



Breaking the rules

Children and young people in kinship care speak about contact with their families

Authors

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Cover photograph of Dylan, age 14. *I am a Star*

'Stand tall, never give up, try, try, try again, persevere, even when people might let you down and despise you. My mum used to say to me "Even if people despise you, be like a kite and let the winds guide you". Be special in your own way, because you're special in every way. You're a star, no matter what anyone else says about you. Happiness comes from the heart, even from afar.'

From the 2011 *As Eye See It* exhibition of photographs by young people in out of home care (reproduced with permission).

Foreword



There has been a huge rise in kinship care over the last ten years, both in Australia and internationally. The Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act 2005 provides that kinship care must be considered first when a child is removed from the care of their parents. Kinship care brings many advantages. Family members – usually grandparents – hang in with children through thick and thin, and go to extra lengths to keep sisters and brothers together. Nevertheless, children’s lives remain challenging. Parents are important, but the difficulties that led to their living elsewhere may continue to complicate contact with Mum and Dad. Measures designed to ensure their safety may unintentionally make visits stilted and uncomfortable. They may miss brothers and sisters, or other family members.

Family Links: Kinship Care and Family Contact is a research project conducted by the University of Melbourne (Department of Social Work) with assistance from my Office. This report describes a part of the research study that was dedicated to exploring the views of children and young people. Twenty-one children, young people and young adults shared personal experiences that included some painful memories. They confirmed the value of being seen as normal kids and remaining within their family, including cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. They spoke of the importance of family contact, as well as the complexity of some arrangements. They stressed the need for workers to listen carefully to their views and not push them into contact arrangements they dislike or fear, or to prevent contact with family members who are important to them, unless for very good reasons.

This Office places high priority on listening to children and young people. Policy for kinship care is currently being developed, and we need the input of young people to develop good practice guidelines to support them and their families. We are grateful to these courageous young people for sharing their experiences in order to teach us how we can do better.

This is the first of three Family Links research reports; each explores a different perspective. The cover photographs of this series of reports are also the work of young people. They are drawn from the *2011 As Eye See It* photographic exhibition by young people in out of home care that is sponsored by my Office. The photos tell their own stories.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bernie Geary', with a horizontal line underneath.

Bernie Geary, OAM
Child Safety Commissioner

‘If other kids like me want to see their families, you should actually let them because it might help them in life. If Nan gets sick, I would like to live with my cousins, I don’t want to go into foster care. You need someone in your life that you’re related to. You need them there for you and you’ve always got them there to love.’

Contents

i	Foreword
2	Glossary
3	Key pointers for supporting children's family relationships
5	Background to the project
8	The research study
11	The young people's views
32	Conclusions
34	Appendix 1: Research studies that included interviews with children in kinship care
35	Appendix 2: Methodology
36	Appendix 3: The participants
37	References

Glossary

Term	Meaning
Family/kin	<p>A group of people related by blood, marriage or adoption, or who see themselves as family due to cohabitation. In addition, 'fictive family' or 'fictive kin' may include people identified as family due to caregiving or longstanding connections.</p> <p>Familial terms such as sister, cousin, uncle and daughter are sometimes used flexibly within families according to how relationships are seen.</p>
Children, young people	<p>For readability, the terms 'children' and 'young people' are often used interchangeably. 'Children' is used at times to refer to participants when under 18; 'young people' may refer to all participants.</p>
Kinship care	<p>Care within the family or friendship network of the child. Kinship care may be informal, or formally approved by child protection. This includes 'kith care' or care by family friends, that is, adults well-known to a child through family or community connections.</p>
Access	<p>A term for parental contact used in legal proceedings and in the Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, in child protection, and other legal proceedings. However, this is not a term that families normally use unless they are referring to the process as governed by a court order.</p>
Contact	<p>In this study, 'contact' has been taken broadly to include both direct (face-to-face) and indirect (telephone, electronic) contact between a child and family members with whom they do not live.</p> <p>While having its own limitations, this term is preferred in this report.</p>
Agency	<p><i>The state of being in action or of exerting power. (Macquarie, 2009).</i></p>
A comment about "parents' rights"	<p><i>Unlike the rights of the child, parental rights as addressed in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 9, 10, 14, 18 and 19) are recognised, but always subjugated to the best interests of the child and the child's developmental stage. The Convention also describes the circumstances under which organisations or people other than the parents will be obliged to assume responsibility for the child's best interests.</i></p>

Key pointers for supporting children's family relationships

1. Keep children safe

Emotional abuse needs to receive the same attention as the more evident physical and sexual abuse. Emotional abuse includes unwanted exposure to parents whom they fear or who provide traumatic reminders of past abuse and neglect.

2. Normality

Children in kinship care regard their family life as normal and as part of the diversity of Australian families. This perception challenges concepts such as 'placement', 'access', 'leaving care' and even 'kinship care' itself, as terms that may not be relevant. A model of kinship care support should not be built on the traditional model of foster care. Kinship care needs to be understood as a distinct entity that invites more normalising ways of thinking about children and families.

3. Sisters and brothers are central to children

Contact with sisters and brothers is critical to children's wellbeing; they may be the most enduring relationships they have. 'Half-siblings' are sometimes as important as 'full siblings'. Kinship support programs need to explore ways in which caregivers can be assisted to keep more siblings together, and to stay in touch with each other.

4. The wider family may offer children support for life

There are often members of children's wider family – cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents and others – who are important to children. These relationships need facilitating to promote children's wellbeing and resilience. Face-to-face assessment of relatives is important, and criminal records need careful interpretation, bearing in mind the emotional harm of severing significant relationships as well as the paramount need for safety.

5. Parental contact may be difficult for children

'Don't push' was the strongest message from the young people in this study. Support programs need to work with family contact issues, such that young people feel they have a say through the protective system and not only by flouting it.

Children's needs and wishes for parental contact may change, depending on their circumstances and development. Requirements for contact to be regular and frequent rather than flexible may be counterproductive.

Contact with family will sometimes take place outside of supervised environments whether approved or not. Children need help to make positive decisions and protect themselves as far as possible.

The practice of supervised contact visits in Departmental offices is rarely conducive to building relationships between children and their parents. Creativity is needed to provide alternative environments, including community locales and family-friendly contact centres.

Contact that is deemed so unsafe as to require intensive supervision may be counter to the needs and wishes of children, who may prefer no contact at all. Their wishes should be taken seriously. Where children do not want contact with parents, the door to contact in the future should be left open unless there are serious safety concerns. Children should not be pushed through it.

6. Support young people into adulthood

While formal kinship care support from the Department of Human Services (DHS) may cease, children may not physically leave the care of their kinship family at age 18. However, childhood trauma leaves legacies that can make early adulthood particularly difficult. Young people may need access to educational support for completing school, transition to post-secondary education, mental health services, moving out of their family's home, and support as young parents.

7. Sponsor research on kinship care by Aboriginal organisations

The *Family Links* project has identified some issues specific to Aboriginal kinship care (see Report Two). Further research is needed to ensure that the voices of Aboriginal children and young people are included in the knowledge base on kinship care.

8. Address structural changes needed in the service system

Current judicial arrangements frequently present great challenges for young people (and also their parents, despite a perceived focus on parents' rights – see Report Three). Children's views on contact with their mothers, fathers and wider families need to be heard by the courts and taken seriously.

9. Resource kinship care adequately to support children throughout their childhood

As a normalising, community-based approach to caring for children at risk, kinship care may offer the best chance of a good childhood. However, this will only be possible if kinship families are carefully assessed, supported and monitored. The age of the caregiver cohort, with associated health issues, gives rise to concerns for the future of the kinship care program. Additional resourcing may be needed if longer-term placements are to remain stable.

Investing in kinship care has the potential to ensure support to children for life. This may yield social and economic dividends by allowing children to develop into strong adults, gain employment, and reduce economic dependency and the need for health and other services. A well-supported kinship care program may also obviate the need to develop alternative, and probably more expensive, care programs in the future.

Background to the project

One morning it just got too much for me and she was with like heaps of different men; there was just men all in the house in the mornings so I went the deputy principal, like I told her about it because I was in tears ... I hated [contact with her] because Mum was the sort of person who would sort of like bribe you and manipulate you into going back whenever she'd see you ... There was always court cases still going on and I always refused to go into court because I hated seeing her. But it was hard because [they] forced this sort of stuff on and that only stopped when my grandparents got permanent care of me. So that's when things started getting better because I could move on a bit more rather than be held back. **(Tamara)**

I'm not allowed to text [my brother] at all, much. But I still do because I need contact with him. **(Brianna)**

These comments provide examples of where the child protection system sometimes struggles under difficult circumstances to regulate children's lives in order to improve safety and wellbeing. At a young age, Tamara ran away from her substance-abusing mother twice; subsequently, she struggled with forced contact visits until she was permitted to break off contact. Now 17, she has begun to visit her mother on her own terms. Brianna, 14, is aware that her brother is getting into trouble with the law, and wants him to turn his life around. However, she has a strong bond with him and keeps it alive, despite legal orders to the contrary. The propensity of children in kinship care to take the law into their own hands suggests that current child protection policy and practice is falling short in making decisions that promote healthy family relationships.

