



Grandparents in Parenting Roles



Notes from the Access Grid workshop held on
Thursday 16 August, 2007, 3.00-5.00 pm AEST

This workshop was run jointly by the ARC/NHMRC Research Network in Ageing Well and the ARACY/ARC/NHMRC Research Network: Future Generation.

Welcome:

Ann Sanson, Helen Bartlett and Colette Browning welcomed participants from both Networks and other organisations and remarked that the workshop was bringing together researchers focussing on the opposites ends of the spectrum in order to examine grandparents in parenting roles.

Workshop Presentations:

Bettina Cass (Professorial Research Fellow, Social Research Policy Centre, UNSW)

Understanding grandparent care: Policy implications of grandparents as primary carers of their grandchildren in the Australian context

Bettina provided an overview of the statistics on grandparents as carers, noting that a large proportion of care is informal so the ABS statistics underestimate the true level. Bettina noted that in 61% of cases the grandparents were 55 years and older, two thirds relied on income support and half were lone grandparents. Bettina suggested that grandparent care should be seen as dyadic or triadic with the parents often still involved in the relationship in some way. Bettina outlined the statistics on the increase in the placement of children in "out of home" care and noted that indigenous children were 6 times more likely to be cared for people other than their parents.

These differences will be assessed in an ARC Linkage Study which Bettina is involved in and which will look at the impact of care for the grandparent and the child.

Bettina noted that legal issues across states and levels of government are complex with informal carers often not receiving the payments and services made to formal carers and often unwilling to make themselves and their needs known to government service providers.

Bettina noted that there were 2 main theoretical frameworks (child welfare and sociology of ageing) and that were inadequate

Research questions:

- 1) Why do some grandparent carers access services and others do not. To what extent is that to do with lack of awareness of services offered or anxiety regarding contact with the "system"?
- 2) Are the costs of grandparental care shared and are the funds going to the most appropriate people?
- 3) What are the impacts of state and federal policy systems?
- 4) How are policies shaped by official expectations?
- 5) What are the experiences and outcomes of grandparental care for all involved?
- 6) How do indigenous families differ from non-indigenous families?

Vicki Rundle (Branch Manager, Child Care Policy and Children's Policy & Programs Branch, FaCSIA)
Australian Government Support for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

Vicki outlined the main sources of data to do with grandparenting including the ABS 2003 Family Characteristics Survey and an AIHW report in June 2006 which showed that of the 13,700 children in informal home care 10,300 were with grandparents.

Vicki outlined the issues being addressed by the government including the need to simplify Centrelink processes, providing grandparents with the same access to support as foster carers. Vicki also summarised the legal issues including access to legal aid and difficulty establishing proof of care. The need for targeted support to address therapeutic needs, assistance in navigating the public health system, respite care etc was also discussed. The government is focussing on the lower income group as these are suffering more.

Vicki summarised the range of government initiatives and benefits relating to grandparental care including the Raising Children Network (<http://raisingchildren.net.au/>) and the Smart Population Foundation (<http://smartpopulation.org/>). Vicki also noted FaCSIA's involvement in research including the work with Bettina and with HILDA. In addition, the Ministerial Counsels and COAG are very involved in efforts to improve access and support.

Vicki outlined the following research questions which she was personally interested in:

- 1) Need more research on the outcomes of care (financial, health, access to services etc) – there is an increasing number of grandparents acting as carers so a longitudinal study is needed to assess impact over time
- 2) Indigenous issues are critical and are a government focus now.
- 3) State and territory differences – it would be interesting to know service available and uptake in each region.
- 4) There is always a call for more services but it is important that we assess whether the current services are being used efficiently
- 5) Need to know the size of the problem – the prevalence of grandparents as primary carers and the size of their service needs.

Lisa Langley (State Policy Officer, Council on the Ageing (NSW)):

Lisa outlined the COTA activities and policies related to grandparents as carers and noted that policy is fragmented and confusing and is lagging behind the needs of the grandparents. Lisa outlined the work of the COTA Intergenerational Working Group which has a focus on grandparenting and seeks to inform policy from the ground up. The Working Party has developed a number of recommendations including: setting up a national information service for grandparents; providing grandparents with the same benefits as parents by ensuring that payments are tied to the child and not the parent; the need to simplify DOCS policies; and the need for respite care.

