



For family or friends who
step up to raise a child.

Kinship care and SEND

Briefing for APPG on Kinship Care SEND spotlight session | Wed 10 Sep 2025

Summary

- Children in kinship care have a high prevalence of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) – most commonly social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH) – comparable to other children's social care groups, such as adopted children and those looked after in local authority care. However, they are less likely than would be expected to be receiving formalised SEND support, including through an education, health and care (EHC) plan.
- This means the ongoing crisis in SEND is likely to be disproportionately impacting on kinship families. The consequences of poor SEND support for this cohort are significant for children, families and the state. Insights from our research and our advice and support work illustrate how challenges managing children's social, emotional and mental health needs is a key contributor to the risk of family breakdown.
- Although kinship families experience SEND system challenges common with others, their unique experiences and characteristics can exacerbate difficulties accessing support. Wider educational and therapeutic support for children in kinship care is poor and inconsistent, but schools remain a key trusted source of support for kinship carers.

What does the evidence tell us about kinship children and SEND?

1. There is a high prevalence of SEND amongst children in kinship care.

Evidence from our sector-leading surveys of kinship carers suggests that nearly half (47%) of kinship children have some kind of special educational need or disability.¹ This is substantially higher than the proportion of all pupils with special educational needs in England (18%)² and broadly similar to other social care groups, including children looked after in local authority care³. As a result, at the time of our 2023 annual survey, kinship children were around 5 times more likely to be learning in a special school than all pupils.

For children in kinship care, their primary type of need is most likely to be social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH). Our evidence finds that nearly one third (31%) of kinship children have diagnosed or suspected SEMH, reflecting their likely experiences of trauma, separation and loss before entering kinship care.⁴ This aligns with what we know about the primary type of need for looked after children and other social care groups too. Comparably, autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is by far the most common primary type of need for the overall population (34%).⁵

SEND needs for previously looked after kinship children are also similar to those for children adopted from care. For the year ending 31 March 2024, amongst those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan, SEMH was identified as the primary type of need for 37% of previously looked after children cared for under a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangements order (CAO) and for 40% of adopted children, compared to just 16% for the wider cohort.⁶

Around 1 in 10 children in kinship care have diagnosed ASD, similar to the prevalence within adopted children⁷ and around 10 times that of all 5 to 19 year olds in England⁸.

2. However, kinship children are less likely than expected to be in receipt of formalised SEND support.

Our evidence finds that kinship children in England are 3 times more likely (15%)⁹ to have an EHC plan than all pupils (5%)¹⁰. However, we would expect this to be even higher given their prevalence of SEND, especially when compared to the percentages of children from other social care groups with an EHC plan, such as children looked after for more than 12 months (32%) and children in need (30%).¹¹ A broadly similar gap between prevalence and support exists for those with SEN support status too.

The ongoing crisis in SEND support, driven by the significance of the role of EHC plans as the “*legislative guarantee of support*”¹², is therefore likely to be disproportionately disadvantaging children in kinship care. We know through our advice and support work that kinship carers often have to battle for the support their children need. They tell us they find the process of getting a diagnosis for SEND and/or support through an EHC plan to be immensely difficult, often having exhausted any and all available support available from the school or elsewhere before this.

3. The consequences of poor SEND support are significant for children, families and the state.

Without the right support, the legacy of childhood adversity can lead to significant ongoing challenges for children's wellbeing and ability to learn and progress well at school. Almost half (47%) of kinship carers told us that their children's adverse experiences had negatively impacted on their ability to cope in education.¹³ Poor support for children's social, emotional and mental health needs continues to be one of the main challenges raised by kinship carers within our advice and support work and our policy, research and campaigns activity.

The absence of support risks potential family breakdown. In our 2024 annual survey, more than 1 in 8 kinship carers (13%) told us they were concerned about their ability to continue caring for their children in the next year. The most common reason given for this concern was managing kinship child(ren)'s social, emotional and/or mental health difficulties (72%).¹⁴ Poor support also acts to prevent children living with their siblings. Nearly 1 in 5 (17%) kinship carers said they had been unable to take on the care of a brother or sister to a kinship child in their care, and nearly half (49%) of this group noted challenges managing social, emotional and/or mental health difficulties as a reason for this.¹⁵

Our forthcoming 2025 annual survey report will reveal that two thirds (66%) of kinship carers say their children regularly display behaviours they find challenging to manage – a 14 percentage point increase from 2022.¹⁶ In addition, the Family Routes study, commissioned by the Department for Education, recently found that the most common issue which special guardians and adoptive parents said had led them to consider whether to return their child(ren) to care was increasing aggression and violence towards them or siblings.¹⁷

After years of battling, Jo – 63, a special guardian from Huddersfield – secured an EHC plan for her kinship child which unlocked two hours of daily classroom support. She said:

“However, there's still nothing for her out of school hours, or in the school holidays when she struggle the most. And I fear things will get worse with secondary school approaching and hormones kicking in. We absolutely love her and would not want our lives to be any different but it's really hard. The constant fighting to get support is exhausting. She should get the help she needs.

