



Having Difficult Conversations

All children ask difficult questions, and often their Kinship carer will struggle to answer in a way which is honest but will not distress or frighten the child.

The child you care for may ask questions about their family and their past which open very difficult conversations. It can be very challenging to know where to start and how to use language which will help the child to understand without affecting their wellbeing. There may be information you need to share with the child but again it may be difficult to know how to do this and you may be concerned about the negative effect it may have on the child.

This guidance will explain about the importance of having these difficult conversations and some information on how to tackle them.

Potential difficult conversations:

- Conversations about previous family relationships that will have led to a child being in kinship care.
- Conversations about contact with parents or other relatives
- Conversations when the child is looking for more information about their past.
- And conversations that may need to take place about, for example, house rules, peer groups, social media, sexual identity...the list could go on and on!

These are just some examples.

If you have read the Kinship Care Attachment leaflet you will have seen information about helping a child feel secure, safe and loved. This makes a good

base for having these conversations in a way in which the child will trust you and be ready to discuss topics which might be difficult for them to hear and understand.

There is always the potential for conversations to become difficult when emotions are engaged and there is potential for misunderstanding. This is why the best outcomes to conversations with young people will happen when the adult involved remains calm and consistent – but this is often easier said than done. For more guidance about managing conflict, check out the guidance in the 'Kinship Care and Conflict Resolution' leaflet

Encouraging the child, as early as possible, to talk about feelings associated with past events and then revisiting them on an ongoing and age appropriate basis can be a vital part of processing what happened and releasing tensions connected with the memories they bring up. This allows the child to understand at a basic level and then develop deeper understanding by building on the foundations laid down earlier. Early, truthful conversations, at a level the child can understand also remove the element of shock at a later stage.

Even very young children can pick up on any discomfort or distress their kinship carer may be feeling. Adults in a child's world play a crucial role in whether 'difficult' subjects become acceptable conversation or not and how the past becomes embedded in the child's self-esteem in a healthy or unhealthy way. Truthful conversations about the past are vital for sequencing and understanding events in

a way that does not result in children being afraid to ask questions because they are afraid of upsetting their kinship carer. Children often blame themselves for past events, or feel that they are not wanted or lovable, and kinship carers, who naturally want to protect the child they care for, can feel conflicted between giving the facts and upsetting the child. However, understanding their life story promotes the child's sense of identity and emotional wellbeing, and when explanations are given in a matter-of-fact, calm and supportive way, the child and the kinship carer will benefit.

Children need to know their history, so it's best not to keep secrets about their past because you think it is too difficult to share. Children need to know how they got to be who they are and where they are. Sharing difficult information can create challenges in the short term but ultimately it will build a relationship of trust, especially when the child understands that you are always willing to discuss their story. You will need to consider carefully when, how and who should do the telling. If we don't fill in the blanks for them, they may try to make sense of it themselves, or potentially, someone else will give them information, and they may end up with a completely incorrect version of their own story.

Children in Kinship care can often get mixed messages from different family members, and can overhear conversations between adults who for whatever reason have their own perceptions. This can be very confusing and can lead to feelings of divided loyalties. They need to know that when they come to you they can rely on answers that are honest and consistent, which over time strengthens their trust in you.

Preparing for the Conversation

For challenging or difficult topics, it's best to plan to have the conversation in advance: "I'd like to talk with you about..." or "We really need to talk about..." Then, mutually agree on a time and a place.

Preparation could include the following:

- Plan when and where the conversation will take place. Ensure that the time works for everyone. Allow plenty of time for the conversation and ideally allow those involved the time to think through things afterwards. This could be on their own or with others who are known and trusted. The conversation would ideally be in a space where everyone feels safe and secure. It is sometimes good to combine difficult conversations with activities e.g. a drive in the car, walking and talking, etc.
- Those involved could think about any questions they need to ask in advance of the meeting
- It can be tempting to avoid asking the difficult questions or to minimise their importance. It may be useful to consider what questions are most important. Also, be mindful that what may seem to you like a minor worry can be a huge issue for someone else.
- Manage the expectations of the child so that they can feel safe that you will consider their feelings and needs and that the conversation is a two-way exercise.
- Be aware of your own boundaries – what sort of behaviour you will accept if the conversation gets heated, and what you will not accept, from both the child and yourself.

