



POLICY BRIEF

Translating early childhood research evidence to inform policy and practice

The Changing Role of Grandparents

Recent changes in family and society have meant that the roles grandparents take on have changed. Many grandparents are playing a bigger and more responsible part of grandchild care than they may have expected, which means additional pressures on their time, their health and their finances. The increasing importance of grandparents, particularly as carers for children, has positive effects for society as a whole and needs support to continue to be effective.

Why is this issue important?

Changes in society over the last two decades have led to changed roles and greater responsibilities for many grandparents. These changes include:

- the increase in the proportion of families with young children where both parents are in the paid workforce
- smaller family sizes and a subsequent reduction in the number of extended family members
- an increase in the rates of abuse of drugs and alcohol
- the increase in rates of separation and divorce
- the increasing geographical dispersal of families

While secure attachment to parents is seen as critical to children's wellbeing, it is often overlooked that there are advantages in having attachments to a number of significant adults (CCCH, 2009; Silverstein, 1991; Tizard, 1986). Bonds with grandparents mean that children not only have back-up care but have several people to influence their development.

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Contact between grandparents and grandchildren can be mutually satisfying. However, when grandparents have too much responsibility for a grandchild or grandchildren, with inadequate support, the role can lose its ‘magical elements’ (Hillman 1999; Kornhaber 1996).

What does the research tell us?

Contact between grandparents and their grandchildren

The majority of grandparents want to spend time with their grandchildren – although the roles they play in their grandchildren's lives may differ. Grandparents have differing relationships with each family of grandchildren and also with individual grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985; Kornhaber, 1996; Troll, 1985). Some grandparents have quite formal relationships, some are informal and playful, some see themselves as the keepers of family wisdom, while others are content to be more distant figures (Neugarten & Weinstein, 1964). Grandfathers who feel that they did not spend enough time with their own children often find special satisfaction in the time they spend with their grandchildren (Ochiltree, 2006). Families that have no grandparents available sometimes report that they are missing out. Not all grandparents have close relationships with their grandchildren.

Contact with grandchildren depends not only on the wishes of the grandparents but also on their relationship with the parent generation

and the demands on the grandparents' time from more than one family of grandchildren. Where there is a difficult relationship with the parents, grandparents are less likely to have a close relationship with grandchildren (de Vaus, 1994). The relationships between grandparents and grandchildren change over time as the children develop and grow, as other grandchildren are born, and as the grandparents grow older (Kornhaber, 1996). Children who have frequent contact with grandparents have the most favourable attitudes to grandparents, especially to maternal grandparents.

A major Australian study has found that most preschool children do, in fact, have regular contact with their grandparents (Gray, Misson & Hayes 2005). Over 97 per cent of infants and of four to five year olds have face-to-face contact with at least one grandparent. Parents report that the relationship between their children and grandparents is 'close' or 'very close', although maternal grandparents are more likely to be 'very close' (Weston & Qu, 2009).

Grandparents and children

In recent years, grandparents have become an important source of childcare (Hayes, Weston, Qu & Gray, 2010). In fact, they are the major providers of informal childcare for infants and toddlers (0-2 years) when parents are working or studying; more than half (52%) of children in this age group who are in childcare are in the informal care of grandparents (ABS, 2005 A). An overwhelming majority of parents report being very satisfied (92.4%) or satisfied (7.1%) with grandparent care (NICHD, 1996). Grandparent care is also more flexible than formal care and it usually costs nothing (ABS, 2005 A; Gray, Misson & Hayes, 2005).

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Grandparents from linguistically and culturally diverse families are more likely to care for their grandchildren than grandparents in the broader community. Sometimes this is a cultural expectation but often it is in response to the

needs of their children (the parents) as both parents work to give their children a start in a new life (Drysdale & Nilufer, 2000; Lever, 1995). Many grandparents also want to pass on the traditions and language of their home country to their grandchildren.

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In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) cultures in Australia, grandparents may carry both an obligation and a responsibility for their grandchildren, and the term 'grandmother' or 'grandfather' may extend to other family members of that generation. Grandchildren may also carry responsibility or obligation duties for their grandparents. ATSI grandparents are more likely to be significantly younger and less healthy than non-ATSI grandparents, and to be struggling with transmission of language and culture in the face of personal and community circumstances.

Caring for grandchildren is a satisfying role and provides the grandparents a central position within the family, although grandparents sometimes feel tired and need more time to themselves (Drysdale & Nilufer, 2000; Lever, 1995; Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003). Grandparents also feel that the caring role should be negotiated to allow them to have some personal choices and balance in their own lives (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003).

Bringing up grandchildren

The most profound change for grandparents is the increasing number of them who are bringing up grandchildren. Where once child rearing by grandparents was a result of the death, illness or disability of parents, these days it is usually as a result of drug or alcohol abuse (Patton 2003, 2004). In 2003 there were 22,500 grandparent families in Australia and 31,100 children aged up to 17 years were being brought up by their grandparents (ABS, 2005 B). Many ATSI grandparents, mostly grandmothers, are bringing up grandchildren (Sam, 1992).

Bringing up grandchildren brings with it not only increased responsibilities for grandparents, but also financial and legal issues, as well as, changes in lifestyle, health and wellbeing. The grandchildren may have lived lives characterised by disorder, confusion, neglect and inconsistent parenting, which is likely to have affected their physical, intellectual, and psychosocial development (Fitzpatrick, 2003, 2004; Gruenert, 2004; Patton, Patton, 2003, 2004).

