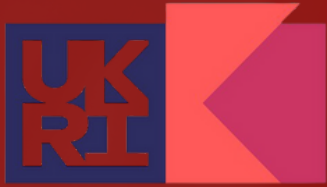


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# Incorporating what matters to children into kinship care practice

Listen, understand, do

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# Introduction

*Our social workers didn't always do what they said they were going to do. I think that's bad. We also had a lot [of different workers]. They also weren't very nice, except for one. [She] was good because she listened to us and made us feel safe.*

*Kimberley*

This kinship care practice guidance has been developed by listening to children's views. It is intended primarily for those who support children and families in kinship care arrangements, but it also applies to other areas of child welfare practice. This guidance starts with an explanation of listening and communication methods that can be helpful for meaningfully listening to children in practice. Then, three main themes are highlighted. The children felt they wanted professionals to listen, understand, and do.

Kinship care is a family arrangement in which children are cared for within their family constellation when their previous primary caregivers (typically parents) cannot do so. Based on the 2021 UK census results, it is currently estimated that there are more than 141,000 children living in kinship care arrangements. Most children are cared for by their grandparents in informal kinship care—i.e., without formal, ongoing statutory involvement.

Written by Dr Paul Shuttleworth.

The quotes incorporated into this concise guide are from the research and the more detailed thesis, '[What matters to children living in kinship care?](#)' (Shuttleworth,

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2021). The original study employed a specific communication method with children: a “What matters” approach.

This was designed to help the children discuss and illuminate the values they deem most important for a successful family life. It uses child-led tours, photographs taken by the children, role-play, drawing, and play, all beginning with the simple question: ‘What matters to you?’. This approach can be helpful for kinship care and child welfare practice.

### **Accompanying video**

Alongside this written guide, a short video has been developed that powerfully illustrates the importance of listening to children.

Watch the video on CoramBAAF’s YouTube Channel [here](#), or click the image below.



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# Some “what matters” approaches that can help with listening, understanding and doing with children

- Ask the child to take you on a tour of “what matters” around their family home, neighbourhood or school. You can use this as a starting point to discuss what is important to them and why.
- Ask the child to take ten photos of things that matter to them as a mini project. Next time you see them, ask them if they want to show you some or all of the photos. As above, you can use this as a starting point for discussing what is important to them.
- After establishing a trusting relationship, ask the child if they'd like to draw or write down relationships that matter to them.
- With the child, role-play going to a party. How would you describe yourselves to each other? How would you tell each other what matters to you? Ask each other follow-up questions. For example, if they say that their friends are important to them, ask a valuation question, such as 'What makes a good friend?'.  
• Having reflected on what the child has told you, describe to them in an accessible way what theories you are using and what might help. This co-production method of child participation will allow the child to revise, corroborate, or reject your understanding of their lives and needs.

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# Listen

***Yeah, you should tell people that kids are not always wrong, and when they say something, maybe you should listen.***

***Unicorn***

The children involved in the research agreed that they needed to be listened to and be part of the discussion about decisions that affect their lives. They felt their experiences were as valid as those of the adults concerned with their care. Kimberley stressed the importance of working together and listening to each other:

***I would say that we do know things, but sometimes we don't really understand, like, things that are happening in life. Like with our mum and dad, we don't know everything. But things that we do know and that we have experienced, like we had gone and seen them, they should listen to us. But they should listen to them as well. I think they should listen to both of the sides of what they have to say because I don't think that all of the time that adults are listening to children.***

***Kimberley***


The children in the study wanted professionals to find fun, creative ways to communicate. For example, the “what matters” activities were preferred over tick-box interviews. They also liked the focus on the significance of values, why they mattered to them, and their personal needs.

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***You know what? I like talking about what matters...I think it's good because we do different things and talk about how I feel...knowing my emotions and the pressure that I'm under like quite a lot.***

***Lucy***

Listening to children requires building relationships, reflection, and adequately supporting the child. Although the children wanted to be included in conversations about their lives, none wanted to take full responsibility for final decisions, especially regarding their safety.