The rise of kinship care

The growth of family-centred practice in child welfare, together with the progressive shrinking of the pool of foster carers, has driven a new awareness of care options in the wider family network (Geen & Berrick, 2002) when mothers and fathers are not available. Unlike foster care, "Kinship care moves a child to a more stable part of their own family" (Brown, Cohon, & Wheeler, 2002, p.70).

There has been a significant upswing in the number of children placed by the courts into kinship care in the last decade (AIHW, 2011) with many more in informal kinship care (O'Neill, 2011). Kinship care is now enshrined in the Children, Youth and Families Act as the placement of first consideration (State of Victoria, 2005). Research has indicated that kinship care provides for greater stability of care (Connolly, 2003; Farmer, 2010), maintains children's wider family connections (Cuddleback, 2004), and improves the chances of brothers and sisters being kept together (Patton, 2003). Kinship care families do not generally see themselves as foster care or as providing 'placements', but simply as family.

Nevertheless, kinship care arrangements are often complicated by abuse and family dysfunction. Relationships become strained by conflict, threats and violence. Substance abuse creates great difficulties given its serious impact on parenting capacity (Dunne & Kettler, 2008) and on relationships between children, carers and parents, and its coexistence with family violence, often testing loyalties to the limit (Kroll, 2007). Under the right circumstances, contact with parents and other

family members is central to the maintenance of family relationships and the wellbeing of children. However, parental contact is often challenging and complex, and at times may threaten the stability of children's care (Farmer, 2010).

With multiple drivers generating the rapid growth in kinship care, research, policy and practice development have lagged behind. In particular, the knowledge base for managing and supporting parental contact in kinship care is limited (McDonald, Higgins, valentine, & Lamont, 2011).

Children's rights and participation

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) affirms the best interests of the child as paramount (Article 3). Their rights are seen to include contact with parents from whom they are separated, unless it is contrary to their best interests (Article 9). They also have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them (Article 12), their views 'being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child ... in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child'. In Victoria, the Charter for Children in Out of Home Care (Department of Human Services, 2007), which includes the right to be listened to, is in the process of being embedded into policy and programs (Berry Street Victoria, 2011). The Charter also includes the right 'To keep in contact with my family, friends and people and places that matter to me ... This means all members of my family, like brothers and sisters and grandparents ...'

The 'best interests of the child' is also the paramount consideration in the Victorian Children, Youth and Families Act (State of Victoria, 2005). Subject to this principle, parents' interests are also promoted. However, national and international literature suggests that both children and parents caught up in child protection intervention often find it difficult to express their views and have them responded to (Alpert, 2005; CREATE Foundation, 2004; Munro, 2011; Thomson & Thorpe, 2003).

As a vulnerable group, the involvement of children in care in research has challenges, but is particularly important (D. Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2005; Paxman, 2006). The CREATE Foundation represents the voices of children in care and advocates to ensure that they are heard by key decision-makers (CREATE Foundation, 2011), and to this end facilitates their participation in research.

The 2004 Audit of Australian Out of Home Care Research noted that apart from grandparent kinship carers, the least common source of data in out of home care studies was from family members, that is, 'parents and siblings' (Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004 p.22). Studies that have included the views of children point to the differing perceptions that young people and adults involved with them have about young people's situations and solutions to problems (Petr, 1992). They also point to evidence that when young people's views are taken into consideration, their placement situations improve, and with the greater control of their lives, their self-esteem is enhanced (J. Higgins, Higgins, Bromfield, & Richardson, 2007).

Literature on views of young people in kinship care

Since the Audit of Australian Out of Home Care Research (Cashmore & Ainsworth, 2004), a number of studies have solicited the views of children in kinship care (see Appendix 1). Researchers note the likelihood that recruitment of children for research participation is likely to favour those in better circumstances (Burgess, Rossvoll, Wallace, & Daniel, 2010; Messing, 2006).

There were several common themes in the findings of these studies. Many children stressed that their families were just normal, like other families (Burgess, et al., 2010; Hunt, et al., 2008; Messing, 2006). Broad, Hayes & Rushforth (2001) commented that a sense of identity through family, siblings and friends contact featured prominently in the children's views. An earlier, large US study of 1,100 children in out of home care suggested that the 100 children in kinship care overwhelmingly felt loved and safe, more so than children in other forms of care (Wilson & Conroy, 1999).

The issue of family contact arrangements surfaced in all the studies. In general, children indicated that their parents were important to them, particularly their mothers, but there was much disappointment and sometimes anger in relation to them: they often felt let down, for example by broken promises for visits. Less emotion was expressed about fathers, about whom they seemed to have lower expectations; many fathers were absent from their lives. Children varied about whether they wanted to see more or less of their parents, and whether they wanted to live with them again. Farmer and Moyers (2008) noted that some of the older children in their study had re-established contact with parents. Messing's study of children in informal kinship care had a particular focus on parental contact. Unlike the other studies, a pervasive theme was the children's hope that they might one day again live with their mothers. This may reflect a different dynamic in parental relationships where the possibility of reunification is not subject to formal processes and timelines.

Notably, all the studies found that children's contact with their siblings and wider family was important to them (Broad, Hayes, & Rushforth, 2001; Brown, et al., 2002; Burgess, et al., 2010; Downie, Hay, Horner, Wichmann, & Hislop, 2010; Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Hunt, Waterhouse, & Lutman, 2008; Messing, 2006).

The research study

The research project *Family Links: Kinship Care and Family Contact* was designed to inform the longer-term support of kinship care arrangements, and to improve children’s wellbeing by encouraging greater attention to family connections. The project had two components:

- A survey of caregivers about their experience of children’s contact with their family members.
- Focus groups and interviews with children and young people, parents, kinship carers and kinship support workers.

For this component of the study, we sought the perspectives of children and young people, and young adults who could reflect on their childhood experience. We set out to answer the following questions:

1. How well does current policy and practice manage and support family contact from the perspective of children in kinship care?
2. How can child protection and kinship services respond better to children’s expressed needs?
3. What control and supervision of family contact is needed for safety and wellbeing?

Details of the methodology appear in Appendix 2. All quotes are de-identified.

The participants

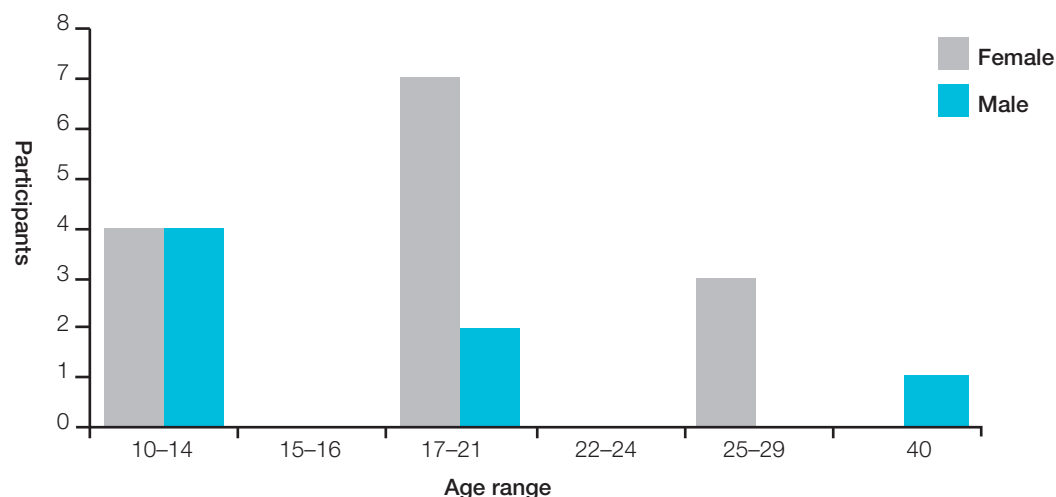
Twenty-one children, young people and young adults were interviewed. Despite active efforts to the contrary, we were unable to recruit Aboriginal children for this study. In this, we have unfortunately replicated the under-representation of Aboriginal people in current kinship care research in Australia. (However, see Report 2 for views of Aboriginal staff and caregivers).

Age groupings

The age range of participants was 10 to 29, with an outlier aged 40 (14 female and 7 male. Two pairs of cousins and a pair of sisters were among the group. Participants are listed by pseudonym in Appendix 3.

Participants fell into four age clusters. Where young people are quoted in this report, their ages are indicated in brackets.

Figure 1: Participants by age cohort and gender



Cluster 1 Eight children aged 10–14 – two girls and two boys aged 10–12, and two girls and two boys aged 13–14.

This group was, unsurprisingly, less articulate than the other young people in the study. All appeared to be in stable long-term placements which had commenced when they were very young.

Cluster 2 Nine young people aged 17–21 – seven young women and one young man aged 17–19, and a 21-year-old man.

Five participated via two focus groups; the other four individually. With insight into painful childhood experiences, and greater propensity to verbalise feelings, these were poignant discussions. The young people were dealing with current life issues, including employment, education and parenthood, against a backdrop of trauma. One was a mother; she and another young woman were pregnant.

