

Children's contact *with grandparents* after divorce

The recent Australian parliamentary inquiry into "joint custody" flagged the potentially important role that grandparents can play in the lives of their children and grandchildren. This article considers the Inquiry's recommendations in the light of current UK research.

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In Australia the "rights" of grandparents to have ongoing contact with grandchildren in the event of parental separation remains an area of lively ongoing debate. This debate has attracted considerable media attention (Nader and Munro 2003), particularly in the context of the recent parliamentary inquiry into "joint custody" (Commonwealth of Australia 2003), and reminds us that children and parents are not the only ones affected by the aftermath of relationship breakdown. Indeed, research suggests that grandparents and other family members can play a pivotal role in the lives of their children and grandchildren (and vice versa) following divorce (Weston 1992).

But why is grandparenting a significant role and what (if any) responsibilities and privileges should accompany the achievement of grandparenthood? As the report notes, these questions are given particular significance when parents separate and divorce. The breakdown of a marriage usually involves major readjustments for parents and children and a realignment or restructuring of the family. Fathers may live temporarily with their own parents until they have found accommodation of their own, or seek their support in facilitating regular contact with their children. Mothers may need to

make changes to the once familiar pattern of daily life, and this often involves recruiting maternal grandparents to provide child care support.

The aim of this paper is to draw upon the results of UK research into grandparenting (Douglas and Ferguson 2003; Ferguson et al. 2004) to provide a reflection on the Standing Committee's policy suggestions about the role that grandparents can play in divorced families. Two suggestions, listed under the report's Recommendation 24, are of particular interest.

The committee recommends that the Commonwealth Government should:

- "ensure contacts with grandparents and extended family members are considered by parents when developing their parenting plan, and if in the best interest of the child, make specific plans for contact with those individuals in the parenting plan; and
- develop a range of strategies to ensure that grandparents, and extended family members, are included in mediation and family counselling activities when it is in the best interest of the child, in particular the development of a wider family conferencing model."



The research

The *Grandparenting in Divorced Families* study was based in the Cardiff University Law School and completed in 2002. It drew upon the experience of three generations of 44 divorced families in South Wales and the South West of England. A total of 115 interviews with family members was completed. These consisted of interviews with 33 mothers, 16 fathers, 30 children, 21 maternal grandparents, and 15 paternal grandparents.

The approach taken was qualitative and involved the analysis and interpretation of the content of conversations with family members. The study set out with few specific questions in mind and interview transcripts were scrutinised for the presence of recurring themes and issues. The analysis aimed to determine whether specific predictions generated within the data held up when they were tested across a larger number of cases. The process drew heavily on a “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1968) in the sense that issues were generated from the interview transcripts rather than imposed as the result of some external body of theory.

Although the research explored many aspects of grandparenting in divorced families, there are two

pieces of evidence that appear to be particularly relevant to discussion of Recommendation 24 in the Australian context. First is the evidence about the nature of grandparenting and the wide variety of ways in which the grandparenting role is interpreted – an important consideration in any policy discussion of grandparent–grandchild contacts. Second is the observation that family members, including those who enjoy affectionate relationships, do not talk about painful or sensitive family issues. We have called this “the norm of non-communication” because it complements research that has investigated the usefulness of the norms of “obligation” and “non-interference” in interpreting grandparents’ relationship with parents and grandchildren (Aldous 1995; Dench and Ogg 2000).

In the United Kingdom, legal recognition of grandparents’ special position in the wider family was rejected when child law was overhauled by the Children Act 1989. Section 10 of the Act treats grandparents in the same way as most other non-parents seeking legal recognition of their relationship with a child.

Does this underestimate the importance of grandparents? Or, given the surprising variety of

ways in which the role is interpreted, should grandparents justify their position on the basis of their actual relationship with their grandchildren (Douglas and Ferguson 2003)? Is family “non-communication” a problem that ought to be tackled with family “counselling activities and the development of a wider family conferencing model”? (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 122)

We believe that some of the findings of the Cardiff *Grandparenting in Divorced Families* study can make a useful contribution to a discussion of both of these issues.

