

KINSHIP CARE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

KINSHIP CARER BRIEFING 2025

INTRODUCTION

This study was a collaboration between the Association for Fostering, Kinship and Adoption (AFKA) Scotland and the University of Edinburgh exploring how the digital world impacts on Kinship Carers and the challenges they face in caring for children and young people. There are estimated to be around 12,000 children and young people living with kinship carers in Scotland, including those who are formally 'looked after', subject to a kinship care order, or where there is a private arrangement.ⁱ Kinship care has increased over the last 15 years to become the largest form of 'out of home' care for children in Scotlandⁱⁱ Whilst support from services may vary depending upon legal status, kinship carers are often provided less formal support than foster carers or adoptive parentsⁱⁱⁱ despite

frequently facing multiple disadvantages^{iv} Notwithstanding such challenges, research suggests kinship care provides benefits for children including greater stability and connections to family and community networks.^v

The Promise (2020, p.20) states: '**Scotland must hold the hands of those who hold the hand of the child**' and '**Whatever the mode of arrangement, Scotland must ensure that children living in kinship care get the support they need to thrive. Kinship must be actively explored as a positive place for children to be cared for.**' This briefing aims to share key findings from this project with you and provide information about some of the supports that are available in navigating the digital world.

KEY POINTS

- Kinship carers have a variety of backgrounds and experiences. You may or may not be confident in using digital technologies and social media.
- You should be able to expect that any support you and your child(ren) receive with navigating the 'digital world' meets your needs and is linked to any support plans you have in place.
- This might include help with accessing information and advice, and support with speaking to your child(ren).
- You may need practical and material support to be 'digitally included'.
- There are ways you can keep up-to-date with information about apps and parental controls.
- You should expect any help with lifestory work and keeping in touch arrangements for your child, to take into account digital technologies and social media.

BACKGROUND

During June 2024 AFKA Scotland undertook four focus groups, two with Kinship Carers recruited with the support of Nurture Scotland and Glasgow HSCP, and two with Kinship Practitioners recruited through AFKA's Kinship Practitioners' Forum.

The 12 kinship carers looked after children and young people aged between 3 and 19 years. Most had kinship care orders and experience of the children's hearing system. The 7 practitioners were from 5 local authorities and 1 third sector organisation, with most being based in kinship care teams.

The focus groups were used to find out more about the challenges of caring for children in a digital world and how supports might be improved for kinship carers.

A Knowledge Exchange Event was held at the University of Edinburgh in August 2024 to discuss the emerging findings.

This was also informed by a presentation from Glasgow HSCP about their digital resilience and kinship support work.

KINSHIP CARE IN SCOTLAND AND THE DIGITAL WORLD

The increasing use of digital technologies and social media in society bring opportunities and challenges for children, young people, and their families. Having access to digital technology and knowing how to use it are increasingly important in being able to access basic services for all families.

Children and young people can enhance their resilience and wellbeing by learning new skills, developing their talents, and fostering their friendships, family ties, and a sense of community and belonging.^{vi} Being able to use digital technologies can support children to realise the full range of their civil, political, cultural, economic and social rights. However, lack of meaningful access to the digital world, or the skills to navigate it, may make existing inequalities worse, and create new ones.^{vii}

There are also risks related to the digital world, and adults need to support children and young people to develop the skills and confidence to navigate it safely. Within the UK, half of 10-year-olds have their own smartphone and 70% of 12–15-year-olds have a social media profile.^{viii} Whilst most children say they are happy on social media, 40% of 12-15 year olds feel pressure to be on popular apps all the time. There can be a negative impact on children's wellbeing when both children and caregivers spend a lot of time on devices and this interferes with communication between them. Caregivers who lack confidence in using tools and controls are less able to support their children around issues of online safety and are more likely to feel that technology has a negative impact on their children's wellbeing.^{ix}

There are lots of books, guides and training aimed at helping parents to navigate the digital world, and resources and training specifically for foster carers is growing. However, little exists for kinship carers and there is a lack of knowledge about what supports you use and would be useful to you. It is important that your digital needs and experiences are better understood so that you and your child(ren) are better supported.

LEARNING FROM THE PROJECT

Kinship carers are a diverse group and there is no such thing as a 'typical kinship carer'. It is important that when services are supporting you and your child(ren) that they spend time finding out what your needs are.

You may be facing challenges using digital technologies or social media. Some of these challenges might be financial or practical. You may not have much experience of using digital technology. This might make it more difficult to access essential services e.g. applying for housing, receiving school information, and making GP appointments.

You may already have a good appreciation of the possible benefits of the digital world and be confident in knowing how to support your child(ren) to be able to access it safely. Nonetheless, it can sometimes be difficult to keep up with the pace at which social media and digital technologies develop.

'It's advertised as a friends app but it's set up like a dating app. You know, what are you looking for in a female friend? (kinship carer)

You may want to know where you can find information to make sure you can keep up as far as possible with any new developments that might pose a risk to your child(ren). This might be particularly the case if you feel your child(ren) already need(s) some extra support because of their experiences. Before living with you, they may have had little supervision or boundaries around their internet and social media use. You might be trying to introduce this and also protect them from unwanted contact through social media.

