

Kinship Care Ireland

A Voice - Scoping Exercise Outcome Report

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Introduction

This document will attempt to highlight the need for a platform for young people in Kinship Care to have a voice. Their voices are not voices of criticism or ungraciousness but voices of wisdom, insight and purity that shine in honesty, emotion, and unconscious humility. Their voices will be spotted throughout the document and in the appendix's (see *Appendix 1 – Our Voices*).

“They’re very good for minding us and taking us in, they didn’t have to do that.”

“We’re lucky that they did look after us cos we could’ve ended up with strangers in a strange family somewhere else.”

As a facilitator with many decades of experience working with young people, I was in awe of these young people and their maturity to clearly see and articulate how their lives are shaped by their life experiences, maybe it was the power of their stories and feelings being shared in the same space, but I was humbled and honoured to be part of this experience.

There is very little research on Kinship Care in Ireland, the most recent comprehensive piece was The Voluntary Care in Ireland Study. And there is a sense that children in Kinship Care do not have a voice. *“Our study participants confirmed that in practice, children in voluntary care do not have their views and wishes ascertained as comprehensively as children in care pursuant to court orders.” (The voluntary care in Ireland study 2020:10)*

This scoping exercise was an exploratory undertaking to get a brief snapshot of ‘life in kinship care’ for young people who experienced kinship care for a variety of reasons. Unfortunately, for various reasons, some young people find themselves in the care of their extended families and this can have complex impact on their lives. Some placements with families are a natural transition during times of crisis because very good relationships may already exist. If asked, young people may well choose these options, however, in most cases young people are not asked. *“Some participants expressed the fear that a requirement for child consent would push a lot of voluntary care cases into the court. However, the vast majority of participants still favoured giving the child the opportunity to express their views.” (The voluntary care in Ireland study 2020:10)*

Sometimes placements are strained, and families feel under pressure to support a young person as an option rather than the formal care system or residential care.

This document and some sample case studies clearly shows us that people have very different experiences in kinship care. Young people in kinship care are often a hidden cohort of young people because of the voluntary nature. A placement can often be quietly agreed between family members with voluntary parental permission or in some cases families will decide on a young person’s living arrangements because of bereavement. There was a common theme or perception in conversations with the young people throughout the process and this was, that when they went into kinship care initially, they had to be quiet and not bring attention to themselves in case they would be removed from the family.

“You were told, don’t say anything or we’ll lose you, so you had to hide things.”

“A lot of the time you are told to be quiet and not to say anything that might get you taken away, so you are always afraid if anyone asks you anything, you’re afraid to answer them in case you say something wrong and you get taken.”

The purpose of this exercise was to identify if there is an interest from young people in sharing their life experiences of living in kinship care and to identify the benefits of sharing these experiences with other young people, their carers and to influence decision makers. Sharing their stories may also influence systems that impact on their lives and help to explore the possibility of a larger and longer-term project ensuring the voices of this group in society are heard.

Principals

“Participation is a process, a way of working that engages children and young people on matters that concern them, individually and collectively. The process itself is respectful of the dignity of children and young people and the contribution they have to make, based on their unique experiences and perspectives.” (BOBF 2014-2020:31)

- The principles of Youth Work were always present to ensure youth participation was authentic and took place at a pace that was comfortable and safe for participants.
- Ensure that young people who chose to participate were fully aware of what they were engaging in and that their participation could be withdrawn at any point.
- Permission/consent was established for working as a group and sharing experiences.
- All child protection processes, procedures and practices were followed.
- GDPR was adhered to.
- Ensure permissions for recordings, photographs, video and conditions of usage of data.

Methodology

- Contact was made by email, phone calls and visits with youth projects to identify young people who may fit the criteria for participation. Nine projects were contacted five participated in this scoping exercise. Three were particularly active in the exercise.
- All informed consent was sought and given, GDPR and privacy was adhered to.
- Several individual conversations and focus/group work with both small and large groups of young people were carried out. Young people were both engaged and not engaged in youth services.
- The facilitator spoke to young people individually, in small groups and in the larger group to explain the reason for meeting them and invited them to take part with no obligation to remain and with the understanding they could exit the process at any point.
- Some sessions took place on trips out and ‘chats’ over pizza and home visits.
- Building relationships and engaging took place in conversation with the young people both in structured conversations and informal opportunistic about their experience of living in kinship care.