Children and grandparents, and the nature of grandparenting

What has clearly emerged from the study, and from many other studies over the last two or three decades, is the fact that grandparents are an important source of help, advice and support for parents and grandchildren. McLanahan and Booth (1989) and Johnson (1985 and 1998) have commented on the vital role that is played by grandparents following the loss of a parent through divorce. Thompson (1999: 471) suggested that grandparents act “as practical everyday carers, as emotional anchors, firm but gentle child rearers, as models for achievement, as listeners, and as transmitters of crucial information.”

The intergenerational transmission of knowledge and values (Kennedy 1992), a sense of family heritage and stability (Kornhaber 1996), and guidance on child care practices (Szinovacz 1998) are among the benefits that have also been attributed to grandparenting in the research literature.

The positive effect of a close and loving relationship with grandparents is undeniable. However, the picture that emerged from the grandparenting study was distinctly mixed and led us to take a cautious view of some of the more positive accounts of grandparenting that occur in the literature. This “mixed picture” was graphically illustrated when we investigated four “grandparenting continua”. We have called these: the “Grandparent as Parent/Grandparent as Grandparent” continuum; the “Adult Centred/Child Centred” continuum; the “Partisan/Non-Partisan” continuum; and the “Reluctant/Enthusiastic Grandparent” continuum.

Grandparent as parent/grandparent as grandparent continuum

We found that maternal grandparents in divorced families who were much involved with their grandchildren before family breakup often became “substitute parents” after the divorce.

We interviewed maternal grandparents who were burdened by their responsibilities and some who felt that their role as substitute parents had taken away the fun of being a grandparent. These grandparents were at the “grandparent as parent” end of the continuum and drew attention to the problems that responsibility for child care can make for grandparents.

Adult centred/child centred continuum

The “adult-centred/child-centred continuum” was helpful in reminding us that the parenting of an adult child can be an important aspect of a grandparent’s role. Some of the grandparents who were interviewed saw their adult child rather than their grandchild as their priority, and some grandchildren were ignored when grandparents devoted most of their attention to the parent. Grandchildren complained that they felt bored when they were expected to amuse themselves or watch television while their parent and grandparent engaged in private conversations (Ferguson et al. 2004). Adult children facing divorce appear to have increased emotional needs (Brown and Day-Sclater 1999), and some in the sample displayed significant dependence and were afraid that the failure of their marriage had “let their parents down”.

The interviews left an impression that child-centred grandparents were a minority and that visits to grandparents were usually a family duty that grandchildren might, on occasions, need to be persuaded to observe. We are inclined to agree with Finch (1989) who commented that the grandparent–grandchild relationship is “asymmetrical” in the sense that grandparents’ feelings of affection for their grandchildren are not always reciprocated to the same extent by their grandchildren.

Partisan/non partisan continuum

The exploration of the “partisan/non-partisan” continuum proved useful in describing the strength of grandparents’ feelings about their adult child’s divorce. Strong emotions were generated by grandparents’ sense of outrage at the way their son or daughter had been treated by their ex-spouse.

“We would have liked the bugger to have gone and disappeared off the face of the earth. Down a pit. Right? And if any arrangement could have been made to make that happen we would have supported that.” (Maternal grandfather)

“And the feeling hasn’t diminished one iota in the years that they have been divorced. Not with me anyway. In fact, it’s getting stronger.” (Maternal grandmother supporting her husband’s views)

Non-partisan grandparents saw that support for their ex-son or ex-daughter-in-law could be exchanged for a long-term guarantee of future contact with their grandchildren, or felt strong ties of affection with their ex-child-in-law that they were unwilling to break. But for two-thirds of the grandparents, the divorce of their son or daughter was perceived as presenting a significant threat. An unwelcome disruption to the life course (Pearlin 1982: 66-67) rather than any direct consequences of the divorce itself might provide an explanation for the ferociousness of some grandparents’ comments. It may help to explain why some grandparents

appeared to be angrier than their own son or daughter, and had more acrimonious relationships with their child's ex-spouse than the divorced couple had with each other. Mothers had occasionally to remind maternal grandparents that they must not express their angry feelings about the child's father in front of the child.

