



GRANDPARENTING: PRESENT & FUTURE

Families Australia
Family Issues Series
No. 2

Report

January 2007

Families Australia is the national peak not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the needs and interests of families.

Families Australia prepares reports on contemporary family issues, drawing on expert forums, focus groups, and in-house research. The results are shared broadly, including with Families Australia Members, the family and community sector, business and governments at all levels.

Titles in the *Family Issues* series:

Report 1: *Work, Families and Wellbeing* (May 2006)

Report 2: *Grandparenting: present and future* (January 2007)

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Grandparenting: present and future

1. Overview and recommendations

Families Australia's Expert Forum at The Australian National University and other consultations and research found that many grandparents, especially those with primary caring responsibilities for grandchildren, would benefit from additional financial, social and emotional support, and from better targeted information about how to get help. There are also inconsistencies in the way custodial grandparents are supported both within and across State/Territory jurisdictions depending on the manner in which children come into grandparent care.

This report makes 29 recommendations, as summarised below:

Grandparents as carers

- Grandparents would be assisted by the establishment of a national information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) which provides information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters and referral to local services and supports. This 'one-stop-shop' would assist grandparents who, for example, unexpectedly find themselves in primary caring roles.
- Exploration of ways to provide eligibility for temporary exemption from Welfare-to-Work participation requirements would assist grandparents who have semi-formal care of a grandchild (that is, where no formal 'registered and active' status has been provided by a State or Territory but where placement of the child has been arranged through a State or Territory authority).
- Additional training to enhance the understanding of front-line staff in child protection agencies and government departments that interact with grandparents, such as Centrelink, Medicare and the Family Court of Australia, may help to ensure that grandparents' needs are better understood.
- The establishment of grandparent liaison officers within child protection and other support agencies to act as a contact point for grandparents would benefit grandparents, in particular those from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable grandparents who may be unfamiliar with, or who experience difficulty in navigating government systems.
- Emergency or discretionary payments from Centrelink or other State/Territory government agencies would assist particularly necessitous grandparents in cases where children are placed in grandparents' care at short notice.
- To ensure that grandparents who provide primary care receive the appropriate income support payments, strategies could be developed to address cases where Centrelink recipients claim child-related income supports when they are not caring for the child (in other words, where "the money does not follow the child").
- A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for grandparents providing primary care of grandchildren so it is based on disposable income as opposed to assets could lessen the disadvantage that some grandparents face in accessing legal assistance.
- Innovative ways to provide information about grandparent carer eligibility for the Family Tax Benefit would help grandparents access this benefit in greater numbers.

- Further consideration by State and Territory governments of the payment of the foster carer allowance to grandparents (and other family members) who are providing primary care for their grandchildren because of child protection orders would benefit children in the care of grandparents or other blood relatives.
- Further consideration by State and Territory governments of the adequacy of financial support for grandparents to meet the needs of grandchildren in their care who are not under formal care and protection orders would help overcome concerns of grandparents about meeting the costs of 'semi-formal' care.
- Small grants to communities through local, State/Territory and Australian governments for support groups, respite services and local information would assist grandparents and grandchildren¹.
- Exploration of options such as the use of 'open adoption' and increased use of high quality foster care might reduce pressures felt by some grandparents that they are obliged to take their grandchildren into their care.
- Developing a program within the National Family Relationship Services Program which specifically targets the needs of grandparents would enhance the usefulness of the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) for grandparents and their grandchildren. FRCs could also play a role in the prior assessment of grandparents' capacities to cope with the caring role before children are placed with them. Dispute resolution services should be encouraged to include grandparents in parenting plans as this may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of grandparents after a family separation.
- Further research into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents would fill a gap in current understanding and may lead to the development of specific interventions to assist these groups.

Grandparents providing childcare

- A review of Internet website interconnectivity between the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Centrelink and Family Assistance Office may help to improve grandparents' understanding of and access to services and supports.
- The provision by local councils and other community organisations of tip sheets with information about free, local activities grandparents can do with their grandchildren would assist grandparents when they are providing childcare. Disseminating tip sheets and other relevant information through baby health clinics, libraries, children's hospitals, schools etc (places where grandparents and parents go) would help to ensure they reach the widest possible target audience.

Grandparents not seeing grandchildren

- Encouraging the use of FRCs as a first stop both for referral and dispute resolution in family separation could assist grandparents who would otherwise not have access to Legal Aid or the financial capability to seek alternative resolution services. This could take the form, for example, of a targeted media campaign highlighting the role of grandparents in the post-family separation environment.
- Raising public awareness about the importance of intergenerational relationships, the availability of support services and the important role grandparents play after family breakdown, through community education campaigns would help to promote the importance of broader family relations and the overall wellbeing of the extended family.

¹ This recommendation also applies to grandparents who provide childcare, see Section 3.2.

- Training practitioners (including Family Court judges) in multi-party dispute resolution would help to ensure the best outcomes for all parties and could be particularly important for Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families.
- Developing strategies that encourage dispute resolution services to include grandparents in parenting plans may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of their grandparents after a family separation.
- Conducting research on international models of conflict resolution that include the needs of grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities would increase understandings and potentially inform practice.

The needs of grandchildren

- Providing appropriate grief and loss counselling, specifically aimed at the needs of children, would help to ensure that traumatised children are given an opportunity to deal with their feelings and to move forward in their lives.
- A guide on parenting skills for grandparents, specifically addressing the generational changes in parenting styles, could assist in the transitional period when grandchildren first come to live with their grandparents.
- An information booklet specifically for grandchildren about their new living arrangements could help grandchildren deal with feelings of dislocation following separation from their parent/s.
- Added education for workers who may come into contact with children living with their grandparents, such as teachers, judges, social workers and childcare workers could assist grandparents who feel excluded from school and other community activities.
- Establishing and expanding mentoring programs for children would provide respite for grandparents and benefits for the children. This also applies to Indigenous mentoring programs for young men who play an important role in fulfilling cultural and spiritual needs and providing a sense of belonging and identity.
- Developing programs that support grandparents who supervise or facilitate contact with the child's parents can help children who have been reported to be unsettled and disruptive after visiting their parents and can help those grandparents who experience changes in their grandchild's behaviour between contact visits.
- Re-establishing the Small Grants Program to enable children to apply for grants for educational and other community/sporting needs may assist children living in low-income families to access extra-curricula activities that might otherwise not be available to them.
- A national project documenting the voices of grandchildren living with their grandparents may provide valuable insights and promote understanding about this group of young people.

2. Introduction

This report, which is part of Families Australia's 'Family Issues' series, is the culmination of an Expert Forum on 'Grandparenting: present and future' held at The Australian National University (ANU), a focus group consultation with grandparents at Marymead Family and Children's Centre, Canberra, and other consultations and research undertaken by Families Australia.

The ANU Forum (24 October 2006) comprised thirty-seven participants, representing government, community and research organisations as well as grandparents themselves. The aims were to bring together leading experts to discuss current national issues relating to the roles of grandparents, draw together the main points of discussion, and develop specific recommendations. *Appendix 1* contains the Forum program, a list of participants, and a summary of the main presentations.

Prior to the Forum, Families Australia undertook consultations with key stakeholder groups, including Grandparents Australia, the Council for the Ageing, and the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

A focus group for grandparents, held on 16 November 2006 at Marymead Family and Children's Centre, Canberra, highlighted several issues for grandparents and grandchildren, and made suggestions about services and strategies that could assist with the grandparenting role. Some participants from this group also attended the Forum. Outcomes from the focus group are included as *Appendix 2*, and have been included in the following discussion.

