

13 March 2014

The Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir or Madam,

Grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren

This submission is written on behalf of the federation of Relationships Australia organisations. All Relationships Australia organisations provide a range of services including relationship counselling, family support and family dispute resolution. Many services are funded by the Commonwealth Departments of Attorney-General and Social Security, as well as State and Territory Governments.

We are committed to social justice and inclusion, and respect the rights of all people, in all their diversity, to live with dignity and safety, and to enjoy healthy relationships.

Submission

Some grandparents have parental responsibility for their grandchildren through family law court orders; some are kinship carers, caring for their grandchildren under state child protection orders; some are informal carers and others are intermittent primary carers of their grandchildren.

Many parents are unable to care for their children due to alcohol and drug abuse or mental ill-health. Some parents are in jail, others are deceased, have become missing persons or are otherwise absent. The majority of children coming into the care of their grandparents have experienced, at best instability, and often neglect, abuse and trauma.

Relationships Australia sees grandparents with primary responsibility for their grandchildren across a broad range of programs: some are state funded programs targeting grandparents, or parents from particular groups (kinship carers or particular linguistic or cultural groups); other grandparents use mainstream counselling or dispute resolution services and children's contact services.

Role and contribution of grandparents

Grandparents are often the obvious alternative to parents as carers of children. They bring familial connection, usually warmth and love, and a desire for the best future for their grandchildren. Additionally,

- grandparents know the child, including medical and social knowledge that others may not have
- they offer familiarity to the children, the chance of security and safety and connection with wider family and family history
- they provide an opportunity for children to have a 'normal' childhood and to achieve their potential.

When grandparents raise their grandchildren they save the cost of state-provided care and the prevention of future costs of social, educational and health problems.

Practical challenges

There are a number of practical challenges facing grandparents who take on primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren. These include:

1. Finances

Financial hardship is one of the greatest challenges grandparents face. In addition to ongoing daily expenses that all parents face, there are often initial establishment costs like cots, prams, car seats, beds and linen, and the extra expenses associated with children who have special needs. At the same time, grandparents are often living on reduced post-work incomes.

Many grandparents find it difficult to navigate social security systems to access benefits, and some are unwilling to do this as this means alerting authorities to an informal arrangement, with unknown consequences. Some find it difficult to deal with Centrelink, and many give up. Some fear their children will take the grandchildren back (to what the grandparents believe is an unsafe situation) or threaten harm if their benefits are stopped. Some grandparents have to remain in the workforce longer; others leave the workforce to care for very young children; many have already retired, but feel they need to find part-time work to meet the additional expenses.

Grandparents have often down-sized their home and need to move or extend their accommodation to include grandchildren. Transport is a problem for many grandparents.

2. Health and ageing

Grandparent carers generally range in age from their forties to their seventies, and sometimes beyond. Many are already at an age at which they develop health problems experienced by many older people. Some ill-health, such as arthritis, is exacerbated

through additional physical work involved in caring for children.

Grandparents often experience poor mental health. They are frequently:

- tired;
- anxious about their grandchildren;
- worried (and/or angry and resentful) about their own children;
- socially isolated because they have had to give up hobbies and interests and cannot fit in with the social activities of their friends or are too tired to join in;
- concerned about what will happen to the children if they become ill or die before their grandchildren are independent;
- grieving for their loss of their grandparent role. Initially it can be very confusing for the both children and grandparents when the grandparents become principal carers and the relationship changes.
- dealing with feelings of shame, guilt and inadequacy: they feel they must have failed as parents, and, although they love their grandchildren, they yearn for the retirement they had planned;
- dealing with the fact that their child may have other children and being realistic that they cannot take on more children (for example, taking on a baby when grandparent is in their sixties and already caring for a four and six year old, or taking on an older sibling when a foster placement breaks down).

3. Parenting

Some grandparents refer to a 'generation gap'. This is a source of worry for many grandparents who feel they are not up-to-date with modern parenting practices and technology. They do not enjoy the friendship networks of younger parents that allow easy opportunities for sharing transport, minding each other's children or discussing commonly experienced problems. Modern education is challenging and many grandparents feel inadequate in supporting their charges.

4. Children with special needs

Children in their grandparents' care may have additional physical, emotional and educational needs due to earlier abuse and neglect - this is not only challenging and distressing for the grandparents, but can incur additional costs. Most children and grandparents are grieving over the death or absence of the children's parent, or worried about their wellbeing if they are incarcerated or have a history of not being able to care for themselves. Many children are not easy to look after and grandparents often struggle to manage and understand their behaviour. Some of these children are severely traumatised and need professional help as well as patient, loving care.

5. Safety

Some grandparents fear for their own and their grandchildren's safety if their children have been violent or irrational in the past due to substance abuse and/or mental ill-health. Some grandparents have had the experience of having their grandchildren snatched away by the parents, and unless there is a court order in place, it can be hard to demonstrate that the children are at risk.

6. Legal status

Grandparents who access family law courts often have difficulty obtaining legal aid. They are daunted by the complexity and cost of the legal process. In some cases they oppose their own children to gain parental responsibility for the grandchildren and this can create ongoing conflict within the family. Once they have a formal order they are able to access social security entitlements, but still have to bear the additional costs associated with caring for troubled children, often using their retirement savings in the process.

Kinship carers are given an allowance and access to some services. Some grandparents find that this is all the support they need, but many do not like being part of the child welfare system. They may find individual workers well-meaning and helpful, but feel constrained by the system that takes away their autonomy. Some feel they have been pressured into caring for the children; others feel they are not free to parent the children as they choose and are overly accountable to the statutory authority; some feel constrained by the child protection orders that have been imposed (for example, around the extent and nature of the children's contact with their parents).

Grandparents who informally care for their grandchildren, permanently or intermittently, are in the most difficult position. They find it difficult to access social security benefits and to demonstrate that they have, in effect, parental responsibility. Some do not want to draw attention to themselves by applying for social security benefits and fear that their children will take the grandchildren back to what the grandparents consider is an unsafe situation. They are often faced with problems like proving the right to consent to vaccinations, medical procedures, school excursions, choice of school and so on.

7. Conflict within the family

Grandparents becoming primary carers of their grandchildren can create conflict in the family. There can be ongoing conflict with the parents of the children, regardless of legal orders. There is often stress on the grandparents' relationship with each other, especially if one partner is not the biological grandparent of the children. Some couple relationships break down. Anecdotally, in many cases grandmothers bear the greater burden of parenting, and some people raising grandchildren are single.

Many grandparents are strongly supported by their other children, but some have to deal with the anger of their other children who think an unfair burden has been placed on their parents and, in some cases, resent the time taken up by the grandchildren and feel

that their own children are not receiving sufficient attention from their grandparents, or fear their inheritance being spent on these grandchildren.

Family conflict takes a further toll on the mental health and well-being of grandparents who are already under pressure with the responsibilities they have assumed.

Recognition

Some recognition of the contribution that grandparents make to their grandchildren, and to the wider community, could be offered with practical support, including:

- financial support - improved and easier access to Social Security benefits;
- support for respite , including after-school care, holiday camps and programs, assistance with travel to other family members for holidays and formal out-of-home care respite;
- readily accessible information and advice about grandparents' rights, responsibilities and entitlements during the time they are raising their grandchildren;
- emotional support (counselling, group support and social networks) for grandparents and grandchildren, especially when the children are grieving, acting out, or showing other signs that worry the grandparents; most grandparents are caring for children who have had adverse experiences in the early months and years of their lives or have been involved in a traumatic experience - caring for these children is not an easy responsibility. Some grandparents feel they cannot manage and reluctantly relinquish care of the grandchildren;
- practical support (for example, with household tasks);
- legal aid;
- carer card that allows them to demonstrate their parenting role to authorities;
- being acknowledged and thanked: this could be a letter from a state authority to thank them for the role they have undertaken; or picnics and other outings organised by the community sector for grandparents and the grandchildren. This acknowledgement is important to many grandparents who feel isolated, judged, overwhelmed, and exhausted.

