



Grandparents Speak...

This paper summarises the key findings emerging from a national survey of 286 grandparents from across Australia - conducted in 2004.

Grandparents are represented at all age levels and all walks of life but share a common commitment to their grandchildren and have clear views about issues affecting them. The areas of interest grandparents have are described in two main categories – family matters and education.

Family matters - The relationships grandparents have with grandchildren are complex with the level of contact they have with them ranging from full, through from occasional to none. Those who act as parents have the most difficult role. Those providing partial childcare are happy to do so: they are often relatively well off and healthy, but do get tired. The grandparents who have no contact tend to suffer in silence. Drug and alcohol abuse tend to be major areas clouding the family relationships involved. There is a general feeling held by grandparents that their work is undervalued; they often suffer financial hardship as well as inconvenience? Key findings about family matters include:

1 Grandparents are from all ages walks of life but share a commitment to their grandchildren

Of the 286 survey responses received (233 female and 55 male), the following broad profile of the respondents can be drawn: these grandparents were more likely to be retired or unemployed, of above average educational achievement, more likely to be married or in a de facto relationship, aged above 60, and living in households of low income.

2 There are three levels of contact grandparents can have with their grandchildren

While the level of contact that grandparents may have with their children ranges from full through part/social to none, an individual grandparent may experience all three levels within their set of grandchildren. In such cases, there is greater difficulty because parents may have to adjust to complications that arise. The level of contact may vary if circumstances change. Such variations may cause significant problems for the children involved who can become pawns in power struggles. Their needs become secondary to the wishes of adults.

3 Most grandparents have very complex relationships with their grandchildren

The relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren are complex, partly as a result of their level of contact and also because of the reasons for contact. About half of respondents had 'conventional' relationships (some childcare and social contact) and were generally satisfied. At the other extreme, those having no contact were probably unhappy. Those who raise them as if their own have the most complex relationships.

4 Grandparents providing childcare are happy to oblige - but tired

Childcare cost shows up as a most important underlying factor requiring grandparents to provide some level of caring. While most provide less than 20 hours a week some provide much more. Positive features of the caring tend to outweigh the negatives, but a number expressed concern over tiredness or perceived lack of appreciation for their time, effort and financial outlay, feeling that their own children (who are the parents) seem to consider this to be an ongoing obligation arising from the original parenthood.

5 Grandparents acting as parents have the most difficult nurturing role

These parents have the most difficult and complex set of roles and relationships. These can range from caring for all or some of their grandchildren full-time. Compounding these arrangements can be the reasons that are behind them with increasing phenomena such as parental drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, divorce and separation are a concern. Combined with the problems associated with observing their own children's problems grandparents often face unbearable pressure in their role.

6 Grandparents who have no contact with their grandchildren suffer in silence

It is difficult to measure the suffering of grandparents denied contact with all or some of their grandchildren. Respondents indicate a degree of suffering and powerlessness. The resulting "disconnectedness" can lead to depression or severe unhappiness, especially in those instances where they know of the existence of their grandchildren but little else.

7 Grandparents who have only social contact with their grandchildren are relatively healthy, wealthy and happy

Grandparents with only social contact are relatively atypical in the respondent group, in that they tend to be more well off and more healthy than the rest of the group. They would like to have more face-to-face contact, but are constrained by factors beyond their control such as distance, work pressures of their own or of their children. In some cases it is because the grandchildren are becoming older and more self-involved, thus, at least temporarily, increasingly resistant to grandparental (and parental) affection.

8 Grandparents add child centred time and attention to their grandchildren's lives

Grandparents clearly consider that the value added elements of time and attention they can give to their grandchildren to be their most important contribution. Also highly significant is the sense of security they can provide in situations that can cause bewilderment and unprotectedness that grandchild may be placed, for no easily explained reason of their own. They see themselves as adding something that would otherwise be missing from the lives of their grandchildren.

9 Drug and alcohol abuse clouds family relations and grandchildren's futures

Grandparents who were raising their grandchildren overwhelmingly nominated drug and alcohol abuse (sometimes associated with gambling) as the reason they are doing so. Mental and other illness, death divorce and separation were lesser but still important reasons.

10 Grandparents are undervalued and underdeveloped

Grandparents face the dilemma that while generally accepting their role is undervalued, they feel frustrated that they often have neither the means or the knowledge to do anything about this. This can include lack of financial support, inadequate community facilities and lack of available time to spend with their grandchildren. This is a cause of considerable frustration. While often indicating they do not begrudge the time and effort they put into grandparenting now, they would generally be much happier in the future to be grandparents than surrogate parents.

11 Who would be a grandparent - the pleasures and pressures?

While overall grandparents reported that the pleasures of grandparenting outweighed the pressures, they did comment on some of the 'downside' pressures that were of concern to them. These included: concerns about their own children's inadequacies as parents, concerns about the future ranging from their own health and financial capability to personal isolation because of the demands of caring. A number were worried as to who would care for the children if they became seriously ill or died. Positive features commented upon included: the feeling of being wanted, the ability to communicate with and receive affection from their grandchildren, and the process of sharing in the good as well as the things of seeing a child grow up for the second, in some cases, third time.

12 Parenting of the 21st century needs more support

The increasing issues of substance abuse, family breakdowns, whether through divorce or separation or unforeseen illnesses and accidents would seem to be a feature of the 21st century which will not go away. They identified a number of issues considered as vital to improving the quality of life for their grandchildren in the 21st century. These would include: parents adjusting their working hours to enable more time to relax and play with their children, parents dealing with their substance abuse, improved discipline provided by the parents themselves. In short, grandparents seemed to indicate that their own children, as parents, were in some cases not making either enough or appropriate support for their children, but instead content to devolve this to grandparents.