3. Issues and ideas

Families Australia's consultations and research indicated that four topic areas required particular examination: grandparents as primary carers; grandparents providing childcare while their parents were at work; grandparents not seeing their grandchildren; and, the needs of grandchildren when grandparents provide primary care.

The following section is structured around these topics. Under each topic, there is:

- an introduction to the main issues, drawing, as appropriate, upon latest available research;
- a description of key points raised in Forum presentations and discussions as well as in the focus group; and
- recommendations for further attention.

The following should not be taken to represent the views of any particular participant or participants, nor the consensus of the Forum, the focus group or other consultations.

3.1 Grandparents as carers

Introduction

According to the latest available data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2003 there were 22,500 grandparent families with 31,100 children aged 0-17 years in Australia, representing around one percent of all families with children aged 0-17 years².

The majority of grandparent families (73%) reported that the youngest child was aged between 5 and 14 years. In 61% of grandparent families, the younger or lone partner was aged 55 years or more³. By comparison, in only 1% of other families was the youngest parent aged 55 years and over (the youngest parent in other families tended to be aged 35-54 years [in 62% of other families], or 15-35 years [37%])⁴. Almost half (47%) of grandparent families were lone grandparent families (compared with 21% of other families with children aged 0-17 years being lone parent families)⁵.

Eighty-nine percent of grandparent families had one or two children in their care, and 11% had three or more children⁶. In about one-third (34%) of grandparent families, one or both grandparents were employed, and 62% received a government pension,

² Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Characteristics Australia*, June 2003, 8.

³ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Functioning: Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren*, Australian Social Trends, 2005, 1.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

benefit or allowance as their main source of income. Most of this income was received from the Australian Government, with only a quarter of children living with grandparents receiving State/Territory financial support for the costs of care. Children living in grandparent headed families were about four times more likely than children in any other family type to live with an unemployed parent/guardian⁷.

Of the 31,100 children living in grandparent families, 28,700 had their natural parent/s living elsewhere⁸. Three-quarters (75%) of these children had face-to-face contact with their natural parents at least once a year, and 37% had face-to-face contact with a parent once a fortnight or more frequently. One quarter (26%) had little or no contact with a parent⁹. To a greater extent than other families, grandparent families tended to live in regional areas: 48% for grandparent families, compared with 33% for other families¹⁰.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics states (2005)¹¹:

The reasons grandchildren come to live with their grandparents are varied, but often include trauma of some kind, such as a parent's drug or alcohol abuse, relationship breakdown, mental or physical illness, or death. As primary care providers, grandparents assume responsibility for their grandchildren's emotional, structural and financial support. Grandparents differ from other adults caring for children. They are often retired or planning retirement, and, compared with younger parents, on average have lower financial resources and less physical stamina. They face difficulties resuming parenting at an older age, difficulties accessing assistance, or legal costs. This situation, combined with their own ageing, can result in unexpected social, financial, and health problems....

The transition to being a grandparent guardian may be sudden, and associated with high initial costs related to accommodating children (e.g. clothes, bedding, school supplies). The ongoing cost of caring for children may not have been planned for and may affect the sustainability of the grandparent's retirement income.

...That said, most older Australians own their home, so the cost of living for these people is not substantially affected by accommodation costs...where grandparent families share the dwelling with other adults, accommodation and other joint costs may be shared, and additional income may be available to support both grandparents and children.

Despite the foregoing, there appear to be gaps in data concerning grandparents in Australia. It is unlikely, for example, that Australian Bureau of Statistics data

⁷ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Characteristics Australia*, June 2003.

⁸ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Functioning: Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren*, Australian Social Trends, 2005, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

accurately reflects Indigenous grandparent care where it is expected that the numbers of children cared for by grandparents and great-grandparents is higher than for the rest of the population. Also, since the collection of reliable population level data about grandparents only commenced in 2003, it is not yet possible to clearly discern trends in caring and other grandparenting arrangements. Some observers suggest that the number of grandparents providing primary care is increasing (as it is in the USA), but there is no reliable national-level quantitative data to support this view.

The support for children in out-of-home care and their carers, including grandparent care, is the responsibility of State and Territory governments. Each State and Territory government determines the level of support that carers, including grandparent carers, receive.

Two of the key determinants of whether, and to what extent, a grandparent carer receives financial and other support are the pathway by which the child enters their care, and the State/Territory in which they live. The amount of financial and other support varies across jurisdictions and, within jurisdictions, depends on whether the child came into the grandparent's care informally or through a Children's Court or the Family Court. Grandparents and other relative carers are increasingly called upon by State/Territory child protection agencies to take in children as the numbers of foster carers continues to diminish, yet grandparents are not always recognised as foster carers and so do not receive the same level of financial and other support. In addition to the issue of financial support, training and casework support provided to foster carers is often not extended to relative carers and may depend upon whether or not a child has been legally ordered into the care of a grandparent. If there are no court orders in place, it is less likely that the grandparent/s will receive assistance.

The Australian Government provides family assistance to all grandparent families on the same basis as other Australian families. Recent Australian Government initiatives for grandparents, outlined in *Appendix 3*, include the opportunity for grandparents to access Family Relationship Centres (FRCs), additional funding for legal aid commissions to involve grandparents in family group conferencing, and the introduction of the Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB).

Grandparents and other relatives who have a formally recognised status as a ‘family, relative or kinship’ carer by the relevant State or Territory authority can gain an exemption from participation requirements under Australian Government Welfare-to-Work provisions if they are receiving income support as a principal carer parent. This recognises the fact that the relative has been formally accepted by the State or Territory to be the appropriate carer for the child. An exemption can be renewed if the circumstances of the grandparent continue to apply.

Cases where a child is placed in the care of a relative under the guidance, or with the knowledge of a State or Territory government, but outside of the care and protection system are referred to as ‘semi-formal’ care arrangements. These carers are normally not given ‘registered and active’ status. However, there are provisions in the Guide to Social Security Law where a carer is not considered ‘registered and active’ by a State or Territory, but a ‘semi-formal’ arrangement is in place. In these situations, a carer may be eligible for a temporary exemption from participation requirements where the State or Territory government provides a letter explaining the situation.

In some cases the child is placed in the care of a grandparent through the Family Court. These cases involve a judgement that the grandparent is the most appropriate person to provide care for the child. As the current guidelines rely on documentation by the States or Territories, these carers are not considered to be in a similar situation to those grandparents that the States/Territories recognise.

In cases where a child comes into grandparent care through a private arrangement with the child’s parent/s or with the involvement of a non-government organisation, these grandparents do not meet the criteria for being a ‘registered and active’ carer. It may be possible for these grandparents to formalise their care arrangements through State/Territory authorities or the Family Court. Grandparents who are primary carers of grandchildren may also be able, on the same basis as other primary carers, to access other exemptions to Welfare-to-Work provisions due to being distance educators or recognised home schoolers or having four or more dependent children (all aged between 6 and 15 years).

On the same basis as other primary carers, grandparents who have principal care of a grandchild and who have special family circumstances, such as the care of a disabled child, are eligible for a temporary exemption from participation requirements on a case-by-case basis. Grandparents on income support, whether a principal carer or not, may be able to access an exemption for up to 13 weeks due to special circumstances (such as temporary care duties), extendable on a case-by-case basis. All grandparent carers are eligible to receive the Family Tax Benefit in the same way as parents; it may also be shared where a grandparent has at least 10% care of the child¹².

Issues

In the course of Families Australia's consultations, the following points were raised in relation to the role of grandparents as primary carers.

