

## **In praise of grandparents**

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Grandparents play a vital role in creating and strengthening child-friendly communities. They do this in three important ways. They often provide child care; they generally give the love and support that helps improve understanding between generations; and many of them provide full-time care for grandchildren whose parents can't care for them.

The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics figures (2002) show that grandparents are Australia's largest providers of informal child care. Almost one in five children aged 0-11 years is being looked after by grandparents. Grandparents provide 31 per cent of the total hours of child care, including formal child care.

Grandparents who spend time with their grandchildren are contributing to the future, passing on important values and also learning about what matters to younger generations. This communication and understanding bridges what can be a significant gap between generations, improving the harmony of society as a whole. The loss of contact between grandchildren and grandparents when parents' relationships break down is a serious loss, not only for the people involved but also for the wider community.

Then there are the many grandparents who take on responsibility for the full-time care of their grandchildren. There are more than 22,000 grandparents providing primary care. The reasons may include traumatic family events such as relationship breakdowns, parental substance abuse or mental health problems, death or imprisonment. This is a serious challenge for people who thought their child rearing days were in the past!

Families Australia recently launched a report about the needs of grandparents, based on discussions with grandparents themselves and an expert forum which brought together specialists in the field of grandparenting.

Across the spectrum of grandparenting, two common themes emerged: many grandparents would like greater recognition for the work they do; and they would like easier access to information about sources of assistance.

Many grandparents said that they found local support groups to be invaluable – places to go to share stories and discuss challenges. Unfortunately, there aren't support groups in all locations. Some grandparents find it challenging to access information about financial and other forms of assistance. Others would like information about child-friendly things to do with their grandchildren.

So, what are some key things which could help grandparents?

Many grandparents said that a 24-hour a day information helpline and a website would help with information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters as well as referral to local services and supports. It could be a one-stop introduction for grandparents to the different organisations and the assistance they offer, and advice could be tailored to individual family situations.

At state and local levels, consistency across jurisdictions could be improved in relation to recognising and supporting grandparent carers. Also, more information could be provided about free local activities grandparents can do with their grandchildren.

For those children in grandparent-headed families, there could be more investment in programs that support children and in respite programs to give grandparents a well-deserved break.

At the family level, grandparents providing child care or primary care often told us that, while they work from a basis of love and care, they sometimes get tired and worried and would appreciate greater acknowledgement of the often unpaid work they do.

Communities that nurture children depend in large measure on the love and commitment of grandparents. Finding innovative, practical ways to support them will help us all. Thanks, grandparents.