'You get into a bad habit of giving them unrestricted access' (kinship carer)

From what we heard during this study, we suggest the following:

- You can **approach your local authority** (e.g. social work, school) for information on what support is available for you and your child(ren) in relation to the digital world. This may include:
 - signposting you to financial and practical support

- information about activities for your child(ren) so that they have things to do other than be online, and
- refer you to **third sector organisations** or other sources of information and advice.

- If you or your child(ren) already have **support plans** in place from the local authority, then any needs you and your child(ren) have in relation to the digital world should be addressed within these. This includes any plans in relation to **keeping in touch** with important people, and **lifestory work**.
- If you have **specific concerns** about the safety of your child(ren), then you should seek help. Where this is urgent you should contact the police. If you want to discuss a concern then you can do so by making a report to a Child Protection Advisor at CEOP, speaking to your child(ren)'s school, or contacting your local authority social work.
- There may be some of your **friends and family** who are confident about the digital world and can offer support to you or your child(ren) in navigating it.
- **Peer support groups** can be great sources of support for kinship carers and can be good places for finding out from other carers about the latest apps and how to use parental controls to promote children's safety.

'Without the support of our kinship group, there's many of us who would be in ward one in-patient mental health placement' (kinship carer)

- Online safety is promoted mostly by **taking an interest** in what your children are doing online and **talking** to them about it. This is even more important than what controls you have in place (Internet Matters, 2022).

'It's not that we're invading their privacy. It's that we're trying to keep them safe' (kinship carer)

- To **keep up to date** with parental controls and apps, consider signing up to a regular newsletter or updates from one of the resources listed below.

RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- There are a variety of guides and resources in relation to online safety for caregivers. Many of these websites also allow you to sign up for newsletters or websites to help you keep up to date.
 - Cyber Resilience and Internet Safety: A guide for parents and carers: https://www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Scotland-Upstream-Cyber-Booklet_V2_26JUN20.pdf
 - Parents and Carers - UK Safer Internet Centre: <https://saferinternet.org.uk/guide-and-resource/parents-and-carers>
 - Parents and carers (CEOP Education): <https://www.ceopeducation.co.uk/parents/>
 - Parents & carers (Childnet): <https://www.childnet.com/parents-and-carers/>
 - Keeping children safe online (Barnardo's): <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/support-for-parents-and-carers/child-abuse-and-harm/keeping-children-safe-online>
- Information relating to neurodivergent young people:
 - Neurodivergent young people and gaming (Internet Matters): <https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/research/neurodivergent-young-peoples-experience-video-games/#full-report>
 - Navigating the Challenges of Social Media for Neurodivergent Youth (ChildNEXUS blog): <https://www.childnexus.com/blog/article/navigating-the-challenges-of-social-media-for-neurodivergent-youth-65464eb50ea4f>
 - Stop It Now! deliver training, often through local authorities or third sector organisations. They have developed a suite of resources on cyber resilience and online safety training for kinship carers: <https://www.stopitnow.org.uk/scotland/kinship-cyber-resilience-training/>
 - The Kinship Care Advice Service for Scotland (KCASS) provides some resources and guidance in relation to Life Story in Kinship Care: <https://kinship.scot/for-kinship-carers/support/life-story-in-kinship-care/>

ⁱ Wijedasa, D. (2017). *The prevalence and characteristics of children growing up with relatives in the UK*. Briefing Paper 3 – Characteristics of children living with relatives in Scotland. University of Bristol

ⁱⁱ Children's Social Work Statistics 2023-24 – Looked After Children - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)

ⁱⁱⁱ Children looked after away from home aged five and under in Scotland: experiences, pathways and outcomes (stir.ac.uk)

^{iv} McCartan, C., Bunting, L., Bywaters, P., Davidson, G., Elliott, M. and Hooper, J. (2018) A Four-Nation Comparison of Kinship Care in the UK: The Relationship Between Formal Kinship Care and Deprivation, *Social Policy & Society*, vol.17(4), pp.619-635 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746418000179>

^v Bell, T. and Romano, E. (2015) Permanency and Safety Among Children in Foster Family and Kinship Care: A Scoping Review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, vol.18(3), pp.268-286 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838015611673>

^{vi} Third, A., Bellrose, D., Dawkins, U., Keltie, E. and Pihl, K. (2014) *Children's Rights in the Digital Age: A Download from Children Around the World*. Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne

^{vii} UNCRC General Comment No 25 (2021) on children's rights in the digital environment

^{viii} Ofcom (2021). *Children and Parents: Media Use and Attitudes Report 2020/21*. Ofcom

^{ix} Internet Matters (2022). *Digital parenting: how parents support children's wellbeing in a digital world*. Internet Matters

Briefing prepared by Mark Hardy and Dr Autumn Roesch-Marsh. We would like to thank: the kinship carers and kinship practitioners who contributed to this project; all those who attended the knowledge exchange event; Jim Quinn for his presentation at this event; and to the Kinship Care Advice Service for Scotland, Glasgow HSCP, and Nurture Scotland, for support in arranging focus groups.