



# Kinship

Submission to the Home Office's consultation on  
defining child to parent abuse

February 2024

## Introduction

Kinship is the leading national charity for kinship carers in England and Wales.

Kinship carers are the grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and other relatives and friends who step up to raise a child when their parents are unable to. There are estimated to be more than 130,000 children in kinship care arrangements in England – more than double the number in foster care – although this figure is likely an underestimate.<sup>1</sup>

*“She blamed me for taking her away from her mum. She blamed me for taking her away from her sister. And at that point I was being physically assaulted every single day, I was being kicked, punched, nipped, bitten ... I had bruises all over my ... I’ve been punched in the face at least once a week, I’ve got ... I mean I’ve still got quite a lot of scars now, but I’ve had bruises every single day.”*

Grandmother and kinship carer.<sup>2</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that Kinship's 2021 Annual Survey revealed that 62% of kinship carers believed that the children in their care had long-term physical and mental health needs, 40% of kinship carers reported their children had displayed risk-taking behaviour including self-harming and drug and alcohol misuse, and 26% of carers had experienced child on carer violence.<sup>3</sup>

Kinship's response below is based on our extensive organisational experience directly supporting thousands of kinship families for more than twenty years through our co-designed and evidence-informed programmes, free advice service, national Peer-to-Peer Support Programme, our 11,000-strong Kinship Community, and our growing network of kinship carer campaigners who are mobilising locally and nationally to secure transformational and long overdue change for kinship carers. We also draw on our own significant evidence base, comprising of robust research, evaluations, and survey evidence.

Kinship carers are at the heart of all that we do. To include additional valuable insights within this response, we have included verbatim quotes and commentary directly from kinship carers with relevant experience gathered during five in-depth individual consultation discussions around the proposed definition for child on parent, caregiver, and kinship carer violence and abuse. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, conversations were in depth, with kinship carers very generously sharing their own lived experiences of violence and /or abuse that they have experienced from their kinship children, often because of adverse early childhood experiences, trauma and the impact of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) of their kinship children, which they often have to battle for support with. Whilst the views of the kinship carers we consulted speak to the experiences we hear from kinship carers in support groups, on our advice line, and in our 1:1 support sessions, we are mindful that our response doesn't constitute the views of a representative sample.

We welcome the example used in the consultation description of an informal kinship carer and are hopeful that this consultation will enable Home Office officials and Ministers to consider more fully the impact of this definition on kinship families.

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<sup>1</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) [Kinship care in England and Wales: Census 2021](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/childpopulationandfamily/articles/kinship-care-in-england-and-wales-census-2021) Released 26 September 2023, ONS website, article. For more information on the Census figures and what they can and can't tell us, visit: <https://kinship.org.uk/news/new-census-2021-analysis-of-kinship-households-published/>

<sup>2</sup> Holt, A., Birchall, J. (2020) [Investigating experiences of violence towards grandparents in a kinship care context](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354888888). University of Roehampton.

<sup>3</sup> Kinship (2021) [State of the Nation Survey 2021](https://www.kinship.org.uk/state-of-the-nation-survey-2021)

## Headline Terminology

### Should the definition describe Group 1 as:

- Children
- **Children and adolescents**
- Something else

All kinship carers that Kinship consulted reported feeling most comfortable with ‘children and adolescents’ as this description aligns with language used by other relevant agencies such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

Kinship recommends this descriptor as it aligns with language already in use, and ensures that parents, caregivers and kinship carers explicitly know it covers children of all ages (including older children often referred to as adolescents).

### Should the definition describe Group 2 as:

- Parents
- Parents and caregivers
- **Something else**

The kinship carers we consulted did not identify strongly with either descriptor. Kinship care is unique and distinct from being a child’s parents (although the kinship carer steps into a parenting role) as the child already has a relationship with them – perhaps as grandparents, siblings, aunts and uncles or family friends. Although kinship carers are caregivers, it is not a term that any of the kinship carers we consulted used, and not a phrase used often by kinship carers more broadly.

Kinship would therefore recommend using a fuller, more inclusive descriptor, such as ‘Parents, caregivers, and kinship carers’ so that it’s completely clear that kinship carers are part of this group. We have used this longer descriptor throughout our consultation response. We would advise against using terminology such as ‘guardians’ as this only applies to individuals who have a legal order making them a guardian of a child, and excludes many other kinship carers who do not have this arrangement.

### Should the definition reference:

- Abuse
- **Violence and abuse**
- Something else

The kinship carers we consulted all felt that it was important that the definition references both violence and abuse. Kinship carers noted that in many circumstances, violence and abuse often present differently. A kinship carer with lived experience of experiencing abuse and violence explained that to them, violence usually feels reactionary and often happens in the heat of the moment, whereas abuse can feel persistent.

