

# DO GRANDPARENTS MATTER?



The Impact of Grandparenting on the Well Being of Children

## 2 Do Grandparents Matter?

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The report brings together the results of research jointly undertaken by the University of Hertfordshire and the Family Matters Institute of the views of children in relation to their grandparents and the grand-parenting experience of grandparents. It reveals a unique relationship that exists between the older generation and the youngest. It is a relationship of love and trust that enables the children to use their grandparents as confidantes and counsellors as well as playmates and cookery instructors.



Children valued the role that grandparents played in offering non-critical support particularly emotional advice and guidance. They also highlighted how they enjoyed being with their grandparents in terms of providing time to focus on a range of play and other enjoyable activities. The grandparents find that the grandchildren bring something of unique value into their life that gives them an additional *raison d'être* and contributes to their health and longevity. Grandparents do not count the cost of either the time or the material benefits they bring to their grandchildren; often giving self sacrificially to help provide for things that are necessary in bringing up the children.

Twenty percent of the grandparents in this survey say that there has been a marriage or relationship breakdown in their family that has affected their grandchildren with more than 80% of these respondents saying that they have been able to support the children during difficult times and one in five saying that they have been refused access to their grandchildren.

The case studies in the Report focus upon the role and function of grandparents where marriage/relationship breakdown occurs. These are just 10 of a large number of accounts, received during the research, of what grandparents believe to be incidents of injustice often amounting to child abuse committed by British Family Courts.

## GENERAL BACKGROUND

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Social and kinship networks, particularly those within families, have increasingly been recognised as having important effects on the accumulation of different forms of capital, including social capital within families.<sup>1</sup> Grandparenting has become in recent years an emergent field for research on the family<sup>2</sup> and policymakers have increasingly suggested that grandparents may serve a valuable role in maintaining social stability within a family.<sup>3</sup> Factors that may determine the content and the quality of grandparent-grandchild relationships, particularly from the perspective of the child, still require further exploration. Moreover, the information and resources needed for professionals to judge how best to support valuable and meaningful forms of grandparent-child relationships is also highly underdeveloped.

Existing research particularly from the USA indicates that grandparenting may have an influential place in young people's social and emotional development. Furthermore the age of the grandparent may be a determining factor in constructing who (parent, child or grandparent) benefits most from the grandparent relationship.

An overarching finding of studies of childhood deprivation is that poverty and disadvantage play a determining role in future mental health status.<sup>4</sup> This was further outlined in the Acheson Report (1998) that highlighted the negative impact that poor socio-economic circumstances can have on children and their long term mental and physical health and development. The National Service Framework for Mental Health<sup>5</sup> (1999) reported that children living in disadvantaged circumstances are three times more likely to suffer from mental health difficulties, compared with children from more affluent households.

A survey conducted for the Office of National Statistics also reported similar prevalence rates<sup>6</sup>. Yet large numbers of UK families continue to experience poverty and social deprivation.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of family breakdown, grandparents have been found to play an important role in the reduction of deprivation. Zeilig<sup>8</sup> found that grandmothers can play a key role in supporting their daughters in the context of lone motherhood and function to prevent the social exclusion and deprivation associated with lone parenthood. Moreover, grandparents and friends have been found to be children's key confidantes in the weeks following their parents' separation. This potentially may be an important issue for adolescents, while an assumption could be that as children move into adolescence grandparents become less important. However, there has been some evidence to suggest that particularly for vulnerable and marginalised adolescent's grandparents may play an important stabilising role in the lives of teenagers.<sup>9</sup> Consequently the dynamic and evolving nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships over the life of the child need to be considered.

In examining the positive role of grandparents, it seems maternal grandparents may have a more positive impact than paternal. Dunn and Deater-Deckard<sup>10</sup> found that children who felt closer to their maternal grandparents had fewer adjustment problems after divorce /separation, although the factors constructing this difference seem poorly understood.

Although it is known that grandparents represent a large and potentially influential group in the lives of young people, what is less well known is how extended kinship relationships may serve more generally to ameliorate the negative impacts of deprivation and thereby contribute to social capacity in a community.

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1 Bourdieu P. *Sociology in question*. Sage: London, 1993; On the family as a realized category: *Theory culture and society*. 13 (3) Sage: London, 1996 19-26

2 Thomas J.L.; Sperry L.; Yarbrough M.S. *Grandparents as Parents: Research Findings and Policy Recommendations* Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 2000, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 3-22(20); Kluwer Academic Publishers: 2000; Mueller M M.; Wilhelm B.; Elder Jr. G.H. *Variations in Grandparenting Research on Aging*, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 360-388 (29) SAGE Publications, 2002.

3 Douglas, G., Ferguson, N. 'The Role of Grandparents in Divorced Families' *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family*. 17, 41-67: 2003

4 Buchanan A, J T Bruckle. *What happened when they were grown up? Outcomes from parenting experience*. JKF: 1997

5 Mental Health Foundation *Bright Futures: Promoting children and young people's mental health*. Mental Health Foundation, 1999

6 Meltzer H, Gatward R, Goodman R. and Ford T. *Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in Great Britain: Office for National Statistics*, London, The Stationery Office, 2000.

7 Palmer G, Rahman M. and Kenway P. *Monitoring poverty and social exclusion 2002*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the New Policy Institute, 2002; Office of National Statistics (2000) *Social Inequalities*. London: Office of National Statistics, 2000

8 Zeilig H, Harper S, Smith T. *Grandmother care: The role of grandmothers in providing childcare for lone mother daughters*. In Tester S, Archibald C, Rowlings C and Turner S (eds) *Quality in later life: rights, rhetoric and reality*. Proceedings of the British Society of Gerontology 30th Annual Conference, Stirling, September 2001.

9 Fisher M, Marsh P, Phillips D. *In and Out of Care: The experience of children, parents and social workers*. Free Association Press, 1986.

10 Dunn J, Deater-Deckard, K. *Children's Views of their Changing Families*. YPS, 2001 (This was a study of 467 children)

By age 50, 1 in 3 people have grandchildren and the majority combine economic activity with caring responsibilities. Moreover European work suggests that this group of grandparents constitute a new generation of grandparents, having lived through major social change with the result that they are more understanding of and have stronger affective ties with their grandchildren.<sup>11</sup> However, further work is required to examine if such relationships occur in other cultural contexts.



Aside from changing social relationships in the context of a post-modern family structure, grandparents in this age group represent an important group for consideration by virtue of their position as the most common providers of childcare in the UK.

These providers are also likely to encounter the increased health problems of those with dual caring and work responsibilities.<sup>12</sup> Currently in the UK there is not a clear model of how best to offer support to this important group of carers. Although research has established that the major influence on self-esteem of children is parenting style<sup>13</sup>, less is known about the role grandparenting style (particularly when they act as carers), might play in the development of self-esteem. In the context of the total family network, even less is known about how positive affirming parenting styles can be reinforced or supported if children and their parents/primary care givers are able to access external support via grandparents.

For older grandparents (aged 70+) the support role provided by them in a relationship with grandchildren may be reduced, while the potential benefits for the older person may increase.<sup>14</sup> A strong bond with a grandchild may function as a protective factor in preventing age-related ill health and promote increased levels of life satisfaction and morale.<sup>15</sup> However, the location of the older grandparent as recipient rather than producer of social capital through the provision of affective and material support should not be assumed as the dominant form of grandparent relationship for this age group.

Early studies have tended to introduce a natural bias into the sample by recruiting primarily from social and voluntary support organisations, with the consequence that respondents have tended towards those with high support needs.<sup>16</sup> Instead, the concept that older grandparents may maintain and develop mutually beneficial ties of affective support across generations needs to be examined.

Overall, greater clarity is needed to determine the types of relationship with a grandparent and styles of grandparenting that are of most value to the child and grandparent. Particular attention needs to be given to ways that supportive relationships can be facilitated and developed in order to inform policy development and professional knowledge at points of service delivery.

This project was undertaken collaboratively between the University of Hertfordshire (CRIPACC) and the Family Matters Institute and combined an experienced research team with a track record in conducting social research with both younger and older people, and a voluntary organisation that has expertise in family research and programme development.

The findings presented in Part 1 of this Report represent the component of the study undertaken by CRIPACC relating to children's views and experiences concerning their grandparents. Part 2 deals with the research undertaken by the Family Matters Institute and represents the grandparents' views and experiences concerning their grandchildren.

11 Attias-Donfut C, Segalen M. The construction of grandparenthood. *Current Sociology*, March Vol 50 (2): 281-294: 2002

12 Mooney A Stratham. *The pivot generation informal carer and work after 50*. London: Policy Press, 2003

13 Elmer N. The Costs and Causes of Low Self-esteem. *YPS JRF*, 2001

14 Phillipson C. Inter-generational relations: Conflict or consensus in the 21st century? *Policy and Politics* 19 (1), 1991, 27-36.

15 Kivnick H. *The meaning of grandparenting*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982.

16 Jefferys, M Inter-generational relationships: an autobiographical perspective. In Jamieson, A, Harper S, Victor, C (eds) *Critical approaches to ageing and later life*. 1997

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### The Changing Role of Grandparents

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The status as well as the role and function of grandparents in British family life has changed dramatically over the past century. So too has the life expectancy of the population which enables more grandparents to watch their grandchildren grow up and have children of their own.

Grandparents of the middle classes in the post-Victorian era of early 20th-century Britain were usually remote autocratic figures, while in the working classes they had little time to devote to their grandchildren as they were usually working until ill-health deprived them of the ability to be wage earners. Research studies began to show a different view of grandparents in the post-World War II period as full employment and rising standards of living affected family life.

