

The relational value of reading: insights from kinship care families

Introduction

The **benefits of reading** are widely recognised. But in the context of kinship care families, where children may have experienced disruption or trauma, these benefits are even more profound. Sharing stories becomes a tool for nurture and connection.



In 2024, as part of the National Kinship Care Strategy, BookTrust provided a suite of support to kinship care families through a wider programme led by Kinship – the leading kinship care charity in England and Wales. This support was designed to help carers unlock the unique power of reading and sharing stories to understand and meet the needs of the children in their care.

Kinship care is when relatives or friends care for a child because their parents aren't able to. It's estimated that more than 140,000 children in England, Wales and Northern Ireland are in some form of kinship care arrangement.¹

BookTrust provided books, alongside information, advice and support to over 1,000 kinship care families through:

- 16 Kinship roadshow events (providing information, books and support)
- 8 workshops (providing in-depth information and practical advice on using stories to discuss emotions and identity)
- 3 online Story Sessions
- 50 Story Explorers subscriptions (monthly kits with books and resources)

About this briefing

This briefing provides new insights into the role reading and sharing stories can play in kinship care families' lives and the types of support they find most meaningful. Kinship care is a broad term covering a diverse range of circumstances and experiences. The themes outlined in this briefing are based on the experiences and views of those we spoke to and may not be representative of all kinship carers.

We'd like to thank the families who shared their insights and the Department for Education and Kinship for making our learning possible.



Our learning approach

We used a range of methods to learn, including:

- Observations and conversations with hundreds of carers at the roadshows and workshops
- Feedback surveys from workshop attendees (57 responses out of 102 attendees)
- Interviews (16 kinship carers, including 5 peer group leads)
- Feedback from partner organisations

Understanding kinship care families

Our child and family-centred ethos guided our approach to developing this support. We combined our expertise in reading and the early years with that of kinship care families through a series of co-design activities involving 56 children and carers. This approach was essential to our success.



“ There’s a lot of feeling as a kinship carer, ...not being heard and not getting the same level of support as the adoption and fostering side of things... So to have something that’s more targeted specifically to understanding... ”

Kinship support group leader, talking about a face-to-face workshop

In our conversations, we heard about some of the challenges carers were navigating. Many of these challenges are well researched, but our learning provides new insights into how reading support, books and stories can support with these challenges.

- **Behavioural and emotional regulation:** carers are particularly interested in reading and sharing stories as a way to support behavioural and emotional regulation for the children in their care
- **Financial constraints:** children’s books are not always something easily affordable, so the opportunity to give children new books is a treasured experience
- **Feeling invisible:** carers often feel overlooked and unsupported in the broader system and within popular culture. Support specifically designed for them, including books reflecting their diverse family structures, provides recognition and understanding

“ At our Virtual School, the use of Story Explorers has opened up access to a wide range of diverse book genres tailored to meet the specific needs of our cohorts. It offers families—particularly kinship carers—a vital source of support, providing a nurturing and inclusive space for the youngest and most vulnerable children to engage with stories that reflect their experiences and broaden their horizons. ”

**Education Development Officer,
Virtual School**

The relational value of books and stories

We learned that, for kinship care families, the relational value of books and stories is what's most important. They provide a platform through which carers and children can open up conversations, nurture connections, regulate emotions and reinforce self-worth. We heard from carers about the power of what emerges across these simple, everyday exchanges.

At the core of these interactions is bonding; the continuous nurturing of the emotional connection between caregiver and child. This connection is foundational to a child's sense of safety, identity, and overall wellbeing, providing a secure base from which the child can explore the world.² Research shows that sharing books and stories can enhance the caregiver-child bond through consistent, emotionally rich, co-constructed experiences. This isn't only important for children, it can also significantly contribute to the emotional health of caregivers.³



“ The five year old, he has a lot of a lot of anger issues really ... But I always make sure that before we get to the point of story time that everything is calmed down so that we can just sit down and read the story... So, as much as possible, I do protect that time to get to that point of being. ”

Kinship carer who attended a roadshow

“ [Reading together] gives her the encouragement and the confidence to be able to talk about other things that are going on at school as well. Because we can sit down and she knows that she's in a safe space and we can talk about anything. ”

Kinship carer who attended a roadshow

Carers we spoke to described sharing books and stories as a valued opportunity for calm, focused time together – especially after a challenging day. But it's important to recognise that while story time creates moments of calm for some, others told us it can take effort to get there. Both child and carer may need to regulate before they are able to sit and enjoy the experience together. Whether created through sharing stories, or in order to share stories, this theme of shared calm and emotional regulation recurred in our workshops in particular.

We found that carers are seeking ways to talk to the children in their care about specific challenges and complex topics such as identity, difficult emotions or loss. They are thinking about how to seed information to prepare for future questions and challenges. They see a clear role for the kinds of books that can help them do this, and have a strong desire for advice on how to adapt more generic stories to create the openings they need.

“ Because he gets to understand that someone's angry in the book, I mean, I had a conversation about it the other day with him, where he came home from school and for the first time ever, he spoke about his emotions. ”

Kinship carer who attended a roadshow

Kinship roadshows

As part of their programme of support, Kinship ran a series of roadshow events where carers could connect and get information. At these roadshows, BookTrust provided books and booklists. Here, we learned that carers deeply value not just the books we provide, but also practical ideas and strategies on how to use them as a supportive tool to spark meaningful conversations. Carers may already be aware of the power of using books in this way, but the knowledge that this doesn't have to be tied to specific storylines unlocks new potential for them to adapt a wider range of books to meet their needs and the needs of the children in their care.