The kinship carers we consulted all strongly felt that as well as naming both abuse and violence, it is important to consider what is causing these behaviours and to be cautious about using either or both terms on their own without further context around potential causes in the accompanying guidance.

Further to this, kinship carers expressed that they were worried that by using the word ‘violent’ in isolation without further context to describe why a child may be behaving in this way can, and in their experience, has been used to label a child as ‘bad’ and therefore less deserving of help and support to address causes of their violent behaviour. One carer cautioned: *“We need to be careful not to label child*

*on parent abuse as just violence, as it is so much more than that, and terming a child as 'violent' often leads to social exclusion."*

### **Do you have any further comments you wish to share on the headline terminology?**

All kinship carers that we consulted felt that having agreed language, headline terminology, and a definition would help to open up conversations about child on parent/caregiver/kinship carer violence, particularly between parents/caregivers/kinship carers and professionals.

Many made comparisons with the language now used around domestic abuse and the way in which having nuanced, and well understood descriptors has helped shift society towards more open and honest conversations about different types of domestic abuse, including domestic violence.

Kinship carers consulted all shared that the stigma and shame they associated with experiencing abusive and/or violent behaviour from their child or children, and how difficult and embarrassing they found it to raise with professionals. One carer said *"When you are dealing with violence from a child – a parent is often kept silent by the embarrassment, you feel like it is your parenting skills that are lacking. You keep asking yourself 'what am I doing wrong'."*

The kinship carers we consulted told us that they would be / or were (in cases of lived experience) reluctant to ask for help from their Local Authority if they were experiencing violence or abusive behaviour from their kinship child(ren), often through fear they'll be seen as failing and risking the child being taken into care, or returned to care. This is a sentiment echoed in Kinship's Breaking Point report (2023)<sup>4</sup> which drew on survey responses from 1657 kinship carers in England and Wales and found that just under half (49%) of respondents said they did not trust at all their local authority to support them and their kinship family; only 3% said they completely trusted them.

A definition may help break down barriers to asking for help and feeling able to do this in a non-judgmental environment. One of the carers consulted reflected on the importance of shared language: *"If we could get to a place where the language is common, it would enable people to feel more comfortable and less embarrassed in talking to professionals."*

Alongside welcoming a definition, carers were keen to ensure that any such definition was inclusive and non-stigmatising – this is particularly important in kinship care, where the circumstances of carers can vary considerably (from informal carers to carers with a legal order such as a Special Guardianship Order, to carers who are Family and Friends Foster Carers). Kinship regularly supports kinship carers who face barriers to accessing support, so would strongly recommend that this is a key consideration. A kinship carer we consulted said: *"we must make sure that we aren't using language that might put anyone off accessing services or make them feel like it doesn't apply to them – the language needs to be universal and people need to feel comfortable and confident in accessing support when they need it."*

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<sup>4</sup> Kinship (2023) [Breaking Point](#)

## Description

### **Do you think the definition of CPA should include the stipulation for a 'pattern of behaviour' or align with the statutory definition of domestic abuse?**

- The description should include the stipulation for a 'pattern of behaviour'.
- The description should align with the Domestic Abuse Act and include both single incidents and a course of conduct.
- The description should not specify either but accompanying guidance should draw out the nuances.

Kinship carers that we consulted did not feel that this question was relevant to their experiences and therefore were reluctant to give an answer. Kinship would be keen to see nuances drawn out in accompanying guidance and would advise some caution between drawing too many parallels with the Domestic Abuse Act in the context of recognising fundamental differences between children and adults – in terms of legal responsibility, intention and levels of cognition and brain development.

### **Do you think this definition should include parents adapting their behaviour as a marker of abusive behaviour?**

- Yes, the description should include parents or caregivers adapting their own behaviour to accommodate a child's behaviour
- No, the description should not include parents or caregivers adapting their own behaviour to accommodate a child's behaviour
- **The description should not explicitly refer to this issue but it should be discussed in the accompanying guidance**

The individual circumstances, experiences and reflections of kinship carers provided a number of different perspectives to this question, Kinship therefore recommends Government takes into account when constructing the definition the need to balance the merits of a clear definition, with allowing enough flexibility within it to take into account different circumstances and responses to abusive and/or violent behaviour and therefore we would advocate for the third option.