By the 1960s and 1970s, grandparents had largely lost the Victorian image and tended to hold less strict and authoritarian views and were more indulgent and warm. In 1981 a study described the "vital connection" of grandparents to grandchildren, focusing on the important influence grandparents have in the lives of their grandchildren.<sup>17</sup>

Recent research reaffirms the important role of grandparents in society and focuses increasingly on their expanding role as the providers of childcare. 'Grandparents play a substantial and vital role in the care of children, providing 60% of childcare.'<sup>18</sup> Grandparents are a source of stability and security for their grandchildren, to whom they act as mentors, give a sense of identity as well as unconditional love, acting as a mentor and exemplifying positive values, ideals and beliefs.

Radical changes in the structure and function of society over the past 50 years have given to grandparents an unprecedented opportunity to be an influence for good in the lives of their grandchildren. The higher rate of divorce and more mothers in the workplace mean that grandparents are called on more than ever before to care for grandchildren. Better health and financial security for senior citizens gives them more resources to help succeeding generations.<sup>19</sup> *'If you've ever wanted to make a difference in this world, active grandparenting provides the perfect opportunity.'*<sup>20</sup>

17 Kornhabe A. and Woodward L; Grandparents, Grandchildren: The Vital Connection; 1981; Doubleday; Garden City, NY.

18 e-petition to the Prime Minister February 2008.

19 Mooney A. and Statham J. with Simon Antonia; 'Informal Care and Work After Fifty'; 2002; The Policy Press.

20 Carson, The Essential Grandparent; p 44; 1996; Health Communications; Deerfield Beach.

### Rewards of Grandparenting

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Grandparents have the freedom to decide how involved they want to be in their grandchildren's lives without any ultimate responsibility. They are free to enjoy their grandchildren's natural spontaneity, joy, innocence, and affection.<sup>21</sup>

Research has found that grandparents who have the most contact with their grandchildren report high levels of satisfaction. *"Having grandchildren is the vindication of everything I have done as a parent. When we see our children passing on our values to another generation, we know we have been successful."*<sup>22</sup>

### Relationship with Grandparents

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Grandparents who are able to have close contact with their grandchildren from birth often form a unique bond that lasts throughout their lives. Grandparents, of course, do not carry the same responsibilities as parents and although they often assist with doing school runs, helping with homework and chauffeuring to out-of-school activities, these are done on a voluntary basis rather than as the tasks of parental responsibility.

Grandparents do not have to enforce discipline in the same way as parents so that they can often listen to their grandchildren in a non judgmental way that enables them to offer gentle counsel rather than lay down the law. This becomes increasingly important during adolescence, *"I would never have made it without my grandparents."*<sup>23</sup>

### Multiple Roles of Grandparents

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Grandparents can have a profound impact on their grandchildren's lives. They can act as the family historian, mentor, playmate, nurturer, role model, confidante, advocate, advisor, and surrogate parent.<sup>24</sup> They may share memories of their own childhood and tell stories about their grandchildren's parents that are highly popular and entertaining with the grandchildren, but also serve as a link with the past that gives continuity and family identity. Grandparents are consequently a potential "keepers of community" because they often interpret and pass on knowledge of events and people from one generation to the next.<sup>25</sup>

21 Clarke L.; 'Grandparenthood: Its Meaning and Its Contribution to Older People's Quality of Life'; 2002; Centre for Population Studies.

22 Rutherford et al.; Simply Grand; pp. 96 -101; Time, October 1999.

23 Carson ibid.

24 Olsen, Taylor, & Taylor; Intergenerational Ties, Grandparenting, and Extended Family Support; 2000; in Dollahite D. (Ed.); Strengthening our Families: An In-depth Look at the Proclamation on the Family; pp. 83-99; Salt Lake City

25 Barusch and Steen; Keepers of Community in a Changing World: Grandparenting at Century's End; p. 49; Spring 1996 Generations, 20 (1)

A 2007 study by Civitas notes the multiple roles played by grandparents as —

- Playmate** — Fun-seeking and informal
- Teacher** — An example of manners and morals
- Counsellor** — A wealth of family wisdom
- Confidant** — Someone to trust and talk to
- Friend** — An imaginative counterpoint to a child's day
- Spiritual Guide** — Helping to find the meaning of life
- Mentor** — Fostering ambition
- Elder** — Showing how to age with dignity
- Role Model** — Imparting a strong work ethic
- Nurturer** — Being involved and providing help when needed

#### Grandparenting Children of Divorced Couples and Broken Relationships

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Since the 1980s the number of divorces in the UK has averaged around 150,000 a year. The scale of the increase over the past 40 years can be seen from the statistics. In 1961, there were 27,224 divorces in Great Britain. Eight years later, by 1969, the number of divorces had more than doubled to 55,556. The number of divorces doubled again in the following three years. By 1972, it was 124,991 in the United Kingdom. This latter increase was partly due to the Divorce Reform Act 1969 in England and Wales, which came into effect in 1971. By the end of the 1970s the annual number of divorces had reached almost 150,000.<sup>26</sup>

Divorce and broken cohabitation relationships can cause a major disruption of family life which often brings a “re-orientation of kinship”. Recent research by the Grandparents Association shows that Grandparents are increasingly being cut off during divorce proceedings and after. “At exactly the time when children most need stable, loving adults, who they know are going to be there for them, their Mum’s or Dad’s parents can be airbrushed out of their lives forever. After a divorce, 42 per cent of grandparents, mostly on the father’s side, lose all face-to-face contact with the small people they adore.” (October 2008)

Divorce and separation can also result in grandparents playing a more active role in the lives of their grandchildren and providing a source of stability and continuity at a time when the children are feeling particularly insecure and emotionally distressed.

#### Grandparents Providing Childcare

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In the latter half of the 20th Century within European and North American geographically, mobile households the role of the grandparent became popularly conceptualised as external and peripheral to the main core of the family. However research in the USA indicates that there are a number of reasons why the role of grandparents is expanding –

- Increasing numbers of parents with small children both work full-time or part-time, and many prefer to entrust their children to a family member rather than to a non-family childcare provider. Many also ask grandparents for help because they can not afford non-family childcare.
- Divorce rates have risen, again raising demand for kin based childcare.
- Teenage parenthood is comparatively high within the UK and USA, leading to Grandparents co-parenting or becoming surrogate parents.
- More mothers and fathers are substance abusers.
- More mothers and fathers are imprisoned.<sup>27</sup>

#### Grandparents as Parents

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Grandparents can be a valuable source of secure attachment for young children during stressful times of family breakdown. Once again we are dependent upon research in the USA to show that most infants and school aged children cope well with these changes where there is a close relationship with the grandparents and they suffer no significant difference in physical health although emotional health is often affected negatively due to the absence of their parents, with more than half experiencing a deterioration of school performance.<sup>28</sup>

The research in this study shows that grandparents themselves often suffer in their health due to the stress of caring for children and the additional physical work involved. They also suffer financially as few grandparents receive any state aid and they often exhaust their savings. Both they and the grandchildren suffer poverty in varying degrees. There are many references to this in the responses to the questionnaires in this research and in the case studies, but there is a dearth of British research on this subject.

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26 Source: Office for National Statistics; General Register Office for Scotland; Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency).

27 Beebe, Marisa and Olsen, Susanne; 2002; Brigham Young University.

28 Solomon and Marx 1995 'To Grandmother's House We Go': Health and School Adjustment of Children Raised Solely by Grandparents; 386-394; The Gerontologist, 35

## PART 1 AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

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### Aims

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This report provides an overview of the research undertaken with children which sought to explore from the perspective of the child the significance of their relationship with their grandparents. A secondary aim was to identify the key elements, (if any) of the grandparent-grandchild relationship that children perceive as contributing to their emotional well-being.

### Study Design

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Measures such as extent of contact do not provide a means to identify a meaningful and valuable relationship, for example, grandparents who see their grandchildren infrequently may still have a valuable and meaningful relationship, while daily visitors may not have a positive affirming role in their grandchildren's lives.<sup>29</sup> Due to the current lack of systematic knowledge concerning the value of different forms of grandparenting and the lack of appropriate intervention tools or strategies for professionals and policy makers, a qualitative research methodology was considered most appropriate.

The sample of children was drawn from schools that predominantly served populations of relative affluence. This study was a small-scale pilot study and additional funding would be needed for a larger study that considered a more diverse population. The lives of more affluent children currently represent an under-researched area and relatively little is known in particular about family life within such communities. There is one notable study that recently looked at middle class young people;<sup>30</sup> however, this looked exclusively on food choice among teenagers. Consequently the study provides one of the few accounts focused on younger middle and upper class children's family life.

### Method

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Focus groups as a methodological tool offer a number of advantages for addressing the core aims and objectives of the proposed research. Foremost, focus groups, as a social science interview tool, offer a research method that helps ensure that priority is given to uncovering respondent's categorisations, their language and their concepts.

In addition as a form of group interview they enable not just analysis of individual responses but also consideration of the interactional features of the data.<sup>31</sup> Focus groups can also promote lively, stimulating interaction which may maintain the participants' motivation and interest in the topic, leading to exploration of facets of the area which may not have been raised in an individual interview.

In conducting focus groups with children, particular sensitivity and skill is required to enable researchers to access the issues that are important for the children and young people.<sup>32</sup> Recent research on conducting interviews with children suggests that strategies such as offering the children an opportunity to represent their experiences in pictorial form or other visual methods greatly enhances the quality of the interview data, as well as assisting with the development of rapport and ethical sensitivity.<sup>33</sup>

In this study, all children were offered the opportunity to draw or write a few words on mini white boards about the most recent visit they had with their grandparents. The children were familiar with using white boards for temporary informal work and therefore found this to be an acceptable and easy task. The drawings were then used as an ice -breaker to start the focus group discussions.

Overall, five single sex focus groups (three girl groups and two boys) were undertaken in two schools with children in school years 4 and 5 (ages 6 -10).