- Some participants acknowledged that the FRCs have the potential to assist grandparents in the context of family breakdown or in other dispute resolution issues relating to their grandchildren. While some grandparents cannot access Legal Aid due to means testing requirements, the three hours of counselling offered on a non-fee basis at the FRCs was seen to be potentially helpful to grandparents. It was also noted that recent amendments to the Commonwealth Family Law Act to include grandparents as "significant others" had usefully recognised the important role grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren.
- It was noted that national Legal Aid strategies aimed at assisting grandparents to access primary dispute resolution services were being negotiated with the Australian Government Attorney-General's Department.
- A Centrelink initiative in Western Australia where a Grandparent Liaison Officer is based in a Centrelink Office was widely viewed as being successful.
- Some participants considered that an assessment of grandparents' ability to cope with the caring role should be made before children are placed into grandparent care. It was stated that grandparents can be vulnerable when they are asked to care for a child and they may agree to take on the role without understanding the likely full implications. Some grandparents fear that, should their grandchild be taken into foster care, they would not have access to them; this misconception can place pressure on grandparents to take on the primary caring role even if they feel they

¹² Australian Government, Centrelink, *Are you a grandparent (or relative) caring for children?*, 2005, 7.

cannot cope. Participants said that some grandparents were not aware that foster care did not preclude them from having an ongoing relationship with their grandchildren.

- Other options apart from grandparents taking over full-time care of grandchildren were discussed by some participants, including the use of ‘open adoption’ (where grandparents had ongoing access and contact with their grandchildren), and increased use of high quality foster care.
- Some grandparents stated that they have found it difficult to access information about matters such as financial and legal entitlements, and support services for themselves or their grandchildren.
- Support groups for grandparents providing primary care for their grandchildren were widely viewed as being beneficial to grandparents. A current example is the grandparent support group at the Marymead Family and Children’s Centre in Canberra.
- Some participants considered that income support payments which are assessed against assets which may include home ownership depending on individual circumstances disadvantaged retired grandparents with little disposable income who unexpectedly found themselves caring for grandchild/ren.
- While the Family Tax Benefit was available to all grandparent carers, it was noted that not all eligible grandparents were applying. Possible reasons for this include fear that the child would be taken back by the natural parent/s, lack of awareness of their eligibility, and inability to provide evidence that the child was in their care.
- It was stated that grandparents who have no care and protection orders for grandchildren in their care do not receive State or Territory financial support, whereas support is available in cases where orders exist. Thus, even where equal amounts of care are provided by those operating under orders and those without orders, grandparents are unequally treated by the system.
- It appears that in some jurisdictions the levels of support provided to foster carers exceeded that provided to custodial grandparents under ‘relatives allowances’ although there may be little or no difference in terms of the care provided.
- Some grandparents stated that they had missed out on financial support either as a result of not knowing about the availability of support or as a result of the child’s parent/s not being prepared to “sign the child over” as they (the parent/s) would

lose their Centrelink payments. This can place grandparents in a difficult position as some believed that to seek financial support could bring their situation to the attention of government resulting in the child being returned to the parent/s.

Suggested ways forward

Based on consultations and other research, the following recommendations are made in relation to the role of grandparents as primary carers:

- Grandparents would be assisted by the establishment of a national information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) which provides information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters and referral to local services and supports. This ‘one-stop-shop’ would assist grandparents who, for example, unexpectedly find themselves in primary caring roles.
- Exploration of ways to provide eligibility for temporary exemption from Welfare-to-Work participation requirements would assist grandparents who have semi-formal care of a grandchild (that is, where no formal ‘registered and active’ status has been provided by a State or Territory but where placement of the child has been arranged through a State or Territory authority).
- Additional training to enhance the understanding of front-line staff in child protection agencies and government departments that interact with grandparents, such as Centrelink, Medicare and the Family Court of Australia, may help to ensure that grandparents’ needs are better understood.
- The establishment of grandparent liaison officers within child protection and other support agencies to act as a contact point for grandparents would benefit grandparents, in particular those from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable grandparents who may be unfamiliar with, or who experience difficulty in navigating government systems. This model could be extended to include all Centrelink Offices, as in the Western Australian model.
- Emergency or discretionary payments from Centrelink or other State/Territory government agencies would assist particularly necessitous grandparents in cases where children are placed in grandparents’ care at short notice.
- To ensure that grandparents who provide primary care receive the appropriate income support payments, strategies could be developed to address cases where

Centrelink recipients claim child-related income supports when they are not caring for the child (in other words, where “the money does not follow the child”).

- A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for grandparents providing primary care of grandchildren so it is based on disposable income as opposed to assets, could lessen the disadvantage that some grandparents face in accessing legal assistance.
- Innovative ways to provide information about grandparent carer eligibility for the Family Tax Benefit would help grandparents access this benefit in greater numbers.
- Further consideration by State and Territory governments of the payment of the foster carer allowance to grandparents (and other family members) who are providing primary care for their grandchildren because of child protection orders would benefit children in the care of grandparents or other blood relatives.
- Further consideration by State and Territory governments of the adequacy of financial support for grandparents to meet the needs of grandchildren in their care who are not under formal care and protection orders would help overcome concerns of grandparents about meeting the costs of ‘semi-formal’ care.
- Small grants to communities through local, State/Territory and Australian governments for support groups, respite services and local information would assist grandparents and grandchildren¹³.
- Exploration of options such as the use of ‘open adoption’ and increased use of high quality foster care might reduce pressures felt by some grandparents that they are obliged to take their grandchildren into their care.
- Developing a program within the National Family Relationship Services Program which specifically targets the needs of grandparents would enhance the usefulness of the FRCs for grandparents and their grandchildren. FRCs could also play a role in the prior assessment of grandparents’ capacities to cope with the caring role before children are placed with them. Dispute resolution services should be encouraged to include grandparents in parenting plans as this may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of grandparents after a family separation.

¹³ This recommendation also applies to grandparents who provide childcare, see Section 3.2.

- Further research into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents would fill a gap in current understanding and may lead to the development of specific interventions to assist these groups.

3.2 Grandparents providing childcare

Introduction

Grandparents are Australia's largest providers of informal child care, and one of the main reasons parents use this and other forms of informal care is to participate in the workforce¹⁴.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2002, almost one in five children aged 0-11 years (19% or 592,000) had been looked after by grandparents in the survey week (equivalent to the proportion who had been in formal care, 597,000). Grandparents provided 31% of the total hours of care provided in the survey week¹⁵. Most children who had been in grandparent care (98%) had been looked after at no cost to parents¹⁶.

In 2002, of the 591,600 children in grandparent care in the week prior to the interview, just over half (51%) had been in care because their parents were either working, seeking work, or attending work related training or study¹⁷.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that “while grandparents may enjoy this caring role, it has the potential to affect aspects of their lives such as their income, health, or access to free time, particularly if they provide large amounts of care.”¹⁸

Issues

In the course of Families Australia's consultations, the following issues were raised in relation to the role of grandparents providing childcare.

¹⁴ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Functioning: Informal Child Care Provided by Grandparents*, Australian Social Trends, July 2006, 1, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

- It was noted that grandparents often filled gaps by providing childcare, including in situations where the parent/s undertook shift or evening work or when the parent/s could not afford, or were dissatisfied with the quality of available care.
- It was noted that there was an assumption that grandparents were available and willing to provide childcare, which was not always the case.
- Many participants commented on the financial impact on retired grandparents with limited disposable income who provide significant hours of childcare.
- Some participants considered that there was a broad lack of acknowledgement of the gap that grandparents filled by providing childcare and that financial support to grandparents who provided long term childcare should be considered under the Child Care Rebate Scheme.