It was clear from responses from kinship carers we consulted that even the notion of a kinship carer adapting their behaviour was a multi-faceted one. We heard from one kinship carer a reflection that adapting their own behaviour is *"not so much reactive as just a response to the ongoing tension."* Another kinship carer explained that *"my grandson is 11, but functions around aged 6. So, I allow for behaviour of a much younger child and my behaviour changes accordingly. Added to this is other people's reactions to 'bad' behaviour, particularly in public, I have felt under pressure to act a certain way."*

One kinship carer gave an eye-opening account of how her own behaviour adapted to deal with her increasingly violent 15-year-old. *"I found that I was 'backing down' on things far easier – like giving her money when she demanded it to avoid being attacked. As a survivor of domestic abuse from a former partner, I recognise with hindsight that it wasn't so different to how I changed my behaviour to keep my then partner happy and calm."*

It is important to acknowledge that where a child is displaying violent and or abusive behaviour related to adverse childhood experiences and/or additional needs, kinship carers are already needing to adapt their behaviour to support their child's needs, and it is therefore difficult to always differentiate between these adaptations and adaptations to specifically help cope with the behaviours that manifest as a result. For example, one kinship carer we consulted shared that she perceives adapting her own behaviour as a healthy way to react to her kinship child's challenging behaviour *"when parenting a child with additional needs and neurodivergence you have to adapt."* She went on to say *"due to my child's attachment disorder, I have to constantly reassure them where I am and what I am doing. I know that obsessive checking in is not healthy, but it is a way to reassure my child."*

**Are there other categories specific to this type of abuse which should be included in the definition?**

- Yes
- **No**

The kinship carers that we consulted felt that the categories of abuse included provided a broad enough scope to allow for their experiences to be recognised within the proposed definition.

Kinship would suggest that accompanying guidance clearly sets out examples within each category to help further understanding, such as this example of controlling and coercive abuse around the threat of involving professionals that one kinship carer shared with us. She detailed how starting at an early age, her kinship child would often threaten to *“call social services and tell them that she was being abused, as a way to blackmail us into doing what she wanted. There was no abuse, but she knew that we were terrified of Local Authority involvement given how lengthy the battle was to gain our SGO.”* The carer explained that she has met with many kinship carers who feel the same way *“we feel like we are being monitored, and our every move scrutinised. The children know that we feel like that and will sometimes use it to their advantage. It made me feel controlled and powerless.”*

**Do you feel that any of the above categories (physical or sexual, threatening, controlling or coercive, psychological or emotional, or economic) should be removed from a definition of CPA?**

- Yes
- **No**

Kinship does not support the removal of any of these categories, but recommends that physical and sexual abuse are split into two distinct categories.

The kinship carers consulted conveyed how uncomfortable they felt having these two categories together – there was a strong sense that it should be clearly separated from physical abuse (although acknowledging that the two can be experienced together) and some carers advocated removing it from the definition altogether.

There was a strong sense from the kinship carers that we consulted that in isolation, labelling abuse in this way could be very damaging for a child, and highlighted the need for any definition of behaviour as sexual to be coupled with a much deeper understanding of potential root causes (for example, a child having been exposed to or experienced sexual abuse themselves).

One carer cautioned that categorising sexual and physical abuse together could create a barrier to parents, caregivers or kinship carers raising issues, saying: *“Sexual abuse feels out of place. People will shy away from accessing support if it is too wide a category, and for me, sexual abuse risks alienating parents further because you wouldn’t want the label attached to your child.”* Another carer added that in her experience *“If there is sexualised behaviour, it is likely down to what they have previously experienced and that must be taken into account when labelling a child as being sexual abusive.”*

Kinship recommends therefore that physical and sexual abuse are separated into two distinct descriptors.

## Do you have any further comments you wish to share on the description?

In Kinship's 2022 report, *The Cost of Loving*, which reported on survey responses from 1564 kinship carers in England and Wales, more than half (52%) of carers reported that their child had behaviours which were difficult to manage, and a quarter had experienced child-on-carer violence in the last year<sup>5</sup>. It is therefore vital that kinship families' experience and expertise are listened to and acted upon as part of this consultation.

During our consultations with kinship carers around a proposed definition, and in many of the interactions we have with kinship carers through our free Advice Line, national Peer to Peer Support Service, and commissioned services run in individual Local Authorities to support kinship carers, it is clear that kinship carers strongly feel that addressing issues around child and adolescent violence and abuse must consider and appropriately reference the impact that experiencing early childhood trauma has on children and the way in which violence is often a direct response to that trauma.

