

GRANDPARENT CHILDCARE IN AUSTRALIA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Grandparents are the most popular form of childcare in Australia today. In 2008, 660,000 Australian children were in grandparent care, far outstripping other forms of childcare including long day care and after school care. Yet despite the prevalence of grandparent care, Australian studies on the subject have been scarce. Little is known about a number of salient issues associated with grandparent care, including parental attitudes, relationship with maternal employment, and the developmental outcomes of children who experience grandparent childcare. The purpose of this literature review is to identify the major themes in both the local and international literature on grandparent childcare, with a view to informing future Australian research. Four key themes are identified: a carer profile and patterns of care; relationship with the formal childcare market; popularity of this type of childcare for young children; and caregiver experiences. Given the prevalence of grandparent childcare in Australia, it is argued that further Australian research on the subject is long overdue. Such work would have much to contribute, not only to childcare and labour studies, but also to sociological debates concerned with the changing grandparent role.

INTRODUCTION

Grandparents are the most popular form of childcare in Australia today. In 2008, some 660,000 children - or just under one-fifth of Australian children aged 12 and under - received grandparent care, far outstripping other forms of childcare such as long day care, and before and after school care.² Yet despite the prevalence of grandparent care in Australia, local studies on the subject have been relatively scarce. A literature review spanning the past twenty years has yielded only seven local studies.

However, in contrast to Australia, grandparent childcare has come under considerable academic scrutiny in its own right internationally within the last ten years, with a growing number of overseas studies focusing specifically on the nature, causation and patterns of grandparent childcare, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom.³ The recent interest in grandparent care is driven by the increasing academic attention afforded to informal childcare generally, as scholars seek to understand the intricate workings and nature of the informal market, its links with maternal labour force participation, and the implications for the functioning of the formal childcare market.⁴

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² Australian Bureau of Statistics *Childhood Education and Care, Australia, June 2008* Cat no. 4402.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2009), 13

³ See, for instance, Julia Griggs, *Protect, Support, Provide: Examining the Role of Grandparents in Families at Risk of Poverty* (Department for Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford: 2010); Karsten Hank and Isabella Buber, 'Grandparents Caring for their Grandchildren: Findings from the 2004 Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe' (2009) 30 *Journal of Family Issues*; Johanna Brandis, *Grandparents as Childcare Givers for Working Mothers* (2003); Lina Guzman, 'Grandma and Grandpa Taking Care of the Kids: Patterns of Involvement' (Child Trends Research Brief No 2004-17, Washington, 2004); Deborah Low Vandell et al, 'Variations in Child Care by Grandparents during the First Three Years' (2003) 65 *Journal of Marriage and the Family*

⁴ Melanie Brown-Lyons, Anne Robertson and Jean Layzer, *Kith and Kin - Informal Child Care: Highlights from Recent Research* (2001), 5.

This article provides a literature review of both the local and international Australian research into grandparent childcare. Despite the paucity of local research on this topic, the seven existing studies cover a broad range of germane topics, including caregiver stress and burden,⁵ intergenerational exchange,⁶ migrant grandparent carers,⁷ and relationship with the normative grandparent role.⁸ Four major themes have been identified and are explored in this article: (i) a carer profile and patterns of care; (ii) grandparents and the 'childcare jigsaw'; (iii) popularity for young children; and (iv) grandparent caregiver experiences. In developing these themes, and where there are gaps in the local literature, substantial supplementary data has been used from both the Australian Bureau of Statistics triennial *Child Care* surveys, and the international literature surrounding grandparent childcare.

Australian grandparents play an important, if undervalued and often overlooked, role as child care providers in Australia. It is argued that further Australian research is required to explore the issues raised in this article. In particular, more academic attention should be paid to the costs and benefits associated with caregiving for Australian grandparents. Research focusing on the demographic characteristics of grandparent caregivers, including variables such as age, gender, and geographic location, would also serve to help clarify many of the issues raised in this article.

GRANDPARENT CARE: PROFILE AND PATTERNS

Profiling Australian grandparent caregivers is a difficult task. To date, there have been no national statistics collected on the demographic characteristics of Australia's most popular childcare providers. The major obstacle for researchers is the scale and extent of grandparent childcare. Data obtained from the ABS *Child Care* surveys shows that such care is popular with both regional and metropolitan parents, with English and non-English speaking families, can range from under five hours to over fifty per week, and is heavily used by families on all positions of the socioeconomic spectrum. Of the local literature, only Binks has collected comprehensive demographic data on caregivers, including variables such as age, nationality and geographic location. However, this research is now over twenty years old, and the data was drawn from a relatively small ($n=216$), non-representative sample limited to South Australian grandmothers only.⁹

Indeed, the variances in caregiving experiences are such that only one characteristic of grandparent carers can be gleaned from the local literature: paralleling patterns of parental care¹⁰, circumstantial evidence suggests that it is predominantly women who provide care; grandmothers, not grandfathers. Data collected from 33,981 Australians by the ABS in 1992, for example, shows that grandmothers were the primary providers of child care for 44% of couple families and 34% of one-parent families; grandfathers, meanwhile, accounted for just 11.6% and 9% of child care to these families respectively.¹¹ Millward's

⁵ Joy Goodfellow and Judy Laverty, *Grandcaring: Insights Into Grandparents' Experiences as Regular Child Care Providers* (2003); Pricilla Binks, *Grandmothers Providing Childcare in South Australia: A Study by the Young Women's Christian Association of Adelaide* (1989).

⁶ Christine Millward, 'Family Relationships and Intergenerational Exchange in Later Life' (Working Paper No 15, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1998); Binks, above n. 4.

⁷ Wei Wei Da, 'Transnational Grandparenting: Child Care Arrangements Among Migrants from the People's Republic of China' (2003) 4 *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 79; Rosemary Lever, *Grandparents: The Mainstay of Modern Families* (1995).