- Using creative and fun interactive exercises throughout the process to ensure interest and creating non-threatening environments to make the most of the sessions.
- Familiarising oneself with current policy affecting young people in care.
- Establish a working/representative group and agreed the terms of reference/guidelines of how they want to work together using their own language and confirm commitment to the project.

Terms of reference

- Using a youth work approach with the principals of Youth Work:
Voluntary Participation (most important – everything hinges on this concept).
Decision Making Process.
Taking Responsibility.
Collective Action – Working together to effect change.
Choice and not coercion.
Empowerment.
Participation – big one in Development work – involve people in their own solutions.
Passing on skills to pass on skills – capacity building.
Task and Process – equally important for people to gain skills while meeting goals.
Belief in people’s abilities to make their own decisions for themselves.

Key responsibilities of facilitator include:

- To provide Kinship Care Ireland with a report documenting the experience of young people in Kindship Care and to explore if there is an appetite for further work.
- To complete and report on the agreed work as set out in the contract.
- To seek Treoir/Kinship Care Ireland approval on any spending of expenses
- To seek Treoir/Kinship Care Ireland approval if any changes are necessary to original agreement.
- To ensure fairness consistency, equality and objectivity in all dealings with persons involved in this scoping document i.e. young people, carers, projects, Kindship Care Ireland and Treoir.
- To advise Kinship Care Ireland on the outcomes and recommendations of findings from the scoping process.
- To provide updates to Treoir who are the overseeing body for the contract of work.

The Exercise

This took place over several weeks, once young people were identified and happy to participate, transport was organised to bring them together in one venue. Small group and

individual meetings also took place to ensure young people were comfortable and happy to speak openly and safely to ensure their voices were heard.

The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making 2015-2020 aims to make sure that children and young people have a voice in their everyday lives and regarding decisions that affect their lives such as in the community, education, health and legal settings. "Children and young people have a right to have a voice in decisions that affect them, both individually and collectively..... The Government is committed to strengthening efforts to ensure that children and young people have this right and that they are supported to express their views in all matters affecting them and to have those views given their due weight, including those of 'seldom-heard' children." (BOBF 2014-2020:8)

Fears, hopes and expectations of a project like this were identified. We built relationships and got to know each other. The young people were incredibly brave and powerful in their conversations and statements. Some of their fears were that they felt a slight sense of being disloyal to their carers if they had issues to raise during the process. They were reassured that this was not an exercise to pick fault. They understood that this process was to inform future policy on how kinship care could be better supported and how it should or could be done better in the future for other young people and their carers who found themselves in this situation. And that young people would understand what 'Kinship Care' meant.

"I didn't even know that it was called Kinship Care, I didn't think anything about it."

What is 'Kinship Care' was explored and explained, none of the participants had either heard of or recognised that is how they lived and who they lived with was Kinship Care, it was just how it was, and they never really thought about it before this. They talked about their life experiences and found common ground and comfort in talking to other young people.

"Like I never had this, ye know talking to other young people face to face who were like me growing up. Its mad, you just think you're on your own but you're not."

Shared voices were also explored and what having and sharing a voice means to them, how they think best to exercise this voice and to whom and where.

"I think every young person should get the chance to do this, what we're doing here cos there's loads of people out there that don't get this chance. "

"We should open this group up to anyone that wants it."

"Even though our stories are different, they're kinda the same."

"We should do an Erasmus project and meet young people from other countries to share what it's like for us and them."

They discussed ideas of how to present their voices – possibly agree a medium i.e., arts, creative writing, drama, film making or a combination of all pulled together in an exhibition.

If they come together for a larger project, they thought a variety of mediums would be necessary so that all young people could be included who have differing talents.