Cluster 3 Three young women aged 25–29 – two 25-year-olds and a 29-year-old.

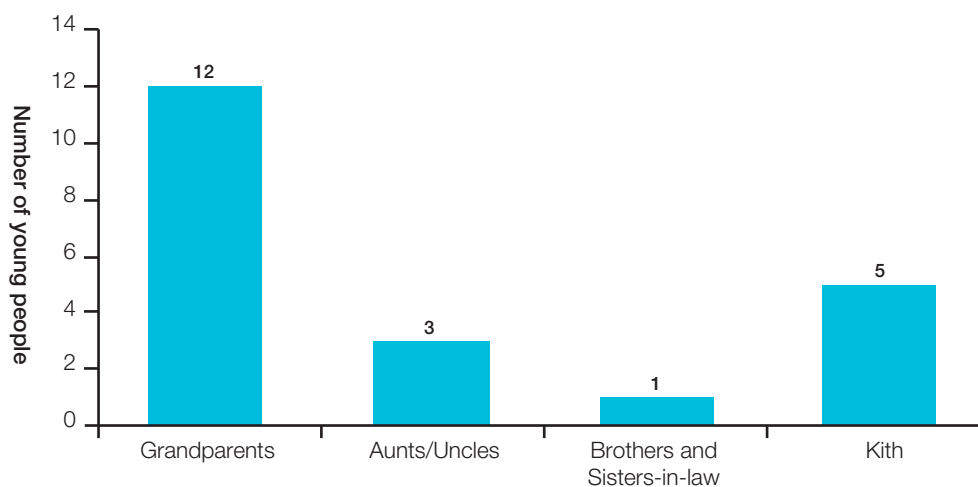
These young women were able to reflect on their care experiences with a degree of distance. Two were struggling with mental health impacts of childhood trauma. Two were mothers.

Cluster 4 A man aged 40. This man is a social worker with experience of working in child protection. He was included due to this unique perspective, and because his former kith caregiver had identified him as having different views on parental contact from her own at the time she was raising him. He is the uncle of a pair of cousins in the sample.

Nature of care

Twelve young people had experienced child protection involvement in their lives; eight were in informal kinship care; and one was under a Family Court order. Most (15) children and young people were or had been in long-term kinship care arrangements.

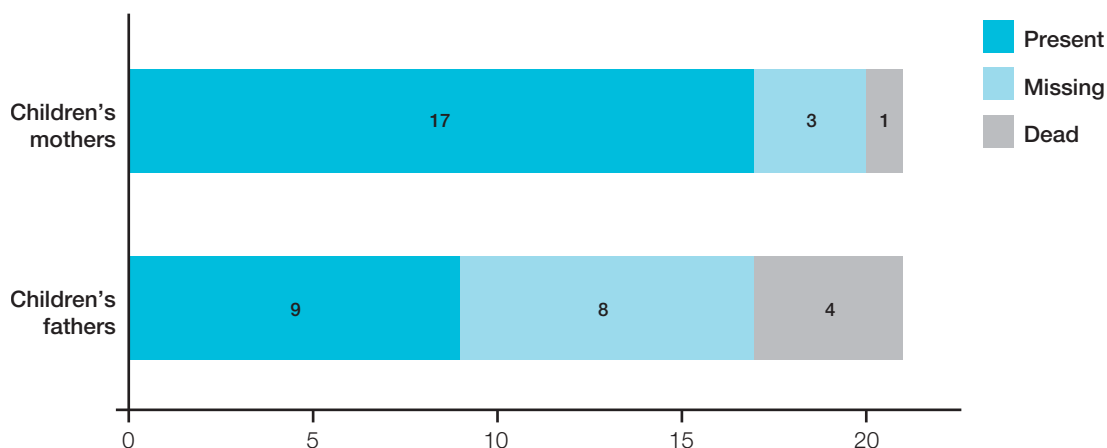
Figure 2: Type of kinship care experienced by young people



In most (12) cases, care was by grandparents; nine were with maternal grandparents. Kith carers included a youth worker, a minister of religion, a teacher and families of school friends.

Mothers and fathers of young people

Figure 3: Mothers and fathers of young people



Mothers were mostly present in young people's lives; however, the maternal relationship was clearly strong and significant in only four cases. Eleven young people reported maternal substance abuse.

On the other hand, less than half the young people had fathers present in their lives. Four fathers were known to have died. Only four young people identified their fathers as significant to them; for two of these, contact was infrequent. At least two young people had a significant relationship with a step-father; their biological fathers were missing. Four of the young people mentioned that their fathers had had periods of imprisonment. Substance abuse by fathers was only mentioned in one case, possibly in part because of lack of knowledge.

Sisters and brothers

All but one had siblings or half-siblings that they knew of. Six identified separate families of half-siblings. However, over half (12) children had been separated from at least one sibling with whom they had lived as a family. Only two sibling groups, a pair of brothers and a group of three, had been together constantly in care.

Cultural identity

Young people were not routinely asked about their cultural identity. However, two young people indicated that they had fathers of recent European origin, another had a Pacific Islander father, and a fourth had two Pacific Islander parents. The first three did not identify with their fathers' cultures; for two this was because of the father's absence from their lives. The fourth young man identified with an Islander culture as a result of ongoing close contact with his family.

Participants' children

Two of the three young mothers had also had kinship care support with their children. One had resumed care of her young son after several years of kith care; another had intervals of kinship care support for her child from her own mother. The third had regular babysitting from her mother and her partner's mother.

The young people's views

Normal family life

Echoing other kinship care research, the young people stressed the normality of their family life. They felt that theirs was simply another family type, and did not see themselves as 'in care'.

I never thought it was a form of care ... I just thought that it was going to stay with Nanna or Grandad for this long time and that's it. It didn't seem weird or strange to me anyway ... I think maybe one thing to do with that was because my Mum and Nanna had a good relationship. **(David, 21)**

It's pretty much the same life that everyone else has really. Just different circumstances ... Really I don't think I'm disadvantaged compared to other kids ... Don't really treat us as special kids. Just different kids, I reckon. Because we're just ... living our normal lives. Just different ways of living it ... We're just normal kids. **(Aiden, 14)**

Young people often defined their relationships as they saw them rather than according to formal definitions. This was epitomised in the description of a young man's fictive 'Nan' who has raised two generations of his family.

She may not be a blood family but who says blood is needed to make a family? They say friends come and go but family is forever. If you've had friends who have stuck by you through the worst then personally in my eyes they are family. **(Oscar, 19)**

In the way of young boys, several succinctly alluded to the value of stable care.

I reckon I got it fine. **(Aiden, 14)**

I just like staying here because it's nice and relaxing. **(Peter, 10)**

I don't really have many problems. **(Tom, 13)**

Family events were often mentioned, especially informal get-togethers, birthday parties, Christmas, and funerals that brought people together, willingly or unwillingly. Sometimes these were opportunities to have fun, see family members after absences, and occasionally to mend bridges; sometimes they brought more pain.

My cousins could come down and stay the night with my grandmother. We had so many sleep over parties ... So that was really good. **(Tina, 19)**

[Moving to my uncle's] was just before my birthday and they were having a birthday for my cousin so they go, 'We'll have to have a birthday for you as well'. So we had a birthday with some of my other cousins. **(Amelia, 17)**

Culture was meaningful to some and not to others, depending on family relationships.

I think I'm culturally different too. I'm a Pacific Islander so I'm more family-based. I guess that makes it easier, is the family relationships. **(David, 21)**

Two days ago I saw [my father] and the day before. And we're going to this Greek church but I didn't want to go. We have to, for Easter. **(Peter, 10)**

Normal family life includes pets, highly valued by the younger children.

Also another person important in my life is Benny ... He's only been around for a few months ... He's a miniature dachshund. 'Aren't you Benny?' He's a good boy. **(Tom, 13)**

Contact with family members and the agency of the child

Overwhelmingly, children and young people saw their families as important. However, there was a wide range of circumstances and experiences among young people, and over time.

For many, keeping contact with family was complicated. Young people described the push-pull of emotions during contact with parents.

Well at the end of the day, I know what went on when I was a kid wasn't right now ... But I don't know – I think it's important to have contact with the people that raised you. Like we talk now, I'm going up to hang out with them soon. **(Ruby, 25)**

I guess it was difficult because at that sort of age we didn't know what was going on; wanting to be with Helen and then wanting to be with Mum as well made it difficult ... because that was a close, familiar thing that was. **(Nick, 40)**

Even seeing your parents it sort of makes you want to go back to them as well, which is why you don't want to see them ... sometimes it's not in the kid's best interest to be able to go back. **(Tamara, 17)**

A set of intertwined themes was observed in young people's comments. These included the preciousness of supportive family relationships; the pain of emotionally abusive relationships; the grief of lost relationships, both positive and 'what might have been'; and children's struggle to deal with their pain.

Systemic problems were frequently mentioned. Young people described pressure to have contact with parents that they did not want to see, and restrictions on wanted contact with other family members. These pressures compounded their distress. Some determined young people were simply not prepared to endure this, and broke the rules.

