

Forgotten children

Children growing up in kinship care

Methodology

This report is based on a survey of the 2,000 members of the Grandparents Plus Support Network for kinship carers funded by the Big Lottery Fund. Membership of the Network is free and open to all kinship carers. Members are mostly recruited by word of mouth, online and also in response to media stories highlighting family and friends care. Others are recruited via their membership of local support groups for kinship carers.

The survey was carried out in early 2013, using both postal questionnaires and an online version via Survey Monkey. The design and content of the survey builds upon a similar survey conducted in 2011. 310 valid responses were received (a response rate of 16%) and were cleaned to remove obvious errors and inconsistencies and the paper responses were logged on Survey Monkey. The survey covers 420 children. We also followed up a sample of responses with telephone interviews to get a more detailed insight into the lives of respondents. Some quotes have been added from a separate survey conducted in 2012 with kinship carers to explore challenges around raising (parenting) kinship children.

Some questions were directly aimed at the carers, such as about their employment status or wellbeing and other questions were aimed at individual children in their care, such as the types of problems being encountered by the child. The sample may be skewed towards families with fewer kinship children, possibly because of the extra time needed for kinship carers with several children in their care to complete the survey.

In comparison with data on kinship carers from the analysis of 2001 Census data¹, it is clear that kinship carers who are not grandparents are heavily under-represented, as are those from ethnic minorities. It is likely that kinship carers who have only been in a full-time caring role for a short period are also under-represented, along with kinship carers from the most marginalised and vulnerable social groups, for example those caring for the children of prisoners and people from traveller communities.

This report focuses on the children in kinship care, and presents a summary of other findings on the demographic characteristics of kinship carers and the children they are raising to provide context.

All the names in the report have been changed.

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1. Key findings

A large, hand-drawn style number '44%' in red.

have never received help from children's services

A large, hand-drawn style number '80%' in red.

find raising kinship children more challenging than raising their own children

Just

A large, hand-drawn style number '8%' in red.

of kinship carers have received counselling or help with parenting

- 420 children growing up with kinship carers are included in the survey.
- The median age of the children is eight and a half. Most are aged between five and 15. 80% have lived with their grandparents or kinship carers for three years or longer, and 40% for at least six years.
- Almost half of children (44%) have never received help from children's services, even though they have often suffered abuse, neglect or the death of a parent.
- 53% of children had emotional and behavioural problems when they first moved in with their carers, compared to just 29% having problems at home now.
- 45% of the children are living with other family members because they have suffered abuse or neglect, and 44% because of parental alcohol or drug abuse. 11% have experienced the death of a parent.
- 80% of kinship carers find raising kinship children more challenging than raising their own children.
- Just 8% of kinship carers have received counselling or help with parenting, and only 5% have received respite.
- More than half of the children (54%) have special needs or a disability. Four in ten have emotional and behavioural problems, 16% have a learning disability and 8% have autism or Asperger's syndrome.
- Four in five children (79%) have contact with at least one parent.

51%

of kinship carers in contact with parents find it problematic

40%

of kinship carers have a disability or health condition

- Half of kinship carers (51%) who have contact with the children's parents find managing contact problematic.
- Although half of those who have contact with parents agree that it is beneficial for the children, one in seven say children are distressed by contact with parents.
- Generally kinship carers report that they find schools supportive.
- Most kinship carers who took part in the survey are aged between 45 and 64. 87% are under 65 and 43% are under 55. The median age is 56.
- 63% are living with a partner, 37% are lone carers.
- 32% of kinship carers in the survey are currently working and 22% are retired.
- Four in ten kinship carers (41%) say their main source of income is work. Three in ten (28%) rely on welfare benefits for their main source of income and a quarter (23%) are reliant on a pension.
- Four in ten kinship carers who responded to the survey have a disability or health condition. Six in ten (60%) describe themselves as tired.
- Three in ten respondents (32%) also provide care for someone else (for example their partner, an older relative or a neighbour).

2. Introduction

There are around 200,000 grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles and other relatives in the UK bringing up 200,000 - 300,000 children

A high proportion of kinship care families live in poverty

Context

Kinship care in the UK

There are around 200,000 grandparents, older siblings, aunts, uncles and other relatives in the UK bringing up 200,000 - 300,000 children² because their parents are no longer able to, often due to serious difficulties such as parental death, drug or alcohol abuse, disability or serious illness, imprisonment, domestic violence, or abuse and neglect. These carers are known as 'kinship' or 'family and friends' carers. Many of the children they are raising would be in care if their relative had not stepped in.

Since the implementation of the Children Act 1989 local authorities have been required to arrange for looked after children to live with family and friends where that is consistent with their welfare, and the Children and Young People's Act 2008 states that family and friends care should be the first option when children cannot live with their parents. This principle was restated in Statutory Guidance to local authorities on Family and Friends Care, published in April 2011.

Difficulties faced by kinship carers

A high proportion of kinship care families live in poverty, with 71% of children in kinship care experiencing multiple deprivations, compared with 29% of children in the general population³.

A survey conducted in 2010 found that 65% of kinship carers reported living on low incomes (below £300 a week)⁴. Often, poverty is a result of kinship carers giving up work when children move in. Grandparents Plus 2011 survey found that almost half (47%) of working kinship carers had given up work, and a further 31% reduced their hours, often finding it hard to re-enter the labour market especially if they are older⁵. As a result, a high proportion (41%) of those previously in work had become dependent on benefits. Studies of kinship care in the UK have also found that family and friends foster carers have lower incomes than stranger foster carers^{6,7}.