During **group conversations** a lot of the conversation seemed to drift towards a sense of common understanding. There was a lot of nodding heads in agreement of what was being said by other participants and comments like “*ye same here*”.

Car conversations were opportunistic on the way home from group meetings. Thoughts and feelings were provoked during group sessions that stimulated and created much more relaxed atmosphere in a smaller group. The young people were fully aware that this conversation was part of the process. On one occasion a lengthy conversation took place about an estranged Fathers threats to come and take them from their Kinship placement.

“I’m afraid he can just get the judge to give us to him cos we can’t be adopted.”

This had created an obvious fear for the young people involved. The facilitator assured them that this was unlikely but that they could help them by telling their carers of their fears so they can feel safe. Their preference in this situation is to be adopted by their Kinship Carer.

“The views of children and young people will be sought and will influence decisions about their own lives and wellbeing, service delivery and policy priorities.” (Better Outcomes Brighter Futures 2014-2020:xiv)

With the young people’s knowledge and permission, the facilitator relayed this information to their carer. Their carer was aware of this situation and assured the young people that this would not happen. However, although reassured by their carer, the young people still felt a sense of uncertainty because they were aware that their father would have legal rights.

“The core policy of supporting children in their families strongly informs the taking of a proportionate approach to child welfare and protection which requires that receiving a child into care at parental request or the removal of a child from the care of their parents, is a measure of last resort. The period of non-parental care should be as short as possible unless the best interest of the child dictates otherwise in the particular case” (High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families 2015:9)

Another part of the conversation was their sense that sometimes adults talk openly around them a lot and directly to them about their biological families. And if their extended families dislike or disapprove of biological parents’ behaviour, the adults say this in front of them.

“Sometimes the adults say too much about other family members, like me Da. They didn’t like him, and they tell us things about him that are not nice.”

“Ye, I don’t like my Da cos of things I heard about him and I don’t think he’s a nice man and I don’t even know him.”

Individual Conversations were necessary to clarify some points that were made, and the facilitator sensed a need of some participants to have their own space to have a conversation about their experience. This option was offered to all participants.

Experience of Social work interventions

Conversations in relation to experiences with social workers featured regularly and needed to be mentioned as part of the participant's voice and experiences in this exercise, however, social work per se was not the focus of this piece of work. It did not present as a major factor for participants.

All participants had initial Social Work involvement due to ongoing concerns and risks raised with Tulsa Child and Family agency. In these situations, emergency interventions took place to remove the children from the care of their birth parents and temporary care was found with extended families and close family friends. Some participants became and remained subjects of voluntary care orders, the uncertainty of voluntary care orders was mentioned on several occasions by participants in the context of them feeling insecure about their future. One complex scenario which was due to parents' illness and imminent limited life span that triggered the extended family's concern of the parent's ability to care for the children and for the care of the children after the parent was deceased. In this situation a planned meeting took place around the older sibling with social work and community structures to support them to take on the care of the younger siblings.

Social work involvement for some participants was initially through concerns for their welfare which meant that social work engagement was at a time of turmoil and upset for them and this was associated with their relationships with Social Workers. There were mixed opinions amongst participants in relation to their feelings towards Social Workers. Whether this was due to a lack of understanding of the role of Social Workers or a fear and perception of Social Workers instilled from their Parents experience, nonetheless there was full agreement that *"Social Workers should not do the job of a Social Worker if they don't like kids!"*.

Constrained resources and availability of social workers impacts on the service to young people. Some young people said that they understood social workers must do their job and they felt that a social worker's job was to get them help and to protect them but some participants felt that some of them did not really care and were just doing their jobs.

"Sometimes Social Workers are just doing their jobs, but not with care or love for you as a child, they just have to get their job done."

"If Social Workers want to work with you, they should really believe in you and know you properly."

"Some good Social Workers & some bad"

"I was terrified of Social Workers"

Some of the participants understood that they can seek support from social work services to help them move into their adulthood with third level education grants. In some cases, it was felt that social worker services would also support them to get their own housing.

"I have had Social Workers all my life, loads of them."