Lisa outlined the plans for a grandparenting forum in 2008 which would build on an earlier forum in 1996 and was being developed in collaboration with DADHC and the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing. The aim of the forum is to bring together researchers, policy makers and constituency groups to identify the key issues and develop recommendations for policy change. The forum will take into consideration differences between CALD and indigenous families etc.

Lisa identified the following research gaps:

- 1) Need to know about the unique needs of ATSI and the structure of family care relationships
- 2) The effect of type of care (parent, grandparent, foster etc) on outcomes
- 3) More detailed demographic data is needed on the “hidden” grandparents not accessing the system
- 4) Regional differences in the needs of grandparents
- 5) The challenges of grandparents raising teenagers and the effect of the generation gap

Research questions arising from the discussion section:

In line with the collaboration between the two Research Networks, two of the essential characteristics of the any research areas to be taken further are that they are of significant interest to both Network's and that the Network's are able to add scale and multi-disciplinary involvement that would otherwise not have been possible. In addition, it was agreed that research on grandparents as primary carers should take priority over other forms of grandparental care. As such, the following potential areas for collaboration were identified:

Prevalence:

- 1) Need more detailed information on informal care which is hidden from the system and could be 4-5 times higher than indicated by ABS statistics

Cross-cultural comparisons: [Post Note – should involve researchers from relevant CALD backgrounds]

- 2) Differences in “out of home” care outcomes in the customary care system found in indigenous communities compared to grandparent care in other communities.
- 3) Cross-cultural differences in multi-generational co-living arrangements including comparisons between people from CALD backgrounds in their adopted communities and in the country of origin.
- 4) Comparative studies – e.g. US/UK/Europe. What are the effects of regional differences in policy etc
- 5) The effect of migration and the disrupting of generational links and outcomes for children and grandparents. [Post Note – this should focus on recent migration, cultural differences as research has been done on earlier post-war migrants]
- 6) The effect of migration on care trajectories – e.g. comparing Chinese families in Australia with their counterparts in China, Hong Kong and/or Singapore

Policy issues:

- 7) The effect of care policy targeted at improving access for grandparents on the probability of family reunification.
- 8) The social policy question of why grandparent acting as parents/carers don't have same access as formal care arrangements
- 9) Reasons behind the anxiety of grandparents not to come to the attention of the system
- 10) Child protection authorities are often viewed as frightening entities because they can take the child away. It would be interesting to know view point of child protection as they are often empathetic towards the families in crisis but must act as agents for the legislative mechanism.

Financial issues:

- 11) Intergenerational flows of wealth
- 12) The effect of socioeconomic status on outcomes (including psychological, physical and financial) for children and grandparents.

Intergenerational relationships:

- 13) The effect of co-residency (i.e. grandparents as primary carers while the parents are still in place but unable to care) on outcomes for all three generations. Need to monitor the lineage and get feedback across the generations
- 14) Relationships from whose point of view – grandparents, parents, children. Needs to be studied in an integrated way.
- 15) Reversals of care such as when the grandparent becomes unable to care and the child takes on the responsibility
- 16) Intergenerational interaction that includes non-familial contacts, e.g. the impact of seniors who volunteer at intergenerational play groups and other program settings on children and vice versa. [Post Note – question suggested by Leng Leng Thang following on from the workshop]

Next steps:

- These notes will be circulated to participants in the workshop and to a broader audience who are welcome to send in comments and suggestions which will be incorporated.
- Researchers interested in particular topics here should contact the workshop convenors (Ann Sanson on behalf of the ARACY Network and Helen Bartlett and Colette Browning on behalf of the Ageing Well Network – emails provided below).

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- Once topics and potential collaborators are identified the two Networks will look at a range of possibilities to facilitate the research including discussion groups and research workshops.