Reluctant/enthusiastic grandparent continuum

The "reluctant/enthusiastic" grandparent continuum also emphasised the diversity of grandparents' opinions. It highlighted the difference between those who wished to minimise their grandparenting role and were not afraid to say so, and those who saw grandparenting as a very significant phase of the life course and an important part of their day-to-day lives.

"No, my mother has only been here once since January. She is not interested in the children. The children will say, 'Why does Nana come here, smoke seven fags and then go away?' . . . She is not interested in looking after the children but she runs a jazz club and a bowling society. She goes bowling and on holiday. But then she says that she can't come down and look after the children." (Resident father talking about his mother who lives in the same city. The paternal grandmother confirmed that she rarely saw her grandchildren.)

Evidence from parents and grandchildren suggested that attitudes to grandparenting generally had origins that *pre-dated* family breakup. Parental divorce might intensify grandparents' characteristic approach to grandparenting, but it did not change it.

Family non-communication

The study found that parents delayed telling their own parents about their decision to separate. Grandchildren did the same – they did not usually confide in their grandparents about their parents' divorce (the "norm of non-communication" referred to earlier). Parents knew very little about their child's relationship with the other parents' extended family, and parents and grandparents who asked questions were given little or no information by their grandchildren.

For children, being discreet, respecting boundaries and avoiding questions that threatened to compromise their neutrality seemed to be part of the experience of living in a divorced family.

Close families, it seemed, did not want to talk about matters that were awkward to broach, difficult to explain, or likely to cause embarrassment and distress to children and other family members. Children made it clear to parents and grandparents alike that they were not willing to answer questions that might appear to be testing their loyalty to the other side of their divorced family. Indeed, the study found that children as young as eight years old remained loyal to both their parents, and maintained discretion when talking to their families.

Discussion

In striving to help foster ongoing contact between grandparents and grandchildren after divorce, two interventions may have much practical use: a need to consider grandparents in parenting plans; and family counselling and conferencing.

Parenting plans and specific plans for contact

In most divorced families, the relationship between the grandparents, parents and grandchildren is negotiated, maintained or diminished without reference to the possible legal position. Divorced fathers generally had good relationships



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However, in four of the 44 families the paternal grandparents had become excluded, not because their ex-daughter-in-law was angry but because they had quarrelled with their divorced son who might otherwise have brought their grandchildren to see them.

In six families in the study, a mother had attempted to prevent her ex-husband from contacting the children after the couple had separated and divorced. In five of these cases, there was at

least one paternal grandparent alive who was no longer able to maintain contact with his or her grandchild. Serious family quarrels or unresolved conflicts between the divorced couple lay at the root of all of these cases and caused great unhappiness for those grandparents who were excluded from contact with their grandchildren.

Should policy makers require parents with care to allow grandparents contact unless there are good reasons why such contact might not be in the child's best interests? Should grandparents have to resort to expensive legal proceedings to re-establish contact with their own grandchildren?

Those lobbying for grandparents to have express "rights" argue that what grandparents want is recognition that they are in a special position regarding their grandchildren which should

would such contact arrangements affect grandchildren who were aware that their parents did not want them to see their grandparents? We agree with Lussier et al. (2002: 375) that "harmonious, supportive family relationships" cannot be ordered, and that "family-generated compromise through the process of mediation" provides the most promising prospects for resolving conflict.

If the development of parenting plans contributed to the resolution of family conflict, this would be an important step forward. But if the process risks the exacerbation of unresolved conflicts between the generations, it would seem unwise to pursue it without knowing more about its effect on grandchildren and the likelihood of further disruption to families. It could be argued that parents' duty to protect younger children means that they should normally retain the right to decide who should be allowed to build close relationships with their offspring.

