

Grandmothers and grandfathers looking after grandchildren: Recent Australian research

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This article presents a snapshot of findings from a research project about the experiences of Australian grandparents who regularly care for grandchildren. The authors wish to thank the grandparents who generously shared their stories for this research.

The time grandparents share with grandchildren takes many forms. Grandchildcare is defined as time when grandparents are responsible for the care and wellbeing of grandchildren, usually in the absence of a parent. In some cases, a grandparent may be undertaking the tasks of grandchildcare alongside a parent. This is different to "seeing" grandchildren, which is characterised by social time without caregiving responsibilities, often in the company of parents.

This mixed-methodology research had two components. The first component involved a secondary analysis of data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA) Release 7.¹ A total of 3,277 grandparents were identified in the HILDA data set (1,343 grandfathers, 1,934 grandmothers). Part two of the research involved qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews ($n = 14$) with six grandfathers and eight grandmothers who cared, to varying degrees, for at least one grandchild.

Differences between spending time seeing and caring for grandchildren

The vast majority of grandparents regularly see their grandchildren. Across the 3,277 grandparents who responded to the HILDA survey, 73% reported seeing a grandchild once a month or more frequently. Grandmothers were likely to see grandchildren significantly more often than grandfathers. Overall, 56% of grandmothers had seen a grandchild at least once a week compared to 49% of grandfathers.

Of the 1,702 grandparents who confirmed they had ever looked after a grandchild, 44% were doing grandchildcare once a week or more often. When comparing grandmothers and grandfathers, grandmothers provided grandchildcare significantly more frequently than grandfathers, with 47% of grandmothers doing grandchildcare at least once per week or more often, compared to 41% of grandfathers. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, grandmothers are more likely than grandfathers to perform grandchildcare daily or several times a week, while grandfathers were more likely than grandmothers to be doing care a few times a year or less often. These results show Australian grandmothers tend to see grandchildren and to look after grandchildren more often than grandfathers.

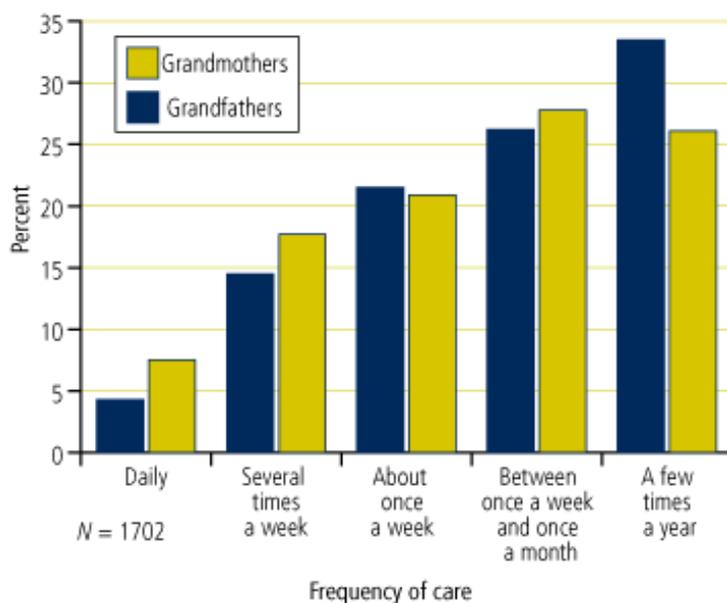


Figure 1. Frequency of grandchildcare by sex of grandparent

Further differences between grandmothers and grandfathers caring for grandchildren

Retirement status had some impact on the frequency of grandparents providing childcare. The most significant difference was between partly retired grandfathers and grandmothers. Of the grandmothers who considered themselves to be partly retired, 30% looked after a grandchild several times a week or more frequently whereas only 9% of partly retired grandfathers performed the same frequency of care. This suggests that, compared with grandfathers, having a paid work commitment does not equate to grandmothers doing less caregiving.

Relationship status was associated with grandfathers doing grandchildcare but not so for grandmothers. Being married/partnered, separated/divorced or widowed did not make a significant impact for grandmothers on the frequency of grandchildcare they provided. For grandfathers though, the presence of a wife facilitated their participation in care because married grandfathers were more likely to report frequently performing grandchildcare than divorced/separated or widowed grandfathers.

The extent to which grandmothers and grandfathers felt satisfied with their free time offered insight into the degree to which grandparents were able to enjoy leisure time as well as perform care and other commitments in life. Although most grandfathers (76%) and grandmothers (69%) who provided grandchildcare were generally satisfied with the amount of free time they have, a significantly greater proportion of grandmothers who did grandchildcare were partially satisfied or dissatisfied with their free time than grandfathers. This was especially so for grandmothers doing grandchildcare several times a week or more frequently.

