Grandparenthood: Its Meaning and Its Contribution to Older People's Lives

Lynda Clarke and Ceridwen Roberts

The grandparent/grandchild relationship is becoming more prevalent as people live longer but other societal changes are affecting how this family relationship operates. Older people, especially women, may be working or enjoying more active leisure interests while more families with children have both parents working and/or experience more family breakdown and lone parenthood. All this has repercussions for intergenerational family relationships. In the absence of accurate data on this vital topic there has been a tendency in public policy to ignore the diversity of grandparents' circumstances, roles and obligations. A key objective of this project therefore was to examine the diversity among British grandparents and the contribution grandparenthood makes to older people's quality of life.

Summary of key findings

- The results from the surveys confirmed our view that Government policy was ignoring the heterogeneity of grandparents' families and roles. One-third of grandparents were aged under 60 years, the majority of whom were working. Over one-third of grandparents (38%) had grandchildren in non-intact families and one-fifth (21%) had step-grandchildren.

- Our national data confirm that family relationships today are complex but grandparenthood remains an important family relationship for older people in Britain. The qualitative study also confirmed the importance of grandchildren to grandparents. The main feeling was of strong emotional closeness and the contribution grandchildren made to the quality of their lives. The symbolic value of grandchildren was clearly important. They represented a sense of continuity and immortality.

- Contact with grandchildren was more frequent than we expected. Three in five grandparents saw at least one grandchild on a weekly basis and a similar proportion (64%) lived within half an hour of one or more grandchildren. The same proportion of grandparents (60%) reported other contact, via telephone, letter or email.

- Four in ten grandparents (40%) wanted more contact with grandchildren. The majority of grandparents (59%) said they had the 'right amount of contact' with grandchildren and under 1% of grandparents wanted less contact.

- Contact with grandchildren is most closely related to proximity (how close they live to grandchildren) but it is difficult to disentangle whether moves occur in order to facilitate contact or vice versa. Lineage (whether maternal or paternal grandparents) is more important than the family type of the grandchildren in predicting contact. Paternal grandparents will see less of their sons' grandchildren, especially if there is a family break-up.

- A majority of grandparents looked after grandchildren under 15 years in the daytime (60%), babysat (54%) or gave money to grandchildren (64%).
Daytime childcare was related to how close the grandparent lived, whether the grandparents were maternal or paternal and the age of the grandchildren. Paternal grandparents were less likely to look after grandchildren, especially if the son had separated from the grandchild's mother.

Older grandparents, those with more grandchildren, those with young grandchildren and those with higher incomes were most likely to give grandchildren money.

We identified three main types of support: practical, financial and emotional. Grandparents, particularly grandmothers, still play a key role as an additional source of child care and are routinely used for practical support in times of normal upheaval like the arrival of new babies, moving house and illness of parent but they also took a key role in more protracted crises.

Financial help and general support varied enormously by both the income level and values of the grandparent and circumstances of the child. Divorce and separation often meant grandparents stepped in to remedy financial difficulties.

Some grandparents felt obliged to provide much more help with childcare than they would wish in order to help their working daughters and daughters-in-law or when their children separated from partners.

Grandparenthood is a role which is partly outside the control of the individuals concerned. Parents of children could act as ‘gate-keepers’ to their children and many grandparents were keenly aware of this. Indeed negotiation of the grandparental role is a key theme in grandparents’ discourse, as is the concept of ‘not interfering’.

A profile of grandparents in Britain
The grandparents showed great socio-demographic variability. The youngest grandparent interviewed was aged 37 and the oldest was aged 94 and the maximum number of grandchildren was 23. The maximum number of sets of grandchildren (that is grandchildren who live together) counted for one grandparent was twenty; the respondent was aged 82 and most of her grandchildren were older. It is likely that the majority of these children had left the family household, and as a consequence every individual represents a different set by our definition. The number of grandchildren and sets of grandchildren was also related to socio-economic indicators, reflecting the higher birth rate amongst lower socio-economic groups, as well as the younger age at childbirth.