29 Mueller M.M., Wilhelm B., Elder Jr. G.H. (2002) Variations in Grandparenting Research on Aging, vol. 24, no. 3, pp. 360-388(29) SAGE Publications

30 Wills, W.J., Backett-Milburn K, Gregory S, and Lawton J (2006) 'Young Teenagers' perceptions of their own and others' bodies: A qualitative study of obese, overweight and normal weight young people in Scotland. *Social Science and medicine* 62(2) 396-406

31 Kitzinger J. (1995) Qualitative research: Introducing focus groups. *BMJ*. 311: 299 – 302 (29 July).

32 Milner P. and Carolin B. (eds) (1999) *Time to listen to children*. London, Routledge; Fraser S, Lewis V, Ding S, Kellett M. and Robinson C. (eds) (2003) *Doing research with children and young people*. London. Sage Publications/The Open University.

33 Sartain, E.A. (2001). "Views on hospital and home care for acute illness in childhood." *Health and Social Care in the Community* 9(2): 108-117

## **PART 1 FINDINGS: THE CHARACTER OF THE CHILD-GRANDPARENT RELATIONSHIP**

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*Nice, huge cuddles, nice food, wrinkly (Boy).*

### Contact with Grandparents

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A grandparent is often thought of as being someone who children visit as part of their extended family, who provides treats and outings, but who is not a central element of the nuclear family. Although a relatively remote or peripheral type of relationship did feature in some of the children's accounts, many children described a relationship with their grandparents that was centrally embedded into family life.

The amount of time that children spent with their grandparents varied considerably, some saw their grandparents daily others and others only a couple of times a year. In many instances the most distinguishing feature that determined the contact with grandparents was the provision of childcare by the grandparents. Daily contact often related to the grandparents collecting the children from school, while weekend and contact during the school holidays were also often as result of meeting working parents' needs.

*I am going to see my grandparents in the summer holidays, because my mum and dad will also be at work (Girl).*

### Spending Time with Grandparents

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The parents of the children in this sample appeared to be mostly professionals with demanding working lives and time poverty was felt by the children in the study to be a feature of their parents' lives. Consequently, for some children while parents were perceived as having little available time, grandparents in contrast represented adults who were willing and able to spend quality time interacting with the child, as the following interaction from the focus group interviews illustrates:

*Child 1: They (my parents) always make time to talk, but they don't play games with me. My grandparents will always have time to play games and things with me.*

*Child 2: Yes same. My grandparents always have time (Girls group).*

Children were asked in detail about how they spent their time with their grandparents, what they did with their grandparents and how they felt about time spent in such activities.

Children talked about enjoying a range of activities from tennis and football to more passive pastimes such as storytelling and playing cards.

*Every time I go there we usually play mini-golf and whenever we're there granddad always let me go on the bowling green as well and we play there and when we've done, he usually takes me to the park (Boy).*

Irrespective of the type of activity, two themes were common to the children's accounts: valuing time spent with an adult who was interested in listening to them, and who was prepared to engage in activities that the child found enjoyable.

*My grandmother always buys me presents when she sees me and she is very kind she always gives me cuddles and she makes up stories with me and writes poems and things (Girl).*

It was interesting that the material provision of expensive treats such as expensive toys were not specifically mentioned by children when they were asked about, what they liked best about their grandparents.

*When sometimes when my mum and dad go on holiday together, they stay with us, and we always go to go to bed really late (Girl).*

*They let me have sweets and biscuits and fizzy drinks (Girl).*

Grandparents represented an adult who was able to have a vision of the world from the individual child's point of view and actively engage with that view in how they as adults responded to their grandchild.

*My grandma usually buys me some chocolate as well as we usually talk about things that have happened about the school monitor and that (Boy).*

### Food and Cooking

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The role notably of grandmothers in both providing "home cooked" family type meals and in cooking with children was something that frequently featured in the children's accounts as a positive aspect of spending time with their grandparents.

*Well when I go to my grandma's house, my grandma and granddad's house, she always like bakes nice cakes, like chocolate cakes with Maltesers on the top, and we help her. Sometimes we help her ice them and stuff, so me and my sister, and then we always eat them, and sometimes we have second helpings because they're so nice (Girl).*

Children talked about gaining pleasure from having a sit down meal of home cooked food such as a roast dinner and family meals were felt to be notable and valued events.

*We go to my grandma's every Sunday with my Nan, and my Grandma cooks. I like her cooking. And I've done a picture of us sitting at the table eating her food (Boy).*

Given the current policy emphasis on improving the nutrition of young people and the reduction of obesity, the role of grandparents in the provision of food and in the transmission of cooking skills warrants further examination.

*I only do cooking with my grandparents (Girl).*

The Uncritical, Significant Adult

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Grandparents were particularly valued by the children when they adopted the role of a less disciplinary and critical adult than their parents.

*Boy 1: Sometimes my mum complains about with the washing and having things left around, like not tidying. My grandparents never complain about anything, they just tidy up themselves and they don't really care.*

*Boy 2: The same with my grandparents.*

*Question: Do your grandparents ever tell you off?*

*Boy 1: No.*

*Boy 2: No.*

The children were asked about grandparent involvement in schoolwork, if they helped them and specifically if they read with them. In the children's responses a grandparent who took an active role in ensuring their compliance with homework or actively 'checked' their levels of attainment was discussed quite negatively by the children. Instead children talked positively about grandparents who advocated a balance between education and play.

*They just ask me how I'm doing but don't do it with me (home work). ...because they don't see me as often, that they think we should do fun things. If I've got good grades in school I shouldn't be doing more school (Girl).*

Emotional Support

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They care about me, when I am hurt they're really sympathetic and they always look after me every time (Boy).

The majority of children reported that if they had a worry or a problem they would talk first to parents and peers or siblings. However children also felt that grandparents were often adults who would simply listen to them without be judgemental or over reacting.

*Girl 1: My mom, I do speak to her a lot about things, but it's just sometimes I'm a bit worried because she usually tries to... if it's a problem at school...*

*Girl 2: She'll try to sort it out.*

*Girl 1: She'll try to like write a letter and it gets me involved, and I hate that. My grandparents can't do anything like that, so I talk to them.*

*Interviewer: So what do they say when you talk to them?*

*Girl 1: They just say ignore, and if you know it was your fault, if I'd fallen out with a friend, you should make it up. If not, don't be a doormat and keep saying you're sorry.*

Children often reported time spent with grandparents as being a calm time, in which few demands were made of them and they were able to relax precisely because their grandparents were calm

*...And they're very soothing as well, you know?*

*Interviewer: Yes, comforting?*

*Yes, they're very nice to be around (Girl).*

Negative Aspects of Grandparents

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The form of relationship children had with their grandparents encompassed a range of relationship types and forms of interaction, not all were viewed positively by children. Grandparents who attempted to adopt the disciplinary role of the parent were viewed negatively by the children, who expressed frustration and general resistance to a grandparent who attempted to assert disciplinary parental authority. The assertion of values that the child felt was inappropriate also reduced the positive significance of the grandparent in the child's view

*Girl 1: thing that's kind of annoying is my grandma will always be going on about sitting up straight and posture and how to be a lady, and it's kind of annoying because at the moment I'm just a kid and I just want to be a kid.*

*Girl 2: And not a lady*

*Girl 1: I don't want to be posh, I want to enjoy the summer, and my grandma goes on quite a lot about being posh.*

Children viewed their relationship with their grandparents as being weak and of little relevance to them when the child perceived a lack of interest by the grandparent or where grandparents demonstrated an apparent unwillingness to engage with the child and 'be fun.'

They aren't really interested in us (child and siblings) they just sit in the conservatory and read the paper (Boy).

When children felt that their relationship with their grandparents was weak and characterised by disinterest or an unwillingness to be playful children expressed a sense of loss and disappointment.

*I feel they should be fun but they're not really (Girl).*

## Conclusion

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In summary, the children across all the focus groups held very similar views and perspectives on grandparents. Both boys and girls consistently valued certain forms of grandparenting and relationship with their grandparents over others. The children did not appear to hold significant distinctions between grandfathers and grandmothers, with the exception of valuing the cooking skills of their grandmothers.

A grandparent for many of the children constituted a positive and supportive adult in the children's lives. Grandparents were seen as particularly important to the child when they sought to create a relationship that differed from that of the child's parents. In relaxing the normal adult disciplinary rules relating to, for example food treats and bedtimes, grandparents provided spaces in which the children felt comfortable and able to have fun or simply be children. Through engaging children in simple play activities and being "fun" grandparents were filling a void in the children's lives that their time-limited parents were sometimes unable to address. In contrast children actively resisted contact with grandparents who sought to function as a surrogate parent, especially in terms of discipline or enforcing values.

Overall, the children appreciated time and engagement from their grandparents more than material gifts or expensive treats. The children held normative expectations of what constituted 'good grandparenting' with kindness, patience and a sense of fun emerging as being highly meaningful for the children. Those children who reported that their grandparents were disinterested, critical, or overly strict, expressed feelings of disappointment and loss that they did not have a grandparent who conformed to their expectations. Importantly, from the perspective of the child, the uncritical advocate was the type of grandparent that the children would actively seek out for advice and emotional support.



## PART 2 THE ROLE OF GRANDPARENTS IN FAMILY LIFE TODAY

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### Aims

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The aim of the study was to explore relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren with a view to discovering the role that grandparents are playing in family life in the first decade of the 21st century. The study aimed to give grandparents the opportunity of speaking about their contact with grandchildren and the kind of activities in which they engage. A secondary aim was to discover if grandparents are playing a vital role in family life today in the support of or provision for their grandchildren and whether or not this enhanced the lives of grandparents or was a difficult burden for them to bear.

### Study Design

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Following extensive preliminary research that included consultation with many of the grandparent associations in the UK, it was decided to carry out the study through a self administered questionnaire that the grandparents could complete in their own homes. The questionnaire was designed to provide multiple-choice answers that were annotated for ease of analysis, although plenty of space was allowed for additional information to be supplied.