However, there was an overall lack of knowledge and understanding of social work role in their lives. It was felt that if there was a follow up project that education on rights and supports available should be included for all young people who find themselves in their situations.

Make up of Participants 11 in total and types of Kinship Care

(1 participant left the process)

No.	Type of Kinship Care	Initial Social Work Involvement	
3	Care of older sibling	Initial Social Work Involvement	Informal
5	In care of Grandparents	No Social Work / Informal	None/informal
1	Family Network / close family friend	Social Work Involvement	Formal Temp
1	Living with deceased Parent's Ex partner	Social Work Involvement	Formal Temp
1	Living with Aunt	Social Work Involvement	Informal

Reasons out of 11

7	At least one parent deceased
2	Both parents deceased
6	Absent Parent for reasons of addiction

Telling their Story

The participants were asked and reminded on each occasion the reason for the get together and conversations. Each time they were asked “knowing what you know now, is there anything you would change or advise for another young person who found themselves in your situation”. They were very open and chatted about their lives to date (see appendix 3 - Sample case studies). In some situations, they had other siblings who didn't live with them, and they found it challenging that they couldn't just see their siblings when they wanted to.

“My siblings are all split up around people and that even makes things more complicated.”

“You can't just see your siblings when you want cos it has to suit everyone else first.”

“You're always being watched when you meet your siblings, it feels real awkward. It's not natural and normal.”

It must always be booked and organised, not like in a normal family, and it is always supervised by somebody, this made them feel that they are always being watched which made it hard to be normal.

Most participants felt it was different living in Kinship Care because they were scrutinised more and felt they had to perform better to prove themselves because they have more to prove. This expectation did not come from carers but more an internal feeling they

developed themselves. There was a sense that they are part of families but don't fully belong. In some cases, they felt they were treated differently than the carers own children. Not necessarily in a negative way but just different.

"You never feel you really belong."

"Even though our foster carers look after us, you are always just an add on to their own families, they treat you well but you always feel outside a bit cos you just do cos your not their kids."

There was a sense they have to achieve better, and they worried if they didn't that they would be in trouble, they also felt that everything could change in a moment.

"You need to prove yourself all the time so you're not a burden."

"I try to do my best and do extra in studies and extra in school to try be the best I can so I am not any hassle."

"You don't want to cause any trouble in case they throw you out."

"You're afraid to be a failure."

When asked why they had this sense of having to achieve or perform, they didn't really know, it was just a feeling they had. And they didn't want to be a burden on the family.

"You feel you are a burden, and you don't want to cause trouble."

"Awake in bed at night thinking about scenarios of what might happen to me."

"You become a people pleaser cos you don't want to rock the boat and cause hassle in case you get taken away."

"We have no control over anything, we just have to go along with it."

"You're always afraid. You're always afraid something might happen again."

There was unanimous agreement that they had to grow up faster and be more alert than other young people. They felt their life experiences had tuned them into their perception and alertness to the world around them. They always felt on alert and watching what was happening because they said everything can change at any time for them.

"We had to grow up quick and cop on very young."

"Even when you're small, you have to be clever and watch everything."

"We are always on alert, even now, you learn to be aware all the time and watch out for things."

"You always have to watch out for things."

"You have to be smarter than other kids cause of your situation."

During one conversation, some participants discussed how they felt judged because of their parents' behaviour. They explained that they will never touch drugs because they felt that they might have a gene that will make them susceptible to drugs so they would steer clear of anything to do with them. This may also explain why, for some participants, they feel they must achieve and perform better. On further exploration of this topic, some participants said they do not want to be like their parents.

"People judge you on your parent's stuff and make up their minds about you before they even know you. You pay for their mistakes."

"Just because your parents were addicts that doesn't mean you will be."

"I would be afraid of my life to touch drugs cause addiction is in my D&A, it's in my blood like so I would probably become an addict if I tried something."

"I will never be like my parents."

"I do everything, so I won't be like my Ma."