***Adults should be there for you and provide for you...And they just want you to be safe. They have more experience, and, like, they are there, there to make the decisions to keep you safe.***

***Zack***

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# Understand

In addition to being listened to, children want their and their families' lives to be better understood.

*It still annoys me really today because nobody really understands or seems to want to understand. Like we never see on the news about like anything to do with kinship care or anything.*

*Eliza*

The children wanted services to recognise and support their needs. They also wished for their family to be recognised as a valid form of family. The children described many genetically and non-genetically related family friends, pets, and personal friends involved in their care. They emphasised that all of them could be considered family.



*Well, I've got nan and grandad, aunts and uncles, mum and dad, and Anna [not genetically related], who now lives with us. So, I call her family, because she is my family really.*

*Sydney*

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For most children, family was reliant on the amount of time and effort others spent trying to relate to them:

***We have friends that, like, it's her granddaughter and her. They're not like our "family family", [but] family like our extended family...they've made the effort to, like, be with us and stuff like that...I don't think for family, you actually have to be about "related to you". I just feel like they have to want to relate with you.***

***Eliza***

In addition to investing time with each other, the use of space was crucial. An example of this is siblings sharing a room.

***Yeah because I share a room, and I don't ever feel like I don't have anywhere to go and just, like, build my own. So, I don't think it's necessarily about needing to have your own room. It's just like needing to know that there is somewhere that you can go if you need to be alone or whatever.***

***Megan***

Overall, the children stated that it mattered more that various spaces were available depending on what they wished to do with their time. The children appreciated spaces where the family could be together and places to be alone. For some children, they wanted to stay in just one home. However, having multiple residences for some children, such as Jordan and Thomas, was also manageable and helped them navigate the different family relationships.



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***We do different things in different places coz there are different people around here. And I don't have [primary carer's birth children] here, which can be good but can also bad.***

***Jordan***

Being mindful that there are multiple meanings of family and home requires professionals to spend time with children so they can understand their perspectives and move away from often static conceptions portrayed in policy and legislation. For example, the children in the research were adamant that they did not want to be seen as being in “placement” or an alternative to fostering and adoption.

***I'm not in fostering or adoption, like [sibling] is. Yeah, like it doesn't need to be like labels. It's just another way of being a normal family.***

