



Biblical Counselling UK

Family Care Research

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Beyond "Do's and Don'ts": Journeying with Parents and Carers

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Summary of Key Findings

- All the participants in the Family Care Research project agreed or strongly agreed that a support network around their family is vital.
- The support network around the Christian parent/carer of care-experienced children is full of potential. Our data shows that professionals, church, peer groups, friends and family all have a unique and important role to play in providing support for the Christian parent/carer. No source of support is dispensable.
- The support network around the Christian parent/carer of care-experienced children is also fragile and complex. Over time, changes in the family, in the support network and in the wider environment, impact the level of support for the better or for the worse.
- Our data shows that it takes a lot of effort and time to secure the right support. Most of our participants feel responsible for and able to manage the support network around them most of the time. But, they would welcome those in the support network to be more proactive in offering support. Proactive support is particularly important in times of crises or transition.
- Our data shows that there is often very little interaction between supporters. This creates a fragmented and inefficient support network around the parent/carer. Both the literature and our participants suggest that if supporters were to interact more with each other, this would create a more cohesive 'team' around the parent/carer.
- Parents/carers are not expecting any one source of support to offer full, wraparound care. They do value all types of support, including emotional, practical, informational and spiritual support, but these are obtained from various places at different times.
- Good relationships are key to good support. This was the strongest theme tracked across our data set. Parents/carers can more easily accept help from professionals, church leaders, church members, peers, friends and family who know them well and who they know well.
- Listening was identified as a key ingredient for developing good relationships. Supporters who take the time to sit with and understand the parent/carer's individual situation become better supporters.
- Parents/carers think that supporters should take up offers of further training and seek resources that explain the reality for care-experienced children. Parents/carers are not always in a position to help supporters understand the wider issues. Our research has found that there are enough bespoke resources for individuals, churches and professionals but these are not being accessed regularly by the right people. Our parents/carers perceive that the most urgent need is for the church to seek further training.
- Faith impacts support, according to our data. Firstly, church is likely to be a significant part of the support network around the Christian family. Secondly, faith is itself a source of support for parents/carers helping to organise and bring meaning to their world and their parenting. Thirdly, a minority of parents/carers were anxious that professional support might clash with faith.
- The parents/carers in our research understand that their own views and attitudes impact support. Our data shows that asking for help conjures up many feelings in the parent/carer, some of which may prevent them from seeking support.
- Parents/carers of care-experienced children have a lot to offer. They have acquired significant skills and experience and most of them are regularly offering help to others.

Introduction

Every 15 minutes a child comes into the social care system in the UK. Children in care need to be away from their birth family for some time and a new arrangement is made by the local authority about who looks after them. Often, they are placed temporarily with foster parents while a more permanent plan is made for their future. Reunification with birth family, long-term fostering, kinship care, special guardianship and adoption are all possible outcomes for a care-experienced child. The best outcome is the one that fits the needs of the child.

There are many joys in parenting a child who has experience of being in care but there may also be some significant ongoing struggles. Most children in care will have suffered some form of neglect or abuse; all will have experienced trauma and loss. At whatever stage in their development the child experiences separation from their birth family, it is well documented that this leaves a mark that may permanently impact the life of the child¹. As their primary carer, parents (whether foster carers, adopters, guardians or kinship carers) are best placed to journey with the children through the highs and lows, but they cannot do it alone. They need a scaffold of support from the community around them². Unfortunately, the lack of adequate support is an issue that has consistently been highlighted in reports about adopters and foster carers³.

Biblical Counselling UK (BCUK) commissioned Family Care Research for two main reasons. Firstly, there are strong indications that - wonderfully - Christians are well represented within the fostering⁴ and adoption⁵ community in many regions in the UK. Adopters and foster carers who are practising Christians will often be embedded in a local church. As the church gathers week by week, there is a rich opportunity for genuinely knowing the stories of each family and what the individual needs are. Indeed the Bible encourages Christian believers to carry each other's burdens (Gal 6:2). Church has the potential to be 'an extension of the creation principle of family that gathers to learn the ways of the Lord, to worship him, and love one another'⁶. As such, BCUK understands that equipping the church to show intelligent love to families of care-experienced children sits under its wider vision of bringing Biblical wisdom to bear on real life.

Secondly, BCUK acknowledges that supporting parents/carers of care-experienced children is a complex matter. Each family is surrounded by a unique and intricate net of individuals, groups and systems that all influence the experience of the parent/carer. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model has been extremely helpful in setting the context around the family (see Figure 1). As you can see, the church is only part of the rich ecosystem around the family. Further, both research⁷ and the Bible confirm that the parent/carer is not a passive receiver. They have their own concerns, views and opinions that directly influence support for the better or for worse. BCUK believes that wise support will seek to understand the individual and their surroundings before offering solutions and interventions.

¹ See, for example, Nancy Verrier (2009) *The Primal Wound*, Gateway Press Inc. USA.

² See, for example, Hook, Hook and Berry (2019) *Replanted: Faith-Based support for adoptive and foster families*, Templeton Press, USA.

³ Adoption UK (2021) [Adoption Barometer](#), UK. p.41

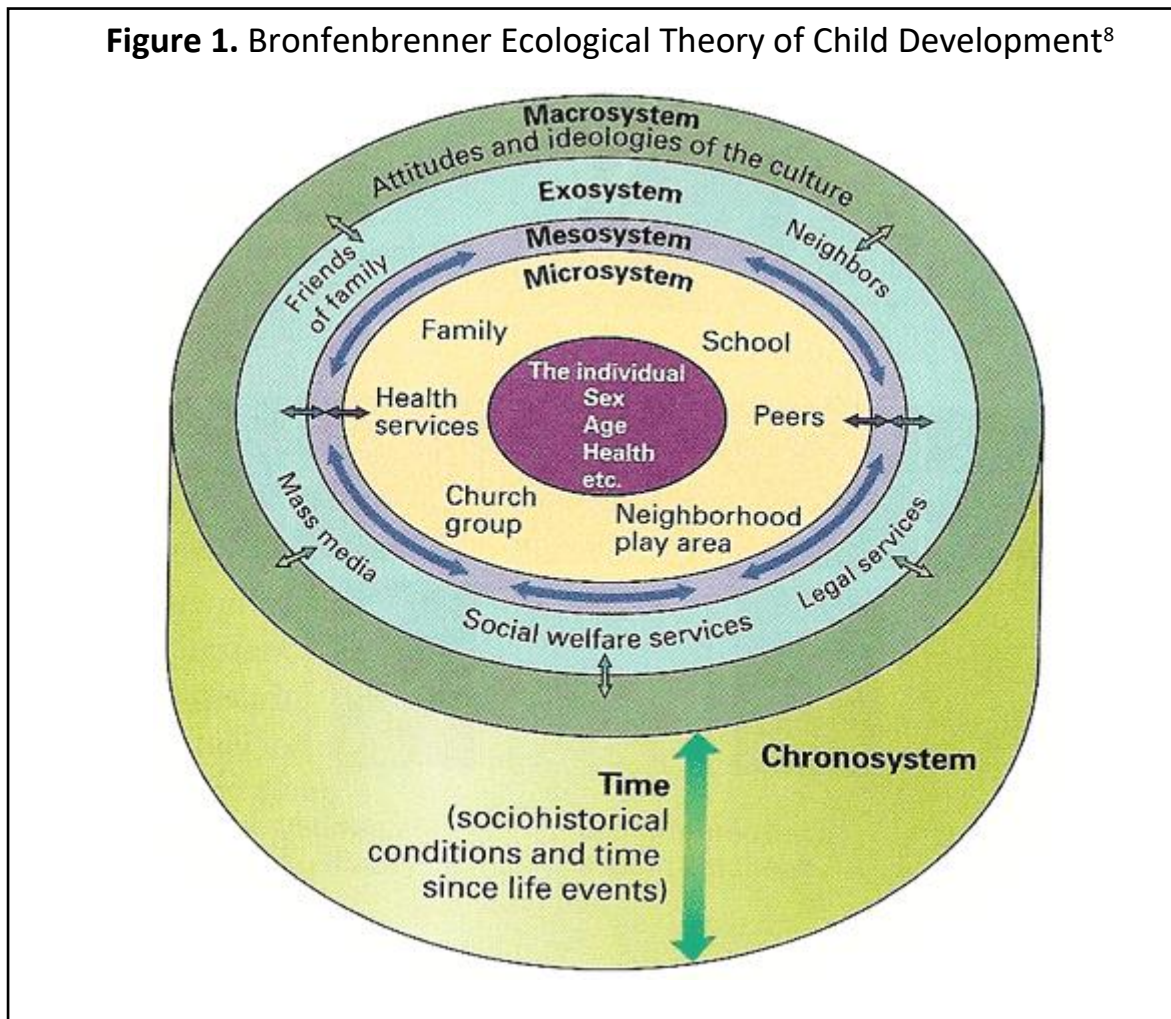
⁴ Fostering Network (2021) [State of the Nation's Foster Care: Thematic Report 1, Status of Foster carers](#), UK. p.27

⁵ For example, see [Premier Article](#) or [DfE funded partnerships](#); and Frames Project (2014) [Three trends on Faith, Work and Calling](#), Barna Research Group, USA.

⁶ Powlison (2019) *Biblical Counseling in Local Church and Parachurch Ministries*, Journal of Biblical Counseling, USA. p.5

⁷ Quinton (2004) *Supporting Parents: Messages from Research*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory of Child Development⁸



The unique contribution of this report is that it offers a wide-lens view of support around Christian parents/carers of care-experienced children, how they interact with and perceive the different sources of support, and identify what support is genuinely supportive. A comprehensive online questionnaire gathered responses from 91 Christian parents/carers. 10 survey participants were randomly selected for a semi-structured follow up interview. A key goal of this research is to identify recommendations for improving support which are grounded in the reality of Christian parents/carers. Our hope and prayer is that parents/carers will be encouraged to seek out help more confidently when needed, while supporters, particularly within church, will learn to move beyond “Do’s and Don’ts” and be committed to journeying more closely with parents/carers.

In Part One of this report, we will outline the methodology of our research and provide an overview of the support currently available. In Part Two, we describe what support is genuinely supportive for Christian parents/carers according to our data. We also include some insights for the parents/carers. We conclude with some ideas of how this project might inform future action.

⁸ [Bronfenbrenner\(2008\) Ecological Theory of Child Development](#)

Part 1

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A literature review was carried out to get a sense of the wider context of support for Christian parents/carers of care-experienced children in the UK. Only a few papers were directly relevant to our search, so it was necessary to look under broader, but relevant, topics and sources. To complement this, a Project Advisory Group was established to hear first-hand accounts of meaningful support from Christian parents/carers of care-experienced children in the UK.

Relationships emerged as a key subject in the literature review. Here, we look at how interpersonal relationships and relationships between institutions impact support. We will conclude with more information about the Project Advisory Group.

Interpersonal Relationships

There are many ways that research and Biblical teaching align when it comes to wisdom around supporting parents/carers. One piece of research emphasises that a good relationship between individuals is always at the heart of effective support⁹. This is modelled throughout the Bible. Our seeking help from God is first grounded in a relationship with Him through Jesus. The Christian community is described in the Bible as a body, made up of interconnected and interdependent parts (Eph 3:6; Rom 7:4; 1 Co 12). The Bible even affirms that relationships can deepen in times of adversity, when we receive help from others (e.g. Prov 17:7, Phil 4:10-20).

Relationships, and thus support, always involve a giver and a receiver whose stories and expectations influence the exchange¹⁰. Each individual has the capacity to help, to hurt and to be hurt¹¹. They each have personalities and experiences that make the task of asking or giving help more or less comfortable. Christians believe that ‘anything that reminds us that we are dependent on God and other people is a good thing. We are not made to go through hard things alone’¹². Considering that God has designed us to be interdependent can encourage the Christian to overcome personal barriers in giving and receiving help.

Research suggests that support works best when parents take the lead¹³. Christian teaching affirms that God’s design is for parents/carers to grow as the ‘experts’ in their family¹⁴. The community is there to help parents embrace their role¹⁵ by taking guidance on what help is appropriate. If parents/carers feel that the support is interfering with their authority or causing a loss of privacy or control, this is described as ‘negative’ support in the literature¹⁶. Though foster carers do not have full parental rights for the children in their care, there is evidence that when they are not treated ‘as an integral and valued member of the team around the child’¹⁷ this erodes their confidence and can jeopardise the placement. In other words, parents/carers don’t want to be passive receivers. By and large, they are wanting to work with the support network for the benefit of the children.

⁹ Ghate and Hazel, (2002) *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

¹⁰ Quinton (2004) ‘Supporting Parents: Messages from Research’, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

¹¹ Emler (2021) *Sinner, Sufferer, Saint*, New Growth Press, USA.

¹² Welch (2015) *Side by Side: Walking with others in wisdom and love*, Crossway: USA. p. 11, 12

¹³ Quinton (2004) ‘Supporting Parents: Messages from Research’, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

¹⁴ Lowe (2018) *Childproof: Parenting by faith not formula*, New Growth Press, USA. p. 46 and Turner (2018) *It takes a church to raise a parent*, BRF, UK.

¹⁵ Turner (2018) *It takes a church to raise a parent*, BRF, UK.

¹⁶ Ghate and Hazel, (2002) *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

¹⁷ Baginsky, et al (2007) *The Fostering System in England: Evidence Review*, DfE, UK.

