

## FRSA Information Factsheet

# Grandparents and Kinship Care

### November 2012

**Are you or is someone you know about to become a grandparent? The arrival of a new baby in the family is a joyful event but it can also be a time of mixed emotions.**

For some, the anticipation of a new grandchild is pure excitement, they can hardly wait for the baby to arrive. This can be very reassuring for 'first time' parents who often ask their own parents for help and advice.

Despite the best of intentions, problems can arise between parents and grandparents when advice or child rearing practices conflict with the advice from health professionals and child development experts. Many grandparents are doing courses or reading parenting material to update their skills and knowledge to avoid such problems.

[raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) is a good place to find information and course providers.

Not everyone is delighted at the idea of becoming a grandparent; it is not uncommon to feel:

- Upset about growing older or entering a new phase of life;
- Concerned about the parents and their readiness to have children;
- Unwilling to provide emotional, financial or practical support such as regular child care;
- Worried about potential conflict over issues such as religion and cultural observance.

It might help to speak to other grandparents, grandparent support services or a family relationship service to get some tips on how to work through any potential issues and avoid conflict with family members.

## Grandparenting - an important role

Recent research in Australia suggests that, overall, grandparents are playing an increasingly active and significant role in the lives of young children<sup>1</sup>. Grandparents come from a diversity of age groups and walks of life but share a common commitment to the grandchildren<sup>2</sup>. The time they spend with children is both enjoyable and educational.

Grandparents are Australia's largest providers of informal child care. An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey in 2002 found that grandparents provided care for almost one in five children aged 0–11 years and that they provided around a third of child care to these children.

Providing regular care for grandchildren can be an enjoyable role that grandparents choose to take on. There is an increasing number of support networks and playgroups for grandparent carers. But for some grandparents, caring for children can become a burden that has a negative impact on their health, choices and finances.

Alternative child care options may need to be investigated. The Child Care Access Hotline **1800 670 305** can provide information about child care options in your area or you may want to get some advice on raising this issue with other family members through Parentline: [www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au).

## Grandparents and Kinship Care

For a whole range of reasons parents are sometimes unable to care for their children. When this happens extended family, often grandparents, may take over the care of one or more children. This is sometimes referred to as 'kinship care'.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that 22,500 families in Australia are 'grandparent families' meaning about one per cent of families with children aged 0-17 years have grandparents as 'guardians' of the children. The actual number of children in kinship care is likely to be much higher.

Kinship care may be a voluntary and short-term solution to meet a particular family need. Or it can be more complex: a 'last resort' that is either a long-term arrangement or for an uncertain period. Illness, injury or disability, death, imprisonment, family violence, mental health problems or drug and alcohol abuse are some of the circumstances that lead grandparents to make this choice.

## Not a new idea

In pre-industrial Western societies and in many traditional societies today, multi-generation households are common. Extended family plays an important role in rearing children, and grandparents often are at the centre of the family's economic and social life. They may care for children, manage the household, grow and cook food, thereby freeing parents and other family members to undertake paid work, sometimes at great distance from the household.

Various patterns of kinship care are found in Australian Indigenous communities, and countries such as Vietnam, China, India, as well as parts of Africa and South America.

Whatever the reason, and even if for a temporary time, it means significant changes to your life at every level: from your living arrangements and relationships to your financial affairs.

## At first

When your grandchild first comes into your care they are experiencing rapid changes and are likely to express their distress through actions. Behavioural problems, bed wetting or night terrors are common.

- You need patience and support through this period.
- They need security and warmth as well as clear boundaries.
- Try to keep the rules simple at first, while you build a trusting relationship.
- Remember to have fun together! Put aside a little time to enjoy each other's company, do something fun and get to know each other.

## Grandparenting through divorce or separation

It can be upsetting to watch people you care about going through a separation or divorce but as a grandparent you can be an important source of support to grandchildren and their parents. It helps to focus on children's needs and best interests, while avoiding 'taking sides' or getting drawn into conflict between ex-partners.

Research tells us that children benefit from maintaining a meaningful relationship with both parents and watching their parents resolve differences constructively. Grandparents can make a difference by encouraging both parents to protect children from conflict.

When parents separate, arrangements need to be made about where children will live and how much time they spend with each parent. Most parents negotiate these arrangements without any help. You

may want to ask them to consider regular opportunities for your own contact with children as part of these discussions.

Sometimes there is a dispute over the parenting arrangements and parents may need some help. Family dispute resolution services can help and may suggest some form of parenting agreement or parenting plan be developed. The importance of children maintaining their relationships with grandparents and other members of their extended family can be considered as part of this process. Grandparents can also contact dispute resolution services if they are in dispute with parents over contact with grandchildren.

In a very small number of cases parents need to go to court for parenting orders because they cannot resolve their dispute. Family law has been amended to allow courts to consider the relationship children have with their grandparents and other members of their extended family and to consult with them to determine what is in a child's best interests. Courts can take into account:

- The nature of the relationship between a child and a grandparent;
- The likely effect that separation from a grandparent will have on a child; and
- The capacity of a grandparent to provide for the needs of a child.

Parents and courts are encouraged to make provision for a child to continue a relationship with grandparents, by ensuring that appropriate time is built into the parenting plan or order.

Family Relationship Centres can provide information and advice to grandparents on divorce, separation, dispute resolution, shared parenting and parenting plans. Use the Services Directory at [www.frsa.org.au](http://www.frsa.org.au) to find your nearest Centre or call the Family Relationships Advice Line on **1800 050 321**.

## Useful links

Seniors.gov.au is the online resource site for people aged over 50 years which currently includes a list of grandparent support programs in every state and territory.

Grandparents Australia is a national network representing the interests of grandparents, call **03 9372 2422**.

[www.playgroupaustralia.com.au](http://www.playgroupaustralia.com.au) has an online directory of playgroups across Australia.

[www.familyrelationships.gov.au](http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au) provides all families (whether together or separated) with access to information about family relationship issues, ranging from building better relationships to dispute resolution.

[raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) provides comprehensive, practical, expert child health and parenting information and activities covering children aged 0-8 years.



- 1 See for example Grandparents supporting children's thinking in technology, Beverley Jane and Jill Robbins, Monash University, Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Melbourne, Australia; November 28th – December 2nd, 2004.
- 2 Grandparents Australia Inc. (2004) Grandparents Speak, 2004: A report of a national survey of grandparents. Kensington, Vic: Grandparents Australia.