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Book Review

The essential guide to kinship care: Trauma-informed, practical help for you and your family

By Sarah Naish and Enza Smith

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The Essential Guide to Kinship Care by Sarah Naish and Enza Smith is a practical and compassionate book that feels particularly relevant at a time when kinship care is receiving increasing attention across Scotland and the rest of the UK. Kinship care is not new and is where most of Scotland's looked after children live. What is changing is how we understand it, talk about it and, importantly, how we recognise the support that children and families need when a child comes to live with their wider family network.

Whilst the book is written for an English context, there is much that is applicable to the challenges and experiences of kinship families in Scotland. The book starts from an important premise: becoming a kinship carer is rarely straightforward. A family member may suddenly find themselves caring for a child because of circumstances they could never have anticipated. There may be grief, trauma, substance use, domestic abuse, parental ill-health, family conflict or a combination of all of these. At the same time, the person taking on the caring role is not simply becoming a carer – they are still a grandparent, aunt, uncle, sibling or other family member, and their relationship with the child's parents does not disappear because their caring role has changed.

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This is perhaps the books most appealing aspect. It doesn't present kinship care as an easy or natural solution simply because a child is living with someone they know. It recognises the complexity that sits underneath kinship care. That feels particularly important in the current Scottish context.

Scotland has made significant progress in recognising the importance of kinship care, including through 'The Promise' and more recent developments in legislation, policy and practice. There is a growing understanding that children should, wherever possible, remain within their families and communities, and that kinship carers need to be properly recognised and supported to make this possible. But recognition is not the same as support.

One of the strongest messages from this book is that the relationship between a child and their kinship carer should not determine the level of support they receive. The circumstances that led to a child being no longer able to live with their parents, and the impact those circumstances have had on the child and their family, need to be understood. A child living with a grandparent or other family member can have just as complex experiences of trauma, loss, disrupted relationships and uncertainty as a child living with foster carers or in residential child care.

The book's trauma-informed approach and focus on therapeutic parenting will be familiar to practitioners working in Scotland. Rather than seeing behaviour as something that needs to be controlled or corrected, Naish and Smith encourage readers to think about what might be underneath the behaviour and what the child might be communicating. The advice is practical and grounded in everyday family life, rather than relying on jargon or presenting unrealistic expectations of carers.

The impact on carers is also thoughtfully acknowledged. There can sometimes be an assumption that family members will simply step up because they are family. But this can come at significant emotional, practical and financial cost. A grandparent may suddenly find themselves parenting again. An aunt or uncle may be navigating a completely different relationship with their sibling while trying to provide stability for their niece or nephew. Family relationships can become complicated very quickly and the book doesn't lose sight of this.

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Its accessible format is another strength. It can be picked up when you need it rather than something that needs to be read from beginning to end. The short, focused sections cover a wide range of issues, from the immediate realities of becoming a kinship carer through to contact, trauma, behaviour, relationships and thinking about the future.

There are places where the book's terminology and references don't translate directly into the Scottish context. Scotland has its own legislation, processes and language around children's care and protection, and readers will need to keep that in mind. However, the underlying messages about relationships, trauma, advocacy and supporting carers are all still relevant.

The value of this book goes beyond its usefulness to kinship carers. It also offers something for practitioners. Children can often move between care givers, and kinship families may be part of a child's journey before, during or after a period of residential childcare, time with a foster carer or being looked after at home. Understanding what that family has experienced, and the unique complexities of kinship care, rather than simply seeing them as the next part of a child's care plan, is crucial.

The book also raises an important question about how we think about *support*. Do we start from the legal status or type of arrangement, or do we start with the child and family in front of us and ask what they actually need?

That question feels particularly relevant to Scotland as we continue to think about what it means to keep families together, to support relationships and to ensure that children experience continuity, belonging and connection. It will support practitioners in Scotland as we begin to implement Scotland’s National Vision for Kinship Care.

Overall, *The Essential Guide to Kinship Care* is an easy-to-read, thoughtful and useful resource. It recognises that kinship care is not simple, and it offers practical ideas, reassurance and, recognition of the complexity of what families are taking on and the unique role kinship carers undertake.

For kinship carers, it could provide a much-needed sense of ‘*t*here are others doing this too’ and practical advice for the day-to-day challenges.

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For practitioners, it offers an opportunity to consider what the experience of kinship care might look and feel like from the families' point of view.

The book also reminds us that behind every kinship care arrangement is a child, a family and a set of relationships that matter – and that supporting those relationships must be at the heart of how we respond.

About the review author

Mel Bridges is an Improving Care Experiences Consultant at CELCIS, where she works to support and influence changes and improvements for care experienced children, young people and their families. Mel facilitates the Transitions Policy & Practice Network, a network that brings together social work practitioners and Scottish Government colleagues to improve policy and practice around transitions for care-experienced young people. Drawing on her experience of bringing together diverse perspectives across policy, practice, research and lived experience, Mel is passionate about creating meaningful opportunities for collaboration, learning and systems change that help young people thrive.

The publisher (Jessica Kingsley Publishers) supplied a copy of this book for review.

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