However, there are times when a caregiver's role is so overwhelming that they do need others proactively to step in. Kilbourn (1996)¹⁸ describes a crisis when parents/carers 'encounter responsibilities where they only feel minimally competent, or just partially in control of the situation and barely effective. When these feelings take over, a caregiver's confidence can quickly erode'. Many parents/carers of care-experienced children know this feeling. Biblical love moves towards those who are suffering, it does not wait and watch while others struggle. (Ez. 34:11; Luke 19:10).

Relationships and Institutions

Relationships continue to be important when individuals are seeking help from institutions. There are two examples from a professional and church setting that illustrate this well. In the UK, the Mockingbird Family Model is available to some foster carers through their Local Authority. Foster carers and their families are brought together by the Local Authority into clusters called 'constellations'. Each 'constellation' is supported by 'hub carers' who provide a range of support to the adults and young people within the constellation. An evaluation conducted in 2016 hinted that the Mockingbird Family Model may 'facilitate some of the conditions that are positively associated with improved placement stability and foster carer retention'¹⁹. The Mockingbird Family Model is implemented within a formal structure, but it is the informal relationships that make it so valuable.

In the US, Replanted²⁰ offer professionally competent services through the local church to adoptive and foster families. Their services encompass a variety of types of support including friendship, training, and respite. There is evidence that parents/carers think this model is highly valuable in meeting their needs and the needs of their children²¹. The combination of church relationships and professional expertise seems to be part of Replanted's strength. Many adoption and fostering campaigners in the US would label Replanted's model as 'wraparound care' as it seeks to meet the need of the family at an emotional, practical and informational level. Some Christian adoption/fostering NGOs would like to see the local church around the globe equipped to provide wraparound support to adoptive/foster families²².

Foster carers in the Farmer et al (2001) research study describe support as a net: it is only as strong as its weakest point²³. Put another way, 'any one type of support cannot necessarily compensate for a shortfall in another'²⁴. Research has identified that support is much more effective when it comes from more than one source. Farmer et al (2001)²⁵ concluded that foster 'placements were significantly more successful when carers had support from family members, friends or local professionals'. Selby et al (2009)²⁶ confirms that being supported by at least two different sources is linked to resilience. This indicates that relationships are important not only between individuals and their support network, but also within the support network. In Bronfenbrenner's model, this is illustrated by the Mesosystem circle. It represents the

¹⁸ Kilbourn (1996) *Children in Crisis: A new commitment*, MARC World Vision, USA, p.226

¹⁹ McDermid et al (2016), [Mockingbird Family Model Evaluation](#), DfE, UK.

²⁰ See Hook, Hook and Berry (2019) *Replanted: Faith-based support for adoptive and foster families*. Templeton Press, USA

²¹ Hook, et al (2017) [Replanted: Offering Support for Adoptive and Foster Care Families](#), Journal of Psychology and Christianity, USA.

²² See for example, the [Christian Alliance for Orphans' objectives](#)- accessed Oct 2022.

²³ Farmer, ERG., Lipscombe, J.C., & Moyers, S. (2001). *The Fostering Task with Adolescents*. Department of Health, UK.

²⁴ In Quinton (2004) *Supporting Parents: Messages from research*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK. Appendix A: Researchers' summaries of their studies p. 209

²⁵ In Quinton (2004) *Supporting Parents: Messages from research*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK. Appendix A: Researchers' summaries of their studies p. 229

²⁶ See for example, Selby et al (2009) *Resilience in Re-entering missionaries: Why do some do so well?*, Mental Health, Religion and Culture, Australia.

interconnections between the elements that surround a family. The more relationships between the sources of support, the stronger the overall net of support.

There are examples in the UK of churches and professionals working together for the benefit of families. The Family Hub Network are 'seeking to inspire and inform churches about Family Hubs, how to build trusted relationships with local authorities and work together to benefit families'²⁷. In this model, families can access support and therapies in a local church setting, funded by the Local Authority²⁸. The Archbishop of Canterbury commissioned a Families and Households Call for Evidence in 2021 with the intent to inform policy and practice within the Anglican church and amongst politicians and policymakers 'to help children thrive and reach their full potential'²⁹. Both of these initiatives are in their infancy, but keen to be inclusive of families who foster and adopt.

Recognising that relationships are key to support is crucial. Understanding that it is relationships between individuals as well as between institutions makes the support 'net' around the family stronger and more cohesive. There are some good examples of this working well for a small portion of parents/carers of care-experienced children, particularly in the US. The Project Advisory Group helped us understand who Christian parents/carers in the UK turned to for support.

Project Advisory Group

Because the literature did not directly address the reality of Christian parents/carers in the UK, a Project Advisory Group was formed to record testimonies of 'experts by experience'. The group was made up of 5 Christian adoptive and foster mothers who had sought support in the UK. The online meetings were recorded and transcribed to capture positive and negative experiences of support. It became clear from this small sample, that Christian parents/carers in the UK look for support from professional services, from church, from peer groups, and from friends/family. This initial evidence set the parameters of the research so that a more robust data set could be worked on to formulate conclusions and recommendations.

²⁷ <https://familyhubsnetwork.com/welcoming-families-transforming-lives/> - accessed October 2022

²⁸ One example of this is [Yeovil 4 Family](#)

²⁹ [Briefing Papers | The Church of England](#) – accessed October 2022

Ethics

It was important to Biblical Counselling UK that the dignity, rights and wellbeing of participants were held in view throughout data collection. To this end, a bespoke Ethics Procedure was designed in consultation with Dr Tim Davy, Lecturer and Head of Research & Consultancy at All Nations Christian College. An Ethics Panel of individuals connected to Biblical Counselling UK with relevant experience met in March 2022 to advise on three main areas: consent, data protection, and the wellbeing of participants.

The consent procedure was embedded into the online survey as a pre-requisite to answering the questions³⁰. It included information on how we would handle their personal data³¹ as well as guidance on the nature of the questions. We anticipated some participants may be upset by recounting difficult stories and therefore encouraged participants to inform a trusted friend or church leader should they need support after answering the questions.

Consent for interviewees was gained by email³². Annabel Silson, research assistant, was available for a debrief phone call with participants should they need a safe place to process their experience of being interviewed. Being a social worker, Annabel was best placed to signpost for further support as appropriate.

Data collection

The questions for the online survey were created after analysing the themes emerging from the testimonies in the Project Advisory Group³³. It was critiqued by Dr Tim Davy and Annabel Silson, and then piloted on paper and online by a small number of Christian parents/carers. The final version was hosted on the Biblical Counselling UK website and launched online to the public on March 22nd 2022. By the closing date on April 18th 2022, the questionnaire webpage had received 320 visits and a total of 91 completed responses were collected. As well as using the Biblical Counselling UK social media channels and mailing lists, we are grateful that Home for Good, Cornerstone Agency, The Hope-Filled Family, Parenting for Faith, and the Additional Needs Alliance shared the link to our questionnaire with their audiences. By far the largest number of the participants who completed the questionnaire heard about it through word of mouth, so we know we had significant support from individuals, too.

The data from the questionnaire was scanned for results that were surprising or unclear. The main researcher and research assistant discussed the findings and identified areas that needed further clarity or elaboration through qualitative data. A script with 10 questions was devised and 10 participants were randomly selected and invited to a semi-structured interview. All 10 participants were given a further consent form in line with our Ethics Procedure and given the opportunity to withdraw. All chose to participate, and interviews went ahead at the end of May 2022. Interviews were recorded over Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai with manual editing to correct any errors.

³⁰ The full wording is available upon request

³¹ [Family Care Privacy policy](#)

³² The full wording is available upon request

³³ More information in the appendix

Data Analysis

Both the questionnaire and the interview yielded significant qualitative data. A thematic analysis was carried out to pick out significant themes that ran across the whole data set.

The qualitative data was read through once before any attempt was made to label or code it under themes. The first set of coding happened on paper, with highlighters, without any attempt to edit or funnel. Where necessary, comments were coded more than once to capture the various possible meanings. The comments and corresponding codes were then catalogued onto a database on Notion Software. This provided a second review of the codes. Where duplicates were identified, they were merged and where codes were unclear, they were renamed. This process started to reveal larger themes. Firstly within each section of the questionnaire, and then across the whole data set. The codes and themes were revisited a third time once the larger themes had been identified.

Larger themes started to map on to the Bronfenbrenner Ecological Model (see Figure 1), so this became the overarching theory organising the data set. In addition, the literature review was revisited to see if other research corroborated our findings.

A peer review was conducted to help ensure the conclusions and recommendations were as unbiased as possible.

Limitations

Research that relies on participants to volunteer their time will always face limitations. The Project Advisory Group acknowledged that parents/carers are likely to self-select if invited. They will take into consideration their availability, their interest in the subject, and their expectation of a positive outcome. It follows, then, that we may have captured responses from parents/carers whose experience and interest in support is more developed. Though there are benefits to this, the danger is that we will not have heard from parents/carers whose experience of support is more limited. In fact, we discouraged parents/carers from participating if they were experiencing a crisis or disruption. Arguably, those families are in most need of support, but we wanted to give consideration to their wellbeing and avoid raising any expectation that they might receive support as a direct result of this research.

The first foster carer who participated in the pilot study noticed that her responses were clouded by her feeling unsupported by her Supervising Social Worker that week. Some participants in our interviews reflected that if they had answered the questionnaire under different circumstances, it would have affected their response. This highlights the fact that the data in this project is only a snapshot in time and should be treated as such.

The lead researcher, Rachel Maclure, is a Christian and has been a foster carer herself. Despite every effort to the contrary, her own views and experiences may have clouded the thematic analysis, conclusions and recommendations. She has also worked in the fostering and adoption world which may have prevented some participants from putting themselves forward.

People

A total of **91 parents/carers** responded to our online questionnaire. Of these:

- 87% were Female
- 95% were White
- 63% were Adopters, 27% Foster Carers, 1% Special Guardians
- 7% had two or more roles (e.g. adopter and foster carer/adopter and special guardian)
- 29% were birth parents as well
- 48% were caring for 3 or more children
- 18% were Single Parents/Carers
- 72% have been Parents/Carers for 5 years+
- 99% have been Christians for 5 years+

Though there isn't a significant representation of men and ethnic minorities in our group, this is a trend that can be tracked in other reports about adoption and fostering in the UK.

We had hoped to have a better representation from special guardians and kinship carers. We recognise that there are distinct characteristics and challenges for these parents/carers and therefore would not want our findings to be applied to them indiscriminately. From here onwards, whenever this paper refers to parents/carers, it is referring to foster carers and adoptive parents.

It is interesting that some parents/carers hold many roles. In the literature, it is rare to find reports that look at foster carers and adopters together, or to look at the impact on birth children. Blended families may have a unique set of challenges as the support available to each child may be different depending on their status.

The Care System has undergone many changes over the last few years. Almost three quarters of our participants became a parent/carer of care-experienced children more than 5 years ago. This may influence their experience of support. There is some indication that those who adopted more recently find it easier to access support³⁴.

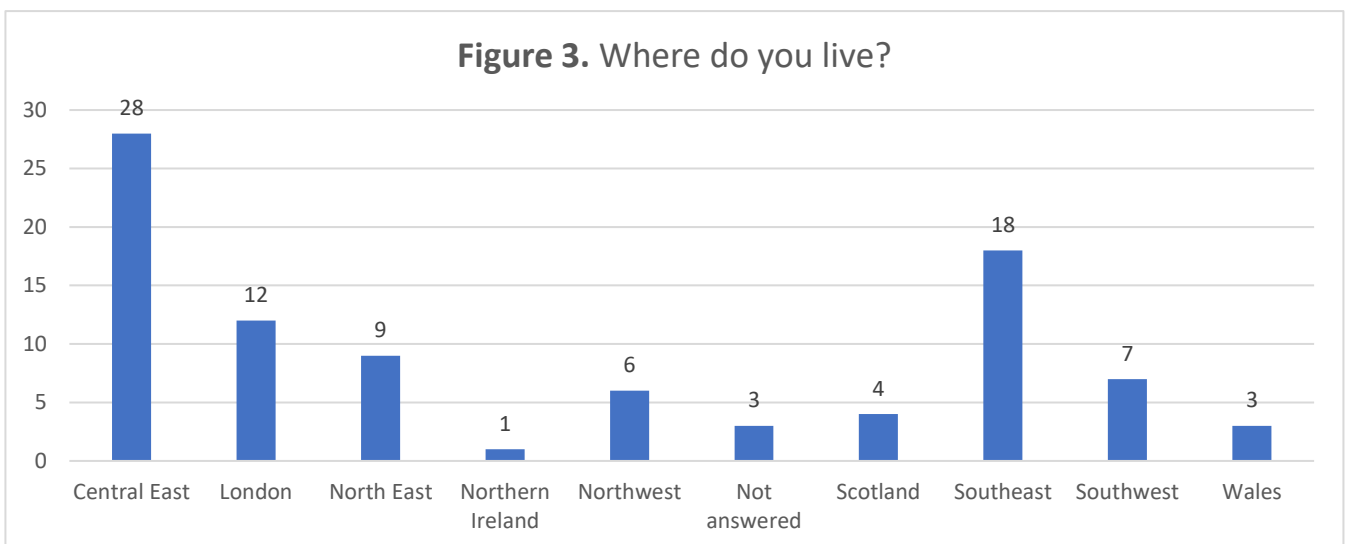
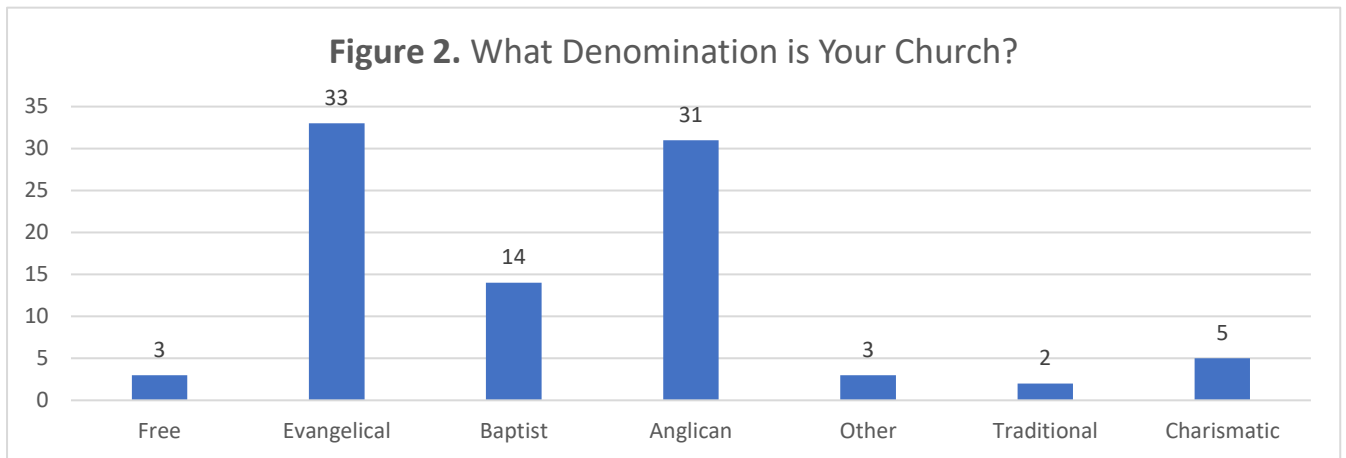
All except one participant had been a Christian for more than 5 years. Studies have shown that the Christian faith is a strong motivator for parents/carers to consider adoption and fostering³⁵. Many consider it an outworking of their vocation and call to live a life of love.

