Received:
29/07/2026
Accepted:
13/10/2026

Keywords:
Supported parenting, Shared lives, person-centred, Scotland.

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.17868/strath.00097687

Short Article

Supported parenting through Shared Lives in Scotland: Keeping families together

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Abstract

In Scotland, despite a Scottish government commitment to keep families together where possible, a disproportionate number of parents with a learning disability continue to have their child removed (MacIntyre et al., 2025). Coupled with negative assumptions by professionals and lack of focused support, parents with a learning disability are arguably being set up to fail (McGarty et al., 2025). This discussion paper explores a service model with an innovative approach - Shared Lives Supported Parenting. Uniquely taking place in the home and community of Shared Lives carers, this approach supports parents to retain parental responsibility and develop the skills needed to care for their child. This paper discusses the strengths, challenges, barriers, and implications for wider practice by drawing on Heather Coady's 2023 evaluation of the Shared Lives supported parenting Project. This paper is written from the perspective of Shared Lives Plus - the national membership charity for Shared Lives schemes and carers, whose vision is of a kinder, stronger society built on shared living, where everyone can live a full life, regardless of the support they need.

Introduction

Since 2013, the Scottish government has been aware that a disproportionate number of parents with a learning disability in Scotland

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have their children removed (Scottish Government, 2013), with a recent study finding that only around 10% of children whose parents had a learning disability lived with their birth families (McGarty et al., 2025). Considering that only 1.17% of children across the population of Scotland are 'looked after' (either at home or otherwise) the inequality is stark. However, due to lack of data collection (McGarty et al., 2025) and the potential underdiagnosis of learning disability (MacIntyre et al., 2019), the true picture is unknown.

Research indicates people with a learning disability face several barriers when seeking to parent their child, including a) vulnerabilities associated with having a learning disability and their impact, e.g. heightened risk of abuse, vulnerability to trauma, and potential challenges with assessing risk (McNally et al., 2021), b) stigma from professionals, e.g. the belief that people with a learning disability cannot care for their child effectively, resulting in families being held to a higher standard than the general population (McGarty et al., 2025), and c) inflexible and inaccessible support centred on child protection and crises (MacIntyre et al., 2019).

With it being widely recognised that separation from birth families can cause children lifelong trauma, and issues with trust and emotional regulation (Verrier, 2009), and the growing acknowledgement that parents who have a child removed often face their own negative effects (Devaney et al., 2024), action is needed to keep families together in Scotland.

Research indicates parents with a learning disability can improve their parenting skills such that families remain safely together, however a change of approach by professionals with specialised, community, and relationship-based support is required (Augsberger et al., 2021; Zeitlin et al., 2024). Throughout this paper one such innovative support model - Shared Lives supported parenting – is discussed within the Scottish policy context, with reference to a 2022-2023 project evaluation, including learning and wider implications for the support of parents with a learning disability.

Policy context

In recognition of the impact family separation can have, the Scottish government has made a commitment to transforming how children, young people and families experience care and support. Central to this

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ambition is 'The Promise', which challenges services to ensure that children grow up loved, safe, and supported within their families wherever possible (Independent Care Review, 2020). Strongly embedded in 'The Promise' is the Scottish government's 'Getting it right for every child' (GIRFEC) - a framework to aid services in improving and upholding the wellbeing of children and families through a choice, rights, and strengths-based approach.

Human rights are central to the Scottish government's approach, with the 'United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' enshrining in law that a child will not be separated from their parent because of a disability, with support to be provided to assist the parent in their child raising responsibilities. However, recent research, commissioned by the Scottish government concluded that, 'parents with learning disabilities in Scotland are not being provided with the support and reasonable adjustments they require' (McGarty et al., 2025).

Supported parenting

'Supported parenting' is a strengths-based approach, which seeks to provide ongoing, whole family, community-based support, empowering parents to build their skills and confidence, retain their parental rights, and develop or maintain the emotional bond between them and their child (Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities, 2015). This contrasts with 'substituted parenting', which replaces the parent's role (University of Bristol, 2023). Supported parenting forms the basis of the Shared Lives approach.

Shared Lives

Shared Lives schemes match people who need support with Shared Lives carers, to share homes, lives, and community. Schemes are registered with the Care Inspectorate (the body who regulate care services in Scotland). Shared Lives carers undertake a similar assessment to foster carers but are trained and supported to provide care for adults.

