

There are differing views on how people experience family involvement as they age. Some say that increased age brings a gradual withdrawal from family connections (Troll, Miller and Atchley 1979), while others say that retirement and ageing increases involvement with family members (Szinovacz and Ekerdt 1995).

Settles (1993) maintains that people contemplating retirement and later life look forward to spending time with their grandchildren. Indeed, a number of studies have shown that the majority of grandparents tend to live in the same city as their adult children and grandchildren, affording opportunities for inter-generational exchange (Shanas 1979; Lee 1980; Kendig et al 1983; Glezer 1991; Millward 1996). Studies have also shown that between a quarter and one half of employed women have their children looked after by a grandmother when at work (Finch 1989; Glezer 1991; Millward 1996), with Finch pointing out that family support flows mostly from the older to the younger generation, not vice versa.

Grandparents can therefore be a rich resource for families. According to Hagestad (1987), family networks now have more multi-generational links than ever before and this results in greater variety and longer duration of family relationships than in the past. Present-day grandparents also tend to have fewer children than in the past, and so are freed earlier from their own parenting obligations. This means they may be more available to spend time with grandchildren.

However, some grandparents, especially after they retire from paid work, become overly involved, thereby encroaching on their adult children's and grandchildren's lives. Conversely, adult children's expectations of receiving child care and other help from their parents may also be a cause of resentment for those grandparents who have looked forward to retirement as an idyllic 'third age' of personal fulfilment (Szinovacz and Ekerdt 1995; Laslett 1989).

Grandparents who pursue their own goals or are involved in retirement 'migration' to more desirable locations may be seen by their adult children as withdrawing from their family obligations (Szinovacz and Ekerdt 1995). However, as these researchers point out, retirement relocations can also involve moving closer to kin, thus potentially strengthening ties. The move away from kin is more common for couples, and the move closer to kin is more common for unmarried women, widows and divorcees. But either way, such relocations may affect levels of grandparent-grandchild interaction (Szinovacz and Ekerdt 1995).

# Effects of Gender and Paid Work on Grandparenting

Two features of the later life experience of many Australians are becoming a grandparent and retiring from the paid workforce. Preliminary findings from the Institute's *Australian Life Course Study* shed light on certain aspects of family involvement as people reach middle and older age.

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discusses aspects of grandparental involvement and the effects of gender and workforce participation of both the grandparents themselves and their adult children.

In general then, grandparents can be seen both as valuable resources for their families and as independent people wishing to pursue their own goals upon retirement.

This preliminary analysis of data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies *Australian Life Course Study* is based on 386 Australian grandparents. Their ages range from 39 to 71 years, but the majority (about 80 per cent) are in their fifties or sixties. Thirty per cent are men (114) and 70 per cent are women (272). Most have partners (80 per cent of grandfathers and 72 per cent of the grandmothers), and around 12 per cent are divorced or separated. Nine per cent of the grandfathers and 15 per cent of the grandmothers are widowed. The grandfathers are significantly more likely to be in the paid workforce (63 per cent) than the grandmothers (40 per cent).

### Gender Differences

Due to gender role differences, grandmothers and grandfathers may have differing experiences of grandparenting. For instance, an intergenerational bond of motherhood between grandmothers and their adult daughters has been attributed to their 'comparable tasks and responsibilities' as mothers and, usually, wives (Fischer 1986), suggesting that grandmothers may be better placed than grandfathers to care for grandchildren. Also, more exchange of goods and time-consuming services has been observed between parents and adult daughters than between parents and adult sons (Sussman 1965), which suggests that gender plays an



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important role in intergenerational family support.

Because of the commonly close mother-daughter relationship and extensive female kin interactions, it is likely that there is more involvement with grandchildren by grandmothers than by grandfathers. Nevertheless, men interviewed by Bergquist et al (1993) said that being a grandfather gave them an opportunity to enjoy grandchildren which, because of lack of time, they had not experienced with their own children. In the same study, grandmothers felt there was an expectation for them to provide child care (often while daughters or daughters-in-law were out at work), which could result in less enjoyment of grandchildren and, sometimes, feelings of related stress.

With these considerations in mind, the following analysis compares grandmothers and grandfathers regarding how often they see or look after their grandchildren, who takes the main responsibility for their care, the level of satisfaction generated by



Picture: Deirdre Toimer

caring for grandchildren, and the overall importance of being a grandparent.

### **Involvement with grandchildren**

Is there greater involvement with grandchildren for women than for men? Two aspects of contact with grandchildren are examined – how often they are seen (visits and social occasions) and how often they are actually looked after by grandparents.