***Harmony***

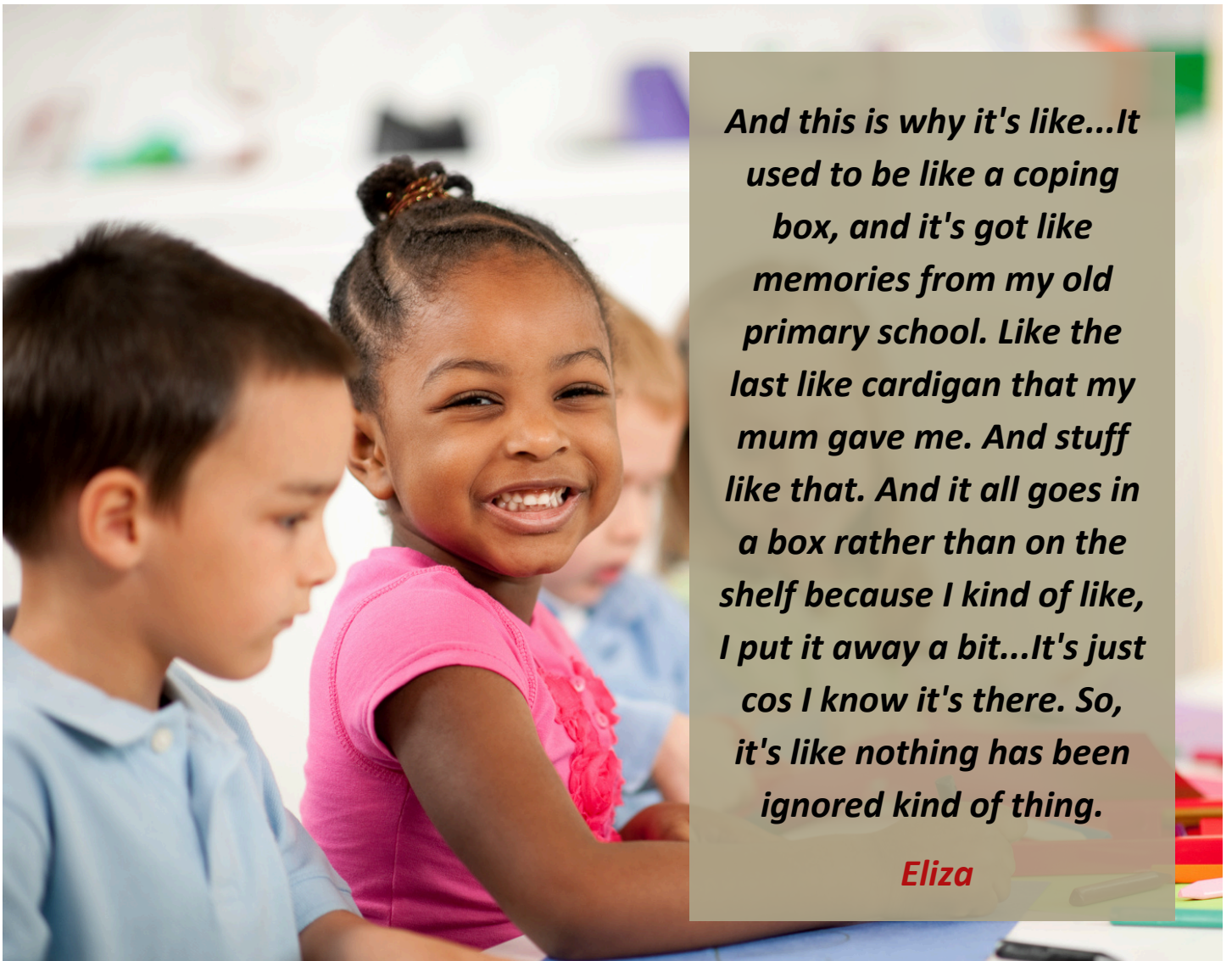
Additionally, they insisted that “contact” or “family time” should be about nurturing safe, positive connections instead of merely being legally mandated visits in a centre. This could be accomplished in numerous ways.

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***Rainbow – Although my sister is not here, I can see her by phone, by computer, and by things that she's given to me, like love. And I talk about people that aren't here every day. And I have pictures of them. And this (shows a postcard). It says sisters will be forever friends. And my sister's fiancé taught me how to ride a bike.***

***Rainbow***

Children in kinship care are working hard to manage the push and pull of these complex connections in nuanced ways. They are already doing the work, which professionals may term “life story work”, although the children in the study never used the phrase.



***And this is why it's like...It used to be like a coping box, and it's got like memories from my old primary school. Like the last like cardigan that my mum gave me. And stuff like that. And it all goes in a box rather than on the shelf because I kind of like, I put it away a bit...It's just cos I know it's there. So, it's like nothing has been ignored kind of thing.***

***Eliza***



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# Do

In line with UK child welfare policy and legislation, children feel that adults and professionals must provide for their basic needs.

*OK, so I'll probably start with living with my grandma and grandad, and having pets, and I really like this house, and I have two sisters and two brothers, erm, and, er, erm, er, having a lot of bikes and scooters and things to play with, and a nice room to sleep in and everything, and really nice food and stuff and yeah.*

*Unicorn*

They also realised they had many ambivalent relationships, including with their parents. Therefore, they wanted to be able to find space and time to navigate those relationships rather than resolve them.