⁸ Betsy Wearing and Christine Wearing, 'Women Breaking Out: Changing Discourses on Grandmotherhood?' (1996) 2 *Journal of Family Studies* 165; Gay Ochiltree, *Grandparents, Grandchildren and the Generation in Between* (2006).

⁹ Binks, above n 4, 15-19. In addition to quantitative surveys being distributed to 216 South Australian grandmothers, a further twenty-five qualitative interviews were also conducted (p. 7).

¹⁰ Lyn Craig, 'Does Father Care Mean Fathers Share?' (2006) 20 *Gender & Society* 259; Michael Bittman, 'Parenting and Employment: What Time-Use Surveys Show' in Nancy Folbre and Michael Bittman (eds.), *Family Time: The Social Organization of Care* (2004) 152, 160; Janeen Baxter, 'Patterns of Change and Stability in the Gender Division of Household Labour in Australia, 1996-1997' (2002) 38 *Journal of Sociology* 399.

¹¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Social Trends 1994*, Cat no. 4102.0 (Canberra: ABS, 1994), 49.

analysis of the Australian Institute of Family Studies' 1996 *Later Life Families Study* found that although there was no difference in the numbers of grandmothers and grandfathers who provided childcare, just 4% of grandfathers reported taking *primary* responsibility for childcare, whilst a full 54% of grandmothers did.¹² The international literature also points to the predominance of grandmothers, as opposed to grandfathers, as childcare providers,¹³ whilst most of the local literature has either excluded grandfathers from their samples,¹⁴ or included only a minority of male caregivers.¹⁵ The limited evidence available, therefore, points to the gendered nature of grandparent carework, indicating that scholars should approach grandparent childcare as an issue with particular salience for women's situation.

Although grandparent care is utilised by families across all income levels, an intriguing trend detailed in the ABS *Child Care* surveys has been the shift in the popularity of grandparent care from low-income families to high income families (see Table One). In 1999, the year when grandparents were first included as a category in the ABS surveys, grandparent care was utilised by 151,800 families with a weekly income of less than AUD\$600, and 114,800 families earning more than AUD\$1,400 and more per week.¹⁶ By 2008, however, only 81,000 families with incomes of AUD\$800 and less were using grandparent childcare; in contrast, at least¹⁷ 336,000 children from families with weekly incomes of AUD\$1400 and over were in grandparent care during the year.¹⁸ Interestingly these figures stand in direct contrast with the literature on child care patterns from the United States, which shows that lower income families are more likely to rely on informal caregivers and unregulated childcare providers.¹⁹ This phenomenon is only partly explained by the general rise in household incomes over the past ten years²⁰, and, as such, given the implications for future patterns of grandparent childcare, further Australian research on this issue is merited.

Other factors which have been connected to higher incidences of grandparent care in overseas studies include:

- Co-residence;²¹
- The age of the mother, with younger mothers more likely to rely on grandparent care, especially from their mothers;²²
- Single parent families;²³
- Lower levels of education.²⁴

¹² Millward, above n 5, 24.

¹³ Nazli Baydar and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, 'Profiles of Grandmothers Who Help Care for Their Grandchildren in the United States' (1998) 47 *Family Relations* 385; Flavia Budini Gattai and Tullia Musatti, 'Grandmothers' Involvement in Grandchildren's Care: Attitudes, Feelings, and Emotions' (1999) 48 *Family Relations* 35; Guzman, above n 2; Hank and Isabella Buber, above n 2, 53.

¹⁴ Binks, above n 4; Wearing and Wearing, above n 7.

¹⁵ Goodfellow and Laverty, above n 4; Lever, above n 6; Ochiltree, above n 7.

¹⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Child Care, Australia, June 1999* Cat no. 4402.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2000), 22.

¹⁷ The single parent income category is capped at '\$1000 and above'.

¹⁸ ABS, above n 1, 34-5.

¹⁹ Karen Folk, 'For Love or Money: Costs of Child Care by Relatives' (1994) 15 *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* 243; Karen Kuhlthau and Karen Mason, 'Market Child Care Versus Care by Relatives: Choices Made by Employed and Nonemployed Mothers' (1996) 17 *Journal of Family Issues* 561.

²⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Household Income and Income Distribution 2007-08* Cat no. 6523.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2009), 20.

²¹ Vandell et al, above n 2, 375; Baydar and Brooks-Gunn, above n 11; Feinian Chen, Susan Short and Barbara Entwisle, 'The Impact of Grandparental Proximity on Maternal Childcare in China' (2000) 19, *Population Research and Policy Review* 571.

²² Vandell et al, above n 2; Harriet Presser, 'Some Economic Complexities of Child Care Provided by Grandmothers' (1989) 51 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 581; Emma Fergusson, Barbara Maughan and Jean Golding, 'Which Children Receive Grandparental Care and What Effect Does it Have?' (2008) 49 *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 161.

²³ April Brayfield, Sharon Deich and Sandra Hofferth, *Caring for Children in Low Income Families* (1993) 2-4; Guzman, above n 2.

²⁴ Folk, above n 18; Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21.

In Australia, no data has been collected on the impact of these and other variables on patterns of grandparent childcare. The result is that local researchers do not really know what family characteristics, if any, may predict higher incidences of grandparent care in Australia.

