

The changing role of grandparents

Gay Ochiltree

Grandparents have always played an important role in family life, but over the last twenty years, many have had increased responsibility for their grandchildren due to changes and issues in families and society. The first major change is the provision of child care. Grandparents, mostly grandmothers, are the major providers of child care for preschool children, particularly for babies and toddlers, when both their parents are in the workforce. Grandparents also help parents with school-age children by picking them up from school, and by caring for them during school vacations. The second change for grandparents, and the one which is associated with more difficult issues in their own lives, is when they have to take over full responsibility for bringing up grandchildren because their parents are unable to do so, often because of drug or alcohol abuse. The relationship that grandparents have with their grandchildren can also be affected by the divorce and sometimes re-partnering of the parent generation. This paper discusses the issues involved in grandparent roles in the above circumstances and suggests ways in which service providers can support grandparents.

Most grandparents look forward to the birth of a grandchild, especially the first grandchild, and the pleasure of getting to know the child without the responsibility that being a parent involves. Grandparents often have fulfilling relationships with their grandchildren, watching them learn and grow and being part of their lives, while others find that they are expected to do too much. Some have to bring up their grandchildren when the parents cannot and some do more childminding than they had expected. Some grandparents have less contact than they would like, due to separation or divorce of parents.

In developed countries like Australia, grandparents live longer, are generally better educated and healthier than previous generations. Some become grandparents when they are relatively young and in the workforce, while others, because of the later age of parents at the birth of their first child, may be retired or approaching retirement. The grandparent role changes over time as grandchildren grow, other grandchildren are born, as family members marry, separate, remarry and move away and grandparents grow old and sometimes frail.

When the first child is born, the parents have to adjust to their new roles as parents, to a changed relationship with each other, and to meeting the needs of the new baby. Grandparents, on the other hand, appear to have less adjustment to make, because it is of a different nature



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Contents

Providing child care	3
Bringing up grandchildren	4
Relationships with grandchildren after parents' separation/divorce	6
Sources of support and information for grandparents	7
References	8

The author

Dr Gay Ochiltree was a foundation staff member at the Australian Institute of Family Studies where she worked for 13 years. She is a social researcher and is well known for her research and publications on children and families in the social context. These include *Who's bringing up baby*, *Children in stepfamilies*, *The effects of child care: Forty years of research* and, most recently, *Grandparents, grandchildren and the generation in between*. Her areas of interest are children, families, parenting and the community.

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AFRC Manager: Ely Robinson

Australian Institute of Family Studies
300 Queen Street, Melbourne 3000 Australia
Phone: (03) 9214 7888 Fax: (03) 9214 7839
Email: afrcaifs.gov.au
Internet: www.aifs.gov.au

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and less dramatic. Being both a parent and grandparent can lead to some ambiguity at times. In the beginning the parent role may be the dominant one as they watch the inexperienced parents (their child and partner) trying to cope. Nevertheless, the feelings that grandparents have for their own child and those, however loving, that they have for a grandchild are usually appreciably different (Kornhaber, 1996). Grandparents often worry more about their own child than their grandchildren for whom they generally feel less responsible.

Secure attachment to parents is seen as vital for children's emotional development but less attention is given to attachment relationships with other significant family members. However, there are advantages for children in having attachments to a number of significant adults and especially to grandparents (Silverstein, 1991; Tizard, 1986). Contact with grandparents can be mutually satisfying for both generations. Grandparents are usually not so caught up with the daily routines and issues of living with the grandchildren and have more time to listen, observe and attend to small things than busy parents. Grandparents can reflect and pass on to their grandchildren cultural knowledge as well family and community traditions (Hillman, 1999; Kornhaber, 1996). Positive relationships with grandchildren are not only satisfying for the grandparents but also offer opportunities for emotional integration rather than self-absorption in their later life development.