³⁴ Adoption UK (2021) [Adoption Barometer](#), UK. p.72

³⁵ See Bell (2019) *What Motivates Christians to Foster?*, Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Luther King House, UK. and Frames Project (2014) [Three trends on Faith, Work and Calling](#), Barna Research Group, USA.

Context

We had a good geographical and denominational spread, but most families came from Central East or South East England and from Anglican or Evangelical backgrounds.



Overview

We have already outlined that each parent/carer is surrounded by a unique support network. While there is a tendency to think of support coming only from professionals, an optimal framework of support³⁶ also includes individuals (such as family and friends) and community groups (such as church and peer groups). Our questionnaire gathered evidence of how the parent/carer perceives support overall, but also how they relate to each source of support separately. In this section, we will present the findings of our questionnaire.

100% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: **'A support network around our family is vital'**.

The majority of Christian parents/carers who responded to our survey are doing well. They have more 'good days than bad days' and they think the support they receive is either 'good' or 'very good'.

Figure 4. Which of these statements best describes your life as a Christian parent of care-experienced children currently?

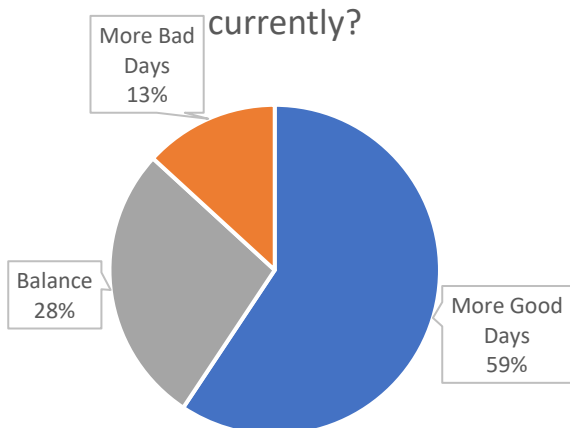
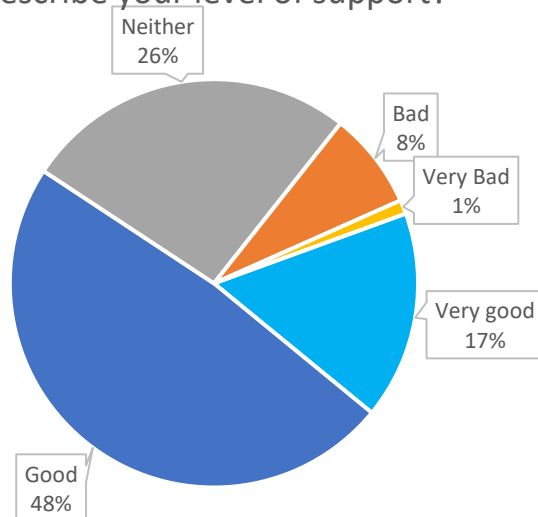


Figure 5. Overall, how would you describe your level of support?



'Supportive'³⁷ and **'Helpful'** were the two most common words used to describe their support network.

At first glance, the picture is overall positive. However, the qualitative data we gathered shows that parents/carers invest a huge amount of effort facilitating "good days". Care-experienced children need a strong sense of security and stability. Parents/carers help achieve this through predictable routines, plenty of reassurance throughout the day, anticipation of transitions, and emotional regulation of both adults and children. Parents/carers live in anticipation that the whole day could be derailed by an unexpected event or reaction from either the child

'Our kids need predictability and stability. They get very wobbly if their secure base is threatened by change without warning.'

Adoptive parent

³⁶ Quinton (2004) *'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research'*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK

³⁷ *Supportive* was a familiar word to our participants as we used it in the consent form and publicity. This could have biased their answers.

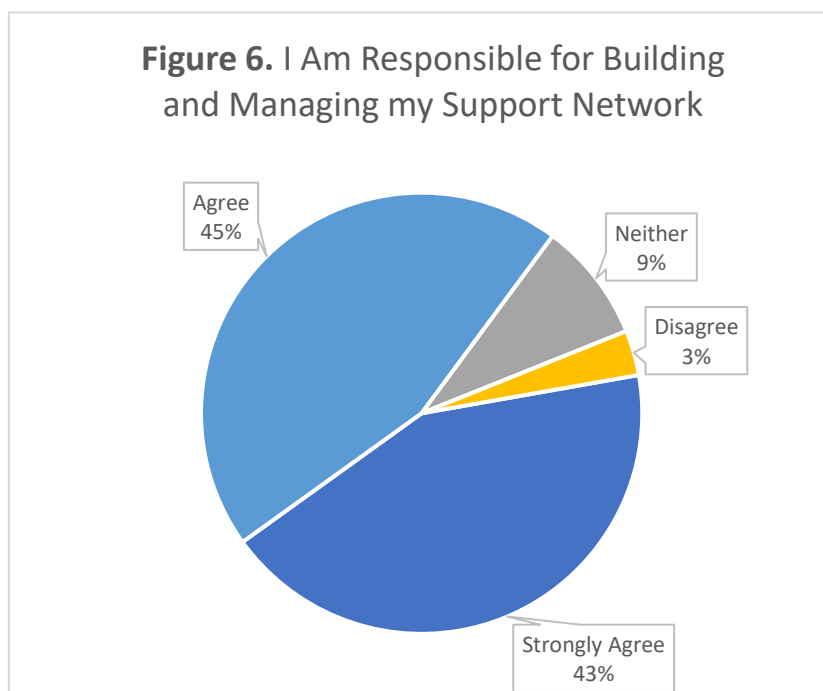
or the environment. Many parents/carers interviewed talked about having to adjust their expectations, be adaptable and find time to care well for themselves.

Interviewees explained that “bad days” are marked by relentless, extreme behaviours, often involving verbal and/or physical aggression. One adoptive parent said that on a bad day, ‘you literally need someone by [her adopted son’s] side to keep him safe and everyone else safe’. Parents/carers have clearly done a lot of work to understand where their children’s behaviour comes from and how to best respond to it. When they realise their own actions fuel the extreme behaviour, they try to make changes and ask for help. But a “bad day” is when the child is not responding or engaging with any of the parent/carer’s attempts to reconnect, leaving the parent/carer feeling ‘deskilled’ (adoptive parent). A foster carer explained that ‘if you’re struggling really hard to do lots of things...you’ve worked and worked, but you can’t see any progress, that is frustrating at the end of the day’.

Most participants agreed that it is primarily **their responsibility**, as a parent/carer, to build and manage the support network. However, many commented on a sense of shared responsibility. One participant who is an adopter and had been a foster carer put it this way:

‘Whilst I think there is a collective responsibility within the church for any family, and within Social Care for fostered and adopted children, I don’t want the support network imposed on me – I would like to have agency and choice about who does the supporting.’

This ‘collective responsibility’ is particularly key in times when the demands within the home are such that parents/carers don’t have capacity to seek out external help³⁸. This is a key tension that parents/carers live with – wanting agency and not having capacity to exercise that agency in practice. Some parents/carers invite help with this. As this foster carer explained: ‘I think that it’s true that I am responsible for my support network but need others to remind me and equip me for it’.

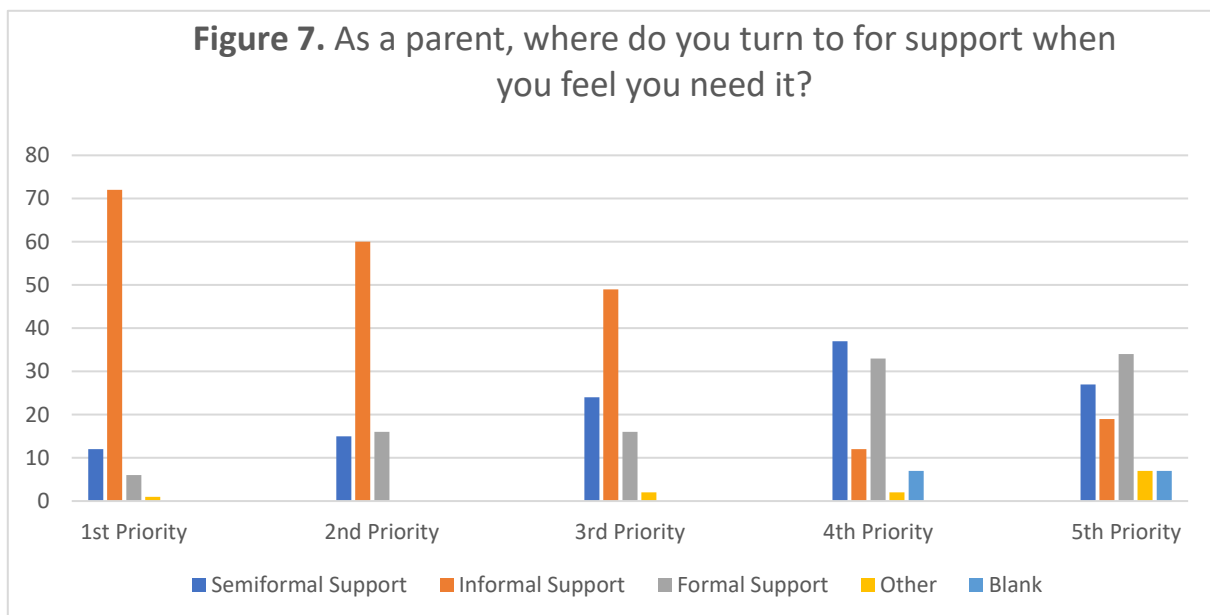


We wanted to know if there was an order to how parents/carers went about securing support for themselves. We did this by offering five identical drop-down lists of support options and asked

³⁸ Also in Kilbourn (1996) *Children in Crisis: A New Commitment*, MARC World Vision, USA.

participants to indicate the five support options they typically turned to. The instructions emphasised that they should be chosen in order of priority, starting with the one they turned to first. The results show that parents/carers seem to have an order of **preference** when it comes to who they turn to for support for themselves. The graph below seems to indicate that the informal network (including friends, family, and peers) are by far the most sought-after source of support. Semi-formal support (including church leadership and charities) steadily increases and becomes particularly important when informal support has already been sought. Formal support (including therapists, counsellors, schools, social services) only becomes prominent as a last resort. By the time a parent/carer calls for help from church leadership or professionals, it is likely that they would have already tried to secure help from their informal network a few times. Still, each source of support features significantly on the graph, making each valuable at the appropriate time.

In the 'other' category, below, we included support that could not be clearly categorised. For example, one participant said she turned to God first. Seven participants left a blank for the last two options. It is unclear if this is because of response fatigue or whether they felt further options were not available to them.



Given that, for the most part, parents/carers manage their support and that they turn to different sources for support, it is helpful to look more closely into what each source has to offer. You will see that, collectively, our participants have accrued significant positive and negative experiences from each of the sources.

Formal Support

In the questionnaire, participants were given the following definition of formal support:

Formal support is provided by organisations where you expect them to have a level of expertise. Often this is characterised by a referral and filtering system and may have a financial cost. For the sake of this questionnaire, formal support includes provision from Social Services, NHS, CAMHS, Schools, professional counsellors, therapists, etc.

In other words, it is the ‘sharp-end’ of support, when specialist help is needed. All foster carers will have an ongoing relationship with Social Services, who are the corporate parent for children in Care. For the most part, adoptive parents have to choose to access formal support when they consider it necessary. Depending on what nation and region they are in, adoptive families in the UK have different levels of provision available to them. The Adoption Support Fund, for example, only serves parents in England with access to specific therapies and professional intervention³⁹.

Even though professional support may be perceived as a last resort (see Figure 7), overall parents/carers are comfortable asking for help from professionals. **84%** of the parents/carers in our questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed with this statement:

‘I am comfortable asking for help from professionals’.