The participants were very wise and although they had to manage life differently from other young people, they saw that they had gained life skills that were good. When the topic of a further project was discussed, the feedback was undisputed for a yes. There was a sense that more young people should have this opportunity to meet up and share their life experiences. They felt they had something to offer each other through empathy, understanding and compassion.

"You learn to have much more empathy for people cos you know what it feels like to be alone and frightened. You feel it for them."

Outcome

The outcome of the scoping exercise is a resounding yes to a follow up project that can further explore experiences and bring them together in a project to show others. One key suggestion was an international exchange with young people from other countries to see how their systems work.

Although the scoping exercise was to see if interest existed, once common ground was established, the flow of experiences and excitement came through in abundance. A follow up project could harness this energy into a very creative project. A youth work approach will be necessary to ensure a measured and balanced journey for the young people to explore their experiences within a creative project of identity and belonging in a safe way.

Challenges

Contacting youth services for involvement of their relevant participants proved problematic because of time restraints on staffing and encouraging participation. The facilitator did not have direct contact with some of the young people so needed to rely on youth workers and key workers.

The nature of the Kinship Care participants own experiences led the conversations to family circumstances and reasons for kinship care. Participant experiences were because of parental challenges with exception of one who's parent died from terminal illness which resulted in kinship care. A more substantial next step could allow for a broader cohort of participants whose experiences may be helpful to see if a different dimension needed to be added to the outcomes. However, identifying participants is a challenge in itself because of the very nature of Kinship Care.

The participants enjoyed the process and on numerous occasions asked if they will be doing this for long. The facilitator explained it was a very short piece to see if there was interest. The short time span pushed the process a little quickly for the outcome, although it became obvious from the first gathering that participants simply enjoyed coming together with others who had similar experiences. On reflection, a longer-term piece should have been planned and agreed in anticipation of the participants enjoying the space and process to meet each other.

The scoping exercise was to explore if there was an appetite for a further project to share their experiences and have a voice, it was very clear that this was something they would like to do. However, during the facilitation process, some of the participants wanted to talk about before Kinship Care, it was important for them that people heard what their lives were like before going into Kinship Care. *(see appendix 2 - Before Kinship Care statements)*

Conclusions

Further research is required on the lived experiences of children in Kinship Care and their carers experience. Ireland has a history of using Kinship Care/private family arrangements as an option because sometimes it is available for the child and sometimes state availability of foster carers is limited. Unfortunately, Kinship Care arrangements have no legal standing and rely almost solely on families assuming full responsibility for the children in their care except for guardianship rights. However, Kinship placements have many positives that outweigh challenges for all participants in the scoping exercise.

“We’re very lucky to have people who care about us and who look after us.”

“It’s much better cos we know them, and they know us, and we can trust them.”

Private family arrangements like Kinship Care provide, the children with safety and security in their own communities with familiar surroundings and consistency with schools and local amenities and access to family networks. This is important for the children to maintain as normal as possible their familiar lives. Placements in Kinship Care are considered to be aligned with Government policy on Families. *“They are consistent with family first policies; keep children within their communities and social networks; are more likely to be in the child’s best interest as children are placed with family and therefore have more increased contact with parents and wider kin;” (Private Family Arrangements for Children in Ireland: The Informal Grey Space In-Between State Care and the Family Home 2021:1207)*

Kinship Care lacks the formality of legal status which leaves the placement vulnerable and open to a parent exercising their legal right to resume custody of a child. Also children aging out of Kinship Care have no legal rights to aftercare supports because they are not formally in state care. *“Finally, young people turning eighteen in is such placements have no entitlement to aftercare supports under the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2015 as they are not in state care.”(Private Family Arrangements for Children in Ireland: The Informal Grey Space In-Between State Care and the Family Home 2021:1208)*

Young people, while truly grateful for their families and carers, they do not feel they have a voice because there is always fear around the possibility of being removed or the placement breaking down. *“Right to be heard (Article 12 CRC): Children in voluntary care have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and their views should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” (Dr C. O Mahony - Annual Report of the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection 2020:66)*

“We have no control over anything, we just have to go along with it.”