Suggested ways forward

Based on consultations and other research, the following recommendations are made in relation to the role of grandparents providing childcare:

- A review of Internet website interconnectivity between the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Centrelink and Family Assistance Office may help to improve grandparents' understanding of and access to services and supports.
- The provision by local councils and other community organisations of tip sheets with information about free, local activities grandparents can do with their grandchildren would assist grandparents when they are providing childcare. Disseminating tip sheets and other relevant information through baby health clinics, libraries, children's hospitals, schools etc (places where grandparents and parents go) would help to ensure they reach the widest possible target audience.

3.3 Grandparents not seeing grandchildren

Introduction

While there does not appear to be any recent broadly-based academic research concerning the impact of grandparents not seeing their grandchildren for either or both parties, the focus group (*Appendix 2*) highlighted concerns for some grandparents over the emotional and other impacts of strained family relationships

between parents and grandparents, and the stress caused to grandparents themselves when family separation results in grandchildren not seeing their grandparents.

Issues

In the course of Families Australia's consultations, the following issues were raised in relation to the role of grandparents not seeing their grandchildren.

- Some grandparents felt excluded from family conflict resolution processes and in relation to the development of parenting plans for their grandchildren following a family breakdown.
- It was reported that, even in some instances where Family Court orders had been obtained, enforcing the orders had been difficult.
- It was noted that children living with the mother were likely to spend more time with their maternal grandparents and vice-versa.
- The experience from the Family Court was that grandparents in the Court environment are frequently involved in an acrimonious relationship with one (or both) parent. The psychological impact on children of hostility between grandparents and parents was varied and uncertain.
- *Granfriends*, a NSW program that connects children with no grandparents (ie deceased or living in another country) with older people/grandparents living in the community, was viewed by some participants as a successful (and replicable) strategy for children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and in fostering intergenerational relationships.

Suggested ways forward

Based on consultations and other research, the following recommendations are made in relation to the role of grandparents not seeing their grandchildren:

- Encouraging the use of FRCs as a first stop both for referral and dispute resolution in family separation could assist grandparents who would otherwise not have access to Legal Aid or the financial capability to seek alternative resolution services. This could take the form, for example, of a targeted media campaign highlighting the role of grandparents in the post-family separation environment.
- Raising public awareness about the importance of intergenerational relationships, the availability of support services and the important role grandparents play after family breakdown, through community education campaigns would help to

promote the importance of broader family relations and the overall wellbeing of the extended family.

- Training practitioners (including Family Court judges) in multi-party dispute resolution would help to ensure the best outcomes for all parties and could be particularly important for Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families.
- Developing strategies that encourage dispute resolution services to include grandparents in parenting plans may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of their grandparents after a family separation.
- Conducting research on international models of conflict resolution that include the needs of grandparents from culturally and linguistically diverse communities would increase understandings and potentially inform practice.

3.4 The needs of grandchildren

Introduction

Grandchildren come to live with their grandparents generally because there has been a breakdown in parental care. Parental drug abuse is a significant factor in the way children come into the care of their grandparents¹⁹. Other issues include: childhood neglect; imprisonment of parents; parental mental or physical illness; death or absence of a parent; and, family violence²⁰.

A needs analysis of children being raised by grandparents was conducted in the ACT in 2004 by Relationships Australia (Canberra and Region), Marymead Family and Children's Centre, and the Canberra Mothercraft Society. Some of the key issues identified by the children included: awareness about the lack of finances and the impact this had on their needs; a sense of missing their parents; awareness of the physical difficulties and disruption experienced by their grandparents; feelings of being protective of their grandparents; and, feelings of gratitude that their grandparents had taken them in – this was particularly the case amongst older children

¹⁹ For research that highlights immediate and long term effects on parental drug use on children, see Patton, N., *The effects of parental drug use – children in kinship care. A review of the literature*. Mirabel Foundation, Victoria, 2003 (cited in Canberra Mothercraft Society, *Grandparents parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs*, Canberra, 2006, 14-19).

²⁰ Canberra Mothercraft Society, *Grandparents parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs*, 14-15.

who had a good understanding of some of the difficult issues being faced by their grandparents.

The report noted that, while the children had experienced challenging times, they were nonetheless coping and engaged with their lives depending on their ages and stages at the time of the study: “This is not to overlook that they will have special needs. Assistance both psychological and practical as a result of their complex and at times demanding emotional situations will be crucial. These are likely to be ongoing and shifting for sometime”²¹.

Further research is required in relation to the short and long term outcomes for children raised by their grandparents.

Issues

In the course of Families Australia’s consultations, the following issues were raised in relation to the needs of grandchildren being raised by grandparents.

- Counselling was widely regarded as important for grandchildren in the care of their grandparents as often there were unresolved traumas due to abuse and/or neglect, family violence (as a direct victim or witness) or, death of a parent.
- While grandparents often facilitated contact with the grandchildren’s natural parents, the contact can cause uncertainty and disruption in the children’s lives, and additional support could usefully be provided to children in this situation.
- Many participants stated that respite programs for grandparents and grandchildren have provided considerable benefit.

Suggested ways forward

Based on consultations and other research, the following recommendations are made in relation to the needs of grandchildren:

- Providing appropriate grief and loss counselling, specifically aimed at the needs of children, would help to ensure that traumatised children are given an opportunity to deal with their feelings and to move forward in their lives.

²¹ Relationships Australia (Canberra and Region), Marymead Family and Children’s Centre, and Canberra Mothercraft Society, *A needs analysis of children being raised by, or significantly cared for by their grandparents*, 2004 (unpublished), 15.

- A guide on parenting skills for grandparents, specifically addressing the generational changes in parenting styles, could assist in the transitional period when grandchildren first come to live with their grandparents.
- An information booklet specifically for grandchildren about their new living arrangements could help grandchildren deal with feelings of dislocation following separation from their parent/s.
- Added education for workers who may come into contact with children living with their grandparents, such as teachers, judges, social workers and childcare workers could assist grandparents who feel excluded from school and other community activities.
- Establishing and expanding mentoring programs for children would provide respite for grandparents and benefits for the children. This also applies to Indigenous mentoring programs for young men who play an important role in fulfilling cultural and spiritual needs and providing a sense of belonging and identity.
- Developing programs that support grandparents who supervise or facilitate contact with the child's parents can help children who have been reported to be unsettled and disruptive after visiting their parents and can help those grandparents who experience changes in their grandchild's behaviour between contact visits.
- Re-establishing the Small Grants Program to enable children to apply for grants for educational and other community/sporting needs may assist children living in low-income families to access extra-curricula activities that might otherwise not be available to them.
- A national project documenting the voices of grandchildren living with their grandparents may provide valuable insights and promote understanding about this group of young people.

4. Conclusions

The joys and pleasures of grandparenting were often mentioned in Families Australia's consultations, but so also were the challenges faced by many grandparents today. The evidence brought forth by grandparents themselves, as well as the quantitative data, strongly suggests that many grandparents, especially those who are providing primary care, would benefit from additional financial, emotional and social

support. There is also a strong case on equity grounds for greater consistency across and within jurisdictions in relation to the recognition of, and support for grandparent carers.

Twenty-nine suggestions have been made in this report; Families Australia notes that many of these are in common with other recent reports, including that by the Council for the Ageing²². Families Australia urges all parties to invest attention in this issue as a matter of urgency.