The questionnaire had to take note of the fact that the respondents had a number of grandchildren and that these would be children of their sons or daughters and therefore would be domicile in different family groups. These different families, moreover, would be living in a variety of geographical areas which would present different levels of contact. Many extended families today include children of different marriages or partnerships that are the outcomes of divorce or partnership breakdown, so that grandparenting presents a complex of relationships. All these variables had to be taken into consideration in the construction of the questionnaire as it went through the various stages of the piloting process.

The questionnaire was supplemented by interviews, telephone conversations and correspondence with grandparent respondents who supplied additional information that was valuable for the research.

### Method

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The questionnaire underwent a lengthy piloting process to ensure clarity in the questions, avoiding ambiguity, while at the same time dealing with the many variations in the type of family in which grandparents function today. The piloting was carried out initially through friends and neighbours of the research team. The draft questionnaire was then taken to several grandparents associations who cooperated in the second stage of the piloting process.

The final questionnaire was distributed by grandparents associations to their members who were given envelopes to return them directly to the research team in case there were issues of confidentiality or information that they did not wish to disclose. Confidentiality was guaranteed particularly to those who volunteered to give additional information that could be used as case studies.

The fact that most of the respondents are members of grandparents' associations inevitably introduces a bias. A further bias was introduced due to the fact that the respondents were those who volunteered to complete the form rather than the total membership of any of the associations. It is therefore not claimed that this study is a fully representative national sample, although every effort was made to eliminate extraneous variables and to produce a reliable sample capable of demonstrating some of the issues facing grandparents in the changing socio-cultural climate of family life today.

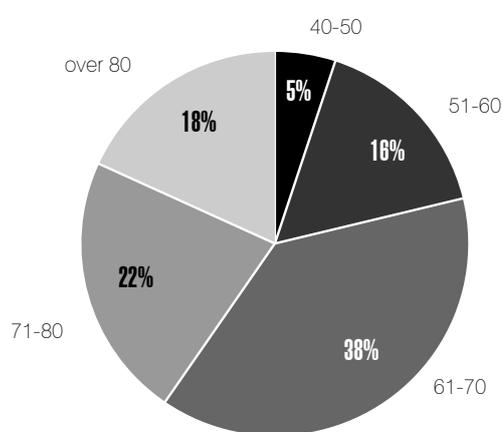
In a small-scale research project with limited means it is not possible to deal with all the variations of a multicultural society, it was therefore decided to confine this research to white Caucasian UK residents. Further research is needed to investigate the problems facing grandparents in situations of family breakdown through divorce and separation and also to investigate other major variables such as African, Caribbean and Asian families resident in the UK today.



Part 2 Findings: The Role of Grandparents Today

The 13.5 million grandparents in Britain today form not only a significant part of the population but play a vital role in the family life of 21st century Britain. Their ages range from 30 to more than 100 years. None of the respondents included in this study were younger than 40 years. The age range of the grandparents who participated in this survey is shown in figure 1 which is close to the national statistics. The smallest group (5%) was the age group 40 to 50 years, while the largest group (38%) was in the 61 to 70 years group.

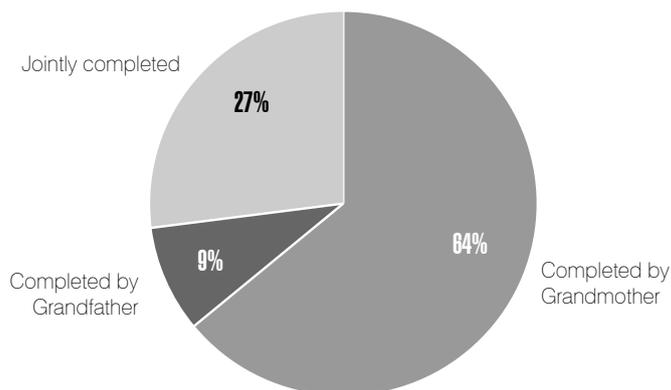
Figure 1 Age of Respondents



Survey Population

The survey was conducted by a self-administered questionnaire with a population derived from members of several grandparents associations. Most of the respondents were grandmothers (64%). Only 9% of the questionnaires were completed by grandfathers alone, and 27% were jointly completed by a grandmother and grandfather. This is shown in Figure 2.

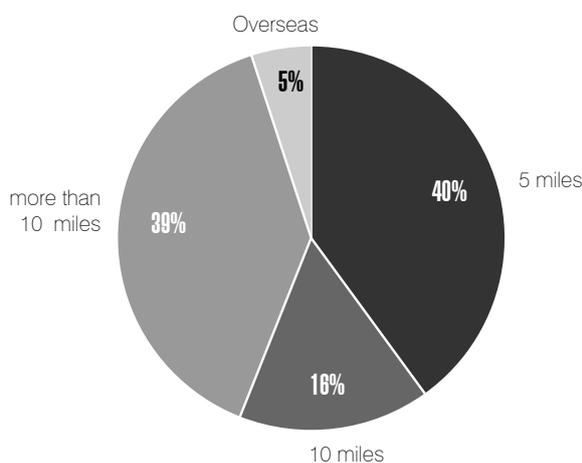
Figure 2 Response by Grandparents



Grandparent/Grandchild Contact

The survey revealed that the majority of grandparents do not live with their grandchildren although most maintain regular contact with one or more of their grandchildren. 14% of grandparents either used to live or presently live in the same household with their grandchildren. The pattern of family life today is very different from that of the Victorian 19th century extended family pattern where most family members lived in close geographical proximity; nevertheless, a surprisingly high percentage of grandparents (40%) had at least one of their grandchildren living within 5 miles. A further 16% had grandchildren living within 10 miles. 39% of grandparents in the survey had grandchildren living more than 10 miles from them and a further 5% had grandchildren living overseas. See Figure 3.

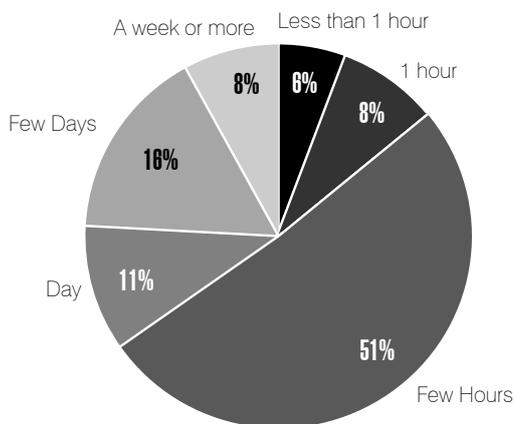
Figure 3 Distance Apart



Most grandparents keep regular contact with one or more of their grandchildren and take a considerable interest in their lives and well-being. 18% of the grandparents in this survey have some form of daily contact with their grandchildren; 19% see them weekly and a further 29% have monthly contact. Only a quarter of the grandparents (26%) reported that they rarely if ever see some of their grandchildren. In the case of 15% this was due to distance and a further 10% said this was due to family estrangement. In terms of family estrangement, for the majority of respondents this was due to the breakdown of marriage or cohabitation that led to grandparents being denied access to their grandchildren.

Among those who maintain regular contact with their grandchildren the majority (51%) spend several hours with them on each occasion. The contact length of time is shown in Figure 4, which demonstrates the commitment of grandparents to spending quality time with their grandchildren. Only 14% of contacts are of one hour or less and these fleeting contacts are usually where grandparents live in close proximity to their grandchildren.

**Figure 4 Length of Visit**

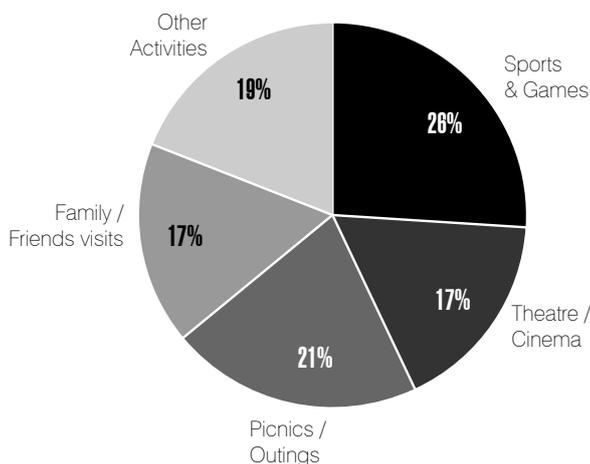


**Grandparent/Grandchild Activities**

Nearly three-quarters of the grandparent respondents in the survey (72%) were actively involved in the lives of their grandchildren. The survey showed that almost all grandparents wish to have a share in the lives of their grandchildren with many of those not involved offered a reason such as age-infirmity, health problems, distance, or the fact that they were denied access. Most grandparents regard contact with their grandchildren to be of considerable value that brings a lot of happiness and a sense of fulfilment into their lives. They enjoy spending time with the children, listening to them and entering into their experiences of school and peer group interaction.

Grandparents engage in a variety of activities with their grandchildren the most popular being playing games, either indoor or outdoor, taking them to sports fixtures, or watching them play matches. These are activities that are not only enjoyed by grandparents who live nearby, but also by those who visit their grandchildren from a distance.

**Figure 5 Activities**



The second favourite was taking the children for outings, particularly picnics which involved the preparation and eating of food together and exploring new places. Grandparents love spending time with their grandchildren and sharing in their joy of discovering new places and new experiences. Other popular activities were taking the children, on visits to the cinema or theatre, or on visits to other family members and friends. In all these activities grandparents were able to spend quality time with their grandchildren which gave opportunities for conversation and for relationships of love and trust to develop.

These contacts with the children come to mean a great deal to grandparents who share in the joy of watching their grandchildren develop from the cradle to mature young adults. For many of the respondents this contact with the grandchildren gives an additional *raison d'être* to their lives and therefore becomes a source of great loss and suffering similar to bereavement when family circumstances change and they are denied access to the children.