Table 1 shows that grandmothers *saw* at least one of their grandchildren significantly more often than did grandfathers. This is consistent with findings from the Institute's 1991–92 Australian Living Standards Study that grandmothers were the most frequently contacted relatives, by both sons and daughters (Millward 1996).

However, there was no significant difference between grandmothers and grandfathers regarding how often they *looked after* at least one of their grandchildren. But when grandchildren were being looked after, none of the grandfathers said they took the main responsibility of care – either they shared this responsibility with their partner/spouse, or their partner/spouse was fully responsible for the care of the children (Table 2).

In contrast, the majority of grandmothers reported that they took the main responsibility of care for grandchildren, with only about one-third saying they shared the responsibility with their partner/spouse.

Given these differences in the amounts of care provided, are men or women more satisfied with the experience of grandparenting? Table 3 shows that only 2 per cent of grandfathers (two) were not completely satisfied with looking after grandchildren, while 13 per cent of grandmothers (22) had

some reservations about the merits of caring. This may be related to a more relaxed and carefree relationship between grandfathers and grandchildren, resulting from the tendency for grandfathers to take less responsibility for the care of grandchildren.

In contrast, Bergquist et al (1993) have noted that, for grandmothers, obligations to care for grandchildren could cause psychological strain, and that in some cases such obligations might therefore be seen as a burden. For example, according to a study by Wearing and Wearing (1996), as grandmothers gain independence from the demands of their own children, they may be resentful of being 'reinvented in the caring role, with its subordinate status and unpaid labour'. This, they suggest, applies particularly if the caring role involves regular or lengthy periods of child care, as it can become tiring and lose its element of 'fun'.

Although not more satisfied with taking the responsibility for care of grandchildren, grandmothers were more likely than grandfathers to report the importance to them of grandparenting (Table 4).

Overseas and Australian studies show that it is grandmothers who provide most of the informal babysitting undertaken by relatives. The Institute's Australian Living Standards Study (Millward and Matches 1995) found that they also provide just over half of all informal child care while parents are engaged in paid work. Because grandmothers are more involved than grandfathers with grandchildren, their grandparenting role may contribute more to their sense of identity than is the case for grandfathers, and therefore be more important to them.

Certainly Wearing and Wearing (1996) found that grandmotherhood contributed to a woman's 'sense of self' and formed part of her identity. At the same time, some grandmothers in their study felt it was an undervalued role in society. Hence, they suggest that some tension exists between feelings of satisfaction with grandmothers and the sense of its overall importance in life.

### **Characteristics of adult children**

The gender of adult children who were the parents of the grandchildren was also considered. This was to test for different levels of involvement with grandchildren on the part of paternal compared with maternal grandparents. Although the Institute's *Australian Life Course Study* focused on the respondents' own lives rather than on their individual adult children and grandchildren, 154 grandparents had only one son or daughter with children. For this group, the gender of adult children could be linked to the grandchildren in question, allowing any differences

**Table 1 Frequency of seeing at least one grandchild, by gender**

See grandchildren	Men %	Women %
At least once a week	60	75*
Between weekly and monthly	22	17
Less often than monthly	17	7
Not at all	1	1
	N = 114	N = 272

\* Significant difference (Phi = .19; p = .003)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 2 Who takes the main responsibility for care when looking after grandchildren?**

Main responsibility	Men %	Women %
Myself	0	56*
My partner	47	7
We both share the caring	53	37
	N = 68	N = 128

\* Very strong significant difference (Phi = .62; p = .0001)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 3 Satisfaction with looking after grandchildren**

Looking after grandchildren is	Men %	Women %
Positive and satisfying	97*	87
Have mixed feelings about it	1	11
A bit of a strain	1	2
	N = 76	N = 171

\* Significant difference (Phi = .16; p = .03)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 4 Importance of being a grandparent**

Being a grandparent is	Men %	Women %
Very important	61	85*
Important	33	14
Not at all important	6	1
	N = 113	N = 272

\* Significant difference (Phi = .26; p = .0001)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

between maternal and paternal grandparents to be examined.

Because of the mother–daughter bond, the gendered nature of exchange, and more active involvement of women than men in kin networks, it is assumed that there will be more help with the grandchildren from maternal grandmothers than from paternal grandmothers (Millward 1996; Fischer 1986).

It was found that grandmothers saw their daughters' children more often than their sons' children, but there was no difference in how often grandfathers saw

the children of sons compared with daughters. Eighty per cent of grandmothers saw a daughter's children at least once a week, while only 59 per cent saw a son's children this often (Table 5).

However, regarding the frequency of looking after grandchildren, there was no difference according to the adult child's gender for either grandmothers or grandfathers. So although grandmothers saw their daughters' children more often than their sons' children, they did not appear to give less care to their sons' children than to their daughters' children.