Contact between grandparents and grandchildren is not entirely a matter of choice but depends on such things as physical proximity, the ongoing relationship that they have with the parents of the grandchildren and other demands on their time from other families of grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985; Kornhaber, 1996; Troll, 1985). Where the relationship between parents and grandparents is difficult or tenuous, it may not be easy for grandparents to have an ongoing close and loving relationship with the grandchildren (de Vaus, 1994). However, some grandparents choose to play a more symbolic role and may only see their grandchildren at family gatherings such as Christmas and birthdays.

Grandparents may have different relationships with different families of grandchildren for the above reasons, but also because of the ages and sex of the grandchildren. At times, grandparents achieve satisfaction with their role through selective investment in a particular grandchild or one particular family of grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985). Where grandparents have too much responsibility for grandchildren the role loses its 'magical elements' (Kornhaber, 1996).

A major Australian study has found that most preschool grandchildren have contact with their grandparents. Very few children (2.9 per cent of infants and 2.6 per cent of four to five year olds) have no face-to-face contact with at least one grandparent (Gray, Misson & Hayes, 2005). More than forty per cent of both infants (48.9 per cent) and four to five year olds (44.8 per cent) had face-to-face contact with a grandparent at least weekly.

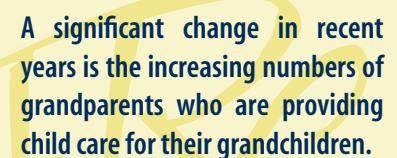
Studies of grandparents in the United States have found that many grandparents subscribe to a 'norm of non-interference' and believe that they do not have the right to tell their children (the parents) how to manage the grandchildren (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1985). Other research has found that while this norm of non-interference exists, and that grandparents do not wish to be critical and intrusive, it is more a matter of respectful cooperation which enables grandparents to have some say (Kornhaber, 1996). The issue which is mostly likely to arise, and sometimes causes conflict between the generations is child behaviour and discipline.

This article will focus on three of the major issues for grandparents in relation to their grandchildren: providing child care while parents work or study; bringing up grandchildren when the parents are unable to do so; and the separation and divorce of the parents of the grandchildren.

Providing child care

A significant change in recent years is the increasing numbers of grandparents who are providing child care for their grandchildren. Australian grandparents are the biggest providers of informal child care for children between birth and 12 years, but particularly for babies and toddlers while their parents are in the workforce or studying (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2006). This care is often for short periods of time, particularly when the grandchildren are young. The trend towards grandparent-provided child care applies not only in Australia but in other Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. As children get older formal child care services are used more often.

Researchers in the United States have found that a third of children under the age of six receive up to 10 hours of care a week and that 47% of all grandparents with grandchildren (under 13 years) living nearby provide some childcare (Guzman, 2004). Although more grandmothers (54%) provided child care it was found that grandfathers (38%) also made a significant contribution. In the United Kingdom it has been estimated that up to half of working parents rely on grandparent care for their children. It was also found that although grandparents were prepared to provide some child care, and at times even reduced their working hours to provide it, they did not want to give up their jobs (Mooney, Statham, & Simon, 2002; Phillips, Bernard, & Chittenden, 2002).



A significant change in recent years is the increasing numbers of grandparents who are providing child care for their grandchildren.

Grandparent care is popular for a number of reasons. Parents feel that grandparents are trusted and that their care is good for the grandchildren (Greenblat & Ochiltree, 1993; NICHD, 1996). Grandparents are affectionate, reliable and are known by the child, and parents believe that grandparent care is the nearest thing to parent care. Grandparent care is more flexible than formal child care and because it usually costs nothing, it is especially beneficial to low-income families (ABS, 2006; Gray, Misson & Hayes, 2005). Grandparents not only provide child care in the preschool years but also pick up children from child care centres, from preschools, from school and look after them on curriculum days, during holiday periods and sometimes when they are unwell.

