



Mission Australia

Grandparents raising their grandchildren

Snapshot
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Introduction

Many grandparents in Australia play a role in caring for their grandchildren. This might involve regular visits, babysitting or providing childcare while parent/s work or participate in education or leisure activities. There is also, however, a sizeable and growing number of grandparents across Australia who are raising their grandchildren with the parent/s either temporarily or permanently unable to provide parental care. While the causes may vary, in Australia and many other areas of the developed world such as the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as in the developing world such as sub-Saharan Africa, a significant number of grandparents are the main providers of care to their grandchildren on a day to day basis.

This snapshot focuses on grandparents raising grandchildren in Australia and:

- Provides an overview of current data on this group, including the reasons they are providing full-time care.
- Identifies some of the issues they are dealing with, drawing both on international literature and interviews conducted by Mission Australia with grandparents living in the Nowra region of New South Wales.
- Describes a service that is effectively working with grandparents who are providing primary care.
- Identifies key areas for action.

Whilst recognising the need to support the entire caring relationship – grandparent/s, grandchildren and where possible the parents – this snapshot particularly focuses on the situation of grandparents, noting the challenges of parenting for a second time as well as recognising that there can be many positive aspects.

...The sad thing about being a carer for your grandchild is that you cannot be a proper grandmother, because I am the carer... Grandparent carer

Why grandparents are raising their grandchildren

The reasons grandparents are raising their grandchildren are varied. From what is known from the literature and from Mission Australia services, important factors include: the death of a parent; parental drug and substance abuse; incarceration; mental health issues; child neglect and/or abuse; unemployment; poverty; and domestic violence.

Increasingly, substance abuse by parent/s is seen as the primary reason grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Preliminary findings from the United States (US) reveal that over 72% of grandparents were raising

their grandchildren due to parental substance abuse (Kelly et al, 2000). Similarly, it is an important reason grandparents become full time carers for their grandchildren in Australia (Council on the Ageing (COTA), 2003). For example, in Victoria 52% of grandparents surveyed who were caring for their grandchild/ren were doing so because of their son or daughter's substance abuse.

Our daughter was a drug addict and so was her partner and she had been in a lot of strife with the law and not being able to care for the children and everything. The father of the children was very violent and he was in and out of jail most of the time. We had been called on a couple of occasions when they were left alone and it always seemed to happen Friday afternoon when you can't get any help. Finally she came to us one weekend and brought the children down and we had quite an altercation and I said to her, 'Now if you need help just ask,' and she admitted then that she did have a heroin problem.
Grandparent carer

Children living permanently with their grandparents or in a situation where the grandparent and parent roles are interchangeable is not, however, always symptomatic of family breakdown or parental problems and can simply reflect cultural norms. For example, among Aboriginal Australians it can be that when the parent/s decide to move to urban centres they might leave young children with their grandparents. It is also apparent from the statistics below that one third of all lone grandparent families shared their dwelling with one or more adults, usually related to the grandparent, which suggests that there may be more complicated family formations occurring which are currently not well understood.

Australian data

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 2003 *Family Characteristics Survey* there were an estimated 22,500 Australian families in which a grandparent or grandparents were the "guardians" of their grandchildren. These grandparents looked after 31,100 children aged 0-17 years. These families represent around 1% of all families with children aged 0-17 years. These figures are estimates and are likely, given the sensitive nature of domestic arrangements, to underestimate the actual numbers.

Some key characteristics of grandparent families include:

- In 61% the youngest grandparent was aged 55 years and over.
- Around two thirds relied on government pension, benefit or allowance as their main source of income; however, a significant proportion of those aged 65 years and over (80%) had outright ownership of their home.