**Childcare**

60% of grandparents were involved in some form of childcare, either on a regular or an occasional basis. 28% regularly care for their grandchildren in the evenings or at nights. Other forms of care include looking after the grandchildren while parents are at work (8%), doing school runs – taking or collecting children — and taking the children to a variety of out-of-school activities. Grandparents provide an invaluable source of childcare that enables parents to have a life of their own both in terms of work and in terms of social and leisure pursuits. Many grandparents are extremely generous and self sacrificial in the care they offer to their grandchildren and the support they give to their children — parents of the grandchildren. For elderly grandparents living on a fixed income from a small pension or dependent upon the state retirement pension, giving help to their grandchildren is not easy but is a practical demonstration of their love and commitment. They really want to help and rather than counting the cost they see it as a privilege.

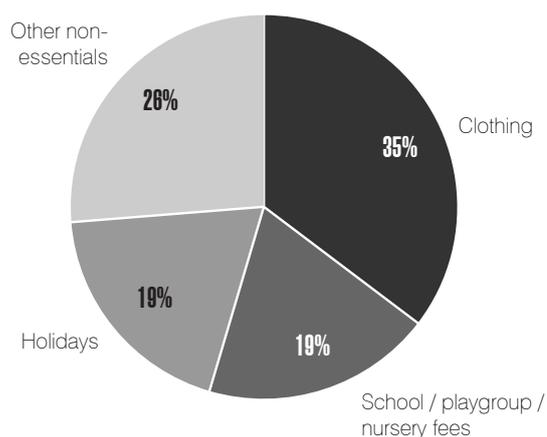
**Financial Support**

34% of grandparents give financial help to their grandchildren or support the parents in meeting the cost of bringing up their children. Most of this financial giving goes to the provision of clothing for the grandchildren. Grandparents often provide for essential support such as school fees, playgroup/day care or a day nursery costs. One in five grandparents also pays for holidays for their grandchildren or contributes towards holiday costs.

There are many other ways in which grandparents give financial support to the care and upbringing of their grandchildren through buying books, toys and games and through feeding them when they have childcare responsibilities or have their grandchildren staying with them for short breaks or holidays.

All the evidence demonstrates that grandparents show considerable generosity in contributing to the cost of bringing up their children's children. A number of grandparents referred uncritically to the cost of caring for grandchildren. Most see this as a part of family responsibility that gives them great pleasure, although many also see the anomaly of being classified as 'family' in terms of caring for grandchildren, which debars them from claiming carers allowances, and yet they are not recognised as 'family' when issues of childcare are brought before English courts. These are issues that are dealt with in some detail in the case studies.

**Figure 6 Financial Support**



## Relationships

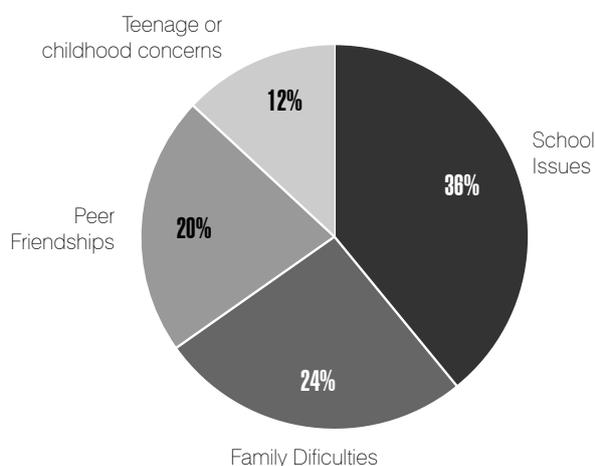
Three quarters of the grandparents in the survey described their relationship with their grandchildren as being either 'close' or 'very close', with only 8% saying that they had grandchildren with whom they were not very close. This is quite remarkable since 39% of grandparents said that they had grandchildren living more than 10 miles from them. This is a demonstration of the commitment of grandparents to maintaining contact with their grandchildren despite the limitations of distance or other barriers. Clearly they are using all the modern means of communication — telephone, mobile phones, e-mail, text, face book and other IT services. The evidence shows that not only the younger grandparents, but also those considerably older are endeavouring to master modern communications technology! They may not have blackberries but they are quite capable of reading and responding to their grandchildren's text messages on mobile phones.

Half of the grandparent respondents (49%) reported that their grandchildren usually or often speak to them about something that is worrying them. The grandchildren confide in their grandparents on a variety of subjects, mainly about things that happen at school and in the home. Bullying is a subject that regularly occurs in discussion about school and peer group relationships. The grandchildren regularly talk to their grandparents about problems with school-friends.

Many of the respondents indicate that the children find it easier to talk to them about some problems than they do to their parents. This may, of course, simply be due to time factors — the fact that grandparents have more time to listen to the children than overstretched working mothers and fathers.

The second most frequent topic of discussion concerned domestic issues. The children confide in their grandparents regarding sibling quarrels, but also about domestic disputes involving their parents. These issues present many problems of loyalties for the grandparents especially when marital disputes lead to separation and divorce. Only about half of the respondents gave details of the topics upon which their grandchildren confided in them, but of those who did give details, the results are given in figure 7.

**Figure 7 Topics Discussed with Grandparents**



The children often find it easier to talk to their grandparents about teenage concerns including sexual problems while younger children often confide about things that worry them such as bad dreams and childish fears as well as more rational problems such as broken friendships. It is these intimate relationships with grandparents where the children are able to confide their emotions and fears that makes the grandparent/grandchild relationship so unique and valuable. Most grandparents attribute this special relationship across two generations to the fact that they have more time to give undivided attention to the children during their visits or other contact opportunities.

This special relationship was also seen from the standpoint of the child during the schools' research noted in the first part of this survey report. Most grandparents do not adopt authoritarian attitudes. The grandparent is therefore generally not seen as an 'authority figure' equal to the parent and is usually regarded as more flexible in enforcing rules about such things as bedtimes and what food is eaten or the amount of sweets consumed!

The grandparents enjoy the time spent with their grandchildren and do not wish to spoil the time with too much rule enforcement. Their concern is to do things with their grandchildren in order to give them pleasure rather than to supervise homework or household chores. This inevitably builds a special relationship in which the child feels secure, loved and special — the kind of relationship in which it is easy for the child to confide secrets without fear of rejection or ridicule.

#### Domestic Issues

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20% of the grandparents reported family breakdowns in their relationships with their grandchildren. 81% of the grandparents who experienced these problems said that they were able to give support to their grandchildren during times of domestic dispute and during the times of the actual breakup of the parental home. The special relationship between grandparent and grandchildren was seen to be a significant factor in the provision of a stabilising emotional influence during times of family stress. The grandparents often provided the one stable factor in family life and the one person to whom the children turned for personal counselling and support.

Most grandparents reported that their special relationship with the grandchildren survived the upheaval of family breakdown through separation and divorce with 80% saying that they had been able to maintain contact with their grandchildren. In 20%

of cases however, the grandparents reported that they had experienced difficulties, some of a considerably distressing nature. The most frequent difficulties were in relation to paternal grandparents being denied access when custody was given to the mother and where there had been a particularly hostile divorce or partnership separation. In these cases it was not unusual for the mother to react by not wishing her former husband's, or partner's, parents to have any relationship with the children.

Many grandparents reported that their health suffered as a result of these disputes and the separation from their grandchildren with whom they had built up a close relationship over a number of years. Some of the grandparents spent all their savings on lawyers and court proceedings sometimes stretching over a number of years and often in vain attempts to secure access to their grandchildren. Many of the respondents spoke of their great dissatisfaction with what they considered to be the injustices of the legal system to which they were subjected. Clearly there is a case for further research into the anomalies of the family Court procedures and decisions and the fact that grandparents have no legal status and are not even recognised as family members but are simply designated, "significant others". Many of the respondents spoke bitterly of their experience of being treated not even as "significant others" but as "insignificant others".



## PART 3 CASE STUDIES

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### Introduction

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During the course of the research a large number of case studies were collected many of which reflected a considerable degree of suffering in the lives of both grandparents and grandchildren. Ten of these case studies have been reproduced below to show different aspects of the problems encountered by grandparents and the way in which the lives of children and grandparents are adversely affected by parental disputes and stress within family life. Names and identifiable factors have all been changed in order to protect anonymity.

## STUDY ONE

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We have three grandchildren, all boys, aged 16, 13 and 7 years. We have a good relationship with our first two grandsons but we are unable to see our third grandson, our son's child. From birth to 3½ years we took care of this third grandson from 7am – 4.30/5.30pm to enable our son and his wife to run their business (a hot food outlet) with no complaints, only praise. We also bought him clothes and toys, whatever he needed.

When our son's marriage broke up after 9 years his wife prevented our son from seeing the child. After the split up we were used. We took care of our grandson while his ex-wife was busy caring for her parents but when they died we were surplus to requirements. She would not allow us to see our grandson anymore. She made false accusations against us and made allegations about us doing something wrong.

After the split up, I believe now that we would not have been allowed to have our grandson, if she could have made alternative arrangements. It was only because she had nobody else to look after him, without costing her money. Money is her god and she will trample anybody to get it. She could hate you, but if you could do her a favour or get her something she needed she would talk to you. Then after she used you, she would cast you aside. She had done this several times to other people but I did not think she would do it to us.

Our son signed over the house and shop but did not put the terms into writing. He wasn't to pay child support until he was on his feet, but after 6 months his ex-wife reported him to the CSA for not paying child support. She has also told our grandson that his father has died!

We live about quarter of a mile from our grandson and his mother and we use the same village for shopping etc. We come into contact with our grandson a lot but when we try to talk to him we get nothing but a mouthful of obscenities from his mother. This is alarming and upsetting for our grandson so we now don't talk to him for that reason. It rips our heart out to be so close and yet unable to talk to him or to hug him. The little boy who used to adore us has been brainwashed and we have not been allowed to speak to him for 5½ years.

We are just two of countless heartbroken grandparents.

## STUDY TWO

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Just over 13 years ago my son's wife left him taking the 2 boys with her. They were then 3 years and 8 months old respectively. My son was devastated. He lost his children and lost his health which led to him losing a good job and his home.