Figure 8 shows a very **mixed response to professional support**.

Some find accessing support when they feel they need it easy, have a good relationship with their social workers, and feel they have the right amount of support today. Others have a very negative experience claiming they don’t know where to turn to or have to fight against an ‘*obstructive bureaucracy*’ as one adoptive parent described it. There is evidence that parents/carers find it easier to access formal support in certain areas, and that professionals’ knowledge and experience with care-experienced children varies. As one foster carer put it ‘*Even professionals working in this sector have varying degrees of understanding of early childhood trauma. This affects their response to what you are saying*’⁴⁰. A few testified to professional support having a detrimental effect on family life.

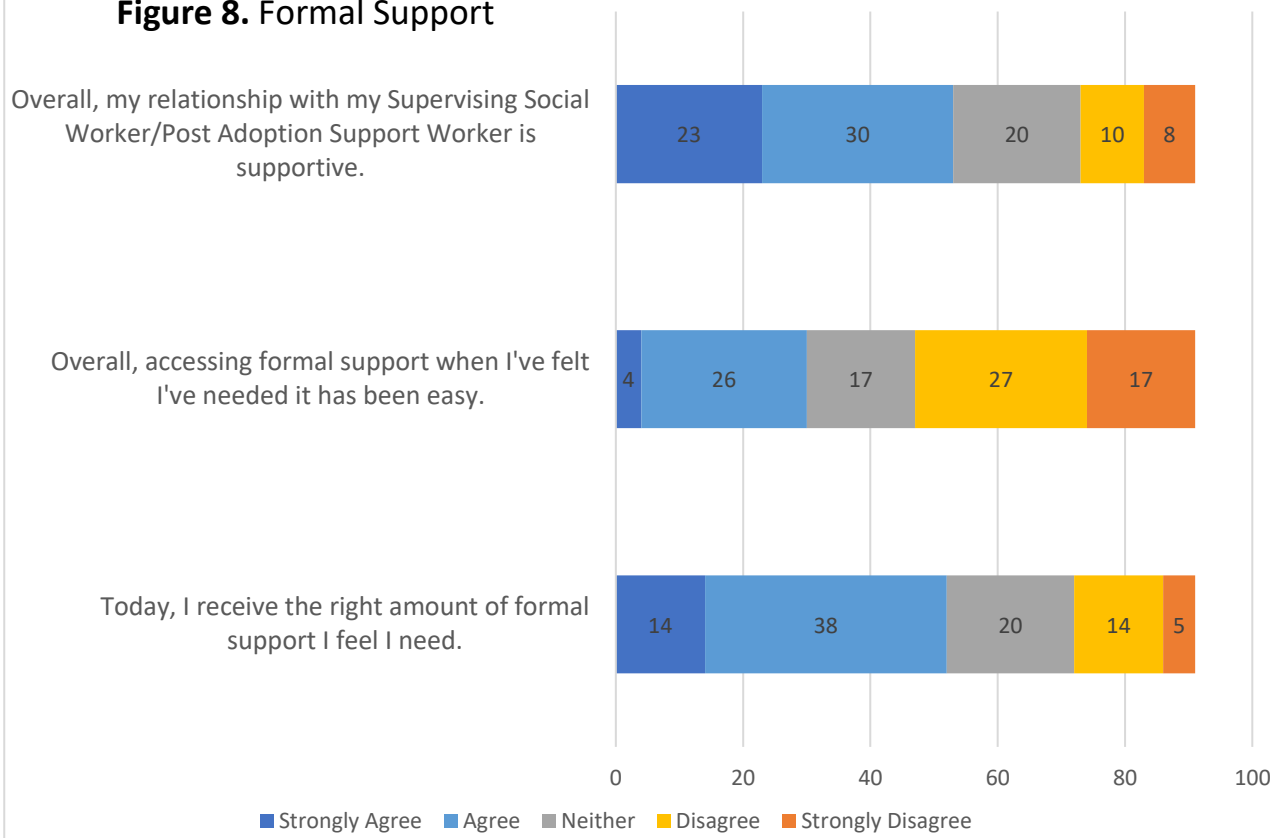
‘I am comfortable asking. I just don’t know who to ask or where to go for help.’

Foster Carer

³⁹ See, for example, <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/adoption-support-fund-asf>

⁴⁰ Also in Ottoway and Selwyn (2016) “*No-one told us it was going to be like this*”: *compassion fatigue and foster carers*, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, UK.

Figure 8. Formal Support



Our data agrees with other research that **a good relationship with the professional is key to formal support** feeling supportive⁴¹. One adoptive parent put it this way: *'It helps if I know them but the faceless professional is such an unknown quantity'*. Many parents/carers commented about their relationship with their social workers in particular. Those who have experienced empathetic, responsive social workers, feel supported. It helps when social workers remain constant, but many speak of high turnover of staff. Some adoptive parents commented that they didn't have contact with their Post Adoption Social Worker out of choice. Others commented they were assigned a new one every time they contacted Post Adoption Support. Our qualitative data also confirms that foster carers in particular can feel that social work professionals undermine their role by not treating them as part of the team. One foster carer shared his experience: *'It's very frustrating, very humiliating, as a foster carer to suddenly find there's been meetings held to discuss the child, ...and you have been involved with the child 24/7, given your home and heart to [them] and you're not considered to be part of that meeting group...you can put up with an awful lot more trouble and difficulties if you're part of the team, right?'*

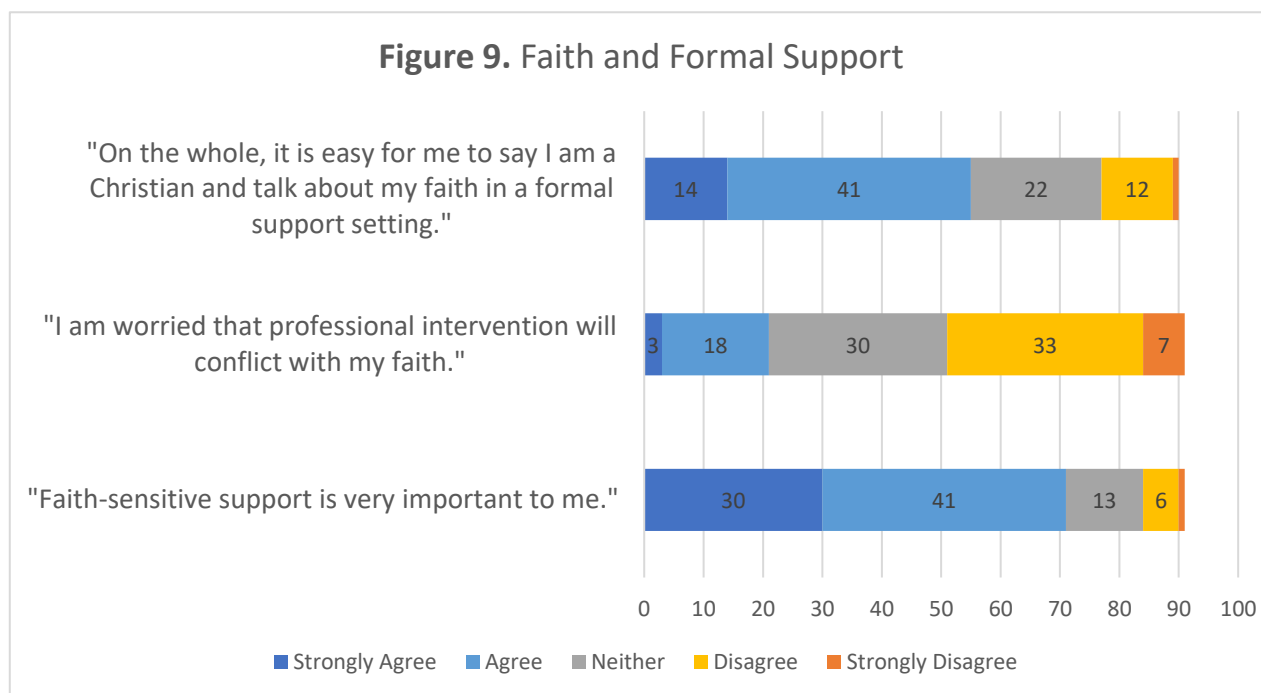
56% percent of our participants had not received any help from friends and family to access formal support. Those who did receive assistance said family/friends had signposted, attended meetings, helped fill out forms, and helped gather information.

Finances have been an issue for 23% of our parents/carers. One of our interviewees, who is an adopter and foster carer, gave an example of how finances impact support: *'Training is a support. ... The cost of training is a real problem...I could be working full-time...and I'm not...I'm working as a foster carer and there's a gulf of income difference there...I could pay £10, or maybe £20, to go to training....but there's no way I can pay £50 or £80'*.

⁴¹ Farmer, ERG., Lipscombe, J.C., & Moyers, S. (2001). *The Fostering Task with Adolescents*. Department of Health, UK.

28% of parents/carers had looked for a therapist/counsellor for themselves. One adoptive parent said, *'there is support for the children but little support for us'*. The literature confirms that supporting parents/carers, 'who so many adopted young people rely on as their main support, is an investment in the young people themselves'⁴².

We wanted to know how **faith interacted with formal support**. In recruitment, faith is acknowledged as a significant motivator⁴³. So much so, that charities like Home for Good offer faith literacy training to Local Authorities and Adoption Agencies. Quinton (2004)⁴⁴ confirms that agreeing on the root problem is more likely to result in support that is accepted and implemented. Christians have a distinct worldview which, we hypothesised, could clash with a professional



agenda. Once again, the picture is not uniform. It seems to depend on the relationship between the individual parent/carer and the professional. As one adoptive parent explains, *'with some professionals I have been able to be more open about my faith than with others'*.

We asked parents/carers what they'd like professionals to understand about the role of faith in their life. Here are the three most prominent themes in the qualitative data:

- 1) Faith is paramount and affects the whole of their life, including parenting.
'Without my faith I wouldn't be on this journey. I can't separate my faith from who I am and how I parent.' (Adoptive parent)
- 2) The benefits of faith are both internal and external to a person.
'I would like them to realise that faith is not an add-on activity in our week which enables us access to another supportive community, but actually a fundamentally different life view in which we find strength, hope and guidance.' (Adoptive parent)
- 3) God is active and involved in their parenting.

⁴² Adoption UK (2021) [Adoption Barometer](#), UK p.77

⁴³ See, for example, Bell (2019) *What Motivates Christians to Foster?*, Unpublished Master's Dissertation, Luther King House, UK.

⁴⁴ Quinton (2004) 'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research', Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

'We would never have fostered if not for God orchestrating things and opening doors at the right time which assured us that we were /are doing the right thing'. (Foster carer)

Semi-formal Support

In the questionnaire, participants were given the following definition of semi-formal support:

Semi-formal support includes all support received from community organisations that are based around a specific theme or interest. For the purposes of this questionnaire, we want to find out what support you have received from church and peer groups.

We have used the word church to mean your local church. But, if you have received help from the wider church community, you can include that in your answers too.

There are other types of semi-formal support available to a parent/carer. But following the guidance of the Project Advisory Group, we chose to focus on church and peer groups.

Church

Semi-formal is indeed a good description of how most local churches are organised, even dating back to the early church. Acts 2:42-47 gives an account of how the first believers had a rhythm, set of values, and practices that governed their gatherings. But there was also a spontaneous, organic dynamic which was responsive to relationships inside and outside the group. Today, the necessary formalities about how a church operates may have increased (e.g. charitable status, assets, governance, etc), but its biblical purpose to grow in relationship with God and one another remains the same. Coming alongside those who suffer and rejoice as if the whole church were suffering and rejoicing is part of the relational growth described in the Bible (1 Cor 12:26). In their book *Home for Good*⁴⁵, Krish and Miriam Kandiah challenge the church to apply this general principle of love specifically to families who foster and adopt.

'For me, church is family. So, I think, as a family, you rally round when something happens'
Adoptive parent

There is anecdotal evidence that some churches are being intentional about this⁴⁶. The most successful church models tease out the different types of support a family might need, and then attempt to meet those needs in innovative ways⁴⁷. The most common types of support that churches have addressed are: emotional, practical and informational⁴⁸. Our research has also added spiritual support. When a church is able to offer all these different types of support to a family, it is called 'wraparound care'⁴⁹. Most of our literary evidence comes from the US so in our survey we wanted to map how parents/carers in the UK perceive and receive each of these different types of support from church. Our data yielded some helpful illustrations and statistics.

