

The rapidly changing nature of family and society is underscored by the rapid growth of a new group in society whose members are slipping through the social safety net – grandparents who are substantially responsible for raising their grandchildren.

In the main, this caring role has been thrust upon them by the inability of their own children to care for their offspring, often due to substance abuse.

In February 2003, the Federal Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Hon Larry Anthony asked COTA* National Seniors to talk to grandparents responsible for raising their grandchildren about: their existing support mechanisms; what additional support they may require; the financial and legal issues they may be facing; and any concerns they may have about the wellbeing of their grandchildren.

This paper discusses some of the findings of that study.

* COTA stands for Councils on the Ageing. COTA National Seniors is a partnership between the State and Territory Councils on the Ageing, COTA Australia, and National Seniors Association.

Grandparents' raising grandchildren – a new class of disadvantaged Australians

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No one knows how many grandparents are raising grandchildren in Australia today. In its June 2003 Family Characteristics Survey, the Australian Bureau of Statistics included specific questions about each child and its relationship to the male and female parent, guardian or primary carer in the household, with "grandchild" being one of the categories. These data will be available in March 2004. However, as evident from a range of sources, it is likely that in Australia the number of grandparents raising grandchildren is growing in line with international trends.

According to the United States Census 2000 Supplementary Survey, the number of children being raised by grandparents in the United States had increased by 78 per cent over the past decade. Between 2.3 and 2.4 million grandparents have primary responsibility for the care and upbringing of 4.5 million grandchildren (Hayslip and Patrick 2003: xi). Most developed countries are experiencing this trend. In the United Kingdom, for example, while authorities do not know the total number of children being brought up by a relative or friend, information from the British Social Attitudes Survey for 2001 and 1988 suggests that there are around 100,000 children under the age of 13 years living with a grandparent (Richards and Tapsfield 2003: 5).

The study

In order to explore grandparents' experiences of raising their grandchildren, COTA National Seniors conducted the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Study*. Various methods were used to identify grandparents, including existing grandparenting and seniors groups, local papers, radio interviews, and community newsletters. In addition, many grandparents mentioned that the ABC TV program, *Australian Story*, about the former New South Wales Police Commissioner and his wife raising their three grandchildren, which coincided with the study, made it easier for them to come forward.

Between February and June 2003, a total of 499 grandparents (63 per cent of them couples) raising 548 grandchildren participated in the project, making up 308 grandparent-headed families. Sixty-eight per cent of all grandparents were aged 55 years or older, the eldest being 82 years (raising three teenagers aged 13, 15 and 17 on her own).

Of the grandchildren, 53 per cent were under ten years of age, the youngest being just 12 weeks old. Just over half of the grandparents were raising two or more grandchildren, with some having up to six children in their care.

Grandparents attended one of 22 workshops and forums in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Grandparents also completed 110 individual responses, mainly in writing but also by telephone and email, answering the same set of questions posed at the workshops. At the same time, the Tasmanian Parliament (2003) conducted an inquiry and in May published its *Report on Issues Relating to Custodial Grandparents*.

All the workshops followed the same format to address three main questions:

- Out of your experiences, tell us about the issues you have encountered, particularly relating to: legal matters; financial issues; parenting your grandchildren; any other – for example, services for children, respite, child care. These issues may arise in the immediate every day, medium term and long term.
- Tell us how you are dealing with these issues.
- Tell us what would help you deal with these issues more effectively.

The workshops were designed to allow as much time as possible for small group discussion of the grandparents' issues and concerns. Information about Centrelink payments and local services and support was provided at each workshop.

Given the recruitment methods that were chosen, and the focus of the study on the issues faced by grandparents, it is likely that grandparents who are experiencing few difficulties in raising their grandchildren were under-represented in the sample. Further, the material gathered focused on the problems more than the rewards of grandparenting. Nevertheless, the data clearly identify serious issues faced by a significant number of grandparents.

Many grandparents spoke for the first time and with great emotion about their situation, and found support from others with similar stories. They obtained useful information about assistance available. Grandparents made contact with each other and talked of joining a support group, or of setting up new groups.