A kinship carer we consulted told us: *"Violence from my kinship child is clearly rooted in his previous experience."* Another carer highlighted the challenges of managing family relationships and contact with the child's parents: *"I know that the family dynamics impact my kinship child's behaviour. Sometimes children show violence to assert some kind of control when they have very little control in other areas of their lives, like how often he gets to see his birth parents."*

Alongside trauma, many kinship children have additional needs such as special educational needs and disabilities; attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), early adversity, autism, sensory issues, attachment disorder, mental trauma, Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), and other complex needs which can adversely affect their behaviour. Furthermore, kinship families often struggle to access vital therapeutic support, which there is limited provision for, especially compared to children who have experienced similar adverse childhood experiences (such as children who are adopted). One carer commented that *"violence is sometimes a way of communicating for children with additional needs."*

As such, many kinship carers feel instinctively uncomfortable with their child being labelled or stigmatised further for abusive or violent behaviours, when they regularly stem from traumatic experiences and a lack of support for kinship families to help their children manage and process these. This is why it is crucial, that the definition must be used as an enabler for families and help them access the right support for not only addressing the violent and/or abusive behaviours but most crucially the root causes, including ensuring the right therapeutic support is available.

Kinship strongly recommends that alongside the definition and guidance, that professionals working in this area seek to understand the varying circumstances and experiences of families (including kinship families) where children are displaying abusive and/or violent behaviour towards parents, caregivers and kinship carers.

The kinship carers consulted all agreed that cohesive language to describe child on parent, caregiver or kinship carer abuse and/or violence would be helpful. One carer told us: *"The words violence and abuse are often difficult to associate with our children, sometimes nothing else fits. I don't know of a better phrase than abuse – but it feels uncomfortable. Any definition needs to take into account that feeling of constant conflict, feeling of barbed wire, ongoing high tension, and walking on eggshells."* Another carer referenced the need to recognise individual experiences, circumstances, and responses (from both children and kinship carers) and the need for flexibility within the definition: *"The definition must be 'elastic' to get its arms around children that have additional needs / experienced trauma."*

Kinship carers also felt strongly that any proposed definition must not stigmatise parents, caregivers or kinship carers and again, should serve as an enabler for accessing support rather than a further barrier to it. One carer we consulted reflected on her experience: *"When I spoke out, all I was faced with was that my kinship child must've witnessed domestic violence. It was a toxic blame culture with no understanding of his previous trauma."*

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<sup>5</sup> Kinship (2022) [The Cost of Loving](#)

## Executive summary

### To summarise Kinship's recommendations around the proposed definition:

- Kinship carers are explicitly included in the definition.
- Consideration is given to balancing clarity over providing a clear definition of abuse and or violence towards parents, caregivers, or kinship carers in order to provide a common language and enable open conversations on the issue, with flexibility around individual circumstances and responses to these behaviours.
- Significant consideration is given to ensuring guidance accompanying the definition highlights the need for supportive and nuanced conversations, and the need to avoid stigmatising narratives around the children and adolescents and/or parents, caregivers or kinship carers.
- Guidance explicitly acknowledges the need for addressing root causes of violent and/or abusive behaviour in children and adolescents, with particular emphasis on early years trauma and/or SEND and the definition should be used to unlock practical, educational and/or therapeutic support as a priority in these instances.

We are clear that a definition is a means to an end, and not an end in itself, and what is crucial is how the definition is used to unlock much-needed support for children and families.

### With this mind, Kinship would strongly support:

- Cross government working between the Home Office and relevant Children's Social Care Teams in the Department for Education to ensure that as work progresses on this definition, and the National Kinship Care Strategy is implemented, opportunities to share information, knowledge and provide opportunities for support to kinship families are maximised.
- Home Office officials ensuring the inclusion of kinship carers in any direct consultations they facilitate with people with lived experience around this definition, implementation, or the wider subject of child violence and/or abuse towards a parent, caregiver, or kinship carer. Kinship would be pleased to support with this.
- Government acting as a matter of urgency to equalise the therapeutic support available to children who need it in all kinship arrangements, regardless of legal order or the child's status, with children who are adopted. In line with this, the Department for Education should also take forward wholesale reform of the Adoption and Special Guardian Support Fund to increase access to all kinship families and enable them to access therapeutic support for their children.



## About Kinship

Kinship is the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. We're here for all kinship carers. The family members and friends who step up to raise children when their parents aren't able to. We want every kinship family to have the recognition, value and support they need and deserve.

We offer kinship carers financial, legal, practical, and emotional support and understanding from the moment they need it, for as long as they need it. Our expert advice, information and guidance helps with complicated and stressful decisions that so many kinship families have to make. We're always there to support them through difficult times and celebrate the good. Kinship carers are strong and determined. Together, they are powerful.

We help them build communities of support and action by connecting families locally and across England and Wales. We're at the heart of kinship networks, partnering with and influencing service providers, local and national government, and other organisations. We give everything we have to fight for each family and their rights, changing society until every kinship family is recognised, valued, and supported.

## Contact

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