

RESEARCH NOTES

JANUARY 2021



AFA Scotland research

AFA Scotland is involved in a number of current research projects and has recruited two new researchers to support this work: a warm welcome to Jessica Cleary and Paula Jacobs. Our Research Forum, for researchers at universities and other organisations across Scotland, continues to meet remotely and provides an opportunities for researchers to share ideas, support each other's work and make connections with practice and policy.

In this update, we highlight some examples of recent research on two topics: support for kinship carers and support for birth parents. We have focused on publications that are freely available as open access reports. If there are topics you would like to suggest for future updates, please let us know.

Support for kinship carers

Many of AFA's members have contributed to the [FACE 19 study](#) (Families' and Children's Experiences of Covid 19) at Stirling University, which highlight a number of key barriers experienced by kinship carers, as well as other children and families, during the pandemic. A briefing paper focused on kinship care is due to be published shortly, following the submission of the main report to the Chief Scientists' Office.

[Kinship and Foster Carers: How do we support them to help young people flourish?](#)

Researchers at the University of Edinburgh are currently exploring the experiences of foster and kinship carers through several connected studies, including a survey of burnout, compassion fatigue and social support in foster and kinship carers and foster and kinship carer wellbeing and child behaviour in the context of child foetal alcohol symptoms. An overview of projects and contact details can be found [here](#).

One recently completed study looked at support networks available to kinship carers using data collected through one Scottish [kinship care helpline service](#). The study identified lack of support and financial difficulties as main themes that kinship carers reported in calls to the helpline. Lack of social support seemed to be higher in older kinship cares and many callers seemed to use the helpline for emotional support, suggesting a lack of local networks. Contact with birth parents was described as problematic and identified as a main risk factor, highlighting the need for support for kinship carers to manage and facilitate birth family relations. Interestingly, callers used the helpline differently depending on their socioeconomic status (identified through postcodes given by callers). Callers from areas with low socioeconomic deprivation spend significantly more time talking to volunteers from the helpline. Kinship carers that experience higher deprivation seem to face additional barriers to accessing helpline support. An open access article with more detailed information can be found [here](#).

[Grandparents Plus: Annual Survey Findings and reflections on barriers for Kinship carers to access online support](#)

Grandparents Plus is the largest provider of kinship family support in England and Wales. Their [annual survey](#) of kinship carers was conducted between August and September 2020 with 561 responses across England, Wales and Scotland. A sub-section focussed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and changes in support with only 18% of kinship carers feeling that they had received the support they needed

from local authorities. Additionally, Grandparents Plus have undertaken some work to look at barriers experienced by older kinship carers to access [online support](#). Barriers identified included digital skills and confidence as well as access to smart phones/computers and internet data.

Additional surveys on the impact of COVID-19 on kinship carers and young people in care have been published by [CELCIS](#) and the [National Youth Advocacy Service](#).

Support for birth parents

AFA is currently involved in a research project commissioned by Scottish Government to explore support available for birth parents in Scotland and map existing supports from a range of services across Scotland. The study hopes to engage with birth parents to find out about their views on what good support could and should look like. For more information, and particularly if you are or know of a birth parent who might be interested in getting involved, please contact Ariane Critchley at Edinburgh Napier University: a.critchley@napier.ac.uk

Below are some recent research studies exploring support services for birth parents. In addition, recent research commissioned by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory has highlighted key messages about modernising contact, including the effects of digital methods of keeping in touch, available [here](#). You can also find UK based data on contact with birth parents pre and post adoption published within the [Adoption Barometer](#) and a more accessible summary from AdoptionUK [here](#).

[‘My children are my world’: Raising the voices of birth mothers](#)

Research tells us that there is often a lack of support for birth parents after children have been removed from their families. A recent study undertaken by the University of Hertfordshire explored the experiences of five birth-mothers who had received support from a counselling service post-child removal. The study emphasises the need for support for birth-mothers and that counselling support might be able to help birth-mothers to move from a situation of despair, where they feel alone and judged, to feeling trust and acceptance. In interviews participants expressed that counselling helped them to explore what it means to be a mother in the absence of their children. However, counsellors were involved in selecting participants, meaning that the sample was likely biased towards those with positive experiences of the counselling service. The article is accessible [here](#).

Similarly, a recent [study from Sweden](#) on birth parents perceptions of provided support highlights experiences of stigma and grief for birth parents. Based on 14 interviews with birth parents, the study explored the benefits of individual and group support provided locally through child welfare services. Interestingly, the study suggests that the provided support was able to help birth parents improve their relations with professionals and address emotional support needs, but that the support provided had little impact on retaining or improving the relationships between birth parents and their children.

This finding is mirrored by the [kContact study](#), a large scale quantitative and qualitative study in Australia. The kContact study was a randomised control trial conducted between 2015 and 2017, testing the effectiveness of an intervention to improve contact experiences between birth parents and children in out-of-home care. It is the largest trial to date to explore the benefit of contact support for 183 children. As part of the intervention support was provided to birth parents by case workers before and after contact visits, supporting parents to reflect on their children’s needs in the context of visits, planning for visits, reviewing what went well, identifying challenges and how to address them in the future. The intervention did not seem to result in a decrease of child externalising or internalising behaviours (the main outcome measure), nor did the intervention have a significant effect on the wellbeing of foster or kinship carers. This might be because the intervention could not always be implemented successfully due to high turnover of case workers. However, significant differences in outcomes were found in relation to a

reduction in cancellations of visits by parents and greater predictability for children and their carers. The researchers suggest that interventions need to include support for children and their carers and that support for birth parents alone might not be enough. Two open access reports are available [here](#) and [here](#).

Other research and publications

Consensus statement – the use of the concept of attachment in court proceedings

A recent item in the CoramBAAF newsletter highlights concerns expressed by judges in England about the use of the concept of attachment in care proceedings. John Simmonds, CoramBAAF's Director of Research, Policy and Development, has been part of a large international group who have recently published a consensus statement aimed at helping to resolve these issues. *Adoption goes to court: child protection and custody issues* has been published in open access form [here](#).

Infants born into care study

This is one of several current projects in Scotland that uses linked data to examine looked after children's journeys to try to shift understanding from snapshots and single points in time to understand children and young people's pathways into, through and out of care. Initial findings have now been published by the Scottish Centre for Administrative Data and can be found [here](#).

Further research, led by Linda Cusworth, is currently underway and builds on University of Lancaster's previous work in [England](#) and [Wales](#). Further related publications about a range of studies involving birth parents can be found [here](#).

Growing Up in Kinship Care

Similarly, researchers from Heriot-Watt University and the University of Strathclyde are using existing data to understand children's lives and outcomes. One project currently under way explores circumstances and outcomes of children living in formal kinship care. Information about the project can be found [here](#).

Foster carer recruitment

Dorothy Neriah is currently undertaking a PhD at the University of Edinburgh. As part of her PhD she has developed a Three-Phase Model to help recruiters improve foster carer recruitment processes. You can hear her speak about her research in this [podcast](#) hosted by IRISS.

These research notes were prepared by Paula Jacobs (paula.jacobs@afascotland.com)
Please contact Paula or Maggie (margaret.grant@afascotland.com) for queries related
to this update or other research, or to suggest topics for future updates.