

## **No good childhoods on the cheap**

A famous 60s ad campaign featured a car mechanic telling a customer that he could pay now for an oil change and filter or pay later for a new engine. The same message of 'pay a bit now or pay much more later' applies to the choices about what it will take for Scotland to end up with the healthy, safe, smart and happy children everyone wants.

Too many children throughout Scotland have been dealt a bad hand early in life. A few make headline news and provoke outrage when their lives end tragically. But the pattern is too little follow-up – and too little investment made in prevention, early intervention and sustained support.

The evidence that we 'pay much more later' is overwhelming. The previous generation's bad childhoods have translated into a host of problems, including adults who: misuse drugs and alcohol; have a low life expectancy; mental health problems; swell the criminal justice and prison systems; become domestic violence perpetrators or victims; are homeless; or chronically unemployed. And remember, many of these unhappy, unhealthy adults now have children of their own.

Breaking the cycle of bad childhoods that end in sad and wasted adult lives requires a new level of commitment and willingness to pay now for needed help and support.

Scotland has a solid, but far from invincible, base upon which to build good childhoods. From our internationally respected Children's Hearings System to well received national policies such as Getting It Right For Every Child and the Early Years Framework, a positive direction of travel is developing. But, long-established public services badly need renewal and new ones need to move more swiftly from nice words on paper to real improvements in children's lives and life chances.

The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) have taken important first steps in improving the prospects for those already-harmed children who become officially 'looked after'. Through good foster care and good residential placements, there is hope for their futures.

Recent media attention, especially by the *Herald*, has helped by shining a light upon the help provided outside of government by grandparents and other relatives. These kinship carers step into the void created when children can no longer live with a birth parent. Many children have been saved from unhappy endings by kinship carers.

Beyond the benefits to the children themselves, kinship care is a bargain for society. The cost of institutional accommodation for thousands more children would put a terrific strain upon the public purse. Besides, there are not nearly enough foster homes or residential places available.

It is estimated that more than 10,000 children are living in kinship care throughout Scotland. The Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) have started to recognise the importance and value of kinship carers.

However, kinship care has been defined and dealt with in narrow terms as family members caring for *official* 'looked after' children. The governmental definition covers only the tip of kinship care and not the proverbial iceberg. It overlooks the far greater number in **informal** kinship care – i.e. children who are not officially 'looked after', but who reside long-term with grandparents or relatives.

Financial and staffing constraints made it easy for governments not to notice informal kinship arrangements. Children's services workloads are already too heavy. Workers have little time or energy to search for new children and families. Official silence about informal kinship care allows national and local government to avoid having to do, or pay, anything.

The silence has been mutual. Most informal kinship carers have avoided asking for help due to their fear that the children they love (or toward whom they feel a family loyalty) might be taken away. Some have been silent because of an unwillingness to make public the problems of the birth parents.

This mutual silence has endured for too long. The majority of children growing up in informal kinship care may be okay now, but given the lack of research evidence and reliable data, this cannot be assumed.

The point is neither for these children to become officially 'looked after', nor for informal kinship carers to receive the same financial package given to kinship carers of 'looked after' children (and foster parents). Instead, the time has come to hear the voices of the children, young people and adults involved and identify what assistance and support they actually need.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that for many kinship carers, the needs are not primarily financial. They want and need help to do the best they can to raise these children. Sometimes this means learning how to help these children heal from the physical, mental or emotional harm they have endured. Sometimes it's learning to make sense of the new technologies, cultural influences and daily concerns these young people bring with them.

Governments should fairly assess the wellbeing of children and provide the support required for each informal kinship care situation to succeed, if possible. There is no substitute for an individual assessment of what is true about a particular child and a specific kinship care situation. Blanket assumptions in favour of, or against, informal kinship care are unhelpful because they fail to keep 'what's true' for that individual child and family at the heart of what happens next.

Investing in the success of informal kinship care could become a classic example of how a modest allocation of resources now – for example, by supporting networks of kinship care families – can avoid massively expensive problems from arising later. There is still time to act on the truth of 'pay now or pay much more later'. But the clock is ticking and children and adults in the largely invisible world of informal kinship care cannot wait for better economic times to be taken seriously.

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**Children in Scotland** is the national agency for voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals working with children and their families in Scotland. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that relevant policies, services and provision are of the best possible quality and able to meet the demands of a diverse society. For further information visit: [www.childreninscotland.org.uk](http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk)