



Research Update

Raising Grandparents

By Eileen Evason, Katrina Lloyd and Lizanne Dowds

I would plead... for the Government to say, 'Grandparents, come out of the woodwork. We need you. You are important'. (Viscount Brentford, Hansard, 1998: col 1171)

Introduction

Over recent years there has been a slow shift away from the perception of grandparents as state-dependent pensioners towards an acknowledgement of the role that they play in family life. Many grandparents provide care, usually on an unpaid basis, for their grandchildren; some also offer financial help and advice to their own children and to their grandchildren. Yet to date, very little research has been carried out in Northern Ireland into the contribution grandparents make to the lives of their extended families. This Research Update uses data from the 2004 **Northern Ireland Life and Times** survey to examine the ways in which grandparents support their families, the services they provide, the money they save the state and their own feelings about their role.

The role of grandparents

So just how much value do we as a society place on grandparents? As Table 1 shows, there is an overwhelming acknowledgement that, with so many working parents, families need grandparents to help more and more. However there is also a fairly strong feeling among all respondents to the Life and Times survey that the help grandparents give is undervalued and unappreciated. Interestingly, grandparents themselves are less likely to feel that many parents do not appreciate the help that grandparents give – 53% of grandparents agreed with this compared with 68% of respondents who were not grandparents. However, while there was a clear acknowledgement of the need

for grandparental help (accompanied by a sense that the help tended to be unappreciated), there was also a general sense that grandparents should not be too involved. Only a minority of people felt that grandparents should be closely involved in deciding how their grandchildren are brought up. Allied to this, relatively few people thought that grandparents did indeed get too involved – only about a quarter of respondents thought that grandparents tended to 'interfere' with the way their grandchildren were brought up.

Profile of grandparents

It would be a mistake to assume that 'grandparents' are a homogeneous group and it is instructive to look at the diversity of the profile of grandparents interviewed on the Life and Times survey. Almost a



Table 1: Attitudes to grandparents

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing		
	Is a grandparent	Is not a grandparent	All
People today don't place enough value on the part grandparents play in family life	69	72	72
Many parents today do not appreciate the help that grandparents give	53	68	64
With so many working mothers, families need grandparents to help more and more	95	94	94
Grandparents have little to teach the grandchildren of today	20	14	15
In most families, grandparents should be closely involved in deciding how their grandchildren are brought up	36	30	31
Grandparents tend to interfere too much with the way their grandchildren are brought up	24	23	23

quarter of respondents were grandparents - aged between 35 and 93 years with half of them aged less than 65 years. While about half of grandparents were retired, just over a quarter were still working. A substantial minority (31%) had a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity, while almost one in five cared for someone who was sick, disabled or elderly.

Attitudes of grandparents towards their grandchildren

Grandparents, almost universally, felt that their grandchildren were a very rewarding part of their lives (Table 2). But balanced against this overwhelming finding is the feeling among quite a few grandparents that they were nonetheless ready for a life free from too many family duties. A

Table 2: Attitudes of grandparents towards their grandchildren

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing		
	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	All
My grandchildren are a very rewarding part of my life	95	97	97
Now my own children have grown up I want a life that is free from too many family duties	47	34	40
I have often put myself out to help look after my grandchildren	65	74	70
I have had to cut down or give up work to help look after my grandchildren	5	14	11

third of grandmothers and nearly half of grandfathers agreed with the statement, 'Now my own children have grown up I want a life that is free from too many family duties'. In terms of 'helping out', 70% of grandparents (and more grandmothers than grandfathers) felt that they had often 'put themselves out' to help look after their grandchildren. We don't know whether or not this was resented by grandparents, but it is nonetheless a reaffirmation of the clear need for grandparental help. What is perhaps most interesting is that 14% of grandmothers have had to cut down or give up work to help look after their grandchildren. This is not a high figure for grandparents as a whole, but is clearly a significant proportion of those grandmothers of working age - and is a point that we will return to.

