Grandparents raising grandchildren because of alcohol and other drug issues

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This paper highlights and explores the issues faced by grandparents who are parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs.

Grandparenting is a rite of passage that many older adults in Australia will have the opportunity to experience. Grandparents provide gifts of caring, knowledge of family stories, happy memories and the gift of love and acceptance (Ochiltree, 2006). Grandparents play a significant role in the lives of their grandchildren. Contemporary grandparents are a significant source of help for their families (Backhouse & Lucas, 2003) most providing baby-sitting and childcare for their grandchildren. Some Australian grandparents will actually bring up their grandchildren (Australian Government, Strategic Ageing, 2004).

Historically grandparents have often stepped in to raise grandchildren in times of crisis. Grandchildren come to live with their grandparents because there has been a breakdown in parental care. Grandparents who raise their grandchildren face complex social emotional and financial issues (Fitzpatrick, 2004). According to UK and US reports, the number of grandparent families is increasing, however there is no reliable quantitative data to support this assertion (Families Australia, 2007) in the Australian context.

Without reliable quantitative data, grandparent families remain invisible. The Australian Bureau of Statistics commenced population-level data collection on grandparent families in 2003. This paper highlights and explores the issues faced by grandparents who are parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs.

The opinions expressed in this paper are taken from a review of the literature and research undertaken by the Canberra Mothercraft Society (CMS). In 2003 CMS in collaboration with Relationships Australia, Canberra & Region and Marymead Child and Family Centre, undertook a needs analysis for grandparents who are parenting. Advertising through community networks and local media resulted in twenty grandparent families identifying themselves and the Grandparents ACT & Region support and education group was started. Over 100 grandparent families continue to access monthly support and education groups. A resource and information pack was published in 2004.

A significant number of grandparents known to Grandparents ACT & Region are parenting their grandchildren because of alcohol and/or drug misuse by the children's parent/s. A parent who misuses alcohol or other drugs is not necessarily unfit to look after children. However alcohol and drug misuse frequently conflicts with a child's need for care. Alcohol and drug misuse have similar impacts on parenting. Drug abuse brings with it...
of alcohol and other drugs, describing the project implementation and outcomes, was published in March 2006 (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2006).

**What we know about grandparent families in Australia**

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) reports there were 22,500 grandparent families with 31,100 children aged 0-17 years in the care of their grandparents. Grandparent families represent around one per cent of all families with children aged 0-17 years. In 73% of grandparent families, the youngest child was aged between 5 and 14 years. In 61% of grandparent families, the younger grandparent parent or single parent grandparent was aged 55 years or over. Single grandparent families comprised almost half (47%) of grandparent families, compared with 21% of other families with children aged 0-17 years. Women represented the highest number of single grandparent families (93%). While 89% of grandparent families had one or two children in their care, and 11% had three or more children.

In around one third of grandparent families (34%), one or both grandparents were employed, while 62% received a government pension, allowance or other benefit as their primary income. The majority of grandparent incomes were Australian Government benefits. One quarter (25%) of children living with their grandparents received state/territory financial support.

Children’s contact with their parents varied significantly. Of the 31,000 children living with their grandparents, 28,700 children's biological parents lived elsewhere (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). Seventy five per cent of these children had face-to-face contact with their biological parents at least once a year, and 37% had face-to-face contact with a parent once a fortnight or more frequently. Twenty-five percent (25%) had little or no contact with a parent.

**What about the children?**

Children separated from their parents because of alcohol and other drugs frequently face psychosocial, psychological, emotional and sometimes physical problems. These may be a direct result of alcohol or other drug use during pregnancy resulting in neurological damage, delayed development, hyperactivity, behavioural problems and poor school attendance. There are difficulties in identifying which problems are the result of environment and which are the result of prenatal drug exposure. Environmental factors also cause a range of physical, cognitive and psychosocial developmental issues for children whose parents use alcohol or other drugs (Patton, 2003).

Parents who use alcohol or other drugs may find it difficult to provide consistent parenting and sustain family routines.

“"The stories my daughter told me made me go for custody. Drugs don’t go with being a parent; the baby was going to the group house with drugs and needles there... I decided to make a choice” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).
In addition to a chaotic home environment, parent-infant/child attachment and the ability to form stable relationships can be inhibited. Often families in which alcohol or other drug use occurs are shrouded in denial and secrecy, causing confusion, tensions and anxieties. A conspiracy of silence isolates the family from wider family and community (UK Advisory Council, 2003).

