

Bridging the gap: Working with grandparents

by Jean Andrews

There were 14,000 grandparent families caring for 18,900 grandchildren in Australia, between 2006 and 2007 (Raising Children Network, 2011). A recent report published in *Family Relationships Quarterly* discussed a survey of 3,277 sets of grandparents – 1,343 grandfathers and 1,934 grandmothers. The term 'grandchildcare' was defined in the report as the time when grandparents are responsible for the care and wellbeing of grandchildren.

The increasing prevalence of grandparents caring for grandchildren, either full or part time, has significant implications for educators, as many of these children may also attend child care. Educators will benefit from understanding the particular challenges that grandparents may face, and this will also assist them to provide effective support and build positive partnerships.

Why do grandparents become carers?

Situations in which grandparents become full time carers usually occur as a result of drug or alcohol abuse by the child's parents (Patton 2003, 2004, cited in The Centre for Community Child Health, 2010). However, many grandparents also take on a significant role in the part time care of grandchildren, which is due to many factors, including:

- Parents needing to meet work or study commitments which can't be fully met by formal child care arrangements
- Smaller families meaning a reduction in the number of other extended family members available to care for children
- Family breakdown
- Greater geographical dispersal of families.

Issues affecting grandparents

Grandparents can experience particular challenges in caring for grandchildren. These challenges will vary, depending on the circumstances that require grandparents to care for children and whether this is full or part time care. The impact of grandchildcare on grandparents will also depend on their own age, health and life situation.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.2, 1.3 and 6.5
OSHCQA Principles:	1.2, 3.1 and 3.2
QIAS Principles:	1.4 and 2.1-2.3

Cultural factors: Grandparents from culturally diverse families are most likely to care for their grandchildren and many of them wish to pass on the traditions and language of their home country to their grandchildren. Grandparents from certain cultures may be resistant to their grandchildren attending formal child care as some cultures do not consider this to be 'proper' care (Ochiltree, 2006).

According to the Centre for Community Child Health, '[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] grandparents are more likely to be significantly younger and less healthy than non-[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander] grandparents, and to be struggling with transmission of language and culture in the face of personal and community circumstances' (2006, p.2).

Financial difficulties: In some instances grandparents who become carers are fully retired and dependent on Centrelink payments for their income. While they may own their own homes, they may have limited access to cash. While some grandparents may be eligible for financial assistance from Centrelink to assist them in caring for their grandchildren, they may be required to relinquish other Centrelink payments to access this assistance. For many, grandchildcare can be a significant financial burden.

Legal: Legal difficulties can occur if there are issues over guardianship, and grandparents may need to take action to obtain legal responsibility for their grandchildren. This can also have financial implications as grandparents who are not legal guardians may be unable to access financial benefits such as a Medicare card for the child or access Child Care Benefit or Family Tax benefits (Centre for Community Child Health, 2006).

Emotional issues: Grandparents can experience, stress, exhaustion and isolation from their peers when they undertake the responsibility of raising grandchildren. This can be especially challenging

when children have come into the care of their grandparents due to family crisis or dysfunction. These children may be in an emotionally vulnerable condition and they may also have behavioural issues that grandparents may find difficult to manage.

Age related issues: Some grandparents may have less physical stamina to do the things that young children want to do. They may not understand technology, and its importance to older children for social networking. While some grandparents may be younger and relish the challenges they face and enjoy the active care of their grandchildren, they may also resent the time taken from their retirement.

How can educators support grandparents?

- Be aware of and respect differences in grandparents' cultural and language backgrounds, as well as their parenting styles. Educators can talk to grandparents about their culture and values, and link these with the values demonstrated in the service. This can help ensure that the culture, experience and knowledge of grandparents is valued.
- Assist grandparents who care for children with additional needs, including physical and emotional conditions. Help them to access literature, professional assistance and support groups.
- Be proactive in engaging grandparents in two-way communication about their grandchildren. Encourage them to share information about the child's experiences outside of care and ensure that you share information about the child's day at care. Sharing positive news about achievements can help grandparents celebrate

these at home. Be sensitive if there have been any difficulties throughout the day when discussing this with grandparents.

- Be aware that some children being cared for by grandparents may have experienced emotional and/or physical stress or trauma prior to coming to their grandparents' care. These children may also be more likely to have poorer physical, cognitive and psychosocial development than other children (Ochiltree, 2006). Educators may need to assist grandparents to access support from other professionals to manage these issues and/or they may need to work with other professionals themselves to support children.
- Communicate clearly with grandparents about the service's policies and procedures, and let them know why these are in place and how they support quality care in your service.
- Understand the financial constraints grandparents may experience. They may experience difficulties in paying fees, or in purchasing clothing or equipment for their grandchildren. Taking a sensitive approach to discussing difficulties may help comfort and reassure grandparents who may be feeling that they cannot cope.
- Recognise the legal issues that grandparents may face and take this into account when implementing procedures for authorised people to collect children from the service.

Conclusion

Grandparenting can be a joyous and rewarding experience. By understanding the difficulties some grandparents face, educators can build effective partnerships with them and support them in achieving positive outcomes for children ■

References and further reading

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