotional and relational challenges and stigma
- compounded by the unplanned nature of placement – often a response to a family crisis.

# Poverty

- more likely to be on very low incomes, or have major financial difficulties than formal carers
- poverty associated with – high rate of single female carers, older grandparent carers, low paid work, unemployment, poorer neighbourhoods
- carers with low incomes faced with the additional costs of meeting the children's needs
- having to reduce their hours of employment

# Children's needs

- lack of information about the needs of children
- many children felt safe, happy, wanted, cared for and listened to.
- did not necessarily feel secure – no contingency plan
- higher than average rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties as a consequence of adverse experiences
- many assume a caring role with older or unwell kin carers

# Carer's needs

- majority of informal care provided by – and most research relates to - grandparents
- high rates of chronic illness and disability – exacerbated by caring
- lives were enriched by close relationship with their grandchild
- move from employment to full-time care, or lives experienced as ‘off-time’, led to social isolation
- Legal vulnerability – difficulty navigating formal systems
- wary of intrusive bureaucratic processes and formal child welfare systems – inhibits help-seeking

- “While financial stress is the critical issue for informal kinship carers, it is not the only difficulty they face. Myriad pressures of care include health difficulties for the large cohort of grandparent carers; challenging behaviours of traumatised children; children’s disabilities and developmental delays; intrafamilial conflict and difficult parental contact visits; mental health issues for both children and carers; social isolation of carers; and the insecurity of care without formal legal arrangements.” (Kiraly, 2023, p11)



# Relationships

- children have existing relationship with carers
- greater parental involvement in decision making and childcare compared to formal kinship placements
- collaborative co-parenting is limited
- most had contact of varying frequency with at least one parent

# Priorities for support

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alleviate poverty - financial assistance or welfare benefit reform

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family mediation to improve complex family relationships

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parenting advice and support re children's emotional and behavioural difficulties

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advocacy and advice to navigate educational, child welfare and health systems

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legal advice and funding for custody applications

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need for active outreach, peer-led support and community-based initiatives that recognise the needs and assets of informal carers

# Priorities for research

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understand the prevalence of informal kinship care

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aim for definitional clarity

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understand children's needs and perspectives

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focus on care by friends and other relatives

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what prevents families seeking and/or receiving assessment and support

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identify models of support provision that respects autonomy of carers and minimises state intervention

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map placement patterns, trajectories and longer-term outcomes

# references

- Black, L (2012) *Kinship Care, Research and Information Service Research Paper 41/12*. Belfast: The Northern Ireland Assembly
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