Social services said they would take her into care if no-one stepped up for her, so obviously we did. It's been an uphill struggle to convince the authorities that she needs support. She can't concentrate and relax into learning at school because she has all these anxieties, so she's missed out on a lot. She thinks ‘if my mum doesn't like me, how can anyone else?’”

Read more about Jo's and other kinship carers' experiences with SEND in our [***Forgotten report***](#).

What are the key considerations for kinship care?

1. Kinship families have unique challenges which can exacerbate difficulties accessing SEND support.

The diversity of kinship arrangements and families means that high quality information, advice and support is crucial. Kinship care arrangements often begin after an emergency, and unlike foster carers and adoptive parents, kinship carers typically don't have a period of preparation and training on relevant topics such as understanding trauma and attachment.

The majority of kinship carers are grandparents who are less likely than parents to have had recent experience with the education system and may find it particularly challenging to understand how to access support. Others may be young adults caring for younger siblings or relatives who haven't had their own children before and who are navigating such systems unexpectedly for the first time. Nearly 4 in 10 kinship carers are caring for children on their own – more than for foster carers and adoptive parents – and they have significantly elevated rates of disability, poor health, loneliness and other caring responsibilities which impact on their ability to cope with the challenges of raising children with SEND.¹⁸

To help address this, Kinship's national offer of training and support, funded by the Department for Education, includes the delivery of free online and in-person workshops including a popular workshop on the EHCP and SEND processes.¹⁹ Queries around education are also common for kinship carers contacting our specialist advice team.

2. Existing educational and therapeutic support for children in kinship care is poor and inconsistent.

More broadly, too many children in kinship care aren't getting the educational support they need, and emotional and therapeutic support for this group is lacking. A complex hierarchy of eligibility – dependent largely on the type of kinship arrangement and whether or not the child is or was previously looked after – is dictating whether or not kinship children regularly receive help with their learning including via Pupil Premium Plus, the Virtual School, designated teacher, adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF), and other routes.

2 in 5 kinship carers tell us they aren't aware of their kinship children receiving any form of educational support, rising to 3 in 5 for those with informal arrangements. Where high-quality support is being provided, this is often due to the actions of individual teachers and schools going above and beyond any statutory obligations.²⁰ This patchwork of support contributes to poor awareness and understanding of kinship care amongst schools and other services such as family hubs, and impacts on how commonly kinship families may be signposted and supported to access help with SEND.

This is particularly problematic in the context of recent disruption and changes to the intensity of funded therapeutic support available through the adoption and special guardianship support fund (ASGSF), one of the few clear routes to therapeutic support for some kinship families.²¹

3. Schools and educational settings are a key source of trusted support for kinship families.

Last year, 44% of kinship carers told us they did not trust their local authority at all.²² Many kinship carers are informal and may have had no or very little engagement with children's services. Where they have, kinship carers most commonly rate the quality of support and information provided by their local authority as poor or very poor, and the nature of experiences with children's services and the dynamics of kinship care means that relationships with social workers can be fractured.

As such, kinship carers are far more likely to say they would turn to educational settings such as schools (38%) than the local authority (25%) for support to help them and their kinship family.²³ The potential role of schools in signposting to and providing relevant support is therefore of key importance for this group, and this should be considered in contexts where SEND support is required for kinship children.