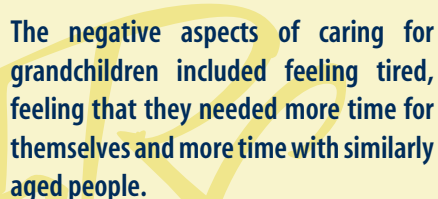
Australian researchers investigating the child care experiences of grandparents (mostly grandmothers) found four styles of caregiver experience (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003):

- **Avid caregivers** whose lives revolve around their grandchildren.
- **Flexible caregivers** who although they are very concerned with family also give some priority to their personal time.
- **Selective caregivers** who although grandchildren are an important part of their lives do not want to be defined simply as grandparents.
- **Hesitant carers** who did not anticipate caring for grandchildren and who recognise that they need to balance multiple roles in their lives.

Grandparents who were born in countries other than Australia were more likely to be in the 'avid caregiver' category. In some cultures there appears to be an expectation that grandparents should provide child care for grandchildren, although grandparents in migrant groups may simply be responding to the needs of their children (the parents of their grandchildren) for child care so that they can both work in order to establish the family in their new country (Drysdale & Nilufer, 2000). Grandparents also often want to pass on the culture, traditions and language of their country of origin to their grandchildren.

Several Australian studies of grandparents have found that whilst there are differences between migrant groups, there are also many similarities (Drysdale & Nilufer, 2000; Lever, 1995). Grandparents felt that they were valued in their caring role and helped the family adapt to Australian society, especially the more recent migrant groups. The most important thing for many of the grandparents was that caring for grandchildren gave them a central role in the family.

The negative aspects of caring for grandchildren included feeling tired, feeling that they needed more time for themselves and more time with similarly aged people. They also sometimes found it difficult to manage the children especially when there was more than one. Some grandparents reported differences with the parents over discipline and spoiling and sometimes these differences led to conflict. Although most of these grandparents (mostly grandmothers) were not paid they often received payment in kind; household bills were paid, food was bought or the grandparents were given some treat. To many grandparents the sense of connectedness within the family seemed more important than social contacts outside the family network.



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Bringing up grandchildren

A particularly complex and life changing issue for grandparents is when they have to take over the care of their grandchildren. There have always been some grandparents who have brought up grandchildren because of the death of their parents, parental physical or mental illness or abandonment. In recent years, however, it has been the increased abuse of drugs and alcohol that has swelled the numbers (Council of the Ageing National Seniors, 2003). This trend is common to most Western countries. Bringing up grandchildren not only brings a great deal of responsibility but also legal, financial, life-style and health issues for the grandparents. Each of these is discussed below.

There are 22,500 grandparent families in Australia with children aged up to 17 years and these represent 1 per cent of families (ABS, 2004). The transition to grandparent care is usually not unexpected, as grandparents are often aware that the parents are having problems. The only exception is the sudden death of parents. In the case of substance abuse and mental illness, the grandparents may have been helping out to some extent by caring for the grandchildren on and off, by helping financially, and stepping in when needed.

There have been a number of enquiries and reviews of the situation in various countries. The Federal Minister for Children and Youth commissioned a major Australian review in 2003. Grandparents were consulted widely about their experiences and also about the support that they actually received and the support that they felt that they needed. Of the grandparents consulted, 72 per cent were in this situation as the result of maternal substance abuse. This enquiry resulted in the report *Grandparents raising grandchildren*, which confirmed much that had already been reported in overseas studies.

Financial and legal issues

Grandparents bringing up their grandchildren have been found to have a number of financial and legal issues, which are complicated and closely related (Fitzpatrick, 2004). Of great concern in grandparent families is the fact that they are mostly poorer than other families and a little under two thirds (62%) are living on government benefits and pensions (ABS, 2004). Almost half of grandparent families (47 per cent) were single grandparents without a partner. Many children living with grandparents are financially disadvantaged as a result (Caspar & Bryson, 1998; Patton, 2003).