Since 1999, the hours of care that grandparents have typically provided have remained relatively stable, corresponding with the 'lopsided model of care'. Identified by Fuller-Thompson and Minkler, the lopsided model refers to the fact that the numbers of grandparents who provide extensive or full-time care is relatively low. In their study of 3,260 grandparent respondents drawn from the North American 1992-94 *National Survey of Families and Households*, Fuller-Thompson and Minkler (2001) developed a five-fold typology:

1. Extensive caregivers, referring to grandparents who provide thirty hours or more of child care per week, and/or had the grandchild stay overnight without their parents for more than 90 nights per year (n=223, 6.8% of sample)
2. Intermediate caregivers, referring to grandparents who provided child care for between 10 and 29 hours per week, and/or had their grandchild stay overnight without their parents for 7 to 89 nights per year (n=788, 24.2% of sample)
3. Occasional caregivers, who provided between 1 and 9 hours per week, and/or had the grandchild stay overnight without their parents for between 1-6 nights per year (n=757, 23.2% of sample)
4. Noncaring grandparents, who provided no child care within an average week, and did not have the grandchild stay overnight without their parents in the average year (n=1,319, 40.5% of sample)
5. Custodial grandparents, referring to grandparents who have full-time custody of grandchildren (n=173, 5.3% of sample).²⁵

Generally, data drawn from the ABS *Child Care Survey* shows that the lopsided model is in operation in this country (see Table Two). The statistics show that, overwhelmingly, Australian grandparents provide very few hours of care – the vast majority for nine hours or less per week.²⁶ Indeed, since 1999 there has been a marked tendency towards fewer hours of care (see Table Two).

Why do grandparents generally provide so few hours of care? One explanation lies with patterns of intergenerational negotiation and co-operation – the argument being that the middle generation is sensitive to, and shies away from, exploiting grandparents for childcare. In the British context, for instance, Wheelock and Jones argue that parents tend to demonstrate a keen understanding of what's 'fair' to ask for from a relative carer, and thus avoid asking for excessive hours of care provision.²⁷ Certainly, when queried, Australian grandparents overwhelmingly report a preference for fewer hours of care,²⁸ and thus it seems, as Thomas has posited, that grandparent caregiver satisfaction has its limits and that willingness to care for grandchildren is rarely open-ended.²⁹ In this context, current patterns of grandparent care may be indicative of the willingness of *both* generations to negotiate fair, mutually rewarding caregiving commitments. An alternative explanation can be forwarded, however: such

²⁵ Esme Fuller-Thompson and Meredith Minkler, 'American Grandparents Providing Extensive Child Care to Their Grandchildren: Prevalence and Profile' (2001) 41 *The Gerontologist* 201, 203-5.

²⁶ ABS, above n 1, 19.

²⁷ Jane Wheelock and Katherine Jones, "Grandparents are the Next Best Thing": Informal Childcare for Working Parents in Urban Britain' (2002) 31 *Journal of Social Policy* 441, 451-2.

²⁸ Binks, above n 4; Ochiltree, above n 7; Goodfellow and Laverty, above n 4.

²⁹ Jeanne Thomas, 'Age and Gender Differences in Perceptions of Grandparenting' (1986) 41 *Journal of Gerontology* 417, 420; see also Pamela Cotterill, "But for Freedom, You See, Not to be a Babysitter": Women's Attitudes Towards Grandmother Care' (1992) 26 *Sociology* 603.

patterns may also be indicative of the general flexibility of grandparent care and grandparent's role in assisting parents to solve the 'childcare jigsaw'.

GRANDPARENTS AND THE CHILDCARE JIGSAW: CHOICE OR LACK OF CHOICE?

The literature has shown that a key reason for the popularity of grandparents is the flexibility of this type of care, conceptualised here by the *responsiveness* of grandparents to the childcare requirements of the middle generation. As a form of unregulated childcare provided by a relative, grandparent care is generally better positioned to accommodate flexibility in childcare arrangements and to assist parents to solve the 'childcare jigsaw' - referring to the fact that some parents may need to use more than one source, and sometimes a mix of formal and informal sources, to meet their childcare needs.³⁰ In this context, there are at least two major domains in which grandparents are portrayed as significantly more accommodating than the formal market.

The first is the provision of care during non-standard hours and in unusual situations. In the U.K., for instance, Wheelock and Jones report that grandparents were the most popular form of non-parental care in abnormal circumstances such as emergencies and school holidays.³¹ In Australia, as Qu (2003) has reported, the *Household, Income and Labour Dynamics* (HILDA) survey has shown relative care to be used by 37% of children from sole-parent families and 23% of those from couple families during the school holidays, and, considered in tandem with general patterns of Australian childcare, it seems likely that grandparents were the primary source of this care.³² Grandparents are also a popular childcare 'backup' when formal childcare options are typically unavailable,³³ such as when children are when children are sick.³⁴ Predominantly, however, grandparents provide a substantial amount of routine care during non-standard hours, such as nights and weekends. Although the vast majority of children in grandparent care attend during the weekdays, the Australian Bureau of Statistics shows that, in 2005, 154,000 children - or nearly one-quarter (23.3%) of all children in grandparent care - were in their grandparents charge during the weekends, and 89,200 (13.5%) of these children were in care *only* during the weekends.³⁵ The international literature has also emphasised the childcare contributions of grandparents during night-time,³⁶ and, in Australia, Binks has reported that 7.3% of grandmothers in her sample often provided care at night, and 13% most often overnight.³⁷

A second key characteristic of grandparent care in Australia is a lack of monetary compensation for carework. In 2008, 97.7% of grandparent carers - looking after some 645,000 Australian children - received *no* cash payments for their care.³⁸ Previous ABS surveys have revealed similar results: in 2005, grandparent care was unpaid for 640,700 children (96.9%),³⁹ and in 2002 the figure was 581,000 (98.2%)

³⁰ Wheelock and Jones, above n 26, 448.

³¹ Ibid, 451; see also Vandell et al, above n 2; Fuller-Thompson and Minkler, above n 24; Cotterill, above n 28; Anne Gray, 'The Changing Ability of Grandparents as Carers and its Implications for Childcare Policy in the UK' (2005) 34 *Journal of Social Policy* 557.