Surveys indicate that only a minority of kinship carers receive a financial allowance from the local authority or any kind of practical support⁸.

Kinship carers also report experiencing difficulties such as isolation, stress and stigma⁹, as well as high rates of long-term illness or disability. A new study found that kinship carers experience very levels of pain and depression, and that many as two-thirds of carers (67%) could be diagnosed as clinically depressed if they presented for a mental health assessment¹⁰. Kinship carers also report stress arising from managing contact with parents.

Difficulties faced by kinship children

Research shows that many children living in kinship care have suffered similar multiple traumas to those in local authority care, and a high proportion have emotional or behavioural problems or a disability, often as a result of their experiences with their birth families¹¹. A recent study concluded that 85% of children in kinship care who have had contact with children's services face difficulties at the point when they come to live with their carer¹².

Despite their early traumatic experiences, research shows that most children in kinship care have good outcomes

The high commitment of kinship carers is key to the children feeling secure and stable and making good progress

Outcomes for children in kinship

Despite their early traumatic experiences, research shows that most children in kinship care have good outcomes¹³. Children in kinship care feel loved and secure and are able to maintain links with their birth families¹⁴. Most children have a close and affectionate relationship with their kinship carers, and have similar levels of attachment to their carers as children in the wider population, despite the adversities and maltreatment they experienced with their parents¹⁵. Most children also feel confident in the knowledge that they have a family for life and can stay for as long as they need - something that is more rarely experienced by children in non-kinship foster care.

Most children are making satisfactory educational progress¹⁶ and do much better than children living in stranger foster care. They often have high educational aspirations with half planning to go to college and almost two-fifths aiming for university¹⁷.

The high commitment of kinship carers is key to the children feeling secure and stable and making good progress, but is often achieved at the expense of the kinship carers' own wellbeing and sometimes emotional health.

Surveys indicate that a high proportion of children in kinship care have special needs or a disability of some kind¹⁸. A minority of children in kinship care have serious emotional and behavioural difficulties and kinship children are more prone to anxiety and depression than children in the general population¹⁹. Their greatest area of difficulty is their ability to express and manage their emotions. However, the proportion of kinship children with behavioural and emotional difficulties is lower than that reported for children who are looked after by local authorities.

Overall kinship children are doing much better than those looked after in non-kinship foster care but, as we would expect given their previous adverse circumstances, are functioning less well than children in the general population²⁰.

By comparison, children in the care system face increased risk of poverty and other adverse outcomes in adulthood. Although outcomes for children growing up in care have improved in recent years, there remains a significant and widening gap between their outcomes and the outcomes for all children. They are over-represented in a range of vulnerable groups including those not in education, employment or training post-16, teenage parents, young offenders, drug users and prisoners²¹.

3. About the kinship carers

60%
of carers say they are tired

45%
are stressed

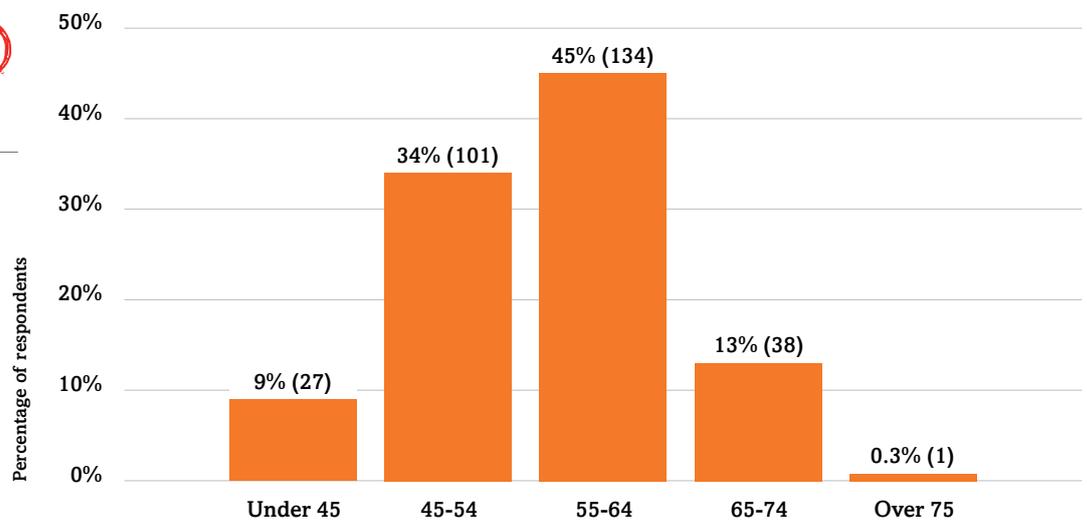
Note: Response rate 97%.

Over nine out of ten kinship carers responding to the survey are grandparents. The majority are maternal grandparents (62%). 87% are of working age (under 65) and their median age is 56. Nearly nine in ten (89%) are women. 95% of respondents are white.

80% of kinship carers find raising kinship children more challenging than raising their own children:

“I’m that much older, and more tired. Plus these children are much more stressful because of challenging behaviour arising out of the traumas they have suffered.”
Grandmother aged 66 raising grandsons aged five and three.

Graph 1: Age of kinship carers



“It was the last thing I expected to do at my age and the challenges are greater and different: going to court, knowing that the child’s father lives close by and not knowing what he could do as he is violent.”

55-year-old grandmother raising granddaughters aged 13 and five.

63% of carers who responded to the survey are living with a partner, 37% are lone carers.