Understandably we were greatly affected by this turn of events and we were very unhappy. Previously we saw the children on a regular basis and babysat on numerous occasions. After the split-up we did not see the children for almost a year because his wife blocked all access both to our son and to us as grandparents. Then my son was granted 3 hours per fortnight access.

The eldest grandson was badly affected by all this and used to "switch off" and it was impossible to communicate with him. We feared for his emotional well being at this time. On one occasion as grandparents we attended a school play and my son's now ex-wife made a big scene because we were there. My son found it difficult to get any information from the school regarding the education of his children. Although he repeatedly requested information on their progress, this was denied.

When the youngest son was 3 years old, he contracted meningitis and was extremely ill. When my husband and I went to visit him in hospital my ex-daughter-in-law tried to prevent us seeing him. Thankfully he is fully recovered but it was a very worrying time.

We did manage to take the children out occasionally but had to beg permission from their mother. It was hard for my son to keep contact as when he telephoned to speak with them they were not always allowed to come to the telephone.

We supported our grandchildren during the hard times by being available as much as we were allowed, providing a stable environment for them and most importantly by showing and telling them how much we loved them.

There is a happy outcome to these experiences as the boys have got older (now 14 years and 16 years) they come and go to us more freely. Our son, their father and his second wife, (who has been a rock in the many ups and downs) have tried to create an area of stability in their lives.

Now we are just available to provide any help or support they need, i.e. education, relationships or just listening to their everyday situations and experiences and laughing together because we do not always understand how the mobile telephone works and we need their help.

We know from firsthand experience how grandparents are hurt doubly by marriage or partnership breakdown as they see their child being made unhappy and also their grandchildren. We were fortunate in that we had a strong and secure marriage and we were able to comfort each other. We were also comforted by our friends who had been in similar situations. This was important as we found there was very little support available for grandparents from other sources.

## STUDY THREE

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I have two grandchildren, boys, aged 2 and 12. The father left the scene when the first child was 1 year old. A wonderful and loving new partner took over and the child was in a loving family environment. We regularly saw our daughter and grandchild and were involved in leisure activities with our grandchild.

When this relationship broke up our grandchild was devastated. When he was 7 years old a new partner came to live with our daughter who stopped all contact between us and the family.

The matter was taken to court and despite a court order, when the second child arrived I was not allowed contact any with him for over two years.

In total it has cost me over £6,000 in legal fees over the years to see my eldest grandson. At the time of the birth of this child a barrister asked if I had reason to believe that partner No.3 was responsible for stopping contact with him. At this time I did not think that was the case. However, he later categorically told me that he did not wish me to see either of the boys.

The police were involved as was my solicitor and a letter sent to the eldest child's headmaster as advised by the police. On that occasion partner number 3 was definitely under the influence of alcohol when he spoke to me. This was also the last time I saw him. We read in the local paper that he had been charged with an offence for which he is likely to go to prison and we think that his relationship with our daughter has broken up.

Now that he is out of the picture my daughter is allowing me to have contact once a month with the children. This, of course, does not wipe out the memory of the years we were denied access to our much-loved grandchildren.

The eldest child spent many happy times with us up until the age of 11 years; holidays, weekend outings, fishing and swimming. But partner No.3 stopped all this; even not allowing me to speak to my grandson on the telephone. He totally breached the court order, yet he had no family connection whatsoever. He was just the live-in lover of our daughter.

British family law is very odd. It gives rights to strangers over the custody and upbringing of children while denying those same rights to blood relatives.

Is there any justice in British law?

## STUDY FOUR

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(This respondent lives in Scotland and is included in these case studies because it shows the contrast between Scottish and English social work practice and the different legal rights of grandparents in Scottish and English law)

About 7 years ago, when David who is my second wife's son met Angela, she fell pregnant and had her third child, each by different fathers. But just a few months before the baby was born David was sentenced to four years for attempted murder of one of his uncles. So he was not present at the birth.

During his time in prison Angela was seeing other men for company. But on David's release they both made it up and fell out and made up several times. They had a lot of arguments and were often fighting. The Police had to be called several times by concerned neighbours as their children were within the house at the time.

David stayed with us for a while, but we had to ask him to leave due to his violent behaviour. Even his two brothers blew their top at him for being in possession of a sword. Just after this Angela gave birth to another son, Mark. That same day David was arrested for another crime, so yet again he was in prison when his child was born.

Some six months later after many fights and arguments we received a panic phone call from Angela at 4.00am to tell us that David and she had just had a big argument and that he had taken a massive overdose of pills. She had phoned the 999 system. Half-an-hour later we got another phone call saying they were taking David to hospital, she was also going with him and that the baby had been taken in by a neighbour.

David was allowed home on the next day and stayed with Angela and Mark, but on the following day both Angela and David had an argument which resulted in Angela being arrested. It did not help that she was in possession of a knife at the time. She was held to appear in court the following day. Mark was put in the care of a neighbour. But the neighbour was a known drug dealer. The first we knew about this incident was when a social worker phoned us to enquire where the baby was.

Angela was released from court in the afternoon of the following day but due to bail conditions she could not return to her home. By this time the social workers and police had managed to locate Mark and had brought him to our home. We discussed the situation with Angela and the social worker and we took Angela and Mark into our home on the understanding that social workers would fast track somewhere for them to live where they would be secure from David.

They stayed with us for three months before being moved into Bed and Breakfast accommodation. We told Angela to hold on to our house key so that she could let herself in to do any laundry. This was working out fine until we returned home one Saturday to find Mark in his buggy in our living room and no sign of Angela. I managed to locate her in our bathroom slumped over the bath with both her arms cut and losing blood. My wife took care of her while I phoned the NHS24 help line to be told to bring her into the hospital, which I did.

My wife attended Mark, changing his nappy and feeding him. By the time I returned from the hospital with Angela, Mark was asleep in his buggy. I then had to pick up the key to the Bed and Breakfast and drive there with Angela to get the travel cot. We both felt that there was no way that Angela could look after Mark due to the number of stitches in both her arms. On the Monday morning the social workers came with the area health visitor and Mark was put straight into our care.

We have tried to assist Angela in getting Mark back but each time she just goes and does something stupid and we end up being asked to look after the child. A few months ago we were encouraged by the social work team to go for Parental rights for Mark as they could not see Angela or David getting him back. This we are doing at the present moment in time.

Angela is only allowed supervised contact with Mark. This is done within our home or at the children's nursery he attends two mornings a week which is meant to give my wife and me some respite time. David is not allowed any contact with any of Angela's children due to his violence and use of weapons, plus his drug and alcohol use. The other three children are cared for in the homes of members of Angela's family.

## STUDY FIVE

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Unlike other grandparents who have been able to see their grandchildren and do a lot for them before they were stopped from seeing them, I have never seen my grandchild who is now two years old. I was not even told about her birth, even though it was in a hospital which is only five minutes from where I live.

I feel I have missed out in so many things, such as the sheer delight of having your first grandchild, the bonding, her first smile, seeing her starting to walk and say her first words. I feel devastated because this is my first and only grandchild and I love children so much.

The only thing I could do when she was born, therefore, was to open a bank account for her and put her gifts in it, which I do without fail every Christmas and birthday. I sent her Christmas and birthday cards in the first year, but my daughter-in-law always sent them back either ripped up or unopened with writing on the back of the envelope such as “why don’t you give up?”

I had a very good relationship with my daughter for 30 years, but when she was getting married she wrote to me saying that she did want me to attend the wedding or ever see me again! This came as a terrible shock to me because we had not had any kind of row prior to this and I do not know to this day what I am supposed to have done. It absolutely broke my heart to be banned from the wedding and again on the birth of my first grandchild. This is always the time when loving grandparents are so happy that they want to tell the whole world about it, particularly when it is their first grandchild

I cannot describe the tears I have shed and I wake up every night thinking about my daughter and the grandchild I have never seen and probably will never see.

I have tried writing to my daughter over and over again but everything is sent back, or as was the case in earlier days I got a mouthful of abuse on the telephone, which was put down before I could say anything. I hope that one day, when she’s older, my grandchild will pick up her own birthday cards when the postman delivers them and wonder who this “Nanny” is, but I hope this will happen before I miss out on everything.

I feel that grandparents can give so much love and kindness to their grandchildren and I hope that before it is too late the law will be changed to give us the right to see our grandchildren, and our grandchildren have the right to see us.

## STUDY SIX

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Losing Amy, my four-year-old granddaughter, in the terrible way I did felt like in a bereavement. Even now, five years later, I can hardly bear to recall it. Yet the details of that day are etched into my mind for ever. I didn't know it, but that evening was to be the last time I would see my granddaughter for almost three years.

We didn't even have time to say a proper goodbye. One minute I was playing with Amy in the front room, and the next, following an unexpected ring at the doorbell, I found myself staring into the faces of two uniformed police officers telling me that they had come to take Amy home to her mother.

I was so shocked I did not know how to reply. All I could think was that I had to let Amy, who was now crying and confused, go with them. I remember cuddling her as I helped her into her coat, feeling as if my heart was being torn from my body.

Amy, the only child of my youngest son and his long-term partner had been my whole world, my life, since the day she was born. Our son was 31 at the time and was trying to build up his business.

His partner had a good job before Amy was born, and when our son told me that she wanted to return to work, I immediately offered to give up my own career to care for my granddaughter.

My husband, George, had already retired by this time due to ill-health. But even though losing my salary would mean a substantial reduction in income for us, I didn't hesitate. I remember thinking that there were some things in life that mattered more than money. Providing my granddaughter with a secure and stable upbringing was one of them.

From the time she was nine months old Amy and I enjoyed the most wonderful time together. Each morning, at around 8.30am, my husband I would drive over to collect Amy and her mother, before dropping her mother off at work and coming back home.

