FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA SURVEY

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Grandparents and child care in Australia

SURVEY 3, REPORT 3 | JULY 2022



OVERVIEW

Being a grandparent means taking on a new family role. For some grandparents, this role involves connecting with family through visits and family activities. Other grandparents take a more active role, helping to look after grandchildren, and supplementing or substituting other kinds of child care. This research report focuses on this caring role, exploring grandparent child care from the perspective of the grandparents themselves.

This mixed-methods research uses the third Families in Australia Survey, which ran May–June 2021 (see 'About the Families in Australia Survey') and included a module targeted at grandparents and the child care they provide or would like to provide. A total of 2,383 survey respondents self-identified as grandparents. Given the over-representation of females in this survey, most of them were grandmothers.

The main focus of this report is on child care provided by grandparents, the reasons for this grandparent child care, and also how grandparents experience this child care. This expands on earlier findings about grandparent child care from previous Families in Australia Surveys (Carroll, Budinski, Warren, Baxter, & Harvey, 2021). In addition, the research explores barriers to grandparent child care, which includes the impact of COVID-19.

KEY MESSAGES

- Two in five grandparents with a grandchild aged under 13 years were providing some child care. The proportion providing child care was higher (63%) if the youngest grandchild was under 10 years rather than 10–12 years (33%).
- Just over one in four grandparents with a grandchild aged under 13 years were providing child care at least once a week. More frequent child care was more likely for younger grandchildren.
- Grandparent child care is more often on a casual or occasional basis (62% of those providing child care), compared to regular (39%) or school holiday (26%) child care. About one in five grandparents provide a combination of these, such as providing school holiday child care as well as occasional child care.
- Most often, grandparents provide child care to support parents' work. Grandparents' desire to connect and build relationships with grandchildren and family was fundamental to them taking on this child care.
- Providing child care was typically a positive experience for grandparents, with 97% saying they enjoyed providing the child care. Caring for grandchildren was seen to be centred on family relationships and connections. Even when child care was reported to be tiring, some also found it energising.
- Some grandparents reported on challenges of providing child care. Speaking up when requests for child care were too demanding or too disruptive appeared be an important factor in protecting the wellbeing of grandparents.
- Barriers to grandparent care were apparent across some domains: distance, breakdown in family relationships, child's age, and personal barriers such as age, health, and having other caring or employment commitments. Distance mattered even more within the context of COVID-19.

BACKGROUND

Grandparents providing child care

Grandparents are a key source of child care in Australia. In June 2017, about one in five (19%) children aged 0–11 had been cared for by a grandparent in the previous week. Surveys going back to at least the 1990s show similar proportions of children cared for by grandparents, even after a significant increase in the availability of formal child care.[1] The reliance on grandparent child care is evident in other countries, including those with widespread formal child care provisions (e.g. Cantillon, Moore, & Teasdale, 2021; Craig, Hamilton, Brown, & Timonen, 2018; Zamberletti, Cavrini, & Tomassini, 2018).

As noted in the introduction, a bias in the Families in Australia Survey is that it has many more female respondents than male respondents and so the majority of grandparents in the survey are grandmothers. This significant survey bias means it is not feasible to use the data to explore gender differences in the provision of child care. Existing research tells us that there are gender differences, with grandmothers more likely to provide child care than grandfathers (Craig & Jenkins, 2016; Craig et al., 2018). Therefore, while the findings throughout the report are expressed in terms of grandparents' provision of child care, this prior research indicates that in many families the grandmother is likely to be taking on more of the caring role.

Certain qualities of grandparent child care make it particularly appealing to families (see e.g. Baxter, Hand, & Sweid, 2016). From parents' perspectives, grandparent child care is valued for being family-based and for providing opportunities to grow the grandparent–grandchild relationship. It tends to be flexible and is usually provided in the home of the child or the grandparents, making it important for those parents who need variable hours of child care or child care outside of standard business hours. There is also a financial element that makes grandparent child care attractive, in that this care is usually free. Previous Australian research has highlighted that grandparent child care is more common when children are very young and mothers are employed (Baxter, 2013, 2015; Hand, & Baxter, 2013; Horsfall & Dempsey, 2013; Jenkins, 2010).

Parental employment and child age are two of the factors linked to the likely need for grandparent child care. Another factor is to what extent families' child care needs can be met by other formal or informal child care arrangements. There are also 'supply' factors that explain grandparents' availability and willingness to provide child care. These include grandparents' own employment characteristics, as well as age, health and location relative to the grandchildren. The nature and quality of the relationship between grandparent and children or grandchildren also affect the likelihood of grandparents providing child care (Qu, Moloney, Weston, Hand, Deblaquiere, & De Maio, 2011). See also Biegel, Neels, and Van den Berg (2021) for a recent international review of factors linked to the provision of grandparent child care.

Much research about grandparent child care is from the perspective of the families using the child care. The perspective of grandparents had been captured in earlier Families in Australia Surveys. Analysis of Survey 2, conducted in November–December 2020, found that among grandparents with grandchildren aged up to 13 years, almost half provided some child care at least once a month, including 14% providing care daily or several times a week and 16% providing care about once a week. Grandparents were providing care to children across a range of ages, with 14% of those providing care looking after a grandchild less than one year old and 22% grandchildren aged six or older (Carroll, Budinski, Warren, Baxter, & Harvey, 2021). This report provides more details about the child care provided by grandparents.

1 Statistics available in 'Time series — Children aged 0-11 years: Type of care attended last week, by age of child' Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2017 | Australian Bureau of Statistics (abs.gov.au).

Grandparent child care and wellbeing

Research typically finds that the provision of grandparent child care is associated with positive wellbeing for the grandparents (Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003; Ochiltree, 2006), particularly with regard to loneliness and social isolation (see review by Quirke, König, & Hajek, 2020).

There is, however, some evidence that grandparents may feel compelled to provide child care, and may not always be fully satisfied with how this impacts their lives (Horsfall & Dempsey, 2011). Providing regular child care can affect grandparents' income, employment and time for other activities and contribute to feelings of time pressure (Craig & Jenkins, 2016; Hamilton & Jenkins, 2015). Though Craig and Jenkins (2016) also found that grandmothers providing regular care were just as satisfied with how they spent their time as other grandparents.

The Families in Australia Survey included some questions to find out about the impact of grandparents' child care on the grandparents' lives and wellbeing. These findings are reported here, along with responses to an open-text question asking about their grandparenting, which often elicited responses reflecting elements of wellbeing.

Grandparent co-residence and child care

Grandparents are particularly likely to provide child care when they co-reside with grandchildren. Most grandchildren do not co-reside with their grandparents, with multigenerational households not very common in Australia, although more likely among particular ethnic groups (Baxter & Warren, 2016; Pilkauskas & Martinson, 2014). Baxter and Warren (2016) used the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children to explore patterns of grandparent co-residence for children between the ages of 0–1 years and 10–11 years. They found that co-residence of grandparents was most likely among 0–1 year old children, at 7% of these children. Very young children in single-parent households quite often shared a home with a grandparent. This analysis also showed that having a co-resident grandparent was more likely for some demographic groups; in particular, those with young parents and from culturally diverse backgrounds. Baxter and Warren (2016) concluded that grandparent co-residence may address housing and financial security in some families, or may reflect cultural aspects of family formation. These findings are consistent with other research on grandparent co-residence, and on multi-generational families in Australia and the United States (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest, & Kopko, 2014; Mutchler, & Baker, 2009).

Grandparents co-residing with grandchildren may also occur when grandparents have primary care for grandchildren.[2] For research related to these families refer to Brennan and colleagues (2013) and Weston and Moloney (2014).

We report briefly on grandparent co-residence in this research, as it emerges in grandparents' comments about their care of or contact with grandchildren. However, as Families in Australia is not a population representative survey, we don't focus heavily on reporting about the incidence of this. The statistics on co-residence from Families in Australia provide some insights on the characteristics within this survey, not necessarily the broader population.

Grandparenting and COVID-19

Grandparents' contact with and care of their grandchildren has been significantly disrupted in 2020 and 2021 by COVID restrictions, with stay-at-home directives aimed at containing the spread of the virus and a focus on protecting the health and wellbeing of older members of society. As noted above, most grandparents in Australia do not co-reside with the grandchildren they care for. As such, the stay-at-home directives applied to both the grandparents and the grandchildren, meaning face-to-face contact between grandparents and their children and grandchildren was discouraged. Even aside from such restrictions, families were often reluctant to expose their older relatives to the virus, and so limited their contact with them.

2 This situation is not covered in this research, although 100 grandparent respondents to Families in Australia indicated they had grandchildren living with them, but none of their own children aged 18 years or older.

Further constraints were put on the ability of families to see each other through border closures both within Australia and with other countries. Such border closures impacted families who had hoped or planned to rely on family members coming from interstate or overseas to provide child care. (See, for example, Grandparents help to raise grandchildren in many families, but coronavirus is changing that - ABC News.)

With the increased rates of working from home in 2020 and 2021 (Baxter & Warren, 2021), some parents managed the care of children alongside their work, so had a lesser need for grandparent child care. Ongoing concerns about the virus and potential impacts on the health of children and family members contributed to parents making changes to care arrangements. Periods of early learning and care service closures and remote learning for school-aged children also led parents to take on more of the caring and early learning roles during these times. Research on child care in 2020 using the Families in Australia Survey showed changes in the use of formal child care were particularly apparent at the peak of the 2020 restrictions (Baxter, 2021).

Using the first two Families in Australia Surveys, conducted in 2020, Carroll and colleagues (2021) reported on the ways in which grandparenting had been impacted by COVID-19. Key family-related impacts described by grandparents, when asked to comment about their contact with grandchildren and COVID-19, were:

- having their regular patterns of care of or contact with grandchildren disrupted by COVID-related restrictions
- feeling disconnected and isolated from their children and grandchildren
- missing out on family traditions.

Some grandparents reported taking on extra child care responsibilities in situations where they had children who were essential workers.

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on grandparents and on the provision of grandparent child care have been reported for other countries (Cantillon et al., 2021; Quirke et al., 2020; Vasileva, Alisic, & De Young, 2021), with research reiterating the important role that grandparents have in many families, including in the care they provide.

The report briefly examines COVID-19 and grandparenting by drawing on comments made by grandparents when asked to report on their grandparenting about halfway through 2021.



DATA

Families in Australia

The third Families in Australia Survey was conducted as an online survey from 19 May to 30 June 2021 and was open to anyone aged 18 years and over living in Australia. The Families in Australia Survey is conducted by the Australian Institute of Families (AIFS) to find out about family life in Australia. The survey was initiated by AIFS in 2020, to meet a perceived need to capture experiences of families through the COVID-19 pandemic. A convenience sampling approach is used, which means the survey reaches a broad range of Australians through promotion of the survey on social media platforms, traditional media outlets and contact through mailing lists and direct approaches to contacts. Participants of previous surveys were invited to participate if they had provided their contact details for this purpose.

Some of the survey promotion was directed at people in the demographic for which questions about grandparenting would be applicable. In total, there were 5,985 participants to this survey, including 2,383 aged 40 years and over who indicated they had grandchildren. Most (2,095) were female.

The convenience sampling approach and reliance on an online survey results in some biases. It is not likely to represent the experiences of all demographic groups, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds and non-English speaking backgrounds.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were ongoing at the time of this data collection, although varying around Australia across the weeks of data collection. Restrictions largely applied to those living in NSW and Victoria, but shorter periods of restrictions were also in place in some other locations.

Grandparent questions

The third Families in Australia Survey included a set of questions about grandparent-provided child care.

Of the 2,383 grandparent respondents 250 had grandchildren living with them (including 130 who only had grandchildren living with them),[3] and 2,133 had grandchildren living elsewhere only. Table 1 shows the age of the youngest grandchild for those who have at least one co-resident grandchild and for those with grandchildren only living elsewhere. See Table 5 (in the Appendix) for information about other variables used in the analysis.