Four in ten (40%) of kinship carers who responded have a disability or health condition. Six in ten (60%) describe themselves as tired, and almost half (45%) as stressed.

“I am permanently tired, always anxious. I had depression before the boys came to me... now I think it will never ever go away. I am often very, very sad about life and worry about the boys and my other grandchildren.”

Grandmother aged 57 bringing up three grandchildren on her own.

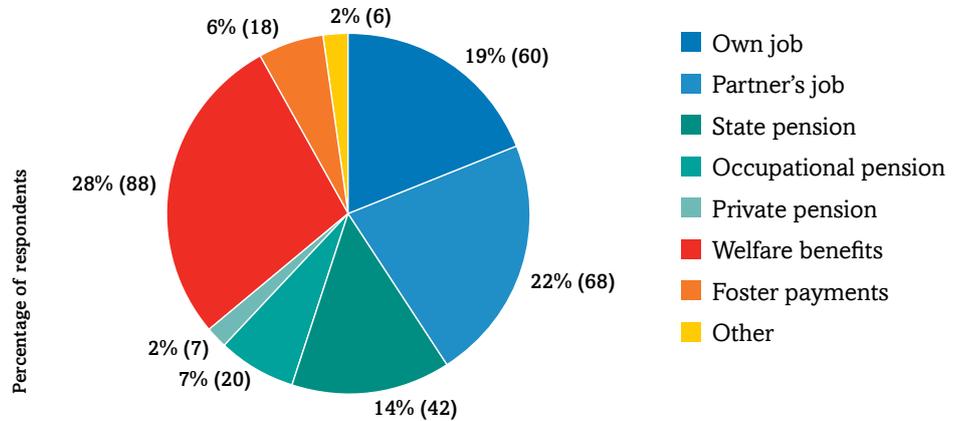
Three in ten respondents (32%) also provide care for someone else (for example their partner, an older relative or a neighbour).

Four in ten (41%) say their main source of income is their own or their partner’s job. Nearly three in ten (28%) are dependent on welfare benefits and a quarter (23%) rely on a pension for their main source of income.

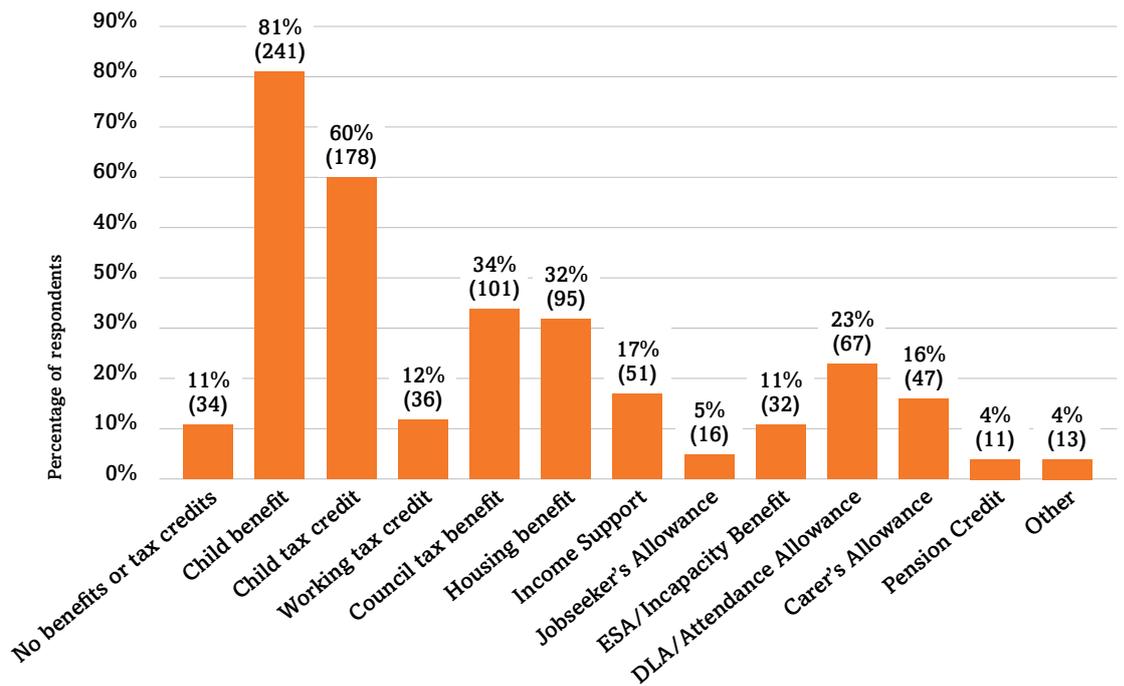
27%
of carers get a disability benefit

Note: Response rate 97%.

Graph 2: Main source of income of kinship carers



Graph 3: Type of welfare benefits and tax credits received



Note: Response rate: 96%. Carers could give more than one response

A high proportion of kinship carers receive income-based benefits such as housing benefit (32%), council tax benefit (34%) and child tax credit (60%), indicating that they are on low or very modest incomes. More than a quarter (27%) receive a disability benefit.

Many carers report they will be affected by welfare reform and benefit cuts:

“We will be affected by the ‘bedroom tax’. We have already been told to pay £12 per week extra.”

57 year old grandmother raising grandchildren aged 17 and four.

“We may lose our DLA in future which would also mean losing our mobility car”.

52 year old grandmother raising six year old grandson.