I must have been the proudest grandmother in the area, wheeling my gorgeous, dark-haired, blue-eyed little granddaughter out to the park each day, taking her to feed the ducks or just sitting on the grass and playing. I adored watching her grow up, as did her grandfather. We loved having her in the house and I looked forward to seeing her smiling face arriving each morning. But by the time Amy was four, I was becoming increasingly concerned about my son and his partner's relationship.

After ten years together they were now arguing frequently, often in front of Amy. I did not want to interfere, but started to become worried about what might happen if they separated. I knew

Amy would not only be very upset but also that it would be very de-stabilizing for her. I hoped desperately for her sake that her parents might be able to work things out. In the meantime, I made sure that my husband and I provided Amy with as stable a daily routine as we possibly could.

Then one day our son called me to say he had moved out into a flat on his own. Then one evening, around two weeks before the visit by the police, I received a call from his partner asking me to baby-sit for the evening. She told me she wanted to see her sister so they could discuss the problems she and our son had been having.

Although obviously very concerned, I wanted to remain on good terms with the mother of my granddaughter and said 'yes' immediately. What I did not know then, and only learned later, was that she did not see her sister — but went to meet her married lover at the airport on his return from a business trip.

The following afternoon, while Amy was with us after school, my son went round to visit his partner unexpectedly — and discovered that her lover had moved in. After a furious row, he returned and told us that he was not letting his daughter go back while 'that man' was in the house.

Amy then stayed with us, with her mother's full knowledge, for the whole of the following week. I hoped that matters might settle down. What I had never in my wildest dreams expected was a visit from the police to take my granddaughter away. It seemed that my son's partner was so bitter because of the break-up that she'd decided to use force with us.

I had never said she couldn't have her daughter back — but she wasn't taking any chances. Amy was crying now, hanging onto me and clearly distressed. I tried to reassure her that she was going home to her mother.

One of the policemen said sympathetically: "I can imagine how upsetting this must be for you. I have two boys of my own . . ." I stared back at him, suddenly wanting to pull my granddaughter back into my arms. "What will happen now?" I asked. "As your son and his girlfriend are not married, your son needs to apply for an interim parental responsibility order," he replied, "but there shouldn't be a problem."

With tears in my eyes I kissed Amy goodbye, and the policemen slowly led her from the house. My last sight of my grandchild for the next three years was a forlorn little figure on the front path waving a tearful goodbye.

Following a sleepless night for all of us, our son went to see our family solicitor the next morning. After talking to his partner later that day, he came to tell us that she was not objecting to his seeing Amy — but on condition that he did not bring her to see us.

I could not believe that she could be so cruel. But my main concern was how Amy would take it. I was determined that I was not going to be prevented from seeing my granddaughter, so the following morning I went to see our solicitor myself. As grandparents, we did not count as 'relatives', he told us. We had no intrinsic legal rights to see our grandchild. I was horrified. But there was a gleam of hope. He advised us to apply to the court for a visiting order — and there was a strong chance of it being granted.

Just over a month after Amy had been taken away, my husband and I attended court to plead for leave to apply for our own contact order. Four weeks later, our son was granted an interim parental responsibility order to see Amy every Saturday from 12noon to 5pm. But we were still not allowed to see her.

Following a second court hearing my husband and I were granted an 'indirect contact order'. We were still cut off — but at least it meant that we could send letters and postcards to Amy, although at her mother's insistence we were not allowed to see her. She gave no reason other than she felt I was trying to undermine her as a mother.

I wrote to my granddaughter, and got two letters in return saying how much she missed us and wanted to see me. I kept her bedroom at our house exactly as it was on the day she left. Haunted by the thought that I might never see Amy again, I was by now determined to fight to do whatever it took. A few weeks later, after attending an extensive interview with a family welfare officer, a report was submitted to the court to request that my husband and I be granted full contact with Amy.

But again at her mother's request, although with no specific reason was given, the contact was denied. That Christmas was undoubtedly the worst of my life. Without Amy there I had no heart to decorate the house. All I could do was to buy her presents of dolls and toys to give to our son to pass on.

The following summer, our son was at last granted full parental responsibility, which meant he had to be consulted on everything, from Amy's education to medical treatment. He also got regular access. But there was still no news of our separate application to see Amy again.

Another Christmas came and went without her. My worst fear was that I might never see her again. Then in the following spring we at last received a date for a further hearing. It would be in the autumn, ages to wait. But, to my joy, the judge confirmed a direct contact order.

I looked forward to that reunion more than anything in my life before. It happened in November, at a contact centre. I was extremely nervous as my husband and I sat there waiting for Amy to arrive. Suddenly she was there — standing shyly at the door

looking at us. I stood up immediately to rush over and give her a hug. For the first ten minutes we were all very self-conscious. It was strange seeing one another again after so long and Amy had grown up so much.

Knowing we had two hours together, I took things slowly, playing with Amy rather than bombarding her with questions, and showing her a story I had written for her about our new Jack Russell puppy, whom she had heard all about from her father. Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched her suddenly slide off her chair and go to sit on her grandfather's lap. I knew then for the first time that we were going to be able to rebuild our relationship. After that, Amy seemed to relax and be comfortable with us again.

Through the years of anguish before that reunion, I had begun to think more and more about other grandparents like ourselves. I discovered that more than 200,000 non-custodial fathers had lost contact with their children after separation and divorce, so the parents of these men would have no contact with their grandchildren. I started a support group for grandparents, running a helpline as well as answering some of the most distressing pleas for help. Some died without ever seeing their grandchildren again, and in many cases, I felt, it was a death hastened by a broken heart.

It is now four years since we were reunited with Amy and we see her every weekend as well as school holidays. Last Easter, she spent five days with us. It was wonderful celebrating her 10th birthday, my husband's 60th and our wedding anniversary all at the same time. But nevertheless, it saddened us to think of how much time we had missed together through our enforced separation. The whole experience was horrendous. I could not help feeling at times that the courts had no interest in the way families are breaking up, and children are losing their roots as a result.

Perhaps if the Government put more money into helping women stay at home and look after their own children instead of into assisting childcare, the divorce rate might come down and there would not be so many children forcibly estranged from their own families.

Grandparents in our position will continue to lobby Parliament until the law is changed to recognise us as family members who can do an important job in providing security for children damaged by the separation of their parents.

## STUDY SEVEN

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We are the parents to an eight year old boy who is actually our great-grandchild but we have raised him since he was a baby. He is the eldest of our five great-grandchildren. Both his parents became drug addicts and unable to care for him. We took him into our home when he was six-months old. That was eight years ago.

Our grandson left home when his child was only four months old and he has not seen the boy since that day. Our step-granddaughter was sent to prison when her child was six months old so we took responsibility for the baby. She is back in prison now serving a second sentence. She also has not come to see her child since he was a baby so he does not know either of his natural parents. As far as he is concerned we are his parents.

We love our great-grandson very dearly although we know that we are not able to do for him all the things that young parents would do. We are not physically able to join in sports activities. But financially we cannot provide him with all the things a growing child needs.

Except for Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit Allowance we get no other financial help. We pay for everything with our senior citizens' pensions and my husband's Army pension. We do not qualify for anything else. We even have to pay for school milk and school dinners.

If we had not taken our great-grandson into our home it would have cost the state many thousands of pounds to place him with foster parents, but when elderly grandparents or great-grandparents like us care for a child we are not recognized as 'carers' because we are family. The state expects us to raise the child with no support other than our pensions. We gladly share with him what we have but we know that he is deprived of many of the things other children have and this grieves us.

We are very involved with our "Grandparents Parenting Again" group and we know others with similar stories.

## STUDY EIGHT

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My son, a Squadron Leader in the RAF, was killed over the North Sea while leading a training exercise when his Tornado blew up. There was no time for either himself or his navigator to eject and both died. Within days, my daughter-in-law removed her wedding ring and asked me why I was crying. "He's dead, isn't he?" She said.

After my husband's death my son had insisted that I should come to live with him and his wife saying that he would never be happy flying with me living in Wales so far from his base in eastern England. As a result I sold my house and put all the money into the new house that we shared, naming my son and his wife as part-owners; much against my solicitor's advice.

They had one son six years old when my son was killed and his wife was six months pregnant. A few weeks later she left the house with my grandson saying she would be back soon. She came back later that day with a hired van which she stuffed full and after she had driven away I discovered that all the services in my home had been cut off, including the telephone. The neighbours were wonderful and helped in every way. Even my doctor called to see me as he had heard what had happened. He said he believed her behaviour was due to grief and her advanced pregnancy.

There was, however, another motive for her moving that only later became apparent. We had always had a good relationship, but now she wanted to exclude me from her life totally. I was not allowed to be present at the scattering of my son's ashes or the planting of a memorial tree at the Base. I was not even informed of the birth of my granddaughter. I telephoned and asked when I could see her but the answer was that perhaps sometime in the future she would think about it. She also denied me all access to my grandson with whom I had been very close until my son's death.

A year later when I was still being denied access and I had not even been allowed to see my new granddaughter I went to court asking for access, but she opposed the application which was denied. The court took no consideration of the fact that I had had a close relationship with my grandson before she moved out of the family home and bought a house with the insurance money from my son's death.

A year later I again went to court and got the same judge with the same outcome. The reason given by my daughter-in-law was that she had now found a new partner and they wanted to have a life of their own in which I had no part to play. Once again there was

no consideration given to the grandchildren; the mother's wishes were paramount. I discovered that she had told my grandson, now eight years old, that I was dead so I was forbidden to write to the children or even send birthday or Christmas cards.

It is now over five years since my son died and I am still denied all access to my grandchildren although I have continued sending cards even though they are torn up or returned to me unopened. I now always buy two birthday cards and two Christmas cards: the one to be sent, which I know will be destroyed, and the other one which I put in a box and keep upstairs. When my grandchildren are 18 years of age they can see the cards and gifts that I have put aside for them – that is, if I live that long.