I loved seeing my parents and my brothers and all that. It was just hard because we've found we had to do it behind the Department's back a bit ... because we had to watch what we were doing, but it was good because I love seeing them. It's just we were suppose to do it through access ... If I had to do what the Department wanted with access and seeing them I just would never have coped with it ... If I had had a choice, I would have picked [DHS supervision at home]. The Department's offices don't feel safe to me. They're like sitting in a prison ward. **(Zoe, 19)**

Mother

The nexus between the signal importance of mothers to children and the profound difficulties children had experienced made these the most difficult relationships and contact arrangements. A very few positive experiences were described; in general, stories carried much pain.

My Mum and Nanna had a good relationship. I guess that makes it easier, is the family relationships. So I would see them when she'd come down to visit ... it was not that much of a distance. **(David, 21)**

We used to come down [to Melbourne] probably every second or third weekend and spend the weekend. So I still got to see her. But I think that's as much as I could have handled at that stage, staying with her just for a weekend. **(Clare, 25)**

The younger children's comments were typically to the point:

I don't really like it because she sticks with the boys and [little sister] Tayla and she makes us upset ... She doesn't really respect me and Hannah. She doesn't really care about us, it feels like it ... We actually don't do anything. We just sit. **(Lisa, 10)**

I haven't been there since Easter ... She's never really done anything. All we do really is we go to [friend] Belinda's. She has a talk while I'm just in the room watching TV. **(Tom, 13)**

[Are there any people that you wish you didn't have to see in your family?] Mum. Yes, that is all. **(Aimee, 10)**

A few young people had established flexible arrangements that appeared workable, if not particularly rewarding. Hannah, 14, visited her mother when she felt like it; her grandmother, sitting in the interview, indicated that she monitored Hannah's safety in relation to domestic violence fuelled by substance abuse.

[I see her] probably once every two weeks, sometimes more ... When I'm not down there a lot ... we get along pretty well but if we're together too much then we don't get along that well. [What are the things that go wrong between you and Mum?] I don't know, just her boyfriend. **(Hannah, 14)**

"Hannah doesn't go on her visits when she doesn't want to ... [Mum's] visits were getting later and later so now it has got down to two or three hours on Saturday so Hannah just goes when it suits ... It's not [flexible] by Welfare, it is by Nan, they don't know ... [But] they do know Hannah goes down there. They just say 'Oh well, as long as she's safe' because he knows I can't pick her up and walk her out the door ... DHS sort of don't hassle us because I've raised them." **(Grandmother)**

Older young people were more explicit about their anger and hurt.

'I've never cried so hard in my whole life.'

Although in the care of her grandmother from infancy, Tessa's (17) story of contact with her mother was particularly difficult.

All I remember is like just waiting at the window for her to pull up and she never came ... I always remember every morning when I went to stay there she'd always disappear in the morning, and I'd go and knock on the bathroom door and be like, 'Where are you?' And she'd be like, 'Oh I'll be out soon, I'll be out soon'. Then one morning I went in there before she went in there and I found her marijuana, and ... I was like, 'What's this Mum?' and she was like, 'Oh, it's green lavender' and then like 'Let me smell it and touch it,' and stuff – and I'll never forget that ... I don't know, like I will always remember just being let down by her really.

At age 13, she took action following a court case to free herself from a connection that she found quite intolerable.

She was like, 'Oh come on give your mother a hug', blah, blah, blah, and I'm like, 'No, I don't want to touch you, I don't want to be anywhere near you'. Then her boyfriend's like, 'Don't talk to your mother like that, just give her a hug'. Then I just said to her, 'I don't have a mother', and I walked away; and we went outside and I was composed the whole time, and as soon as the doors closed and she couldn't see me anymore I've never cried so hard in my whole life. But I was so glad that I finally got to say it. Like I was in Grade 6 – like what 13-year-old says to their Mum 'I don't have a mother'. But I have always thought it, and like I'm glad that I had the chance to finally say it to her.

I hated [contact with her] because Mum was the sort of person who would sort of like bribe you and manipulate you into going back whenever she'd see you ...
(Tamara, 17)

In the sense that I'm her daughter I'm close to her but I'm distant in that she stuffed up – and stuffed up my life. I love her because she's my Mum but I hate her for all the stuff she did. **(Grace, 17)**

Father

Echoing previous studies, children's contact with their fathers was apparently less fraught. Only two of the young people appeared to have significant relationships with them. Many did not know their fathers because they were dead or absent. Mostly this appeared to be accepted as a matter of fact. Several had been in jail. Several others might have seen more of their fathers but for their fathers' partners.

My Dad passed away when my Mum was pregnant with me. I've never known that side of the family. **(Grace, 17)**

I think I haven't seen my Dad for about five years. **(Jackson, 12)**

Unusually, Imogen's situation of voluntarily living with her aunt in her teens was relatively uncomplicated.

I see them [father, brother and sister] every day, I go over there. I like to. **(Imogen, 18)**

A few of the younger children apparently sought to gloss over their fathers' absence and dysfunctional behaviour.

When my Dad was in jail in Adelaide that was a bit tough ... we went over and saw him ... it was alright, I just managed ... there was food and stuff whenever you wanted it, it was pretty good. **(Aiden, 14)**

Peter's father had been part of his life since infancy, but the relationship was not strong.

[What's that like when you see him?] Boring. [But you like your Dad?] Yeah, but he always comes down to my room and talks and talks and talks. [What would you like to do with him?] I'd like to shut my door. **(Peter, 10)**

The older participants spoke more vividly about painful experiences with their fathers.

He never really sort of needed me, like in the end ... I went into hospital when I was in Grade 7, I spoke to him that morning and he said 'I'll call you tonight and I'll make sure everything went alright' ... and he didn't call for three years. He was a stranger to me basically, I don't know anything about him. **(Tessa, 17)**

I wanted my parents to be the ones to step forward and admit to me that they'd done something wrong, but they're too stubborn to even think of that ... One thing I've wished my entire life is that me and my Dad could do a father-son activity together where I didn't get yelled at, or just me and him spend some time together. **(Oscar, 19).**

Parents' partners and step-parents

Parents' partners featured large; young people were overwhelmingly negative about them. They were rarely seen as a parent or step-parent. Young people reported that their parent's partners did not like them, created barriers to their contact with their parent, and threatened them. Some were transitory people who contributed to an unsafe and frightening childhood.

So you don't have any contact with Dad these days? No. [Do you want to?] Yeah, sometimes. [How would you get in touch with him?] Don't know. I don't want to see him because of his wife. [What's she like?] Angry. **(Jackson, 12)**

But sometimes her boyfriend is there, Jason. I really don't like him. They always argue and stuff in front of us kids and it gets ... kind of scary because when I was younger I saw all that stuff that Jason did to her. **(Lisa, 10)**

There was always different men so you couldn't really get close to them. They were really – about as messed up as her. **(Tamara, 17)**

I've had two step-Dads, I don't like men in general. I don't really like men in my life. There weren't bad things happened with my stepfathers, but they didn't respect me or my Mum or my brothers. I never wanted to be home, I was never there. I'd have a couple of hours sleep and then I'd go to school early. **(Grace, 17)**

'He doesn't actually stick up for us.'

Brianna's (14) father raised her for some time, but upset her by allowing his new partner to take priority.

Dad was still able to look after us [after Mum died] ... He has always looked after me and Andy. When he moved in with Sally, it was hard because she doesn't like Andy or me, because it reminds Dad of Mum. So she hated it ... I'll go to his place now and then, but I kind of try and stay away from the house because of his girlfriend. When I lived there [two years after my Mum died], she used to scream and swear at me and Andy. Dad's not allowed to come near our house with Ethan [infant half-brother] because of Nan. Sally absolutely hates Nan. Anything to do with Mum, she hates ... But I'm upset with him a lot, because he's going out with someone else. He treats us kids like shit and all he does is tell us off, he doesn't actually stick up for us or anything much.

In a rare exception, Aimee's 'Dad' was more real to her than her 'real Dad'.

I only see Dad when Dad picks the boys up.

[Nan – He is step-Dad. She has no Dad.]

Aimee: I do have a Dad, but I have never seen him before ... I mean my real Dad, like in body, like us.

[The man you call Dad, is he a nice Dad to you?]

Yes, yes ... Sometimes we go to his work, a radio station ... we listen. We usually bring him dinner, when it is like the songs he can eat his dinner. They say, 'Okay guys ... get ready for a movie.' He says that on the radio, then we say 'Okay!'

(Aimee, 10)

'I don't want to be anywhere near you or your dirty husband.'

Tessa (17) had a further reason to cut contact with her mother.

About three years ago when one of my aunties got married, my Mum's husband had a massive go at me in front of everyone - calling me a whore and ... and saying that I'm nothing like my mother, I'm a slut and all this. So when she was on the phone asking me to move in with her, I was like, 'I don't want to be anywhere near you or your dirty husband'. And she's like, 'What's he ever done to you?' I basically just said, like 'Don't you remember Kylie's wedding and what happened?' And she's like, "Yeah, well he's sorry for that". I said, 'Well he never apologised'. Well I was 13 – and she goes, 'Well he wants to apologise', and I go, 'Well he could of.'

