

# Relative Experience

Stories from the project



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**Relative Experience is a befriending project based in Newcastle for family members bringing up children because of serious family difficulties. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund Silver Dreams Fund, the project is a partnership led by Grandparents Plus with Family Lives and the Family and Childcare Trust.**

### Kinship carers' stories

#### Pat

Pat has been bringing up her grandson, now aged 6, for the past four years due to her daughter's mental health difficulties and is sharing the care with his other grandparents. Pat has been receiving support from a peer befriender through the Relative Experience project for about four months. She says she was on her "last legs" when she got in touch with the project:

"I had no-one to talk to and I would have to try to work things out in my head. It's tough – I'm divorced and I've got no-one in my life. You're lonely. Before I had my grandson I had a bit more money and got out a bit more. But with a child you're too tired."

Pat has found support from the project enormously helpful: "With my befriender I can say whatever I want to say, she doesn't judge me. I'm not afraid to talk to her. It's peace of mind. It helps me through the week, having someone there and knowing I can sound off."

*"Having a befriender has been life saving for me."*

For Pat, the fact that her befriender is also a kinship carer is important. "She's had similar things in her life, she can relate to what I am saying. She understands what it's like to bring a grandchild up and it's very supportive. I can talk to her about Jack's behaviour, like changing his reward charts; she'll give me ideas to try out. He's pretty good at learning but his social and emotional side is immature and he'll lash out without thinking at his peers at school.

"I also talk about issues to do with my daughter. It's good and I'm pleased that she's finally seen the light, she's stopped drinking and smoking and joined Slimming World. But it wouldn't be right for my grandson to go back to her; he's never on his own with her for more than half an hour because she can't cope with his behaviour."

Because of the sensitivity of relationships in Pat's family she particularly values the

confidentiality offered by her befriender. “I can say these things to her. I can’t talk to family members, they might not listen, they might put it on Facebook or tell another person, they might kick off. You have to be careful what you say.”

*“With my befriender, I can say whatever I want to say, she doesn’t judge me. I’m not afraid to talk to her.”*

Pat works at weekends whilst her grandson is with his other grandparents. “When my befriender comes we talk about the week I’ve had. It means I can go to work without it all in my mind. He had a bad day at school on Friday; I feel it might have been my fault. I’ll talk to her about it so when I go to work I’m not still thinking about it. It’s very calming.

Pat believes her relationship with her befriender has helped her rebuild her confidence and self-esteem. “At the school parents’ evening I held my own and took charge. I talked to my befriender [beforehand] and it helped me to put across [what she wanted to say] and hold my own with the teacher and the other set of grandparents.”

Pat adds: “I’m 50 this year. I’ve done things like go to the Burns night at church and a birthday party – before I probably wouldn’t have had the confidence to go. I’m doing a lot of firsts this year – like going to the kinship carers’ meeting at the Town Hall, and giving a speech. Having a befriender has been life saving for me.”

## Anne

Anne and her husband, who have two grown up children of their own, are bringing up their niece Ava because her parents felt unable to take on a child with a disability. Anne took unpaid leave from work to care for Ava when she left hospital at five days’ old. After Ava had spent several months with the family her parents decided they wanted her to be adopted by strangers and move away from the area. However, now that Ava was settled and attached to Anne and David, the independent guardian appointed by the Court to act on Ava's behalf took the view that she should remain with them and they were awarded a Residence Order.

*“It’s wonderful to talk to people of a similar age, you have similar worries.”*

Anne says: “The independent guardian spoke to us and to Ava’s parents, they felt that Ava was in the best place with us – I have worked for 26 years with children, eight of those with children with special needs. I have seen children who don’t have good attachments. I didn’t want to see Ava doubly disabled by poor attachment.”

Anne and David, both in their early 50s, applied to adopt Ava. Sadly, their relationship with her biological parents broke down completely and Anne turned to Relative Experience for support.

Anne says, “The service has been wonderful. It’s wonderful to talk to people of a similar age, you have similar worries. What if we don’t live long enough? You don’t think about that when you are younger.”

She is able to talk to her befriender about the feelings she has towards Ava's biological parents: “I do feel resentful towards them because they have treated us badly and it’s good to be able to share that with her. Ava's father just wanted to wipe the slate clean and forget about her. But it’s not right that they can choose to bring a child into the world and just walk away without providing her with any financial support. They only provided the bare essentials on first bringing Ava to us.”

*“It’s been great being able to talk to someone who feels exactly the same and not be judged.”*

She adds, “There’s a sadness too about how they have handled themselves. [The befriender] had similar experiences and was left to get on with it with the parents just walking away.” For Anne, talking to her befriender has felt much easier than speaking to a counsellor and she appreciates the longer term relationship. “I would feel a bit uncomfortable talking to a counsellor and you only get six sessions. Counselling helps at the time but the feelings don’t go away. I would like to just carry on seeing her, it would be so supportive. She feels like a friend, I felt that I could just call her.

“She can appreciate the life change that it is – I wouldn’t change it for the world and I’m amazed sometimes how much I love Ava – she’s part of our lives now. But there’s the realisation that you have given up a lot.”

Anne says, “It's great being able to talk to someone who feels exactly the same and not be judged. It’s so nice to be able to talk and not feel guilty.”

### Barbara

Barbara, who is in her 60s, has been a kinship carer for 11 years. She volunteers as a befriender to two women through the Relative Experience project because she wants to provide support and friendship to other kinship carers who are experiencing isolation and stress.