Table 1: Age of youngest grandchild of survey respondents with grandchildren

Age of youngest grandchild (years)	Grandchild lives elsewhere	Co-resident grandchild	All grandparents
0–1	539	55	594
2–3	451	34	485
4–5	243	30	273
6–9	378	41	419
10–12	184	30	214
13 and over	338	60	398
All	2,133	250	2,383

3 This is a diverse group including those with permanent care of grandchildren as well as those living in an extended family arrangement with children as well as grandchildren.



Questions about grandparent child care were asked of grandparents who have at least one grandchild under 13 years of age (*N* = 1,985). The survey includes questions asked of grandparents about:

- characteristics of the child care, including hours of care, whether that care is provided regularly
- characteristics of the children being cared for – ages and whether from the same family
- reasons the care is needed/provided
- how grandparents feel about providing child care and how the child care impacts grandparents
- whether grandparents would like to be providing more/some grandchild care and, if so, barriers to providing that child care.

The analysis has been undertaken using weighting that adjusts for some of the biases in the sample.

Free-text comments

All grandparents were asked if there was anything they wanted to say about their care of or contact with their grandchildren. Out of the total 2,383 grandparents, 1,109 provided a comment. These comments were reviewed to identify key themes. These included:

- expressing joy of spending time with grandchildren and/or love of grandchildren
- expressing a wish to be able to spend more time with grandchildren, to have more contact
- explaining more about levels of contact and nature of child care
- explaining barriers to grandparent contact – distance (interstate/overseas barriers), family estrangement, COVID-19
- explaining circumstances that relate to grandparents living with or being full-time carers of grandchildren.

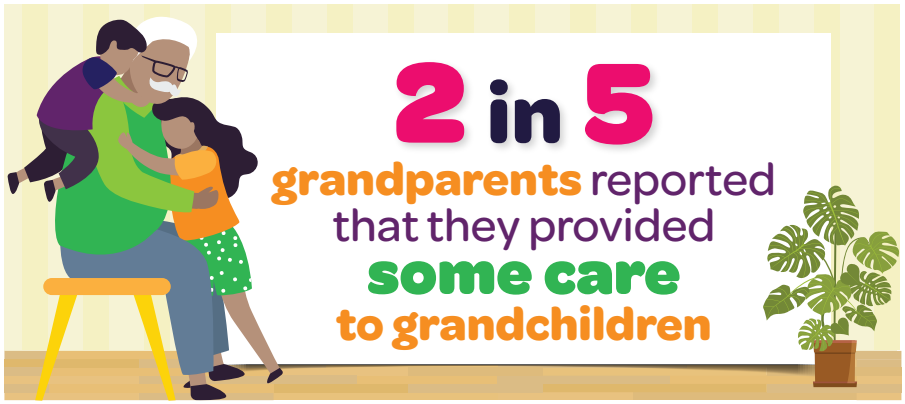
The comments are used to illustrate findings emerging from the quantitative analyses. A final analysis section expands on some of the themes not related specifically to the provision of child care.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Grandparents providing child care

Who provides grandparent care

Of the almost 2,000 grandparents with grandchildren aged under 13 years in the Families in Australia Survey, two in five indicated that they provided some child care to grandchildren. The proportion providing some child care is higher when the youngest grandchild is aged under 10 years (63%) compared to when the youngest grandchild is aged 10–12 years (33%).



Using multivariate analysis (logistic regression) a range of variables was explored to consider which grandparents were the most likely to provide child care. The findings are presented in Table 2. The analysis also showed that providing child care is less likely once the youngest grandchild is 10–12 years.

One other finding is that those with family living within 30 minutes travel were the most likely to provide child care. Comments by survey participants highlighted the opportunities for grandparent child care presented by living close by (see also 'Barriers to grandparent–grandchild contact'). Among those living close to their grandchildren, the care provided is not always formal or planned.

> *My grandchild's parents live nearby, the mother works from home part-time. I often make an impromptu visit, and care for my grandchild while meal preparation, work or other household chores are undertaken if needed. There is no formal care arrangement in place.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 66

Another grandmother wrote of intending to make significant changes, including moving closer to the family, to allow her to be involved in the provision of child care.

> *I intend to close my business at the end of the year, sell up and move to another capital city where my grandchild is so I can care for her and be more involved in her life.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 69

Table 2: Multivariate analysis of which grandparents provide child care

Variable	Category	Odds ratio of providing child care
Relationship (ref. = single or partner lives elsewhere)	Lives with partner	1.4**
Self-reported health (ref. = good)	Very good or excellent	1.2
	Fair or poor	0.7*
Location of family (ref. = within 30 minutes travel)	Co-resident	0.7
	Elsewhere	0.4***
Age of youngest grandchild (ref. = 0–1 years)	2–3	0.9
	4–5	0.7
	6–9	0.8
	10–12	0.4***
Hours worked per week (ref. = not employed)	1–14 hours	1.2
	15–34 hours	1.2
	35 hours or more	0.8
Age of grandparent (ref. = 40–59 years)	60–69 years	1.5*
	70–79 years	1.0
	80+ years	0.3**
Grandparent gender (ref. = not female)	Female	1.2
Constant		5.3**
N		1,661
Pseudo R-square		0.0876

Notes: Findings are from a logistic regression model. The model also included state/territory. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$

About one in 10 of the survey participants lived with their grandchildren, which in some cases also provided a context for involvement in the child care.

> *I am blessed and help care for my grandchildren everyday as I live on the same property as my daughter and her husband in a granny flat.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 61

> *They live upstairs with their parents but I occasionally share the care of them.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 78

Older age and poor health were both associated with being less likely to provide child care (also see 'Barriers to grandparent–grandchild contact'). However, age was not always a barrier, as we heard from some great-grandparents who are involved in helping out with child care.

> *I'm still capable of looking after great-grandchildren. Do so regularly.*
>
> **Great-grandmother,** 79

We noted earlier that this research would not explore gender differences in the provision of child care given the over-representation of grandmothers in the sample. Given the small number of grandfather respondents, it is not surprising that gender of respondent was not significant in the analysis. The qualitative data indicate grandfathers are also involved in the provision of child care in some families, as suggested by their own comments and a few grandmothers' comments referring to the care 'we' rather than 'I' provide.

> *A wonderful enjoyable experience where we can pass on the things we know from our past.*
> **Grandfather,** aged 70

> *I enjoy it very much and they are always pleased to have me care for them. It's a wonderful time watching them grow up and learn things.*
> **Grandfather,** aged 66

> *We respond when the need arises. Family are very aware of our health issues so don't make unreasonable demands. There is an established routine in place for care so we respond to more unexpected events rather than providing frequent care.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 72

How often grandparents provide child care is varied. Of grandparents with one or more grandchild aged under 13 years:

- 2% provide child care daily
- 13% provide child care several times a week
- 12% provide child care about once a week
- 11% provide child care between once a week and once a month
- 21% provide child care less than once a month.

The remainder (40%) never provide child care.

The frequency of child care varies by some of the characteristics of grandparents and grandchildren explored above.[4] For example, by age of youngest grandchild, Figure 1 shows that more frequent child care is provided for grandchildren aged up to five years, compared to six years or older.

The differences by age of grandchild were reflected also in grandparents' comments about how their care of (and contact with) grandchildren had changed as grandchildren grew older.

> *Love spending time with my grandchildren, it's sad when they grow up and no longer need you.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 72

> *Less times as they get older and have more sports and activities to engage in.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 70

4 Given small numbers providing daily child care, this was combined with those providing child care several times a week.

Figure 1: Frequency of child care by grandparents, by age of youngest grandchild

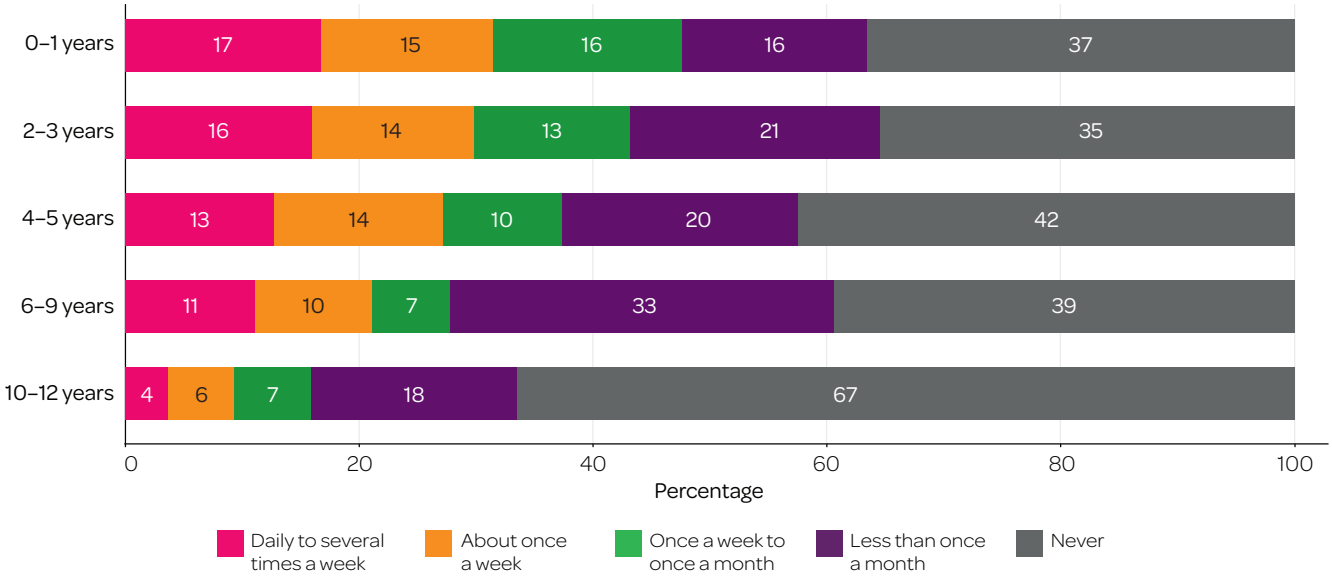
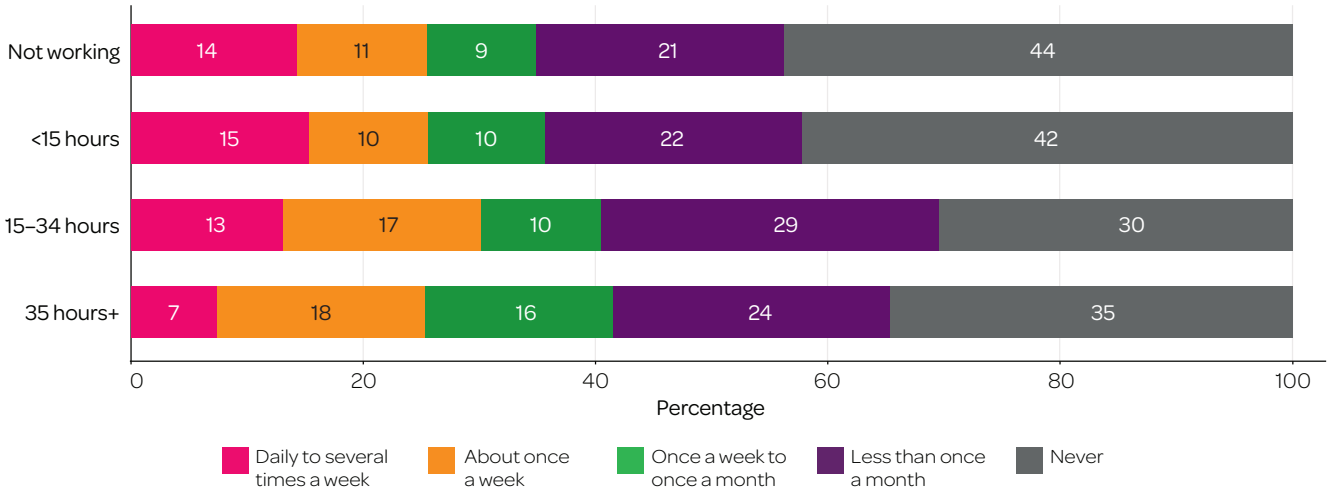


Figure 2 shows that grandparents who work full-time hours (35 hours or more a week) are less likely to provide the most frequent grandparent child care. However, those working 15–34 hours or 35 hours or more a week are the most likely to provide child care about once a week.