Sisters and brothers

Most young people spoke of the importance of their sisters and brothers: they were a source of support, comfort and fun. Where relationships had been conflictual, these seemed often to improve as children grew up.

Siblings were variously identified according to history and connection; often children did not differentiate between 'full' siblings and 'half' siblings, especially when they had lived together. Those who lived elsewhere might or might not be important to them; this sometimes depended on the way they felt about their siblings' other parent.

I have three annoying [little] brothers ... They sleep over ...

[Do you like seeing them?] Yeah. **(Aimee, 10)**

My father has got three children. With her.

[But you don't really see them as your brothers or sisters?]

No. **(Jackson, 12)**

There were many stories of separation or limited contact between sisters and brothers. Separation was often very difficult for them.

I always, like, go there. I sleep over the most. I'm the only one that really does that ... A couple of months ago he had a cricket final the next day so I helped him with his bowling, like I threw them to him and when he caught them he got them, and then I helped him throw them to me, so it helped him do a lot of things. And he actually won ...

[So if you could wave a magic wand, what could you make better about seeing people in your family?]

That I can live with Dillon, and I would still see my baby brother more often.
(Lisa, 10)

Babies were generally popular, whether baby siblings, or siblings' babies; they appeared to strengthen relationships around them. Lisa's construction of her image of her little brother had charm:

He's only one year's old. I love saying a word for it because he's my brother but I've got a different mother. When you have a different mother and you have the same Dad you call them 'your brother from another mother' ... He is just like my brother, but I don't get to see him that much. **(Lisa, 10)**

'My nieces can play with my daughter.'

The birth of Amelia's (17) daughter played a part in improving relationships with her many brothers and sisters.

Even though things have changed now, where I do see my brothers and sisters a lot and my parents, but back then I didn't want to. Like my thing was that they had neglected me so they could go to hell sort of thing. [You've sort of made up some ground with your brother?] Yes, especially my younger brother who has just turned 15. My older brother, yes he can still go to hell. My younger one is a little shithead all the time but I still love him, and three of the others.

But two of them I see, like my nieces all the time. I love that because my nieces can play with my daughter. Then there's another one. He went and got himself help for his drug addiction ... and has got himself a career and is really helping himself out. He's really supportive as well. He supports me through everything that I've been through.

New electronic communications, including the ubiquitous mobile phone, allowed young people to overcome barriers in communication, particularly with siblings.

I have [my three brothers'] phone numbers, I have contact on Facebook and MSN. I can talk to them whenever. **(Grace, 17)**

I can remember being really upset many of the times and going through the depression stage. That was something I didn't really want to pass onto my sisters ... because they really didn't get to know me and when I spoke to them on the phone, I might be crying and things like that. So when I set up my email address, it was really easy for me to email them. If I was teary, no one knew... that's the big thing of having the internet access. **(Tina, 19)**

For Aiden growing up as an only child with his fictive grandmother, Facebook allowed for contact with a half-brother whom he had not yet met.

I have a half-brother. He's 18, Tyson. He's in Sydney. I've never seen him so ... I talk to him on Facebook so that's alright. It's pretty good because I mean I can't really go over to Sydney so it gives me a way to talk to him so that's pretty good. I went to Sydney a few years ago but his mother didn't want me having contact. Because she didn't want my Dad coming back into the picture and all that ... **(Aiden, 14)**

A few children described wanting to care for sisters and brothers. On occasion, children were 'parentified,' taking on undue responsibility for younger children.

'I hate that my little brother and sister are exposed to that.'

Oscar (19) faces young adulthood with a dilemma regarding the parenting of his much younger siblings.

I just wanted out and so I came here [for a year, to Nan]. But there was one plus side that my parents realised that without me to be the babysitter they weren't coping too well ... they haven't changed a bit [since I returned]. They're getting worse if anything. The second I walk in the door, 'Oh you're staying here with the kids. 'They sit in the garage and smoke for a few hours ... It's really frustrating because my little sister's two years old and my brother is six years old with autism, so he's quite a handful ... I hate that they argue a lot, knowing my little brother and sister are exposed to that. That's really upsetting because I can't step in at all.

[So you probably feel like getting out, do you?]

I do, but I don't want to get out in the sense of my little brother and sister.

Barriers to contact with sisters and brothers included systemic issues such as placements apart and court bans on contact, as well as problems with other family members. They were felt keenly. Contact with 'brothers behaving badly' was important to a couple of the girls, despite difficulties. In one family, the sibling relationship created by adoption came a poor second to a fictive relationship. Despite prohibitions on contact the two have maintained their connection.

Through my adoption family I've got an older brother and then I've got Cal, we were in care together for ages and we're like brother and sister ... When I moved out ... they wouldn't let us see one another because of that 'cross-contamination behaviour' crap. He's been in like heaps of trouble with the police recently and the courts. He's been telling his solicitors and that that we're brother and sister. Like that's how close we are ... We weren't allowed to call one another on the unit phones. With my adoption brother there was not to be any contact at all. [That was okay] because he's an arse. **(Zoe, 19)**

Well, me and him used to fight a lot. He's always stuck up for me every time I get in trouble or get in a fight ... he will punch the kid to get them away from me. He has got in trouble for that lots of times but he actually has saved me a lot. Everyone says he's bad, he's not allowed near me. He has been in trouble with the police ... I do get annoyed with him and the friends he hangs out with, but I'll never hate him because he's always been there for me. I'm not allowed to text him at all, much. But I still do because I need contact with him. **(Brianna, 14)**

'I really have missed out a lot with my brothers and sisters.'

Arrangements that do not allow for separate contact with parents and siblings may unintentionally disrupt important connections.

Look, at the end of the day, they could've, my auntie or uncle could've gone around and picked them up. It could be done in so many different, it could've even been Mum and Dad drop the kids off at McDonalds with my DHS worker and I'm there spending time with my brother and sisters and things like that. But it was never an opportunity. It was always, did I want to see my parents. 'No, I don't want to see my parents.' But there was no questions asked well, 'Do you want to see your brother and sisters?' 'Do you want to see your aunts, do you want to see your cousins?'

[Did that matter to you that you didn't see your brothers and sisters much?]

It did in many different ways now that I'm older and seeing them now and having the contact with them now that they've all grown up. Sort of missed out on a lot of things that brothers and sisters do and stuff like that. But we've got a really close relationship now, all three of us – there's four of us ... [Growing up] I knew them and stuff but it wasn't a big thing. Because if I wanted to see my brothers and sisters, it was attached to my mother or father being there ... I didn't want to see my mother and father for that period ... so, if I don't want to see Mum and Dad, I take the thing of not seeing the kids. I always looked forward to Christmases or birthdays and things like that when I did get the opportunity to see them and spend a couple of days with them. But, at such a young age, you don't realise about how much family things can mean to you. Now that I'm older, I really have missed out a lot with my brothers and sisters. **(Tina, 19)**

‘Brothers and sisters, they’re the ones you lean on...’

Grace (17) described the cost to herself and her brothers of their childhoods in care.

We were always pretty much split up...Heath and I are the closest, we were there for each other when everything went down.... He wasn't old enough to take me and Simon with him, you have to be 18. I wanted to live with him....But we have always kept in touch by phone, and now Facebook and MSN...It's very important [to keep kids together] otherwise you don't really know each other. Then they have to learn to get to know you and who you really are. It was very hard for me not really knowing them. What to buy them for their birthday. The music they like, simple things, their favorite colour. My caregiver couldn't take care of Simon because he was too young for her work. So it was some of the difficulty in being in my care placement, it's a cost of where I am.

Brothers and sisters, they're the ones you lean on. I don't have a lot of contact with Heath now but I can see him any time I want to, so that's good. He's expecting a baby soon so that gives us now a reason to catch up. I could babysit for him. I could see him and not get in the way when he's busy working. I would take some of the pressure off him and I'd get to spend time with my niece or nephew.

Extended family – aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents

There were frequent references to significant relationships with cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. These emerged in every interview and group session.

Grandparents were important both as caregivers but also as supportive relatives.

I remember when Pop died I was about 10. I remember everything about it. He died of prostate cancer ... I was the last person he spoke to. I remember it well. I get upset on the date that he died and his birthday. He was the one I was closest to in my whole family. He was like my Dad, my Pop and my friend all wrapped into one. **(Grace, 17)**

Paternal grandparents tended to get lost to the child if the father was not in contact. Tina described the importance of her non-biological grandparents out of what she saw as her five sets of grandparents:

But I don't have any contact with any of my other grandparents. At a young age, yes I would see my mother's mother. I was never excited to see her or anything like that. Because Mum's side of the family, we have nothing to do with. But with my stepfather's side of the family, which is where my grandmother's from, we were a very close-knit family ... at that stage when I was five, I didn't know that my step-Dad wasn't my real Dad. It was when I was fifteen I found out that I had another biological Dad. It was a very confusing situation. **(Tina, 19)**

Cousins featured as treasured, fun playmates. Ten-year old-Peter had aunts and uncles living nearby; he described one household he visits frequently:

And in that house there is Ella my cousin, Aunty Janine my aunty, Uncle Brendan my uncle or – I don't know – uncle, my other cousin Ned, and a little doggie. **(Peter, 10)**

In another family, sisters were working together to care for their niece and nephew, as both the children's mother and their own mother had problems of substance dependency.