³² Lixia Qu, 'Minding the Children During School Holidays' (2003) 65 *Family Matters* 18, 20; see also Helen Glezer, 'Juggling Work and Family Commitments' (1991) 28 *Family Matters* 6, 7.

³³ Gray, above n 30; Vandell et al, above n 2; Presser, above n 21; Wheelock and Jones, above n 26.

³⁴ Gay Ochiltree and Evelyn Greenblat, 'Mothers in the Workforce: Coping with Young Sick Children' (1991) 28 *Family Matters* 18, 20.

³⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics *Child Care, Australia, June 2005* Cat no. 4402.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2006), 18.

³⁶ Fuller-Thompson and Minkler, above n 24; Presser, above n 21.

³⁷ Binks, above n 4, 30.

³⁸ ABS, above n 1, 19.

³⁹ ABS, above n 34, 22.

children.⁴⁰ A survey of the international studies has revealed similar results. In Presser's study of American grandparents, for instance, less than half (42.8%) of the sample received either cash or non-cash payment for services, and both the load of care and the ability of the mother to provide payment was strongly influential of this trend.⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that lack of monetary payment does not mean that grandparents receive no compensation at all for their care; rather, this may take the form of gifts or non-cash assistance. In the United Kingdom, for example, Wheelock and Jones found that while complementary childcare payments were 'very much the exception rather than the rule', a little over a third of parents provided a non-cash payment to caregiving grandparents.⁴² The relevance of issue in the Australian context is not clear; to date, there has been no local research on non-monetary childcare payments to grandparents.

How to interpret these trends? Are they indicative of intergenerational negotiation and co-operation over childcare provision between the generations, as both grandparents and parents mutually seek to solve the 'childcare jigsaw'? Exploitation of grandparents by the middle generation in a quest for free childcare? Demonstrative of a lack of alternative childcare options, especially for parents working nights or weekends? A response to the escalating cost of formal childcare?⁴³ In other words, to what extent is the use of grandparent care in Australia a *choice* on the part of the middle generation?

Many studies, both international and local, have indeed treated the use of grandparent childcare as a choice on the part of the middle generation. From this perspective, grandparent care is commonly viewed as the 'next best thing' to parental care, and is highly valued for its supposed intrinsic benefits: the fostering of closer inter-generational relationships, the quality of grandparent care in contrast with the formal market, and the satisfaction that grandparents apparently derive from the caregiving role.⁴⁴ Often, the choice to use grandparent care is portrayed as motivated primarily by the well-being of the child, due to the perceived high quality of care.⁴⁵ In the British context, as Wheelock and Jones note:

The type of care that grandparents are seen to provide is often critical to what *families perceived as high quality*; it is the 'best' childcare...repeatedly, in the focus groups and in the interviews, carers and parents expressed the view that if mothers are going out to work, then relatives and in particular grandparents are the *best alternative*...There was then, a clear perception that *grandparental care is linked to the well-being of children*.⁴⁶

In some of the international literature, the fostering of inter-generational family relationships was also shown to be a major consideration for using grandparent care.⁴⁷ Regular grandparent childcare allows grandparents and grandchildren to develop a meaningful relationship, while the middle generation receives the benefit of leaving their child with someone they trust, and whose quality of care is perceived to be superior to other care alternatives.

⁴⁰ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Child Care, Australia, June 2002* Cat no. 4402.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2003), 23; see also David de Vaus, Matthew Gray and David Stanton, 'Measuring the Value of Unpaid Household, Caring and Voluntary Work of Older Australians' (Research Paper No. 34, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2009), 13-4.

⁴¹ Presser, above n 21, 588.

⁴² Wheelock and Jones, above n 26, 457.

⁴³ Rebecca Cassells et al, 'Perceptions of Child Care Affordability in Australia: What the HILDA Survey Tells Us' (9th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Melbourne, 10 February 2005), 9, 13-18; Justine McNamara et al, 'Trends in Child Care Use and Cost Between 1999 and 2002' (2006) 9 *Australian Journal of Labour Economics* 125.

⁴⁴ Wheelock and Jones, above n 26; Margaret Jendrek, 'Grandparents Who Parent Their Grandchildren: Circumstances and Decisions' (1994) 34 *The Gerontologist* 206; Chen, Short and Entwisle, above n 20; Lina Guzman, 'The Use of Grandparents as Child Care Providers' (Working Paper No 84, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1999); Gattai and Musatti, above n 12; Bonita Bowers and Barbara Myers, 'Grandmothers Providing Care for Grandchildren: Consequences of Various Levels of Caregiving' (1999) 48 *Family Relations* 303.

⁴⁵ See Wheelock and Jones, above n 26; Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21.

⁴⁶ Wheelock and Jones, above n 26, 454 (emphasis added).

⁴⁷ Guzman, above n 43; Gattai and Musatti, above n 12.

Other scholars, however, have pointed to patterns of grandparent care as indicative of a distinct *lack* of choice of other childcare options. From this perspective, the flexibility of grandparent care helps facilitate their use as ‘complementary’ caregivers who assist parents in filling in the gaps in the ‘childcare jigsaw’.⁴⁸ There is some limited evidence for this argument in the Australian context: most notably, the fact that a significant minority of Australian grandparent care occurs at night and during the weekends, when formal childcare options are typically unavailable. Lack of alternative childcare – due to high demand, prohibitively high costs, or geographic isolation – may also drive grandparent care. As Binks has reported, nearly one-fifth (19.4%) of her sample of South Australian grandmothers stated that alternative childcare was simply unavailable.⁴⁹

However, to date, no Australian studies on grandparent childcare have utilised the voices of Australian parents on this issue. The result is that we do not know whether grandparent care is freely chosen by parents, or if grandparents are called upon to care because parents have few, or no, childcare alternatives. Another critical question is the connection of patterns of grandparent care with those of maternal labour force participation in Australia. Because maternal employment is generally characterised by considerably higher incidences of part-time or casual work, and a higher likelihood of irregular work hours, and indeed, irregular work schedules,⁵⁰ families with employed mothers tend to report a preference for flexible, negotiable childcare,⁵¹ such as that provided by grandparents. Correspondingly, the international literature has shown that grandparent care is more likely when mothers work part-time, rather than full-time, hours.⁵² Local studies on this issue are needed to address the link between part-time work and grandparent care, and would likely provide significant insight into the causation of grandparent childcare in Australia.