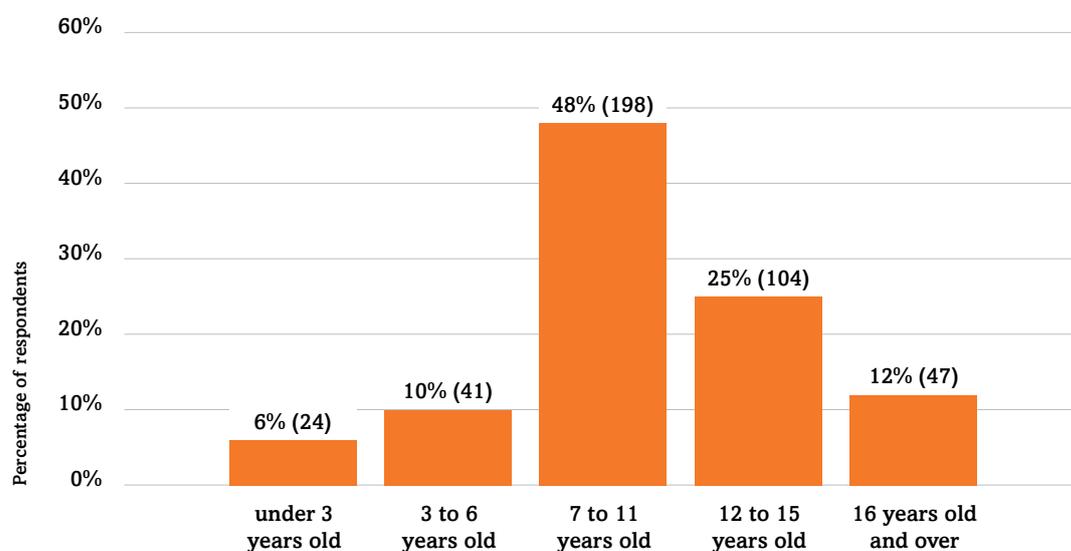
4. About the children

Age of children and duration of placement

Most of the children are aged between five and 15. The median age is eight and a half. 80% of children have lived with their kinship carer for three years or more, and 40% for six years or longer.

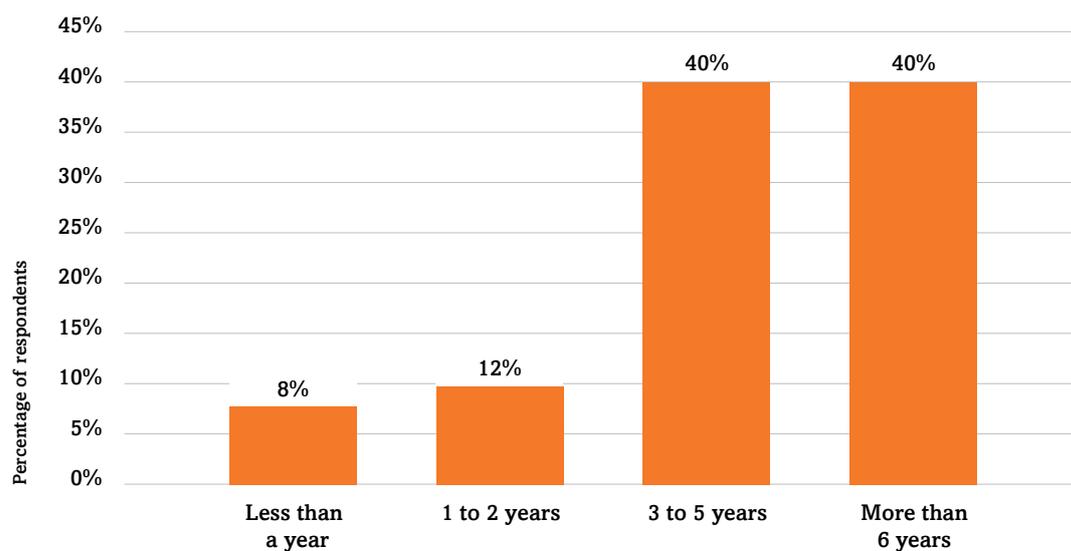
Six in ten respondents are looking after one child. The carers are mostly living in households with just one child under 18, however 30% have two children and 11% have three or more children.

Graph 4: Age of children



Note: Response rate 97%.

Graph 5: How long the children have been living with their carer



Note: Response rate 95%.

54%

of carers are raising a child with special needs or a disability

22%

of children have received mental health services (CAMHS)

Carers reported that 53% of the children had emotional and behavioural problems at home on arrival, compared to just 29% having problems at home now.

Carers often report that children's behaviour improves after they have had a chance to settle down and develop their relationship with them.

"When he came to me first, he was very bad really. He couldn't eat and was a year behind. He's definitely improved now, with the stability and everything. He's learned to talk and he has no troubles at all. He's doing well at school and he takes it all in his stride".
Grandmother aged 52-year-old raising her five-year-old grandson.

"When she arrived she would scream and she couldn't communicate. She was 18 months old then. Now, she's great, just a lovely normal child, a regular chatterbox."
72-year-old grandfather raising teenage granddaughters.

