Grandparent involvement and Child well-being – in the child’s best interests?

ESRC funded research
Ann Buchanan

Post-Separation families and shared residence: setting the interdisciplinary research agenda for the future
What we know to date...

• Although considerable research on grand parenting – *very little from perspective of young people*

• Grandparents have *always been central to supporting families* (Buchanan and Ten Brinke, 1997) particularly in times of need or family disruption but there is *growing evidence that grandparents today are playing an increasing role in rearing the next generation*
What we also know

• Grandparent involvement follows a continuum from full-time care, to regular involvement as babysitters and counsellors, with possibly a minority of grandparents having no involvement.
• In England and Wales 6,800 children are currently formally cared by relatives or friends (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010) nearly half of whom are grandparents. Much larger numbers receive informal grandparents care.
The legal situation

• In England and Wales, grandparents have to seek leave (permission) of court before making any court application. (CA ‘89 s10.)

• This applies to all Section 8 Orders: residence, contact, specific issues, and prohibited steps.

• Some grandparents cannot afford to do this.

• Some limited circumstances where GP can apply without ‘leave’ e.g. where child has lived with grandparent for 3 out of the 5 previous years.

• Or where they have consent for those with residence or parental responsibility.
In giving ‘leave’ the court must:

• Consider the nature of the application; the applicants connection to the child and the risk of disruption in the child’s life.
• If the child is looked after by a local authority, it must also consider the authority’s plans and parents’ wishes and feelings
• Other factors such as the application is vexatious may also be considered by the court.
The wider picture

• In the US, all states have legislation providing for ‘grandparenting visitation’ subject to the welfare of the child. But legislation in most states legislation quite recent.

• It could be said that in England and Wales the current legislation falls short of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (article 5)

• ‘Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents, or where applicable, the members of the extended family….'
How was the study was undertaken?

• Stage A: a survey of a representative sample of 1566 children (aged 11-16) from 70 different schools in England and Wales undertaken by gfkNOP
• Page 1: demographic details child and family
• Page 2: details about grandparents
• Page 3: relationship with grandparents
• Page 4: involvement with grandparents
• Page 6: Open ended questions
The questions

• To what extent are grandparents in England and Wales 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?
Standardised measures

- *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (to measure psychological well)
- *Subscales*: emotional, conduct, hyperactivity, peer problem, pro-social
- *Family Adversity Scale*: range of family type difficulties as two time points: within last year –and before last year
- Glen Elder’s scale to measure *Grandparent closeness*
- *Our own scale on Grandparents’ involvement*
- *Measure of Community deprivation;*
- *Analysis*: multi level regression of quantitative data.
In-depth interviews

• Stage B:
• 40 children from all over the country
• Undertaken by Julia Griggs and Jo-pei Tan
• Semi-structured, individual interviews with 40 young people, aged 11-16
• With at least one living grandparent
• Sample from the quantitative survey
• In England and Wales (not Scotland or Northern Ireland)
• Use of N/Vivo to analyse interviews
FINDING 1: Filling the parenting gap for time-poor parents?

- **Grandparents living**: MM 79%; MD 65%; DM 69%; DD 54%. (23% or 372 no contact or no GPs)
- **Contact** out of 1224 responses: **94%** See GM: several times a year, twice a week or daily. Frequent contact with other grandparents also.
- **Where they live**: 69% GM live in same town or within 10 miles.
- **The vast majority of ADOLESCENTS HAVE AT LEAST ONE GRANDPARENT INVOLVED IN THEIR LIVES**
Their relationships

• Do you spend time with GPs?  MM: yes 72%
  MD: 69% (of those with contact)

  How often do they look after you: MM: 71%
  regularly (of those with contact)

  Shared activities MM: 72% (of those with contact)
How often do you?