Figure 2: Frequency of child care by grandparents, by work hours of grandparent



The associations between work hours and child care provision were apparent in survey participant comments. Some grandparents mentioned work as a barrier to their ability to provide child care (see also 'Barriers to grandparent–grandchild contact'), others commented about fitting child care around their work, or reported they had changed or intended to change their work hours to better fit in providing child care.

> *When I lived near my grandchildren, an hour away by car, I babysat them once a month. When my first grandchild … turned one, I babysat him every second Friday for a year. I gave up work for that day to do that.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 64

I have gone from full-time to part-time work in order to provide care for my grandchildren.
Grandmother, aged 67

Other differences in frequency of child care provision largely reflected the higher probability of never providing child care.

Description of grandparent provided child care

Focusing only on those grandparents who provided some child care to a grandchild aged under 13 years, this section explores the characteristics of this child care. Among grandparents providing child care, the age of the youngest grandchild they cared for was varied.[5]

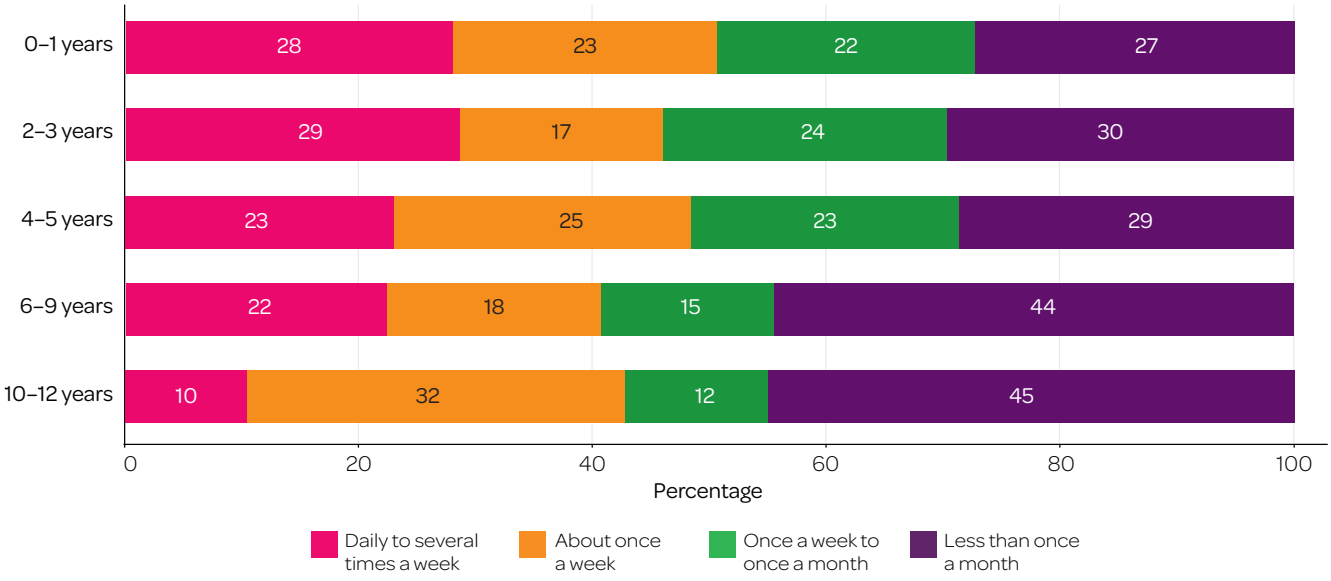
- For 24% the youngest grandchild cared for was aged 0–1 years.
- For 27% the youngest grandchild cared for was aged 2–3 years.
- For 15% the youngest grandchild cared for was aged 4–5 years.
- For 21% the youngest grandchild cared for was aged 6–9 years.
- For 13% the youngest grandchild cared for was aged 10–12 years.

Overall, among those providing child care:

- 4% provided child care daily.
- 23% provided child care several times a week.
- 21% provided child care about once a week.
- 19% provided child care between once a week and once a month.
- 33% provided child care less than once a month.

Figure 3 shows that the frequency of grandparent care, among those providing care, varies with the age of youngest grandchild cared for. As noted previously, this to some extent reflects the changes for children as they grow to primary school age and beyond.

Figure 3: Frequency of child care by grandparents, by age of youngest grandchild cared for



5 The analysis excludes some grandparents who had a grandchild aged <13 years but the youngest grandchild cared for was 13 years and over. They were excluded as care details were not captured for grandparents who cared for grandchildren aged 13 years or over and who had no younger grandchildren.

I looked after them after kindergarten regularly … their mum worked 9 am to 3 pm. I worked from 4 pm to 9 pm. So I saw a lot of them. Later I picked up kids from primary school, sometimes when their mum had other things, or was working late. I only worked at my job part-time. I don't see so much of them, now.

Grandmother, aged 72

As my older two grandchildren are in school, they require less interaction and care in a typical week. My availability to care for grandchildren is also limited by my working 32 hours per week.

Grandmother, aged 64

Grandparents who provide child care were asked how many grandchildren they care for in a typical week. This was often skipped for those who provided child care less than once a month, so focusing just on those who provided child care at least once a month:

- 32% cared for one child.
- 39% cared for two children.
- 19% cared for three or four children.
- 5% cared for more children than this.
- Another 4% did not answer.

Most (72%) of those providing child care to more than one grandchild in a typical week reported the children were from the same household, with 28% saying the children were from different households.

Grandparents were asked how many hours a week they spent caring for grandchildren. Those who provided care less frequently often skipped the question or indicated their usual care hours were zero. Overall, among grandparents who provided some child care at least once a month:

- 26% said they provided up to five hours of child care a week.
- 20% provided between five and nine hours of child care a week.
- 24% provided 10–19 child care hours a week.
- 21% provided 20 or more child care hours a week.

About 9% reported their usual hours of caring was zero, or did not complete the question.

Those who provided 10 or more hours child care, especially those providing 20 or more hours, were often providing child care daily or several times a week.

Grandparents were asked if the child care they provided was regular, occasional or during school holidays – they could select all of these if they provided all different kinds of child care. Overall:

- 62% said they provided occasional child care, as required.
- 39% provided regular child care.
- 26% provided child care in school holidays.

Just over one in five (21%) provided combinations of these; for example, sometimes providing occasional care as well as regular care, or occasional care as well as school holiday care. Overall, 46% provided only occasional child care, 24% provided only regular child care and 6% provided only school holiday child care.

The comments by some grandparents highlighted a preference to provide occasional rather than regular care.

I love babysitting. It's so good for a great ongoing relationship but a regular long time babysitting 'job' would change this feeling somewhat.

Grandmother, aged 65

> *We are here for our children and grandchildren, but prefer being occasional or emergency care, or somewhere for the children to have a change. We would not want to be tied to some daily or weekly commitment.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 77

The occasional child care is sometimes provided during times of grandparents' or grandchildren's visits, given distance does not allow more regular provision of child care.

> *Our known grandson lives interstate so when we visit, we take over kindergarten pickup and drop off. A very special time.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 71

The nature of grandparent care also changes as children grow.

> *I have two other grandchildren that I have been taking care of for past seven years but both are now in school and kindy so I only see them to babysit in school holidays or when parents need a break. I think caring for grandchildren has kept me young and energised to a great extent even though it is exhausting. I love the connection and that I can help my daughter while she works and keep her mental health on track by folding clothes and tidying and cooking an evening meal.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 64

Other comments by grandparents often mentioned school holiday care.

> *Enjoy picking the children up from school twice weekly and mind them on school holidays.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 66

> *We live five hours' drive away and would be happy to provide more incidental care; however, I work full-time, which reduces our availability to some school holidays.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 67

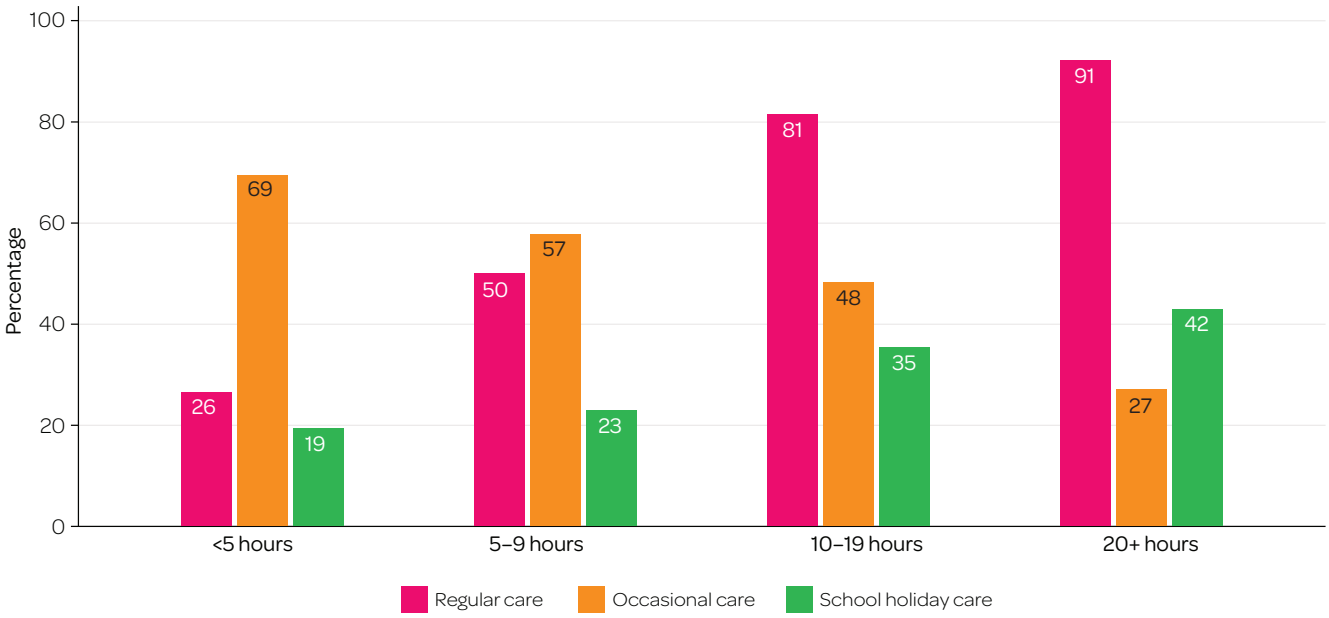
> *Babysit two under-three year olds each Thursday. Regular school holiday day care, plus 'sick day's care. Love doing it.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 65

Providing child care to sick children was reported by a number of grandparents who acknowledged this can be difficult for working parents to manage. For example:

> *I would love to be able to spend more time with our grandchildren. It is great being able to be a positive part of their lives, and to help our children and their spouses, as there is often little other support available, especially when the grandchildren are sick. It would be helpful if there was some way the government could pay a little of the child care subsidy to grandparents who care for their grandchildren. I love being a grandma.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 61

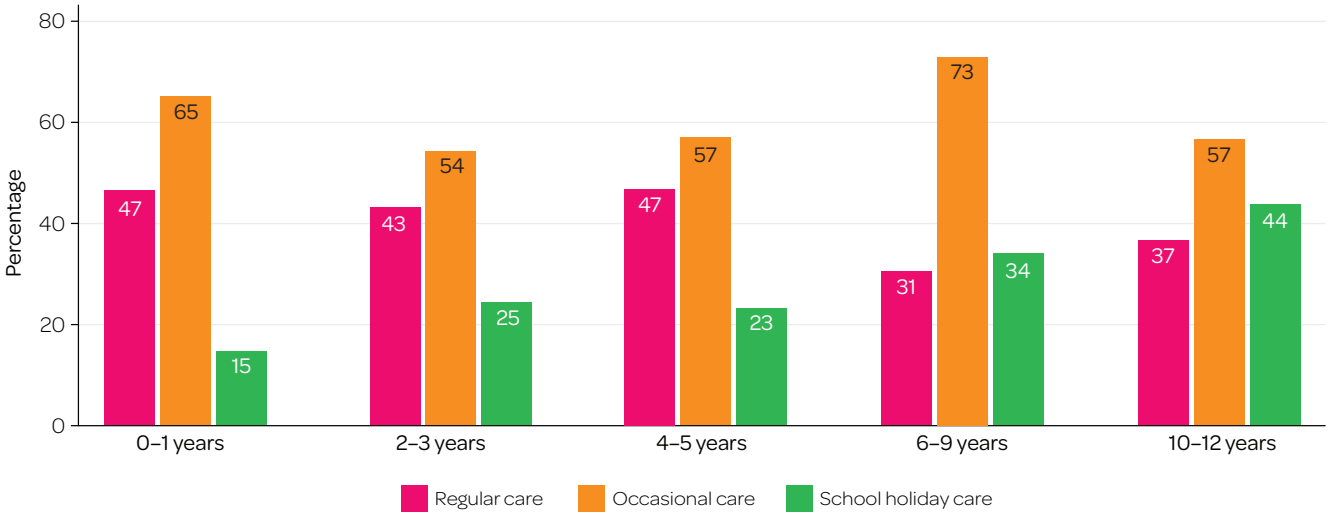
The proportions providing occasional, regular or school holiday child care varied according to the number of hours of child care usually provided (Figure 4). Grandparents providing fewer hours of care were the most likely to be providing occasional child care, while those providing child care of at least 10 hours a week were more often providing regular child care.