Older children may find it harder to adjust to new boundaries:

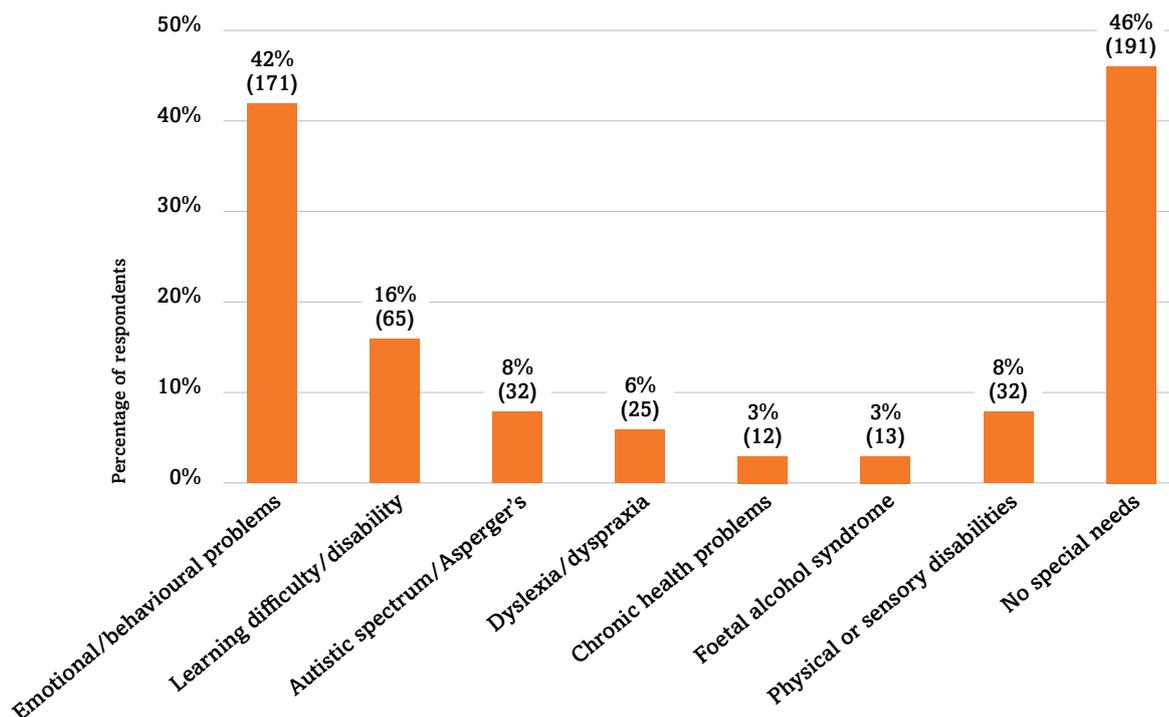
"It was different with her sisters. They came to us when they were eight and nine years old. And they really were too old. They didn't want to be told what to do; it was a struggle getting them to school in the mornings."
72-year-old grandfather raising teenage granddaughters.

Children with special needs and disabilities

More than half of carers (54%) say one or more of the children they are raising have special educational needs or a disability. Around four in ten say the child has emotional or behavioural problems, 8% are raising a child with Asperger's syndrome or autism and 16% have a child with a learning disability.

A very high proportion of the children (14%) get disability living allowance (DLA). By comparison in 2011 in England and Wales 3% of DLA recipients were aged under 18²². A high proportion of children (22%) have received support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Graph 6: Children with special needs or disabilities



Note: Response rate: 98%.
Carers could give more than one response

“I have to fight to get the help I need – there’s no help offered to carers who cope quietly.”

“I have looked after my three grandchildren for 13 years with very little or no help especially from social services.”

“The local authority said it was a private arrangement even though they placed the children with me.”

Help from children’s services

“I have to fight to get the help I need – there’s no help offered to carers who cope quietly.”
Grandfather aged 60, raising four grandchildren aged 14, 13, 12 and 10.

Just over half (56%) of kinship carers responding to the survey had received help from children’s services with their kinship children. The most common form of help received is a financial allowance – received on behalf of four in ten (43%) of children in the survey. Just 5% have received respite, despite the high proportion (14%) getting DLA for a disabled child, and only 8% get counselling or parenting support.

Nearly half of children in kinship care with emotional or behavioural problems (45%) have never received any help from children’s services.

Conversely, almost half (44%) of the children in kinship care have never received any help from children’s services and six in ten (57%) of children in kinship care in total have never received any financial help.

“We got nothing for the first six months of caring for Lucy .The local authority deemed it was a private arrangement even though it was child protection because they placed the children with me. We were left with no choice but to fold our own business to care for the children. We receive an allowance for the children now but this is nowhere near the amount paid to foster carers.”

44- year-old grandmother raising two granddaughters

“I have looked after my three grandchildren for 13 years with very little or no help especially from social services.”

61year-old grandmother bringing up three grandchildren.

There is no indication that support received is linked to children’s needs:

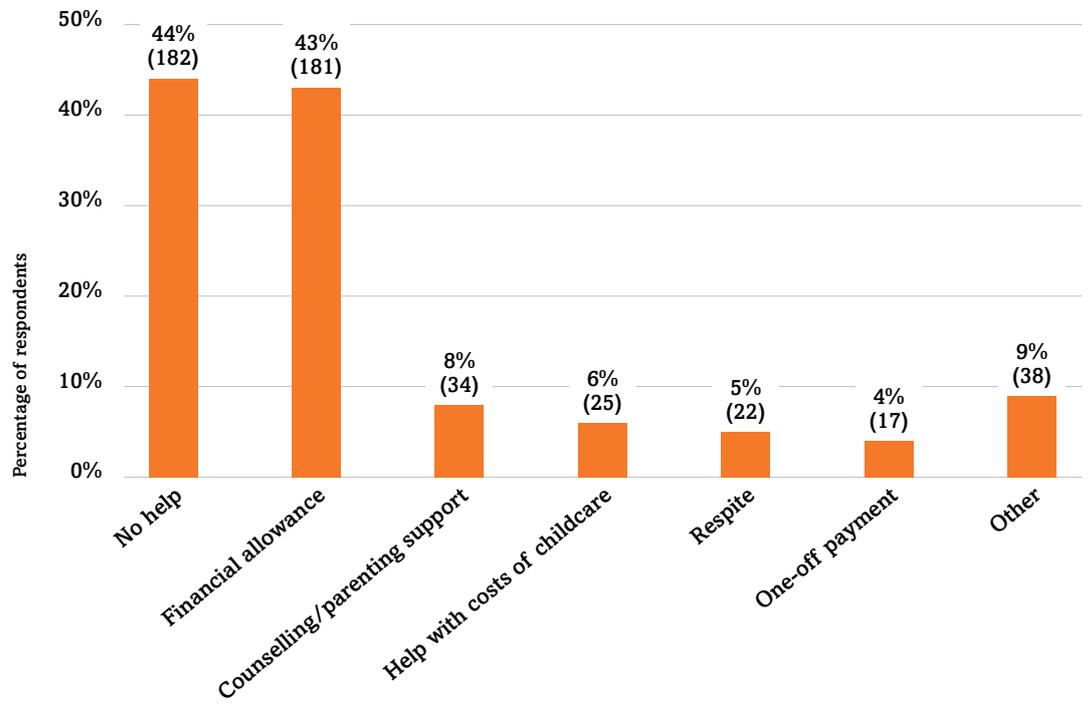
“I became a grandparent when I was 37. My two youngest children are only five and six years older than my grandchildren. I have been asking social services for help for years to no avail.

“When my grandchildren were living with their parents I and many other people alerted social services on numerous occasions to the neglect of the children. Social services never intervened even after the police drug team busted the house where they lived, leaving me no choice but to take my grandchildren away. At the time I was at university studying to become a nurse but had to drop out.

“Social services have never supported me.... I’ve been trying to get a special guardianship order (SGO) and an allowance for years. I feel social services don’t want me to have an SGO, they say I already have a residence order but I have never received an allowance.”

The majority of carers (87%) have some form of legal order, of whom 42% have a residence order, 39% have a special guardianship order and 6% are foster carers.

Graph 7: Children receiving help from children's services



Note: Response rate: 54%.
Carers could give more than one response

Overwhelmingly kinship carers find schools supportive

65%

of kinship children are achieving at or above the expected level

32%

get help with special needs

Note: Response rate: 98%.
(of those at school)

How are kinship children doing at school?

Children in kinship care are doing well at school overall, particularly given their prior adverse experiences and that so many are living in poverty. Two thirds (65%) of kinship children are achieving above or at expected level. By comparison, the percentage of pupils in all schools achieving the expected level at key stage 2 (for pupils aged 7 to 11), level 4 or above, for both English and mathematics was 79 per cent in 2012²³.

Overwhelmingly kinship carers find the school supportive, with 80% responding 'yes' to the question, 'Generally have you found school supportive?' Almost half of the children (46%) have received some sort of individual or specialist support, ranging from one -to-one tuition, mentoring, support workers and counselling.

Three out of ten (32%) of all children receive help with special needs at school. Three quarters of the children with special needs (77%) are getting the help they need at school. Three quarters (75%) of kinship carers with a child with behavioural difficulties at school have found the school supportive.

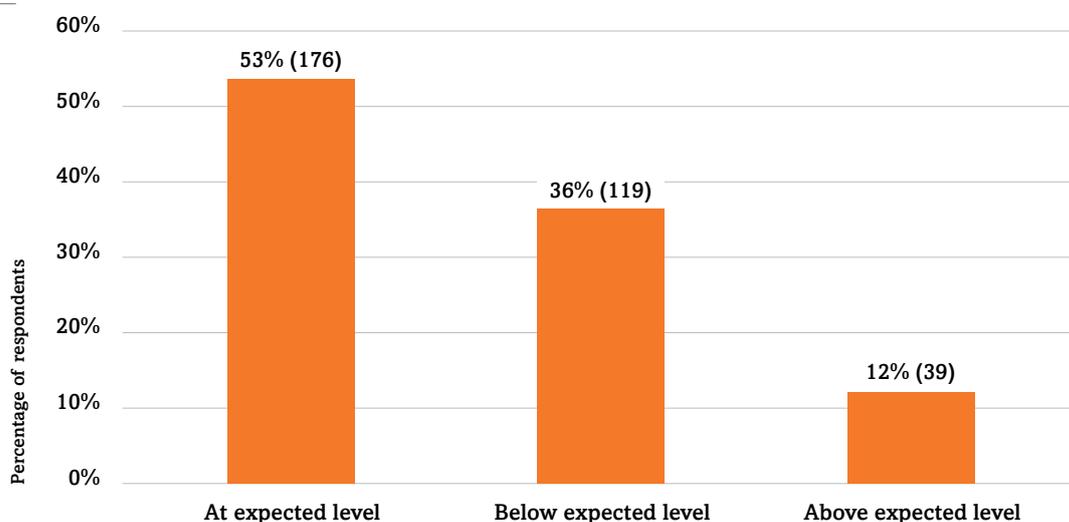
"If any help is needed, the school is extremely supportive."

Grandmother aged 41 looking after two grandchildren aged six and four.

"I have asked for help so that she can discuss issues if they come up. They have allocated a teacher to do this as and when needed."

51-year-old grandmother raising granddaughter aged seven.

