

Grandparents are by far the greatest providers of informal child care, yet little is known about how grandparents view this role. Insights into grandparents' experiences have the potential to inform child and family policies.



# Grandparents supporting working families

## *Satisfaction and choice in the provision of child care*

**T**he rise in the number of sole-parent families and the rise in maternal employment are seen as being among the most significant changes to have affected family organisation in recent times (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2002; Wise 2003).

In Australia, there are almost one million (973,700) children growing up in sole-parent families and these represent one-fifth (around 570,000) of all families (ABS 2002). Over the past ten years the percentage of women in the workforce with dependent children aged 0–4 years from both couple and one-parent families increased from 44.5 per cent in 1991 to 49.8 per cent in 2001 (ABS 2002). While this reflects an increasing trend of workforce participation by women from 52.3 per cent to 55.2 per cent, it also indicates that there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women with young children of below school age who are entering or re-entering the workforce. Most of these women require alternative forms of child care.

Child care falls into the categories of formal and informal care. Formal care refers to licensed services; informal care encompasses, among other things, care by relatives and, in particular, by grandparents. Many grandparents *choose* to

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care for their young grandchildren while the parents of these children work – with mothers' employment being the main reason why grandmothers (and some grandfathers) accept the responsibility for child care on a regular basis (ABS 2003). Other grandparents may feel *obligated* to provide such care.

Trust and reciprocity is part of what occurs within kinship relationships where routine patterns of intergenerational support are provided (Brandon 2000). However, circumstances (such as geographical proximity or grandparents' employment) may make it difficult for grandparents to provide the desired support.

Mothers may enter or re-enter the workforce when their children are quite young. Figure 1 shows that, in 2002 for children aged 0–4 years, the demand for child care increased with the age of the child and peaked in the year before school when 90 per cent of four-year-olds were receiving some form of non-parental care or attended preschool, whereas 34 per cent of children below one year of age received some type of care.

The type of child care also varies with age. Figure 1 shows that at the time of the ABS data collection in June 2002, 22 per cent of all children under 12 months of age were regularly cared for by grandparents, with only 5 per cent of

children at that age using long day care. For one-year-olds, 57 per cent were using some form of child care, with grandparents providing 31 per cent of care. Two-year-olds were also largely being cared for by grandparents, but as children reached the age of three, more were using the more formal long day care services available in the community. The use of formal care then continued to increase with the age of the child until the child entered school (ABS 2003).

Families may also mix their children's care arrangements across different types of services or between formal and informal care arrangements. Figure 2 shows the various forms of child care used by families participating in the Multicare Project in New South Wales (Goodfellow 1999).

What has become evident through the ABS data and data gathered in the Multicare Project is the significant use of grandparents as child care providers. Over one-fifth of children of below school age in Australia are currently cared for by their grandparents as part of regular child care arrangements (ABS 2002).

What is less evident, however, is how grandparents perceive their role as regular child care providers. Following a short outline of previous grandparenting research, this article discusses grandparents' own perspectives, using data from the recent *Grandcaring Study*.

### Previous grandparenting research

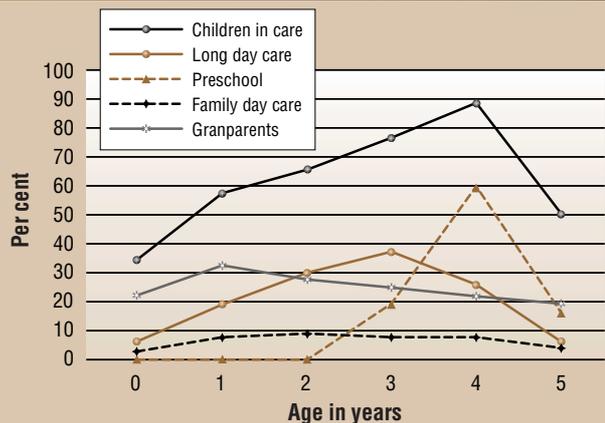
Most research on grandparenting has been conducted during the past 20 years. This research has largely investigated the nature of grandparenting from the point of view of those grandparents who have custodial care of their grandchildren. Studies in the United States and United Kingdom have highlighted the demands that such responsibilities place on grandparents (Smith and Drew 2002). Images also abound of grandparents who are nurturing, supportive, authoritative and influential

within family contexts.