Children being raised by their grandparents because of parental alcohol and other drug use have particular needs:

- support and early intervention for particular behavioural and medical conditions;
- counselling support or family therapy to help build and maintain family relationships;
- opportunities for social, recreational and life skills educational activities that enhance engagement and participation in their family, community and society; and
- affordable childcare and respite care.

Grandchildren being raised by their grandparents need to be visible too. Further research is needed to understand the lived experience of these young people.

**The impact on grandparent’s lives**

The contemporary grandparent is a significant source of assistance to families through child care; financial and moral support (Backhouse & Lucas, 2003). There are many issues that come with the increased responsibility of raising grandchildren. These include:

- health and age-related issues;
- impacts on family relationships;
- social isolation and loss of friends and social networks; and
- stress; physical, emotional and social.

All of these issues are exacerbated by alcohol and other drug use.

**Health and age related issues**

Grandparents parenting grandchildren are likely to be older than other parents and foster carers. Adjusting to life with young children presents many problems for grandparents. Parenting over the age of fifty-five years is older than other parents and foster carers. Adjusting to life with young children presents many problems for grandparents. Parenting over the age of fifty-five years has significant health impacts.

“I was 58 when they gave me my two and half month old granddaughter. They had totally unrealistic expectations of my ability. She needed feeds at 10pm, 2am and 6am and then to be ready for a daily 8am contact visit with her mother. We already had one of her other children. My youngest was then 14… it affected the whole family” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Grandparents frequently feel tired and worry about their capacity to keep going.

“We are not young and must face the fact that something may happen that will prevent us from caring for the children into the future. And while we know that our son and his wife would take the children, it would mean much more trauma all round” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Grandparents raising grandchildren want support and recognition of the health impacts that raising children brings. Grandparents want to be valued, respected and acknowledged for the contribution they make to the lives of their grandchildren.

Many grandchildren have a good understanding of some of the difficult issues their grandparents are experiencing.

“Where will I go if she dies?” (Dawson, 2004).

The world has changed since grandparents brought up their own children.

“Clothing worn by this generation of children is another revelation. At primary school uniforms are de rigueur and the children all look neat and tidy. But high school is a very different matter – there is a ‘colour code’ only and with in this code anything goes… The clothing worn by the girls in particular is sometimes not all that elegant or smart or even decent in many cases. Even quite young girls are dressed in outfits more suitable for streetwalkers than little girls” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Grandparents often do not feel confident with computers, mobile phones and modern technology. Youth culture and clothes frequently present a quandary for grandparents.

**The impact on family relationships**

When a family member becomes involved in alcohol or other drug use, there can be significant and enduring impacts on the whole family, especially siblings of the drug using parent. Some felt resentful that their parent’s energy was going into raising their grandchildren and their own children missed out on a relationship with their grandparents. Many grandparents spoke about the change in their role:

“…losing the specialness of being a grandparent – the parenting role takes over” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

The stresses impact significantly when grandparents have to put the needs of their grandchildren before their own children.

“I have fights with my daughter – she says ‘you stole my child’ – abusive fights, but we have still maintained a connection. You still love them (your own children)” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Relationships are further strained when legal proceedings are involved. Formalising their parenting role through legal proceedings can be the only way grandparents are able to access financial support. Formal arrangements also provide stability to the grandchildren. Grandparents raising grandchildren face complex legal issues in relation to custody, access to allowances from state and federal government and legal support.

Taking legal action causes financial hardship. The children’s parents can make repeated appeals to change contact, appeal orders while receiving legal aid. Grandparents are commonly ineligible for legal aid and consequently face disadvantage in proceedings. Some grandparents have mortgaged their homes to undertake legal proceedings.
“We knew we would have a huge fight on our hands – at the end of the court proceedings we were out of pocket $40,000” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

The financial burden grandparents experience needs to be recognised through equitable access to legal services focussed on the best interests of the children.

**Social isolation and loss of friends and social networks**

Social activities are essential to the health and wellbeing of all carers, but they are difficult to maintain. Grandparents may be widowed or divorced and caring for children alone (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005).