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- Don't be afraid to show emotion, but be ready to explain what your emotions mean – for example, a tearful adult can be alarming to a child.
- Try to keep the topic at the centre of the conversation. If the conversation feels uncomfortable or unsafe, there is a temptation to bring in other, unrelated things – i.e. in a conversation about the actions of the child's parents, where loyalties are involved, the child might bring up the actions of someone else, to deflect the attention away from their parent and make the conversation less difficult for them.
- If it feels appropriate, use metaphors, story-telling or play. This works very well with younger children but can also work with teenagers. Instead of having a conversation which will cause the child distress, approach it through a story involving their toys. When the child is taken out of the centre of the situation, and becomes an observer, it can be easier for them to manage.

The Conversation

It is likely that all involved will be a bit nervous on the day and may be worried that things may not go well. Agree about what will happen if things become overwhelming for anyone. Will you have a break or reschedule for another day? Although emotions may be running high, if possible it is best to work with these emotions and get the conversation done. It will feel much better, after the conversation if all the questions have been asked and answered. Avoiding the really difficult questions and answers will leave a feeling of disappointment.

It can be good to ask questions that don't just have "yes" and "no" answers. This provides an opportunity to give precise answers.

It's also really important that all involved agree in advance to some form of confidentiality. This will build trust in each other and confidence that the conversation will remain confidential and will encourage children in particular to open up and feel that they can have discussions where they will not feel judged. It is important that children know that information will not be shared in a way which they would feel uncomfortable with, but it is wiser to say that anything you discuss will be kept "private" or "safe", rather than "secret", which has less positive undertones.

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It is also, however, very important that the child is aware of circumstances where information must be shared with relevant people, for example, doctors, social workers, etc. For example, it is appropriate to discuss any situation which may cause harm to the child or to your relationship with the child with a relevant professional.

Looking after everyone

When we get new information or confirmation about something that we have suspected, it usually takes time to process how we feel about things. Different people process information in different ways and at different rates, so it is important not to expect people to move on too quickly. As a kinship carer or a young person, be there to support each other and be willing to listen to what people have to say, when they feel ready to say it.

Sometimes we minimise things e.g. "I don't care" or "it doesn't bother me". Sometimes our feelings can be exaggerated or inaccurate e.g. "I hate them" or "I

hate you". It can be beneficial to give everyone time to work through the range of emotions that they may be going through and not to pay too much attention to initial comments.

Finally it could be easier for the child you care for to talk things through with someone who is not so involved e.g. a social worker, teacher, family friend or relative.

Families Outside has an interesting story for children whose parent is in prison. www.familiesoutside.org.uk/honest-emmas-story

Alcohol Focus Scotland have the Rory resource which can be used with children where one or both parents have an addiction. www.roryresource.org.uk

There are a range of helplines including ChildLine where children and young people can talk with someone who is independent and will listen to them without making any judgements. www.childline.org.uk

Kinship carers can also access helplines including parent line Scotland on: www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/



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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

GET IN TOUCH

Call our helpline: 0808 800 0006 (freephone)
Lines open 10am-2.30pm, Mon to Fri

Visit our website at: www.kinship.scot

Email: kinship@adoptionuk.org.uk

 [kinshipcarecas](https://www.facebook.com/kinshipcarecas)

 [@kinshipscotland](https://twitter.com/kinshipscotland)

RESOURCES

www.familiesoutside.org.uk/honest-emmas-story

www.roryresource.org.uk

www.childline.org.uk

www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland/

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