Four recent Australian studies have focused on situations where grandparents have had the responsibility for caring for their young grandchildren on a regular (but non-custodial) basis.

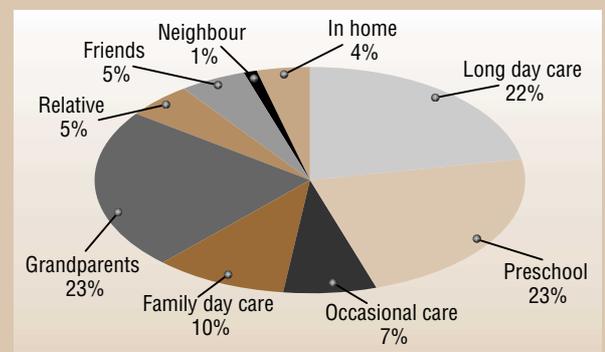
A study of 20 grandparents living in a middle-class locality within the Sydney metropolitan area identified ways in which the experiences of those grandparents were "rewriting the script" of grandmotherhood (Wearing and Wearing 1996: 176). These researchers drew conclusions from their study suggesting that the basic characteristics of "good" grandmothers were that they had more time to give their grandchildren than they did their own children, and were patient, caring and supportive but not interfering in the raising of their grandchildren. While some grandmothers provided child care to enable the child's parents to gain employment, they also balanced their child care and personal roles and so had an independent life that included paid and/or voluntary work as well as being involved in leisure activities. However, grandparents in the study resented any assumption that it was an automatic expectation that they take up the role of being a child care provider. The grandmothers objected to their child care or "baby-sitting" role being taken for granted by their families

Figure 1 Trends in the use of various forms of child care for children aged 0-4 years



Source: ABS 2003: 11-12.

Figure 2 Percentage of families using various forms of child care within a mix of care arrangements (n=697)



Source: Goodfellow 1999.

and by the community at large. While these grandmothers found caring for grandchildren a positive and satisfying experience, Wearing and Wearing raised concerns about the exploitation of grandparents who often felt "unrecognised and undervalued" (p. 175).

In a study undertaken by Millward (1998), interviews with 323 grandmothers revealed that 95 "looked after" their grandchildren at least once a week. While many of these grandmothers spoke positively about their role, others were somewhat ambivalent about the responsibility. Many grandmothers were still in paid employment and yet it was these grandmothers who were most likely to have responsibility for the care of their grandchildren on a regular basis. They, like their adult children, were balancing family and work.

A third study focused on the health of grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds – Women's Health in the North (WHIN) and the Victorian Cooperative of Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) (WHIN/VICSEG 2000). Many of these 30 grandparents, who had responsibility for the care of their grandchildren, viewed their grandparenting role positively. They valued going on outings with their grandchildren and attending the playgroups established as part of this action research project. However, a number of the grandparents also expressed concern about the difficulties that confronted them such as tiredness, loss of independence, the narrowing of social contacts, and the unavailability of support services.

The fourth Australian study was undertaken with 36 Vietnamese families (Vo-Thanh-Xuan and Liamputtong

2003). Twenty-three of these grandparents lived with their grandchildren who were six years of age or younger. As immigrants, the grandparents in this study were faced with having to address both cultural and generational expectations in relation to their role as grandparents. In addition to personal concerns, some of the common themes that arose from in-depth interviews with three grandparents and focus group discussions were: the heterogeneity of grandparents and grandparenting; the role that parents play as gatekeepers in giving grandparents access to their grandchildren; and the positive support and negative stress aspects of the arrangements.