Across the UK just under 10,000 people are supported by Shared Lives, with research indicating that the programme enables choice and control through inclusivity, flexibility, and responsiveness (Brookes et al., 2023). Good outcomes are generally experienced (Ryan et al., 2024), with evidence of independent living skills development and increased social participation (Purcell et al., 2024).

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Shared Lives supported parenting builds on this model by matching parents with a learning disability with a Shared Lives carer. The parent, along with their child, lives with the Shared Lives carer as part of their household and retains full parental responsibility. The role of the Shared Lives carer is not to take on the parenting role, but to support the parent to care for their child.

In practice, this means offering day-to-day guidance, modelling, emotional support, and help with navigating services - much like extended family support - while respecting the parent's autonomy and rights. This is distinct from substituted parenting or fostering where others take on the parenting role, potentially risking the child's attachment to their parent (University of Bristol, 2023).

An example in practice – Kerryann

Kerryann had been supported by Cornerstone Shared Lives for nine years, having lived with Shared Lives carers, Sandra and Stephen, for two years since she became pregnant. Kerryann was clear that she wanted to keep and care for her baby.

From the outset, Kerryann's wishes were at the centre of decision-making: detailed discussions were held with Kerryann to understand her aspirations and concerns, while parallel conversations were held with her Shared Lives carers Sandra and Stephen to explore their willingness and capacity to provide a supported parenting arrangement. Both carers expressed a strong commitment to supporting Kerryann in her parenting role.

Cornerstone Shared Lives worked closely with the carers throughout Kerryann's pregnancy and after the birth of her child, including frequent visits, regular communication, and advocating for financial support and benefits, whilst providing ongoing emotional and practical support to all parties.

The Shared Lives carers played a significant role in supporting Kerryann's engagement with health services - accompanying her to medical appointments and scans, helping Kerryann understand medical terminology and processes that might otherwise have been inaccessible to her. Sandra also acted as Kerryann's birthing partner.

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A child protection process was initiated during Kerryann's pregnancy. Cornerstone Shared Lives worked collaboratively with the safeguarding midwife, social work services, other professionals, the Shared Lives carers, and Kerryann herself. This was a lengthy and demanding process, requiring sustained advocacy and clear communication to demonstrate that a Shared Lives supported parenting arrangement could meet the child's needs safely and effectively. Throughout this period, the scheme and carers provided consistent reassurance and support, helping Kerryann to understand that openness and honesty were essential to achieving the best possible outcome for her and her baby. The resulting child protection report concluded they were satisfied with the support in place.

Kerryann is thriving as a mother. From the outset, she expressed a strong desire to build her independence and has taken primary responsibility for her daughter's care. She formed a strong bond with her baby and consistently prioritised her daughter's needs. Kerryann has also grown in confidence, supporting her child with age and stage development and independently in the community - an important milestone in her journey towards greater autonomy.

The Shared Lives supported parenting project

Project overview

Funded with support from The Promise Partnership and administered by the Corra Foundation, Shared Lives Plus (the UK membership and development charity for Shared Lives schemes and carers) led a pilot in Scotland to explore whether this approach could be developed and sustained within the Scottish social care landscape.

The project aimed to establish a small number of Shared Lives arrangements for parents with a learning disability, whilst also exploring outcomes for families, the views of key stakeholders, and the potential for sustainability and replicability.

While the project was facilitated by Shared Lives Plus, a steering group led its direction, ensuring key issues were jointly discussed and managed. Membership included social workers, Shared Lives scheme workers, representatives from advocacy services, learning disability charities and academic research, as well as those with lived experience of Shared Lives support. This helped ensure the project was grounded in the local context and led by experts by experience.

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The project involved three parents with a learning disability, either recognised by their Health and Social Care Partnership as in need of support and referred to the local Shared Lives service or already living within a Shared Lives arrangement. The Shared Lives arrangements were then supported by their local scheme, with the additional support of the steering group.

The project was independently evaluated using a rapid review of policy alongside interviews with the parents, Shared Lives carers, and stakeholders from the steering group. A thematic analysis of the interview responses was conducted and synthesised into key findings which are used in this paper to discuss the Shared Lives supported parenting model's outcomes, implications for practice, challenges, and limitations.