- Almost half (47%) were lone grandparent families, with 93% of lone grandparents being grandmothers.
 - One third shared their dwelling with one or more other adults (usually related to the grandparent) as did one quarter of couple grandparent families.
 - In most the youngest child was between 5 and 14 years.
 - Around one tenth of the grandparents had three or more children in their care.
 - A similar proportion lived in major cities as lived in regions (48% compared to 45%) which is markedly different to other families (65% compared to 33%).
 - 92% of children in these families had a natural parent living elsewhere and over a third (37%) had face to face contact with a parent fortnightly or more frequently.
- (All figures derived from ABS, 2005)

Formal and informal arrangements

The increased reliance on grandparents to provide full-time care to their grandchildren coincides with growing numbers of children being placed in out-of-home care through state/territory child protection authorities. In 2005 there were almost 23,700 children in out-of-home care in Australia, an increase of 70% since 1996 in absolute terms (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2006). This growth has occurred across Australia but with the increases being most marked in Queensland, New South Wales and the Northern Territory. While a majority of children placed in home-based care live with foster carers, a growing percentage (42%) live with relative/kinship carers (AIHW, 2006). This may reflect that community agencies have become more sensitive to the importance of family continuity in child development (Ainsworth and Maluccio, 1998). However, another reason is the difficulty community agencies are having in attracting and retaining foster carers (McHugh, 2002). It is in this context that grandparents in particular, as well as other relatives, are becoming an increasingly significant provider of home-based care.

In addition, in light of the devastating effects on Indigenous individuals, families and communities of former policies, the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle has been adopted in all Australian jurisdictions. Priority for out-of-home placements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children must follow the following order of preference:

- With the child's extended family
- Within the child's Indigenous community
- With other Indigenous people (Lock, 1997).

Grandparent care may also be established following an application to the Family Court or Federal Magistrates Court granting the grandparent/s a parenting order (Ellison et al, 2004). This is usually done in cases where the parents' marital relationship has broken down, resulting in separation or divorce, and the grandparent/s have made an order to the court to be granted parenting rights.

There are also informal grandparent primary care arrangements in Australia, not under the aegis of state authorities. These include when the parents are considered

Jeff and Sue: Grandparent carers

Jeff and Sue* are in their late fifties and care for two challenging teenagers who experience relationship and social problems. Their daughter, the mother of the children, has chronic mental health and drug dependency problems. The grandchildren experienced a traumatic early childhood including neglect and being left alone. Jeff and Sue gained custody of the children through the Family Court 10 years ago. They have experienced substantial financial difficulties as they had to meet significant legal costs which resulted in them having to remortgage their home. Jeff is no longer able to work as he has Parkinson's disease and experiences difficulty with mobility, eating and speaking. The family is now struggling financially as Sue has stopped work to care for Jeff. She has been feeling isolated and exhausted from the ongoing caring demands of her husband and the two teenagers.

by the extended family to be unable to provide adequate and appropriate care, often for reasons similar to those which lead to formal kinship care placements. Evidence from the US indicates that only approximately one eighteenth of all children being raised by grandparents and other relatives with no parent in the home are classed as being in foster care (Generations United, 2004). This suggests that much of the care provided by grandparents is not recognised in a formal legal sense.

Issues facing grandparents

Existing research from overseas and Australia, as well as practice wisdom from a range of Mission Australia services, highlights a number of issues for grandparents providing primary care to their grandchildren. These include:

- Financial resources
- Legal issues
- Parenting issues
- Social supports
- Health and wellbeing.

The role can be very complex, particularly as grandparents often find themselves responding to an emergency situation with little or no preparation.

Financial resources

With almost two thirds of grandparent families relying on government pension, benefit or allowance as their main source of income it is not surprising that financial matters are identified as a key issue. Establishing and maintaining a household geared to the needs of dependent children is difficult, and more so in an environment of limited income and stretched resources. This can be exacerbated if there are legal matters to resolve.

An Australian study found that the costs to foster carers for children in their care are, on average, 52% higher than

the costs of caring for children not in care (McHugh, 2002). This can be attributed to the increased needs of these children, many of whom will have come from difficult circumstances and may require extensive support. This can be exacerbated by the lack of preparation time many grandparents experience, pressed into 'active service' as a result of a crisis. Data from the US shows that the percentage of grandparent carers living below the poverty line is greater (19% as opposed to 14%) than for other types of families with children (Simmons and Dye, 2003). Similar figures are not available for Australia.