I have used a large amount of my savings in legal fees and fruitless litigation and my health has suffered from years of stress and longing to see the children. I have still never seen my granddaughter whom for five years I have longed to cuddle. I have even been on the brink of being sent to prison for alleged 'contempt of court' for continuing to send birthday cards.

I am a widow over 70 years of age and I'm spending my time acting as a volunteer 'granny' for a class in a school for disabled children and I am also a volunteer helper in a society for the blind. But none of these activities really compensates for not being allowed to see my two grandchildren, now eleven years and five years old. I am the only living relative of their daddy, and when I die there is so much about their roots they will never know. It surely is cruel to deny the children any knowledge of their father's family. I worry about the effect this will have upon them in later life.

Why is it that English Family Courts so despise grandparents? Why is it that consideration is only given to the wishes of the mother even when she is clearly acting out of selfish motives and showing a vindictive spirit?

Why are children denied the love and attention that a grandparent is longing to give them, especially when they are going through the traumas of bereavement or the breakdown of their parents' relationship? This is when they most need the tender loving care of an older family member who dearly loves them. Why do English courts only recognise the wishes of mothers and not the needs of children?

## STUDY NINE

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We remember the day nine years ago when our only son came to tell us that his wife had left him, taking our two grandsons, one aged three years and the other eight months. He was devastated as we were. Over the weeks that followed we did not see our grandchildren, except in the distance. In a small town that is very hard to bear.

When the hearing took place in the Family Court, our son's wife claimed she was the victim of domestic violence. In truth it was the other way round as witnessed by others who wrote to the Court to that effect. She had even tried to put a hot iron on our son's face in front of the children. The Court, nevertheless, gave custody to the mother and our son was banned from seeing both his wife and the children.

For the next year the three-year old spent the most of the time with us whilst his mother had other relationships. The child did not understand what was happening in his life and the changes it would make. But when our daughter-in-law took a new partner into her home and divorce proceedings were completed she cut off all contact with us and our son, banning the children from seeing us.

Our son applied for access to the children and the outcome of the court settlement was that our son could have the children for three hours every fortnight.

These were such sad times for all of us. Our son was broken. He lost his home, his job, his health and his children. In addition his then ex-wife's family launched a hate campaign against him saying that he owed them money.

All of this took its toll upon us. We were not able to sleep or to concentrate. We had no rights at all as grandparents so we were only occasionally allowed to see our grandchildren. The eldest grandchild would go very quiet when he had to return to his mother and if we met the children in the local high street they were both run to us and hug us before their mother took them away. This made us very sad, our hearts going out to the children because they did not understand why he could not stay with us.

Things are better now in some ways. Our son has the children for the weekend each fortnight and the eldest grandson comes to us after school three days per week. But the whole episode has left many scars and there is an ongoing tension in the lives of our grandchildren. The elder grandchild tells us things his mother says such as, "Mum calls you an old witch." The younger child made us a card saying, "I love you Nan and Grandad. I wish I could see you more often."

We are worried about the long-term effects upon our grandchildren. The strains within their family life have already had a detrimental effect on the education of both boys. The older boy shows an inability to concentrate. His mother has now taken a new partner whom he does not like and this makes him very angry. This is affecting his behaviour at school. He is now 12 years old and has already been in trouble with the law. He says he is often smacked by his new 'father' and suffers verbal abuse from his mother. We are quite sure that his violent behaviour is due to the turbulence in his family life but we are powerless to intervene.

His mother is still involved in domestic violence with her third partner after her divorce. She seems to have a hatred for men but this was never appreciated by the Family Court who simply accepted her testimony. We see this as a grave failure of the Family Court where the whole bias is towards the mother and the testimony of the father is often disregarded or dismissed as unreliable. Our grandchildren's lives have been ruined by the failure of the court to investigate and assess our ex daughter-in-law's charges or to take into consideration the wishes of our grandchildren. If we had been allowed to take responsibility for them their lives would have been very different.

## STUDY TEN

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Our daughter was 21 when she married. Two years later she gave birth to a baby girl, Jenny. Less than a year later her husband left her for another woman. She was devastated, being left without support. She came home to live with us, bringing the baby with her. She returned to nursing in our local hospital and we became full-time carers whilst she was at work.

Jenny was a lovely child and as an infant we did everything for her while her mother was on duty. We shared in all the joys of seeing the child grow, of taking her first steps and speaking her first words. By this time our daughter had obtained a divorce and the separation from her former husband was complete. He made no attempt to contact her or to see the child, or even to inquire after.

When Jenny was three we enrolled her in a local playgroup so that she would have social contact with other children of her own age. She enjoyed the experience and looked forward to going to the group. We took her and fetched her home at the end of each session. Then, when she was old enough for school we were usually responsible for taking her in the mornings and meeting her from school in the afternoons when her mother was working at the hospital.

Our lives, of course, completely changed and, although I was still working, my wife undertook most of the child-care responsibilities. I shared them whenever I was available. Holidays were usually taken altogether in a foursome that we all enjoyed. We were a family and our lives revolved around Jenny.

Then when our daughter was 31 she contracted cancer. It was inoperable and in two years she was dead. It was then that her ex-husband reappeared. Jenny was 10 years old and she had never seen this man since she was a baby. To our amazement he applied to the court for custody. We engaged a solicitor to help us to fight for Jenny and he assured us that we had a very strong case as we had cared for the child since she was a baby and we were the only family she knew.

The court, however, ruled against us in favour of her natural father. It was not long before a very tearful Jenny, still grieving and emotionally disturbed from the loss of her mother, was forcibly taken from us.

The court gave no consideration to the close relationship between Jenny and her grandparents; they only recognised the father's right to her custody. Jenny was taken from us and given into the custody of her father and his partner — leaving us heartbroken; coping with a double bereavement. Most of all we were grieving for a sensitive child taken from her home and the family whom she loved and forced to live with two total strangers.

How can such gross injustices and barbaric acts of child cruelty be committed by an English court in the 21st century where the rights of children are supposed to be paramount?

## PART 4 CONCLUSIONS

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Most grandparents make every effort to maintain contact with their grandchildren despite the limitations of distance or other impediments. Three-quarters are actively involved in the lives of one or more of their grandchildren and this is seen by grandparents to be of considerable value both to them and to the children. Grandparents acknowledge that the time spent with their grandchildren brings happiness and a unique *raison d'être* into their lives.

The relationship between grandparents and grandchildren has a special quality. The research from grandparents confirmed data received through the focus group interviews with children reported in Part One of this study that most children regard their grandparents very favourably — as adults who have a special care for them and who are prepared to spend quality time with them. The grandparents considered the investment of time in their grandchildren to be uniquely worthwhile. 60% are involved in child care activities and they gladly undertake responsibilities such as babysitting, looking after children during holidays and out of school activities that enable the parents to be economically active.

Most grandparents give financial support to the upbringing of their grandchildren in a variety of ways. For some, with limited means, this is self-sacrificial. The most usual support is through the purchase of clothes, books, toys, food and paying for holidays, as well as helping the parents with school fees, playgroup, day-nursery and similar child-care costs.

Three-quarters of grandparents report that their relationships with one or more of their grandchildren are either 'close' or 'very close'. This enables the children to confide on a confidential basis that often includes relationship problems that they are encountering at school or with neighbourhood friends, but it also enables them to speak about domestic issues. The grandparents believe that they are seen as a non-authoritarian adult; as people who love and support the children. The grandparents believe that it is worth giving their undivided attention to their grandchildren and it is this 'quality-time' that enables the children to entrust them with their secrets.

Twenty percent of the grandparents reported that there had been a marriage or co-habitation relationship breakdown in the lives of their grandchildren. More than 80% said they were able to give

support to the children during these difficult times. One in five, however, reported that during or after the divorce or relationship breakup they were debarred from contact with the children. For most this was a stressful experience, not only for them, but also for the children. Both were likely to suffer emotional distress or physical ill-health. There were numerous reports that during legal proceedings neither the children nor the grandparents were consulted or had their views taken into consideration.

Many of the grandparents speak of their dismay at discovering that they have no legal rights in offering loving care and support to their grandchildren whom they know to be distressed through scenes of parental strife that they have witnessed. There is a growing body of evidence to show that Family Court decisions do not always take account of the best interests of the child, sometimes allowing the rights of parents to take precedence. There are strong calls from among the 13.5 million grandparents in Britain for a review of their legal position.

The 20th century modern period of social change largely destroyed the extended family in Britain replacing it with the nuclear family living in geographical and social isolation. The postmodern period has done much to destroy the nuclear family, replacing it with a variety of relationships, formal and informal, in which both the elderly and the young suffer neglect. With children increasingly becoming parents before they have even had time to grow up and reach adulthood themselves there is a strong case for reviewing the role and function of grandparents in family life today. There is evidence that this pattern of behaviour tends to be repeated in the next generation thus producing grandparents who could be as young as 28 years. Clearly, any changes in legislation would have to take note of these generational differences among grandparents.

Grandparents over 60 come from a generation where moral standards were taught at home, in school, in voluntary associations and uniformed organisations. Perhaps we should no longer assume the primacy of rights of all parents in a generation of parents who have in many cases demonstrated their inability to act as responsible parents. It may be necessary to skip a generation and give automatic rights to the generation of older grandparents, not only for their sake but for the well-being of the children who are the innocent victims of immature or self-centred parents.

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Research Team

University of Hertfordshire  
Professor Fiona Brooks  
Dr Ellen Klemra  
Dr Maxine Offredy

Centre for Research in Primary and Community Care  
University of Hertfordshire  
College Lane  
Hatfield AL10 9AB  
Contact: [f.m.brooks@herts.ac.uk](mailto:f.m.brooks@herts.ac.uk)

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Family Matters Institute  
Dr Clifford Hill  
Letitia Cook  
Rebekah Clark

Moggerhanger Park  
Bedford  
MK 44 3RW  
Contact: [research@familymatters.org.uk](mailto:research@familymatters.org.uk)  
website [www.familymatters.org.uk](http://www.familymatters.org.uk)

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