These four Australian studies have highlighted the need to investigate further the nature of grandparents' experiences as regular child care providers. Indeed, Cotterill (1992) has suggested that attention should be given to the tensions between altruism and self-interest within such care arrangements. Concern has also been expressed that recent research has tended to be oriented towards "problem solving" rather than "gaining an understanding" through insights into the phenomenon of being a grandparent (Smith and Drew 2002).

Participatory research is a useful means of examining the experiences of grandparents who provide secondary rather than primary care, engaging with grandparents in the inquiry process, and situating the outcomes of such investigations within a theoretical, societal and economic context. The use of participatory approaches to researching older people is also strongly advocated as part of investigations currently being undertaken through the Growing Older Program in the United Kingdom (Walker 2002).

### Seeking the views of grandparents

The *Grandcaring Study*, described here, sought to gather the perspectives of grandparents on their role as (informal) carers of grandchildren on a regular basis, and to identify the joys, frustrations and dilemmas associated with that experience. Underlying its experiential orientation, the study was also open to investigating the sensitivities of relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren and between grandparents and their adult children who were the parents of the grandchildren.

The initial approach was to find out what the grandparents experienced as part of being a grandparent responsible for the care of a young grandchild. Subsequently, their stories provided insights into the meaning of those experiences.

The guiding questions that shaped the recall of experience were:

- What is a typical day like for you when you care for your grandchild?
- What are some of the most/least satisfying parts of your regular caring role?
- What are some of the things you discussed with your children as part of making arrangements to care for your grandchild?
- What are some of the most important things about your role and how it impacts on your life?

- What are some of the things that have confirmed or challenged your views on having regular responsibility for the care of your grandchildren?

The investigation encompassed two studies. Study 1 involved grandparents who attended one or other of two playgroups in the Sydney metropolitan area. One was a regular playgroup for mothers and their children. The other playgroup specifically targeted grandparents with their grandchildren. Both playgroups met on a weekly basis. A focus group discussion was held with grandparent couples who attended the regular playgroup. The researcher attended the grandparents' playgroup for eight weeks, gathering data on each occasion.



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Study 2 was undertaken following an open call for expressions of interest from grandparents across inner and outer metropolitan areas of Sydney and in a rural area of New South Wales to participate in the research. All enquiries were followed up to ensure that potential participants fitted the criteria of caring for a child younger than school age on a regular basis for at least five hours each week.

A total of 32 grandparents were involved in the *Grandcaring Study*, with 15 participants in Study 1 and 17 participants in Study 2. There were four couple grandparents and two grandfathers; the remainder were grandmothers. Grandparents were from a range of socio-economic backgrounds and their ages ranged from 45 to 74 years. While many were born in Australia, others came from non-English-speaking countries, but they all spoke fluent English. The grandparents cared for a total of 41 children whose ages ranged from five months to four years. Twenty-nine of the children were two years old or younger. Four grandparents lived with their grandchild's family.

The grandparents most often negotiated the child care arrangements with either their daughters or daughters-in-law. The reasons the grandparents gave for caring for their grandchild(ren) were mostly related to enabling their daughters or daughters-in-law to participate in the workforce. However, there were exceptions: one grandparent was helping her daughter who had had an accident and was finding it difficult to physically care for her child, and three grandparents (including one grandparent couple) were caring for grandchildren while their daughters attended recreational activities.

While in-depth semi-structured interviews were the primary sources of data, Study 2 supplemented data from interviews with grandparents' journal writing. Interview transcripts were shared with individual participants, and two small focus group discussions were held in Study 1. The researchers kept research diaries during the process so that emerging concepts could be recorded for further investigation.

## Grandparents' experiences

An overarching finding of the study was that grandparents' care experiences are diverse, with many contradictory views. Grandparents are not a homogeneous group, and thus the findings reflect the views of individual grandparents in the study rather than generalised accounts.

Each family has its own situation or system within which particular variables interplay and impact on decision-making processes. Within every grandparent story or experience there were positive and negative aspects. However, underpinning all the stories was a desire on the part of grandparents to support their adult children's wellbeing. Associated with this was an intense desire to be part of their grandchild's everyday life.

