

Grand parenting

the growing influence of grandparents

With changing families, increased life expectancy, growing numbers of dual-worker households and higher rates of family breakdown, grandparents are now playing an increasing role in their grandchildren's lives. Despite their growing importance, there has been little research from the perspective of young people on their involvement with grandparents and how this impacts on their well-being.

A team lead by Professor Ann Buchanan from the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at University of Oxford and Dr Flouri of the Institute of Education, have just completed, funded by the ESRC¹, the first nationally representative study of young people's views on their relationships with their grandparents. They surveyed 1596 children (aged 11-16) in schools across England and Wales and undertook in-depth interviews with 40 young people.

The study sought to answer some of the key questions: To what extent are grandparents involved in young people's lives and what factors are associated with this involvement? What impact does this involvement have on grandchildren's emotional and behavioural well-being? To what extent do grandparents help or hinder the grandchild's adjustment at times of family breakdown? To what extent do grandparents reduce the impact on grandchildren's well-being of family adversity?

METHODOLOGY

A representative sample of 1596 young people aged 11-16 from England and Wales were recruited by a survey company (GfKNOP). The young people completed a questionnaire in classroom including details of family type, educational attainment (SATs), special educational needs status, and free school meal eligibility. The young people reported on grandparents' characteristics and the role of the parent in supporting that relationship. Elder and Conger's (1994) grandparent-grandchild emotional closeness scale was used. Well-being was assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Family adversity was measured using Tiet et al.'s (2001) Adverse Life Events Scale. Additionally, for a first time, the school's postcode was used to identify the level of local disadvantage, measured on the Indices of Deprivation. Multi level, multi-variate regression models were used to analyse the survey findings. From the original survey sample, 40 interviews were undertaken with young people.²

PARENTING TIME GAP

The extent of grandparental involvement was surprising. More than 80% saw their grandparents on a regular basis. Almost a third of maternal grandmothers provided regular caretaking for their grandchildren while another 40% provide occasional care-taking. Other grandparents were also involved. Most grandparents provided regular financial support or other assistance. In addition, there was considerable involvement from grandparents in sharing young people's interests and activities, and talking about future plans. They were also involved in helping to solve the young people's problems and taking part in school activities.

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FOOTNOTES:

1 ESRC 'RES-000-22-2283', June 2008

2 The interviews were conducted by researchers Jo-Pei Tan and Julia Griggs. Interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo.



keepers' to grandparent involvement. Grandchildren felt grandparents became closer when they undertook some traditional parenting tasks.

GRANDPARENT INVOLVEMENT AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT

The second question considered whether the high level of grandparental involvement impacted on grandchild wellbeing. To date research in the UK and US has been ambivalent showing that grandparents with heavy grandchild commitments can be severely depressed, and this impacts on children, and that adolescents become less close to grandparents as they get older. In this study it was interesting that a grandparent's active involvement was significantly associated with *better adjusted* adolescents. In particular, taking part in grandchildren's hobbies and interests was significantly associated with fewer emotional and behaviour problems, and fewer peer problems. Grandparent

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involvement in schooling or education was also related to a lower maladjustment score and fewer conduct problems, and talking to grandparents about future plans was associated with fewer overall emotional and behavioural difficulties, and fewer peer problems.

The interviews showed that grandparents were often regular attendees at school events, providing emotional support and 'cheerleading' their grandchildren. They were also participants in grandchildren's hobbies. Many grandparents played a role as teachers/educators and as general supporters. Helping with homework was a key form of involvement. Grandparents also helped their grandchildren in thinking about their future careers. A strong theme was the role grandparents played during times of difficulty or crisis. Some young people reported that it was easier to open-up to their grandparents than to their parents.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN

Under the law in England and Wales, Grandparents have no legal rights over grandchildren. A study in 2003 of 44 families involved in divorce proceedings concluded that grandparent-grandchild contact post divorce did not have an 'essential purpose or fundamental importance' which would justify an enhanced legal status for grandparents. In the current national study, however, grandparent involvement was strongly associated with reduced adjustment difficulties in all family types but particularly so amongst adolescents from non-intact families. Contextual risk factors do not occur in isolation, and it is the combination of various contextual and family risk factors that portends negative child outcomes, in particular child maladjustment. The question here was to what extent did grandparents, in times of family adversity, and neighbourhood disadvantage, act as a buffer against grand children's risk of emotional and behavioural problems? This analysis while taking account of neighbourhood disadvantage, found closeness to a grandparent reduced the associations of recent adverse life events with maladjustment.

CONCLUSION

The role of grandparents is almost invisible in UK family policy. Although individual families may have different relationships with grandparents, overall the findings from this study suggest that

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The findings were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Grandparents Association on June 4th, 2008. Participants voiced concerns about the limited legal rights grandparents have when cases involving their grandchildren come to court and the lack of any visitation rights following parental separation and divorce. They would like to be consulted in all cases – say for example where their grandchildren may be at risk of entering public care, as long as this is in the child's welfare.

Outside the legal domain, other ideas have been suggested to promote intergenerational relations. Since grandparents may be involved in helping young people with homework, some schools now have grandparents/parents open days to discuss the curriculum. In some areas it may be appropriate to allocate sheltered housing for older people near to accommodation for young families with a priority for places in the sheltered housing for those with grandchildren in the area. It was also suggested that there should be special intergenerational days when cultural events were taking place so that ethnic minority grandparents could discuss their cultural heritage with their grandchildren.

The author hopes that this article is just the start of the debate about ways of promoting grandparent/grandchild relations. In a changing world, since this is of benefit to both generations, it makes sense to do what we can to promote these relationships.