Wider research shows the value of books and stories in helping children express themselves.⁴ Just as carers can open up the conversations they are seeking, books can be the catalyst for children to voice emotions or thoughts they may not have had a way to express before.



View our **recommended books** for families and children in Kinship care [here](#).

“

It was something that - not only is it for the kids - but it's also for me, because it now gives me another avenue to go down. To be able to... go through with my little boy and read them and have some different books other than his school books that he reads all the time. ”

Kinship carer, talking about the BookTrust stall at a roadshow

“

It talked about heroes without a cape and you know she actually had me in tears because she just literally looked at me and she said. 'But I've already got a hero without a cape, because you're my hero and Uncle Colin is.' And I was like, oh my God, I did not expect that... ”

Kinship carer, talking about the book *Not All Heroes Wear Capes* received at a roadshow



Workshops

In our online and in-person workshops, carers explored how to use stories and books to start conversations with the children in their care on topics relevant to their needs and experiences. We also provided specific books for discussing emotions and identity. This was the first time we'd delivered these kinds of sessions, and we learned that, regardless of whether they are in-person or online, there are two key ingredients:

- Shared space with peers facing similar challenges
- Knowledgeable experts who first listen and then provide tailored advice

“ [The facilitator] started to listen and learn from each of us individually about the children that are in our care. And then her knowledge of all of the books, the selection of books that she had there, to be able to then offer different books to different people. ”

Kinship carer, talking about a face-to-face workshop

Carers especially value practical, easy-to-digest advice and clear, concise, actionable guidance that they can immediately apply.

“ People were talking about issues that they were having at that time. I think I was having a particular issue with my little one and [the facilitator] was able to pick up a book and say ‘Look at this, this is how this would help with that,’ ...in a kind of really fun and kind of non-intrusive way, non-judgmental way. Kind of giving options. ”

Kinship carer, talking about a face-to-face workshop



55 out of 56 carers said they picked up new ideas for how to share stories to support their child's needs



56 out of 57 carers said they'd use the ideas from the workshop



Story Explorers

Story Explorers is our early years offer for kinship, foster and adoptive families, providing monthly kits with books and resources to support joyful story sharing experiences at home. As part of the Kinship programme of work, kinship care families either received Story Explorers through their Virtual School team or kinship and fostering support service.

“ We recognise there’s often inequity between what our kinship carers can access vs adoptive or fostered families. And take every opportunity to be able to offer such resources to our families, acknowledging the importance of forming bonds through reading and play.”

Team manager (local authority kinship support service) talking about Story Explorers

Since first launching Story Explorers, we’ve heard from a range of families across fostering, adoption and kinship. The introduction of the kits enriches and prompts new behaviours, both in reading and the relational space this creates. Crucially, the kits are designed to support children’s engagement and agency. We’ve seen that this plays a key role in creating the shared space through which deeper reading engagement and deeper relational engagement occurs.



Ellena, Erica and Zahin – one family’s story

Ellena is a kinship carer with special guardianship of her two grandchildren, Erica (5) and Zahin (2). The arrival of Story Explorers has become a joyful part of their routine. Zahin is always the first to explore the box, while Erica, who has learning difficulties, is equally drawn in – the books capturing her attention. She loves turning pages, asking questions, and connecting the stories to her own life. Erica gets so excited each month when the new books arrive, she takes the books to school to read with her teacher and classmates.

Ellena has noticed the impact books have on Erica’s developing emotional literacy. *“Identifying emotions, that’s something she’s recently done.”* she shares, *“I know for a fact she picked up from the faces in the book, The Perfect Fit, how those people were feeling.”* Ellena has told her kinship support group how helpful the kits have been, not just for reading and learning, but for supporting emotional development and bonding. *“I encouraged others to have a look at what was on offer”* she says.

Ellena also described how their reading habits have changed since receiving Story Explorers. Where reading used to be a once-a-day bedtime routine, it’s now something that happens several times a day, led by Erica and Zahin’s enthusiasm. *“You make extra time when it’s something they’re excited about.”*

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals



What next?

Reading can help build strong foundations for the happiness and future success of children in kinship care. BookTrust has been supporting children in contact with the social care system for over twenty years. Looking to the future, we'll be working to increase recognition of the role reading can play in supporting kinship care families, so this can be built into their support systems. We'll provide support to practitioners so they can harness the power of reading, and we'll continue to learn with families to deliver the support they need and the joy they deserve.

“ If I could just put in a bottle. The joy and the happiness and the laughter... She just loves Octopus Shocktopus!, every single night we've had it... That book has brought so much joy and that's the book that she wants and there are different conversations about that book every single time we read it. ”

Kinship carer, talking about the books received at a roadshow



About Kinship

Kinship helps professionals and local authorities to support kinship carers through a range of free and commissioned services.

[Find out more about Kinship](#)

About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. Each year, we get millions of children reading, especially those from families with a low income, and those in foster care, kinship care and adoption. Reading supports children's wellbeing, strengthening bonds and relationships. It supports children to do better at school and become more creative. It helps overcome disadvantage. This is why we work with families, supporting them to start sharing stories and books together from the earliest possible age and continue throughout childhood. Our carefully selected books and well-researched programmes are delivered by thousands of local partners, bringing the magic of reading to children in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



Story Explorers is a new programme designed with and for foster, kinship and adoptive families to bring enjoyment and stability through reading.

[Find out more about Story Explorers](#)



Letterbox Club is a longstanding programme designed to support children who are experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage to engage in reading and numeracy.

[Find out more about Letterbox Club](#)



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Endnotes

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