“You are not asked what you want or need. You just have to go with whatever can be sorted for you by the adults.”

“Adults talk around us but not with us.”

Dr Roisin Farragher explains how it is important to see care from the lens of the young people who are experiencing it. *“in her article, in which she outlines her current research into how young people in the care system experience ‘family’. Her research approach*

involves listening to and enhancing the voices of young people as they describe their experiences of family relationships in care.” (Foster, issue 7 2019:3)

I believe this exercise has clearly shown us that young people in Kinship Care who took part in this process feel grateful and appreciative of the care they are given. They would however also appreciate a platform for their voice to be heard and a safe space where they can share and empathise with others who have similar life experiences.

Recommendations

- A further National action research study is required in partnership with young people with kinship care experience that should be presented to policy makers. The study should focus on the lived experiences of young people in kinship care and with past kinship care experiences and access to practical supports that may be needed to settle into new kinship home. As well as therapeutic, educational, access to early intervention/assessments, when necessary, financial, and aftercare supports.
- Fast-tracked therapeutic supports that are available and accessible for young people in kinship care where necessary, in recognition of their care experiences.
- An information guide of facts should be gathered and produced on the rights of young people in Kinship Care that can be made available to both young people and carers.
- National funding for a youth work post in Kinship Care should be secured to develop specific peer support spaces for young people in Kinship Care, in local or regional youth services. This post would co-ordinate and facilitate best practice in youth work, to include specific individualised needs of young people in Kinship Care.
- Kinship Care Ireland to create the space or platform for young people and carers to express and share their experiences in a way that listens, cares for, and explores solutions and recommendations that can be put forward to policy makers.

Compiled by Susan Menton Curtis

Appendix 1 – Our Voices

Social Workers

“Sometimes Social Workers are just doing their jobs but not with care or love for you as a child, they just have to get their job done.”

“If Social Workers want to work with you, they should really believe in you and know you properly.”

“Some good Social Workers & some bad”

“I was terrified of Social Workers.”

“Social Workers should not do the job of a Social Worker if they don’t like kids!”

“I have had Social Workers all my life, loads of them.”

“I didn’t have a social worker it was all just quiet in the family.”

“I think my social worker is sorting grants for me for college and getting a house when I turn 18.”

Participant experiences in their own words:

“Don’t say anything to anyone – hidden secrets.”

“Don’t tell anyone what goes on or you’ll be taken.”

“You were told, don’t say anything or we’ll lose you so you had to hide things.”

“Sometimes we heard too much. Too much adult conversations.”

“Adults talk around us but not with us.”

“We hear bits of things but don’t fully understand them and then worry thinking what’s it about.”

“Adults think they’re protecting you but they’re not really.”

“We have no control over anything, we just have to go along with it.”

“You’re always afraid. You’re always afraid something might happen again.”

“I wouldn’t want to go to strangers though.”

“We had to grow up quick and cop on very young.”

“Even when you’re small, you have to be clever and watch everything.”

“We are always on alert, even now, you learn to be aware all the time and watch out for things.”

“You always have to watch out for things.”

“You have to be smarter than other kids cause of your situation.”

“Awake in bed at night thinking about scenarios of what might happen to me.”

“Just pretend everything is ok so not to draw attention to your situation.”

“I used to imagine if me Da had me on a train and he got into trouble and was arrested then I would be taken by the guards and put into a home so I used to be always afraid to be with him.”

“I was with my granny and she died and me uncles took over and they were a nightmare so I just put me head down and said nothing cos I didn’t want to be taken away.”

“I didn’t even know that it was called Kinship Care, I didn’t think anything about it.”

“They’re very good for minding us and taking us in, they didn’t have to do that.”

“We’re lucky that they did look after us cos we could’ve ended up with strangers in a strange family somewhere else.”

“You become a people pleaser cos you don’t want to rock the boat and cause hassle in case you get taken away.”

“You never feel you really belong.”