There are three different arrangements through which grandchildren become the responsibility of their grandparents after family breakdown and each has different financial implications. These different arrangements are not mutually exclusive and more than one may apply in some families:

- **Informal arrangements.** These arrangements may or may not have the agreement of the parents and may or may not involve State child protection authorities. Where the arrangements are informal grandparents can apply to the Family Court to obtain a formal legal order. However, they often do not in case it upsets or antagonises the parents of the grandchildren and because not all grandparents can afford to take this legal step as many are not entitled to Legal Aid. Where arrangements are made informally there may initially also be issues with consent for medical treatment, obtaining a Medicare card and enrolling children in school.
- **A Children's Court Care and Protection Order**, which is the result of an application from the child protection authorities. In these cases grandparents receive non-taxable, non-means tested payments to assist in raising the children. They may also receive support services as deemed necessary by child protection services.
- **A Family Court of Australia Parenting Order**, which give grandparents legal responsibility. In these circumstances grandparents are eligible for Family Tax Benefits and other means tested pension or benefit through Centrelink. In some case Child Support payments may apply.

The financial drain of raising children may make it impossible to do the things that the grandparents may have planned to do in retirement. Even those grandparents who are still in the workforce may find that they are unable to save and that they are spending their retirement savings on the daily costs of raising children and/or legal costs.

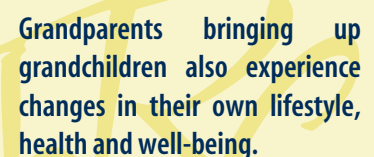
Child development and behaviour management

Parental substance abuse puts children at risk of neglect and abuse, particularly as these children may not have the usual family and developmental experiences (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Gruenert, 2004; Patton, 2003, 2004). Parents may not be capable of caring for them regularly, or are in and out of jail or rehabilitation centres. These children live with disorder, confusion, and uncertainty and sometimes experience the death of a parent from a drug overdose. At the very least they have experienced inconsistent parenting and are more likely to have poorer physical, intellectual and psychosocial development than children in non-substance abusing families.

Grandparent lifestyle and health issues

Grandparents bringing up grandchildren also experience changes in their own lifestyle, health and well-being. The following are issues of concern to grandparents in these circumstances:

- isolation from friends and peers because they are not free to take part in activities with their own age group;
- friends and family may not help them out because they do not understand the situation;
- fewer opportunities to enjoy and indulge their grandchildren because they are responsible for discipline and other parenting tasks;
- affects on health due to the additional work and stress involved in caring for often difficult children and they may neglect their own health; and
- being tired and overworked (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Jendrek, 1993).



Grandparents bringing up grandchildren also experience changes in their own lifestyle, health and well-being.

Providing extensive care for grandchildren has also been linked with a higher level of depression and other declines in the health of grandparents such as increased risk of coronary heart disease, even after taking into account the effects of age (Lee, Colditz, Berkman & Kawachi, 2003; Minkler & Fuller-Thompson, 1999). Grandparents who are parenting grandchildren are less optimistic about the future than other grandparents. They worry about their own health and what will happen to the grandchildren if they die or become incapacitated. Many grandparents worry about money, and how they will make ends meet as the grandchildren get older and their daily expenses are greater. They also usually have unresolved issues about their own children

and have to deal with their own ambivalent feelings about bringing up their grandchildren at a time when they had anticipated a life with fewer responsibilities.

Relationships with grandchildren after parents' separation/divorce

The third major issue that concerns grandparents is the separation and divorce of their children. Grandparents not only feel the pain and distress of their own child's situation but are also concerned about the effects on the grandchildren. As a result of divorce some grandparents, usually paternal, may lose contact with their grandchildren, or what contact they have may be intermittent or tenuous.