Figure 4: Proportion providing occasional, regular and school holiday care among grandparents providing child care, by usual weekly hours of care provided



Note: Excludes those who did not report the usual hours of child care provided.

Figure 5: Proportion providing occasional, regular and school holiday care among grandparents providing child care, by age of youngest grandchild cared for



Providing regular care was more likely for the younger grandchildren while, not surprisingly, school holiday care was more common for older primary school-aged children (Figure 5). The occasional grandparent care varied across ages but without a particular trend.

Other characteristics associated with different types of child care provided were identified through multivariate analysis of types of child care by grandparents providing some child care (Table 3). Findings included:

- Grandparents who had family living close by (within 30 minutes travel) were more likely than others to provide regular child care. The provision of school holiday care was more likely if grandparents were co-resident with grandchildren.
- Grandparents who were not working were more likely than those who were working full-time hours to provide regular child care.

Table 3: Multivariate analysis of kinds of child care, grandparents who provide child care

Variable	Category	Regular	Occasional	School holiday
			Odds ratios	
Relationship (ref. = single or partner lives elsewhere)	Lives with partner	0.9	1.3	1.2
Self-reported health (ref. = good)	Very good or excellent	0.9	1.0	1.3
	Fair or poor	0.8	1.0	1.1
Location of family (ref. = within 30 minutes travel)	Co-resident	1.5	1.1	2.4**
	Elsewhere	0.5***	0.9	1.0
Age of youngest grandchild (ref. = 0–1 years)	2–3	0.8	1.3	1.3
	4–5	0.6*	1.2	1.1
	6–9	0.4***	1.5*	2.4***
	10–12	0.4**	1.1	3.1***
Hours worked per week (ref. = not employed)	1–14 hours	0.7	1.0	1.3
	15–34 hours	0.8	1.0	1.0
	35 hours or more	0.4***	1.4	0.7
Age of grandparent (ref. = 40–59)	60–69	1.2	0.8	1.2
	70–79	0.9	1.1	1.5
	80+	0.7	0.6	0.9
Grandparent gender (ref. = not female)	Female	1.5	0.9	1.7*
Constant		1.2	1.3	0.1***
N		1,048	1,048	1,048
Pseudo R-square		0.07	0.02	0.06

Notes: Findings are from a logistic regression model. The model also included state/territory. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$; ***$p < 0.001$.

Reasons for grandparents providing child care

The survey sought information from grandparent carers on what prompted the need for this child care; that is, whether the child care was usually to support parents' work or study, for parents to undertake other activities, to give parents some respite or other reasons. Grandparents were able to say it was for more than one of these reasons. Overall:

- 64% said their grandparent child care was while parents/guardians worked or studied.
- 32% said it was while parents undertake other activities (e.g. sporting or social).
- 45% said it was for parents' respite – to give them a break.
- 15% said it was for other reasons.

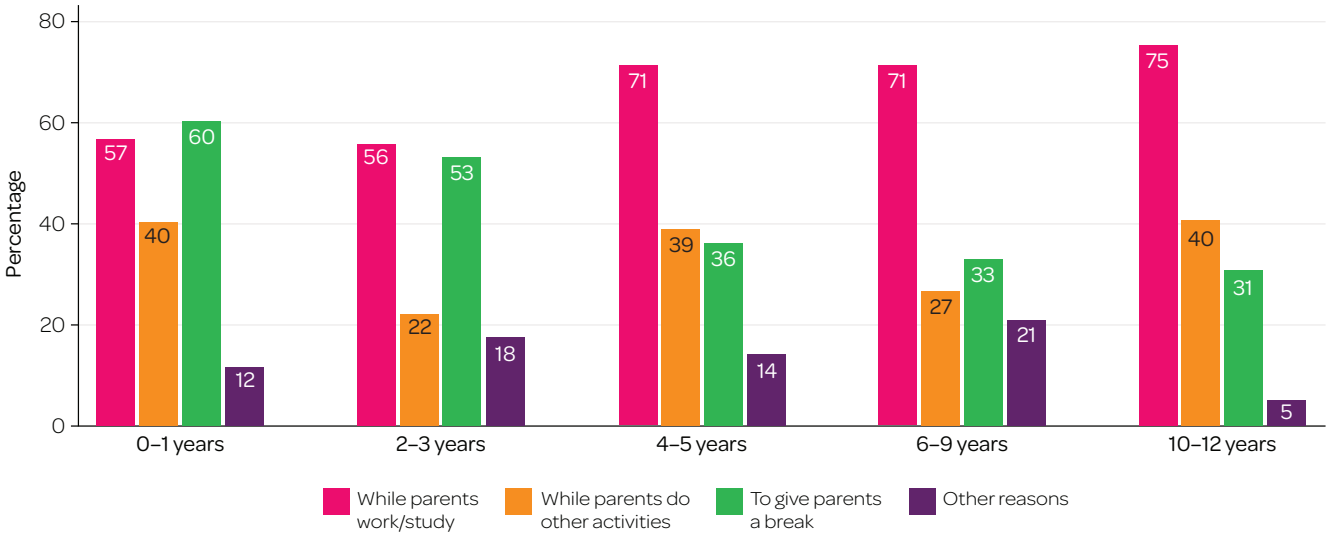
The 'other' reasons fell into a few different explanations including:

- to allow bonding, sharing time together, for holidays or sharing specific activities of children
- to provide support when parents attend medical appointments
- issues related to more troubled family relationships that saw grandparents helping out or taking on some of the care.

Looking at the reasons for child care by the age of the youngest grandchild cared for (Figure 6), those looking after young grandchildren included those doing so to give parents a break as well as those supporting parents who were working. It was at these younger ages that 'to give parents a break' was more common compared to

those caring for older grandchildren. Once the youngest grandchildren cared for were a bit older – those in the range of 4–12 years, it was more common for the reason for this child care to be parents' work. Across all ages, some grandparents were providing child care to support parents while they did activities other than work or cited 'other reasons'.

Figure 6: Reasons for grandparent child care, by age of youngest grandchild cared for



Some more detail about the reasons comes from grandparents' quotes.

The grandparents' role in supporting parents who need additional help or need a break was apparent in relation to children with additional needs. For example:

> *One has severe Autism and the parents are very stressed out and limited help for them. I wish I could do a lot more.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 55

Support of parents' work included grandparents providing care to support self-employed parents and providing 'flexible' child care around parents' shifts.

> *We work together as a whole family. A number of my children operate small businesses and need support to care for their children. This provides my husband and I good opportunities to be involved in the lives of our grandchildren. We enjoy caring for them, even though we are sometimes very tired after and it can be difficult to get done all we need to do for ourselves as well.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 59

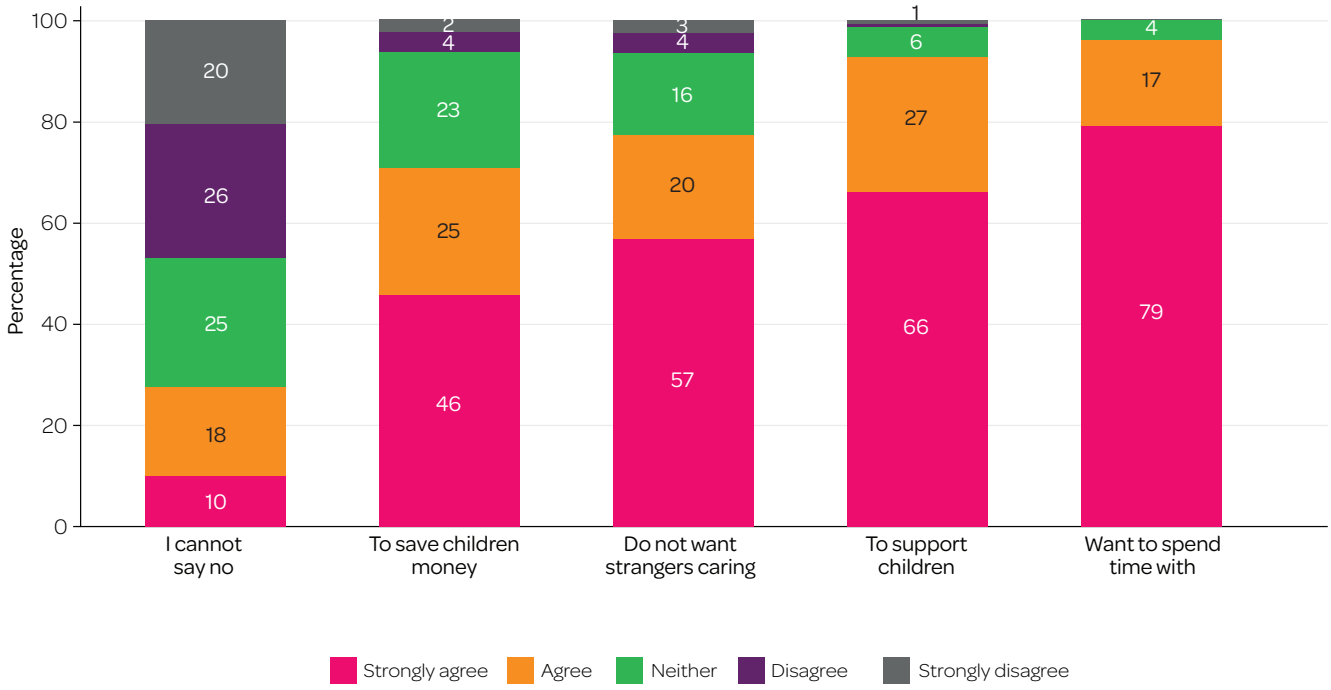
> *Child care often not available when both parents' shifts clash. Often get called with an hour to get there (45 minute drive away) if children's father is unable to finish his shift before Mum starts hers.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 54

Some of the 'other' comments reflected grandparents taking on more than a 'child care' role; for example, with grandchildren being co-resident when the parents were unable to care for their children.

Motivations to provide care

An additional set of questions was asked of the grandparents about the motivation for, or influences on, grandparents to provide the child care (Figure 7). This overlaps somewhat with some of the comments mentioned in the 'other' reasons for providing care (see above).