- 1. Emotional Support.** Emotional support for our parents/carers is when church are proactive in finding out how the family are doing outside of Sundays. Regular text messages, phone calls, and visits where the goal is just to listen and understand are hugely encouraging to the parent/carer. Also, valuing and welcoming the children, learning their names and taking an interest is part of emotional support. As one adoptive parents put it *'It's an attitude....feeling like 'yeah, we're known, we're seen, we're really liked, we're not judged'*. (Rom. 15:7)

⁴⁵ Kandiah and Kandiah (2013) *Home for Good*, Hodder & Stoughton, UK, p. 103

⁴⁶ See Home for Good's campaign: <https://homeforgood.org.uk/more-than-sundays>

⁴⁷ Hook, Hook and Berry (2019) *Replanted: Faith-based support for adoptive and foster families*. Templeton Press, USA, AND Webber and Johnson (2020) *The Fostering Church, a Limited Series Podcast*, More than Enough Production, CAFO

⁴⁸ Quinton (2004) *'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research'*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

⁴⁹ Hook, Hook and Berry (2019) *Replanted: Faith-based support for adoptive and foster families*. Templeton Press, USA

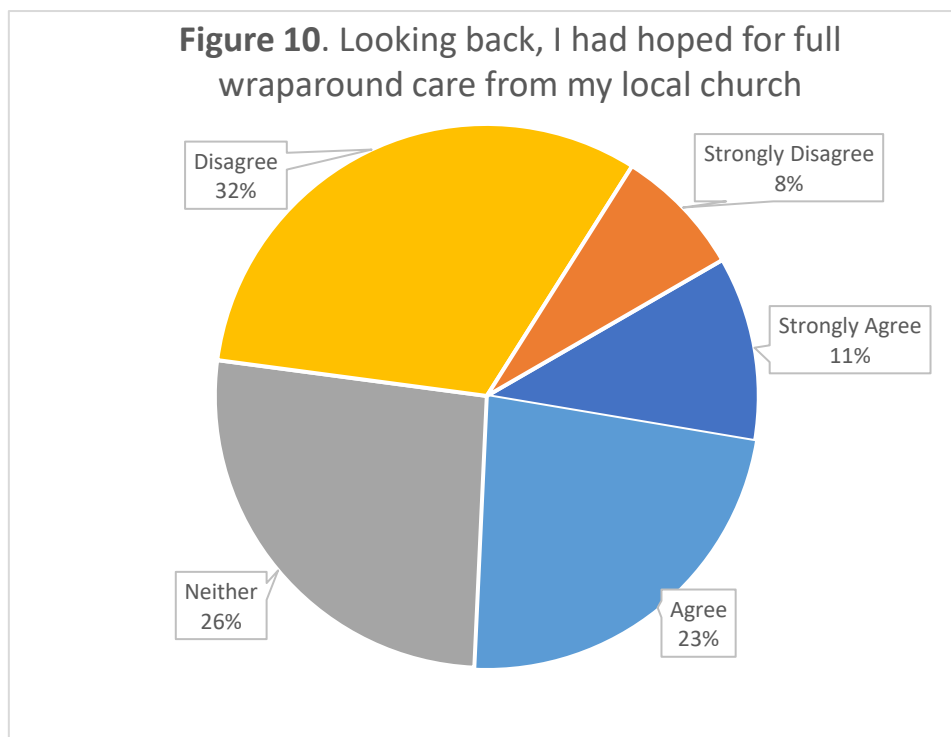
67% strongly agreed or agreed that **‘their local church has been a source of emotional support to me as a Parent/Carer’**.

93% of participants said they **had at least one person in their local church who they could turn to if they needed a safe person to talk things through.**

- 2. Practical Support.** Practical help comes in many forms. It is any type of support that meets a felt need. (Acts 2:45) Particularly in times of crisis, most churches have been able to respond to parents/carers in this way. One adoptive parent remembers that when she broke her ankle, *‘the church really got around us...for eight weeks...different people stayed over, they cooked meals, they arranged a rota to take the children to school. They were amazing.’* Meals and babysitting are the most popular, but supplies for the children (e.g. bikes, beds, clothing) are also common. **88%** of parents/carers had received **some form of practical help.**
- 3. Informational Support.** Both the parent/carer and the church need information to grow in wise support. One of our interviewees said, *‘the more educated you are, the more supported you feel...’*. It is clear that parents/carers have undergone a lot of training and sought various resources to care well for their children. Sadly, parents/carers perceive that the church is still very behind in knowledge and skill as regards care-experienced children. **90%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: **‘To help me most effectively, the church needs to learn about specific issues related to care-experienced children’** In fact, our data shows that parents/carers think that church learning about the needs of children in care, is more important than professionals learning about faith (see Figure 9). Developmental trauma, attachment, therapeutic parenting, and an understanding of the care system were all highlighted as key issues. **45% of parents/carers think that their church is learning how to support them better as time goes by.** (29% didn’t think their church was learning and 26% were not sure.)
- 4. Spiritual Support.** Parents/carers explain that spiritual support includes prayer, acknowledgement of their parenting as a ministry, and a good theological understanding of issues they face, such as suffering, shame and trauma. **92% of survey participants see their parenting as a calling from God.** Bell’s (2019) research highlighted that faith is a significant motivator for Christians to become foster carers⁵⁰. The parents/carers in our survey testified that parenting and faith continue to interplay, post-placement. Most parents/carers have seen their faith grow and be challenged as a result of being a parent/carer of care-experienced children. **78%** strongly agreed or agreed that **‘their local church has been a source of spiritual support to me as a Parent/Carer’**.
- 5. Wraparound care.** This term caused significant confusion amongst our participants. Some had no idea what it meant. Others did not think this was appropriate. Others believed this was part of the church’s calling. Our survey meant wraparound care to include all of the types of support⁵¹ mentioned above. As you can see from Figure 10, parents/carers had very different hopes as to whether their local church would offer them wraparound care after placement.

⁵⁰ Bell (2019) *What Motivates Christians to Foster?*, Unpublished Masters Dissertation, Luther King House, UK.

⁵¹ [Johnson \(2022\) Wrapping around foster and adoptive families](#)



Wonderfully, a lot of church support comes from individual volunteers who sacrificially give time and resources. Also, wonderfully, church is often made up of ‘needy’ people⁵² who themselves are seeking support from church. Though this is part of God’s design for His church, it does pose a challenge to the parent/carer. Especially since COVID-19, parents/carers are painfully aware that churches have reduced capacity. Some are therefore more reluctant to ask for help from their church. This accounts for some of the noticeably lower level of comfort in asking for support from their church compared to other sources of support. **64%** of participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: **‘Overall, I feel comfortable asking my church for support.’**

One of the strengths of the local church for parents/carers is that it is a relatively **stable** part of their life:

- **67% of participants had been at their local church for 8 years or more.** We have evidence that when participants move to a new location, they will look for a new local church so this is a key part of their support network. Some parents/carers might even choose to move churches if their family would be better supported elsewhere. *‘We recently moved churches over this issue. Our previous church felt unable to offer us the support we needed and suggested with us that we moved.’ (Adoptive parent)*
- **64% of participants were in the same church when they went through assessment.** Most parents/carers chose to tell their church when they were going through the assessment. On many occasions, church had been involved in praying for the process and providing references for the parent/carer.

⁵² Welch (2015) *Side by Side: Walking with others in wisdom and love*, Crossway: USA

Peer Support Groups

Peer support groups are considered semi-formal support because they are relationships based on shared experience forged by an organisation who provides the space and structure for meetings. Prior to being in a support group, parents/carers are often strangers to each other.

Studies consistently show that meeting other carers is a very important source of emotional support and advice⁵³. In Ottoway and Selwyn (2016)⁵⁴, foster carers explained that the 'mutual understanding of the fostering task led to feelings of greater support without feeling judged'. The Strengthening Families APPG report (2019) said that an 'important ingredient in providing early stability to adoptive placements is peer support'⁵⁵. Given this, we are delighted to see that **78% of our participants are in at least one peer support group**.

As well as peer groups available through Social Services and adoption/fostering charities, there are support groups specifically for Christians parents/carers of care-experienced children. The charity Home for Good has a list of regional peer support groups on their website as well as an affiliated Facebook Group. A small number have peer groups within their churches.

Our data concurs with other research that emotional and informational support are the two strongest pulls of peer support groups. Having people who automatically 'get it' and are on common ground allows for a frank exchange that makes parents/carers feel less alone and encouraged for the task at hand. 'Hearing [another person's] story resonate with ours' is how one adoptive parent described it. This is a rare and treasured experience for many parents/carers. One foster carer surmised that 'there is so much wisdom to be shared' in peer groups. In particular, new parents/carers value the recommendations and insight of those who are further along on the journey. Those who can offer advice find it rewarding, even redeeming.

'Somedays it can feel like it should be so much easier especially when I am surrounded by children who have not experienced Care. The support group helps me not feel as isolated.'

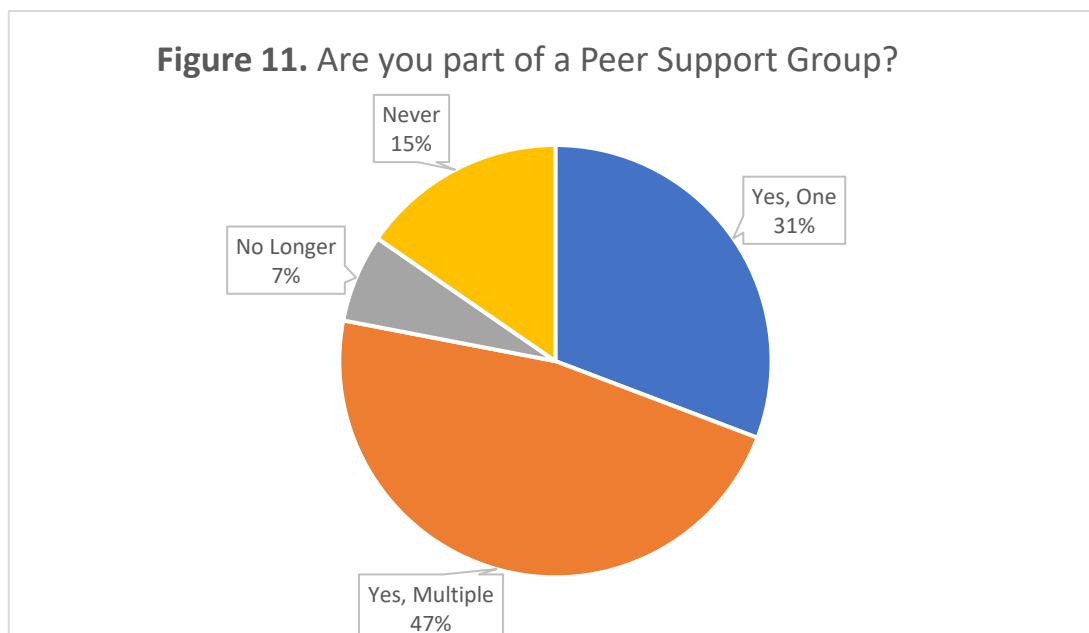
Adoptive Parent

⁵³ Sinclair, Gibbs and Wilson (2004) *Foster Carers: Why they stay and why they leave*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK

⁵⁴ Ottoway and Selwyn (2016) *"No-one told us it was going to be like this": compassion fatigue and foster carers*, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, UK, p. 19

⁵⁵ Adoption and Permanence Parliamentary Group (2021) *Strengthening Families*, UK [Download \(APPG\)](#), p.35

Figure 11. Are you part of a Peer Support Group?



Being in a peer group does require regular commitment to reap the rewards. One adoptive parent explained her experience: *'it was an awkward thing to begin with, but we are getting there and we can invite new people in to that.... it has taken to choose to belong to it and to choose to keep plugging into...to sort of push through the awkwardness'*. The value of meeting face-to-face was highlighted as an important part of a peer group. Those who are not part of a peer group say there are no appropriate groups in their geographical area, or do not have the time to go to one.

In our survey, **96% of participants agree that prayer has made a difference on their journey**. We asked parents what makes a Christian peer group distinctive, and they affirmed both prayer and a belief in God's provision are key. Some expressed it as a 'relief' to find others whose family experiences and faith overlapped with theirs so much. It can be a space to speak without reserve and be confident of receiving trustworthy advice and wisdom. A surprising, minor theme of the benefit of Christian peer groups is the opportunity to have 'fun'.

Some general themes emerged about the potential negative impact of peer support groups. If the stories are too overwhelming, or if the parents/carers seem defeated and despondent, this will be discouraging and may lead to disengagement. One foster carer described it as *'the lame supporting the lame'*. Some parents/carers have experienced this in Christian peer groups, too. This seems to happen most often when the organisation that put the group together does not offer ongoing input and structure.

Informal Support

Throughout our survey, our data confirms what Ghate and Hazel (2002)⁵⁶ highlighted: relationships are at the heart of support. It is conceivable that formal and semi-formal sources might deliver support without relationship. Informal support, however, is entirely dependent on relationship. This is the definition of informal support in our survey:

Family, friends and neighbours are all involved in giving and receiving informal support. This type of support is often very flexible and responsive to immediate needs. However, it can also be the hardest to manage and initiate.

75% of our participants agreed or strongly agreed with this statement: **‘Overall, I feel comfortable asking for help from friends and family’**

Quinton (2004)⁵⁷ explains that informal support will be forthcoming if people believe helping each other is a key part of the relationship and if there is some balance in the giving and receiving of help. It is losing this balance that most contributes to parents/carers not feeling comfortable in asking for help from friends/family. They talk about being a ‘burden’ to their informal network when they ask for help too frequently and when the help they need is so costly. Parents/carers are all too aware that choosing to look after a care-experienced child requires some level of knowledge, skill and resilience. Friends may even need to be DBS checked. This pushes the relationship outside of the expected dynamic of informal support. Parents/carers do not want to impose this on relationships. Some feel their choice to become parents/carers should not negatively impact others. Only if the relationship is close and strong enough would parents/carers risk tipping the balance. Otherwise, they might feel indebted to the friendship in a way they could never repay.

‘I feel comfortable asking for emotional and prayer support, but not practical support. Practical support feels more costly for others and I don’t like to put anyone else out. If I was offered, I would accept it – I just don’t want to ask.