Grandparents may worry about their grandchildren even before the separation of the parents if they see signs of difficulty in the parents' relationship. The increase in the number of divorces in Australia and other Western countries means that this concern is quite realistic. Almost half (49.8 per cent) of the divorces in 2004 involved children and more than 60% of these children were aged less than 10 years old (ABS, 2005).

Grandparents may try to help out at the time of the separation as the family tries to adjust to the new circumstances. Grandparents may be called on to provide additional support, comfort and continuity for their own child/parent and the grandchildren.

In most families the family works out contact with the grandparents informally, but at times hostilities exist that make it impossible for the grandparents to see their grandchildren.

Some family relationships, especially between grandparents and their own child, become closer in the vulnerable time after separation and divorce. Other relationships, however, usually between parents/grandparents and their in-law child/parent may cease entirely, at least until the parents adjust and come to terms with their own feelings and changed circumstances. When this happens they often lose touch with their grandchildren or see them far less often.

In the period after the separation and divorce the experience of some grandparents is that they are essential in assisting in the care of the grandchildren as well as providing emotional support. A small qualitative study of three generations in 44 divorced families in the United Kingdom found that although there was evidence of warm and loving relationships most grandchildren did not want to discuss the separation of their parents with their grandparents (Ferguson, 2004a, 2004b). Four grandparent relationship patterns were found:

- grandparents who had been very involved with their grandchildren before the separation and became surrogate parents after;
- grandparents who saw their priority as their own adult child rather than the grandchildren and often ignored the grandchildren;
- grandparents who had strong ongoing negative feelings about the former partner which did not lessen with time. These grandparents often had to be reminded not to express these opinions in front of the grandchildren. In contrast non-partisan grandparents tried to continue their relationship with the former partner either because of a good relationship or in order to facilitate contact with their grandchildren; and
- grandparents who were in the reluctant or enthusiastic dichotomy. Reluctant grandparents minimised their grandparent role for one reason or another and these attitudes usually pre-dated the separation and divorce of the parents; some were not good with children and although their child may have wished for them to take a greater role they remained reluctant. Enthusiastic grandparents, on the other hand, were confident and devoted both before and after divorce of the parents.

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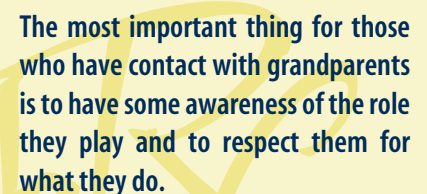
An Australia study of contact with grandchildren came from information collected from parents who had divorced several years before (Weston, 1992). The children were around 13 and 15 years of age. It was found that children living with their mother were more likely to have regular contact with their maternal grandparents than paternal and the reverse was true if they were living with their father. In other words the residency arrangements of the family have the greatest influence on which side of the family has more contact with the grandchildren

and becomes more important in their lives. Total loss of contact with grandparents, however, is rare, although the amount of contact may become less over time. Generally, it is paternal grandparents, more than maternal, that suffer more discontinuity in their relationships with their grandchildren after the disruption of divorce.

Some grandparents who continue to have a close relationship with their grandchildren after the divorce of the parents may have a second disruption and period of adjustment when one or both of the parents repartner or remarry (Ochiltree, 2006). Grandparents may find themselves step-grandparenting and having to adjust to step-grandchildren who they have not known since birth and who may have been accustomed to different family rules and conventions and who also have other grandparents who are part of another extended family. Grandparents in these circumstances sometimes have unrealistic expectations that they will love these children, when it is more realistic to build a relationship that is based more on friendship.

Sources of support and information for grandparents

The most important thing for those who have contact with grandparents is to have some awareness of the role they play and to respect them for what they do. Some grandparents need more support and information than others. Some simply want to know more about what is available in the community that might benefit them and their grandchildren. Some, but not all, of those in the most difficult circumstances usually those bringing up their grandchildren prefer ongoing support groups, others occasionally want links with other grandparents in the same circumstances perhaps by telephone, some want printed information, while others again prefer verbal information face-to-face. It is the grandparents who are bringing up grandchildren who have the greatest need for precise information about the issues discussed earlier.