Figure 7: Influences on grandparent child care



Note: Grandparents were asked their agreement with 'To what extent do the following explain why you care for grandchildren?' I/we want to spend time with the grandchildren; We prefer the children were not cared for by strangers; We want to help our children financially, so they can reduce their child care costs; We want to help our children in other ways by providing support and care to the grandchildren; We felt we could not say no when asked.

Grandparents very strongly affirmed that wanting to spend time with grandchildren is part of the reason for providing child care. This statement was supported more than any other, and grandparents made many supporting comments about this.

> *We have our grandchild because we enjoy his company and not because of any requirement or expectation from his parents that we have him.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 61

> *I love my grandchildren and enjoy every minute I spend with him.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 53

> *It is a privilege to care for my grandchildren. I am very lucky to be able to spend this precious time with them.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 65

The next most affirmed statement was that they provide child care to support their children. In the grandparents' comments, statements about this were connected to references about the parents' circumstances (e.g. single parents who need help, or parents with a disability or health condition, or struggling to manage) or about the children having additional needs that require more intensive care. The provision of more general help and support was also noted.

> *I help with her care as required to enable her single divorced mother to continue her busy workload.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 66

> *I love my grandchildren but sometimes find my daughter does take advantage; however, she is a single mother so it is imperative I help.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 49

> *How important it is that we as grandparents can avail ourselves to help out with care and support. Also essential for us all to maintain good strong family connectedness, helps with raising children learning values and what it means to belong.*
> **Grandfather,** aged 69

A majority of grandparents agreed with each of the statements related to helping children save money and preferring grandchildren were not cared for by strangers. However, for these two statements fewer strongly agreed compared to the two described above (i.e. wanting to spend time with grandchildren, and to support their children). The cost of paid child care was an issue from the perspective of grandparents also, as well as the difficulties accessing formal child care.

> *The cost of paid child care is prohibitive for my children.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 67

> *I help because child care is expensive. In doing so I sacrifice earning more income by giving up a day's work.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 59

> *I care for 11-month-old twins as finding child care for both has been very difficult in regional Queensland. I have to drive in excess of two hours each way to care for them.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 65

> *I use all my annual leave to care for grandchildren during school holidays. The cost to the essential workers with children is outrageous. The kids need a break, they shouldn't be going to care at 6 am during school holidays.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 57

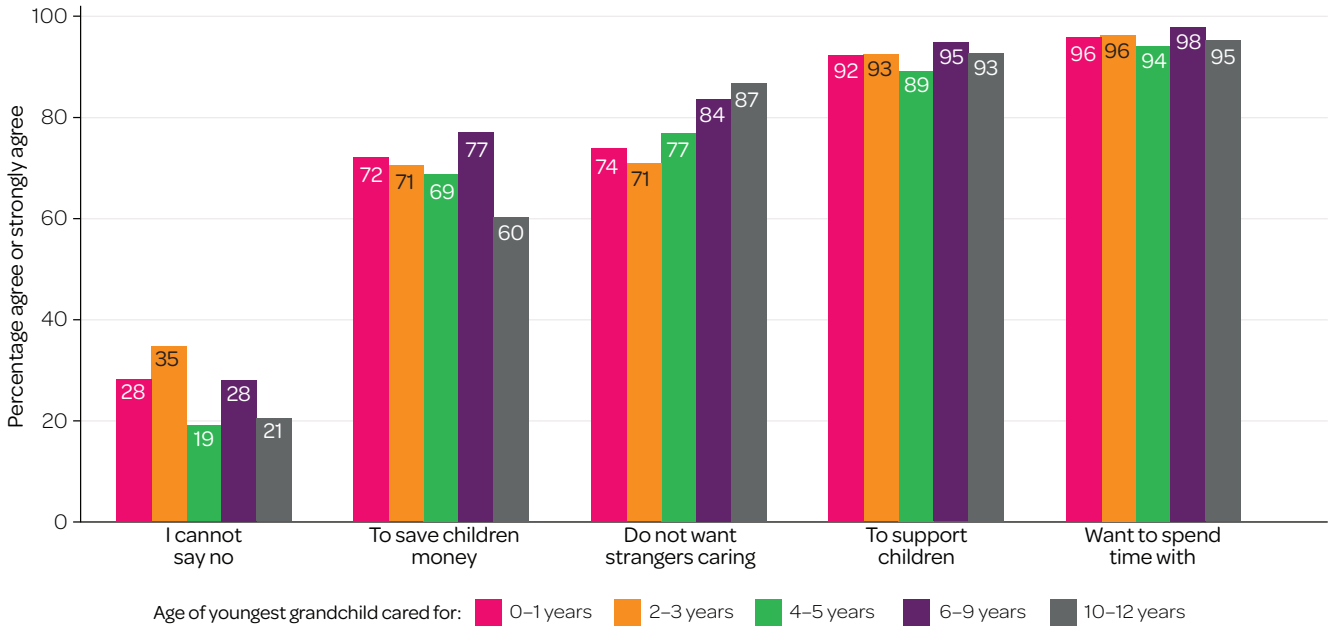
One statement concerned whether grandparents felt that being unable to say no was a factor in their providing child care. While around one in four grandparents agreed with this, just under half of the grandparents indicated that this did not apply to them. There were references to this in some of the comments.

It's only on a weekend if they are busy. We can say no if we want to.
Grandmother, aged 51

I am not really physically capable of caring for my grandchildren as much as I adore them but I feel like I cannot say no!
Grandmother, aged 64

Analysing these responses by characteristics of the grandparents and/or grandchildren (or of the care), there were a few significant findings. There were differences by age of youngest grandchild on two of the items, as shown in Figure 8. One unexpected finding was that agreement with not wanting strangers to care for grandchildren as a motivation to provide child care increased with the age of the youngest grandchild cared for. It was expected that this motivation would be greatest for those with younger grandchildren. Helping children to save money was somewhat more of a reason for those caring for grandchildren under 10 years of age.

Figure 8: Influences on grandparent child care – proportions agreeing to statement by age of youngest grandchild cared for



Note: Grandparents were asked their agreement with 'To what extent do the following explain why you care for grandchildren?' I/we want to spend time with the grandchildren; We prefer the children were not cared for by strangers; We want to help our children financially, so they can reduce their child care costs; We want to help our children in other ways by providing support and care to the grandchildren; We felt we could not say no when asked.

Barriers to the provision of grandparent child care

Grandparents were asked if they had grandchildren they would like to care for but do not.

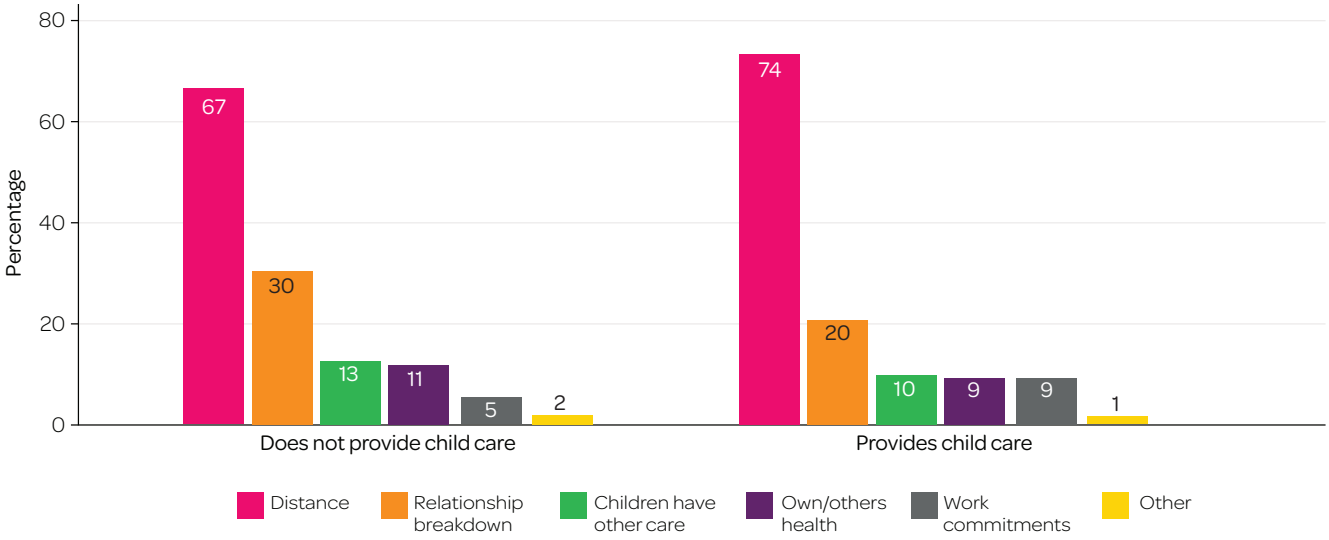
- Of those currently providing child care, 28% said they had other grandchildren aged under 13 years they would like to care for but cannot. Another 71% answered 'No'.
- Of those not providing child care, 41% said they had grandchildren aged under 13 years they would like to care for but cannot. Another 51% answered 'No' and 8% 'Don't know or prefer not to say'.

As these data indicate, some grandparents are content that they do not have a role in providing child care. For example:

> *I prefer to have minimal contact and no longer want the responsibility of caring for children.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 61

Grandparents who indicated they would like to provide some or more child care were asked what the barriers were. The most common barrier cited was that of distance (see Figure 9). This was exacerbated during the restrictions related to the COVID pandemic (see 'Grandparenting and COVID-19').

Figure 9: Barriers to providing child care to grandchildren among grandparents who would like to provide child care (or more child care)



Note: Grandparents were asked whether any of the following were barriers to providing care: Distance – we live too far from each other; My/our health; My/our work commitments; Parents have other arrangements; Breakdown of family relationships; Other.

> *All grandchildren live a long way away and COVID has made travel even more difficult.*
> **Grandfather,** aged 77

> *Would love to assist with care and education of two grandchildren under three living interstate. It would increase bonding, save parents $ on child care and be fun and challenging for us. I visit once per year and partner visits twice per year. Christmas is bi-annual so they share time with in-laws. PS children have three sets of grandparents! Lucky kids.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 57

> *Currently living overseas and we haven't met them face to face. This is a source of grief for me.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 56

> *The distance is very hard. I often get sad or just cry when I look at their photos.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 56

The next most commonly reported barrier was that of family relationship breakdown. There were numerous comments by grandparents on this when invited to comment about their grandparenting. Sometimes this referred to a breakdown in the parental relationship (leading to grandparents losing connection to grandchildren), and sometimes a breakdown of the grandparents' relationship with their child or children. For example:

> *My grandson's mother will only let me have him for the day on the last Sunday of the month. I would love to have him more often but she will not allow this.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 43

> *Hubby is estranged from his daughters and we no longer see the grandchildren.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 64

> *I no longer have contact with two grandkids, who live in Melbourne, since the breakdown of my son's marriage.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 76

A smaller proportion referred to their children's other care arrangements being a barrier to their providing child care. This emerged in grandparents' comments about the 'competition' with child care provided by another set of grandparents.

> *We strongly desire to have more to do with our grandchildren but we are the paternal grandparents and whilst there is no conflict/relationship strain at all, our daughter in law gets support from her mother.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 53

For those reporting that 'my/our health' was a barrier, this related to their own health limitations and/or caring responsibilities.

> *Due to chronic pain cannot handle having grandchildren for long.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 68

> *Caring for a husband with advanced dementia makes caring for grandchildren difficult and limits the amount of time I have available. I sometimes use my respite time caring for grandchildren.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 68

> *It's hard being disabled, looking after an active little boy.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 60

> *I wish we could provide more child care but due to husband's disability not able to. Grandchildren have no other family supports at all.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 70

Consistent with the earlier analysis in Table 2, employment was not often said to be a barrier to the provision of child care. This in part reflects that many of the grandparents in the survey (about two-thirds) were not employed. Comments from some of those that did find work to be a barrier noted this was related also to their financial circumstances, which meant they could not forgo their employment to provide child care.