Grandmothers who nurture

Grandmothers and grandfathers alike used the word "nurturing" to describe what it means to be a grandmother, whether that involves grandchildcare or not. Consistent with earlier research (Wearing & Wearing, 1996; Millward, 1997), grandmothers described themselves as doing the practical work of care and being primarily responsible for the grandchildren, even when their husbands are involved in care. Fiona, who has five grandchildren explained:

Look, he's around, especially because he's home now, but in a sense I take responsibility for looking after (grandchild). I say "come on Thursdays" and I take the responsibility for it. So he's here but I'm the basic caregiver.

A prominent theme across the interviews with grandmothers was the juggle of managing time and contact with grandchildren. Balancing the needs of grandchildren with domestic labour, paid work, caring for elderly parents and their own personal time was a challenge. For example, Carol, a grandmother to eight children, spoke about time management as part of her preparations for spending time with grandchildren and ensuring that their time together goes as smoothly as possible:

It's been a challenge from the point of view that it's not easy. I get the benefits I think by managing time. I'm a time management freak I think, but I, we, get so much more quality from the visit or outing if I know that it has been time managed.

The demand for grandchildcare, particularly for young children, was fuelled by a combination of social expectations to be a caregiver, the busy schedules of adult children who struggled to find suitable childcare and difficulty saying no when asked to provide care. All of the grandparents who were interviewed talked about contemporary grandparents, especially grandmothers, being expected to do grandchildcare and to be a strong source of support for adult children. This was perceived to be occurring to an extent far greater than in the past and could become quite burdensome. For instance, this pressure was experienced by Denise, a grandmother of three, who commented:

Sometimes it gets a bit over the top. Last week I did five days with the grandchildren. I was tired by the end of the week and I was ready for a day off.

According to Cheryl, the reluctance to refuse requests to do grandchildcare can sometimes be motivated by wanting "to be seen as always available and never saying no" to adult children and grandchildren. The perceived social expectation of doing grandchildcare complements the idea that nurturing grandchildren can be an extension of nurturing one's own children, thereby fulfilling maternal ideals about women.

Grandfathers getting involved

Contrasting earlier research by Cunningham-Burley (1984) and Scraton and Holland (2006) that suggested grandfathers were distant figures in grandchildren's lives, the grandfathers who participated in this research spoke enthusiastically about engaging with grandchildren. For example, Mark, a grandfather of seven, showed the picture books he makes with his grandchildren, he explained:

We've had a lot of stickers, all the favourite singers (pointing to Hannah Montana). I bought a lot of those and a couple of books and the grandchildren will come in and say "I want to do stickers" and we'll get the box of stickers out, so I stick stickers with them.

This was Mark's special activity that he enjoyed with grandchildren while providing care along with his wife.

In contrast to grandmothers, the role of grandfathers was, on the whole, not associated with the practical tasks inherent in caring for children. Instead, most of the grandfathers talked about doing things, like entertaining the grandchildren while their wife made dinner, as a way to support the care that their wife was performing. This reflected the greater likelihood of grandfathers participating in care more frequently if married, as found in the HILDA data. Peter, who has three grandchildren, described himself entertaining the grandchildren while his wife performed domestic labour or prepared a meal for the grandchildren:

She would often be cleaning up the house because my daughter, and son in law for that matter, are bloody hopeless with that. So she'll be doing a lot of that when I'll be playing with the kids. She'll be cooking or getting something ready so she'll be able to play with the kids too.

Across all the interviews, being a male role model and mentor to grandchildren strongly featured in the way both men and women talked about grandfathering, compared to the theme of nurturing in relation to grandmothering. As Robert, who has four grandchildren, explained:

Probably more so now than any other time in history, I think it's important that little boys in particular, but I presume little girls as well, actually do have a male role model. So often at school all the teachers are female, they spend infinitely more time with their mother than their father, and the role of the grandfather is there, I believe, largely to be a male role model.

Two grandfathers we spoke to provided grandchildcare on their own. Simon and John emphasised that caregiving was a conscious decision they had made, although each came to the decision from different life histories. Simon had strong egalitarian beliefs about gender roles and John had experienced being a primary carer to his own children. Overall, grandfathers appeared to have greater flexibility in care-giving compared with grandmothers.

Conclusion

Australia has amongst the lowest public expenditure on early childhood services across OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) nations (OECD, 2008) and this research has demonstrated that grandparents, especially a substantial proportion of grandmothers, are filling the shortfalls of formal childcare. Although there were a small number of interviews conducted with grandparents, the personal experiences of these grandparents shed some light on significant patterns emerging in the quantitative national survey data. Overall, this study revealed gender inequalities associated with doing grandchildcare which have the potential to impact on the lives of older women, particularly in relation to experiences of paid work, leisure time and expectations to provide care.

For practitioners working with families over the life course, it is important to recognise the potential costs of caring for grandchildren by older women. Adult children may need to be made aware of the significance of what they are asking of their parents, rather than assuming that they will be there to do what is expected. Grandparents, especially grandmothers, who may be unlikely to say no to unpaid care, when they can see the benefits to their adult children and grandchildren, could be supported in boundary setting. Furthermore, grandfathers who are clearly capable carers could be making a greater contribution to caregiving. As this research shows, grandparents continue to be a vital source of support for their adult children and grandchildren in modern family life.

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