Family counselling and conferencing

The view that a counsellor's contribution is to free "clogged channels" (Street 1994: 89) suggests that communications that were once in good order have somehow fallen into disrepair. However, the descriptions that parents, grandparents and children gave of their family's avoidance of open discussion did not suggest negligence or neglect, but active choices, policies and strategies. Families used non-communication (which can be interpreted as "respect for boundaries") to avoid causing pain.

Reimers (1999: 364), a family therapist who is among those who clearly recognise the problem, has noted that clients avoid highly charged issues by changing the subject, by the use of non-sequiturs and strategies that avoid encounters with emotional intensity. "We can all sense danger in the face of questions even when none is intended. Within close relationships there are many questions which can feel dangerous or impossible to answer straightforwardly."

There are risks in communicating openly about sensitive topics, and grandchildren's decision to keep relationships with both sides of the family separate from one another may be sensible. We concluded that the grandparents, parents and children in the divorced families in our study had learned that "non-communication" can be a valuable coping strategy. It is a possibility that is not fully recognised in the traditional approach of family therapists and counsellors, and one that might be considered by those court officers and others who are responsible for liaising with separated couples and their families. Grandparents should not believe that they are automatically cast in the role of family counsellors or confidants in divorced families, or that children should be placed in situations where they are pressured to provide information that they might not otherwise have divulged.

It may be true that divorced mothers who use high levels of "avoidant coping" (including non-communication) experience higher levels of psychological distress in the long run (Tein et al.



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be reflected by the law, vesting them with automatic rights to contact and to seek care.

Our study does not support this view. The range of grandparenting styles that we have identified and the diversity in the quality of intergenerational family relationships refute the suggestion that just being a grandparent is enough to justify special recognition. How would specific plans for contact help paternal grandparents who have quarrelled with their son? Would they be likely to persuade a mother to restore contact on behalf of her ex-husband? How

2000). However, counsellors and mediators should be wary of treating a lack of emotional openness as necessarily unfortunate and in need of immediate correction without recognising its value to members of divorced families. This may be particularly important in family counselling, rather than individual counselling and conferencing, when an ill-advised sharing of information may have adverse effects on the long-term development of relationships.

Conclusion

Grandparents can and usually do fulfil their grandparenting role in ways that benefit their families, and it is a role that is often critically important in divorced families (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 120). But grandparenting is a voluntary activity without the rights and responsibilities of parenting. Some grandparents might not want to accept this fact, and might want to challenge the view that their role usually depends on the quality of their relationship with parents (Gladstone 1989; Drew and Smith 1999).

Such grandparents would no doubt support the opinion that: "The part that grandparents and extended family members should play in children's lives should be specifically addressed in parenting plans" (Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 5.62).

But it is not self-evident that there is always a part that grandparents and extended family members *should* play. Policies and services to support grandparents need to be understood and defined in the light of the feelings of grandchildren and parents as well as those of the grandparents themselves. If they are treated unfairly by parents, they may need to seek help from the law. But they should seek redress on the basis of their prior relationship with their grandchildren rather than on the basis of their "status" as grandparents. In most cases, grandparents will be able to obtain a contact order from the court, and it is better to require them to do so than to place all post-divorce families at risk of disruption, regardless of the nature and quality of the grandparent–grandchild relationship.

Opportunities for grandparents and members of the wider family to attend group counselling and family conferencing sessions would no doubt allow grandparents to gain new knowledge about relationships within the nuclear family. But our observations about family non-communication, avoidance of painful topics and respect for boundaries (Ferguson et al. 2004: 87) suggest that involving the wider family might also carry risks.

With most western countries wrestling with high rates of family breakdown, it is important to understand the intricacy of grandparent–grandchild relationships in divided families and how best to balance the interests of family members. The diversity of grandparenting and the variety of family relationships that must be taken into account are not always understood, and an increase in our understanding would need to take account of the changing nature of grandparenting in a wide variety of family structures.

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