



Permanent Care and Adoptive Families

Kith and Kin Care¹

Kith and kin carers

- Mostly (approx. 65-70%) grandparents – therefore usually 2 generations older than the children with implications for carers' health, longevity, finances etc.
- Significant minority (approx. 30-35%) of others - great aunts and uncles, aunts and uncles, older siblings, godparents, friends, neighbours.
- Mostly maternal (approx. 70%) relatives or friends
- 2046 households in Victoria (11,106 nationally) providing formal 'statutory' kith and kin care (see AIHW, 2013)
- At least four times in informal, 'non-statutory' care (see Dept of Human Services Kinship Care Program Model December 2008, attached)

Summary of issues for carers

- Becoming full time carers (once again) – grandparent/parent roles confused, less energy, retirement plans on hold, out of step with their peers, less fulfilling social life, isolation, male carers become a substitute for absent fathers.
- Grandparents' relationships with their own children – stressful (sometimes violent) relationship with parent/s of the child/ren
- Finances – always complicated. Lack of adequate finances for children OR if adequate finances, parents of the children expect to be 'bailed out' PLUS each state offers different financial support.

¹ Based on research undertaken by Dr Cas O'Neill, Research Fellow, School of Health Sciences, University of Melbourne.



- Relationships with government agencies – feelings of being judged by workers
- Other family members miss out - complex reactions from other children – ‘why not more available for the other grandchildren?’
- Respite – rarely available formally; carers rely on family and friends who may resent the situation.
- Peer support – increasingly (but not routinely) available, although not well advertised and may be hard to access in terms of transport etc.

Issues for kith and kin carers

Grandparents becoming full time carers describe the experience as:-

- Tiring
- Isolating

‘There’s a kind of isolation you feel if you’re in a situation that none of your friends are in ... I can’t talk to even my close friends about my daughter’s addiction, because no one understands it ... they either feel ill, or they’re judgemental or they give you a theory ...similarly with the grandparenting situation’

- Joyful

‘This is what has happened in our family ... if you can accept that, you do find the energy and space in your life ...the experience has been enormously enriching’

- Financially stressful (for many)
- A chance to do it better the second time round



The children may have:

- Been drug affected at birth
- Foetal alcohol syndrome
- Been malnourished
- Experienced disruption and neglect
- Learning and other disabilities
- Challenging behaviours

They will need expensive services such as:

- Counselling
- Tutoring
- Speech therapy
- Dental care

Grandparents' relationships with their own children (the children's parents)

- They have coped for many years when their child was absent, violent, erratic and in danger of dying

'If you have a drug using child, you have their death in your mind all the time'

- They may have reported their children to Child Protection, although this is a hard decision to make

'(If you do this) you destroy the relationship with your own child, which then probably exacerbates their drug behaviour'



- They have usually supported their children through numerous court appearances for theft and violent crimes
- They have often been threatened with violence, or even assaulted, by their children or their children's partners
- Custody battles are sometimes an issue and many grandparents strongly believe that Courts favour parents
- Their children want their support, yet resent needing it - and often blame their parents
- 'I don't regret having him, but I regret the situation and there's days I actually hate my daughter ... this is not what I had envisaged for myself ... my life's come to a standstill'
- The child may become a pawn between parents and grandparents

Finances

- Financial and other support differs markedly between states. There may be a role for the Commonwealth in facilitating greater consistency so that children and their families receive similar support wherever they live
- For those carers with little money, life is a huge struggle, especially for the many grandparents who do not receive state caregiver payments (and who are not even therefore counted as kinship carers - i.e. they are truly invisible)

'The government banks on that - they hope that the grandparents will automatically take them (the children) without going to Court, so that they can get out of paying'



- It is embarrassing to ask for 'welfare'
- If young people are themselves eligible for Commonwealth payments, grandparents then need to negotiate with the child for adequate contributions to household expenses.
- Victorian state carer payments are not means tested. However, they are only available if the children are clients of the Child Protection system and many non-statutory (informal) carers therefore miss out
- For those carers with adequate money, there are other complexities:-
'Things would have fallen apart very early on (if the support hadn't been provided) - however, in a sense it also let her off the hook and let him off the hook ... it's difficult to know whether we've actually arrested the development of (daughter) taking on full responsibility or not'

Relationships with government agencies

- Not being informed that their grandchild/relative is in foster care with strangers
- Spending weeks/months trying to see their grandchildren and/or gain custody of them
- Being treated as an unsuitable carer (by very young workers)

They 'think I'm awful, because my daughter's awful - they treated me like I'm a deadset shit, because my daughter's a deadset shit'

- Contact with workers who are 'intrusive and patronising'



Other issues

- When grandparents are caregivers for their grandchildren, other family members may miss out

'He (caregiver's son) resents the attention that (granddaughter) gets'
- Grandparents frequently talk of the need for respite
- Peer support is another unmet need for many
- When children return to parents after some years, grandparents and children need considerable support to cope with the separation

'Kith' care

- Kith care can be seen as an extension of neighbourliness
- Kith carers choose to care for children that they know – this is different to the 'choice' which most kinship carers make
- Kith carers may be even more invisible than kinship carers as they can be seen as simply 'helping out' for a period of time
- Relationships between kith carers and birth families can be very stressful
- Kith carers need the same support as kinship and foster carers



'Kith' care – why do it?

'I took her in because I could see she was in danger ... and I didn't want anything awful to happen to her'

'I told DHS that I wasn't going to hand her over ... I wasn't going to let her go into a hostel ... I said I want her here'.

'I always seem to help a lot of girls out, like I've had a lot of girls that have been using drugs and prostitution and I've tried to get them off the street ... trying to clean them up ... it's my nature I guess ... taking every cat off the street, every stray cat ... my life wasn't hunky dory, I had a really bad childhood'

'I still adore her ... she pops in and out of my life ... she is part of my family ... I might see her about 2 or 3 or 4 times a year, but she is still part of my family' (carer)

She 'is like my little sister, always part of the family' (carer)



Young people's views

Carers as parents

'I see her as a mother, a mother figure - she's still my grandmother, but she does the role of the mother ... it's almost a bit of both'.

'She's auntie, mother, sister, best friend, cousin - all in one'

Do they feel different to other young people?

'I never really felt like I regretted not having parents ... I was really just thankful for having my nan because I love her so much ... I got everything I ever needed from her, so there wasn't any gap ... she did everything that a normal parent would do'

'It was a bit awkward when people would ask questions about your parents - what does your dad do? ... these days if I say I don't live with my parents, I live with my grandmother, it's just normal, nothing really out of the ordinary'.

What have they gained?

Love, consistency, education, opportunities

What has made a difference?

Extended family and community support