POPULARITY WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Many of the overseas studies have reported that grandparents remain an extremely popular childcare choice for children aged under six, a trend particularly pronounced for children aged three years and younger.⁵³ The ABS *Child Care* surveys indicate that this trend is occurring in the Australian context. In 2008, 39.5% of children in grandparent care were aged three years old and under; another 16.2% were aged four or five-years-old⁵⁴ (see Table Three). Similar findings have been reported from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC). In the first wave, in 2004, for the infant cohort ($n=5107$) grandparents were reported as the primary providers of care for 37% of infants in care, and secondary providers for

⁴⁸ Wheelock and Jones, above n 26; see also Vandell et al, above n 2.

⁴⁹ Binks, above n 4, 85.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Pungello and Beth Kurtz-Costes, ‘Working Women’s Selection of Care for Their Infants: A Prospective Study’ (2000) 49 *Family Relations* 31; Cynthia S. Darling-Fisher and Linda Tiedje, ‘The Impact of Maternal Employment Characteristics on Fathers’ Participation in Child Care’ (1990) 39 *Family Relations* 20; Joan Williams and Holly Cohen Cooper, ‘The Public Policy of Motherhood’ (2004) 60 *Journal of Social Issues* 849.

⁵¹ Jinseok Kim and Maryah Fram, ‘Profiles of Choice: Parents’ Patterns of Priority in Child Care Decision-Making’ (2009) 24 *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 77; Karen Folk and Yunae Yi, ‘Piecing Together Child Care with Multiple Arrangements: Crazy Quilt or Preferred Pattern for Employed Parents of Preschool Children?’ (1994) 56 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 669; Nonie Harris, ‘Women’s Reflections on Choosing Quality Long Day Care in a Regional Community’ (2008) 33 *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 42.

⁵² Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21.

⁵³ Guzman, above n 2; Karen Folk and Andrea Beller, ‘Part-Time Work and Child Care Choices for Mothers of Preschool Children’ (1993) 55 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 146; Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21; Gray, above n 30; Peter Brandon, ‘An Analysis of Kin-Provided Child Care in the Context of Intrafamily Exchanges: Linking Components of Family Support for Parents Raising Young Children’ (2000) 59 *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 191; Folk, above n 18; Brayfield, Deich and Hofferth, above n 22.

⁵⁴ ABS, above n 1, 14.

another 13% of Australian infants, making them by far the most popular type of care.⁵⁵ For the four-and-five-year-old cohort in the following year ($n=4983$), meanwhile, a diverse range of options for education and childcare were accessed; however, grandparents still provided care for nearly one-fifth (17%) of this group.⁵⁶

Australian studies have little to offer regarding the *prevalence* of grandparent care for young children in the Australian community - although Lever, in her study of 59 Arab, Vietnamese and Italian grandparents in Melbourne found that over half (54.8%) of the children cared for were aged three and under, and 82.2% were under school age.⁵⁷ What has been made clear from the Australian research carried out so far, however, is that grandparents steadfastly believe that they are the best childcare choice for young children. Goodfellow and Laverty found that grandmothers felt they offered more than could be found within the formal childcare market, particularly in relation to grandchildren less than two years of age, as the 'next best thing' to mothers.⁵⁸ Lever, meanwhile, reports that her respondents felt that 'mothers should care for children, especially when they are very young and if they can't, then grandparents are an excellent substitute'.⁵⁹

Why is grandparent care so popular for young children especially? In the international literature, there are two major theories regarding this trend. The first is that grandparents, and particularly grandmothers, are highly valued as substitutes for maternal care.⁶⁰ Despite the fact that most mothers are now employed, significant discomfort remains surrounding the quality of formal care and the developmental and behavioural impacts of maternal absence, particularly on young children,⁶¹ underpinned by child development theories which stress the importance of maternal attention and bonding for children's social and psychological well-being.⁶² In this context, for parents with infants and young children, grandparents may be viewed by *both* generations as the 'next best thing' to maternal care: providing loving, individualised, high quality care to the grandchild. Correspondingly, Gray, Mission and Hayes in their analysis of the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC), found that grandparents reported a warmer relationship with the grandchild than centre-based carers.⁶³ Given the wide variety of circumstances of families who use grandparent care, however, it is difficult to generalise. Although some empirical studies of Australian parents' childcare preferences show that 'maternal' characteristics such as warmth and responsiveness to the child are reported as important to the quality of care,⁶⁴ others stress the importance of structured, social, and developmentally advantageous childcare choices for parents,⁶⁵ a

⁵⁵ Linda Harrison and Judy Ungerer, 'What Can the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Tell Us about Infants' and 4 to 5 Year Olds' Experiences of Early Childhood Education and Care?' (2005) 72 *Family Matters* 26, 27-30.

⁵⁶ Australian Institute of Family Studies, *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children - Annual Report 2005-2006* (2006), 29.

⁵⁷ Lever, above n 6, 17.

⁵⁸ Goodfellow and Laverty, above n 4, 17.

⁵⁹ Lever, above n 6, 29.

⁶⁰ Kuhlthau and Mason, above n 18; Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21; Gattai and Musatti, above n 12.