Finding and outcomes

Outcomes for families

The parents experienced increased confidence, development of parenting and independent living skills, meaningful relationships, and strengthened community ties. Their children were able to continue living with their parents, with reduced children's social work involvement, and evidence of secure and healthy attachment.

One of the parents involved in the project, with previous experience of having a child removed from her care and subsequently adopted, received support with budgeting, parenting skills, and linking in with advocacy and health services. She built up time alone with her baby, moving from local walks and groups to overnights at home. The parent and child are now ready to move into their own home.

Two of the parents had entered the project with a deep fear of statutory services, shaped by earlier experiences of child removal or intense assessments. In contrast, relationships with Shared Lives carers were characterised by trust, consistency, and emotional safety - qualities that parents reported were absent from previous experiences of services. Over time, with Shared Lives support, they began to engage more confidently with professionals, health services, and community resources.

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Key stakeholders' views

Respondents agreed that all three families involved had excellent outcomes:

> Anyone who has experience of the model would get behind it. If the service is backed up with guidance, scrutiny monitoring then people would get behind it.
>
> (Strategic lead at the Scottish Commission for Learning Disabilities [SCLD])

The family-based support was seen as a positive, however an advocacy worker did have concerns that Shared Lives support could be seen as 'another "eye" of the state' by parents mistrustful of social work services.

However, the main challenge appeared to be convincing statutory agencies that Shared Lives supported parenting was a safe approach. Daily visits by social workers during the first few months felt intrusive and disrupted bonding, sleep, and the development of ordinary family routines. This resulted in a parent fearful of her child being removed, in direct contrast to the positivity from her Shared Lives carer and scheme workers.

> K is parenting exceptionally well and is a loving and engaged mother. Both K and her Shared Lives carer have had to work incredibly hard to convince social work that this arrangement should go ahead.
>
> (Cornerstone Shared Lives lead)

Additional systematic challenges were found to be:

- A lack of understanding about learning disability within child protection systems
- Parents being held to higher standards than non-disabled parents
- Disputes over funding and responsibility.

Social care landscape

The evaluation found a disconnect between policy and the realities of services, including disjointed working between adult's and children's services and the use of a deficit-based approach by social work professionals. In contrast, Shared Lives supported parenting aligned with

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good practice guidance, including accessible communication, and co-ordinated, long-term, whole family support based on needs and strengths, with access to independent advocacy (SCLD, 2015).

Sustainability and replicability

Common themes identified during the evaluation as integral for replicating the approach's success include:

- Early intervention, e.g. Shared Lives support from early pregnancy
- Coordinated planning between statutory and third sector agencies with holistic whole family support
- A strengths-based approach from all professionals
- Adult's and children's services working together to ensure families are given appropriate support, whilst parenting assessments do not hold parents with a learning disability to a higher standard
- Clarity in funding.

Discussion

The Shared Lives supported parenting project sought to explore the outcomes of relationship-based support for parents with a learning disability and, whilst limited in reach, supporting only a small number of parents, for the three families involved the impact has been life-changing.

Aligning with research into other supported parenting approaches (Stewart et al., 2016), Shared Lives supported the women involved to develop the skills and confidence required to parent their children, preventing them being taken into care and the associated trauma of this separation, as evidenced by one social worker:

> Without (Shared Lives) we would have gone down the permanence route and would have found ourselves revisiting the same pattern as before - i.e., the removal of a child into care/adoption.
>
> (Children and families social worker)

Shared Lives supported parenting did not focus solely on parenting skills, with the outcomes for parents reaching into areas of wellbeing, health, independence, self-advocacy, and links with the community, all areas where studies have shown that people with a learning disability

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experience poorer outcomes (Emmerson & Baines, 2010; Ormston, Eunson & McAteer, 2017; SCLD, 2020; SLDO, 2026; Theodore and Franklin, 2020). The approach reflects the findings of Stewart and McIntyre (2017), who highlight that a holistic approach, rather than focusing specifically on parenting skills, is much more impactful for families.

Stewart and McIntyre (2017) also conclude that effective programmes for parents with a learning disability include accessibility, advocacy, and joint working practices. Within Shared Lives supported parenting, guidance and wider information is made accessible, through modelling, repetition, and the support of a Shared Lives carer at appointments, meetings, and classes. The Shared Lives scheme can access advocacy services on behalf of the parent as well as facilitating multiagency working between children's and adult's services.