Recommendations

Improving access to SEND support for kinship children

1. The government's approach to SEND reform, to be set out in a Schools White Paper in autumn 2025, should consider the specific needs, experiences and strengths of children in all types of kinship care arrangements given the evidence of their elevated SEND prevalence, similar to that for other social care groups.
2. The existing SEND Code of Practice recognises the importance of addressing SEND in the stability of looked after children's lives and says that local authorities *"should be particularly aware of the need to avoid any delays for looked after children and carry out the EHC needs assessment in the shortest possible timescale"*²⁴ Any future iterations of a SEND Code of Practice should establish similar expectations around timely needs assessments for kinship children as for looked after children.
3. The Department for Education should use existing datasets (e.g. SSD903 looked after children return, Ministry of Justice data, National Pupil Database etc) and methods of additional data collection, including through the School Census, to build an improved picture of the SEND characteristics and educational outcomes of children in all forms of kinship care. In the interim, the Department should regularly publish SEND data on previously looked after children cared for under special guardianship and child arrangements orders in its annual release on outcomes for children in need. These actions would also better support Virtual Schools to deliver their new duties in relation to kinship children.
4. As part of the new requirement to publish a kinship local offer, local authorities should ensure these contain tailored information for all kinship families about relevant SEND support. This should include signposting to Kinship's national offer of training and support, and should be aligned with information provided in the SEND Local Offer. The National Kinship Care Ambassador should support and challenge local authorities to do this effectively.

Improving wider support for kinship children in education

5. In the longer term, the government should introduce new legislation to harmonise the patchwork of educational support for kinship children, enhancing the level of support available through the 'triangle' of Pupil Premium Plus, the virtual school, and the designated teacher to provide a clear and cohesive offer which recognises the unique needs, strengths and experiences of kinship children.
6. In the interim, the Department for Education should explore the feasibility of an automatic opt-out system to avoid the need for eligible families of previously looked after children cared for under a special guardianship or child arrangements order to self-declare their eligibility for Pupil Premium Plus in the autumn School Census each year. This would increase the funding provided to schools to support the education of such children and enhance opportunities for kinship children to access appropriate support with SEND.
7. Teachers and other education professionals (e.g. SENCOs, ALNCOs, teaching assistants, education welfare officers etc) should receive initial and ongoing training on the needs, strengths and experiences of children in kinship care. This should include information about the impact of trauma and childhood adversity on children's development, learning and behaviour.

Further information

Please visit our [kinship care policy tracker](#) to stay updated and read our collection of recent [policy reports and briefings](#) for further information and recommendations. Of particular relevance is our 2024 report *Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health* and our Feb 2025 [submission to the Education Committee's 'Solving the SEND crisis' inquiry call for evidence](#).

You can also download our [information pack](#) for MPs for everything you need to know about how to support kinship families in your constituency and in Parliament, and visit our [kinship care constituency map](#) to learn more about the kinship families in your constituency.

About Kinship

We are Kinship. The leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for kinship carers – friends or family who step up to raise a child when their parents aren't able to. Together, let's commit to change for kinship families.

Contact

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References

¹ Kinship (2024a) [Forgotten: Support for kinship children's education and mental health](#)

² Department for Education (2025a) [Special educational needs in England: Academic year 2024/25](#) [Published 12 June 2025]

³ Department for Education (2025b) [Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England: Reporting year 2024](#) [Published 10 April 2025]

⁴ Kinship (2024a)

⁵ Department for Education (2025b)

⁶ Figures accessed via a Freedom of Information request, kindly shared by Adoption UK. Information on SEND for previously looked after children isn't routinely published by the Department for Education.

⁷ Adoption UK (2023) [The Adoption Barometer: A stocktake of adoption in the UK](#)

⁸ NHS Digital (2017) [Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2017: Autism spectrum, eating and other less common disorders](#)

⁹ Kinship (2024a)

¹⁰ Department for Education (2025a)

¹¹ Department for Education (2025b)

¹² Children's Commissioner for England (2024) [New statistics on Education, Health and Care Plans \(EHCP\) for children with special educational needs](#) [Published 29 January 2024]

¹³ Kinship (2024a)

¹⁴ Kinship (2024b) [Make or Break: Annual survey of kinship carers 2024](#)

¹⁵ Kinship (2024b)

¹⁶ Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving: Annual survey of kinship carers 2022](#)

¹⁷ Department for Education (2025) [Family Routes study: making decisions about their children's care](#)

¹⁸ Kinship (2024b)

¹⁹ For more information on Kinship's advice and support work, including our free training and events, please visit kinship.org.uk/support-and-advice.

²⁰ Kinship (2024a)

²¹ For more information on the recent changes to the ASGSF and our verdict, please visit our kinship care policy tracker: <https://kinship.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/policy-and-influencing/policy-tracker/therapeutic-support-for-kinship-families/>

²² Kinship (2024b)

²³ Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point: kinship carers in crisis](#)

²⁴ Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care (2015) [Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years](#)