

# Policy briefing Paper 04

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We champion the wider  
family who care for children

## Family and friends care and parental substance misuse

Parental drug or alcohol abuse is leading to around 140,000<sup>1</sup> children in the UK being raised by grandparents and other family and friends carers. This is a finding from new analysis of a survey into the experiences and situation of grandparent carers carried out in summer 2010 by Grandparents Plus.<sup>2</sup>

46%, or 117 of the 255 grandparents and other kinship carers who responded to the survey said that parental substance misuse was the main reason, or one of the main reasons why they were bringing up the children.

Drug or alcohol abuse is often associated with other family difficulties, including abuse and neglect, domestic violence, parental imprisonment, illness or disability or death. Of the 117 carers who gave drug and alcohol as one of the main reasons why they were looking after the children, 27% also said that abuse and neglect was a problem, with 15% also citing domestic violence and 7% citing parental imprisonment. 8% mentioned parental illness or disability and 6% said death of a parent.

### Demographics of the carers

Over nine in 10 (93%) of carers responding to the survey who are looking after the children because of parental drug and alcohol abuse are grandparents. There are also small numbers of great grandparents, aunts and uncles. 95% describe their ethnicity as white.

93% are aged under 65, and 44% are under the age of 55. 40% of carers are raising the children alone (i.e. divorced, single, separated or widowed).

### Financial hardship

Family and friends carers raising children as a result of parental drug or alcohol abuse are even more likely than other carers to say they are struggling financially – 47% compared with 36% looking after children for other reasons. 64% of these carers have a household income of below £300 a week. 28% say they had to give up work when they took on the care of the child or children, and a further 28% said they reduced their hours.

## **Health and wellbeing of carers**

Over half the carers (53%) have a chronic health condition or disability, of which arthritis and high blood pressure are the most commonly cited. Just 23% describe their personal wellbeing as “good”, with 52% saying they are stressed and 11% depressed. Only 2% of carers receive help from social services with their health condition or disability.

## **Children with special needs or a disability**

Almost half (49%) of the carers who are looking after the children due to parental drug or alcohol abuse say that they are looking after at least one child with special needs or a disability. There is a particularly high incidence of children with emotional and behavioural problems, with 37% saying at least one of the children they are looking after is affected compared with 28% of carers raising children for reasons other than parental drug or alcohol misuse. This is likely to reflect the often very difficult experiences of children with their birth parents before they moved in with the carer.

16% of these carers are looking after a child with a learning disability or difficulty, and 8% are looking after a child with Asperger’s or autism spectrum disorder. 41% of carers also say one or more the children they are looking after has difficulties at school, of which the most commonly cited problem is making friends with other children.

## **Relationships between the carers and the children’s parents**

The relationship with the drug or alcohol misusing parent may be a source of continuing stress and difficulty for the carer. In some cases, as well as bringing up the children, the carer is providing emotional, practical or financial support to the parent. It is not unusual however for carers to lose contact with the parent, who may be their own child, and they are more likely than other family and friends carers to have difficult relationships with parents.

32% of family and friends carers in the survey describe the relationship with the child or children’s mother as “difficult”, and just 22% describe it as “good”, while 24% had no contact. 23% of carers describe the relationship with the child or children’s father as “difficult” and just 14% describe it as good, while 43% have no contact with him.

## **Contact with social services**

Grandparent carers experience very high levels of dissatisfaction with their contact with children’s social services.

Grandparents Plus survey found that while 86% of the carers are either currently in contact with children's social services, or have previously been in contact, just 24% say they "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with their experience of children's services. 71% say they are "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied".

73% of carers say they have been looking after the children for at least 2 years, and 36% for over five years. 69% provided intensive support to the family in the years before the children came to live with them. 83% of carers have a legal order (Residence Order, Special Guardianship Order or Care Order) for the children they are looking after, however only 37% get any financial support from the local authority.

### **Key facts about parental substance misuse**

Around 1.3 million children in the UK, or one in 10, are affected by parental alcohol misuse<sup>3</sup>.

At least 250,000 -350,000 children under 16 in the UK have a parent who has serious drug problems<sup>4</sup>. Recent estimates indicate that as many as one in 30 children has a parent who is a problem drug user<sup>5</sup>.

Children of substance misusers are at risk from emotional and physical neglect, and of developing serious emotional and social problems themselves later in life<sup>6</sup>.

In a study of four London Boroughs, 83% of families on social work caseloads were affected by parental drug or alcohol misuse use<sup>7</sup>.

3,000 babies are born every year in the UK with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome caused by heavy maternal drinking in pregnancy. Symptoms include learning and behavioural difficulties and in some cases facial abnormalities<sup>8</sup>.

### **Conclusions**

Grandparents and other family and friends carers who have stepped in to bring up children as a result of parental drug and alcohol abuse are struggling financially and report high levels of stress. At the same time, they report very high levels of dissatisfaction with the support they receive from children's social services.

## **Recommendations**

### **We want to see:**

1. The welfare of children affected by parental substance misuse promoted across all drug and alcohol strategies at a national, regional and local level.
2. Greater understanding and awareness among professionals working in both children's and adult services of the role of the wider family in supporting children affected by parental drug and alcohol misuse, and access for families to counselling, peer support and other services.

### **Family and Friends Carers tell us they want:**

1. Recognition of the vital role they playing in looking after vulnerable children and keeping them out of the care system. As a minimum they deserve to be counted – we need official data on the number of families in this situation.
2. Respect and support from service providers, including legal advice when needed and information about financial and other support they may be able to access.
3. Protection for the impact of welfare reform and cuts to local authority children's services, which may hit family and friends carers and the children they are looking after (especially those outside the care system) particularly hard. We also want to see the introduction of a national allowance for family and friends carers who look after a child for more than 28 days.
4. Better access to services for them and for the children they are looking after including respite care, peer support groups and family group conferencing.
5. A period of paid leave equivalent to adoption leave when they take on the care of a child. This would give them time to manage the upheaval in their lives whilst keeping their job and would reduce the number who feel they have to give up work.

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## References

- <sup>1</sup> There are estimated to be at least 200,000 family and friends carers in the UK raising 300,000 children. Source: Family Rights Group cited in Saunders H. and Selwyn J. (2008) Evaluation of an informal kinship care team, *Adoption and Fostering*, Summer Vol 32:2, pp31-42.
- <sup>2</sup> For further details of the survey see Wellard, S. and Wheatley, B. (2010) *What if we said no? Survey Findings Report, Family and Friends Care*, Grandparents Plus.
- <sup>3</sup> Cabinet Office. (2004) and Department of Health (2007) as cited by Alcohol Concern (2009) *Knowledge Set 2: Parenting* <http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/publications/other-publications/embrace-knowledge-set-two-parenting>
- <sup>4</sup> Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, (2003) *Hidden Harm*, Home Office.
- <sup>5</sup> Estimate based on data in the 2009 National Report (2008 data) Reitox National Focal Point UK *New Developments, Trends and In-depth Information on Selected Issues*, EMCDDA.
- <sup>6</sup> Bancroft, A et al (2004) *Parental drug and alcohol misuse Resilience and transition among young people*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- <sup>7</sup> Forrester, D. and Harwin, J. (2006) as cited by Alcohol Concern (2009) *Knowledge Set 2: Parenting* <http://www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/publications/other-publications/embrace-knowledge-set-two-parenting>
- <sup>8</sup> Donaldson, L. (2008) *Chief Medical Officer's Annual Report 2008*, Department of Health.

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