### The rewarding side

Grandparents saw care as a responsibility to kin and to building relationships. They valued having a close relationship with their grandchild and developing this relationship when their grandchild was quite young – “an opportunity that you should grab” (Gwen). It was through that relationship that grandparents experienced a strong bonding with their grandchild, described by grandparents as a responsive, intensive form of nurturing – “It's more than child care” (Libby) – in which they were significant loving adults in their grandchild's life. They spoke about how rewarding it was to have such a close association with their grandchild and the special bond that existed between them – “It's the most important thing in the world”, “to educate” and “to pass on values” (Nan, Tess).

The joy and pleasure that grandparents experienced were evident in the ways in which they spoke about their grandchildren – “I love their imagination and responsiveness” (Thelma). However, grandparents were not only observers of their grandchildren; they also facilitated their grandchild's development – “I brought them over to see the big seas at Coogee the other day and these big mushrooms that grow in the grounds here” (Deidre).

Grandparents were readily able to provide “stability, continuity and routine” (that is, consistency and, by implication, flexibility) (Thelma). Literature on child care has identified such factors as being paramount to quality care (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

### The challenging side

Caring for grandchildren was also seen by grandparents to be physically and emotionally exhausting – “I'm bone tired” (Libby). Grandparents noted that it was often 30 years or more since they had had their own children and it was now physically challenging for them to lift and carry younger grandchildren and *just be there with them* all the time.

Several grandparents also found that lengthy care routines became repetitive and monotonous. Jean explained that while it is wonderful to have a grandchild around, “I get bored sitting and playing with her and doing things like drawing or playing with playdough”. For Jenny, “It's like Groundhog Day” because you do the same things day in, day out. These feelings were summed up by Thelma – “It's occupying my time but not occupying my mind”. (Thelma was a highly educated grandparent who held a senior executive position until she retired to care for her two grandchildren.)

Grandparents' commitment to caring for their grandchildren and the physical and emotional challenges and associated responsibilities were also identified as a limiting factor restricting grandparents' social activities. Jean

considered that, as a parent, “It is possible to get involved in activities where your children may be involved, such as those associated with school – however, for grandparents it is different”. Even going out for coffee with friends was not as easy for grandparents “when you have a three-year-old crawling round your feet” (Thelma).

Having personal time and free time was valued by grandparents and they looked forward to having this time outside their regular care arrangement hours. Therefore, it is not surprising that grandparents found unplanned requests to “babysit”, or the delayed arrival of the parents to collect their child, to be challenging. Grandparents often considered babysitting requests to be unreasonable because such requests implied that little account was taken of the emotionality of the caring relationship that they had with their grandchild. They believed that they supported their adult children in ways that had social and economic benefit to their family but did not wish to be unpaid babysitters and “taken for granted” (Rema).

### Kin relationships and emotional availability

Throughout the conversations with grandparents it became quite clear that they perceived their role as being engaged with and responsive to their grandchildren. This was particularly reflected in conversations about “engagement with” and “being available emotionally” (Jenny) to their grandchild.

Engagement was not only about the amount of time grandparents spent with the child but how they spent that time. Grandparents valued interactional processes which reflected a caring relationship and conveyed warmth, consistency, trust, responsiveness, attunement and reciprocity. These features are more indicative of “authoritative” rather than “authoritarian” parenting (Wise 2003: 10). The sensitivity with which grandparents engaged in emotional exchanges with their grandchildren reflects Biringen's (2000) concept of “emotional availability”. Emotional availability and related maternal sensitivity not only support the quality dimensions of child care but also provide the basis for enhancing children's developing social competence and growing self-esteem (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000).

### Satisfaction and choice

Greater grandparent satisfaction with their role appears to be related to the degree of negotiation that occurs about the boundaries and responsibilities associated with that role. Finch (1989, cited in Hakim 2000: 293) suggests that relations between family members are much more than negotiation for they are structured by “the delicate balance between feelings of affection, moral imperatives of duty, and calculations about personal advantage and disadvantage”.