“When (carer) was having a bad day, you just knew it so you’d keep yourself to yourself and stay out of the way incase they decided not to let you stay there”

“its always a worry cause you never know what the next step is going to be”

“like me and my little sister were staying with (carer) and I went on a trip, and when I got back, she was gone to a residential home down the country, I was like what, when, why wasn’t I told, so ye see, you never know”

“Even though our foster carers look after us, you are always just an add on to their own families, they treat you well but you always feel outside a bit cos you just do cos your not their kids.”

“Its hard but you just accept it.”

“I became a carer for my grand-da when my granny died cos he was sick. But I didn’t know that’s what I was, I just did it.”

“Every story is different!”

“You feel you are a burden and you don’t want to cause trouble.”

“You know they’re trying to do what your Ma and Da are suppose to do.”

“I’ve learnt that if you open up and ask for help, people will help you”

“Once you turn 18 it gets harder cos you won’t get support.”

“There’s no after care/out of care supports for you, you just turn 18 and that it then.”

“My family situation is just too complicated to explain so I just don’t.”

“My ‘aunty’ is not really my aunty but she kinda is related but auh its just too hard to explain it.”

“I was the eldest so I had to always mind my younger siblings. I had to protect them”

“My Da looked for custody and we didn’t even know him.”

“Adults are stupid sometimes, they think they’re helping but they’re not.”

“Sometimes the adults say too much about other family members, like me Da. They didn’t like him and they tell us things about him that are not nice.”

“Ye, I don’t like my Da cos of things I heard about him and I don’t think he’s a nice man and I don’t’ even know him.”

“My Da just txt my phone out of the blue and says bad things about my aunty an all.”

“My other siblings have other Dads.”

“My Da has loads of kids.”

“I’m afraid he can just get the judge to give us to him cos we can’t be adopted.”

“You don’t know who you can trust.”

“A lot of the time you are told to be quiet and not to say anything that might get you taken away so you are always afraid if anyone asks you anything, you’re afraid to answer them in case you say something wrong and you get taken.”

“Some things should be kept away from you as a kid until you’re a bit older and can understand better. You don’t comprehend everything that’s said to you so you just wait and see what’s going to happen.”

“Your expected to grow up too fast.”

“My siblings are all split up around people and that even makes things more complicated.”

“You can’t just see your siblings when you want cos it has to suit everyone else first.”

“You’re always being watched when you meet your siblings, it feels real awkward. It’s not natural and normal.”

“You are not asked what you want or need. You just have to go with whatever can be sorted for you by the adults.”

“You don’t get an option.”

“You need to prove yourself all the time so you’re not a burden.”

“I try to do my best and do extra in studies and extra in school to try be the best I can so I am not any hassle.”

“You don’t want to cause any trouble in case they throw you out.”

“You’re afraid to be a failure.”

“Ye have to try keep everything balanced.”

“Everything can change in a split second so you have to always be aware.”

“People judge you on your parents stuff and make up their minds about you before they even know you. You pay for their mistakes.”

“We’re very lucky to have people who care about us and who look after us.”

“It’s much better cos we know them, and they know us, and we can trust them.”

“Just because your parents were addicts that doesn’t mean you will be.”

“My Ma and Da were just mad, they didn’t care about anyone, never mind me.”

“I would be afraid of my life to touch drugs cause addiction is in my D&A, its in my blood like so I would probably become an addict if I tried something.”

“I will never be like my parents.”

“ye have to listen to people on the street slagging your ma and da, calling them junkies”

“I do everything so I won’t be like my Ma.”

“They didn’t pick us.”

“I don’t really remember my Ma, I was too young. She died from drugs but my Nannie doesn’t talk about it, I’d like to know some day what happened but I can’t really ask them”

“My Granda is too old to play football or anything so when we went on holidays, we just went for walks. But sometimes when me uncles came, they did stuff with me so its grand”

“They’re helping us cause of our situation.”

“You learn to have much more empathy for people cos you know what it feels like to be alone and frightened. You feel it for them.”

“I think every young person should get the chance to do this, what we’re doing here cos there’s loads of people out there that don’t get this chance. “

“We should open this group up to anyone that wants it.”

