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# **Because We're Family**

**A Study of Kinship Care Of Children  
in New Zealand**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
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at Massey University, Albany Campus**

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## ABSTRACT

Since 1989 child welfare policy and practice in New Zealand has been guided by the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act (1989). This Act mandates placement with kin as the option of first choice for children in need of care and protection.

However, there is an absence of New Zealand research on this practice. The few recent overseas studies showed that children placed in kin-based care have similar levels of physical, emotional and educational difficulties as children in stranger foster care and that the personal consequences for caregivers and their families are significant. The 1989 Act defines family in the widest sense and includes members of the extended family. Definitions of family serve different political interests, and this thesis compares the current structure of New Zealand families with the ideological constructs of family/whanau inherent in the 1989 Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act.

This qualitative study describes the experiences of five families who have cared for abused and/or neglected kin children. The thesis develops an understanding of the transitions occurring in kinship care for the children and their families through both ecological and feminist theories, and focuses on the gendered, economic, and political environment in which kinship care is performed in New Zealand. The feminist caregiving literature comments on the social expectation that women will assume the caregiving role, and the effect that this has on their lives. This study shows that the task of caring for a kin child who has suffered abuse and neglect is taxing on both caregivers and the whole caregiving family, and not made easier by virtue of a biological relationship.

Children placed with extended family and children placed in foster care with strangers are treated as two distinct populations in terms of both practice and policy, kinship care families being considerably under-resourced. This thesis shows that such a dichotomy is not justifiable, and that the knowledge gained from foster care research should be transferred to the kinship population. The 'invisibility' of kinship care allows the particular needs of this group to remain unaddressed. Data is urgently required in regard to numbers of children placed with kin, and the longterm outcomes for both the children and their families.

A reconstruction of kinship care, using a critical theory framework, concludes the thesis and provides recommendations for policy, social work practice and future research.

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