While Millward (1998) supports such a view, she also argues that other factors such as geographical proximity, personal affection and sense of obligation, as well as socio-economic resources, come into play when considering the role and function of family. Research with grandparents also suggests that autonomy and cohesion are additional elements that need to be added to the list of processes. These elements are in sharp contrast to imposition and a feeling of being “put upon” (Nan).

While most grandparents expressed levels of satisfaction with their role, it was clear that those who were least satisfied felt a sense of disempowerment. As Deidre explained, having felt pressured by her daughter into giving up work to care for her grandchildren: *I didn't want to give up work . . . I couldn't believe what had happened*

[no longer working and caring for grandchildren instead], there is no way I'd have chosen this." For Deidre, her choice was to trade her personal autonomy for intergenerational obligation and a commitment to ensuring that her adult children's needs were being met.

Grandparents came to the care experience with unique histories and understandings and were seeking different levels of active engagement with their grandchildren. The *Grandcaring Study*

**With continuing changes in family composition, the increase in blended, step and sole-parent families, and the rise in maternal employment, it is possible that grandparents may be the only significant and stable family members in the lives of many young children.**



identified four different carer clusters that reflected a continuum of grandparent satisfaction and balance between care responsibilities and pursuing their personal interests. These clusters were "avid carers", "flexible family carers", "selective carers", and "hesitant carers". The clusters reflect grandparents' care commitments and their views in relation to contributions within the family, centrality of the care role relative to broader life goals and priorities, and their personal sense of autonomy and independence (Laverty 2003).

"Avid carers" were those who chose to live lives revolving around their grandchildren, and this is reflected in Rani's explanation:

"I live for the children – I don't know what I would do without them in my life ... My daughter was saying, 'Mummy you have to find something else, not only the children. When they go to school they won't be here all the time – let them come after school. I'm already 62 years old so whatever I have now I will enjoy it. Things change. Maybe I won't be able to walk in the future, who knows. Enjoy it now.'" (Rani)

On the other hand, Stefan indicated that while he chose to live his life around his grandchildren he also placed some priority on his own personal time. His comments reflected those of other "flexible carers":

"To me the family is the thing ... But the one great thing about grandparenting when you have had the kids for four or five hours, or six hours, and you're really tired and you can say 'Oi, take this and go home.'" (Stefan)

"Selective carers" were those who sought to live independent lives and wanted their sense of self to be defined more broadly, although care of grandchildren was an important part of their lives. Insights into this view were revealed through comments that indicated a sense of balance and compromise:

"I want to have my own life, I want to have my own privacy, I want to have my own solitude. All the other things in my life – I want to have time to do all that. I wouldn't be at all happy to have the children five days a week. I would do that if I had to, but ... I would regret very much having to give up that much of my life in order to, because my daughter needed me ... Time is very important in your sixties." (Libby)

"That was one of the considerations, that it worked for us as well ... you've got to set your limits to start with." (Lyn and Paul)

"Hesitant carers" also recognised a need for balance in their lives but wanted their lives to be filled with multiple roles. They had either not anticipated their role as child care providers or planned for the care of grandchildren to be only a small part of their overall involvement:

"Never in my life did I expect to be doing this." (Camilla)

"I liked my job ... Look, I love my grandchildren and enjoy them, but I don't enjoy the life. It is not my life I'm leading." (Deidre)

Grandparents born in both non-English-speaking countries and English-speaking countries other than Australia were mostly clustered in the "avid carers" group. This indicates a potentially stronger commitment among this generation of overseas-born grandparents to family care and contribution, and the passing down of cultural and family traditions (ways of doing things) across generations.

The degree to which grandparents expressed satisfaction with

their role appeared to be directly related to the extent to which care arrangements fitted with their personal expectations of family contribution, autonomy and the nature of choices they made in undertaking the role.