5. Acknowledgements

Families Australia wishes to express particular appreciation to the following individuals and organisations: Anne McLeish and Grandparents Australia; Marymead Family and Children's Centre, Canberra; presenters and participants at the Expert Forum on Grandparenting; the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs; the Council on the Ageing; Families Australia Board members and staff; and, University House at The Australian National University.

Report prepared by Brian Babington and Grace Concannon, Families Australia.

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APPENDIX 1: FORUM PROGRAM AND PARTICIPANT LIST

**Expert Forum on
'Grandparenting: present and future'
24 October 2006
University House
The Australian National University**

Program

The Forum operated under Chatham House rules (that is, non-attribution of comments) to promote frank discussion, build linkages and encourage understanding of different perspectives, and was facilitated by Families Australia staff. The Forum was divided into three main sections: (i) short plenary presentations on current grandparenting issues; (ii) workshop discussions focusing on possible solutions; and, (iii) a facilitated discussion and concluding remarks.

- 09.45-10.00: Welcome, aims, method, introductions (Brian Babington, Chief Executive Officer, Families Australia)
- 10.05-10.50: Five x 5-10 minute scene setting presentations on:
- The expectations on grandparents today – have they changed? Anne McLeish - Grandparent's Australia
 - Issues for Indigenous grandparents
Julie Tongs – Winnunga Nimmityjah
 - Grandparents as primary carers
Emma Baldock – Canberra Mothercraft Centre
 - Grandparents caring for grandchildren while their parents are at work
Prue Warrilow – National Association of Community Based Child Care
 - Grandparents and Legal Aid
Heidi Yates – ACT Legal Aid
- 10.50-12.00: Small group discussions
- 12.00-12.30: Small groups report back
- 12.30-1.15: Lunch
- 1.15-1.25: Grandparents and Family Law
Luise Lang – Family Court of Australia
- 1.25-2.15: Facilitated discussion
- 2.15-2.30: Drawing together of the main issues and next steps

**Expert Forum on
‘Grandparenting: present and future’
24 October 2006
University House, The Australian National University
Participant list**

Mr	Brian	Babington	Families Australia (facilitator)
Ms	Emma	Baldock	Canberra Mothercraft Society Inc Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services
Mr	David	Brudenhall	and Indigenous Affairs
Mr	Adam	Blakester	The NAPCAN Foundation
Professor	Bettina	Cass	Social Policy Research Centre, University of NSW
Ms	Anne	Charlton	Gosford City Family Support Service Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services
Ms	Jasmine	Chee	and Indigenous Affairs
Ms	Grace	Concannon	Families Australia
Ms	Sandie	de Wolf	Child and Family Welfare Association of Australia
Ms	Deborah	Durie	Relationships Australia
Ms	Janenne	Hamilton	Relationships Australia ACT
Mr	John	Hardwick	Grandparent
Ms	Kate	Hasler	Attorney-General's Dept Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services
Ms	Angela	Hewson	and Indigenous Affairs
Ms	Joanne	Higgins	Centrelink Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services
Ms	Michelle	Hood	and Indigenous Affairs
Ms	Suella	Jarvis	Marymead
Ms	Luise	Lang	Family Court of Australia
Dr	Marie	Leech	Mission Australia
Ms	Anne	McLeish	Grandparents Australia
Ms	Mary	Mertin-Ryan	Relationships Australia
Dr	Alison	Morehead	Department of Employment & Workplace Relations
Ms	Eileen	Newmarch	Department of Employment & Workplace Relations
Mr	Bruce	O'Meagher	Department of Human Services
Ms	Bev	Orr	Australia Foster Carers Association
Ms	Sam	Page	Family Services Australia
Ms	Sue	Pidgeon	Attorney-General's Dept
Mr	Paul	Rajan	Department of The Chief Minister NT
Ms	Shiela	Rimmer	Australian Council on the Ageing
Ms	Lisa	Robinson	ACT Legal Aid
Mrs	Jean	Smyth	Grandparent
Mr	John	Smyth	Grandparent
Ms	Julie	Tongs	Winnunga Nimmityjah
Ms	Prue	Warrilow	National Association of Community Based Children's Services
Mr	Barry	Williams	Lone Fathers Association
Ms	Sharron	Williams	SNAICC Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services
Ms	Susan	Woolias	and Indigenous Affairs
Ms	Heidi	Yates	Legal Aid ACT

**Expert Forum on
'Grandparenting: present and future'
24 October 2006
University House
The Australian National University**

Summary of main presentations²³

Anne McLeish, Grandparents Australia

Grandparents - the alchemists of the 21st century

The role of grandparent is changing rapidly – and can be traced back to rapid changing in the wider society.

For example, the increased incidence of family breakdown accompanied by bitterness and dysfunction creates a challenging role that many grandparents find demanding and shameful to deal with. The relationships grandparents have across blended families are complex and require all to exercise new levels of relationship building skills.

Even where family circumstances are stable grandparents find new challenges in their role as they battle to ensure the same opportunities for their grandchildren that they enjoyed. Questions of access and equity loom large in issues such as education and the environment. Thinking and acting on future planning is becoming a prime activity for grandparents. They wish to leave the world in the shape in which they would want their grandchildren raised.

Emma Baldock, Canberra Mother Craft Centre

Grandparents Parenting Grandchildren Because Of Alcohol And Other Drugs

Canberra Mothercraft Society received a grant through ACT Health Alcohol and Drug Policy Unit from the National Illicit Drug Strategy, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs to conduct research into the needs of grandparents who are parenting because of alcohol and other drugs. The project aimed to identify the needs and aspirations of grandparents and grandchildren in relation to family issues due to alcohol and other drugs.

Key successes of the project have been to:

- raise the profile of grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising because of alcohol and other drug issues;
- enhance understanding and increase knowledge among service providers, policymakers and the community about: the needs of; strengthened family resilience; reduced personal isolation; and social disruption experienced by grandparents and the grandchildren they are raising because of alcohol and other drug issues; and
- build the capacity of service providers and policy makers to identify and meet the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs.

²³ Formal presentations are available on the Families Australia website www.familiesaustralia.org.au

The project report makes recommendations to inform sustainable future directions for service provision and policy to support grandparents parenting grandchildren because of parental drug and alcohol use. Achieving substantive improvements in well being for grandparents raising grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs issues, and their families requires new legislative and policy changes framed in an intergenerational context.

Julie Tongs, Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Clinic

Julie Tongs, a Wiradjuri woman, is the CEO of Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health Clinic. As an Indigenous grandmother Julie gave a heartfelt account of her personal situation. She spoke of mental health issues for young Indigenous people and that drugs and alcohol are often used by them as self medication.

Julie also spoke of the many Indigenous grandparents raising their grandchildren on their own, as Indigenous men are dying younger. Winnunga Nimmityjah provides a holistic service that addresses health and social problems.

Providing mentors for young Indigenous men is a successful program that fulfils their cultural and spiritual needs and provides a sense of belonging and identity.

Note: No formal presentation is available.

Prue Warrilow, National Association of Community Based Child Care Services

This presentation focused on grandparents providing childcare while their parents are at work. All percentages are from *Child Care Australia*, Cat No. 4402.0, ABS, 2006.

Grandparents can be carers of their grandchildren as legal guardians, informal custody or providing child care while parents retain full custody and responsibility for their children. In 2005, 3.2% of children aged 0-4 years were in formal care and 38.4% of children aged 0-4 years were in informal child care; 72.9% of this informal care was provided by grandparents. In 2005, 14.2% of children aged 5-11 years were in formal care and 30% were in informal care; 50% of this informal care was provided by grandparents. Grandparents provided informal care for 0-12 year olds most often for one (44%), two (18.6%) or five (10.9%) days a week.

