

Grandparenting: still a family exchange for older people?

Information on grandparenthood in Britain is urgently needed for many research and policy purposes. The relationship of grandparent and grandchild is becoming more prevalent due to demographic changes in longevity and other societal changes imply alterations in how this family relationship operates. Not only are people working longer and enjoying more active leisure interests in older age but more parents working and more family breakdown, lone parenthood and dual earner families have repercussions for intergenerational family relationships. Family relationships are widely known to be central to the well-being of individuals, family groups and society in general. These relationships encompass emotional, practical and financial support as well as less tangible feelings of mutual support and reciprocal obligation. While relationships with partner, children and parents may be most important for younger adults, relationships with grandchildren, also, are relevant for older people.

Without accurate data on grandparenthood in Britain there has been a tendency in public policy to ignore the diversity of grandparents' circumstances, roles and obligations. The Government has emphasized 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 difficulties (The Home Office 1998). A key objective of this paper is to examine diversity among grandparents in this family role.

In the British study we collected new, national data on over 2000 grandparents about their contact with grandchildren, activities undertaken as well as attitudes to grandparenting. We also interviewed 45 grandparents about their life in detail; including rating their quality of life, family and leisure commitments, role 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 were differences according to the family type of the grandchildren.

The results confirmed our view that Government policy was ignoring the heterogeneity of grandparents' families and roles. One third of grandparents were 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.

A comparative study with colleagues in the University of South California is underway (results will be ready for PAA) and suggest that American grandparents tend to be older than British grandparents and live further from grandchildren, which influences contact and activities undertaken.

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

Proximity is most closely related to contact but it is difficult to disentangle whether moves occur in order to facilitate contact. Demographic factors are more important than socio-economic factors in predicting contact with grandchildren. Age and lineage are most important for predicting contact; younger grandparents with young grandchildren through daughters are most likely to have at least weekly contact. Lineage is more important than family type of the grandchildren. Grandparents will see less of grandchildren through sons, especially if there is a family break-up. They are also less likely to see grandchildren aged 10 and older. Non-married grandfathers are also less likely to see grandchildren weekly. This confirms that family breakdown affects grandparent/grandchild contact and the relationship with the grandchildren's parents is particularly important where this occurs.

Multivariate analysis of the data activities undertaken with grandchildren, including financial assistance is currently being undertaken. Preliminary results suggest that demographic factors are more important than economic, particularly lineage of grandchildren.

Our findings from the qualitative study highlighted the variation between grandparents in what they provided, how they helped and what they were willing to do for their families. 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 breakup. However, grandparents also expressed the wish to maintain their own lives and interests. Not all was good news, however, we were told some stories of hardship and distress when grandparents were denied access, when they helped with children after family splits or when they were asked to do 'too much'.

Grandparents were unanimous in reporting that grandparenthood was an important part of their life; only 4% said it contributed 'not at all'. 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.

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. This often involved being asked to do too much or being taken for granted that they would help. Stepping in after family breakdown or losing contact after this could also be difficult.

Grandparenthood is a role characterized by negotiation and constraint. Much of it, including entry into it, is outside the control of the individual concerned. Nearly all of the grandparents in our national study were involved with their grandchildren (only 0.5% never saw their grandchildren). Parents of grandchildren could act as 'gate-keepers' controlling the frequency and terms of access, even if only implicitly. Grandparents in our in-depth study were keenly aware of this. Indeed, negotiation was a key theme in the grandparents' discourse as was the concept of non-interference. They were aware of the

need to strike a balance between providing support and not doing anything which might be construed as interference in order to avoid conflict and tension. Most recognized the tenuous nature of their position and reported a number of strategies for ensuring equilibrium.

Our national data confirm that family relationships today are complex but grandparenthood remains an important family relationship for older people in Britain. The 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. In summary, family relationships may be more complex now but grandparenthood remains an important family exchange for older people.