

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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For many people, the longest and closest relationships of their life will be the relationships they have with their siblings. Given normal lifespans, most of us expect to outlive our parents, meet our spouse or partner once we have reached maturity and have our own children in adulthood but we hope our *siblings* will be with us from early childhood through to old age. Siblings may compete with each other for their parents' affections or try to top each others' achievements but many siblings will also say that they will always be there for each other and understand each other in a way that know one else quite gets. Siblings may see each other as rivals, while at the same time uniting against anyone who they think is trying to come between them. Clearly, the close family bond of a sibling relationship is one of enormous significance to many of us but perhaps never more so than when, in the absence of a parent who is able to care for them, siblings elect to stay together, with an older sibling taking on a 'parental' role for younger brothers and sisters.

It is estimated that there are between 200,000 and 300,000 children being raised by relatives and friends in the UK. The majority are being raised by grandparents with the next largest group being those raised by aunts and uncles. However, studies of family and friends care arrangements have consistently shown that there is a small but significant number of these children who are being raised by their older siblings. This research project is the first study of this particular group of family and friends carers.

The aims of the study are simply to find out more about these sibling care arrangements and to hear from carers what would make a difference to their lives and the children they are raising. We wanted to know how these young people came to be raising their younger brothers and sisters. How well are they managing their new responsibilities? What have been the difficulties and the rewards? What sort of support have they received from the local authorities and other agencies who have been involved with them? How could they and the child be better supported?

The publication includes a legal chapter which describes the different legal arrangements that can apply to sibling care arrangements and an international literature review, considering information that is available globally about sibling care arrangements (which in some places are the result of groups of children being orphaned by natural disasters, epidemics, wars or genocide). It also considers representations of sibling care arrangements within arts and the media. The report also includes indepth interviews with sibling carers, a web-based survey of carers and the views of sibling carers posted on Family Rights Group's electronic discussion board. The final chapter sets out recommendations on the way forward.

It is impossible to read this report without feeling overwhelmed by the extraordinary actions, determination, resolution, love and sacrifices that these young people, some still in their early 20s, have made to give their younger siblings the best childhood they can. Often the children they are raising have had very traumatic experiences and these young carers have had to tackle problems that most adults will never address in a lifetime. If the way we judge our society is how it treats its most vulnerable, then it is clear that too often we're failing those who most need our help– with the research study citing example after example of social care services making these young people's situation so much harder than it need have been rather than giving them the support they desperately require. Of course there is the odd excellent example that should also be acknowledged, particularly when kinship care teams in the local authority got involved, or of school workers who went well beyond the call of duty.

We very much hope, however, that this report is a wake up call to all social workers, local authority managers, schools, civil servants, politicians and indeed to us all.

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