“Like I never had this, ye know talking to other young people face to face who were like me growing up. Its mad, you just think your on your own but your not.”

“Even though our stories are different, they’re kinda the same.”

“We should do an Erasmus project and meet young people from other countries to share what its like for us and them.”

Appendix 2 – Before Kinship Care arrangements were made

“I had younger brothers and sisters, so I had to mind them and try to help them not get hurt.”

“My Ma would tell the younger ones to lie for her so she wouldn’t get into trouble, but I used to tell them not to lie and tell the truth, but they were afraid cos she used to tell them they’ll be taken off her and go to strangers.”

“Like I knew my Ma’s boyfriend wasn’t a good person but there was nothing I could do so I just tried to protect the small ones as best I could.”

“There used to be fighting all the time.”

“My Ma and Da were junkies and they didn’t care about me, they picked drugs over me. If it wasn’t for my granny I would have ended up in a home so I will always be grateful to her for taking me in.”

“Our Ma was sick and when she died our sister took us. But it was alright cos we were used to her being sick, she was sick for ages. Our sister used to mind us anyway and we stayed with our auntie too.”

“Social Workers should have acted sooner and took us out of a bad situation.”

Appendix 3 – Sample Case studies

Case study 1

Participant 1 is 16 years old, eldest of six children. Herself and her siblings had different Fathers, the three youngest had the same Dad. Her Mother was parenting alone, had addiction issues with both drugs and alcohol. Other issues such as domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, and low parental education attainment were all present. Her life was constantly involving social work interventions, extractions into emergency care late at night and so on.

This chaotic life impacted on her school, social life, and mental health. She played a role in protecting her siblings and keeping them safe. She often felt alone, unsupported, and afraid to tell anyone what was going on at home. Following a number of serious events, she and her siblings were removed from their mothers care into Kinship Care under a voluntary arrangement.

She has been in Kinship Care for more than two years now and all things considered, she feels she is thriving. She is doing well at school and has begun to make plans for her future. While her ideal home life would be in a biological functioning family with her siblings, she recognises the consistency and care she is receiving in Kinship Care and is grateful for this.

She acknowledges her self-preservation characteristics of survival and separates her thoughts up into what she has control over and what she does not and that is, she says, is how she lives her life now.

She misses her siblings and wishes they could all be together.

Case study 2

Participant 2 is 18, an only child. He spent his very early years with his parents, both in active addiction. He spent a lot of time staying with his grandparents during periods of time when his parents were absent due to addiction. Domestic violence, poverty, unemployment, and low parental educational attainment all impacted on his life. His life was very chaotic, and he often didn't know if he had a bed to sleep in some nights.

His education was impacted because of absenteeism due to the chaotic life he experienced, he was too young to comprehend the seriousness of his situation and on one occasion went to stay with his grandparents and he never went back to his parents, both parents died when he was a very young teenager. He continued to live with his grandparents.

His grandmother died when he was just 14 years old, and he became his grandfather's natural carer at home. His grandfather died when he was 16 years old, and his uncles assumed care of him then. This was not a good time for him as his uncles had chaotic drug use. He involved himself in his local youth services, where he feels he got tremendous support and he continues to thrive and achieve for himself. He is attending third level college.

He recognises the care his grandparents gave to him, and he feels that he would not be alive if they had not have taken him into their care. He has developed resilience and independence. He has a desire to support other young people who find themselves in challenging life situations.

Case study 3

Participant 3 is 14 years old, living with his grandparents. His mother died from an overdose when he was just 1 year old and his sibling was 4 years old. He and his sibling went to live with their grandparents. As they grew up, his older sibling acted out with very challenging behaviours and attended CAMHS. His grandparents were older, the relationship between them and his brother broke down and they had to seek help with extended family members and his brother went to live with them. He misses his brother.

His experience with his grandparents was love and attention, although their age did not give many opportunities for him to do sports or adventurous things like other young people but they did seek local youth services to address this gap.

He wants to know about his parents and is curious about his mother but does not feel he can ask these questions of his grandparents yet. He is doing well at school and becoming more independent as he matures.

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