- Talk to them about problems? MM: 54% MD: 45%
- How often do Grandparents get involved with your school? 52%
- Get involved in things you like to do – hobbies etc?
- Talk about future plans? MM: 84% MD: 76%
- Get good advice for problems? MM: 84% MD: 76%
- Money or other help? MM: 91% MD: 85%; DM: 85%; DD: 82%
- These are important developmental interactions
Discipline

• Do they get involved in telling you what you can or cannot do? MM 77%

• Do you respect what they say? MM 94%

• To what extent is your grandparent the most important person outside your immediate family? MM 88% ; MD 84%; DM 79% DD 76%
What predicts grandparent involvement?

Regression analysis of total sample 1595

- The child’s age – GPs more involved with young adolescents
- Living in a less deprived community
- Frequent contact
- Good grandparent health
- Grandparent-grandchild closeness
- Proximity not crucial as young people used modern technology.
- Grandparents became closer when undertook some tasks traditionally thought of as parenting tasks.
the importance of parent-grandparent relationship

• Parents are *gatekeepers* to grandparent involvement
• How do parents get on with GPs?
• MM: Well 93%  MD: 92% of those with contact
FINDINGS 2
‘There are always there for us’
GP involvement and adolescent well-being

Question: to what extent was grandparent involvement associated with better child adjustment?

In regression analysis of 1569 young people (total sample):

- Sharing adolescents' hobbies and interests significantly associated with GC better adjustment and fewer peer problems.
- GP involvement in schooling and education also related to lower maladjustment score and less conduct problems.
- Talking to GPs associated with fewer emotional and behaviour difficulties and fewer peer problems.
- **BUT BETTER ADJUSTMENT ONLY ASSOCIATED WITH GRANDPARENT INVOLVEMENT NOT JUST CLOSENESS**
The 40 in depth interviews showed......

• Different siblings had different relationship with GPs—reasons:
  combination of gender, age, personality and birth order
• Involvement important to both generations (from child’s perspective)
• Just three interviewees felt seeing GPs was a duty – to be endured rather than enjoyed (all older males)!
• Lots of emphasis placed on importance of family and maintaining contact (GP as connector)
• Young people saw grandparent involvement as normative felt it was part of the grandparents’ role to ‘be there’ for them
GPs involvement in schooling

- More contact = more involvement (domestic routine & homework)

*Because I go to my grandma’s straight after school, which is where I usually do my homework, they kind of help us a bit more [than my mum does] [female, 13, White British].*

- GPs providing high-level of care sometimes took on ‘the parent’s role’ in a young person’s education:

  *Because my mum was sick on the day that I had my parents evening my grandma came with me and spoke to my teachers [female, 14, Black African].*
Grandparents involvement in education

- GPs as home-work assistants and educators (languages, cultural heritage, local and family history)

My grandmother basically taught us to read and write [male, 15, Mixed Ethnicity].

- Differences between grandmothers and grandfathers: GMs offered more formal support (language lessons), GFs less-structured (field-trips)

Me and Granddad sometimes go out for a walk... and we’ll talk about... like he reads up on certain areas and he tells me about them [male, 15, White British].
More involvement in education

- Help with problems at school (attendance, school-work, bullying):

  *If, like, I bunk off school then my mum tells me I've got to go to my gran and granddad’s and they sit down and talk to us [female, 13, White British].*

- *My nan is always asking if I’m getting bullied... My nanny P used to go in every time I’d come out of school crying and my nanny B would comfort me [female, 12, White British].*
Involvement in future-planning

- Respected, seen as a source of knowledge and good advice (particularly when GCs ambitions coincide with GPs experience)

What sorts of things do you talk about?

What job I want to take and what university to go to and what the best university is. What subjects to take in GCSEs... They’re very supportive and helpful when it comes to what career to take and that kind of thing, because they know which ones are bad and which ones are good and which subjects I should take [male, 14, White British].
Involvement in activities

- Two kinds of involvement: as participant or supporter
- Joint activities: things that both generations enjoy, a shared-interest (shopping, drawing, football)

*Me and my nan have got the same hobbies, I like to make things, I like to make cards and stuff and cakes and my nan likes to do exactly the same* [female, 13, White British].