*“I just sit and listen, I don’t judge. I show empathy because I’ve been through it.”*

She explains, “I didn’t get much help when I became a kinship carer. My husband and I thought we were the only ones. We hadn’t heard of other people. There was no-one I could talk to, I couldn’t even talk to my neighbour. Knowing that I’d been through it and knowing what help I could give to others, that’s why I did the befriending.”

Barbara is bringing up two grandchildren who are both autistic. She says, “My daughter and her partner split up and I was asked to take both children. They don’t have contact with their parents and we’ve just plodded along, getting on with it. Social services did help a little bit, but it wasn’t just given to us. I’ve been through it, financially and behaviour wise with the children.”

The befriending service offers an opportunity for kinship carers to talk about the difficulties they are experiencing with the children, other family members or services with someone who understands the challenges they are facing and if needed can signpost them on to further help. Barbara says, “I ask them how they are feeling, if they’ve have any traumas to deal with. I just sit and listen, I don’t judge. I show empathy because I’ve been through it. It’s just being a friend, but it’s got to be professional. We signpost if they need help in anyway. But I don’t tell them what to do, which family members will do.”

*“I get the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve listened and supported someone and that I’ve kept confidentiality.”*

The project establishes clear boundaries to provide safety for both kinship carers and befrienders, with professional supervision available if befrienders need help or advice for themselves. Barbara explains, “There’s boundaries to go by so it’s safe for us too. We can go and visit or sit in a café but we don’t go round the shops with them. If I had to go to a meeting I would have to speak to the supervisor first and then just go and support them. We can tell them about our family lives – just what we are comfortable with. We have a special phone, we don’t give them home numbers. It’s mainly just to use if I’m not going to visit or to say ‘I will be with you in an hour, are you going to be in?’ We’ve got supervisors we can get in touch with if we’ve got anything on our mind.”

Confidentiality is important too: “They know I can sympathise and they know it’s not going any further.”

Barbara says she find the volunteering very rewarding: “I get the satisfaction of knowing that I’ve listened and supported someone and that I’ve kept confidentiality. They seem quite happy, they like me to go every week. I enjoy it – I’ve got two lovely women. It’s been good to meet other kinship carers.”

She adds, “I’ve grown in confidence – I’m not afraid of sorting things out.”

### Sylvia

Sylvia is a befriender for two kinship carers and visits each of them once a fortnight for a cup of coffee and a chat. Her motivation for volunteering to become a befriender with Relative Experience was that she “didn’t want anyone else to go through with social services what I went through without anyone to talk to”.

Sylvia has been a kinship carer for four years and is raising her six-year-old grandson. She explains, “It all started when my grandson had a fall. Social workers didn’t want to listen to anyone about what had happened, we were seen as criminals. I was there at the time and saw what happened but they didn’t believe me. They thought he had been abused and put him with a foster carer for four months, until the medical tests showed it was an accident. You couldn’t get any help – when you call a social worker they didn’t get back to you.”

She adds, “It’s still tough now. I’m 60 and bringing up a six-year-old and still supporting my daughter in her life – she has mental health problems and relies on alcohol a lot.”

*“I have an ear out for anything she seems concerned about and I say ‘would you like to tell me more?’ She’s said I’ve been a support to her and she couldn’t have gone through it without me.”*

Sylvia sees how trust has developed between her and the women she is supporting over the months she has been visiting: “At first they talk about problems with children’s services, but after a while they talk about personal things, like how it’s affecting their health and family lives. One of my ladies never says a word until we’ve had a cup of tea and then she tells me what’s gone on in the fortnight. I have an ear out for anything she seems concerned about and I say ‘would you like to tell me more?’ She’s said I’ve been a support to her and she couldn’t have gone through it without me.”

Sylvia believes the shared experience of being a kinship carer as well as empathy is vital: “I think it helps them that they know that someone’s there who gone through the same thing. They can ring me if they have an urgent need to talk to someone – just knowing you have someone there helps.”

Sylvia feels that she has developed personally as a result of the training provided by the project and her involvement with volunteering: “I’ve learned to think before I speak. Before I would have said, ‘No I don’t agree.’ Now I can stop and listen. The training was good. Part of it involved getting us to see what it feels like when people aren’t taking any notice of you. That was the worst thing, even though I knew it was an exercise.”

Sylvia found the role challenging at first but is now more relaxed and confident. “At first I was worried I was doing it wrong – I’d never done anything like that before. But now I take every meeting as it comes. Volunteers have someone they can talk to if the need to. I’ve only done that once, after my second visit because I felt it didn’t go well. Now I have more confidence.”

She adds, “It’s given me more patience and I have got more social contact to with other kinship carers. It’s a big commitment but it’s one I don’t mind doing. When I see them I see how I was two or three years ago.”

### **About this paper**

This briefing has been produced for the Relative Experience North East Pilot project. Its author is Sarah Wellard from Grandparents Plus.

We would like to thank everyone at the project who helped with this briefing, particularly the kinship carers who shared their stories and gave up their time to be interviewed.

All names have been changed to protect the identity of those interviewed.

### **Who we are**

**Grandparent Plus** is the national organisation that champions the role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives, through the provision of advice and support, research and campaigning. We reach up to 5,000 kinship carers nationally through our peer support network and advice service. *Reg. charity no: 1093975*  
**[www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk)**

**Family Lives** is a charity that has over three decades' experience in helping parents deal with the changes that are a constant part of family life through a range of national and local services including a 24 hour helpline, live chat service and local services in community venues across the country. *Reg. charity no: 1077722*  
**[www.familylives.org.uk](http://www.familylives.org.uk)**

The **Family and Childcare Trust** work to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK. *Reg. charity no: 1077444*  
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