Well you worry about your furniture. You work all your life to get it and then there is a young child who is frustrated and to get attention pulls the chair over which would have cost \$150, \$200. Grandparent carer

Legal issues

The legal and policy issues surrounding grandparent care are complex and may result in jurisdictional confusion and conflict. There is also a high cost involved in initiating proceedings through the Family Court. Access to legal aid for such matters is rare given that most grandparents own their own home and do not pass the asset test for eligibility. Grandparents seeking support at an early stage can face high ongoing costs, since the greatest supports are available after a situation has deteriorated.

The amount of financial support a grandparent is eligible for varies depending on the arrangements under which they come to be providing care. The greatest financial support is provided where a formal arrangement has been established at a state/territory level, although provisions vary by state/territory. Not having a formal legal arrangement is the worst possible situation in terms of financial support; child allowances and benefits might continue to be paid to the parent even though the child lives with the grandparent. In addition, there may be difficulty in making childcare and school arrangements, and medical and immunisation decisions. Grandparents can also find themselves playing a caretaker role or being involved in a revolving door. This can be true especially where a parent has an unresolved drug problem and reappears when in remission only to subsequently disappear again.

Parenting issues

Becoming a parent again raises a whole set of parenting issues for grandparents. Perhaps most importantly the grandchild/ren in their care may be suffering from trauma and have a range of challenging behaviours as a result of the problems they have experienced in their parental home and in the process of removal from parental care (Osborn and Delfabbro, 2006). It is not uncommon for these children to require very intensive support.

The two children are in my care until they are 18. You might as well say I've had the eldest all barring a year of his life, but the year he was with them left a lot of scarring, what his dad did to him, what he did to her. It took a lot of hard work from the pre-school. He is getting there. The other little one I've always had problems with. I couldn't quite put a word on it but there was always something not quite

right...his behaviour is becoming worse so I just recently had him assessed and he is autistic. They can't tell me if it was because mum was on drugs or dad did that...

Grandparent carer

Many grandparents also find themselves parenting in a very different social context to when they last parented. There have been significant technological and social changes which may prove challenging. Cultural changes may have given rise to very different mores in the intervening years. Grandparents may feel too old to do certain physical activities. They may also share little in common with the parents of the grandchild/ren's friends and feel alienated from school and social environments.

We go to bed at eight o'clock, half-past eight. The kids don't want to go to bed then, they want to stay awake until eleven o'clock. Grandparent carer

Social supports

If raising a child has a significant effect on lifestyle, then raising grandchild/ren has an even more profound impact. This is caused by the often unrelenting nature of the care required. This can affect the relationship between a couple, between the couple and friends and with other family members. It can also affect the relationships they have with their other grandchildren. Grandparents may not have formal support structures or others with whom they can share their experiences. They may not know anyone else in the same position. Grandparents can find themselves becoming increasingly isolated, rarely having a break and even finding themselves envious of those without these responsibilities.

Sometimes I look at other grandparents and I think all they've got to do is play bowls. They can sleep in.

Grandparent carer

US research shows that informal social support networks are critical to the wellbeing of grandparent carers, particularly informal carers who do not have links to child welfare and associated service systems (Goodman et al, 2007).

Health and wellbeing

Various pressures act as sources of stress for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Even when there is a great willingness to take on the role of primary carer, there can be significant physical, emotional and psychological issues. The fact that almost half are lone grandparents raising their grandchild/ren does not make it any easier. As is known from the broader carer literature, caring can take its toll. According to the *National Survey of Carer Health and Wellbeing* (Carers Association of Australia, 2000) over half of all carers have suffered a decline in physical health as a result of providing care. A similar proportion also believes they have worse emotional and mental health as a result of their caring role.