⁶¹ Terry Arendell, 2000, 'Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship' (2000) 62 *Journal of Marriage and Family* 1192; Heather Dillaway and Elizabeth Pare, 'Locating Mothers: How Cultural Debates About Stay-at-Home Versus Working Mothers Define Women and the Home' (2008) 29 *Journal of Family Issues* 437; Glezer, above n 31, 6-7.

⁶² Catherine Booth et al, 'Child-Care Usage and Mother-Infant 'Quality Time'' (2002) 64 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 16.

⁶³ Matthew Gray, Sebastian Mission and Alan Hayes, 'Young Children and Their Grandparents' (2005) 72 *Family Matters* 10, 16.

⁶⁴ Katherine Rose and James Elicker, 'Parental Decision Making About Child Care' (2008) 29 *Journal of Family Issues* 1161; Harris, above n 50; Lisa da Silva and Sarah Wise 'Parent Perspectives on Childcare Quality Among a Culturally Diverse Sample' (2006) 31 *The Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 6.

⁶⁵ Roslyn Elliot, 'Sharing Care and Education: Parent's Perspectives' (2003) 28 *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 14, 16-20; Jillian Rodd and Jan Milikan, 'Parental Perceptions of Early Childhood Services for Pre-Primary Children in Australia', (1994) 101 *Early Child Development and Care* 89; for a study which looks at the childcare choices of Indigenous parents, see Lynda Windisch, Vickii Jenvey and Marlene Drysdale, 'Indigenous Parents' Ratings of the Importance of Play, Indigenous Games and Language, and Early Childhood Education' (2003) 28 *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 50, 53-55.

point which appears to become pertinent especially as the child ages.⁶⁶ Further, the literature on childcare choice in Australia demonstrates that parents are influenced by a number of variables, including cost, perceived quality of care, and geographical proximity, among others.⁶⁷ Thus, whilst this theory accounts for the decreasing popularity of grandparent care as the child nears school age, as well as the prevalence of Australian grandmothers, as opposed to grandfathers, as caregivers, further research is required to flesh out precisely to what extent maternal characteristics are an important factor in grandparent care for young children in the face of other considerations such as cost, geographic location, and, importantly, the perceived developmental and social needs of the child.

The second theory is connected to the issue of grandparent caregiver flexibility and the childcare jigsaw. In circumstances where mothers with children aged three and under are more likely to be working casual and part-time hours,⁶⁸ it is argued that grandparent care, characterised by flexibility and inter-family negotiation, meets the mother's needs better than the formal market.⁶⁹ In support of this argument, and consistent with the lopsided model, in the Australian *Child Care* surveys higher incidences of grandparent care for young children have been recorded in families where the mother works casual or part-time hours, rather than full-time.⁷⁰ In 2008, 47.5% (292,000) of children in grandparent care had mothers who were employed part-time, whereas children whose mothers were employed full-time accounted for 28.1% (155,000) of grandparent care.⁷¹ Again, however, further research is required to examine the exact nature of the link between part-time work and care for young children by grandparents.

CAREGIVER EXPERIENCES

The final focus of this literature review is on Australian grandparents' experiences as carers. Generally, care provision has been approached as a rewarding activity, with much of the local literature documenting the significant benefits grandparents derive from the caregiving role. Developing a strong and meaningful personal relationship with one's grandchild is overwhelmingly the strongest theme. As Goodfellow and Laverty, in their study of 32 caregiving grandparents, summed it up:

Most of the grandparents participating in the two studies felt they provided an intense or deep form of nurturing for their grandchildren through their regular care role. This was based on an *exclusive connection* between grandparent and grandchild and *embedded in a strong and dynamic relationship...* Grandparents identified the regularity of contact, exclusive interaction, active engagement with grandchildren around everyday activities (willingness to give of themselves) and continuity or permanency of care as *creating strong and potentially enduring bonds* with grandchildren.⁷²

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Davis and Rachel Connelly, 'The Influence of Local Price and Availability on Parents' Choice of Child Care' (2005) 24 *Population Research and Policy Review* 301, 325; see also Gray, Mission and Hayes, above n 62, 16.

⁶⁷ Rebecca Cassells et al, above n 42; da Silva and Wise, above n 63; Winnie Liu, Alexander Yeung and Sue Famer, 'What Do Parents Want from Day Care Services? Perspectives from Australia' (2001) 16 *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 385; Karen Noble, 'Parent Choice of Early Childhood Education and Care Services' 32 *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 51.

⁶⁸ Folk and Yi, above n 50; Folk and Beller, above n 52; Paula McDonald, Lisa Bradley and Diane Guthrie, 'Good Mothers, Bad Mothers: Exploring the Relationship Between Attitudes Towards Nonmaternal Childcare and Mother's Labour Force Participation', (2005) 11 *Journal of Family Studies* 62; Australian Bureau of Statistics *Australian Social Trends 2007* Cat no. 4102.0 (Canberra: ABS, 2007), 127; see also Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Barriers and Incentives to Labour Force Participation: July 2008 to June 2009* Cat no. 623930 (Canberra, ABS: 2009), 4.

⁶⁹ Gray, above n 30; Guzman, above n 2.

⁷⁰ ABS, above n 15, 33; ABS, above n 39, 35; ABS, above n 34, 36; ABS, above n 1, 31. However, this data has not been linked to the child's age. This trend has also been recorded in international studies: see, for instance -Fergusson, Maughan and Golding, above n 21, 164; Presser, above n 21; Vandell et al, above n 2.

⁷¹ ABS, above n 1, 31.

⁷² Goodfellow and Laverty, above n 4, 17 (emphasis added).

