

# **Grandparenting**

## **Families Australia's policy**

### **Vision**

Grandparents are treated with respect and acknowledged and adequately supported in the important work they do in their families and in the community

### **Introduction**

Families Australia is Australia's national peak, independent, not-for-profit organisation which promotes the interests of families. Families Australia undertakes research and consults families and family and community service organisations on current family-related issues. The outcomes are disseminated to a wide range of stakeholders. This policy statement concerns grandparenting.

### **Why a policy on grandparenting?**

- There are many joys and pleasures of grandparenting, but there are also challenges faced by many grandparents today.
- 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 years.
- The number of grandparent-headed households appears to be growing. Many of these grandparents (precise figures are not known) take on the primary caring role as a result of their own children's drug problems, which often co-occur with factors such as mental illness, alcohol abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and gambling.
- Issues for grandparents include: physical capabilities associated with ageing and affecting the ability to care for children; emotional and social pressures such as isolation and stress; inconsistent advice from some Government services; generational differences in relation to cultural issues and parenting styles; and financial and legal issues related to raising a child.
- Despite the increase in the number of grandparents caring for their grandchildren, and the many issues they have, there are few services in Australia directed to assisting them.
- An example of the challenges faced by some grandparents raising grandchildren is inconsistency in the way they are assisted by governments across Australia. The support for children in grandparent care as one form of out-of-home care is primarily the responsibility of State and Territory governments. Each State and Territory government determines the level of support. 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.
- As the numbers of foster carers continue to diminish, grandparents and other relative carers are increasingly called upon by State/Territory child protection agencies to take in children; yet grandparents who are not formally recognised as foster carers

by State/Territory child protection agencies do not receive the same level of financial and other support.

### **Families Australia's policies**

- Grandparents play a vital and highly valued role in the wellbeing of families across Australia.
- Many grandparents, especially those who are raising or playing a significant role in raising their grandchildren, would benefit from respite and from additional financial, emotional and social support.
- There should be greater consistency across and within jurisdictions in relation to the recognition of, and support for, grandparent carers.

### **Priorities for Action**

#### **Grandparents as carers**

- Establishment of a national information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) would make information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters more accessible to grandparents and would enable appropriate referrals to be made to local services and supports.
- Extended exemptions 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 State/Territory 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.
- Establishment of grandparent/kinship care liaison officers within State/Territory 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 or 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 better to provide information about grandparent carer eligibility for the Family Tax Benefit would help grandparents access this benefit in greater numbers.

- Payment by State/Territory governments 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 close relatives.
- A review by State/Territory governments of the adequacy of financial support for grandparents in both formal and informal care arrangements would help overcome concerns of grandparents about meeting the costs of 'semi-formal' care.
- Recurrent funding to communities through local, State/Territory and Australian governments for support groups, respite services and local information would assist grandparents and grandchildren.
- Exploration of options such as the use of 'guardianship' and 'parenting orders' and the increased use of high quality supported foster care and/or permanent 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.
- Further research into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents would close a gap in current understanding and may lead to the development of specific interventions to assist these groups.
- Equality of entitlement for working grandparent carers to leave conditions applying to parents.

#### Grandparents providing child care

- 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 child care.

#### 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.
- 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.

#### 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. Such a guide should be available in diverse media formats and could be used as a stand-alone resource or in conjunction with support networks for 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 child care 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, which 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-curricular 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.

### **Families Australia's activities in relation to grandparenting**

In January 2007, Families Australia released a report entitled 'Grandparenting: present and future'. The report was based on an Expert Forum at The Australian National University, a focus group consultation with grandparents at Marymead Child and Family Centre, Canberra, and other consultations and research undertaken by Families Australia. The Expert Forum comprised thirty-seven participants, representing government, community and research organisations as well as grandparents themselves.

In May 2007, the Australian Senate passed a motion which called for further attention to be paid to the issues facing grandparents and commended Families Australia's work in this area.

### **August 2007**

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