Peer support is often cited as valued by parents with a learning disability (Stewart et al., 2016; Tarleton & Turner, 2015) but was not explored during this project. However, the trusted relationship developed brings confidence, and Shared Lives carers are uniquely placed to connect people to local groups, activities, and support, all adding to the prevention of social isolation (Brookes et al., 2023).

At present the impact of Shared Lives supported parenting is extremely small in scale - Scotland currently has 12 Shared Lives schemes, covering approximately half of the 32 local authorities. However, with the Scottish Government committed to helping parents with a learning disability to realise their right to have a family, the time is right for growth in the approach:

> Shared Lives Supported Parenting shows if given help and support you can parent as well as everyone else. You have the right to be a parent.
>
> (Amanda McCarren, learning disability policy manager, Scottish government)

Structural barriers do, however, remain. The project evaluation highlighted risk aversion, increased scrutiny, deficit-based assessment, and funding challenges within social work systems, practices which McNeish et al. (2016) suggest are the antithesis of a strengths-based approach.

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The increased scrutiny that one parent experienced from social work professionals is consistent with the experiences of the mothers in Malouf et al.'s (2017) study which concluded that '[b]eing supervised and judged by maternity professionals and social workers was stressful and disempowering' (p. 8). Theodore and Franklin (2020) further suggest that, as opposed to supporting a family, this scrutiny and the associated feelings of powerlessness and mistrust can lead to parents disengaging from services, thus increasing the likelihood of having their children removed from their care.

Parents in Malouf et al.'s study craved normality, which Shared Lives supported parenting seeks to provide, but this could potentially face challenges from the social work context it finds itself operating within.

With regards to funding and access, Stewart et al. (2016) raise the issue of parents who 'fall between the gap in services' - a parent may not be eligible for adult services, with children and family services unaware until there is a child protection concern. In these cases, the opportunity for early intervention has been lost. Furthermore, a recent study within children's services in Scotland concluded that 'holistic non-stigmatising support' should be available to all, and that when this is in place there are long-term benefits for children throughout their lifespan (Davidson et al., 2026, p. 71). This emphasises the need for greater awareness of models of support, beyond just social work teams, to enable earlier referrals and prevent crisis-led interventions.

Whilst this paper refers to an independent evaluation, this is not formal research and is primarily descriptive and written from the perspective of the membership organisation for Shared Lives schemes and carers in the UK. Further evaluation of longer-term outcomes, with a wider cohort of families, is needed to offer wider implications for practice. However, it does suggest that a systemic change in approach across the social work sector is needed for innovative, strengths- and relationships-based approaches such as Shared Lives supported parenting to be effective in keeping families together.

Conclusion

This discussion paper outlines Shared Lives supported parenting as an innovative practice model which can empower people with a learning

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disability to parent their child safely and with confidence. It provides an illustration of what it means to truly keep 'The Promise' in Scotland.

Whilst further evaluation of this approach is needed, the project outcomes drawn on in this article suggests that when parents with a learning disability are trusted, supported, and valued, they can and do parent well. It also proposes that preventing children from entering care is not about taking risks with safety, but about investing in early intervention, holistic support, relationships, time, and belief.

For Scottish residential childcare, the approach is both a challenge and an opportunity. It challenges the sector to question why children enter care, and whether earlier, family-based support might have changed that path. At the same time, it offers hope - that a care system rooted in relationships and rights can create different and positive futures for families.

Acknowledgements

Kerryann, Stephen, and Sandra were happy to openly contribute to the drafting of this article and provided consent to their details being included. The authors thank them for supporting the drafting of this article, including reviewing it and providing feedback.

This article is based on Heather Coady's 2023 Shared Lives supported parenting project evaluation and is co-produced with Cornerstone Shared Lives scheme, parents supported in Shared Lives, and The Promise Scotland.

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Nicola Watson is the nations officer and Jess Jackson is the communications manager at Shared Lives Plus. Shared Lives Plus is the UK membership charity for Shared Lives schemes, Shared Lives carers, and Homeshare organisations. The organisation's vision is for a kinder stronger society built on sharing our lives and our homes.

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