Adoptive parent and foster carer

Our qualitative data yielded good examples of ways that friends/family had purposefully pursued resources and training to become better supporters to parents/carers. They showed up with offers of **specific help** which helped overcome the ‘imbalance’ perceived. Parents/carers say that having at least one friend with these characteristics makes a big difference. Here are some examples:

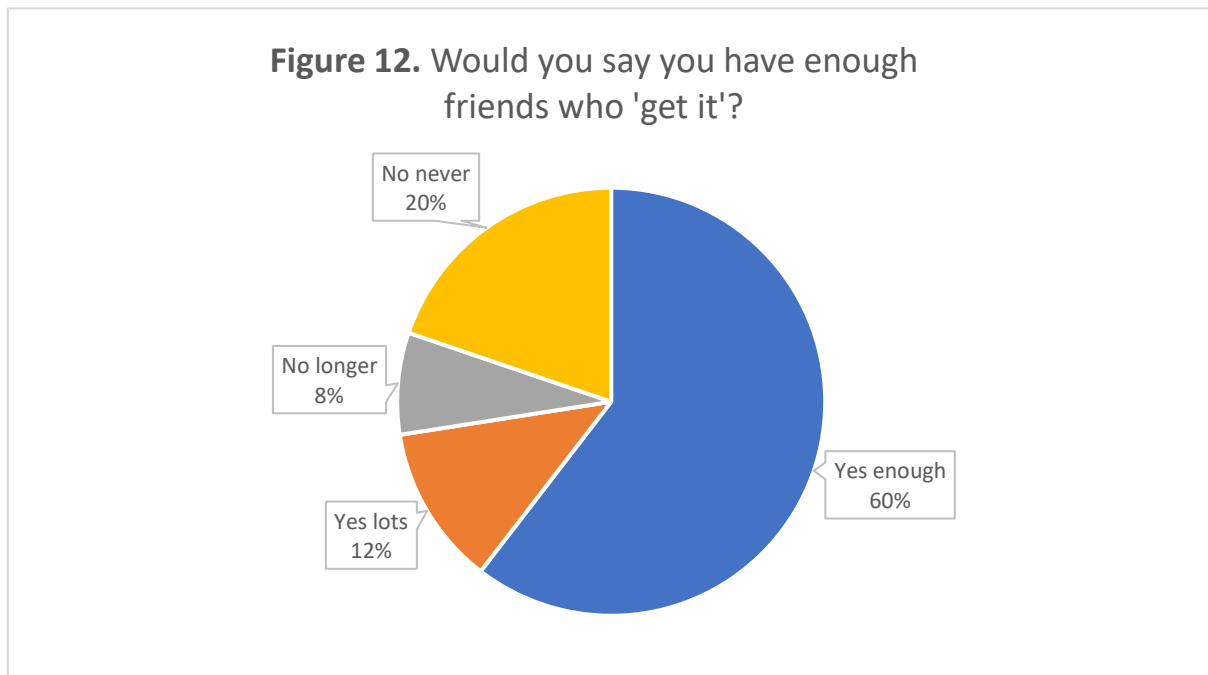
- *‘I find [my sister] kind of like my first port of call to go to because she gets it. She’s very experienced with children. But she’s done quite a lot of reading. So, she understands what I’m dealing with and what I’m worrying about.’ (Adoptive parent)*
- *‘It doesn’t have to be planned in advance, it can be spontaneous...like ‘we’re doing this, come along if you want’. It’s that freedom of not...feeling guilty about saying no or feeling guilty saying yes even.’ (Foster carer)*
- *‘We had one couple who for about 5 years running, had all three children for us for a week while we went on holiday ...they’ve got to know a little bit about the children’s issues and so on, to be able to manage it in our absence.’ (Foster carer)*

Parents/carers learn to be selective about who they turn to for help. Mostly, they gravitate towards those who **“get it”**. Parents/carers are clear that you do not necessarily have to have

⁵⁶ Ghate and Hazel, (2002) Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

⁵⁷ Quinton (2004) Supporting Parents: Messages from Research, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK

personal experience of fostering and adoption – though that certainly does help. People who ‘get it’ are first and foremost, willing to listen and, secondly, are seeking to understand. It is more about an attitude of positive regard to what the parent/carer is doing. In one study, there was a strong correlation between support for fostering from relatives and the carer’s positive attitude to it⁵⁸. Over time, these relationships grow deeper and more supportive. One adopter says ‘*over the years I have sought out friends who are willing to listen and learn about our children and not people who, ... already think they know the answers*’. Parents/carers say that having friends/family who ‘get it’ helps them manage friendships who don’t. As you can see from Figure 6.5, **20% of our parents/carers have never had enough friends who ‘get it’**.



Of all the sources of support, informal support is the **most inconsistent and changeable**. Many parents/carers highlighted that they live far from extended biological family or that grandparents have developed health issues. Some have recently moved away from a supportive network and are having to rebuild their support from scratch. Friends who have previously offered support can have a change in personal circumstances that means they are no longer able to help. Participants in Ottoway and Selwyn’s (2006)⁵⁹ research testified to the ‘detrimental effect fostering had on friendships and social activities...because of exhaustion and/or concerns from others about the children’s behaviour’. **16 of our parents/carers** alluded to this decrease in relationship over time. One foster carer gave this illustration:

‘One particular person who’s helped a lot with previous children. She can’t at the moment, she’s got so much on.....And I feel as though I’ve kind of burned her in the past and maybe felt so ‘that’s why she doesn’t want to do it’. But actually, in reality, when I think about it, it’s because she’s too busy. And that’s, that’s life.’

Almost all our parents/carers are offering support to others. Mostly, this is among other fellow adopters and fosters, or prospective parents/carers. But many said they have been able to offer

⁵⁸ Quinton (2004) Supporting Parents: Messages from Research, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK. P. 101

⁵⁹ Ottoway and Selwyn (2016) *“No-one told us it was going to be like this” : compassion fatigue and foster carers*, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, UK

help to families who experience challenges with their biological children. Our participants say that their own experiences inform the type of support they offer. Top of the list is an empathic listening ear, but also they are a wealth of knowledge when it comes to navigating the formal support system. In a few cases, their insight has also helped create better structures and content within churches around pastoral support and children's ministry. Some parents/carers mentioned that they've learnt to offer authentic '*prayer and encouragement from God's word*' (adoptive parent).

Part 2

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The drumbeat of our findings is that relationship is key to support. There are no formulas or shortcuts to developing good relationships with parents/carers but our data does provide some outlines of what support is genuinely supportive, and what support, however well-meaning, is not appropriate. The findings below should not be taken as a list of “do’s and don’ts”. They provide a framework to better understand the parent/carer of care-experienced children so that supporters can move towards parents/carers they know in wisdom and love.

We will first look at insights pertinent to the support network. Some of the findings are applicable to any supporter, regardless of the nature of the relationship with the parent/carer. Other findings are relevant specifically to formal, semi-formal or informal support networks. We will look at each of these in turn. We will conclude with some insights that have emerged for parents/carers themselves.

All Supporters

Some insights emerging from our findings are applicable to any supporter, regardless of whether they are in a formal, semi-formal or informal relationship with the parent/carer.

1. It is supportive when supporters are proactive in building relationships with parents/carers of care-experienced children.

A strong theme in our data set was that parents/carers wanted the support network to be proactive about reaching out to them. However, our interviewees emphasised that a spontaneous offer of support is much more likely to be accepted if they know and trust the person who is making the offer. One foster carer put it this way: *‘it’s about a trusted relationship that you feel at ease with those people. Because if it’s people you don’t know that well, there’s expectations.’* So, the first step in offering help, is getting to know the parent/carer. Parents/carers are unlikely to initiate this, since many feel exhausted and overwhelmed by the demands of life in the home. Professionals, church members, family and friends who proactively check in with parents/carers just to see how they are doing, demonstrate that they care and want to help when needed. It may require some determination and dedication from the supporter, but over time parents/carers and their children will learn to trust the supporter and begin to welcome different types of support from them.

2. It is supportive when parents/carers are equipped to better understand and manage their support network.

Bronfenbrenner⁶⁰ has provided a helpful starting point to illustrate the rich ecosystems around the family. A Biblical view recognises that Christ informs and shapes all levels of the system and the individual/family being supported. Parents/carers live under God, within support networks ordained by Him. By and large, parents/carers in our research are incredibly competent at managing their support networks. They are often aware of God’s provision of support.

But there are times when they lose sight of this and welcome help. One of the strong themes throughout our data set was a feeling of exhaustion and fatigue. Galvanising support often involves taking a step back and objectively assessing what people, resources, and skills are

⁶⁰ [Bronfenbrenner\(2008\) Ecological Theory of Child Development](#)

available⁶¹. Parents/carers can feel tired of asking for help as well as tired of the daily demands of caring for their children. We would argue from our data that trusted supporters could encourage parents/carers to periodically map their support network, identifying strengths and weaknesses⁶². This then allows a more targeted approach to developing the right kind of support for that season in life. Particularly in times of crises or transition, having one or two trusted individuals come alongside a parent/carer to help them understand and manage their support network can make a big difference.

3. It is supportive when the support network collaborate with each other where possible.

Parents/carers in our survey used a number of metaphors to explain support: net, scaffold, jigsaw. Each demonstrates an interconnectedness inherent within support. However, our data shows that the formal, semi-formal, and informal support networks are very often operating as disconnected elements around the parent/carer. Bronfenbrenner's model⁶³ includes a sphere called the Mesosystem which alludes to the importance of the relationships between the support networks. Both the literature⁶⁴ and our data suggests that when each source of support understands and relates to the other, it creates a stronger, more supportive environment overall. In the last few years, professional services have understood the value of multiagency work⁶⁵. Our data seems to say that adding the informal and semiformal support networks to this collaborative work can create a more cohesive network around the family.

4. It is supportive when the support network recognises the impact of time and universal events on parents/carers.

Bronfenbrenner⁶⁶ also encouraged the support network to consider the impact of time on a family's support network. Many parents/carers talk about not having 'spare time'. Others mention that their children need more time overall to reach developmental milestones. Historic, political, cultural and seasonal events happening in the backdrop will affect support for parents/carers. Our data was collected just after the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic were easing. Many parents/carers alluded to the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on their support network. Some spoke about being able to access training more easily online. Others felt their support network had eroded and had not recovered. We suggest from our data that being aware of the changes happening within a family (including life cycle events) and in the larger environment will help the support network adapt to the ongoing support needs of the family. *'Different people are suited to different placements needs at different times so a fluid and flexible support network is helpful'* (foster carer).

⁶¹ Quinton (2004) *Supporting Parents: Messages from Research*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK. P.28

⁶² This is an exercise that assessing social workers do with prospective foster carers and adoptive parents.

⁶³ [Bronfenbrenner\(2008\) Ecological Theory of Child Development](#)

⁶⁴ Farmer, ERG., Lipscombe, JC., & Moyers, S. (2001). *The Fostering Task with Adolescents*. Department of Health.

⁶⁵ See, for example, Anna Freud's module on Integration [here](#).

⁶⁶ [Bronfenbrenner\(2008\) Ecological Theory of Child Development](#)

Formal Support

1. It is supportive when parents/carers do not feel 'judged' for seeking support from professionals.

According to our parents/carers, looking for professional support carries some stigma. They can be judged by the professionals themselves or by the wider support network around them who may perceive it as symptomatic of 'not coping' or 'failing'⁶⁷. They can also stand in judgement of themselves. Parents/carers of care-experienced children underwent a thorough assessment and were approved by a panel of experts. They feel they 'ought' to be able to handle things on their own. In the qualitative data, an adoptive parent put it this way: *'I actually found coming to parenting through an assessment process really difficult...it was almost a barrier to asking for help, because I felt like I have been assessed as good enough to have this child. What would somebody say if I said that I actually am finding it really hard?'*

2. It is supportive when formal support offers training to friends, family and church on a regular basis.

One adoptive parent recalled that her adoption agency had offered training for 'friends and family' prior to her being matched with her son. She said *'that was really helpful where they were able to kind of hear [about the process] from somewhere else'*. We commend the adoption agencies and local authorities who provide training to the extended support network. Providing this type of training on a regular basis (not just during assessment) would make it an even better experience for parents/carers and supporters.

3. It is supportive when formal support services are able to match professionals and parents/carers on the basis of faith.

When professionals have shared the same faith as the parent/carer, our qualitative data shows that this has been extremely supportive for parents/carers. Those relationships are successful because individuals can relate on multiple levels. This fosters a greater sense of trust and can lead to lifelong relationships. One adoptive parent said *'I'm still in touch with my social worker for when I adopted my daughter back in 2005. And because she was a Christian,...we got on really well.'* And another *'our recent Post Adoption Support Worker is a Christian and often at the end of a conversation she would say she would pray for us and faith would be intertwined with any help or conversations we had. We were very lucky'*.

4. It is supportive when formal support services acknowledge the impact of faith on support.

Our participants clearly said that faith was essential to how they viewed and lived in the world. There are three ways this impacts support according to our data. The most obvious way is that church is likely to be a significant feature of the Christian parent/carer's support network. None of our participants had stopped attending church altogether, even though some clearly found it hard. Despite its shortcomings, most Christians believe the church is the primary place where God chooses to build relationships that care for the weak and the vulnerable (1 Cor 12:12-27). It is not helpful therefore when professionals discourage church attendance or are suspicious of it.

⁶⁷ Also in Ottoway and Selwyn (2016) *"No-one told us it was going to be like this": compassion fatigue and foster carers*, Hadley Centre for Adoption and Foster Care Studies, UK

Secondly, many of our parents/carers explained that faith is itself a form of support. Many parents/carers talked about relying on God daily. They mentioned their faith offered a grid that organises and brings meaning to their world and their parenting. It gave an order and priority about how some parents/carers go about securing support. Thirdly, a minority of parents were concerned that professional intervention would clash with a Christian worldview. As Quinton explained, the giver and receiver of support may have different views of what the root problem is and what should be provided in an attempt to help with it⁶⁸. Given all this, we would argue from our data that faith literacy training for professionals is key not only in recruitment, but also post-placement.