*I feel like my mum, like she is still my mum and stuff, but obviously I can't change that, and yet I have to respect that she's my mum, but I just don't feel like she was like a mothering figure really at all times so I feel like... It's a good and a bad thing, really.*

*Purple*

To help children explore the complex relationships in their families, it is vital that they feel safe to talk about what this means to them. The focus is not on finding a perfect solution or resolving contradictions but on guiding children through them.

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The communication methods used with the children showed that they think about their lives and future in nuanced ways. Their insights from their everyday lived experiences should be the starting point. For example, Lucy talks about how she has been permanence planning.

***And yeah, Grandma said if she drops down dead the next day, then we have to go and live with Uncle M and Auntie J and her sister. We have to move all the way to where they are, and so then I'll have to, like, go to a different school when I'm, like, literally in my second term at secondary school.***

***Lucy***

The children also demonstrated that they can often provide realistic strategies to navigate the complexities of their lives and relationships, e.g. for maintaining connections.

***Once, a social worker came. He said have you ever thought about like other ways of seeing your mum and dad...And we said, 'What about writing a letter or like writing an email or something?'. And then he was like 'Oh my gosh, I'd never thought of that before. Like that's a really good idea'.***

***Erika***



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The children were adamant that adults should also be responsible for disclosing sensitive information. A child's right to know should not precede sensitive practice attuned to the particular child's emotional needs.

*I feel like it's too much to put on a child for them to know every single thing. I feel like there, I feel like there, it isn't a necessity for them. Maybe when they're older, and they themselves know that the...I just think that it's like on a young brain that's still developing, like not finding out themselves and stuff. It's too much to tell them everything about their lives if they, I think if they, can't remember it and it's not affecting them, and they haven't really asked to know, then there's no point in telling them like the details that they like that they probably don't need to know right now.*

**Eliza**





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# Conclusion

*Things can take too long...[Social workers] don't listen to us...they don't always do what they say.*

*Erika*

Child welfare professionals must consider the unique circumstances of each child. Information must be shared, and family life must be discussed, but not every detail has to be disclosed all at once. Discussions must be conducted in a timely manner with sensitivity by a knowledgeable and competent individual. Professionals should guide conversations in a space that promotes navigating challenges rather than just outright solving them. It is an ongoing process built on relationships of trust, understanding particular contexts, “outing” inner conversations, and navigating often competing voice(s) that children may have.

When a plan has been devised alongside children's perspectives, they want to be reassured that this will happen. The research also found that a “what matters” approach and creative modes of communication can be helpful to aid the vital ongoing reflexive process of including children in decision-making.

Lastly, not using terms such as placement, contact or life story can also have a considerable impact. These small utterances can quite quickly change the broader conversations on kinship care. Changing how social workers speak about kinship care can change how social workers think about family and childhood. This encourages practitioners to consider such family structures with greater compassion. It also demonstrates to the individuals we listen to that we acknowledge how they view their family life. If children do not use these words when describing their lives, then social workers should try and avoid using them too.





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# Resources

[BASW \(2016\) Social Workers' Communication with Children and Young People in Practice](#)

Boddy J (2023) Thinking Through Family, Bristol: Bristol University Press

Collins S (2018) 'Ethics of care and statutory social work in the UK: critical perspectives and strengths', Practice, 30:1, pp.3–18

Lefevre M (2018) Communicating and Engaging with Children and Young People: Making a difference (2nd edition), London: Policy Press

[Nuffield Family Justice Observatory \(2021\) Short Video: Contact between children in care and their families: messages from research](#)

[Research For Practice \(2021\) Podcast: What Matters to Children in Kinship Care](#)

# Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all of the children who participated in the original research, and the children and young people from the [Liverpool Kinship Carers](#) group who were consulted to inform this guide and the accompanying [short video](#) - Paul Shuttleworth