Almost all (96%) informal care provided by grandparents was free. Grandparents express mixed feelings about providing informal child care on a regular basis; on a positive note it can create a strong bond between grandparent and grandchild, but it can be limited by the physical well-being of the grandparent. Some grandparents commented on tiredness, lack of sleep, and trying to manage competing demands – grandchildren, parents and spouse/partner.

The current lack of quality formal children's services may mean that some families are actively choosing to use grandparents, when they may prefer formal care. This could be masking actual demand for services, and lack of choice for quality community-owned children's services.

For those grandparents who have full responsibility for grandchildren, whether legal or informal custody and want to access formal children's services a number of issues can make this difficult. If grandparents have informal custody of their grandchildren they may not have access to documentation that facilitates easy access to children's

services through the Commonwealth Government's Priority of Access Guidelines; and they may not be able to access Child Care Benefit, which impacts on ability to afford formal child care. There is Grandparent Child Care Benefit but this information is not readily available or accessible through Commonwealth Government web sites or Centrelink offices. This is exacerbated for those grandparents who have never accessed any type of Government assistance and have no idea where to go or what to ask.

Recent research by EAC and COTA National Seniors proposed some ways forward to support grandparents in grandparenting role:

- increased visibility, and recognition and respect for their grandparenting role;
- financial assistance to reimburse the cost of activities provided to their grandchildren; and
- community support through grandparent playgroups and similar networks.

Heidi Yates, ACT Legal Aid

Many grandparents seek assistance from Legal Aid Commissions in situations where they are:

- caring or seeking to care for their grandchildren on a full-time basis
- seeking contact with their grandchildren (often after separation)
- where they have a role in facilitating contact or residence arrangements.

The services offered by Legal Aid Commissions differ somewhat on a state and territory basis. However, all Commissions offer free advice and duty lawyer services, community legal education and representation for negotiation and litigation where applicants satisfy the relevant means and merit tests. Each Commission also runs a family dispute resolution program aimed at assisting family members to resolve their disputes without going to court.

In 2003, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Services identified a need for major changes in family law system. The Committee's report titled *'Every picture tells a story'* recommended a range of changes including reform designed to enable grandparents to remain connected with their grandchildren after separation.

In response to this report, the Commonwealth Government allocated \$1.7 million over four years in the 2005-06 budget to expand the opportunities for grandparents and extended family members' to be directly involved in Legal Aid dispute-resolution programs. A working group has since been established to develop a project aimed at:

- Extending the intake and assessment procedures involved in Legal Aid conferences to pro-actively include grandparents and extended family members;
- developing community legal information for grandparents and other extended family regarding contact with grandchildren; and
- developing a model and deliver training for all Legal Aid conference chairpersons regarding multi-party negotiation conferences involving grandparents and extended family members.

Luise Lang, Family Court of Australia

Luise is a Senior Counsellor with the Family Court of Australia. Her presentation outlined the recent amendments to the Family Law Act and the role grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren after separation.

APPENDIX 2: FOCUS GROUP REPORT

**Grandparenting: focus group consultation
October 2006**

Report by Families Australia

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Grandparenting: focus group consultation

1. Summary

The focus group for nine grandparents held at Marymead Child and Family Centre on 16 October 2006 highlighted several important issues facing some grandparents and their grandchildren. The highest level of agreement concerned the feeling that the value and importance of the grandparent caring role had not been adequately appreciated, particularly by governments, as evidenced by inadequate information about possible sources of financial and other support, varying levels of satisfaction with the professionalism of case workers, lack of financial support for eventualities such as emergencies, and difficulty in accessing legal aid due to means testing thresholds. There was strong agreement about the value of support groups, and the need to help grandchildren cope with difficult family situations.

While there are limits to the conclusions which can be drawn from one consultation and the findings should be regarded as exploratory, based on this study, themes for further consideration are to: identify additional ways to recognise the important roles played by grandparents, especially those providing primary care; improve the targeting and dissemination of information about government benefits for grandparents; examine training for agency case workers with a view to ensuring the particular needs of grandparents are better understood; establish a program to cover emergency needs when children come into grandparent care; fund additional grandparent support groups; review the needs of children in care of grandparents; and, support initiatives such as targeted counselling services.

2. Background and purpose

In late 2006, Families Australia undertook an examination of issues affecting grandparents in Australia today. As part of that work, a focus group for grandparents was held at Marymead Child and Family Centre, Canberra, on 16 October 2006.

The main purpose of the focus group was to gain understandings of contemporary grandparenting issues, and to use those understandings to inform an Expert Forum on “Grandparenting: present and future”, which was held at The Australian National University on 24 October 2006.

The methodology for the focus group is set out in *Appendix A*; in short, it is based on latest Australian and overseas research about qualitative social research, and supported by a quality assurance framework involving independent expert external review. This report has been prepared and externally reviewed in accordance with Families Australia's methodology and standards requirements.

The focus group was attended by members of an established support group for grandparents, many of whom provide primary care for grandchildren arising from adverse family circumstances. Group discussions were shaped around four main topics: the main issues for grandparents; main issues for grandchildren; policies, services strategies that could assist grandparents; and, policies, services strategies that could assist grandchildren. *Appendix B* contains the questions used at the focus group.

The group comprised nine participants: six women and three men. Seven participants were aged between 65 and 74 years; two participants were aged between 55 and 64 years. Two participants were single, one was widowed, and there were three couples. Four families represented were providing full-time care of grandchildren (a total of nine children). Two grandmothers were currently not seeing grandchildren (a total of five children).

The moderator team comprised Ms Grace Concannon (moderator) and Mr Brian Babington (assistant and note-taker). Ms Lyla Rogan, Principal, RPR Consulting, Canberra, audited the focus group as an external independent reviewer and provided comment on this report.

Families Australia had intended to run another focus group for grandparents in Canberra but this did not eventuate in the timeframe for the project despite extensive local media advertising and use of community sector networks.

The following section provides information and analysis of responses under each heading.

3. Results

3.1 Main issues for these grandparents

The group was asked to think about the main issues they face in their grandparenting roles. They were asked to consider questions such as: “Have you felt supported in the role (early days and now)? What are/have been the rewards? What are/have been the challenges? Has it impacted on your relationship with your husband/wife/partner? What are your future fears and hopes for yourself and your grandchildren?”

All participants felt that greater acknowledgement was required of the contributions made by grandparents in caring for grandchildren. A common sentiment was that, arising from a sense of love and responsibility, sometimes at very short notice, and sometimes to avoid foster care, grandparents had taken their grandchildren into their full-time care. Yet, a strong concern was that governments and others did not adequately recognise and support grandparents in that role. Typical comments were:

We are not important enough but we're saving them [governments] millions of dollars.

All of us are grandparents trying to do the best with our blood, we love our grandchildren... how remiss would we be if we didn't take the role on, no-body else wants to do it, and we try to give them the same values that we have because we have a wealth of experience...I'd hate to think that if all the children being raised by grandparents at the moment [were sent away from grandparent care], where would the system go? It would go into overload. It's time someone stood up and said these people are doing a job...so why do they want to keep battering us around all the time and giving us grief?

We are treated as foster parents but that's not so – we are parents.

We have to fight for these things – but why should we?

All of us have a story of how inept the system has been.

We need an advocate.

Almost all participants stated that insufficient information had been provided to them about avenues for support, such as financial assistance. One or two participants had been provided with information at an early stage by support or case workers, but most agreed that information had come late (sometimes years late), or was incomplete or unreliable. Typical comments included:

We found out by accident what facilities were available to us.