Many grandparents reported losing contact with their friends. Grandparents’ lives are irrevocably changed when they become parents again.

“The holidays were no longer possible and overseas travel became a thing of the past. Even a holiday with the children was not easy as the court order stipulated that we could only go away with them for a period of no more than ten days each year. … Family Services (statutory child protection department) have also allowed and paid for the children to visit their father’s parents during school holidays so this effectively reduces any time available for other pursuits or holidays” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

The stigma of substance abuse may affect attitudes of neighbours, grandparent and grandchildren’s friends, the school, other parents and classmates. Grandparents can feel blamed or express a sense of responsibility for their own children’s drug use.

“There is a tendency to blame the parents for the children’s problems – they say it must be our fault that our kids went off the rails. Our children blame us as well for taking their children” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Blame and shame exacerbate social isolation and increase psychological anxiety experienced by grandparents and their grandchildren. Lack of support and resources heightens psychological anxiety (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2005). While grandparents parenting grandchildren provide generous and loving support to their grandchildren who would otherwise be placed in foster homes, there is a need to consider the experience of the grandparents whose physical and psychological health as older adults is likely to suffer. There is a limited body of knowledge or research examining the health impacts of grandparents who are parenting grandchildren.

Feedback from grandparents in the ACT has identified the importance of social support from other grandparents and opportunities to meet. Grandparents who have attended support groups say that it has made a positive difference in their lives. For many different reasons, support groups do not suit everyone. Some grandparent families remain socially isolated because they fear judgement and recrimination from child protection or legal services:

“Being a grandparent you have to be careful because you get blamed for everything. You can’t smack or rouse on the children – it will go against you and it will end up in court. They told us to write everything down, if they (grandchildren) hurt themselves we have to document it, all the time you are having to be careful, you have to be careful and protect against possible repercussions” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Studies suggest respite care should be available for tired and isolated grandparents raising grandchildren (Hayslip & Hicks-Patrick, 2003). It may take time for grandparents to trust that others can support them or provide appropriate and safe care for their vulnerable grandchildren.

**Stress: Physical, emotional and social**

Grandparents may have been concerned for some time about what was happening as a result of parental alcohol or other drug use, family violence, poor nutrition, lack of cleanliness or abuse. Alternatively, grandparents may not have known the extent of the problems to which their grandchildren were subjected. When the children arrive, grandparents are unlikely to be prepared for the dramatic and often sudden changes caused by unplanned parenthood.

“A grandchild aged seven phoned the grandparents from a local public phone box asking them to come and pick her up. The child’s mother wouldn’t wake up, so the grandparents called an ambulance. Within hours the grandparents had four small children to care for” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

In addition to taking on the role of parenting, the alcohol or other drug use by their own children can add to the stigma, guilt and shame grandparents feel about what has happened and whether they could have prevented it.

Grandparents who are stressed are more likely to become depressed. Depression and anxiety can lead to inconsistent parenting, which has been linked to adolescent substance use (Rodger-Farmer, 1999).
There is a need for clinical health services for grandparent families. The provision of family therapy aimed at improving the quality of family relationships could assist in reducing grandparents and grandchildren’s stress. Practitioners need to be aware of the special issues faced in grandparent families and the circumstances in the past and intergenerational influences that have resulted in the formation of these families. Supportive educational and therapeutic counselling services which help grandparents to deal with the problems of their grandchildren, as well as group and individual counselling for grandchildren are options. Strengths-based interventions that convey messages of strength, hope and capture the essence of the richness of these family relationships, the love, the giving, the ways in which these grandparents keep their grandchildren safe and provide them with stable loving opportunities to grow up in what might otherwise be a chaotic context (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Ways forward

Research shows the key areas of intervention needing attention to address the issues faced by grandparents parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs are:

- accessibility to relevant and timely information and advice;
- consideration of financial implications of raising grandchildren;
- legal complexities and costs;
- health impacts on grandparents and children;
- the contribution of grandparents to the social capital of our society; and
- the need for further research (Families Australia, 2007, Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2006).

In planning for these families the wider family needs to be involved. Opportunities to bring the family network together could ensure that the resources of the extended family and community are more effectively used for the benefit of the grandchildren. Grandparents identified a need for service providers to have specialist education and training to inform them of the issues faced by grandparent families:

“Rules are there as guidelines….I’m hoping that maybe they can bend the rules a little and look at how our lives are affected by their decisions. I’m hoping someone will sit down with enough compassion and ask how we can make things better” (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2007).