To sum up, gender has some effect on the frequency of interactions with grandchildren, but this seems related to the gender of grandparents rather than to the gender of their adult children.

### Workforce Participation

Whether or not grandparents were in the workforce (in paid employment or unemployed and looking for work) is another factor that may be pertinent to grandparents' level of involvement with grandchildren.

A major change for people in their fifties and sixties can be retirement from paid work – either for themselves or their partner or for both. At the same time, an increasing number of grandmothers are in paid employment. In 1991, 63 per cent of married women aged 45–54 years and 34 per cent of those aged 55–59 years were in the paid workforce. In comparison, in 1971, only 36 per cent of married women aged 45–54 years and 23 per cent of those aged 55–59 years were in the paid workforce (ABS 1993). This raises the question of how much time and energy women in these age groups have to devote to grandparenting.

Soldo and Hill (1995) note that the amount of time available for, or spent in, paid employment affects the potential level of family exchange. Intergenerational transfers and responsibility can either increase paid work commitments (to support younger or older generation family members) or decrease work commitments (to provide labour-intensive care for family members).

Decreased work commitments may have consequences for retirement income and may affect middle-aged women more than men, since women are more likely than men to have already had interrupted work histories and less investment in superannuation (Soldo and Hill 1995; Burns 1996). Therefore, for the sake of family responsibilities, women may be more personally impoverished in older age than men.

Most child care and domestic help is provided by grandmothers – the same group whose workforce participation rate has been increasing (Glezer 1991). This may lead to an 'overload' for middle generation women, who assist both children and parents, 'in addition to facing the demands of workday life and household maintenance' (Hagestad 1987:419).

**Table 5 Grandmothers only: Frequency of seeing grandchildren, by whether they are the children of adult sons or daughters**

Grandmother sees her grandchildren	Children of sons	Children of daughters
	%	%
At least weekly	59	80*
At least monthly	24	12
Less often	10	8
Not at all	7	–
	N = 41	N = 61

\* Significant difference (Phi = .29; p = .03)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Therefore, in contrast to grandfathers, grandmothers may feel conflict between grandparenting and paid employment. Bergquist et al (1993) found that babysitting for extended periods of time might be manageable for grandmothers either retired or not in the workforce, but stressful for those in employment.

### Involvement with grandchildren

Does workforce participation affect grandfathers' levels of interaction with grandchildren to the same extent as grandmothers? Grandparents who were in the workforce were compared with those either not in the workforce or retired.

The workforce status of grandfathers made no difference to how often they saw the grandchildren or cared for them, or to their feelings of satisfaction with the caring role. This is not surprising since their partner/spouse was actually taking *responsibility* for the care. However, workforce status of the grandfathers' partners also made no difference to how often grandfathers reported seeing or looking after grandchildren.

**Table 6 Grandmothers only: Frequency of seeing at least one grandchild, by workforce participation**

Sees her grandchildren	In workforce	Not in workforce or retired
	%	%
At least once a week	81*	72
Between weekly and monthly	13	20
Less often than monthly	4	9
Not at all	3	0
	N = 109	N = 163

\* Significant difference (Phi = .19; p = .02)  
Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

**Table 7 Grandmothers only: Satisfaction with looking after grandchildren, by workforce participation**

Looking after grandchildren is	In workforce	Not in workforce or retired
	%	%
Positive and satisfying	85	89
Have mixed feelings about it	13	8
It is a bit of a strain	1	3
	N = 82	N = 89

Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Since grandmothers were giving most of the care to grandchildren and thus expending more time and energy on the grandparenting role, it might be expected that those in the workforce (almost all in paid employment) are less involved with grandchildren due to their other commitments. This, however, was not the case. Table 6 shows that grandmothers in paid work saw their grandchildren more often than did those not in the workforce or retired.

Such findings are akin to Pahl's (1984) findings about domestic provisioning: those participating most in informal exchange (including family interaction) were also likely to be in the formal labour market, implying that family and employment obligations co-exist rather than compete.

The employed grandmothers were significantly younger than those not in the workforce or retired, and tended to look after younger grandchildren (who are usually more demanding). However, overall there was no significant difference between grandmothers in or out of the workforce regarding how often they looked after grandchildren. So those in paid work did not contribute less often than the other grandmothers with regard to this aspect of family care (although the comparative duration of periods of care was not measured).

Furthermore, 64 per cent of employed grandmothers worked at least 30 hours per week. This suggests that generally their availability for child care was not linked to short working hours and plenty of spare time.