'My uncle was more like a father to me than what my actual father was.'

Amelia's (17) uncle became her father-figure, and her fictive cousins, the children of his partner, were more important than biological cousins.

I had my two cousins up there and my uncle was up there with his girlfriend and her kids –which they were more like cousins to me than my actual cousins. Because my actual cousins like never gave a shit about me ... I lived with my three cousins and one of them was three days younger than me ... They always looked up to me like their older sister. I still have contact with them now even though the rest of the family doesn't ... My uncle would go out and wrestle with me on the trampoline ...

He would go out for tea and we'd eat the same foods ... It was really lots of fun. My uncle was more like a father to me than what my actual father was at the time ... Every cent he got for me, he put in into an account for me to have when I turn 21 ... There was the four of us cousins, it was awesome because we always got along ... There's a photo of us throwing mud around at each other ... I go to his gravesite every anniversary.

For Aiden, whose mother had died and with limited contact with his father, to meet distant relatives was positive.

I went over to New Zealand a few years ago. Saw some of my relatives over there. That was pretty good ... just pretty much learnt about my family, met relatives. There was a bit of going out to places but mostly it was just staying. [Do you think you will go and see them again one day?] Yeah, definitely. **(Aiden, 14)**

Two young women expressed frustration about orders that forbade contact with a significant uncle and cousin, due to adverse police checks for matters that they felt were not relevant to their safety. In both cases, the relative died and they felt bereft.

He hasn't re-offended since he was 19. It wasn't an assault of a minor or anything like that ... I couldn't see that uncle. When I was 17 he passed away ... When I was five or six, growing up with my grandmother I had a really good relationship with him. Then I couldn't have any relationship whatsoever because of the care sector saying no ... well I was happy to have supervised access with him. My uncle wasn't a threat or whatsoever to me ... Now, he's passed away ... How much do I miss out on, especially when I hear other cousins talking about that uncle ... To actually talk to him, you know, keen to get to know me and watch me grow up. **(Tina, 19)**

One young person was clearly aware of the vulnerability of her circumstances and the safety net her wider family provided:

If other kids like me want to see their families, you should actually let them 'cause it might help them in life, and yeah, 'cause if ... Nan dies, or has a heart attack again, I won't be able to live with her and I don't want to go to foster care So I would like to just live with my cousins ... Because once I forget about them – you need them there for you ... you need someone in your life you're related to, and you've always got them there to love, so yeah ... **(Brianna, 14)**

'Maybe next time his father will come with us.'

Nick and his nephews Oscar and Aiden have maintained close bonds forged by their connection with Helen, their caregiver. Oscar (19) described an upcoming outing with Aiden:

Tomorrow me and Aiden are going motorcycle riding. I'm taking a video camera for the first footage of him ever riding a manual motorcycle. His father's never been a really huge part in his life and I want to be able to say, 'I want you to watch this video of your son riding his motorcycle for the very first time'. Give his father that joy of a memory he might have missed ... And hopefully his Dad will have a little bit more respect too ... Maybe next time he'll come along with us ... Get his father to ride a motorcycle, which would be really priceless to watch.

'Our family was a mini community ... it was a big thing that I lost.'

For Tina (19) and some of her cousins, family connections with each other were more important than with their parents. Tina articulated the difficulty for a child in having her voice heard regarding family connections.

Well when I was five I was in kinship care ... I got to see my aunties and uncles a fair bit. We didn't have a lot to do with my birth family ... So I saw lots of cousins and a lot of extended family like my third cousins and stuff ... but when I actually left kinship care [connections were lost] ... There are four of us that are within six months apart so we're really, really close ... one auntie and one uncle I was extremely close with. But a lot of my other cousins grew up with the older sibling. They actually didn't grow up with their biological parents either. So it was like the cousin group was really, really tight when I was younger ...

That was a big thing in care that I lost. Not having contact with my extended family because we used to be, when my grandmother was alive, a very close knit family. It was like a little mini community that was our family. We had our family weekends and things like that. Now I'm trying to re-connect with them. Finding out that a couple of extended uncles or cousins have passed away.

... It's really hard to work out the dynamics and maybe if I had stood stronger when I was 13 and tried to say well I want contact, I want this, I want that and stood my ground. But at 13, how do you know how to stand your ground ...

continued ...

They should have known through the communication that my grandmother had with them being in kinship care, that I was close with my cousins and aunts and uncles. And some support from DHS for keeping those contacts with family and friends.

The struggle for resolution

It would be good if you could give me some confidence. **(Anna, 29)**

She's not going to bring me down now. **(Grace, 17)**

Most (14) children and young people identified a psychological impact associated with their family relationships. This included mental health, behavioural and/or educational problems.

I've got a phobia of reading because when I was younger my Dad would beat me if I didn't, so now I'm petrified to pick up a book ... you know when you're a young kid the school gets you to take books home to read ... Only recently have I started of reading again. I'm reading like kiddie books and I get really weird looks. **(Oscar, 19)**

I [need to] fix myself ... be happy with who I am ... I have depression ... Help needs to be more than like an hour once a week ... I find the friend-making thing very hard. I don't trust people. **(Anna, 29)**

Teenagers and young adults were in various stages of resolving their issues with family members, particularly parents. This included resuming contact and making allowances for parents' problems; coming to terms with loss and rejection; rejecting parents where they felt traumatised by them; and building other relationships and endeavours.

Resuming contact

Several young people had taken it into their own hands – in some cases, at considerable personal cost – to cut off contact with parents for a period of time, possibly years. They described radical decisions to deal with problem family contact, frequently in early adolescence. However, it was not uncommon for contact to be made again in the mid-teens on their own terms when the young person was able to assume a measure of control to reduce their distress.

I never wanted contact with my Mum and Dad. But when I was about 17 I got back in contact with [them]. Now, my Mum and Dad and I have no relationship whatsoever again. I think my Mum and Dad's and my relationship will always be a roller coaster ride. Sometimes it will tip over, but for my brothers' and sisters' sake I think we'll work things out, then it'll all fall over again ... I don't think in a year that my Mum and I will have a relationship whatsoever. I think my Dad and I will, but not my Mum and me. **(Tina, 19)**



I wasn't allowed to talk to them on the phone or accept cards but my uncle had to read them first. In one way it was good because they couldn't have hurt me any further than what they already had, in another way it was bad because I missed out on the birthday cards and letters ... I started having full contact with them when I found out I was pregnant with my daughter. My Dad came to every appointment and supported me through my pregnancy ... I've been able to forgive, not so much forget. **(Amelia, 17)**

'We're starting to form a relationship again'

Tamara (17) described the vicissitudes of her relationship with her substance dependent mother.

When I moved in with my grandparents full-time, I lost touch there for about a year and then DHS pushed me to see her and stuff. Then I saw her for a bit and then after that when I wasn't forced to, I didn't see her for about three years ... I was scared they were going to send me back there and then Mum would like kill me for getting DHS involved. More than anything because I was just sick of living there and everything that went on.

A funeral brought the family together, and allowed her at 17, to move to a different connection with her mother.

My grandparents have started speaking to her again after all this time because my Grandma's Mum recently passed away. My Mum came to the funeral and that brought everyone a bit together. It was good in a way because it made them move on more as well, because Grandma was really like stuck in the past ... [Mum] actually started coming back round to our house. I started seeing her after that, just once a week or something. It's good because I've got a boyfriend now and he's been really supportive. He'll come with me to see Mum whenever I want to see her. I could never do that with Grandma and Grandpa because they were just like always judging her and stuff. It was difficult sort of – and I never wanted to go by myself ... We're starting to form a relationship again. As much as you can because [Mum]'s sort of spaced out now because of all the drugs and stuff. It's hard to hold a proper conversation with her. We'll go there for dinner or we'll just pop in there like if we've got some free time.

Coming to terms with absent fathers

Missing fathers may also bring a sense of loss. For one teenager, it was that she had been unable to determine who her father was, and with that, her paternal family.

I did a DNA test with a man that my grandparents thought it was when I was in like Year 8 ... but that came back negative. But Mum was prostituting at the time she had me so that was like the last chance that we could find him ... it really upset me because I really wanted to know who he was because you sort of have a whole other family that you don't know about. **(Tamara, 17)**





While with the benefit of maturity Nick had adopted a pragmatic approach to his absent father, he saw the value of contact in adulthood to know what his father was like, and to confirm for him that there was no value in the relationship.

[My father] disappeared when I was about six or seven. I saw him for a period of time when I was over in Perth in my twenties ... he helped me get the job at the gold mines, so he did a bit ... It was like meeting a stranger really. It wasn't really like meeting a family member ... It's hard to say really what sort of person he is, I guess. There was no apology for what had occurred, there was no excuses, no nothing – 'I left because of this or that' – there was just who I am and that's it ... I think it was good [to meet up again] because then I realised I had no connection whatsoever with him, so when I left, that was it ... I haven't spoken to him in nearly twenty years.

[Did you have a feeling of 'How could you do that to us?' when you met him?]