I didn't know about this child allowance, this kinship allowance, non-parental care allowance – in eight and a half years I never received a thing even though they gave me [the grandchild] and said 'take this baby or we'll put it in foster care. I couldn't see her going into foster care.

I rang [a government support agency] to see about financial support and I was treated as if I was the most mercenary person – it was quite insulting.

I didn't even know about it [a financial allowance] before I came here [to the support group].

Almost all participants expressed concern about being able to provide adequate support for their grandchildren. Lack of money was one factor, but not all: the time and energy to take children to events such as sports and the movies were also highlighted as sources of concern. Typical comments included:

We are a lot older aren't we, and I don't think we are capable, like we took our kids to the football and netball, and soccer and hockey – we could do all these things – I'd love our (grand)kids to do all these things if someone could take them too... We're just not capable.

Notwithstanding the problems, all participants spoke of the rewards of grandparenting. Typical comments were:

Seeing our grandchildren at such close quarters, seeing them gain confidence and independence [is rewarding].

It keeps us all young.

[They] give us a purpose to go on.

3.2 Issues for grandchildren

Participants were asked to discuss the key issues for their grandchildren. They were asked to consider questions such as: “Has there been support available for the children? Have they had ongoing needs, if so what? special needs? Contact with their parents – how does it impact on them?”

Several participants expressed concern over the wellbeing of grandchildren, especially in circumstances where relationships between parents and grandparents were strained,

or where the parent or parents had problems, such as with mental illness, alcohol or other drugs. Some participants talked about the difficulty for the children in navigating between sometimes competing family loyalties. Many participants talked about fears that their grandchildren expressed about the health and wellbeing of their grandparents, and about the lack of counselling and other support for the children in these situations. Typical comments included:

I think they [the grandchildren] have compartmentalised their lives. The child sees their parent and they are not quite the same [when they return to the care of the grandparent].

There's very little counselling available for children.

My grandchild said, 'I don't want to grow up, because if I grow up you'll get old'

What happens if you and grandma die – what will happen to us? Where would we live?

Our older one was having sleeping problems...he said 'I worry about you and grand-dad [getting old, dying]'.

3.3 Policies, services, strategies that could assist grandparents

Participants were asked about ways they could be assisted in their grandparenting roles. They were asked to consider questions such as: “What do you need when it first happens (particularly if it is unexpected)? What would have assisted in the early days? What do you need in the longer term?”

All participants firmly believed that support groups, such as the Marymead group, were very important in a myriad of ways, such as in sharing stories, offering friendship and finding out about avenues of assistance. Concerns were expressed about the future of the group due to funding pressures; all strongly wished it to continue. Typical comments included:

I don't think we would have survived without it [the group] and now no-one will fund us.

If we wouldn't have had this place we would have gone under, both of us. All the people [here] gave us support and courage.

Many participants expressed concern about the difficulties grandparents face in accessing legal aid as the means test precludes some grandparents who own their home but who may otherwise be living on limited income. Typical comments were:

It cost me \$18,000 [in legal costs], but she [the grandchild's mother] got hers [legal aid] for nothing – how?

The assets accrued over a lifetime disqualify us from such things as legal aid, family allowance, carer's pension, health care cards etc etc, yet we are saving the welfare system millions of dollars by giving children care and safe haven.

3.4 Policies, services strategies that could assist grandchildren

Participants were asked to discuss ways to further assist their grandchildren. Some participants highlighted the fact that children come into care with almost no resources such as clothing, bedding, or furniture, and that additional support should be given to help cope with such emergency situations. Typical comments were

When the children were given [to us] they only had their school clothes, we had to start from scratch.

There were frequent expressions of frustration and anger over experiences with child protection agency case workers and/or management. While some workers had been helpful, the experience of some grandparents was that they were sometimes seen as part of the problem rather than helping to give the child a better life. Some of the comments included:

What they want you to do is to do their job for them... They don't give a shit about you. Nobody will come to your aid until you find out and start pressing the buttons.

Our situation was different [better than others had expressed]. It seems to depend on the case worker you have. Our caseworker offered us kinship allowance.

[Case] workers need to be more accountable.

4. Limitations

The study was of one focus group which included a relatively large number of grandparents who are providing primary care for grandchildren arising from adverse

family circumstances. It needs to be noted that this group is not necessarily representative of the views and experiences of all grandparents, for example, those who provide child care on an occasional basis. Additional focus groups would provide more representative samples of other targeted population groups. Consequently, the foregoing findings need to be considered as exploratory and subject to later verification. Nonetheless, the small sample does identify some consistent themes for grandparents, especially those providing primary care¹.

5. Conclusions and themes

The responses of the focus group participants to the questions provided important insights into the issues facing some grandparents and their grandchildren. Amongst issues that rated the highest levels of agreement amongst group members was the feeling that governments had not adequately appreciated the value and importance of their caring role as evidenced by inadequate information about possible sources of financial and other support, varying levels of satisfaction with the professionalism of case workers, lack of financial support for eventualities such as emergencies, and difficulty in accessing legal aid due to means testing thresholds. There was a strong feeling that support groups provided invaluable assistance to grandparents. The need to help grandchildren cope with difficult family situations, for example, through counselling, also received prominence.

Arising from the discussion are themes for further consideration that:

- Additional ways could be identified to give greater recognition to the important roles played by grandparents, especially those providing primary care;
- The targeting and dissemination of information about government benefits for grandparents could be improved;
- Training for case workers could be reviewed with a view to ensuring that the particular needs of grandparents are better understood;
- Consideration could be given to establishing a small grants program to cover emergency needs when children come into grandparent care;
- Additional grandparent support groups could be funded; and

¹ After Krueger, Richard A., *Focus groups. A practical guide for applied research*. London: Sage Publications, 1988, 147.

- A review could be undertaken of the needs of children in the care of grandparents, including consideration of additional support initiatives such as counselling services.

6. Acknowledgements

Families Australia wishes to thank the following for their assistance in the preparation of this report: the Marymead Child and Family Centre grandparents' group; the Management and staff of Marymead Child and Family Centre; and, Ms Lyla Rogan, Principal, RPR Consulting, Canberra.

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Families Australia's focus group method and standards: summary of main characteristics

Families Australia is the national peak not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the needs and interests of families. Families Australia's purpose is to represent the interests of families in Australia, working from a network of services, organisations, carers, consumers and communities, which takes in a rich diversity of families and communities.

Face-to-face consultation with individuals and families is one of the main ways in which Families Australia gathers information about contemporary family-related issues, so forming the basis for Families Australia's broader information and representation work.

Families Australia undertakes focus groups in accordance with a formal methodology which includes key standards and practice benchmarks. The framework is elaborated in Families Australia's publication, *Method and Standards for Focus Group Consultations* (available on the Families Australia website from 1 February 2007, www.familiesaustralia.org.au).

Key practice *standards* for Families Australia's focus group work are:

- A written research plan is developed at the outset in consultation with the client.
- The client is provided with a written statement of aims and method setting out understandings of the issues to be raised in the consultation as well as information about the methods which Families Australia will employ in running the consultation process, including the likely limitations and benefits.
- The client is asked to formally agree or acknowledge this statement of aims and method as the basis for the professional conduct of work.
- If focus groups are to be used, participants are selected for their relevance to the topic, a suitable venue is selected, group size is optimal, and appropriate questions are developed and tested in advance of the session/s.
- The sessions are moderated in the utmost professional manner paying particular regard to duty of care and informed consent.
- Sessions are recorded both electronically and in writing and are observed by a moderator assistant.
- Families Australia operates from an ethical framework which gives utmost regard to the wellbeing of staff who undertake consultation work as well as to the participants in those processes, and which protects the confidentiality and privacy of information.
- A written report is prepared by the moderator team based on the evidence from the consultation in accordance with protocols regarding data collection, analysis, review and consultation.
- Monitoring the quality of work takes place at every stage of the consultation cycle in accordance with specified standards and key practice benchmarks, but is also given importance as a major activity in its own right.
- Reporting and other consultation processes are subject to ongoing review and improvement based on feedback from clients, professional reviewers and other stakeholders.