The quantitative survey confirmed our hypotheses that the families of the grandchildren were not uniform. Nearly one in four grandparents (38%) had experienced family breakdown in at least one of their sets of grandchildren, and for 10% this meant family breakdown in all sets of grandchildren. Family breakdown of grandchildren’s families was not related to socio-economic characteristics of the grandparent. Interestingly, over a fifth of grandparents interviewed had at least one step-grandchild and this was more common for grandparents who were younger than 70. The effect of family change, particularly in more recent years (younger grandparents), is having a marked impact on grandparents and numbers of grandchildren and family patterns.

The meaning of grandparenthood/contribution to quality of life
Our national data confirm that family relationships today are complex but grandparenthood remains an important family relationship for older people in Britain. Grandparents were unanimous in reporting that grandparenthood was an important part of their life. Most rated the relationship with their grandchildren as ‘one of the most important in my life’. Over half (55%) said that being a grandparent contributed ‘enormously’ to their quality of life and a third (31%) said it contributed ‘a lot’. Only 4% said it contributed ‘not at all’.

The qualitative study also confirmed the importance of grandchildren to grandparents: ‘That was the only thing I wanted in this life... a grandchild’ and ‘It makes life more worth living... it’s something to look forward to’. The main feeling was of strong emotional closeness and respondents generally told of the contribution grandchildren made to the quality of their lives. The symbolic value of grandchildren was clearly important. They represented a sense of continuity and immortality - ‘the generations are going to continue’ - as much as a sense of achievement, ‘I feel as if compared to work I’ve achieved something... I’ve used my time usefully and they are kind of like the end product’.

But equally grandchildren were valued for the additional dimension they brought to grandparents' lives. Grandchildren 'keep you young... when they come along you have to move up a few notches... go a lot...
faster'. Grandparents reported doing things they wouldn't otherwise have done and clearly enjoyed this as much as the reduced sense of responsibility associated with grandparenting compared with parenting 'when its your grandchild its different - there's not the worry behind it'. Given previous reports of grandparents being less involved in family networks, we were surprised by how much grandparents in our qualitative study were involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Many reported being actively engaged with grandchildren and, also, they spoke of their attachment and love for grandchildren.

A small number of grandparents reported the downside of being a grandparent. In all cases they were doing more or different things than they anticipated grandparents doing. In one case the grandfather was acting as a parent in the absence of his daughter and had taken this role on rather than see his granddaughter adopted. He did not regret doing this but described it as 'like putting your life on hold for ten, fifteen years'. For the others who felt there had been some adverse effects this often came about because they were asked to do too much to help out or it was taken for granted that they would help. These grandparents felt they were due their time and had done their parenting 'I've brought mine up and it's up to them to bring up their's.'

Finally, our respondents' reactions to becoming grandparents reflected the stereotypical picture of grandparents still held in the wider population. Many said they felt 'odd' when they first knew they were to become a grandparent as they did not think of themselves as a typical grandparent which they defined as an elderly, often ill, removed grandparent who does not become engaged in a practical way with grandchildren. This was at odds with both how these grandparents wanted to be and their experiences.

Contact with grandchildren

Contact with grandchildren was more frequent than we expected. Three in five grandparents saw a grandchild on a weekly basis and a similar proportion (64%) lived within half an hour of grandchildren. The same proportion of grandparents (60%) reported other contact; via telephone, letter or email.

Contact is related most importantly to proximity (how close they live to grandchildren) but we could not tell whether moves occur in order to facilitate contact or vice versa. The next most important factor is lineage; being a grandchild of a son, especially living in a non-intact family, decreased the likelihood of weekly contact. Grandchildren through stepchild relationships, or step-grandchildren, were the least likely to see grandparents. Grandfathers were only less likely to see grandchildren frequently if they were not living with a wife. Weekly contact was less likely if the youngest grandchild was over 10 years old, and close proximity was less likely if grandparents were older.