Graph 8: Children's achievement at school



Contact with parents

The majority of children (79%) have contact with at least one parent. 34% have contact with both parents, a further 34% have contact with only the mother and 11% have contact with just the father.

Four in ten (37%) said the contact is beneficial for the children. Worryingly, one in seven (13%) of kinship carers report that children find contact distressing. 42% say children find it unsettling.

"Parents kept not turning up or turning up under substance use so we had to stop visits."

Grandmother aged 57 raising grandchildren aged ten, eight, five and four.

13%

of children in contact with parents find contact distressing

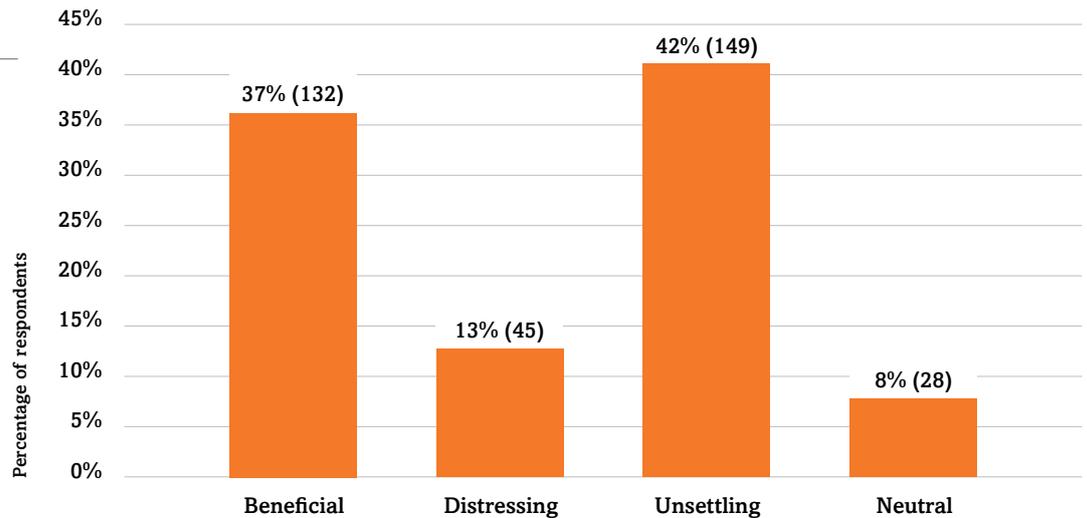
Note: Response rate: 96%.
(of those having contact)

Of those who have contact with parents, half of kinship carers (51%) find managing contact with the children's parents problematic.

"It varies between being unsettling and being OK for Kelly. Contact is more beneficial for the mum than for her. She does love her mum though."

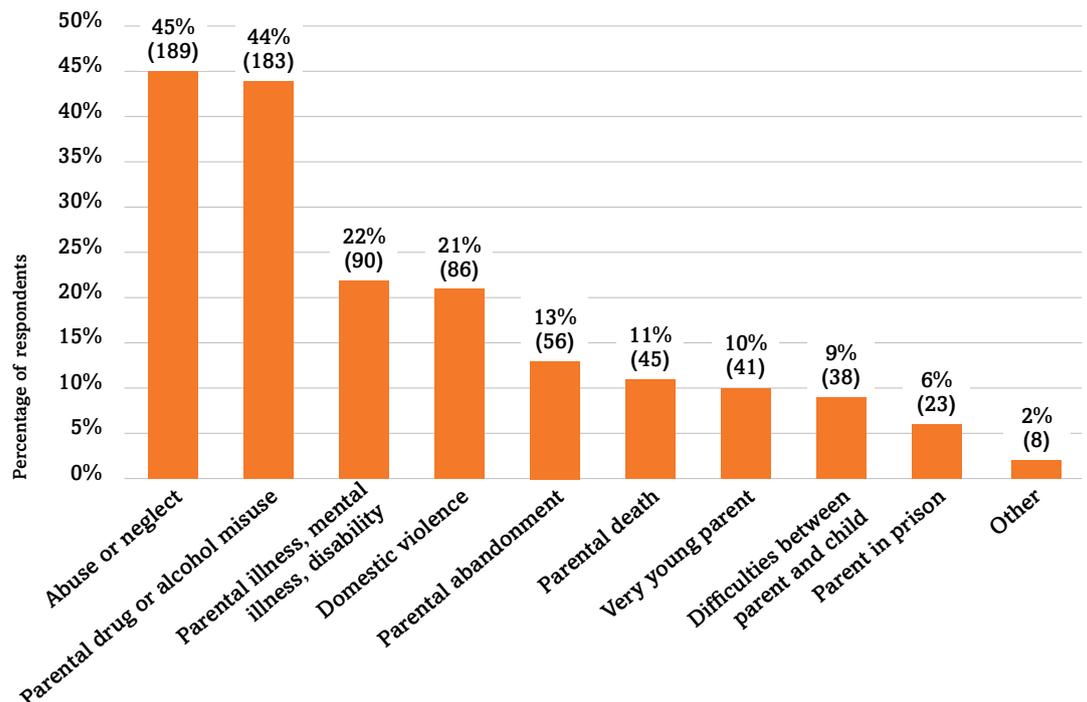
Grandmother aged 65 looking after granddaughter aged 12.

Graph 9: Impact of parental contact on the child



Abuse and neglect and parental drug or alcohol misuse are the two most commonly mentioned reasons for children coming to live with kinship carers. Often kinship carers cite multiple reasons, for example abuse and neglect and domestic violence, or substance misuse and parental illness.