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Strategies for supporting grandparents

There are two major strategies for supporting grandparents. The first is to provide information about issues of interest or concern. The second is to provide practical support where needed. Below is a list of various sources of support and information for grandparents. There is a great deal of information on the internet and this list is just a starting point. As many grandparents do not have access to the internet, service providers can assist by downloading material that they see as useful and/or local and having it printed off and readily available.

Information for grandparents bringing up grandchildren

‘When the children arrive’: A resource book for kinship carers. Mirabel Foundation
www.mirabelfoundation.com/pubs.html

A comprehensive guide covering all the issues, but particularly legal and financial issues and offering contact information as well as information on the range of issues.

Grandfamilies: A resource guide for Western Australian grandparents raising grandchildren

www.community.wa.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/ADFE518B-62C3-4F26-BDBD-8C63AC1DFD8C/0/DCDGUIGrandfamiliesJune2005.pdf

An example of an excellent state resource and guide book.

Grandparents raising grandchildren: A compilation by About Seniors

www.aboutseniors.com.au/Grandparenting.html

A concise guide to finding help with all the relevant issues, with contact information for support organisations and sources of legal and financial advice.

Grandparents caring for grandchildren: Frequently asked questions

www.centrelink.gov.au/internet/internet.nsf/individuals/pg_grandparents_faqs.htm

Centrelink advises grandparents on the various financial supports that grandparents in different circumstances are entitled to. This is the major source of financial information and support for grandparents. The Centrelink website provides information on what is available, but a

face-to-face interview is necessary to assess eligibility. There is also a list of the grandparent organisations in each state, with contact details.

Grandparents who spend regular time with their grandchildren

Below are some tips for service providers to assist grandparent who spend regular time with their grandchildren:

- Make a list of community resources where grandparents and grandchildren can go in your local area and make it available to grandparents with whom you come in contact. Encourage your local council to print a brochure of resources and contact points for grandparents, as these differ from area to area. The following are some examples of local supports, but depending on the locality there may be others.
- The best source of company and support for grandparents who are providing regular care for preschoolers is playgroups, where grandparents and their grandchild can attend and meet grandparents and parents while the children play together. There are some 'grandparent only' playgroups, or grandparents support services can start one with the help of their state playgroup association.
There is a national toll free number to find out more: 1800 171 882
www.playgroupaustralia.com.au
- Set up a grandparent support group for grandparents to get together. Depending on the need grandparents can meet regularly, occasionally, connect with each other by telephone and make their own decisions about what they want to do.
- Children's story time at the local library – ring your local library for times.
- Occasional care in community centres, neighbourhood houses, leisure centres, and some churches.
- List and map the location of the local children's playgrounds as grandparents may be caring for grandchildren in the grandchild's home and not know where the best playgrounds are located. Note also where there are playgrounds which cater for children with disabilities.
- Grandparenting education: Grandparents often want to know more about the way in which their grandchildren are being brought up and about discipline and child development as they feel that they are out of date. List sources of parenting information in your state or local area and find out if they run any grandparent groups. Groups for parents are not suitable for grandparents as their interests may conflict and grandparents can sound critical. Grandparents are usually particularly interested in issues of discipline (behaviour management) and child development. South Australia has a number of Parent Easy Guides on line which grandparents may find useful including No.12 *Grandparenting* (www.parenting.sa.gov.au/pegs).

Information for grandparents on separation, divorce and remarriage

If grandparents have problems in relation to contact with their grandchildren, put them in contact with the nearest Family Relationship Centre. They may also find support in a Grandparent Association in their State. 'Grandchildren after divorce and remarriage', Chapter 4 in *Grandparents, grandchildren and the generation in between* by Gay Ochiltree (2006) has a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved and is available from Australian Council for Educational Research (www.acer.edu.au).

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