> *I would like to offer more hours of care but my concern is that my superannuation is limited due to my part-time work when my own children were young so I am trying to do some catch-up so continue to work full-time. I work in health and the limited resourcing results in me working long hours for no extra salary.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 62

> *All my grandchildren live interstate. If I am not working, we can't afford to visit them. When I am working, I have limited time.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 62

> *I would love to see her more frequently, but when not in lockdown I am working at every possible moment in casual jobs to pay my bills.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 65

As noted above, a range of issues emerged in 'other' barriers. This included children's disabilities or additional care needs. It also included limitations of grandparents' housing:

> *One of the children is too young and breast fed and another one has severe disability and I can't transport, lift, manage their needs.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 62

> *I would've liked to mind grandchildren more often but the place I live in is small. As they get older this is not preferred by them.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 65



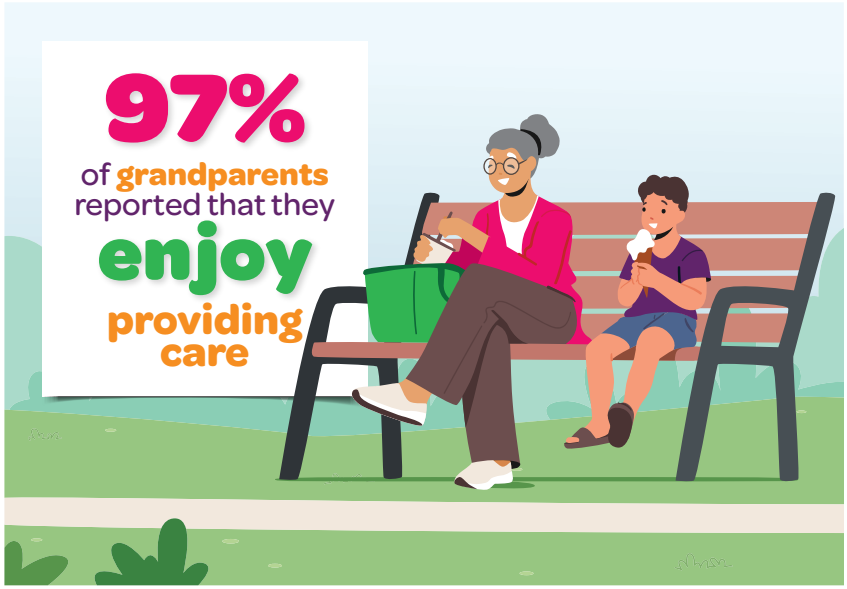
Grandparent wellbeing and child care

As described in the introduction to the report, an important question is to what extent the provision of child care by grandparents is helping or hindering their wellbeing. This is not necessarily straightforward, as there may be factors not captured in the survey that explain better or poorer wellbeing. Such factors may also contribute to the frequency and nature of the grandparents' provision of child care.

A number of statements related to wellbeing were presented to grandparents who provide child care, and they were asked to report their agreement concerning the child care they provide. These statements captured potential impacts on health, subjective wellbeing and social connections.

As shown in Figure 10, among grandparents who provide some child care, responses were very much on the positive side. Many reported agreement (often strong agreement) on the more positive elements and disagreement on the negative ones. For example:

- 97% of the grandparents reported that they enjoy providing the care, including 72% who strongly agreed with this.
- 94% said providing child care increases their connectedness to family, including 60% who strongly agreed with this.
- 86% agreed that caring for grandchildren gives their lives added meaning, including 51% who strongly agreed.

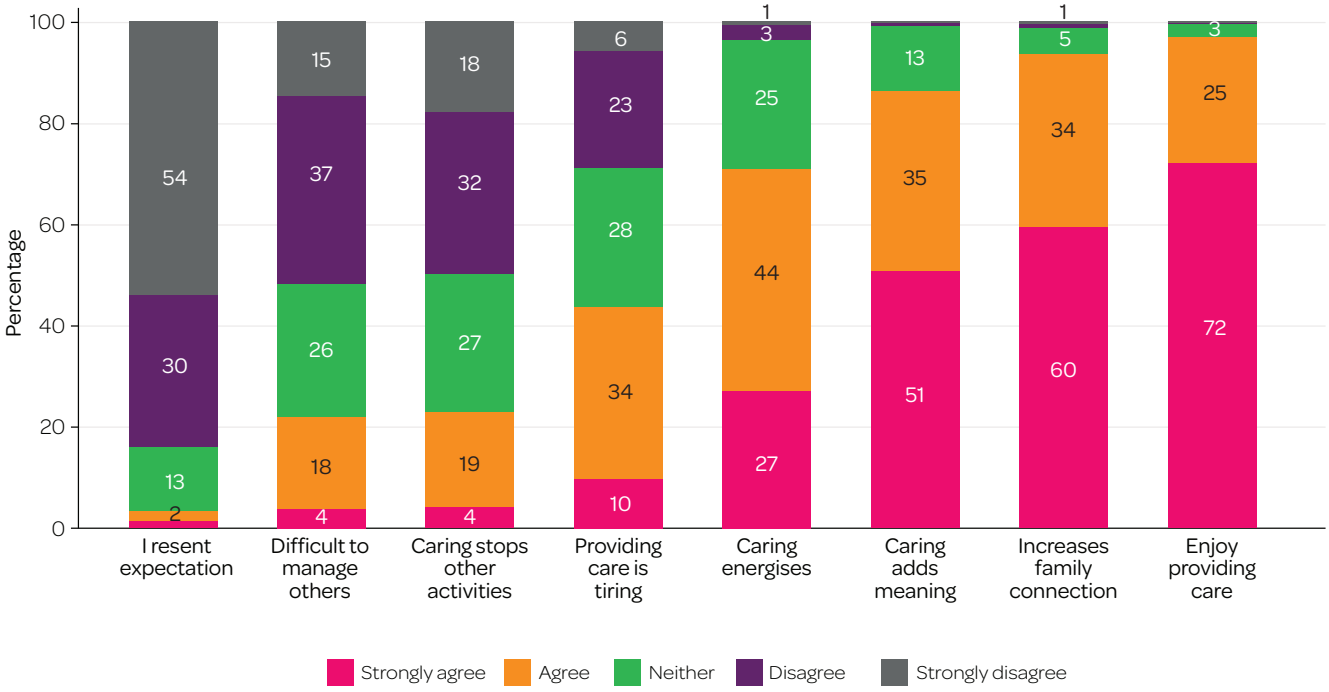


Also, looking at some of the potential negative aspects:

- 84% disagreed with the statement 'I feel resentful that I/we are expected to do it', including 54% who strongly disagreed.
- 52% disagreed that 'it is difficult to manage along with other responsibilities', including 15% who strongly disagreed. On this one, there was some agreement also, with 22% agreeing or strongly agreeing that the child care is difficult to manage with other responsibilities.

These findings are described further below, along with some of the comments by grandparents.

Figure 10: Wellbeing relating to grandparent provided child care



Note: Grandparents were asked to rate their agreement about the child care they provide: (a) I/we enjoy providing this care; (b) I/we find it very tiring; (c) It is difficult to manage along with other responsibilities (e.g. work or caring for others); (d) It increases my/our connectedness to family; (e) I feel resentful that I/we are expected to do it; (f) It gives my/our lives added meaning; (g) It energises me/us; (h) It sometimes stops me/us participating in other recreational activities.

Positive responses were most apparent in relation to enjoying providing care, increasing family connection and adding meaning. This was supported by the free-text responses also.

Nobody 'requires' us to care for them, we do it because we want to. If we weren't both still working, we would probably spend more time with them. We also just like spending time with our kids and grandkids, not babysitting, but all hanging out and doing things together.

Grandmother, aged 68

Lot of skills are gained or learned from both sides.

Grandfather, aged 61

It's so rewarding. Nice to feel useful, too.

Grandmother, aged 67

I would drop anything and everything to hang with my grandkids. They are my absolute joy.

Grandmother, aged 60

It is lovely but exhausting to have them visit, mostly because we have a couple routine and it is interrupted when they are there.

Grandmother, aged 51

Sometimes it is a joy and other times it can be onerous. Usually depends on the mood of the two year old.
Grandmother, aged 67

Although tiring, caring for our grandchildren is the most joyful and meaningful activity we have, the time we didn't have as parents, we now have to care for and enjoy our grandchildren. We are also aware this is a window of opportunity of about five years in each child's lives before they branch out into the wider world.
Grandmother, aged 74

On the health side, just under half agreed that providing child care is tiring, although about seven in 10 agreed that providing child care energises them.

Caring for grandchildren assists with my physical activities keeping fit and active now that I am retired.
Grandmother, aged 69

I thought I would care for them more but find it tiring physically.
Grandmother, aged 70

We love our two grandchildren and want to help – but it's getting physically harder as we get older!
Grandmother, aged 70

I love spending time with my kids and grandkids, it is never a burden; however, I am tired as I have a medical issue and I am caring for an elderly mother. Sometimes it all gets very hard as I work also, but never do I begrudge helping my kids or spending time with my beautiful grandkids. The oldest is 18 and all too soon I will not be needed for the youngest one.
Grandmother, aged 65

About one in five grandparents agreed that providing child care was somewhat of a barrier or a challenge to doing other activities, but more disagreed with this. The vast majority disagreed that they resented the expectation of their providing child care. Some relayed their experiences of feeling obligated or, conversely, making sure they said no when they needed to.

It is expected. It causes me to not be available, which is missing $380 per day on income.
Grandmother, aged 62

I love my grandchildren and only do what I can manage to do with them. They are cared for by professionals at other times. I enjoy being with them but am always honest about whether the care requested is too much or inconvenient.
Grandmother, aged 73

Sometimes it's tiring and hard to manage babysitting but my mum always managed so I can feel obligated sometimes.
Grandmother, aged 52

Love having all my children. But have learnt that if I am doing something, I don't cancel my arrangement unless it is an emergency. Which doesn't happen very often.

Grandmother, aged 66

We love our grandchildren very much and want to help our daughter who is a single mum after her partner died. It does get tiring, however, and it is difficult when it is just expected that we will help. Caring for the boys sometimes precludes us caring for our other grandchildren, which is difficult for us and our other children. We would like to go on road trips more but would need to arrange for someone else to care for the boys.

Grandmother, aged 66

As illustrated in some of the quotes, providing child care may have positive as well as challenging aspects. This is further evident in Table 4, which focuses on one of the wellbeing measures: providing child care is tiring. This measure had a spread of responses across agreement and disagreement. Responses on the other wellbeing items are compared for those who agreed it was tiring, those who were undecided and those who disagreed that it was tiring. Some findings are:

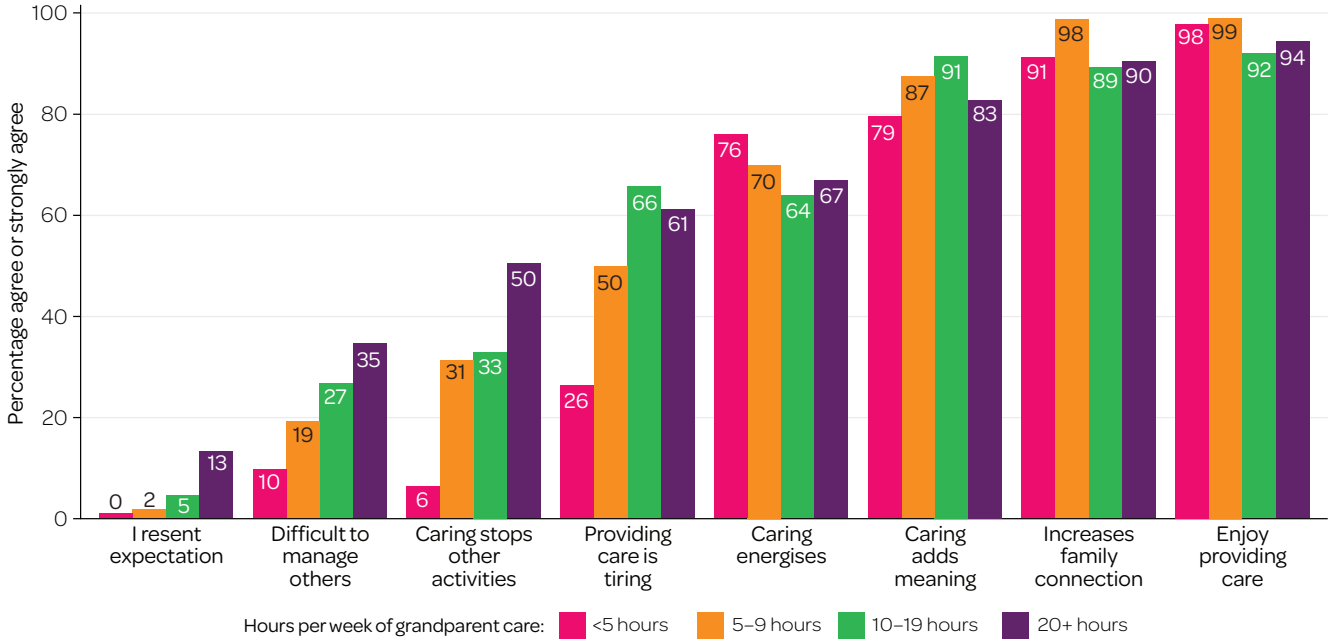
- A majority (over 90%) of those who reported that providing child care is tiring still reported positively about enjoying providing the child care and this child care increasing family connection. Also, more than 80% of those who reported that providing child care is tiring agreed that caring for grandchildren gives their lives added meaning. So, while tiring, there are positive aspects for many.
- Just over half of those who report that providing child care is tiring also agreed that it is energising, so showing the contradictions that providing child care can have positive and negative consequences, even on similar aspects of wellbeing.
- Those who indicated that child care is tiring were considerably more likely than other grandparents providing child care to say that caring for the grandchildren sometimes stops their participation in other activities, and to say that it is difficult to manage the child care along with other responsibilities.
- While few grandparents indicated they resent providing the child care, the proportion that did indicate this were among those who reported that providing child care is tiring.

Table 4: Associations between wellbeing responses among grandparents providing child care

Grandparent wellbeing statement	I/we find providing child care tiring			
	Agree or strongly agree	Neither	Disagree or strongly disagree	Total
	% who agree or strongly agree			
I/we enjoy providing care for grandchildren.	93	99	100	97
Caring for grandchildren increases connection to family.	92	94	96	93
Caring for grandchildren gives my/our lives added meaning.	82	93	86	86
Caring for grandchildren energises me/us.	56	77	86	71
Caring for grandchildren sometimes stops me/us from participating in other recreational activities.	42	9	8	23
It [child care] is difficult to manage along with other responsibilities.	37	14	6	22
I feel resentful that I/we are expected to do the child care.	8	0	0	4

Exploring grandparent wellbeing by motivations to provide child care and other characteristics, there were very few significant associations. There were some significant findings for items that capture some of the potential challenges. The clearest finding was that longer hours of providing care was associated with more challenges, as shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Wellbeing relating to grandparent provided child care



Note: Grandparents were asked to rate their agreement about the child care they provide: (a) I/we enjoy providing this care; (b) I/we find it very tiring; (c) It is difficult to manage along with other responsibilities (e.g. work or caring for others); (d) It increases my/our connectedness to family; (e) I feel resentful that I/we are expected to do it; (f) It gives my/our lives added meaning; (g) It energises me/us; (h) It sometimes stops me/us participating in other recreational activities.

Other aspects of grandparenting

Grandparent–grandchild connections

This research was designed to focus on grandparents' experiences of providing child care, but knowing that this is only one way grandparents are involved in the lives of their children and grandchildren, the Families in Australia Survey also invited comments more generally about grandparents' contact with grandchildren.

Just as with the comments about providing child care, there were many comments about grandparents' contact, or time spent, with grandchildren. The themes from such comments were similar to those arising from the research on child care. That is, time spent with grandchildren was reported on very warmly and with great affection.

> *Being a grandparent is the best thing that ever happened to us. Our two, two-year-old grandchildren (son and daughter had a child each a month apart) have brought us so much joy and made our family connection even stronger.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 61

I can't believe the pleasure I get from spending time with my grandson. Watching him develop, grow and take pleasure in learning about nature, relationships and loving is wonderful. It's even better than having your own children, because you are not so busy and so you have time to soak up the moments.

Grandmother, aged 66

Assisting in their homework allows us to educate and for them to question and enquire with adults in a safe environment. It is a blessing to be in good health and participate in their lives.

Grandmother, aged 70

I believe very strongly that there are great benefits for all three generations involved in sharing fun and responsibilities related to children. My grandchildren also benefit from and provide great enjoyment to their great-grandma. It takes a village to raise a child – this is so true.

Grandmother, aged 66

I think it is important to have the influence of grandparents as long as they complement the parenting style of the child's parents. I love babysitting my grandsons because I have more time to devote to them than I had with my own children.

Grandmother, aged 59

In fact, given the other ways grandparents are involved in grandchildren's lives, some survey participants did not appreciate the survey questions being so focused on the provision of child care.

The whole focus of the questions above seems to be about grandparents as unpaid child carers. I try to spend time with my grandchildren because I love them and want to spend time with them.

Grandmother, aged 64.

I felt this question was more about child care not spending time with grandchildren; I cook and do art and craft, take one to the library, watch sport, all fun stuff NOT child care!

Grandmother, aged 66

I care for my grandchildren so their parents can have some time together. I don't think of it as caring for them, I think of it as spending time with them.

Grandmother, aged 64

Time grandparents shared with grandchildren was seen as valuable from grandparents' perspective, as well as of benefit to family connections and relationships, and for imparting education.

I love all my grandchildren and go and watch them play sport … do assemblies … help pick up from school and help with transport.

Grandmother, aged 60

Love the connection with our little grandchild, but also love to connect with the whole family so often have family time all together.
Grandmother, aged 60

Some had more complex situations, including step-grandchildren and those sharing care and contact time with other grandparents.

They are step-grandchildren but I love them just the same and have had a role in their upbringing.
Grandmother, aged 75

The opportunity to share caring with other grandparent (mother) whom also works (like self) has been a gift. We both travel approx. two hours in total (each) to care for our grandson alternate weeks.
Grandmother, aged 71

We made the decision to have consistent contact/visitation with our grandchildren and alternate fortnightly with their other grandparent. Both maternal and paternal families get together to create good relationships for each other and our children/grandchildren.
Grandmother, aged 50

Barriers to grandparent–grandchild contact

Just as is the case for the provision of child care, grandparents often face barriers in being able to stay connected to grandchildren. Distance is one barrier, although many reported they would travel when they could to spend time with grandchildren, and they valued the time they could have together.

I travel full-time (home base only is ACT), and I fly home every three months or so to visit grandchildren. Love caring for them when I am there, but also love my lifestyle travelling.
Grandmother, aged 61

We live hundreds of miles apart, so time together is precious, valued and enjoyed.
Grandmother, aged 70

Grandparents relied on technology to stay connected to their grandchildren.

My granddaughter lives interstate with her mother and weekends with our son, her father. We see her weekly via Zoom.
Grandmother, aged 65

My grandson lives in the Scandinavian country of Denmark … I have yet to meet him. I am so very grateful for the ways we can keep in touch electronically: he recognises me when we have 'facetime' and calls me by my name.
Grandmother, aged 59

As was the case for child care, one factor that affects the degree or quality of grandparent–grandchild time is simply the grandchildren growing up and having more of their own interests and priorities. Sometimes grandparents reflected on positive connections with the now grown-up grandchildren.

> *They are healthy, active and doing well. I would love to see more of them but they have lots of weekend sport. We are in contact all the time, which is great.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 75

> *I mostly see my youngest grandchild with her father for pleasure at the weekends when her mother has to work. I actually don't babysit these days, although in the past I did for my older daughter's, giving her one day a week to do [what] she had to do [without] having the grandchild with her. I did this for all of her four children. This has enabled me to have great relationships with them now they are adults.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 82

Some reported disappointment about how relationships had changed as the need for child care had diminished.

> *I was heavily involved in child minding weekly when my grandchildren were little at much cost to my personal time and energy. I rarely see five of my six grandchildren now they don't need minding when parents leave them alone. I find it difficult to relate to them as teenagers but always try to accept requests for help with them to maintain relationships with them. I resent that I only see them when help is needed, and it makes me very sad as I loved and enjoyed being such a big part of their lives for so many years and they obviously loved me. Wouldn't know now.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 72

Also as reported in the context of child care, there were many comments by grandparents whose contact with grandchildren had been impacted by family relationship breakdown. For some, this involved a breakdown between the grandparent and their child or children. For others, it involved the children's relationship breakdown, which led to the estrangement of grandchildren along with the former partner or spouse, or more challenges in managing these relationships.

> *Mother of grandchildren does not allow us, the grandparents, any contact with grandchildren, we don't know where they live or if they are okay. Father of children, who is refused any contact with the children at all, also has to live with us as he can't afford his own housing.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 57

> *I miss the grandchildren that I cannot see. Family breakdown has left us disconnected.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 72

> *Personally I would put my hand up to babysit my granbabies every day if my health would allow me to. Also due to both of my son's being estranged from each other, has at times been hard balancing commitments equally so as not to cause arguments. While trying to maintain a connection with the granbabies and their cousins.*
>
> **Grandmother,** aged 64

Grandparenting and COVID-19

When grandparents were invited to provide comments about their provision of child care, or their contact with grandchildren, many referred to the impacts of COVID-19. These centred on feelings of disappointment or grief at missing grandchildren, and on the substitute ways grandparents were staying connected to grandchildren.

> *When there are COVID lockdowns in Victoria I help by entertaining my grandchildren by Zoom calls, so mum can work at home.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 66

> *We have missed having regular face-to-face contact with both grandchildren this year. One has a chronic illness and COVID restrictions have prevented us having regular visits. Text messaging is not the same.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 62

> *It is very difficult to have a grandson who lives overseas. Due to COVID-19 I have not been able to visit and I have only seen photos of him. I visit my other grandchildren regularly – it a joy to spend time with them.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 64

> *Due to their family unit structure, they live in WA, may as well be on the moon!*
> **Grandmother,** aged 62

> *My grandchildren currently live overseas and hence they are not able to visit me and I am unable to visit them. Prior to their move overseas (which occurred last year), I saw my grandchildren frequently and helped with their care. I miss them! When travel restrictions are lifted, I expect to spend time with them – both in Australia and overseas – at least twice a year.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 67

One of the respondents reported on how they had needed to help with the care of a grandchild because border closures had meant the expected care of another grandparent had not been possible.

> *I am currently caring for one grandchild, one day per week while working from home as no child care is available for him. The family planned to have his other grandparents from USA move over to live with them (to support with child care as well as care for the grandparents) but this plan has been hampered by the pandemic. They are now trying to get an exemption as the grandparents really need to move here and child care for the youngest child is proving difficult to find.*
> **Grandmother,** aged 59

SUMMARY

The focus of this research was on providing child care, as despite grandparent child care being a common and valued approach by families to managing their child care needs, there is not much research that focuses on this from the grandparents' perspective (although for Australian research see Craig & Jenkins, 2016; Hamilton, Hill, & Kintominas, 2021; Hamilton & Jenkins, 2015; Hamilton & Suthersan, 2021; Horsfall & Dempsey, 2011). This research, using the Families in Australia Survey, reminded us that grandparent child care is not the only way grandparents are involved in their children's lives. Even among survey participants who were providing child care, some said they did not think of it as 'child care' given the pleasure they got from the shared time together.