"I can't describe the horror I felt at the abuse of my grandchildren or my fear for their safety. I had to deal with police and welfare departments and all sorts of people outside my realm of experience. My life was turned upside down and changed forever. All because my son at a vulnerable time in his life was attracted to a person totally unsuitable as a partner, for all the wrong reasons! I've lost my health, my job, my partner and years of my life. Thankfully, I've retained my sanity and sense of humour." (Grandmother aged 52, raising grandchild aged 13)

How the children came into the care of their grandparents

For all the stories told by grandparents, there are broadly three arrangements by which the grandchildren come into and remain in the care of grandparents:

- *Commonwealth Family Law*: parenting orders result from a hearing before the Family Court or Federal Magistrates Court. Support for grandparents raising grandchildren in these circumstances is limited to Family Tax Benefits and any other means tested pension or benefit they may be eligible for through Centrelink and Child Support Agency payments if such apply.
- *State legislation*: designed for the protection of children and young people. On application from the child protection authorities, the Children's Court (however styled in each State) may make a range of protective orders to provide a legally sanctioned mandate for child protection services to work with the family.
- *Informal arrangements*: which may or may not have the agreement of the parents, and may or may not be with the involvement of the State child protection authorities.

Among the most significant of a number of underlying factors that impact on the transfer of the care of children from parent to grandparent is children's exposure to parental drug abuse which may damage the psychosocial development of children more than any other developmental area. It affects the way these children interact, think and feel about themselves, others and society. The literature indicates children may develop anti-social behaviour, hostility, depression, and a wide range of other stress related difficulties (Patton 2003: 7-8).

Another major factor is that children may be wrongly diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

after exposure to a drug-using lifestyle when increasing evidence suggests that the children may actually be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Patton 2003: 8).

In essence, these children were emotionally – and sometimes intellectually and physically – damaged from their experiences of abuse and neglect, and exposure to their parents' drug using. Many children have experienced prolonged family violence, including an alarming number whose mothers have been killed by their partners.

Study findings

Several major issues emerged from the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Study*. These included legal issues, financial issues, the parenting of a new generation, the lack of children's and family services, grandparents' relationships, and the health of grandparents. These are discussed below.

Legal issues

Some grandparents speak of the injustice of a legal system under which the parents often qualify for legal aid and continue to receive it even in circumstances where grandparents feel the action is aimed at forcing them to spend their savings. The grandparents still have to pay all their legal costs while the parents are covered by Legal Aid. Grandparents are rarely eligible for legal aid as owning even a

modest home disqualifies them, so they must pay for their own legal representation each time even if the hearing is adjourned. They also complain they cannot obtain information about the legal process from Legal Aid staff but the parents receive extensive assistance.

"The parents had access to legal aid; we did not. My advice was that because we owned our own home, Legal Aid would place a lien on it and could sell the house at a later stage to recover the monies. In addition, I have spent approximately \$4,000 on legal fees in respect to our protection of the child." (Grandparent at workshop)

Some grandparents find the Family Court system and its rulings particularly difficult. For example: parents may contest decisions for the care of the grandchildren; a parent in jail may still have legal custody; parents may be erratic in exercising access rights leaving the grandparents to cope with hurt and disappointed children.

Many grandparents say that they have been given the children but not the authority to make decisions for those children, and that their position as carers of their grandchildren is often precarious. This can have major effects on the children's health and education.

Grandparents and their grandchildren can be caught in a confusing legal system in which Commonwealth and State laws and responsibilities determine the extent of ongoing assistance and security they will have.

Grandchildren's birth certificates are often difficult and expensive to obtain. This is particularly important in the case of informal arrangements when, for example, the grandparents need the birth certificate to enrol the child in



school but have no proof of relationship or authority to request a certificate.

Financial issues

Some grandparents have a sense of injustice in being asked by governments to take in their grandchildren who, if grandparents were not available, would end up in State foster care systems as the responsibility of the child protection authorities, and at considerable expense to taxpayers. In many cases, when grandparents seek help from those authorities they are told: "We know the children are safe with you. We have closed the file."

In other cases, grandchildren are covered by care and protection orders and so their carers are entitled to receive financial and other assistance, which many grandparents find most beneficial when it works smoothly. However, some grandparents are reluctant to ask for help because in the past child protection staff had suggested that if they are seeking help they must not be coping and that perhaps the grandchildren should be removed from their care.