'We have had some good support from both Christians and non-Christians but if I could receive the same level of support from Christians that would be my preference.'

Adoptive Parent

5. It is supportive when semi-formal and informal networks of support consider providing financial aid in order for families to access formal support services.

One of our interviewees said *'the more educated you are, the more supported you feel...(but) the cost of training is a real problem...'*. Many adoptive/foster parents/carers are unable to go back to work full-time, making finances a real issue for the family. In the US, churches are encouraged to think of financial support as one of the practical ways they can help adoptive and foster families⁶⁹. In the UK, our data shows that churches often provide practical support that relieves financial pressure (e.g. use of venue, supplies for children, meals, etc). Though the realities in the UK and US are very different, there is still scope for churches to provide occasional financial aid to foster and adoptive families, especially where the Adoption Support Fund is not available (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland). Some of our participants talked about friends/family providing funds to secure some formal support.

6. It is supportive when semi-formal and informal networks of support learn about the experience of accessing formal support and offer assistance when appropriate.

'Church leaders seem to assume there is a huge bank of support and care from Social Services for carers, they have probably read the literature seen the adverts and taken the statements at face value when it says 24 hour support. The reality is very far from this assertion.' Foster carer

Parents/Carers face an uphill fight in securing formal support. They perceive it as risky because there are no guarantees that the intervention will be effective even after all the time and energy invested. They face a high turnover of professionals, making relationships hard to develop. And some are nervous the intervention may clash with their faith. Some parents/carers would love 'companions' who could help navigate this complicated maze with them. One interviewee wondered if the wider church could play a more proactive role in helping parents access formal support. The skills and resources accrued by some church members could aid parents/carers to find effective routes, fill out forms, advocate for their rights and keep persisting. Some parents/carers who anticipate a clash in worldview between their faith and professional support, might appreciate *'being able to review recommendations with a Christian.'* (Adoptive parent)

⁶⁸ Quinton (2004) 'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research', Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

⁶⁹ See for example Replanted

Semi-Formal Support

Church

1. It is supportive when church leaders and church members undertake training to better understand care-experienced children and their families.

Our parents/carers' most consistent message for churches of all sizes and denominations is to undertake further training to better understand care-experienced children and their families. Our data shows that it is not always appropriate for the parent/carer themselves to be responsible for training their church family. Firstly, parents/carers feel uncomfortable speaking candidly about their children's challenging behaviour when this is not evidenced at church. Care-experienced children may present very differently in public than they do at home. Church folk may assume all is well and never find out about the hidden, acute, ongoing needs of the family. As one adoptive parent put it, *'They see a lovely child they adore...parents see that too, but also the anxiety, tantrums, soiling, food issues, sleep issues...'*

Secondly, there are privacy and confidentiality issues. An adoptive parent explains, *'We're not wanting to share too much, to allow it to be our children's choice as they grow up who knows what'*. Foster carers are asked by Social Services to keep the details of the child's story confidential.

Thirdly, some parents/carers grow weary of talking about their problems. They may have spent all week liaising with health professionals, teachers and neighbours about their children's behaviour. They may be reluctant to revisit the details on a Sunday with a new set of people. Put together, these factors make it hard for the parent/carer to be solely responsible to help the church better understand the issues related to care-experienced children.

Parents/carers do not expect church to automatically understand care-experienced children. They know church has a broad remit, welcoming people from all walks of life. But, parents/carers would urge churches to liaise with parachurch organisations that carry the expertise and can provide tailored training. Thankfully, organisations like Home for Good, Cornerstone and Join the Dots have training available for a UK church audience⁷⁰. This does not replace the importance of speaking to the family about their specific needs. Rather, the training offers a framework to help church leaders ask good questions and consider how the church (and individuals who are part of the church community) can offer support.

2. It is supportive when churches validate parenting care-experienced children as ministry.

Almost all of our parents/carers think that God has called them to be a parent/carer of care-experienced children. Turner (2018) effectively argues that all parents are called by God to minister to their children⁷¹. But, Schloer et al (2009)⁷² adds that the type of parenting that care experienced children need is redemptive – one that re-establishes the environment that God designed children to flourish. The research around early developmental trauma confirms that some of its effect can be mitigated by loving caregivers⁷³ but emphasises that this comes at a great personal cost. Day to day, some parents/carers may not see much evidence of this redemption. When churches understand and validate that parents/carers are called by God to 'set the lonely in

⁷⁰ See Home for Good's *'Becoming Communities of Welcome'* and Cornerstone's *'Caring for Caregivers'* courses.

⁷¹ Turner (2018) *It takes a church to raise a parent*, BRF, UK.

⁷² Schooler et al (2009) *Wounded Children, Healing Homes*, Navpress, USA.

⁷³ See for example, Perry and Szalavitz (2017) *'The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog'*, Basic Books, USA.

families' (Psalm 68:6) and recognise it as a lifelong task, it can help the parent/carer feel supported. Speaking about it positively from the pulpit, allowing parents/carers to take a step back from other ministries, and praying for them are all ways that churches can acknowledge the importance of parenting as ministry.

3. It is supportive when churches value and acknowledge the spiritual wisdom required to parent care-experienced children.

Our parents/carers know the value of prayer. Many of them talk about having to rely on God daily as they parent their children. They have learnt more about God as they parent their children. They have seen great fruit in themselves as God has worked in their hearts. The spiritual wisdom that parents/carers of care-experienced children have accrued is a great asset to the church. Churches that value and acknowledge this will make a parent/carer feel supported. But parents/carers would also like the church to encourage them to continue to trust in God with robust theology and thoughtful insights. Suffering, pain, sin and its consequence, unanswered prayer, confusion over God's plans, are all issues our parents/carers say they struggle with. We would argue from this evidence that spiritual support is a crucial factor not only in recruiting Christian parents/carers, but also in the ongoing challenges of family life, post-placement. One foster carer said, *'I've got no quiet time that I can count as being any good. And I am so reliant on (...) Sunday mornings ...to wash away that horrible feeling when things have gone wrong. And you just feel as though you've made mistakes. Just to let it out...'*. Our participants seem to agree with Layzell (1999)⁷⁴ that a relationship with God is the most important of all the resources available to the Christian parent/carers of care-experienced children, and so churches that nurture this are extremely supportive environments.

4. It is supportive when church leaders are proactive about meeting with parents/carers to establish realistic expectations of what support could be offered by the church.

Parents/carers understand that *'full wraparound care is a completely unreasonable expectation from most small churches'* (adoptive parent). They do not want *'to be a drain on resources when there are others who also have significant needs for support but aren't doing something that is considered 'admirable' such as fostering'* (foster carer). Church leaders can be reassured that most parents/carers are not expecting the local church to provide all types of support. They understand that the response from each church will be contextual, dependent on their size, location, congregation, and skills. Parents/Carers are hoping those in church leadership roles would offer to sit with them, seek to understand their support needs, and clarify what is realistic for the local church to offer and what further support can be secured from elsewhere. Where the church is not able to offer direct support, it is helpful when the church signposts and liaises with other churches, charities and professionals⁷⁵ with the parent/carer's permission. As the local church understands the needs of the parent/carer, they are called by God to respond with wise compassion (1 Cor 12:25; Gal 6:2-10). Following the early church pattern, church leaders can initiate and facilitate the support structure around those in need (Acts 6:1-6).

5. It is supportive when the local church considers its own long-term pastoral care strategy.

Our data shows that church support is often responsive in emergencies and crises but struggles to remember that the support needed is *'ongoing and forever, really'* (adoptive parent and foster carer). Some parents/carers explained that there was a lot of support initially, but it tailed off over

⁷⁴ Layzell (1999) *Adoption is for Life, Not Just for a Crisis*, Grove Books Ltd, UK.

⁷⁵ Hambrick (2021) *How to Create Effective Care Teams at Your Church*, Journal of Biblical Counselling, 21-38.

time. Particularly in the teenage years, parents/carers can feel they and their children are 'forgotten'. Parents/carers long for the church to 'keep love constant' (1 Peter 4:8), to persist and not give up 'doing good' (Gal 6:9). Lane (2009)⁷⁶ argues that 'sometimes the need for long-term care can be challenging if a church is not prepared in advance'. He offers some strategies that can be activated for this type of care to thrive. A small, but consistent, group of trusted and trained people who liaise with the parent/carer and each other under the supervision of the church can create a good foundation for long-term pastoral care.

6. It is supportive when churches cultivate a culture of welcoming strangers and mutuality of care.

A culture of welcome in churches was a consistent theme in our data set. Churches that accept and accommodate adults and children from all walks of life create supportive environments for parents/carers (Rom 15:7; Eph 4:2). Sometimes this is evidenced in how much 'noise' or 'disruption' is tolerated in main services. One adoptive parent offered this illustration: *'What contributes to feeling safe in the current church is more of an open attitude that things go wrong and life is hard. A simple example...if there is a technical problem with a microphone or a song.... there would have been tension that someone "had got it wrong". Now there is more of an "oh, OK, can we sort this, nevermind, a bit like life this." Makes a big difference to tone and culture that is picked up on by kids'*. Also, the church can cultivate a culture of interdependence, where asking for help from one another is part of the Christian way of life (Rom 12:10). One adoptive parent who recently moved churches noticed the difference and said *'there seems to be more of an independence than an interdependence culture in this church which makes (asking for help) harder'*.

⁷⁶ Lane (2009) [Some Thoughts on How to Provide Long-term Pastoral Care](#), CCEF.org - accessed June 2022

Peer Support Groups

1. It is supportive when organisations that set up peer groups offer ongoing supervision and guidance to peer group leaders.

Organisations that facilitate peer groups should offer ongoing help in setting the tone and the goals of meeting together. As people come and go, it is the organisation's job to hold the identity of the group and to carry it forward. When parents/carers are asked to lead, they should be offered ongoing supervision so that they know who to turn to if relational conflicts emerge or if they have to handle safeguarding issues. Groups that do not have this structure around them and depend on individuals are unlikely to have much longevity, according to our data.

2. It is supportive when churches that set up peer support groups make it distinctive from adoption/fostering interest groups.

It is wonderful to see that some churches have set up peer support groups for families who foster and adopt. Some of our parents/carers have explained that these groups become less supportive when admission to the group is too broad. Parents/carers may not be comfortable speaking freely when there are prospective parents/carers or social workers in the group. They don't want to put either group off by their candidness. It might be better to create two distinct groups with different goals. The groups can certainly be linked on occasion, but it is important to protect the safe environment of a peer group.

Informal Support

1. It is supportive when informal networks of support move towards families to discern bespoke ways of caring for them.

Whether you are a church friend, neighbour, fellow parent or family member, we recommend that you persist in moving towards parents/carers to learn about their specific needs and issues. Our data suggests that each parent/carer will have a different view of what is helpful and what is not. Some parents/carers would love to talk about their experiences, others feel fatigued from spending all week on the phone and would welcome other kinds of conversations. Even with practical support, which is considered more 'straight-forward', friends/family should avoid assuming they know what is helpful. The evidence we collected around offers of meals to parents/carers is an example. Some parents/carers would love meals delivered to their door on a regular basis. Others say that their children prefer food that has been cooked by the parent/carer. Some parents/carers would love to be invited to other people's homes. Others think this would be a 'nightmare'. Even being aware of this spectrum helps generate informed questions to discover what is going to be supportive. Sometimes parents/carers themselves don't know what will be supportive, so be prepared to persist and offer creative solutions. Learning to care well for someone is not a linear process and may involve some missteps. The key is gently to keep moving towards them.

2. It is supportive when informal networks of support seek to enhance their knowledge and skill around care-experienced children.

Parents/Carers find it extremely supportive when friends/family ask about resources and training to help them better understand care-experienced children. If friends/family have little or no personal experience, it can be helpful to read blogs and books which give a little insight into what life is like for parents/carers. In recent years, some training packages and books have been written specifically for the informal networks of support⁷⁷. These offer advice and suggestions of how to become a better supporter to families who adopt and foster. A friend or family member who is willing to be trained and resourced becomes a trusted source of support who is able to offer significant help. For example, some parents/carers mentioned they are looking for people who had the right knowledge, heart and skill to offer respite care. For friends/family to be able to do this, they need to get to know the family, develop a trusted relationship with the children and have some skills to know how to respond well in tricky times. One adoptive parent and foster carer explained it this way; *'if somebody (said) "I can really see this is a struggle for you, I would really like to get to know you as a family and get to know your son and see if we can make it work that we could offer some respite for you". ...we could have that built, but there's nobody...who has it on their heart....'* Some types of support require a lot of investment from the supporter.

3. It is supportive when informal networks of support listen well to parents/carers.

Powlison (2018)⁷⁸ explained a common problem we see amongst many of our parents/carers: 'Suffering often brings a doubled pain... "the problem" itself ...is hard enough. But it is often compounded by a second problem. Other people, even well-meaning, often respond poorly to sufferers...These reactions add relational and psychological isolation to the original problem'. Many of our parents/carers say that the first and best response that friends and family can offer is to listen. In sharing their experiences, parents/carers are not always asking for a solution. They are

⁷⁷ See for example, the Hope-Filled Family's 'Adoption Cheerleaders' Course and Johnston (2012) *Adoption is a Family Affair: What Relatives and Friends Must Know*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

⁷⁸ Powlison (2018) *God's Grace in Your Suffering*, Crossway, UK. P.52

most likely trying to find someone who can be with them in their difficult, conflicting feelings. As Layzell (1999)⁷⁹ explains, other adults help the parent/carer 'contain them in their distress so that they can go on containing their children in theirs'. Christians believe that we can only ever contain others in their distress because we are contained by God. A good friend/parent can reflect this as they love the other. This foster carer expresses it this way: *'The one thing that we would value is people who listen but I think it's a very difficult thing...I expect this is why it's easier to talk to somebody else who's in the same position as ourselves...not because of any insight, but...you want to share how you feel and the frustrations you have. But everybody's natural reaction over what you start to tell them about an issue you have with the children...is to try and fix it'*.