Graph 10: Reason(s) why the child came to live with the kinship carer



Note: Response rate: 99%.
Carers could give more than one reason

5. Conclusions

Children in need

The report indicates that children in kinship care have experienced serious adversities and trauma before moving in with the carers, with the most common reasons given by kinship carers for taking on the care of children being abuse or neglect, parental drug or alcohol misuse, parental illness, disability or mental illness, or domestic violence. Over half of the children have special needs or a disability and one in seven are getting disability living allowance. More than one in five receive or have received support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).

Placements are stable and children show improvement over time

The majority of children in this survey have lived with their kinship carer for three years or more, and 40% for more than 6 years. Carers report that children generally settle down, with 53% of the children having emotional and behavioural problems at home on arrival, of whom just 29% have problems at home now.

Positive school experience

Generally carers feel that children are well supported at school with the majority of children with special needs receiving appropriate support. Most of the children are achieving at or above the expected level for their age, despite their prior adversities.

Kinship carers themselves experience stress, poor health and poverty

Although children in kinship care settle down and make good progress, this is often at the expense of kinship carers' own wellbeing. 80% of survey respondents found bringing up kinship children more challenging than bringing up their own children. Six in ten (60%) describe themselves as 'tired' and almost half (45%) as 'stressed'. A high proportion of respondents (37%) are lone carers and four in ten have a disability or health condition. Three in ten respondents (32%) also provide care for someone else (for example their partner, an older relative or a neighbour). Many are managing on a low income, with three in ten (28%) dependent on welfare benefits and a quarter (23%) reliant on a pension for their main source of income.

Patchy help from children's services

41% of children in kinship care with emotional or behavioural problems at home receive no help from children's services. In line with other recent research findings, this report finds that there appears to be little relationship between children's needs and the level of help they get from children's services.

Contact with parents is a major issue for kinship carers

Although many carers report that contact with parents is beneficial for children, one in seven of those who have contact with the children's parents are concerned that children find it distressing. Half (51%) find managing contact problematic. Kinship carers would welcome help and guidance on managing parental contact.

Impact of benefits cuts

The kinship carers in this survey are mainly older women aged 45 to 64 who are not working. 28% rely on welfare benefits as their main source of income and are thus likely to be disproportionately affected by welfare reform and benefits cuts.

6. Policy recommendations

Kinship carers tell us they want:

1. Recognition for the vital role they play in looking after vulnerable children and keeping them out of the care system. As a minimum they deserve to be counted – we need official data on the number of families in this situation.
2. Respect and support from service providers, including legal advice when needed and information about financial and other support they may be able to access.
3. Support from service providers based on the needs of the children and a legal duty on local authorities to conduct a 'children in need' assessment when kinship families ask for help and provide appropriate services to them. One way in which this could be done would be to introduce an amendment to the definition of 'children in need' to include children being cared for by family and friends.
4. Protection from the impact of welfare reform and cuts to local authority children's services, which may hit kinship carers and the children they are looking after (especially those who are outside the care system) particularly hard. We also want to see the introduction of a national allowance for kinship carers who look after a child for more than 28 days.
5. Better access to services for them and for the children they care for, including help with parenting skills, contact with birth parents, respite care, peer support groups and family group conferencing.
6. 'Adjustment leave': a period of unpaid leave equivalent to parental leave for a kinship carer during the first year after a child moves in, to enable kinship carers to adjust whilst keeping their jobs.
7. A period of paid leave equivalent to adoption leave when they take on the care of a child. This would give them time to manage the upheaval in their lives whilst keeping their job and would reduce the number who feel they have to give up work.

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- ¹⁸ Wellard and Wheatley, *ibid*
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- ²¹ Department for Education and Skills, 2006, *Care Matters: transforming the lives of children and young people in care*, <http://www.education.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/6781-DfES-CM%20Summary.pdf>
- ²² In 2011, the total number of children under 18 in England and Wales is 11,970,000 (ONS, 2012). Office for National Statistics. (2012) ‘*Census 2011: Usual resident population by single year of age and sex, England and Wales*’. Accessed on 30.05.2013 at: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-257414>.
In 2011, total number of DLA recipients under 18 in England and Wales is 353,880 (DWP, 2011). Department of Work and Pensions. (2012) ‘*Disability Living Allowance: all entitled cases Caseload (Thousands): Age of claimant by region*’. Accessed on 30.05.2013 at: http://83.244.183.180/100pc/dla_ent/cnage/ccgor/a_carate_r_cnage_c_ccgor_feb11.html
Thus, the percentage of DLA recipients/ total population= 3%
- ²³ Department for Education, 13 December 2012, *National Curriculum Assessments at key Stage 2 in England, 2011/2012 (revised)* SFR 33/2012. Accessed on 03.06.2013 at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/167380/sfr33-2012v2.pdf

Grandparents Plus is the national charity (England and Wales) which champions the vital role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives – especially when they take on the caring role in difficult family circumstances. We do this because we want to make children's lives better. We:

- Campaign for change so that their contribution to children's welfare is valued and understood
- Provide evidence, policy solutions and training so that they get the services and support they need to help children thrive
- Advise and support grandparents and family members who are raising children who cannot live with their parents by ensuring they have access to professional advice, information and peer support
- Advise, inform and support professionals to develop good kinship care practice.

Grandparents Plus Advice Service for kinship carers is open from 10am to 3pm Monday to Friday
0300 123 7015 advice@grandparentsplus.org.uk



We champion the wider family who care for children

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