For grandparents, particular stressors might include the need to make multiple new decisions, feelings of guilt and shame as well as grief and loss issues in relation to their own children. Australian and US research indicates that grandparents raising grandchildren are likely to experience

an increase in physical illness and psychological distress and a decline in their health status (COTA, 2003; Kelly et al, 2000). With the youngest grandparent aged over 55 in most grandparent families, these broader health and wellbeing issues can be compounded by confronting their own mortality.

Our main fear was that we would die and then what would happen to the children...we could go another 10 years without any health problems but who knows what is around the corner. Grandparent carer

Clearly raising grandchildren has financial, legal, social, and health and wellbeing impacts.

Doing it on my own is the hardest thing. I raised three children with a husband and that has its problems but nothing like this. You've got no respite. When you've got a kid that cries, and she doesn't do it now, but for the first three years she had night terrors every night and you are trying to work and you are getting no sleep. It is like a new-born...well she was like that but with night terrors and you couldn't get near her and you can't help her. In the end you just get cranky and you think that's not helping either but you are cranky because you are tired not cranky because you are angry at the child.

Grandparent carer

Current initiatives

Commonwealth and state/territory governments are aware of the issue of grandparents raising their grandchildren. This is shown for example by: the COTA paper commissioned by the Commonwealth government in 2003; the Council Of Australian Governments (COAG) communiqué of 25 June 2004 which stated that, 'there needs to be a better co-ordinated approach across jurisdictions to support grandparents who are providing full-time care to their grandchildren'; and by the recent statement from Community and Disability Service Ministers.

There has been some progress since 2004 in four main areas. First, there are measures waiving the work, study or training test for access to Child Care Benefit and enabling access to the Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB). For eligible grandparents, the GCCB covers the cost of child care for up to 50 hours for each child in approved care each week. At 24 June 2005, a total of 1,615 grandparents had been assisted through this measure supporting the care of 2,271 grandchildren (Department of Family and Community Services, 2005). The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs has also supported a number of specific local grandparent support projects around the nation. Recent amendments to the Commonwealth Family Law Act, while not specifically

Nowra Grandparents program

Mission Australia's Grandparents Program is an innovative program to assist grandparents who have full time care of their grandchildren and live in and around the Nowra area on the south coast of NSW. The program, running since 2004, aims to meet the key needs of grandparent carers through providing social support, counselling and information about legal, financial and parenting matters.

The program's goals are to:

- Increase the capacity of grandparents to be primary carers
- Increase grandparents' access to local support mechanisms
- Develop strong social supports for grandparents who are primary carers
- Build the leadership skills of grandparents.

The program runs a number of activities:

- A weekly drop-in
- Monthly workshops on key issues that grandparents have identified
- Links to services
- A monthly newsletter
- Individual and family counselling
- Social programs including picnics, circus visits and weekend breaks.

Workshops have been run on legal issues and behaviour and parenting skills. Other workshops have been planned around stress management and family budgeting. A community services handbook and information kit has been developed including information on the Department of Community Services (allowance issues, guardianship issues), Centrelink

(financial entitlements) and the Department of Education (supervision of children, behavioural issues at school).

The grandparents have also been involved in weekend recreational activities.

The program is currently assisting approximately 50 grandparents raising approximately 40 grandchildren. Almost half of the children are between 12 and 14 years old, with those between 6 and 11 years the next biggest group. Almost all the children are considered to have challenging temperaments or behavioural problems. 15% of the grandparents have a disability. Most of the grandparents are retired with a significant proportion being self-funded retirees.

The Nowra Grandparent program's educational workshops, advocacy, counselling and social support have ensured that these grandparents are better supported. Grandparents have noted clear benefits from their participation in terms of: raising their grandchildren; dealing with stress; coping with legal difficulties; improvements to their own self-esteem; and enhanced relationships.