Glasser (1998) has identified five basic human needs that can be related to the nature of the choices that grandparents make:

- the need for belonging (kinship, as part of the family);
- the need to have some type of control over one's life rather than be dominated by others (having personal space as well as time and a degree of independence);
- the need to have freedom to pursue personal interests and satisfy needs (Glasser links this type of freedom with the ability to be creative and argues that creative people are more likely to be unselfish and thus willing to share something of themselves with others);
- the need for enjoyment, particularly in relationship with others (gaining/receiving pleasure); and
- the need for survival (maintaining one's health and wellbeing).

It was evident that some grandparents had weighed up their choices and while they may have felt constrained by their decision they were choosing to remain in existing care arrangements. For example, the choice may have been to support family harmony and relationships rather than complain about the disregard of their adult children towards their emotional involvement with their grandchild and the intentionality of their caring relationship. Other grandparents clearly articulated that it was not their role to undertake additional responsibilities:

"I told my daughter that if she were to have another child then she would have to give up work." (Rema)

Still others made a life choice and commitment to their adult children to care for grandchildren:

"When you retire you think that you are going to do a lot of things and then you end up minding grandchildren." (Edna)

"It has turned our lives around completely. We used to have a caravan hooked up to the car and we went away for about nine months

of the year travelling. Now the caravan's gone, the car's gone, and we've changed our lives completely to look after our grandson. Sometimes I regret that, but I wouldn't go back ... we plan our lives around him." (Norman)

"His parents are talking about another child, so it will be our child too." (Edna)

## Summary and Implications

Many of the findings in this study, supported by earlier research, confirm that grandparents should not be regarded as a homogeneous group. Findings presented here also provide further insights into grandparents' experiences and the complexity of grandparent/parent/grandchild relationships. In particular, these findings draw attention to:

- the significance of grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren and their role in fostering their grandchildren's development in the critical early years;
- the importance of grandparents' needs being considered alongside adult children's work commitments and grandchildren's wellbeing as part of care arrangements, and the need for grandparents to become "care negotiators";
- the importance of grandparents having personal choices and the capacity to retain a degree of autonomy and sense of self; and
- the need for grandparents to achieve the right "balance" in their lives – juggling family contribution, obligation and independence in care negotiations.

With continuing social change, including changes in family composition and the rise in maternal employment, it is possible for grandparents to play a significant role in the lives of many young children. Further to this, consideration of the role of grandparents as regular child care providers within the current context of child care provision suggests that there are a number of areas that require further attention.

First, changing demographics may mean that there will be a continuing demand for grandparents to provide child care on a regular basis, particularly for children under three years of age. However, with older people remaining in the workforce, grandparents may, like their adult children, have to balance work and family.

Second, the quality of care provided by grandparents reflects the recent recognition being given to the importance of relationships during the critical early years of life. Therefore, it is desirable that, where needed, grandparents be supported in providing such care and given recognition for the significant role that they play in children's early development.

Third, greater consideration needs to be given to including grandparents more fully in discussions on families, child care provision, and family policies and initiatives. As providers of family support, greater recognition needs to be given to diversity among grandparents, as well as the mix of family circumstances, the individuality of choice, and the nature and extent of care negotiations across generations and within family contexts.

Fourth, the stories told by grandparents in this study have revealed the existence of tensions between familial emotional exchanges and obligations associated with inter-generational reciprocity, workforce participation and the market oriented economy within which we live and work. While community cohesion and social capital are being valued as alternatives to current concerns about social dysfunction, these tensions may well spell a danger of social

isolation for some grandparents. Therefore, there is a need for grandparents to have a voice and to have their voices heard.

Finally, there may well be a need to consider the roles and responsibilities of grandparents as well as parents within broader workplace reform. While grandparent child care providers do have a role to play as significant attachment figures during the early years of their grandchildren's lives, they also have a role as contributors to the child care system in supporting economic growth. The grandparents in the *Grandcaring Study* have made it possible to open up some of these issues for further consideration.

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