More than half (59%) of grandparents said they had the right amount of contact with grandchildren and only 0.5% wanted less contact. However, four in every 10 grandparents wanted more contact. These grandparents were not easily distinguished from other grandparents.

Grandparents and family support

The Government has emphasised the importance of grandparents for family life through caring for children when mothers work as well as providing support when families break up or experience difficulty.

The results from our second national survey show that the majority of grandparents looked after grandchildren under the age of 15 years in the daytime (60%) or babysat (54%). They were also likely to give grandchildren money (64%) or have children to stay overnight (52%). Grandparents who looked after grandchildren in the daytime were more likely to be grandmothers or married grandfathers, and be maternal grandparents. Paternal grandparents were less likely to look after the children of sons than daughters, especially if their sons were no longer living with their partner. Income, employment or economic status, and the age of grandparents were not related to the likelihood of providing such support once proximity was taken into account. Grandparents who gave money to grandchildren or provided major financial assistance were older, had more grandchildren, had younger grandchildren and had a higher income.

Our in-depth study highlighted the variation between grandparents in what the amount and type of practical, financial and emotional support they provided and felt was appropriate. Most grandparents were generally prepared to step in to 'help' their children with grandchildren when needed for childcare, babysitting or with help in times of family break-up or a crisis. But, while some were clearly prepared to 'drop everything', others wanted time to themselves and set boundaries on what was legitimate.

Practical help was seen as part of the territory, though some felt there was pressure on them to do more childcare than they wanted, as their daughter [in-law]
had to work. Financial support varied by the income level of the grandparent and circumstances of the child. Often grandparents were buying 'luxuries' but some were buying necessities like shoes or consciously trying to compensate for the different living standard of cousins in lone parent families. Others were pained at not being able to buy things. Emotional support was a constant but mentioned chiefly when seen as required by a crisis. Family break-ups provoked this most frequently and grandparents often were used to help calm or discipline grandchildren who were deeply upset, particularly grandfathers for grandsons.

**Grandparenting: constraints and negotiation in the role**

Grandparenthood is a role characterised by negotiation and constraint. Much of it, including entry to it, is outside the control of the individuals concerned. Parents of grandchildren could act as 'gate-keepers' controlling the frequency and terms of access even if implicitly. Grandparents were keenly aware of this. Indeed negotiation is a key theme in grandparents' discourse as is the concept of 'not interfering'.

Nearly all of the grandparents in our national data were involved with their grandchildren (only 0.5% never saw their grandchildren) and were aware of needing to strike a balance between providing support and not doing anything that might be perceived as interference so as to avoid conflict and tension. Most grandparents recognised the tenuous nature of their position and the necessity of 'standing back'. Their role was to advise if asked, and be supportive and show interest without being critical or 'overstepping the mark'. Grandparents reported a number of strategies for ensuring equilibrium between themselves and their children in order to maintain contact with their grandchildren. Conflict between grandparents and their children about grandchildren, if it occurred, seemed to be reported more commonly when grandchildren were young.

**About the study**

This study was undertaken by Lynda Clarke, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and Ceridwen Roberts, University of Oxford. It started in collaboration with the Family Policy Studies Centre. Helen Cairns undertook the majority of the qualitative interviews and contributed to initial analysis. Melin Klemann and David Mayer, at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, contributed to the analysis of the quantitative results.

In this project we collected new, national data on 870 grandparents, their contact with grandchildren and attitudes to grandparenting. This survey was carried out by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in 1999/2000. We then interviewed 45 grandparents in depth about their life in detail, including rating their quality of life, family and leisure commitments, role of and meaning of grandparenthood, the economic, practical and financial exchanges between grandparents and grandchildren, how the role was negotiated with the parents and whether there are differences according to the family type of the grandchildren. Finally, a two-month ONS Omnibus Survey in 2001 of 2,110 grandparents repeated questions from the previous national survey and asked further questions on the specific activities undertaken by grandparents, including financial contributions, and whether they wanted more or less contact with grandchildren.

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