13 Time on task in parenting and grandparenting is important

The importance of time on task in caring/upbringing by both parents and grandparents was strongly emphasised by respondents. Grandparents see the value of their time in terms of providing stress free time that is both nurturing and secure. In doing so, they recognise this may involve juggling their own time and commitments, even sometimes disrupting their social life including plans made with friends. At the same time, they see the need for parents to accept that they should pay similar attention to the need for themselves to spend more valuable time with their children, accepting the same associated inconveniences.

Education - Grandparents see education as a top priority and a possible salvation to many of the problems they now encounter and foresee. Their satisfaction with current education provision tends to decrease as the level of education increases. They see a need for better funding and improved curriculum, especially with emphasis on such aspects as values and life skills education and, especially, communication skills. Grandparents consider that two crucial elements in the education of their grandchildren are good teachers and a good school culture. Kindergarten education is applauded because it is child centred and usually involves a creative curriculum. Tertiary education is more removed, largely because as their grandchildren age they become more independent and thus responsible for their own lives. Some key findings about education are;

14 Education is a top priority and a salvation

Most of the respondents had grandchildren in school level education. The remainder were almost equally enrolled in kindergarten or tertiary education, although there were fewer individual grandparents with tertiary level grandchildren. Most involved grandparents had some experience with education provision, either as total carers or after school minders. Key issues identified were the need for and benefit of values and life skills education and the cost of education. Education's value for the future was clearly identified.

15 Satisfaction with education declines as the level of education gets higher

Perhaps not surprisingly, satisfaction with education declines somewhat as the stages of education increase. This may be related to the increasing age of the grandchildren, especially teenagers and those in tertiary education. Positive views related to values education in the curriculum, including diversity of courses available and the caring and welcoming culture of the institution.

16 Education must be better funded with a broader curriculum provided

Grandparents indicated a need for improved funding and a broader curriculum. Suggestions for improvement included smaller class size, better discipline (including dress codes) and control of bullying. Also identified were the need for more teachers and teacher-aides and the development of special needs programs. The need for better public transport was also mentioned.

17 Good teachers and school culture are crucial

While grandparents generally hold the teaching profession in high regard and value the part that good teachers play in the education of their grandchildren, they did comment on such matters as the low participation level of male teachers and the need for improved teacher training, especially in the area of educating for life skills.

18 Grandparents applaud kindergarten education because it is child centred with a creative curriculum

Grandparents with involvement in kindergarten education tended to be very satisfied with kindergarten education, mostly because of its child centred and creative curriculum, including values education and preparation for the transition to school level. Additional features commented upon were teacher quality and parent participation. The need for greater access to kindergarten education was stressed.

19 School education is highly regarded but requires curriculum change

While less substantial than that indicated for kindergarten level education, the respondents were still in general quite satisfied with school education, although consider there is a need for some curriculum change. The quality of teachers was seen as a key to good school education and parent (including grandparent) participation was also seen as a positive feature. Features for improvement included the employment of more male teachers, smaller class sizes, improved and more flexible curriculum (especially emphasising values education), less homework and better discipline.

20 Tertiary education is more removed

Only 43 grandparents had children in tertiary education. On the whole those respondents were satisfied with the education provision, seeing as very positive the range of subjects available and the relationship with work. High fees, especially the recent increases, high level of competitiveness and low levels of pastoral care (attendance) were seen as negative factors. Responses to education in this sector must be considered in the context of the grandchildren involved moving into adulthood, thus normally less dependent upon grandparent caring.

21 Grandparents pay for grandchildren' education

Quite a few grandparents (about 40 %) pay for the education of their grandchildren. This is not only for those who care totally for their grandchildren – it is across the whole group of grandparents. A significant number also indicated they were saving towards future education of their grandchildren.

22 Grandparents call for values and life skills education

There is a clear message in the responses that grandparents see there is a need for values and life skills education to be included in the education provision of their grandchildren. Included in the elements of such a curriculum would be communication, respect and tolerance, good manners, honesty and trustworthiness, and a sense of community.

23 Communication is the most crucial life skill

It is of special interest that grandparents identified communication as the most crucial life skill. The mode and frequency of communication between grandparents and grandchildren emerged as a major area of concern. Key aspects of communication included talking, listening, empathising and recognising the rights of others.

Grandparents Speak

A report of a national survey of grandparents conducted in 2004

A copy of the full report is available by forwarding \$10:00 to:

Grandparents Australia Inc
14 Youlden Street
Kensington 3031

The conduct of the survey and the development of the report was funded by the Australian Scholarships Group (ASG) as a community service.

About Grandparents Australia

Established to:

- Promote the role grandparents
- Undertake public awareness campaigns and research projects relevant to the needs of grandparents and grandchildren
- Liaise with the federal, state and local governments on matters of significance to grandparents and grandchildren
- Support member organisations

Member organisations are:

- Grandparents and Grandchildren Society (Qld)
- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (Tas.)
- Grandparents Victoria Inc. (Vic.)
- Moreland Community Childcare Co-op. (Vic.)
- Bankstown Grandparents Support Group (NSW)
- Grandparents Looking After Grandchildren (WA)
- Grandpower for Grandkids (WA)
- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (SA)
- Grandparents for Grandchildren (SA)

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