The grandparent's group is a phenomenal thing; they advocate for us and call if they haven't seen us for a few weeks. It's nice knowing that there's somewhere to go and someone to call. Grandparent carer

The program has recently been successful in attracting funding to develop a mentor initiative for adolescents who are being cared for by their grandparents. In this way the program is moving to a model which considers and supports the entire grandfamily situation, including the grandparents, the grandchild and ultimately the parent where possible.

directed at grandparents raising their grandchildren, recognise the role of grandparents in general and provide for increased support at times of crisis through Family Relationship Centres. In addition, in July 2006 the Community and Disability Service Ministers from across Australia agreed to 'the development of an intergovernmental mechanism that would make grandparent carers eligible for appropriate payments and services...outside of the formal foster care system.' (Queensland Government, Media Release 8 August 2006).

While welcome, these measures represent only a beginning of what needs to be done.

Addressing issues

The complexity of situations of grandparents raising grandchildren means that no single support will ensure their diverse needs are met. Nonetheless, there is a remarkable degree of consensus about the issues they face and what needs to be done in the short-term.

Given existing policy settings, many grandparents will continue to raise their grandchildren. The key areas in which they need to be better supported include ensuring:

- The assets grandparents have accumulated over a lifetime are not slowly (or sometimes due to legal costs, swiftly) eroded.
- Access to the legal system is not based simply on the ability to pay.
- The development of appropriate supports to grandparents who are in an informal caring relationship.
- That grandparents who have not parented for many years are appropriately supported in circumstances that may have changed radically and with children who are likely to have challenging behaviours.
- That grandparents do not become isolated but remain socially engaged and supported, including having access to respite and opportunities to network with others in a similar situation.
- Programs that meet their unique needs in a comprehensive way.

A key component of supporting grandparents is the timely provision of clear and relevant information. A program such as the one being conducted in Nowra, which provides a comprehensive response to the needs of grandparents and includes an emphasis on educational workshops, advocacy, counselling and social support, gives a sense of the shape of programs that are required and demonstrates what works.

Research and future directions

This is still a relatively new area of research, policy and program development, particularly in Australia. There is much that still needs to be known and more research is needed to:

- Provide more authoritative demographic data about grandparents raising grandchildren, and with it a better understanding of differences within this group such as between grandparents in urban areas and those in rural and regional areas.

- Explore the particular issues of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and other population groups including grandparents of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- Focus on the effects on children raised by their grandparents.
- Develop models of intergenerational care between grandparent, parent and child.
- Address legal and policy complexities across jurisdictions.

The Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, in partnership with Mission Australia, the Commonwealth Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the NSW Department of Community Services, the South Australian Department of Families and Communities and the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services, has recently been awarded an Australian Research Council Linkage grant to undertake a three year research project to explore some of these issues. The project researchers are Bettina Cass, Deborah Brennan, Sue Green and Anne Hampshire.

Conclusion

Grandparents in Australia, like grandparents elsewhere in the world, often wish to care for their grandchildren. For some this can be a cultural norm that reflects traditional ways of caring. For others, the decision to care can be precipitated by a crisis which necessitates immediate action. Irrespective of cause, and the whereabouts of the parent/s, many find great satisfaction in caring for their grandchildren.

It ties you down a lot but when you think back what it could have been if we hadn't taken them and you just think well they might not be here now...It gives your life love ...I said to him this morning 'You're 14 next year mate, you've only got another two years to live with us.' He said, 'Oh no I'm not leaving here.' That just makes you feel good.
Grandparent carer

Grandparents raising their grandchildren are performing a vital social function without which government or community agencies would need to be more heavily involved. Perhaps most importantly they are helping to ensure their grandchildren are supported in circumstances which are often traumatic. Some supports for these grandparents are needed immediately. As this group, and the differences within this group, are better understood, there will be a better sense of the other supports required, and the type required at particular times. Supports for grandparent carers need to be guided by the principles of dignity, self-fulfilment, care, participation and independence (United Nations' Principles for Older Persons, 1991). This support needs to be located within support for the whole caring situation, including not only the grandparent, but also the grandchild and where possible the parent.

*Names used in this document are not the real names of participants.

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Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life.*



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