Contact with grandchildren

Grandparents were asked a series of questions about one of their grandchildren (selected at random). The vast majority of grandparents (94%) said they were either 'close' or 'very close' to their grandchild and, accordingly, contact was frequent. Just over two thirds of grandparents saw their grandchild at least once a week. However the level of contact varied widely depending on the age of the grandparent. Eighty four per cent of grandparents aged 35-54 saw their grandchild once a week or more compared with 73% of those aged between 55 and 64 and 56% of those aged 65 years and over. Equally of course this pattern could have as much to do with the age of the grandchild as the age of the grandparent - that is, older grandchildren who may have moved away would obviously have less opportunity for

contact with elderly grandparents. In cases where there had been some type of family breakdown, grandparents often reported seeing less of their grandchildren or

Table 3: Grandparents helping out with grandchild under the age of 12 in the past year

	% helping once a week or more		
	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	All
Helped with babysitting or childcare during the day	22	40	33
Helped with babysitting or childcare in the evening	12	26	20
Taken/collected grandchild to/from school or nursery	12	17	15
Cared for grandchild in home during illness or after an accident	0	8	5

losing contact with them altogether. One in five grandparents said it became more difficult to keep in contact with their grandchild following the death of a parent or separation of the parents, and 10% said they were not allowed contact with their grandchild in such circumstances.

Involvement with grandchildren

For those grandparents whose selected grandchild was aged 12 years or under, two findings are clear. First, a significant amount of help is being provided, and second, it is more likely to be grandmothers than grandfathers providing it. As Table 3 shows, around one in five grandfathers compared with 40% of grandmothers had given regular help with babysitting or childcare during the day. Just over a quarter of grandmothers and 12% of grandfathers had looked after their grandchild in the evening once a week or more in the last year. More grandmothers than grandfathers also said they had taken or collected their grandchild from school or cared for their grandchild in the home during an illness or after an accident. Once again, more grandparents in the youngest age group (35-54 years) had helped with childcare than those in the oldest age group (65 years and over). This probably reflects the age of the grandchildren - younger grandparents tended to have younger grandchildren (mean age of selected grandchild is 5 years for those in the 35-54 age group compared with age 16 for those in the 65 and over age group). Again, the fact that a third of grandparents in the younger category are helping once a week or more with childcare during the day reaffirms the significant role that grandparents play in this area.

Table 4: Help and advice to children and grandchildren

	% ever helping out		
	Grandfathers	Grandmothers	All
Have you ever helped out your grandchild's parents with money	50	35	41
Have you ever helped out your grandchild with money	42	41	41
Have you ever given advice to your grandchild (if over 4 years)	49	52	50

But the help provided by grandparents is not limited to childcare. As Table 4 shows, two out of five grandparents (41%) said they had given money to the parents of their grandchild to help them out. In this financial arena, grandfathers come into their own as more grandfathers than grandmothers said they had provided monetary support (50% and 35% respectively). Forty two percent of grandfathers and 41% of grandmothers had also given money directly to their grandchildren. Half of all grandparents said they have given advice to their grandchildren (over the age of four years) and there was little difference between grandfathers and grandmothers.

Conflict can sometimes arise between parents and their children on the best way to bring up children. Grandparents taking part in the Life and Times survey were asked to what extent they agreed with their own children on how best to bring up their grandchild. Almost one third (32%) of grandparents said they agree about almost everything and a further 42% said they agree more often than not. Only 2% said they have disagreed about almost everything, while 17% said upbringing has not really been discussed. There was little difference between grandmothers and grandfathers and between older and younger grandparents on this issue. At least as grandparents see it then, there is little serious conflict in this area.