No, I think I'd gone past all that. **(Nick, 40)**

'It just makes me question myself – what's so wrong about me?'

Clare (25) experienced the pain of subsequent rejection after finding her father and establishing a connection with him; she suspected that his partner was a factor in this rejection. She still struggles to resolve this.

I first actually met my biological father when I was 11 years old. I stayed in contact with him probably for only about three years ... I actually found him again on Facebook not long after I had Nicola. I sent him a message –I'd like him to have a chance to meet her – but he never replied. I sent him another message after I had my second daughter. He actually blocked me from Facebook. I did ring him probably 18 months ago, said Hi, it's Clare, you're my Dad. He goes, I don't know anybody by the name of Clare and hung up. It hurts me. It just makes me question myself. What's so wrong about me? What have I done? And I don't think I should have to do that. But I've got to the point now that it's his loss. He has two beautiful granddaughters who are very smart for their ages. He's the one that's going to miss out. Their other grandparents love them so much. So, you know, one extra grandparent I guess is not going to do any good.

On the other hand, her discovery of her paternal grandfather in her adolescence boosted her sense of self-worth – despite his death before they were able to meet.

He never actually met me. He'd only heard my voice and interactions through phone calls, letters and photos that I sent him. But he was still willing to open his heart and his life to me, to somebody he probably had absolutely no knowledge even existed before. But that is a good memory.



Dealing with lack of parental love

We don't do the whole lovey-dovey family thing ... Basically I'm left in a dead-end town with nothing and no-one ... My Mum won't let me move into [the family] house, she says there's not enough space. (Anna, 29)

Rejection was very hurtful to several young people. However, in working through rejection, young adulthood brought opportunities for alternative family relationships and life directions. Love was found for some in the form of an intimate partner, friends, or other family connections retained from childhood due to being in the kinship network.

Now that I'm older, I'm realising that there's so many times that I can make the effort but my mother ... believes her own lies and she's just going into this mental breakdown she reckons at the moment. But I'm not really fussed my Mum and I having a relationship because yes, we talk about family contact and everything like that, but sometimes you can find your family elsewhere. (Tina, 19)

'I resigned myself that it didn't really need to work with my parents.'

After multiple disappointments that have contributed to significant mental health issues, Tessa (17) is trying to put her parents behind her. Her energies have gone into her studies and building a life for herself.

I sort of resigned myself to the fact that it didn't really need to work [with my parents]. I had sort of become used to living without them anyway - I mean like they were strangers, I didn't really want any sort of relationship with them because I didn't know who they were, and I didn't feel any love from them at any stage ...

I've always been an A+ student. I think because I was forced to grow up really quickly, I sort of have always been intellectually stronger than everyone else my age, so I've had the capacity to take in a lot of information in a short period of time. So I think if I wasn't as naturally intelligent, I really would have struggled with school and with what was going on. Now I'm working two jobs and going to school. I've got the biggest social life ... I'm thinking of doing anthropology or law.

Young people's advice

Young people gave clear messages for good practice. They emphasised the complexity of parent-child relationships and the sensitivity of children. They felt that many interventions designed to promote engagement between them and their parents had actually made things worse.

Treat us as normal

The concept of normality was revisited in discussion of contact arrangements. Overwhelmingly, young people viewed contact arrangements in Departmental offices under close observation as unworkable, and favoured supervision where necessary in more discreet and informal ways, and in community environments. While they did not always disagree with measures to ensure their safety, they wanted contact to be as relaxed as possible if it was to take place at all.

I don't like the idea of sitting in a building and being watched seeing my parents. Whereas I just wanted to act like normal around them. Kind of, because I was mostly seeing them at my brother's place ... It was just more comfortable, like every day, back home sort of thing. **(Zoe, 19)**

The only way they can enforce [rules with parental behaviour] is to limit contact and to have supervised contact, which is detrimental. So you're punishing the young person ... There's no such thing as a positive supervised contact. **(Nick, 40)**

Don't push – really listen

Many young people expressed the view that parents are listened to more than children, and that children have to comply with contact arrangements regardless of their own needs and wishes. A few expressed the view that their intelligence was underestimated and their feelings ignored. They made appeals for empathy and sensitivity, and for their best interests to be considered first from their own point of view.

Listen and really understand the child's situation. It's about their best interests. **(Clare, 25)**

Just my turf, my time and my taste. **(Tina, 19)**

Be really careful not to push kids too much and listen to them more. Not so much listen to the parents as much because it's more important for the kid to be happy than the parents. Like that's what I think – it was pretty focussed on was making the Mum happy as well. Like, losing their like child, but sometimes it's got to be for the best. So they've got to listen more. **(Tamara, 17)**

A number of young people used the words 'pushy' and 'force' to describe counterproductive approaches.

Especially when I was about 13 or 14, DHS kept pushing for reunification between me and my parents and that's something that neither of us wanted. It just really pushed our relationship so far away, that it wasn't funny. **(Tina, 19)**

[Pushing contact with mother] was probably a bad move in terms of family continuing because you're still making connections to things that had gone wrong. There was nothing that had actually been fixed there, nothing had actually changed ... So you're still perpetuating this link that kept those thought processes lingering of everything that happened in the past. **(Nick, 40)**

To help kids like me, really, would be, just to trust kids. If they ask them – I don't know how to put this. If they want to move kids into different families and they're old enough to make their own decision, to actually give the kids the chance – to not push them and tell them what to do. If they make a little mistake, that's their fault. They need to learn. Not boss them around so much. **(Brianna, 14)**

'Don't underestimate kids.'

Grace (17) appealed for greater sensitivity and understanding in working with children.

Don't underestimate what kids can understand. A lot of adults have treated me like less than I am, they've spoken to me as if I'm a 10 year old when I'm 15 for example. Treat me as an equal. Let the kid come to you and not to force yourself. When they first come into your life kids won't open up with you straightaway. They will suss you out first, you've got to be patient with the kid.

I know a lot of kids who don't have contact with their family. Be careful what you say when it comes to family, you may push a lot of buttons, you might upset the kid. When I left my Mum lots of things upset me, like Mum jokes, like people talking about their Mums and what they did with them. I got very upset. Be mindful of the kids' situation. Do your background information first.

'There was no real connection, there was no link there any further.'

Nick (40) has remained close to his childhood caregiver, Helen. However, as he looks back he is critical of her encouragement of contact with his biological mother, a neglectful parent.

Yes, in terms of contact with biological parents, I think that perhaps that shouldn't have been pursued as much as it was. There was no real connection – after a period of time –there was no real connection, there was no link there any further. The links had changed ...

I guess it was difficult because at that sort of age we didn't know what was going on; wanting to be with Helen and then wanting to be with Mum as well made it difficult ... because that was a close, familiar thing that was. It was difficult because Helen was encouraging it. I think it sent confusing messages; as well that is 'This what we're meant to be doing', is 'This what we're meant to be feeling', that we should be staying in contact ... There was nothing significant - apart from the actual physical contact of being in the same room – that I thought was really worthwhile, really beneficial to my wellbeing or my brother or sister's wellbeing ... There was so many of those that she'd promise, 'Oh I'll take you to Luna Park', or I'll do this or I'll do that, and you'd be looking forward to it and then it would never eventuate. After a while you just resigned yourself to it and thought, 'Oh yes, okay'.

continued ...

He described the protective role he might adopt should his own mother seek contact with her grandson – Nick’s nephew Aiden.

As far as I’m concerned [if] Aiden says yes I definitely want to see her, then I think in her case I’d need to supervise it or someone else needs to be there as well, because of the insidious nature of all the different things she could be saying to him and making up stories about the past.

Part of the solution?

Nick’s (40) reflection on work in child protection in the context of his personal experiences may provide one aspect of the way forward to better respond to the needs of children.

‘We need to move away from being so cautious, and support the young person to experience and experiment around what contact they want to have.’

I do remember there were times when I didn’t want to see her, and because of it being arranged that we had to go. I think there was too much emphasis placed on parents seeing the kids, rather than kids seeing the parents. It’s still like that now.

I’ve stood up in court and advocated for the young person and said, ‘This young person does not want to see their parents, they don’t want to see them. I’ve asked them a thousand times, they don’t want to have contact with them, they’ve got nothing in common with them’ and the young person saying, ‘Please don’t make me see them’. I’ve explained that to the magistrates, I’ve written a letter and they’ve still argued about the parents have a right to see their child. Well it’s not about the parents any more. It seems to be the rights of the parents overwhelm the rights of the child.

I’ve been senior case manager for child protection. I wouldn’t do that again. It’s not about the children, it’s about the processes and everything else, like forcing the kids to have contact because it’s part of the process ... or someone having a beer on a table and all of a sudden having to have supervised contact ...

The only way they can enforce [rules with parental behaviour] is to limit contact and to have supervised contact, which is detrimental. So you’re punishing the young person. There’s no such thing as a positive supervised contact.

I’ve always toyed with the idea of creating an environment for fathers to be able to reconnect with their sons, just to be able to go out and build something, like to build a shed ... It’s not simply around supervised contact, it’s around them actually bonding and spending time together and working together ... Rather than just sitting in a room talking about ‘How was your day, good?’; ‘How was your day?’ ‘Good’, in this artificial environment. You’ve got to have something to do.

continued ...