⁷⁹ Layzell (1999) *Adoption is for Life, Not Just for a Crisis*, Grove Books Ltd, UK.

Our data also shows that parents/carers in our research influence the support network around them. Therefore, we include some insights for parents/carers.

1. Parents/Carers could reflect on their own feelings about asking for help.

Kilbourn (1996)⁸⁰ warns that under huge stress, it is common for caregivers to deny their own feelings. Our data shows that asking for support conjures up various feelings in the parent/carer. Very rarely are these feelings favourable to the task of asking for help. Feelings of pride, fear, guilt, worry and defeat are some of those listed by parents/carers that prevent them from freely seeking support. Some parents/carers have identified this as coming from a specific internal mindset of independence and self-sufficiency which could have been influenced by past experiences. In the assessment phase, this may have been perceived as a strength but, post-placement, it can have a detrimental effect on galvanising support. An adoptive parent and foster carer offered this encouragement: *'I'm very independent and sometimes feel asking for help is a negative. I have to swallow my pride and recognise that it's for the benefit of the children and that others want to do their part too. By allowing them in, they can fulfil their role in the journey too'*. Another adoptive parent gave this illustration, *'I've got quite an independent and self-sufficient mindset, where I've felt "I've taken this on"..."I've got to be sorting things out for myself". But I think having broken my ankle, without any kind of warning, it happened. I had to really lose that mindset and...humbled myself really...and accept the help because there was no alternative. I've made new friends through the whole experience'*. One adoptive parent demonstrated how the life of Jesus impacts her thinking with this short statement: *'Making myself vulnerable and taking a step to ask. Jesus asked the woman at the well for a drink.'*

In our interviews, participants were asked what other variables intrinsic to the parent/carer might influence support. Gender was highlighted as a strong factor. Three of our interviewees were male. An adoptive father mused that asking for help could be perceived as an admission of failure *'particularly in the male side of British society'*, who aspire to be *'professional, reasonably high achieving'*. Two of our female interviewees wondered if their husbands would give radically different answers. One said *'it would be very interesting if you sat down and asked my husband all these same questions....he's never been interested in seeking out support as a foster carer or support as an adoptive parent'*.

2. Parents/Carers could consider what tasks they would be willing to delegate should someone ask if they can help.

A common problem we tracked with our participants is summarised in this statement: *'(supporters) ask what would be helpful, and mostly I don't know what to say'* (adoptive parent). One interviewee who had previously held a corporate job created a spreadsheet itemising the types, skills and frequency of support he needed. Whenever someone offered help, he would try and match the person with a gap. In this way, he admits, it was easier to harness the support potential and be upfront and clear about what was helpful. He advises *'I guess foster carers have a responsibility as well to always have in their mind 'which bit am I prepared to let somebody else do?'... And if you're going to encourage people to (offer help), we need to encourage the carers to be thinking about the answers'*.

⁸⁰ Kilbourn (1996) *Children in Crisis: A new commitment*, MARC World Vision, USA.

3. Parents/Carers could reflect on whether they are holding on to any unrealistic expectations of their support networks.

Pre-placement, certain sources of support may have been identified as more forthcoming than others. When the reality of life post-placement is different to what was anticipated, it can leave the parent/carer feeling disappointed. For example, one parent/carer had high expectations of her son's godparents. Unfortunately, they have not been as supportive as she had hoped. She expressed some sadness in this but has been able to look to other sources of support.

Parents/carers who hold on to expectations have a harder time adjusting to and receiving the support that is realistically on offer. One adoptive parent gave this testimony, *'I am more realistic about what I expect from people, and I hope I have learnt to be forgiving when I don't receive the support I crave from someone, although that has been a hard struggle'*.

4. Parents/Carers may be best placed to initiate the connections between supporters.

As parents/carers find themselves in the centre of the web of support around them, they may be best placed to initiate and promote the connections between the different sources of support. This will ensure that they keep agency of their support network, giving permission for the suitable connections to be made. When this is overwhelming, a trusted friend can act as an advocate. One foster carer described it like this: *'you're in the middle of that teamwork...to build that teamwork sense around you makes you, I think, more resilient.'*

5. Some parents/carers could benefit from counselling for themselves.

In our data, counselling did not feature very highly as a type of support that parents/carers were accessing. Anecdotally, we have heard that while parents/carers are parenting, they may not have a lot of time or space for this kind of support. It is, perhaps, when the children leave home or become more independent that a parent/carer may consider this kind of support. More research would be needed to know if this is true. But our literature review confirms that 'caregivers must work on their own emotional needs outside, or apart from, their relationships with their children'⁸¹. And one adoptive parent who has regular counselling says *'I was having quite a lot of bad, like harder days, and not always knowing how to manage them, and manage them well. And so actually having a Christian counsellor now, that has been a real, huge support'*.

⁸¹ Kilbourn (1996) *Children in Crisis: A new commitment*, MARC World Vision, USA.

Conclusions

The data we collected and presented here paints an overall positive picture of support for Christian parents/carers of care-experienced children in the UK. However, we have understood that it is mainly the parents/carers who are galvanising the support, and that they would welcome more informed, proactive and sensitive offers of support. We conclude with some recommendations of how this can be done, and some ideas for further research.

Recommendations

- 1. We recommend that all supporters engage with existing resources and training about care-experienced children and their families.** Educating supporters was highlighted as an urgent issue. Especially, educating the church on issues related to care-experienced children. There are bespoke training packages for churches and individuals in the UK. Our parents/carers would urge all supporters to engage with these as a starting point to better understand their situation. Every effort should be made on behalf of parents/carers to promote and popularise these resources. A database and a more efficient method of signposting would help supporters find the resources more easily.
- 2. We recommend that the breadth of parents/carers' voices and stories be told sensitively.** It is easy to find inspirational stories of foster carers and adopters. The hard, unresolved stories also merit telling and hearing. Our data shows that there is as much to learn in them as the stories of success.
- 3. We recommend considering whether existing resources for families are suitable for parents/carers of care-experienced children.** Parents/carers in our research access resources from a range of different organisations and charities. It would be helpful if these organisations and charities were able to consider parents/carers of care-experienced children as part of their audience. If the material already available could be adapted to families with care-experienced children, this would help parents/carers feel more integrated into the community.
- 4. We recommend that a toolkit be developed for individuals to learn how to grow relationships in the context of hard struggles.** To improve support, most parents/carers in our research say they are looking for better relationships with the existing support network around them. Our data seems to say that supporters can easily drop away when parents/carers hit hard times. Parents/carers are not looking for people to fix things. They want supporters to learn to be with them in their struggles.
- 5. We recommend forming a think tank of Christians parents/carers to further develop the concept and delivery of spiritual support for families of care-experienced children.** There is an obvious dearth of resources with a Godly, wise, and discerning perspective on the complex issues that care-experienced families face. While there is much knowledge that can be gained from scientific research, many Christian parents/carers would appreciate a robust, Biblical view on issues such as trauma, shame, and identity, that can inform their faith and their parenting.
- 6. We recommend that parents/carers and supporters adopt a better understanding of the rich ecosystem around families and how this changes over time.** Reinterpreted through a Biblical

lens, the Bronfenbrenner model is a helpful tool that could be used frequently to evaluate the support network around the family at any one time. It can be used to map strengths and weaknesses so there is a more targeted approach to improving support.

- 7. We recommend that resources be developed for use in peer groups.** There are courses for prospective parents/carers. The resource we are recommending would be for parents/carers after the child has been placed. Either parents/carers could be brought together around a resource, or it could be offered to existing peer groups. The right resource could help parents/carers make use of their time together to process feelings, engage in constructive conversations, and offer meaningful encouragement.
- 8. We recommend that, with the parent/carer's permission, churches and professionals work collaboratively wherever possible.** Our data yielded very few examples of good relationships between institutions. On the contrary, we found some evidence of suspicion and misunderstanding between church and professionals. This creates an unsupportive environment around the parent/carer who may feel divided between the two. Parent/carers are best placed to initiate the relationship between church and professionals, but it requires both parties to be willing and open to new ways of working. Faith Literacy training would help professionals understand better how faith plays a role. And church leaders could be invited to training offered by professionals, so they better understand the interventions. Regular meetings between church leaders and social workers, possibly in church spaces, may contribute to an ongoing partnership.
- 9. We recommend that the church be encouraged to receive and offer good theological teaching on suffering.** In our data, some churches had devolved responsibility of caring to professionals. Others were responding poorly to parents/carers making them feel guilty and burdened. A better understanding of the church's role in corporate lamenting and supporting those with ongoing struggles would help the community be more proactive in moving towards those who suffer.
- 10. We recommend that, where needed, the church work with parachurch organisations with expertise around pastoral care and youth work.** Some church leaders and youth workers may need help to build more formal structures of support around parents/carers and their children. We have evidence that church is helpful in informal ways, but because the help needed is ongoing, more formal pastoral structures and an equipped youth work can prevent the support from tailing off.
- 11. We recommend that training colleges consider including an understanding of care-experienced children and their families in the curriculum.** Statistics show that future church leaders and youth workers are likely to have a foster carer or adopter in their congregation. When parents/carers find that church leaders already know a little about care-experienced children, this can be incredibly supportive.
- 12. We recommend a campaign to debunk some of the myths around support.** Our research has debunked a few myths about support. For example, people often say that every foster carer and adopter would appreciate a meal delivered. Our research suggests that it is best not to assume, but to ask. A campaign that helps debunk some of these myths can help catalyse the right kind of support.

Research

More research is needed in the area of support for parents/carers. These suggestions emerge from our findings:

1. We have evidence that the parents/carers' own faith impacts support. But our data seems to indicate that church culture, size and demographic also impacts support. Further research would be needed to confirm this.
2. More research with a wide-lens view of support with parents/carers of other faiths, or no faith, would be helpful. This will help contrast the Christian experience captured here and understand what is unique to Christians, and what can be tracked amongst other parents/carers.
3. Because the impact of time was a factor that emerged as a strong theme in our dataset, more longitudinal studies would help us understand how support changes over time. Our research only captured one moment for parents/carers.
4. A significant proportion of respondents were church leaders themselves. A separate study could look more carefully at how support is different for them. Our data seems to suggest that for some, support comes more easily, whilst others find it harder.
5. Many parents/carers in our study were parenting children who came to the family in different ways. Some families had birth children, foster children, adopted children and/or children with a special guardianship order. We have not been able to find any research that looks at this complex dynamic. Each children's status may elicit different levels of support. Further research could clarify this and make suggestions for their support needs.

Family Care Research has certainly helped paint a picture of support for the Christian parent/carer of care-experienced children in the UK. However, our project also points to potential directions for where the church, and other supporters, might be better equipped to journey with parents/carers.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire had four sections in line with Quinton's⁸² framework for support:

- I. Background data. Information about the participant and their family that helped give context to their answers. And some general questions about how they perceived support.
- II. Formal Support. Questions pertaining to support received from professional services.
- III. Semi-formal Support. Questions pertaining to support participants received from church and peer groups.
- IV. Informal Support. Questions pertaining to support participants received from friends and family.

The transcripts of the first two meetings of the Project Advisory Group formed the basis of the questionnaire. A cataloguing system was designed to tease out the testimonies into the different sources of support (formal, semi-formal and informal). Under each source, the quotes were assigned sub-themes and grouped together. Subthemes were kept when they were repeated by more than one participant or emphasised in both meetings. For example, the Project Advisory Group spoke about finances (sub-theme) in relation to accessing formal support (source). This subtheme did not appear in relation to informal and semi-formal support. Once catalogued, the quotes served to formulate the questions.

Consideration was given to the response burden for the participant and the practicality of data gathering. Where possible, questions were framed as statements for participants to agree/disagree or a list of options was given for participants to choose from. Comments boxes were added at the end of sections for participants to add their views. The Project Advisory Group was clear that the data gathering had to have a purpose – they needed to feed in to recommendations for support to be adapted or developed for Christian parents. Questions were then filtered through this lens – if the answer to a particular question could not feed into recommendation about support, this was deleted.

The rough draft of the questionnaire was given in printed form to a foster carer. Her responses highlighted that some questions were unclear and needed rephrasing. The response burden was still high as altogether it took her about an hour to complete. A redrafted questionnaire was sent to Dr Tim Davy, Research Advisor, and Annabel Silson, Research Assistant. Both their comments and edits were incorporated before turning the questionnaire into an online format.

The online questionnaire was hosted on the Biblical Counselling UK website. In line with our Ethics Procedure⁸³, the parameters of the research and the consent form were embedded into the questionnaire such that you could not progress to the questions without giving consent and contact details. The online version was piloted with three Christian parents/carers of care-experienced children. The semi-formal section of the questionnaire was identified as the 'heaviest' piece so some open questions were turned into closed questions to improve flow.

⁸² Quinton (2004) 'Supporting Parents: Messages from Research', Jessica Kingsley Publishers, UK.

⁸³ More information on this is available upon request.