Wearing and Wearing also found that grandparents identified interacting and building a relationship with grandchildren as a significant source of caregiving satisfaction. For many of the twenty Australian grandmothers they interviewed, the enjoyment they obtained from care provision was derived within the framework of the traditional grandmother role, as an 'extension of the nurturing/caring roles that these women have carried out during their lives', however, with less responsibility for care and more time for themselves, as individuals, because 'you can give them back'.⁷³ Caregiver satisfaction, from this perspective, is gleaned from performing the 'fun' activities of caregiving – nurturing, playing with, and entertaining the child – with little or none of the childrearing responsibilities.⁷⁴

However grandparents aren't always so positive, and for many, childcare can be a very stressful activity. Three types of caregiver stress have been identified in the literature. First is the general stress of providing care for children, especially for extended periods. In Australia, Binks reported that 16.9% of her respondents identified with the statement 'I wish that I did not have this childminding commitment' (1989: 23), and that, furthermore, 25.3% of the sample felt strained by the demands of the caregiver role.⁷⁵ Lever noted that 'getting tired and needing more time to themselves were the two most frequently reported complaints' from her sample of 59 grandparents.⁷⁶ As Goodfellow and Lavery (2003: 20) argued, caregiver stress may also be exacerbated by existing health problems such as arthritis and previous work injuries.⁷⁷

The second type of stress is related to the perceived *choice* of providing childcare, specifically when grandparents feel that they lack the choice to actually determine the parameters of their caregiving commitment. Goodfellow and Lavery (2003), in their study of 32 grandparents providing childcare, found considerable tension manifested in the caregiving role, with grandparents mediating the dilemmas between caregiver satisfaction and inter-generational exploitation, family obligations and personal autonomy, retirement plans and normative family functioning. The authors found autonomy and choice to be critical tools for achieving grandparent caregiver satisfaction, which measured significantly higher when grandparents possessed the resources and ability to negotiate the time, place and nature of their childcare provision, as 'pro-active and vocal partners in establishing care arrangements'.⁷⁸ Similarly, Ochiltree's (2006) interviews with Australian grandparents revealed that some felt forced into caregiving, mostly due to pressure exerted by the middle generation. Nonetheless, most respondents reserved the right to determine their own caregiving arrangements; subsequently, the expectation that grandparents should always be available for childcare was a demand emphatically rejected by many grandparents.⁷⁹

Yet this is not always the case. An interesting finding from Binks' (1989) survey was that the ideologies and feelings of grandparents may contribute to a lack of autonomy and choice in childcare commitments, rather than pressure from the middle generation per se. Notably, 46% of her sample identified that they provided childcare due to the middle generation's need – rather than enjoyment, or a mix of the two. These grandmothers, Binks found, experienced more caregiver stress, were more likely to feel taken for granted, were less likely to believe that their family would be supportive if they themselves needed help, and felt more uncomfortable declining care requests.⁸⁰ These grandmothers felt locked into the caregiving role often as a result of feelings of guilt and thought that they should be helping their families regardless of the cost to their own wellbeing. 'It seems,' Binks concluded, 'as if a percentage of them are simply their

⁷³ Wearing and Wearing, above n. 7, 172.

⁷⁴ See also Ochiltree, above n 7.

⁷⁵ Binks, above n 4, 23.

⁷⁶ Lever, above n 6, 25

⁷⁷ Goodfellow and Lavery, above n 4, 20; see also Mary Hughes et al, 'All in the Family: The Impact of Caring for Grandchildren on Grandparents' Health' (2007) 62 *Journal of Gerontology* 108.

⁷⁸ Goodfellow and Lavery, above n 4, 26.

⁷⁹ Ochiltree, above n 7.

⁸⁰ Binks, above n 4, 57-64.

“own worst enemies”, super-sensitive to their children’s needs, committed to what they believe is right, but, unable to put appropriate limits on the sacrifices they make, they remain susceptible in their own discomfort’.⁸¹

A final type of stress comes from the deviation from the ‘normal’ grandparent role. When caregiving commitments exceed or conflict with grandparents’ lifestyles, stress may occur. Wearing and Wearing, interviewing 20 Sydney grandmothers, found that a definite discourse about being a ‘good grandmother’ existed and included characteristics such as being patient, listening, spending time, supporting, caring and not interfering.⁸² However, grandmotherhood did not constitute the whole of these women’s identities – it was an enjoyable, important part of their lives, but grandmothers also performed volunteer work, paid work, and enjoyed leisure activities.⁸³ Thus, when extensive carework was expected of them by the middle generation, it was often resented, leading to stress and guilt; for although grandmothers enjoyed caregiving, many felt preserving their autonomy was either more or just as important.⁸⁴

Caregiving, therefore, is not an uncomplicated activity for many Australian grandparents. The literature reviewed here indicates, as Goodfellow and Lavery have found, that both satisfaction and stress are linked with the compatibility of the carer role with individual grandparents’ life goals. The authors developed a four-fold typology of grandparent carers:

1. Avid Carers - Care role central to life goals; family focused; a belief in the superiority of family care over other types of care; highly value passing on family and cultural traditions
2. Family Flexible Carers - Care role important but not the sole determinant of a meaningful life; family focused; care one way of supporting family; expect some personal priorities
3. Selective Carers – Partial to care role but not the sole determinant of a meaningful life; independent life; own determinant of family contribution; expect multiple priorities and some care
4. Hesitant Carers – Care role does not really contribute to meaningful life; independently minded; limited exchanges with family; expect multiple priorities and little care.⁸⁵

This framework is very useful for thinking about grandparent childcare in Australia. Grandparent carers cannot be treated as a homogenous group, always happy to care for grandchildren or, conversely, never comfortable or content in the role. Rather, grandparents bring vastly different ideologies, values, and life experiences to the caregiving role and this effects both satisfaction and stress.⁸⁶ Further, the complexities and contradictions of carework for grandparents need to be acknowledged. Though many Australian grandparents undoubtedly enjoy caring for their grandchildren, developing close, personal relationships with the new generation, they can also – sometimes simultaneously – be stressed by the role, feel exhausted and under intense pressure.