- Families Australia reviews its overall consultation methodology and practices on a regular basis.

To support these standards, Families Australia's *benchmarks* for running focus groups include requirements that:

- Each group should, where possible, comprise participants of roughly similar characteristics (for example, age, education, income, background), unless there are strong reasons to diverge from this model.
- Participants will be invited using, where possible, existing networks or identifying participants directly through such means as advertising in the media or through other contacts.
- The ideal focus group size is 6-8 persons, with each session running for 60-90 minutes.
- The venue should be amenable to free-flowing group interaction in terms of, for example, size, ambience, lighting, accessibility, and proximity to facilities.
- Around 5-6 questions, but no more than ten questions, will be used in each session.
- All participants will be issued with a written invitation and background information about the aims and methods to be used in the consultation.
- Families Australia will undertake research into the consultation topic in the lead-up to the consultation and clarify any issues with the client.
- Sessions are conducted by a moderator team comprising the moderator and an assistant.
- At the outset of the session, participants will be formally welcomed and advised of the purpose and method of the session. They will be encouraged to speak openly and frankly and that no comments will be attributed to any individual.
- At the conclusion of the activity, participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire providing information about the participant and feedback about the session.
- Families Australia has a responsibility to ensure that moderators and other staff are provided with opportunities for confidential debriefing and/or counselling by skilled and accredited professionals who are external to Families Australia and other reasonable and relevant support that may be requested by staff. The costs associated with these measures will be borne by Families Australia.
- Families Australia staff will be encouraged to undertake further and ongoing training in relation to consultation work.
- External peer review will be undertaken by a professional consultant with expertise in social policy and qualitative research techniques on a selected basis.
- Families Australia staff will undertake in-house assessment and reflection on each completed consultation project. The results of those reflections will be included in reporting to the Professional Reference Panel.
- Families Australia will formally review its consultation methodology and practice model every two years, involving external experts.

Focus groups have the main benefits of: discovering new information and consolidating old knowledge; obtaining a number of different perspectives on the same topic; gaining information about participants' views, attitudes and beliefs; examining participants' shared understandings; brainstorming and generating ideas; and, exploring controversial ideas and complex or sensitive topics². They can produce

² Litoselliti, L., *Using focus groups in research*, 18.

insights and ideas due to the dynamics of group interaction not found in interviews. Morgan notes that focus groups offer “valuable data on the extent of consensus and diversity among the participants”³.

Focus groups can present a more naturalistic environment than an individual interview as focus group participants are influenced by the views of other participants⁴ and are less amenable to control by the facilitator or moderator⁵. Given that focus groups are small groups that have as their objective the acquisition of information based on the perceptions, beliefs, traditions and values of its participants, they are well suited for conducting research among minority and vulnerable populations⁶. Focus groups may also assist in obtaining data from children and from individuals who are not particularly literate, and allow the researcher to interact directly with respondents, thus allowing clarification and follow-up questioning⁷.

The main limitations of focus groups are: bias and manipulation – leading participants to particular conclusions; ‘false’ consensus – some participants may remain silent while others may dominate; problems of differentiation between the group view and individuals’ views – avoiding the appearance that the group has reached a consensus; over-generalisation of outcomes due to the limited number of participants and the difficulty of getting a representative sample; and, problems of analysing and interpreting the results due to the open-ended nature of the group. There may also be uncertainty over the accuracy of participants’ comments, and the relatively chaotic data can complicate the task of data analysis⁸. Some of these difficulties can, however, be addressed through careful planning and skilful group moderation.

It is also important to recognise that the results of a focus group “may not be generalizable or representative, but indicative; that is, illustrating social phenomena”⁹. Marczak and Sewell state that: “because focus groups are usually made up of a very small number of people who voluntarily participate, you cannot assume that their views and perceptions represent those of other groups that might have slightly different characteristics. They are not ‘random samples’ ”¹⁰.

More information about Families Australia can be found at:
www.familiesaustralia.org.au

³ Morgan, David L., “Focus groups”, in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 139.

⁴ Litoselliti, L., *Using focus groups in research*, 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2, and Morgan, David, L., *Focus groups as qualitative research*, 14.

⁶ Calderon, Jose, Baker, Richard, and Wolf, Kenneth, “Focus groups: a qualitative method complementing quantitative research for studying culturally diverse groups”, in *Education for Health*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2000: 92.

⁷ Marczak, Mary and Sewell, Meg, *Using focus groups for evaluation*. University of Arizona. Cited at <http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/focus.htm> (accessed November 2006).

⁸ *Ibid.* and Lee, Thomas W., *Using qualitative methods in organizational research*. London: Sage Publications, 1999, 53-54.

⁹ Litoselliti, L., *Using focus groups in research*, 21-22.

¹⁰ Marczak, Mary and Sewell, Meg, *Using focus groups for evaluation*.

Focus Group Questions:
Grandparenting

Issues for grandparents.

- Have you felt supported in the role (early days and now)?
- What are/have been the rewards? What are/have been the challenges?
- Has it impacted on your relationship with your husband/wife/partner?
- What are your future fears and hopes for yourself and your grandchildren?

Issues for grandchildren.

- Has there been support available for the children?
- Have they had ongoing needs, if so what? special needs?
- Contact with their parents – how does it impact on them?

Policies, services, strategies that would assist grandparents.

- What do you need when it first happens (particularly if it is unexpected)?
- What would have assisted in the early days?
- What do you need in the longer term?

Policies, services strategies that would assist grandchildren.

APPENDIX 3: SUMMARY OF RECENT AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES FOR GRANDPARENTS

New Approach to the Family Law system

- The Australian Government's new approach to the family law system announced in the 2005-06 Budget incorporates a new network of Family Relationship Centres to offer information, advice and dispute resolution services and be supported by a website and national telephone network. These services are available to grandparents.
- Proposed changes to the Family Law Act now reinforce the role of grandparents. In addition the Government is providing \$1.7 million over four years to legal aid commissions to provide family group conferencing in matters involving grandparents.

Increased child care support for grandparents

A package of increased child care support was announced as part of the Government's *Extra Assistance for Families* Election 2004 policy. Two new measures were introduced enabling eligible grandparent carers to receive greater assistance with the cost of child care.

- One measure introduced on 1 November 2004 waives the work, training, study test for grandparent carers, providing access to up to 50 hours of Child Care Benefit (CCB), as opposed to the 20 hours normally available to carers who are not working, training or studying.
- A second measure called the Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB) was introduced on 3 January 2005. This measure provides up to 50 hours of approved child care at no cost to grandparent carers who receive an income support payment.
- The package is expected to benefit around 5000 grandparents who care for their grandchildren over the first four years.

Transition to Independent Living Allowance (TILA)

- The Government has also committed to funding TILA for a further four years at a cost of \$10.6 million. TILA now assists young people leaving out-of-home care to successfully make the transition from informal extended family and kinship care such as that provided by grandparents, including Indigenous kinship care. Previously it was only available to those grandparents caring for young people in the formal state child protection systems.