You need to determine the risk factors, do risk assessments. But they say 'Do some supervised contacts,' where you've got to make sure that you hear everything, no inappropriate conversations and things. As soon as the kids [leave] their Mums or whatever, there is still communications that occur. Kids have got mobile phones. They've got their Dad's phone number, how do you know when they're having a conversation?

I think we need to move away a bit from being so cautious, and make sure you support the young person and then allow them to experience and experiment around what level of communication and contact they want to have, rather than us dictating to them saying, once a week for two hours ... You keep putting all these parameters and borders around everything and boxing these kids into certain environments that just makes it worse. Like for myself, my brother and sister, because at the time people felt it was so important to maintain those links that I think possibly it had more of a detrimental than a positive effect.

If the children say 'I don't want to see them', then just say 'Okay'. [Workers will] think, 'They don't quite know what they're talking about, they don't understand it, they've got an inner need to see their biological parents, it's this nurturing thing that they need to fulfil' and all those sorts of things ... It will happen [later]. They'll say 'Yes I want to see them, I want to know who they are, I want to know where I come from'.

Conclusions

**In the little world in which children have their existences, whosoever brings them up, nothing is so finely perceived nor so finely felt as injustice. Charles Dickens
Great Expectations (1851)**

Parents are critically important to children, and the breakdown of parent-child relationships threaten children's wellbeing and mental health. Support and assistance to children, parents and caregivers is critical if relationships are to have their best chance. It is clear that court orders on their own can do little to assist family relationships; relationships need to be supported and facilitated as far as possible.

McHugh (2009, p.iv) has identified parental contact as 'the most problematic area of kinship care' and has reported high levels of concern by carers about children's wellbeing during contact visits. We can no longer overlook the central dimension of family contact in kinship care. Nor can we expect that families can necessarily manage this unaided (Hunt, Waterhouse, & Lutman, 2010).

There are tendencies in current child welfare practice to over-focus on the maternal relationship and the possibility of reunification between mother and child, to do limited work with fathers, and to underestimate more positive extended family relationships that may provide support during childhood and beyond. These biases can impact on the self-esteem and wellbeing of children. Parental relationships need to be approached with great sensitivity. Children need to be consulted and assisted in ways they feel comfortable with. This includes helping them deal with family conflict, with changing circumstances over time, with their parents' partners, and with recontacting parents after absences. Regular parental contact is not always desirable; the circumstances and timing need to be decided in partnership with children. On the other hand, more energy needs to be put into facilitating other family relationships that are important for children.

Children have a right to protection which may override their expressed wishes at times, and society has an obligation to provide this. Nevertheless, children always have the capacity to vote with their feet. Kinship arrangements make this easier than foster care, where foster families and 'birth families' are often kept apart. The use of mobile phones by young people makes proscribing contact with particular family members futile. As far as possible, court rulings and case planning need to avoid creating circumstances where children feel that they have to break the rules in order to maintain family support or avoid emotional abuse. In doing so, they may or may not secure their own safety and wellbeing. Whatever the outcome, the feeling of having to take drastic action to achieve their basic human rights is a burden no child should have to bear, and the circumstances surrounding such action risk scarring the child emotionally.

The service system needs to work with the difficult issues of family contact and relationships, rather than moving quickly to ordering regular, controlled contact arrangements, or attempting to forbid contacts unless absolutely necessary. Within safe limits, young people may sometimes need to explore what will work for them. This requires support workers to have the skills to deal with the complexity of family relationships where there has been abuse and neglect.

Deciding what is safe needs to include an increased focus on emotional safety, including not pushing children into re-traumatising experiences. When supervision is needed, it should respect the child and parent's need for space and informality as far as possible. The practice of supervising family visits in Departmental offices needs to be reconsidered, and more family-friendly environments provided. If risk is deemed to be so high that intensive supervision seems necessary, it may be necessary to reconsider whether contact is in the best interests of children, listening carefully to their views.

Ironically, the focus on regular and frequent parental contact in the Children's Court is not empowering parents either. Report Two of this series presents the views of parents (mostly mothers) of children in kinship care, who frequently feel unsupported and disempowered by the courts and child protection. A different approach is needed to support parents who have experienced significant difficulties.

Difficulties with family contact contributes to the legacy of trauma carried into young adulthood. Young people with a care history may have limited education, and sometimes become young parents, on their own or in insecure relationships. Parenting may be particularly challenging for them due to childhood experiences. Support for young adults coming out of kinship care will yield benefits in improving their life chances and those of their children.

In the difficult world of child protection intervention a key source of information, the views of children themselves, is still often overlooked. If relationships with young people can be built slowly, and they are listened to and not pushed, young people can describe better than others the impact of the difficult situations they find themselves in.

The new Victorian kinship care programs delivered through community service organisations that commenced in 2010 have started the process of providing support to children in kinship care. The early implementation phase has generated increasing awareness of the complexity of kinship support, leading to the development of tailored training initiatives. These programs have great potential.

Given the rapid growth in kinship care, considerably more resourcing for kinship support programs will be needed if the safety and wellbeing of children are to be assured. Upfront preventative expenditure in supporting family care has the potential to yield welfare cost savings in reducing the need for higher tariff interventions such as residential care, health services and juvenile justice interventions, as well as helping young adults to be able to contribute to society rather than depend on long-term support (Hunter, 2011).

There are additional barriers. Much has been identified about the deleterious impact on children and their families of the adversarial processes of the Victorian Children's Court (Campbell, Jackson, Cameron, Goodman, & Smith, 2003; Humphreys & Kiraly, 2009). Judicial reform is needed so that children's voices can be heard in the court room, and not subsumed into a system where a distorted approach to parents' rights frequently disadvantages both children and the parents themselves.

Achieving justice for children in child protection matters is one of the most difficult of human endeavours. Nevertheless, the contribution that children themselves can make to improving this process cannot be overestimated.

Appendix 1: Research studies that included interviews with children in kinship care

Authors	Country	Target group	Number of children in kinship care	Age range
Wilson and Conroy (1999)	USA	1,100 children in out of home care	100	5–18
Broad, Hayes & Rushworth (2001)	UK (England)	In or post kinship care	22	11–25
Brown et al (2002)	USA	African-American kinship families	30	9–17
Gibbons and Mason (2003)	Australia (NSW)	Formal kinship care	Number of young people not given	Unknown
Spence (2004)	Australia (NSW)	Formal kinship care	9	5–12
Hislop et al (2004)	Australia (WA)	Grandparent care, permanent arrangements	20	8–15
Aldgate and McIntosh (2006)	UK (Scotland)	Formal kinship care	30	8–16
Messing (2006)	USA	Informal kinship care	40	10–14
Farmer and Moyers (2008)	UK (England)	Formal (mostly) and informal kinship care	16	7–20
Sands (2009)	USA	Grandchildren interviewed with their grandparents	Approx 36	Unknown
Hunt et al (2010)	UK (England)	Formal kinship care	14	11–20
Burgess et al (2010)	UK (Scotland)	Informal and formal kinship care	12	11–17
Downie et al (2010)	Australia (WA)	Grandparent care formal and informal	20 (same cohort as Hislop et al above)	8–15
O'Neill (unpublished, work in progress)	Australia (Victoria)	Mixed formal and informal kinship care	11	Unknown

Appendix 2: Methodology

Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee, and ratified by DHS and participating community service organisations.

Young people were provided with user-friendly information about the research, both written and verbal, as were their caregivers. All gave signed consent, and for legal minors, their caregivers did also. They were given gift vouchers as an honorarium.

Two small focus groups (total of 5 young people aged 17–23) were conducted in conjunction with the CREATE Foundation. Accessing other young people was done via natural networks of family and community connections (K. Higgins, 1998).

A semi-structured interview process was used. Interviews were held in locations preferred by the young people, mostly in their home. With the younger children most caregivers preferred to be in the room or nearby.

Human research in sensitive areas requires reciprocity (Quinn Patton, 2002). Participants were sent a progress report on the research and an invitation to review the draft research report. Scholarship information was provided to two young women in their final year of school; one subsequently advised that her application had been successful. Reading material of high interest was provided to a young man with reading difficulties and particular career aspirations. Information about relevant activities was provided to others.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. The NVivo (QSR, 2010) software package was used to code topics discussed. Results were de-identified. On occasions where a story is potentially identifying despite name changes, small factual details have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

For the researcher, the interviews were an emotional but rewarding experience that was re-lived many times during analysis.

Appendix 3: The Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Pseudonym	Age
Peter (cousin of Imogen)	10	Amelia	17
Lisa (sister of Hannah)	10	Imogen (cousin of Peter)	18
Aimee	10	Oscar (cousin of Aiden, nephew of Nick)	19
Jackson	12	Tina	19
Tom	13	Zoe	19
Hannah (sister of Lisa)	14	David	21
Aiden (cousin of Oscar, nephew of Nick)	14	Clare	25
Brianna	14	Ruby	25
Tamara	17	Anna	29
Tessa	17	Nick (uncle of Aiden and Oscar)	40
Grace	17		

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