

DO GRANDPARENTS MATTER?



The Impact of Grandparenting on the Well Being of Children

REPORT SUMMARY



*“My grandparents
will always have time
to play games and
things with me”*

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

DO GRANDPARENTS MATTER?

This timely and important report shows the immense value of grandparents in 21st century family life. It reveals a unique relationship that exists between the older generation and the youngest: 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.

The report shows that children value the non-critical support, emotional advice and guidance that grandparents offer and enjoy the quality time their grandparents give them. It also found that the relationship has benefits for grandparents adding to their *raison d'être* and contributing to their health and longevity.

The report also notes the change in the nature of family relationships in Britain throughout the 20th century, from the extended family to the nuclear family to the current variety of relationships, formal and informal, in which both the elderly and the young suffer neglect.

With today's increased incidence of divorce and family breakdown, grandparents can sometimes provide the only stable family relationship in a child's life, and yet grandparents often lose contact with their grandchildren during or after a divorce or relationship breakup and have no legal rights through the Family Court to continue offering loving care and support to their grandchildren.

The report concludes that there is need for much greater understanding of the role and function of grandparents in family life today.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD GRANDPARENT?

Grandparents are seen as a positive and supportive adult in many children's lives, providing a relationship that is different from that between a child and his or her parents.

Children appreciate the time their grandparents have to spend with them engaging in simple play activities and being “fun” grandparents, 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.

Children held expectations of what constituted 'good grandparenting' with kindness, patience and a sense of fun emerging as being highly meaningful for the children. 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.

Those children who said that their grandparents were disinterested, critical, or overly strict, expressed feelings of disappointment and loss.

GRANDCHILDREN ARE GOOD FOR YOU

Most grandparents regard contact with their grandchildren to be of considerable value bringing a lot of happiness and a sense of fulfilment into their lives. They enjoy spending time with the children, listening to and sharing in their experiences of school and peer group interaction.

These contacts with the children come to mean a great deal to grandparents who benefit from 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.

PRACTICAL HELP

Grandparents can often provide an invaluable source of childcare that enables parents to have a life of their own. 60% of the grandparents in the study were involved in some form of childcare on a regular or occasional basis. 28% regularly care for their grandchildren in the evenings or at nights. Grandparents look after grandchildren while parents are at work; they do school runs – taking or collecting children — and take them to a variety of out-of-school activities. 34% of grandparents give financial help to their grandchildren or support the parents in meeting the cost of bringing up their children.

GRANDPARENTS IN FAMILY BREAKDOWN

81% of the grandparents in this study whose children had been involved in family breakdown said they had given support to their grandchildren during times of domestic dispute and the breakup of the parental home. The grandparents often provide the one stable factor in family life and those to whom the children turn for personal counselling and support in times of stress.

“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”

“They care about me, when I am hurt they’re really sympathetic and they always look after me every time”



CASE STUDIES

Ten case studies in the report illustrate the experience of grandparents during times of parental disputes and stress within family life. 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.

THE RESEARCH

The aim of the research was to examine the role of grandparents in family life today from the perspective of both the children and the grandparents. Two schools participated and the study and a number of organisations working with seniors distributed questionnaires to their members.

The research was carried out jointly by a team from the University of Hertford led by Professor Fiona Brooks and a team from the Family Matters Institute led by Dr Clifford Hill.



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