Attitudes of grandchildren to their grandparents

Grandparents thus report a close bond with their grandchildren and contribute extensively to family life. To find out if grandchildren are as positive about their grandparents, the Life and Times survey asked respondents some questions about

the relationship they had with their grandparents. In all, 17% of respondents to the Life and Times survey have living grandparents. The vast majority of these respondents agreed that their grandparents were an important part of their lives, though two thirds felt that their grandparents would like to see more of them. Only 15% of respondents said they would not see as much of their grandparents as they do if they did not have to, and 11% said their grandparents were not very interested in their lives (Table 5).

Conclusion

On the one hand the results of the 2004 Life and Times survey encourage a 'feel-good' factor with regard to the benefits of the extended family and the role that grandparents play in those kinship networks. Grandparents are highly valued by society as a whole and are seen by grandchildren as an important part of their lives. Grandparents enjoy their grandchildren - though they do not want to be consumed by family duties. There is a general sense among respondents to the survey that the support that grandparents give is undervalued. By and

large grandparents are not seen as overly interfering, contact with grandchildren is frequent and bonds appear to be strong.

However, the hard but hidden reality lies in the extent to which grandparents are 'giving' to the state and the economy whilst 'giving' to their families. A fifth of grandparents are caring for someone else who is sick, elderly or disabled. Added to this, 40% of grandmothers with a grandchild under the age of 12 were helping with childcare at least once a week, with a quarter also helping with babysitting in the evening. Fourteen per cent of grandmothers (of all ages) have had to give up work or cut down hours to help look after grandchildren. Further analysis of this and other surveys will be able to clarify in monetary terms just what this means to Northern Ireland's economy, but there is little doubt that the contribution that grandparents make to society is indeed financially 'undervalued' in the broader scheme of things. Perhaps the ultimate irony for grandparents themselves is in the way that social policy perceptions have shifted over the last 25 years. To move from being seen as a burden on society to being perceived as providing cheap support for poorly funded public services is a doubtful form of progress.

Finally, from a policy perspective, it should be noted that grandparents have a role to play in many areas of social policy but are the direct objects of none. The role of grandparents as providers of childcare is clearly an essential prop to the strategy of, for example, encouraging lone parents to seek paid employment. The living standards of many two-parent families would clearly be lower - and entitlement to various benefits higher - without the help with childcare grandparents contribute.

Table 5: Attitudes of grandchildren to their grandparents

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing		
	Males	Females	All
My grandparents are an important part of my life	86	85	85
I wouldn't see my grandparents as often as I do if I didn't have to	16	12	15
My grandparents are not very interested in my life	10	13	11
I don't see as much of my grandparents as they would like	67	65	66

Additionally, many grandparents in their fifties and sixties are assisting their own elderly parents. In this role they are reducing pressure on statutory provision and are playing a vital part in the strategy of enabling the elderly to live independently in the community for as long as possible. Alongside all of this, however, grandparents

themselves are coming under pressure from other, quite separate, policies. As part of its strategy for dealing with the pensions crisis in the United Kingdom, government is now placing heavy emphasis on getting those below retirement age who are not in employment back to work and sending out clear messages to the effect

that people must now expect to work up to, and beyond, retirement age. There is a need for more joined up thinking here to ensure that, for the future, grandparents are not subjected to contradictory and conflicting obligations and expectations.

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Key Points

- There is a general sense among respondents to the survey that families today need grandparents' help but that the support grandparents give is undervalued.
- The vast majority (97%) of grandparents said their grandchildren are a very rewarding part of their lives although 40% said they want a life that is free from too many family duties.
- Nevertheless, one fifth of grandparents care for someone who is sick, elderly or disabled while 40% of grandmothers with a grandchild under the age of 12 help with childcare at least once a week, with a quarter helping with babysitting in the evening.
- While grandmothers tend to be the main providers of care for their grandchildren, more grandfathers (50%) than grandmothers 35% said they had provided monetary support to their child.
- At the other end of the age spectrum, 85% of grandchildren said their grandparents play an important role in their life, although two thirds said their grandparents would like to see more of them.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times** survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2004, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times** survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9097 3034 with any queries.

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