Two in five of the almost 2,000 grandparents in the third Families in Australia Survey with a grandchild aged under 13 years were providing some child care, with the proportion providing child care being higher (63%) when the youngest grandchild is under 10 years rather than 10–12 years (33%). Of the grandparents with a grandchild aged under 13 years, just over one in four were providing child care at least once a week. More frequent child care was more likely for the younger grandchildren. Grandparent child care was more often provided on a casual or occasional basis (62% of those providing child care), compared to regular (39%) or school holiday (26%) child care. Of course, grandparents may provide regular care as well as provide casual care, which is a key aspect of the flexibility of this form of child care. See also Hamilton and Jenkins (2015).

The research set out to understand the reasons for the grandparent care. For many this child care was to support parents' work or to support parents in other ways. But this went deeper for many than just a transactional arrangement, with the relationship aspects more often what were mentioned in the comments about grandparent care. That is, grandparents supported the parents (including their employment) because of family connections, or to facilitate or enjoy the connections they had with the grandchildren. The family relationship was at the centre for many. Even among the smaller number of grandparents who indicated they felt an obligation to provide child care, there was a sense they did this to support and build on their family relationships.

Another important part of this research was to explore to what extent grandparent child care was contributing to poorer or better wellbeing for grandparents. Overall, the sense was that providing grandparent care was a positive experience. This linked back to the reasons for the provision of this care being centred on family relationships and family connections. Grandparents also enjoyed being useful. Of the potential negative impacts the main one was that providing child care could be tiring – nearly half the grandparents indicated this was the case. But even among those who experienced this, a large majority still reported that they enjoyed providing the care and that this child care increased family connections.

The responses to the survey data and specifically the wellbeing questions indicated a very positive experience of grandparent child care. This research was made richer by the mixed-methods approach that took account of the comments made by grandparents. For many, the grandparents' comments supported the positive findings about impacts of grandparent child care. However, other comments highlighted that there could be challenges in providing this child care. Such challenges included those related to grandparents' own health or caring needs as well as struggles managing when the care needs were more intensive.

A number of grandparents reported that they spoke up when requests for child care were too demanding or too disruptive, and this seemed to be important in protecting the wellbeing of grandparents and guarding against possible negative impacts of providing child care. Grandparents providing longer hours of child care more often reported this being difficult to manage alongside other activities and responsibilities. This is consistent with previous research on this topic (Hamilton & Jenkins, 2015).

In terms of explaining whether or not grandparents provided child care, the key factor was distance. This was even more so within the context of travel restrictions and border closures due to COVID-19. Another universal factor was child age, with opportunities changing as children grew, and increases in children's own activities

diminishing the need for grandparent child care. The nature and quality of the family relationship was a key motivating factor for many grandparents providing care. However, there were clear examples of grandparents whose role had been affected by their own fractured relationship with family members or because of a breakdown elsewhere in the family, most notably when the parents of grandchildren had separated. Other personal characteristics, including age, health and employment status, explained some of the differences between grandparents' likelihood to provide child care.

This research did have some limitations, being based on a survey that is not representative of the whole population. In particular, the vast majority of respondents are female. While the female responses are useful in respect to grandmothers' experiences of child care, the survey may not have adequately captured how the provision of child care impacts grandfathers. The survey also will not have captured the experiences of some demographic groups. For example, it is unlikely to fully represent the experiences of low-income families and families from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Overall, the research indicated that grandparenting is for many a happy experience, and opportunities to contribute as grandparents, including in providing child care, are often valued. Even with the availability of formal child care, it is likely that the grandparent child care role will continue to be valued by families and the grandparents themselves. Given the limitations of this research, and the identification of some challenges and barriers for grandparents providing child care, it would be worth exploring further how providing child care fits around grandmothers' and grandfathers' other activities and responsibilities, and how it may be better supported.

The child minding time helps us build a special relationship with our grandkids. It's a time for us to have positive input into their growth and development.

Grandmother, aged 57



REFERENCES

Baxter, J. A. (2013). *Child-care participation and maternal employment trends in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS).

Baxter, J. A. (2015). *Child care and early childhood education in Australia*. Melbourne: AIFS.

Baxter, J. A. (2021). *Child care in 2020* (Families in Australia Survey Report). Melbourne: AIFS.

Baxter, J. A., Hand, K., & Sweid, R. (2016). *Flexible child care and Australian parents' work and care decision-making*. Melbourne: AIFS.

Baxter, J. A., & Warren, D. (2016). Grandparents in their young grandchildren's lives. In Australian Institute of Family Studies (Ed.), *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children annual statistical report 2015*. Melbourne: AIFS (pp. 13–40).

Baxter, J. A., & Warren, D. (2021). *Employment and work-family balance in 2020* (Families in Australia Survey Report). Melbourne: AIFS.

Biegel, N., Neels, K., & Van den Berg, L. (2021). Uptake of childcare arrangements: Grandparental availability and availability of formal childcare. *Social Sciences*, *10*(2), 50.

Brennan, D., Cass, B., Flaxman, S., Hill, T., Jenkins, B., McHugh, M. et al. (2013). *Grandparents raising grandchildren: Towards recognition, respect and reward*. Sydney, NSW: Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales.

Cantillon, S., Moore, E., & Teasdale, N. (2021). COVID-19 and the pivotal role of grandparents: Childcare and income support in the UK and South Africa. *Feminist Economics*, *27*(1–2), 188–202.

Carroll, M., Budinski, M., Warren, D., Baxter, J. A., & Harvey, J. (2021). *Connection to family, friends and community* (Families in Australia Survey Report). Melbourne.

Craig, L., Hamilton, M., Brown, J., & Timonen, V. (2018). The composition of grandparent childcare: Gendered patterns in cross-national perspective. In Timonen, V. (Ed.), *Grandparenting practices around the world.* Bristol: Policy Press (pp. 151-170).

Craig, L., & Jenkins, B. (2016). Grandparental childcare in Australia: Gender differences in the correlates of providing regular grandparental care while parents work. *Community, Work & Family*, *19*(3), 281-301.

Dunifon, R. E., Ziol-Guest, K. M., & Kopko, K. (2014). Grandparent coresidence and family well-being implications for research and policy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *654*(1), 110–126.

Goodfellow, J., & Laverty, J. (2003). Grandparents supporting working families. *Family Matters*, *66*, 14–19.

Hamilton, M., Hill, E., & Kintominas, A. (2021). Moral geographies of care across borders: The experience of migrant grandparents in Australia. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society.* dx.doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab024

Hamilton, M., & Jenkins, B. (2015). Grandparent childcare and labour market participation in Australia. (SPRC Report 14/2015). Kensington, NSW: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

Hamilton, M., & Suthersan, B. (2021). Gendered moral rationalities in later life: Grandparents balancing paid work and care of grandchildren in Australia. *Ageing & Society*, *41*(7), 1651–1672.

Hand, K., & Baxter, J. A. (2013). Maternal employment and the care of school-aged children. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, *16*(3), 329–349.

Horsfall, B., & Dempsey, D. (2011). Grandfathers and grandmothers looking after grandchildren: Recent Australian research. *Family Relationship Quarterly*, *18*, 10–12.

Horsfall, B., & Dempsey, D. (2013). Grandparents doing gender: Experiences of grandmothers and grandfathers caring for grandchildren in Australia. *Journal of Sociology*. doi:1440783313498945

Jenkins, B. (2010). Grandparent childcare in Australia: A literature review. *Elder Law Review*, *6*, 1–19.

Mutchler, J. E., & Baker, L. A. (2009). The implications of grandparent coresidence for economic hardship among children in mother-only families. *Journal of Family Issues*, *30*(11), 1576–1597.

Ochiltree, G. (2006). *The changing role of grandparents* (AFRC Briefing no. 2) Melbourne: AIFS.

Pilkauskas, N., & Martinson, M. (2014). Three-generation family households in early childhood: Comparisons between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia. *Demographic Research*, *30*(60), 1639–1652.

Qu, L., Moloney, L., Weston, R., Hand, K., Deblaquiere, J., & De Maio, J. (2011). Grandparenting and the 2006 family law reforms. *Family Matters*, *88*, 42–50.

Quirke, E., König, H.-H., & Hajek, A. (2020). Extending understanding of grandchild care on feelings of loneliness and isolation in later life. *Zeitschrift für Gerontologie und Geriatrie*, 1–3.

Vasileva, M., Alisic, E., & De Young, A. (2021). COVID-19 unmasked: Preschool children's negative thoughts and worries during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, *12*(1), 1924442.

Weston, R., & Moloney, L. (2014). *Inquiry into Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren*. Submission from Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Zamberletti, J., Cavrini, G., & Tomassini, C. (2018). Grandparents providing childcare in Italy. *European Journal of Ageing, 15*(3), 265–275.

APPENDIX: GRANDPARENT SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Table 5: Sample characteristics, FIA respondents with grandchildren

Respondent characteristics		Grandchild lives elsewhere	Co-resident grandchild	All grandparents
All		2,133	250	2,383
Gender	Female	1,855	239	2,094
	Male	253	9	262
	Other/prefer not to say	19	2	21
Partner?	Yes, lives full-time with partner	1,287	107	1,394
	Yes, partner lives elsewhere always or sometimes	86	12	95
	No	668	122	790
	Other	89	12	101
Grandparent age group	40–49	30	4	34
	50–59	322	37	359
	60–69	954	127	1081
	70–79	716	80	796
	80 and over	111	2	113
Employment status	Not employed	1,434	165	1,599
	Part-time employed	325	43	368
	Full-time employed	277	25	302
Distance to family	Within 2 hours travel	1,386	190	1,576
	More than 2 hours travel	409	0	409
Health status	Very good or excellent	605	44	649
	Good	638	66	704
	Fair or poor	673	105	778
State	New South Wales	616	70	686
	Victoria	604	48	652
	Queensland	376	60	436
	South Australia	208	30	238
	Western Australia	155	21	176
	Tasmania	87	13	100
	Northern Territory	15	3	18
	ACT	69	5	74

ABOUT THE FAMILIES IN AUSTRALIA SURVEY

The Families in Australia Survey is AIFS' flagship survey series. Its scope is every person in every type of family, with the survey open to Australians aged 18 years and over.

The Families in Australia Survey seeks to find out how families are managing, about relationships, connections and support, as well as about the things families do together or in the community, such as work and study. This survey is not representative of the Australian population but nevertheless provides useful insights on aspects of Australian families.[6] Further research using the Families in Australia Survey will explore these and other family relationship data as well as other issues for families, in more depth.

The third Families in Australia Survey ran from 19 May to 30 June 2021, with 5,985 participants. At the time of the survey, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have a significant impact on families, workplaces and society more generally. Australia's international borders were largely closed, and within the survey period, region-specific lockdowns also meant restrictions on movements within and across some state borders.

The first survey in the series was *Life during COVID-19*, which ran from 1 May to 9 June 2020. The second Families in Australia Survey, *Towards COVID Normal* ran from 17 November to 22 December 2020.

Credits

Authors: Jennifer Baxter

Editor: Katharine Day

Graphic design: Lisa Carroll

Suggested citation

Baxter, J. (2022). *Grandparents and child care in Australia* (Families in Australia Survey report). Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studies.

ISBN (online): 978-1-76016-257-3
ISBN (PDF): 978-1-76016-258-0

6 Statistics have been calculated using post-stratification weights (based on age group, gender, state, education and whether the respondent speaks a language other than English) to compensate for some bias resulting from over-representation of respondents with certain socio-demographic characteristics. However, the Families in Australia Survey is a non-probability sample and, as such, it is not representative of the Australian population.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2022. With the exception of AIFS branding, the Commonwealth Coat of Arms, content provided by third parties, and any material protected by a trademark. All textual material presented in this publication is provided under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International licence (**CC BY 4.0**). You may copy, distribute and build upon this work for commercial and non-commercial purposes; however, you must attribute the Commonwealth of Australia as the copyright holder of the work. Content that is copyrighted by a third party is subject to the licensing arrangements of the original owner.

Visit the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) website at **aifs.gov.au** to explore our work, publications and events, and to discover our research agenda in more detail.

Australian Government
Australian Institute of Family Studies

Discovering what works for families

Front cover: © GettyImages/FG Trade
2206_FIAS3_Grandparents