*My granddad, I see him nearly every Saturday, because he bought me a season ticket for Lincoln City and we go to every home game together* [male, 12, White British].
Involvement in activities

• Regular attendees at school events and sporting matches - GPs as ‘cheerleaders’ (‘being there’)

I did a production, a musical, so I needed support for that and she [my grandma] was there really supporting me [female, 14, Other Ethnicity].

• Desire to be involved

My grandfather used to come to come to my basketball matches, and my grandmother. They always want to come and cheer for me [male, 15, Mixed Ethnicity].
Conclusion from interviews on GP involvement adolescent adjustment

• Clear links between what grandparents do and child well-being
• Grandparents (often retired) have more time than working parents to support young people in activities
• Shared activities = opportunities to share problems
• Greater degree of ‘physical monitoring’
• Importance of parental involvement in education, may be that GP’s can fill same role
• Supported; positive pressure to achieve; encouraged in decisions
FINDINGS 3: Do Grandparents make a difference at times of family breakdown?

- Under the law in England and Wales, GPs have no specific legal rights over grandchildren.
- 2003 study of 44 families involved in divorce proceeding concluded GP-GC contact post divorce did not have ‘an essential purpose or fundamental importance’.
- Some GPS may aggravate conflict BUT in general as shown in this study, GP involvement was significantly associated with reduced maladjustment in families of divorce/separation.
Not Grandparent rights but OUR RIGHTS

• Young people not concerned about Grandparents’ rights but they were concerned ABOUT THEIR RIGHTS TO MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH GRANDPARENTS.

• ‘They play a big part in your life...its someone else to turn to...’

• ‘They can help you can’t they? They are part of the family’
Grandparents as protectors

• ‘If Mum and Dad are screw ups, at least the grandparents can help and point me in the right direction’.

• ‘If something is going on, I think they should step in and have a say...that’s if something is going wrong.’

• ‘If Mum and Dad die, I would prefer to go to my Nan and Granddad because they are family. If you go to a foster parent, they are not related.’
Should grandparents be involved in court proceedings?

• ‘Yes, because they are family and might help me’
• But when it came to divorce young people more pragmatic.
• ‘they might favour one side and a fight would start... so if you let the children resolve things it may be better’.
• Generally it was felt they should be consulted but not directly involved in court proceedings
Did young people want continuing contact with grandparents?

• ‘Yes they should, because their family, so they should be able to see their own, be able to talk to them and keep in contact.’
• ‘Even if Mum had a fight with your grandma, I think the child should keep in touch with their grandma’.
• They have had nothing to do with the divorce, so it would be unfair if they could not see their grandkids’.
• ‘If I wasn’t allowed I would go and see them in secret and not tell anyone….’
FINDINGS 4
Buffers against risk

- Question *Do Grandparents impact on child well-being at times of adversity?*
- Contextual risk factors do not occur in isolation
- It is the combination of various contextual and family risk factors that lead to negative child outcomes
- The study found that *closeness to a grandparent* reduced a g-c’s associations of recent life events with maladjustment.
Conclusion

• The role of grandparents is almost invisible in UK family policy.
• Although individual families may have different relationships with grandparents...
• OVERALL the findings suggest that grandparents are playing an important role in ensuring the well-being of the next generation.
• Should we re-evaluate how society may support this role?
• If so what form should this take?
Developments in the legal situation since undertaking the research

• The research found that grandparents involvement was generally ‘in the child’s best interest’. i.e. it improved their well-being. The young people also felt strongly that it was THEIR RIGHT to maintain contact with their grandparents.

• But the Family Law Review has not changed the law just bolstered the view that grandparents should play a greater role in contact with the children. Their proposal is for parenting agreements to allow people to determine the arrangements for the care of a child themselves and to involve grandparents.

• Grandparents, in most cases, still have to apply for ‘leave’ of court before any applications about their grandchildren.
Is this in the child’s best interests?