Practical measures that can be implemented by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments and the community sector to better support grandparents raising their grandchildren, including key priorities for action

Commonwealth, state and territory governments can offer

- legislative and regulatory changes that will support and offer entitlements to all grandparents who offer primary care to their grandchildren, including informal carers

(mandatory reporting by community agencies offering assistance will ensure that the children are safe);

- access to legal aid;
- provision of information;
- funding for community support programs.

The community sector can offer

- trauma-informed counselling (for children and grandparents), mediation, and grandparent support / parenting education groups;
- liaison with the child protection system;
- a chance to talk through the complexities of caring for grandchildren and independent advice and assistance with the development of care plans and succession planning;
- practical home help; and
- respite, and recreational/holiday activities.

The specific needs of particular groups within the caring population, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander grandparent carers, grandparents caring for grandchildren with disability, grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, grandparents with mental health needs and grandparents with an informal care arrangement for their grandchildren.

- some grandparents are intermittent primary carers, but see themselves as the most secure point in the grandchild's life, and feel powerless to make the grandchildren's lives more secure. They are not sure who they can turn to without reprisal from their children that could result in no contact with the grandchildren;
- in Aboriginal and many other cultures the transition to children being cared for by their grandparents is not difficult as it is a cultural norm. Grandparents have authority in many cultures and they know when a parent is able to care for their child and when they need to step in. This does not mean that they do not need support as they are ageing and the grandchildren usually have extra needs;
- many Aboriginal grandparents through their own experiences as stolen children are reluctant to involve authority figures. Aboriginal agencies and other community sector agencies that have a good working relationship in a community are often better placed to support grandparents than statutory authorities;
- some people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups fear authorities and lack knowledge of and trust in the supports and the care system that could offer them help;

- grandparents deserve respect from statutory authorities. They want the recognition that they are volunteer parents and are entitled to having a significant say in how they raise the children;
- older grandparents, or grandparents with some medical conditions or disabilities, or grandparents who are raising grandchildren with disabilities, are especially concerned about what will happen to the children when they can no longer be able to look after them, or if they die. Assistance with succession planning would likely provide comfort in these cases.

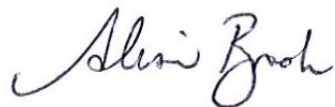
Recommendations

The support of grandparent carers is an investment likely to result in the saving of significant social and financial cost in the long-term. Grandparents offer their grandchildren security and the chance for healthy development and directly save the cost of out-of-home care. Supports for grandparent carers should include:

- legislation, regulation and ongoing funding making support available to grandparents;
- grandparental responsibility assessment (similar to an aged care assessment) that assesses individual situations of grandparents caring for their grandchildren, regardless of their legal status. Outcomes may include:
 - a review of entitlements and access to social security benefits;
 - practical forms of support including: subsidised practical help around the house; respite care; subsidised holiday activities and camps; after school care; provision of health care cards;
 - assistance with housing – rent rebates, move to larger public housing accommodation, if needed;
 - assistance with the development of a care plan and a succession plan;
 - emotional support for grandparents via counselling, support groups, parenting groups (including chance to meet younger parents and learn about current parenting trends and issues);
 - trauma informed support, including groupwork, for children when necessary;
 - couple/family counselling during periods of family tension and conflict;
- legal aid;
- a grandparent carer hotline: a chance to talk anonymously. This could be done through existing support lines but grandparents need to be aware of it, and staff and volunteers need to be educated about specific supports available;

- information pack with basic information including a list of contacts, regularly updated, available at schools, medical practices, pharmacies, Human Services outlets, community websites;
- ways to demonstrate that grandparents have responsibility for child: a government issued 'carer card' that would be recognised by schools, medical personnel and government authorities;
- symbolic recognition and acknowledgement of the importance of the role the grandparents have undertaken.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alison Brook". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Yours sincerely," text.

Alison Brook
National Executive Officer