Accessibility to relevant and timely information and advice

Advocacy and mediation could avoid family conflict in custody and access issues. Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) may act as a buffer against some of the stresses faced by grandparent families. The relative accessibility of FRCs increase their potential to offer comprehensive, timely and respectful processes that could go some way towards minimising many of the stresses faced by grandparents ‘when the children arrive’.

When the children arrive is a resource booklet, written specifically to assist kinship carers address and identify some of the issues and concerns that may arise when children come into their care. It recognises the impact of taking on the care of these children and the ramifications of a loved one’s substance abuse. Over the years, the Mirabel Foundation of Victoria has encountered many families from a range of heartbreaking experiences. Their stories of hardship and grief have many commonalities and it is these shared experiences and questions that may arise when children come into their care. It recognises the impact of taking on the care of these children and the ramifications of a loved one’s substance abuse. Over the years, the Mirabel Foundation of Victoria has encountered many families from a range of heartbreaking experiences. Their stories of hardship and grief have many commonalities and it is these shared experiences and questions that may arise when children come into their care.

Resources such as these need funding to be updated. Resources and information developed by community organisations with small one-off grants rapidly become out of date and there is a lack of funding to undertake updates and reprints. A national database of information could be linked to a National Parenting Resource such as the Raising Children website to be accessed by practitioners and the wider community.
Taking care of grandchildren puts financial stress on families who may already be on a low income. When grandparents take over the care of children they will have additional expenses – clothing, bedding, home modifications and perhaps extensions.

"The assets we accrued over a lifetime of hard work disqualify us of such things as legal aid, family allowance, carer’s pensions and health care cards” (CMS Forum, 2005).

Grandparents who sell retirement property are faced with considerable tax penalties through capital gains tax (grandparent communication CMS Forum October, 2005). Most grandparents will have planned for retirement not raising another family. The majority of grandparents who attended the ‘Drug use and families: A cross sector approach to exploring issues CMS Forum’ (held in Canberra, October 2005) spoke of the financial hardship raising grandchildren brings. A commonly raised issue was the difficulty grandparents had in finding out what they were entitled to through Commonwealth, state and territory departments. Entitlements were often changed at short notice or if circumstances changed slightly or they were given incorrect information.

After hearing the voices of grandparents, service providers, policymakers, peak bodies and the community sector, Canberra Mothercraft Society made eight recommendations.

1. The voices of grandparents parenting grandchildren affected by alcohol and other drug issues should be heard and listened to through regular consultation.

2. A collaborative intersectoral approach with cross-sectoral reference groups to inform future policy and service provision should be established.

3. Coordinated early intervention and prevention education and counselling programs are needed for grandparent families at risk of the impact of alcohol and other drug issues, with financial commitment to sustain programs that reduce social isolation, build family resilience and support networks.

4. Ameliorate the direct financial burden through recognition of the special needs in relation to government financial assistance to grandparent families.

5. Further research to identify the needs of grandparent families especially indigenous families is needed.

6. Develop an agreed minimum consistent data about children of families presenting to alcohol and other drug services.

7. Strengthen family resilience through mediation and support services, parenting and life skills education programs, responsive and flexible respite and child care and well supported out of home kinship care.

8. Recognise and build on the strengths of grandparents raising grandchildren by providing opportunities for training, advocacy and leadership activities, to serve as spokespersons with media, public and private sector policymakers, grandparent families and community and government organisations.

Grandparents parenting grandchildren spoke strongly and often of the importance in knowing their grandchildren are safe and well cared for. One of the themes that emerged from the grandparents’ stories was “it’s not about us, it’s about the children” The stories of grandparents are woven throughout this paper. The grandparents’ stories grew out of a ‘gathering process’ with a ‘listening team’ using a Narrative Therapy approach. A key aspect of Narrative Therapy involves documenting particular skills and knowledges held by individuals and communities, that will assist them to address the challenges they face. As these skills and knowledges are articulated and documented, they are acknowledged and become more available.

“We hope that the children will take their rightful place in society… We want to keep the dignity of children alive” (Canberra Mothercraft Society 2007).

References