There are several pathways to grandparent responsibility for bringing up grandchildren, including an informal arrangement; a Children's Court Care and Protection Order as the result of an application from child protection authorities; or a Family Court of Australia parenting order (Ochiltree, 2006). These pathways may overlap and each has different financial and legal implications for grandparents which are often difficult to negotiate.

Where the initial care arrangement is informal – whether because of intervention by child protection authorities who place children with grandparents in an emergency situation, or because the grandparents have taken over care from parents through their own initiative – there are likely to be legal difficulties that impact on financial supports for grandparents. The grandparents may have to take action in the family court to obtain legal responsibility for their grandchildren. Until that time it can be difficult to obtain a Medicare card; consent for medical procedures; enrol children in school or childcare; or access Child Care Benefit or Family Tax benefits. These legal issues add to the financial burden on grandparents.

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Generally grandparent families have lower incomes than other families and a little under two thirds (62 per cent) are living on government benefits and pensions.

Many are single grandparents without a partner (ABS, 2005 B). The costs and responsibilities of raising grandchildren mean that many grandparents are unable to do the things that they planned to do in retirement and even those that are still in the workforce may be unable to save for the future. These grandparents might experience isolation from friends and have fewer opportunities to indulge their grandchildren because they are responsible for parenting tasks and discipline. Their own health is affected because of stress, the additional workload and managing sometimes difficult children. They may also worry about dying before the grandchildren have left their care (Fitzpatrick 2004; Lee, Colditz, Berkman & Kawachi 2002; Minkler & Fuller-Thompson 2001; Jendrek 1993).

Separation and divorce

The separation and divorce of the parents of their grandchildren is also affecting grandparents. Almost half (49.8 per cent) of divorces in 2004 involved children and more than 60 per cent of these divorces involved children who were under 10 years of age (ABS, 2008). Although children's relationships with their grandparents after separation and divorce are usually worked out informally, hostilities within some families can make it impossible for grandparents to see their grandchildren. Depending on the residence arrangements, the children may have closer contact with one set of grandparents and tenuous contact or no contact with the other grandparents (Weston, 1992). Paternal grandparents are likely to have less contact if the grandchildren are living with their mother, although total loss of contact is relatively rare.

Under recent changes to the Family Law Act, grandparents who have lost contact with grandchildren can apply to Family Relationship Centres for an order to see their grandchildren (Ochiltree, 2006). However, the principle of the 'child's best interests' applies to any decisions and may overrule grandparents' rights for contact.

Grandparents are also affected when the parent or parents re-partner or remarry. The new partner and grandparents must get to know each other and there may be jealousy or rivalry. The grandparents may have to adjust to new step-grandchildren (Ochiltree, 2006).

What are the implications of the research?

- **Grandparent care contributes to society as well as family.** Through the provision of childcare, grandparents contribute not only to their own family but also – and often without recognition – to the broader society. Some families find it impossible to afford formal childcare and some find it difficult to find places for babies and toddlers. Grandparent childcare saves society the cost of providing more formal childcare places and is usually free of charge to families and to the state.
- **Grandparent care is more flexible than formal childcare.** Grandparents help families balance their work and family commitments and fill the caring gaps by picking up their grandchildren from childcare, preschool and school, and caring for them until parents arrive home. Grandparents also do extra care during school holidays and often when care is needed unexpectedly, including overnight when necessary.
- **Grandparents are important for grandchildren in difficult times.** Grandparents can be an important source of comfort and security for grandchildren after the separation and/or divorce of their parents because grandparents are familiar and are associated with stability.
- **Grandparents need recognition and support.** Grandparents who are bringing up grandchildren need societal and institutional recognition of the important role they are playing. They need understanding that they are often under financial, emotional and sometimes legal stress. Grandparents may need information and support to find out what financial and legal support they are entitled to and what assistance is available with behaviour management and child development issues.

Considerations for policy and programs

- Grandparents cannot simultaneously be working in full-time paid employment and taking on the role of formal or informal carer of their grandchildren. Policy makers will need to consider where the role of the grandparent provides the most value; as childcare providers or as paid employees. This decision will have significant implications for policies developed in the childcare and workforce portfolios and funding allocated to these areas.
- Grandparents placed in the difficult position of rearing their grandchildren at a time when their own health may be declining require access to affordable and culturally sensitive support services. They also require access to parenting information on behaviour management and child development issues and specific education on contemporary methods of obtaining parenting and health information, such as via the internet or other online learning programs. Such services will be required to employ unique engagement strategies to reach their target population.
- Some grandparents find themselves in a position where they hold financial, but not legal, responsibility for their grandchildren. While financial and legal issues within family law are always challenging, the focus could be in the first instance on providing grandparents with accessible information about their rights, responsibilities and any support available to them. Financial and legal support services need to formally recognise the changing role of grandparents in often complex family situations, and ensure future policy incorporates the role of the grandparent.
- Grandparents taking on a significant childcare role often do so at the expense of their own retirement plan. Greater formal recognition of the significant contribution grandparents make, not only to their own immediate family, but to the broader society, could be made at the state and federal level.

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References

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