The Australian Government Centrelink system is also confusing to many grandparents with an array of payments and eligibility requirements. Means tests apply to most Centrelink payments, so that any financial support for the grandchildren, such as Child Support payments, impact on the grandparents' own Centrelink entitlements. If the grandparents are self-funded retirees (or still in the workforce), their income and assets are taken into consideration in the means test for Family Tax Benefits for the grandchildren, and therefore couples especially may not be eligible for any payment.

"Financially we are not receiving any support from either parent. We are financially supporting our grandson on our own. We do not get any Centrelink payments. These are still being paid to the mother, and she does not spend any of the payments on her son. My husband and myself are looking after all of our grandson's needs. As my husband has a full-time job, and it is shift work, most of the day and night care is done by me." (Grandparent couple aged 47 and 50, raising grandchild aged four months)

Some grandparents say that Centrelink does not inform grandparents of possible benefits available to them. There is no category for grandparents and no recognition of grandparents' status or circumstances, so they are made to look for work or are put on inappropriate benefits.

Grandparents find that they are spending their retirement savings and superannuation on raising their grandchildren. Any hope of being self-funded retirees is lost. Many grandparents find their employment and retirement plans thrown into chaos by the cost of raising the grandchildren. Depending on the age and needs of the grandchildren and difficulties with child care, they may be forced to give up work in order to care for them full time, resulting in a serious loss of income. Others find that because of a lack of financial assistance from government and/or the parents, they need to continue working well beyond their planned retirement date.

Many grandparents struggle with the cost of raising their grandchildren. Apart from the normal day-to-day costs that families usually have, these grandchildren often involve greater expense than other children because of their psychological, emotional and physical health care needs.

Grandparents worry about the high cost of education – fees, uniforms and books. They often find that their grand-

children are not eligible for State education allowances or "school cards" because a means test is applied to the grandparents' income and/or assets. The grandchildren would be eligible for those benefits if living with their parents or if in foster care.

Grandparents rarely receive any financial assistance for the initial resettlement when grandchildren first arrive. Police or child protection workers may bring them at the weekend or late at night, without basic clothing and personal items. Grandparents have to find the money for urgent requirements – for example, bedding, furniture, clothes. They believe they should be treated the same as foster carers who receive an initial establishment grant and regular payments for clothing and major or special expenditure.

Many grandparents feel very strongly that they should be treated equally with foster carers who assume the care of other people's children. They state most firmly that they are saving Commonwealth and State Governments an enormous amount of money and therefore they must be supported. If they did not take in their grandchildren, the children would be the responsibility of government and placed in foster care.

Parenting a new generation

Grandparents speak of being too old to be doing the things young children want to do. They often feel very tired, and they worry about their capacity to keep going. Many say that the hardest thing is discipline. They do not know what is acceptable.

Some grandparents still have their own younger children living at home. Added to this, their grandchildren's early experiences may mean they have particular behavioural and emotional problems which the grandparents are unlikely to have encountered first time around and which perhaps require a different approach to parenting.

Lack of children's and family services

These children are often very insecure and exhibit a range of traumatised behaviour, such as extreme attention seeking and acting up. They need routine and security, and a great deal of encouragement.

Most grandparents identify the need for specialist therapeutic services – for example, counsellors and psychologists to assist with their grandchildren's behavioural problems. Most of their grandchildren have experienced trauma and abuse, abandonment and/or rejection. They all have to live with the grief and anger of not being with their parents.

Grandparents find that specialist therapy services for their grandchildren are limited or non-existent. Some excellent specialist paediatric services have lost their funding, and rural areas are grossly under-served. Services approved and paid for by the child protection authorities may be withdrawn because the authority assesses that the grandchildren no longer need them. General services are not necessarily equipped to identify and cope with the needs of these children.

