



Involved Grandparenting and Child Well-being

With changing families, increased life expectancy, growing numbers of dual-worker households and higher rates of family breakdown, grandparents are now playing an increasing role in their grandchildren's lives. Despite their growing importance there has been little research from the perspective of young people on their involvement with grandparents and how this impacts on their well-being.

A team lead by Professor Ann Buchanan from the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at University of Oxford and Dr Flouri of the Institute of Education, have just completed, funded by the ESRC, the first nationally representative study of young people's views on their relationships with their grandparents. They surveyed 1596 children (aged 11-16) in schools across England and Wales and undertook in-depth interviews with 40 young people.

The study sought to answer some of the key questions: To what extent are grandparents involved in young people's lives and what factors are associated with this involvement? What impact does this involvement have on grandchildren's emotional and behavioural well-being? To what extent do grandparents help or hinder the grandchild's adjustment at times of family breakdown? To what extent do grandparents reduce the impact on grandchildren's well-being of family adversity?

Filling the parenting gap for time-poor parents?

The extent of grandparental involvement was surprising. More than 80% saw their grandparents on a regular basis. Almost a third of maternal grandmothers provided regular caretaking for their grandchildren while another 40% provided occasional caretaking. Other grandparents were also involved. Most grandparents provided regular

financial support or other assistance. In addition, there was considerable involvement from grandparents in sharing young people's interests and activities, and talking about future plans. They were also involved in helping to solve the young people's problems and taking part in school activities. A range of factors predicted grandparent involvement: the child's age, living in a less deprived area, frequent contact, good grandparent health and grandparent-grandchild closeness. Proximity was not necessarily important as young people used modern technology to communicate. Parents acted as 'gatekeepers' to grandparent involvement. Grandchildren felt grandparents became closer when they undertook some traditional parenting tasks.

'They are always there for us'. Grandparent involvement and child adjustment

The second question considered whether the high level of grandparental involvement impacted on grandchild wellbeing. To date research in the UK and US has been ambivalent showing that grandparents with heavy grandchild commitments can be severely depressed, and this impacts on children, and that adolescents become less close to grandparents as they get older. In this study it was interesting that a grandparent's active involvement was significantly associated with *better adjusted* adolescents. In particular, taking part in grandchildren's hobbies and interests was significantly associated with fewer emotional and behaviour problems, and fewer peer problems. Grandparent involvement in schooling or education was also related to a lower maladjustment score and fewer conduct problems, and talking to grandparents about future plans was associated with fewer overall emotional and behavioural difficulties, and fewer peer problems.

The interviews showed that grandparents were often regular attendees at school events, providing emotional support and 'cheerleading' their grandchildren. They were also participants in grandchildren's hobbies. Many grandparents played a role as teachers/educators and as general supporters. Helping with homework was a key form of involvement. Grandparents also helped their grandchildren in thinking about their future careers. A strong theme was the role grandparents played during times of difficulty or crisis. Some young people reported that it was easier to open-up to their grandparents than to their parents.

Do grandparents make a difference at times of family breakdown?

Under the law in England and Wales, Grandparents have no legal rights over grandchildren. A study in 2003 of 44 families involved in divorce proceedings concluded that grandparent-grandchild contact post divorce did not have an 'essential purpose or fundamental importance' which would justify an enhanced legal status for grandparents. In the current national study, however, grandparent involvement was strongly associated with reduced adjustment difficulties in all family types but particularly so amongst adolescents from non-intact families.

Buffers against risk? Do Grandparents impact on child well-being at times of adversity?

Contextual risk factors do not occur in isolation, and it is the combination of various contextual and family risk factors that portends negative child outcomes, in particular child maladjustment. The question here was to what extent did grandparents, in times of family adversity, and neighbourhood disadvantage, act

as a buffer against grandchildren's risk of emotional and behavioural problems? This analysis while taking account of neighbourhood disadvantage, found closeness to a grandparent reduced the associations of recent adverse life events with maladjustment.

How the study was undertaken

A representative sample of 1596 young people aged 11-16 from England and Wales were recruited by a survey company (GfKNOP). The young people completed a questionnaire in classroom including details of family type, educational attainment (SATs), Special Educational Needs status, and free school meal eligibility. The young people reported on grandparents' characteristics and the role of the parent in supporting that relationship. Elder and Conger's (1994) grandparent-grandchild emotional closeness scale was used. Well-being was assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Family adversity was measured using Tiet et al.'s (2001) Adverse Life Events Scale. Additionally, for a first time, the school's postcode was used to identify the level of local disadvantage, measured on the Indices of Deprivation. Multi level, multivariate regression models were used to analyse the survey findings. From the original survey sample, 40 interviews with young people were conducted. Interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo.

Conclusion and possible impacts on policy and practice

The role of grandparents is almost invisible in UK family policy. Although individual families may have different relationships with grandparents, overall the findings from this study suggest that the policy implications of the important role that grandparents are playing needs to be reconsidered.

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