CONCLUSION

The literature reviewed here consistently demonstrates a complex, reciprocal relationship focused on the care of grandchildren, where both grandparents and parents seek, and often find, mutual benefits. Here, both grandparent and parent hold the grandparent caregiving role in high esteem: a ‘natural’ and

⁸¹ Ibid 64.

⁸² Wearing and Wearing, above n 7, 171.

⁸³ Ibid 174.

⁸⁴ See also Binks, above n 4, 50-6; Ochiltree, above n 7.

⁸⁵ Goodfellow and Lavery, above n 4, 32.

⁸⁶ Binks, above n 4; Goodfellow and Lavery, above n 4; Ochiltree, above n 7.

meaningful role, it is seen as providing superior quality childcare for the grandchild. Grandparents who babysit are able to develop meaningful, long-lasting relationships with their grandchildren whilst providing significant assistance and help for their own children. The middle generation, meanwhile, benefit by leaving their child in the care of a trusted relative, who may be flexible regarding nights and weekends, and will most probably not demand monetary compensation. However, despite the ultimately voluntary nature of childcare provision and the control over caregiving parameters exercised by many grandparents, some grandparents are also vulnerable to caregiver stress and exploitation; it can be difficult for them to disappoint familial expectations and cultural conventions, despite personal exhaustion, social isolation, and general dissatisfaction with caregiving. Reiterating Goodfellow and Lavery's (2003) findings, then, grandparent caregiving is represented here as a complex, and, at times, contradictory role.

This literature review has revealed a number of gaps in the state of Australian knowledge. Identified areas for further research include:

- Empirical studies on the concept of parental 'choice' and its relationship to grandparent childcare. This is perhaps the most pressing area for further research. Grandparent care needs to be positioned in the context of parental values and wishes, but also in the reality of 'constrained' choice – filled childcare centres, affordability, transportation issues, geographic isolation, and other concerns and issues which parents must face when finding care for their children;
- The collection of nationally representative, comprehensive demographic data on grandparent caregivers, including age, gender, income, and geographic location;
- Local studies which examine the impact of a number of family variables, such as income, maternal age, co-residence, and education, on the use of grandparent childcare, with a particular focus on the increasing use of grandparent care by high-income Australian families;
- Studies probing the link between gender ideologies and patterns of grandparent care, expanding on the work of Wearing and Wearing (1996); and
- Further research on the popularity of grandparent care for young Australian children.

Given the prevalence of grandparent childcare in Australia, further local research on the subject is long overdue. In particular, further research will help to fully illuminate the role of grandparents in providing significant support to families with children, particularly if attention is paid to both the costs and benefits associated with such support. The grandparent caregiver role is rarely straightforward, and while many grandparents derive significant satisfaction and may develop close intergenerational relationships, others may be under pressure to provide care, experiencing both stress and a lack of autonomy. There is a need for more local studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to further explore the dynamics and scope of such issues for Australian grandparents. Ultimately, it is hoped that further research will help to contribute to responsive, sensitive public policy regarding grandparent care, supporting the wishes and lifestyles of both Australian parents and grandparents.

Table One: Number of Children in Grandparent Childcare by Family's Weekly Income, 1999 - 2008⁸⁷

Weekly Income	1999	2002	2005		2008		
			One Parent Family	Couple Family	One Parent Family	Couple Family	
Less than \$400	74,300	58,200	28,100	9,800	48,000	33,000	
\$400-599	77,500	57,100	48,300	18,900			
\$600-799	102,700	61,500		10,300	32,800	35,000	33,000
\$800-999	85,600	48,500	56,200				
\$1000-1999	65,200	77,300	67,800		20,000	43,000	
\$1200-1399	58,000	62,000	7,800	63,800			51,000
\$1400-1999	86,400	84,900		138,200			147,000
\$2000 or more	28,400	53,100	104,800	189,000			
Don't Know/Not Stated	84,600	89,000	74,400		61,000		
Total	662,700	591,600	661,200		660,000		

⁸⁷ ABS, above n 15, 22; ABS, above n. 39, 25; ABS, above n 34, 26; ABS, above n 1, 34.

Table Two: Hours of Grandparent Care, 1999 - 2008⁸⁸

Hours of Care	1999	2002	2005	2008
Less than 5	242,300	216,500	243,700	292,000
5-9	162,900	157,000	164,200	165,000
10-19	131,000	122,200	128,500	109,000
20-29	60,400	50,300	63,600	50,000
30-34	16,300	13,500	12,700	13,000
35-39	10,400	4,700*	6,000*	7,000*
40-44	9,400	5,800*	13,200	6,000*
45 or more	29,900	21,700	29,300	16,000
Total	662,700	591,600	661,200	660,000

⁸⁸ ABS, above n 15, 15; ABS, above n 39, 17; ABS, above n 34, 17; ABS, above n 1, 18.

Table Three: Grandparent Childcare for Children Aged Three and Under, Australia, 1999 - 2008⁸⁹

Age	1999		2002		2005		2008	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Less than One	71,200	10.7%	53,500	9%	55,600	8.4%	54,000	8.2%
One	79,800	12%	76,700	13%	84,30	12.7%	70,000	10.6%
Two	82,900	12.5%	68,800	11.6%	76,000	11.5%	76,000	11.5%
Three	75,200	11.3%	61,500	10.4%	65,100	9.8%	61,000	9.2%
Total	309,100	46.7%	260,500	44%	281,000	42.5%	261,000	40%

⁸⁹ ABS, above n 15, 10; ABS, above n 39, 12; ABS, above n 34, 14; ABS, above n 1, 13.

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