Indeed, given commensurate levels of caring, the employed grandmothers may have felt more strain over the grandparenting role, especially as many of them also had other family obligations. Thirty-six per cent still had other children living with them (significantly more than those not in the workforce (21 per cent); 60 per cent had elderly parents (twice as many as those not in the workforce); and over one fifth were also the main carer of a family member with a long-term illness or disability. Somewhat surprisingly therefore there was no significant difference between grandmothers in or out of the workforce regarding the satisfaction or strain of caring for grandchildren (Table 7).

To sum up, employed grandmothers saw grandchildren more often than grandmothers not in the workforce or grandfathers. They also looked after them just as often as did grandmothers not in the workforce. However, there were no differences in frequency of seeing or looking after grandchildren according to the workforce status of either grandfathers or their spouses/partners.

### Adult Children

Because of increased workforce participation of both single and partnered mothers with dependent children, there has been an increase in the need for work-related child care. In 1994, for example, nearly half (46 per cent) of all Australian mothers with

**Table 8 Frequency of looking after grandchildren by workforce participation of adult children**

Grandparent looks after grandchildren	In workforce	Not in workforce
	%	%
At least weekly	30	36
At least monthly	10	13
Less often	30	24
Not at all	30	27
	N = 86	N = 55

Source: Australian Life Course Study 1996, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

children aged 0 to 4 years were in the workforce, most in part-time positions (ABS 1994). Employed mothers may need more help from their children's grandparents than those not in the workforce, due to work-related child care needs.

Overall, there was no significant difference in the frequency of caring for grandchildren according to whether or not adult children (both sons and daughters) were in the workforce (Table 8).

However, because almost all (95 per cent) of the adult sons were in the workforce, patterns of care for grandchildren were considered only for adult daughters, 44 per cent of whom were in the workforce.

Again, there was no significant difference in how often grandchildren were looked after according to daughters' workforce participation. Nevertheless a higher proportion of grandparents looked after grandchildren fairly regularly when their daughter was not in the workforce (53 per cent weekly or monthly) than when their daughter was out at work (39 per cent weekly or monthly). This may be due to greater availability of 'at home' daughters, or their likelihood of having very young children with consequently greater need for the practical and emotional support of their mothers.

## Conclusions

Overall, analysis showed that interaction with grandchildren was an important and satisfying part of the later life experience of both men and women.

However, since being a grandmother rather than a grandfather clearly meant more contact and greater responsibility for the care of grandchildren, the perpetuation of gender roles is evident. The mother-daughter bond is also evident, since mothers of daughters with children saw their grandchildren more often than did mothers of sons with children. The responsibility for care also appears heavier for grandmothers than for grandfathers – whether by necessity or choice – and some grandmothers had mixed feelings about this situation.

According to these findings, the nucleus of family care does not seem to be shifting from women to men, at least in this generation of grandparents. However, with increasing social emphasis on father-child involvement (Amato 1996), it will be interesting to see whether or not today's fathers

will take on a greater role as grandfathers than their own fathers appear to have done. So far, research indicates that men are still generally reluctant to commit more time to the care of children (Daly 1996) and this may continue to hold for both the role of father and grandfather.

Overall, grandmothers were very positive about looking after grandchildren, and were more likely than grandfathers to identify themselves in terms of their grandparenting role, since the importance to them of grandparenting was greater than it was for grandfathers. Indeed grandfathers without partners saw and looked after grandchildren much less frequently than those with a spouse/partner and so appeared more isolated from their grandchildren. No conclusion can be made, however, as to whether this is due more to social roles and circumstances or to choice on the part of unpartnered grandfathers.

That employed grandmothers were more involved with grandchildren than those not in the workforce or retired suggests a double burden for these grandmothers which grandfathers do not appear to experience: the time of greatest need of assistance with grandchildren is when many grandmothers are still themselves in paid employment. Indeed, if not met by commercial or government provisions, the projected demands for work-related child care into the next century is likely to result in an increasing reliance on middle-aged grandmothers who are still contributing to the paid workforce and taxation system.

Retirement from the workforce did not seem to engender more involvement with grandchildren. On the contrary, the findings suggest that when grandmothers are retired, and therefore older, their grandchildren are also generally older and are not likely to need as much care.

It will be interesting to see whether or not this trend will be reversed with the next generation of grandparents who, due to their adult children becoming parents at a more mature age, might commonly have grandchildren born after their retirement.

However, the so-called 'army' of unpaid domestic and child care labour, in which middle-aged grandmothers feature prominently, may shrink with future generations either due to later career development or increased demand for retirement lifestyle changes. If so, then government policies predicated on the assumption of the ready availability of 'family care' may require substantial modifications.

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