

# Family types and social integration in kinship foster care

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## Abstract

*Objective:* The aim of this article is to address the complexity of relationships in kinship foster care and explore the social integration of foster children. The article analyzes the meaning of family and parenting from the perspectives of the child, the foster parents, and the biological parents.

*Method:* The study is based on qualitative methodological design supplemented by a quantitative study of long-term kinship foster care in Norway. This article draws mainly on interview data from children aged 9–12 ( $N=17$ ) placed in long-term kinship care, biological parents ( $N=14$ ), and foster parents ( $N=47$ ), representing a total of 29 placements. The methodological approach partly employs the principles of Grounded Theory, combined with abductive strategies, family and kinship theories.

*Findings:* Based on three criteria derived from the analysis of the interviews—power, understanding of the assignment, and solidarity—I have developed a typology of negotiated relationships among kinship caregivers, biological parents, and foster children. These are archetypal constructions whose purpose is to illustrate the internal variation of family understanding in kinship foster home undertakings. The article clarifies the criteria for constructing the types of family and discusses the social integration of kinship foster children on their basis.

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*Keywords:* Kinship care; Foster care; Family; Social integration; Negotiated relationships

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## 1. Introduction

Every year, children are removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect. For example, there were 6006 children in state custody in Norway in December 2005 (Statistics Norway, 2006), 60,300 children were being looked after in England in March 2005 (Department for Education and skills, 2007); and 12,185 children were being looked after in Scotland in March 2005 (Scottish Executive National Statistics, 2005).

Child welfare systems are accountable for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in their care. Ostracizing mechanisms for children placed in out-of-home care are thoroughly described in the literature. Children in out-of-home care display more educational, behavioral, physical, and psychological problems than do their peers (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Egelund & Hestbæk, 2003; Rubin et al., 2004). It is not

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certain whether this is caused by the placement itself, the maltreatment that precipitated it, or shortcomings in the child welfare system (Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2007).

The field of this research is formal kinship foster care. Kinship care is broadly defined as “the full-time nurturing and protection of children who must be separated from their parents by relatives, members of their tribes or clans, godparents, step-parents, or other adults who have a kinship bond with a child” (Child Welfare League of America, 1994). Although kinship placement is an ancient practice in many cultures, formal kinship care is a newer placement paradigm in Western Europe, the United States, and Australia (Aldgate & McIntosh, 2006; Broad, 2004; Scannapieco, 1999; Vinnerljung, 1993). In Norway and some other European countries, there has been a shift in policy regarding placements over the last 10 years, resulting in a larger number of children being placed with relatives. According to Statistics Norway (2006), 15% of children in public care are placed with relatives. The UK with 18% has a lower percentage of children living in kinship care than many other countries (www.bristol.ac.uk, 2007): 90% in Poland, 33% in Belgium, and 25% in Sweden (Aldgate & McIntosh, 2006). In the United States, this has become the predominant form of out-of-home placement since the 1990s (Hegar & Scannapieco, 1999).

In a systematic review, Cuddeback (2004) found that kinship caregivers are more likely to be single, unemployed, and older, less educated, and poorer than foster parents. According to Cuddeback, kin caregivers report more health problems, a higher level of depression, and less marital satisfaction than foster families, and such families receive fewer services and less training and financial support. Cuddeback also found that birth parents rarely receive family preservation services, with the consequence that children in kinship care are less likely to be reunified than children in foster care. Moreover, inconclusive evidence has suggested that children in kinship care have greater problems concerned with overall functioning than do children in foster care.

In spite of growing recognition of kinship foster care, the *relationships* that make up kinship foster families are rarely the focus of research, although this variation is most important for examining the full complexity of child fostering. Verhoef (2005) examined 20 fostering arrangements in Western Africa based on analyses of interviews with caregivers and birth mothers, and suggested that the nature of adult relationships is central to the living arrangements of the children. She developed three caregiver–mother relationship profiles: the joint venture, the ambivalent takeover, and the tug-of-war. The importance of understanding the variations in kinship placements also emerged in a study performed by Taylor (2005). She investigated the ideals of mothers and fathers regarding foster caretaker selection and real fostering outcomes: specifically, the laterality (matrilateral versus patrilateral) and genetic distance of the foster caretakers of fostered children in two villages in Thailand. Taylor found that in environments of high marital stability and paternity certainty, parents seem to prefer close genetic kin from either side as foster parents for their children. In low marital stability and paternity certainty environments, parents trust their own lateral kin, regardless of genetic distance, more than close genetic kin from the other side. The study confirmed the importance of considering the social environments of the child before deciding which kin is to be selected as foster parent.

An Australian study explored the perceptions of families held by children in foster care (Gardner, 1996). It was based on a data set composed of 40 children in non-kinship foster care, 3 in kinship foster care, and 42 matched controls living with their biological parents. The results showed that the children in care consistently related to their foster family instead of their biological kin as “family”. However, they appeared to place themselves further from their foster parents than did children in intact families with respect to their biological parents. Gardner stated that the results indicate that the foster family is not quite like a “real” family and that children in care perceive themselves to be “on the outside”.

A German study (Kotter & Cierpka, 1997) involving 51 foster families investigated the influence of parental visits on the extended foster family and showed that most foster parents saw the foster family as a quasi-biological family. The foster families viewed continued contact with the biological parents as an additional chronic stress factor. The authors found that breaking off contact reduced the chance of the foster child developing a close relationship with his or her biological parents (Kotter & Cierpka, 1997).

The co-parenting process has been the focus of both theoretical and empirical investigations (see Montalto & Busch-Rossnagel for a review of the literature). Montalto and Busch-Rossnagel defined “co-parenting” as the extent to which parents function as partners in their parenting roles. According to the authors, co-parenting makes an independent contribution to child adjustment and health. Montalto and Busch-Rossnagel explored the role of “co-parenting” in foster care on behavior outcomes. Co-parenting was here defined as the extent to which biological parents and foster parents function as partners or adversaries in their parenting roles. The authors concluded that the unique focus on the co-parenting relationship in foster care underscores important targets for intervention and prevention.

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