"When I was first offered my grandson he was eight months old, and family and friends offered help. He was born heroin addicted and continues to have ongoing academic, social and behavioural problems. He is ADHD also. So care is continuous. There is often aggressive behaviour with no break. A difficult situation with a difficult child (through no fault of his own) whose mother is still drug affected and now diagnosed with schizophrenia." (Grandmother aged 50, raising grandchild aged nine)

Many see the need for family counselling but this is rarely offered or available. Many grandparents feel that they are given children with “problems” but then given no support. They would appreciate specialist assessment of their grandchildren, advice and ongoing monitoring, but this is rarely provided.

Many grandparents desperately need respite care. They rarely get a break from the responsibilities of caring for their grandchildren. They are very protective of their grandchildren and insist that respite must be safe, appropriate to the children’s age, and with people known to and trusted by both grandparents and grandchildren.

Grandparents’ relationships

Grandparents can find that all they had prepared for at this stage in their lives has changed – change of lifestyle, changed relationships between family members, and a loss of freedom. They may experience relationship difficulties with each other and even separation and divorce because of demands of caring for their grandchildren, the loss of their time together, and the shattering of their plans for the future.

“It took its toll on my marriage – my husband has left me. It’s hard doing it myself, especially when he’s been a very caring and loving husband. It became very stressful on him. He did a lot of overtime. It is also affecting my job, as I need to be away from home for two to three nights. They get sick and I take time off work, when we only get three days parenting leave per year.” (Grandmother aged 49, raising grandchildren aged three and six)

They may find that their other children are angry that their sibling cannot or will not take responsibility for their own children. Grandparents mourn the loss of a normal grandparenting relationship with their grandchildren and may even lose contact with their other adult children and their offspring.

These grandparents often experience isolation from their peer group – perhaps arising from their shame at having a dysfunctional family, but largely because their friends are no longer interested in having children present in their social activities. Few grandparents have, or can afford, reliable and trusted babysitters to allow them to go out without the grandchildren.

Many grandparents come to rely on grandparent support groups for the friendship, advice and understanding that members can offer each other. Some even say that the support groups save their sanity and keep them going.

Grandparents’ health

Grandparents say that their own health is badly affected by the burden of raising their grandchildren without support and recognition. They must cope with their own stress and grief, at the same time as they are helping their grandchildren through theirs. They often do not have the time to grieve properly for their loss – of their child (the parent), of their freedom and plans, and of their life as normal grandparents. They often have the constant worry about money, the cost of raising children faced by all families as well as the additional costs of these children’s particular needs, and the threat (and reality) of expensive legal action.

“The years have taken their toll on us. Our health is going. Prescriptions eat into our wages. Still we struggle on ... We’re proud people.

We love our grandchildren. We’d like to be younger but we can’t be. I’ve heard of great-grandparents still bringing up the great-grandchildren. I don’t think we’ll be alive to do that. The stress and worry of the money would be too much, especially when you see their parents sitting back copping it sweet on the dole with all the government support.” (Grandparent couple aged 55 and 57, raising grandchildren aged 12, 14 and 15)

Grandparents are extremely concerned about their grandchildren in the event of their own ill health and death, even if their spouse or partner is still alive. Some need home-based care services for themselves. Many talk about doing their best to keep well while facing the normal effects of ageing and the future. It is also quite common for grandparents in their 40s and 50s also to have elderly parents to care for.



Conclusions

Grandparents take on responsibility for their grandchildren with love, courage and determination that the children should have the best opportunities for healthy and happy lives. The *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Study* has shown a failure of community support systems in regard to grandparents raising grandchildren. This failure has profound impacts on the lives of both grandparents and grandchildren – in the

present and for the future. In conjunction with grandparents raising grandchildren and their support groups, COTA National Seniors developed a set of 21 recommendations to help resolve some of the problems. We do not underestimate the difficulties of implementation, but it is self-evident that these issues urgently need to be tackled.

This study was specifically focused on grandparents raising their grandchildren but it also points to a broader challenge in regard to the role of grandparents in a climate of change across society, the family and the economy. The study raises questions about the pressures on grandparents generally, in families not necessarily influenced by drugs and violence but simply by the stresses of precarious employment, marital failure, financial problems and other factors.

References

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COTA National Seniors has put forward a wide range of recommendations to the Australian Government. The full report and recommendations to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, is available on the website of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services at www.facs.gov.au.