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**BETTER SUPPORT FOR GRANDPARENTS:
ISSUES & RECOMMENDATIONS**

FAMILIES AUSTRALIA

July 2008

Families Australia is the national, independent, peak not-for-profit organisation dedicated to promoting the needs and interests of families.

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BETTER SUPPORT FOR GRANDPARENTS: ISSUES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Overview

Grandparents play a vital and usually hidden role in supporting families and individuals. Their work provides a major underpinning of Australia's prosperity, but they need greater acknowledgement and support. Families Australia wishes to focus attention on the role of grandparents, especially those who act as primary care givers for children and those who act in child care roles. We make several recommendations to better support these people.

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.

2. Better supporting grandparents raising grandchildren and those providing child care

Families Australia has conducted extensive consultations with grandparents and grandparent groups over the past few years. These consultations and other research indicated that urgent policy attention was required in the areas of grandparents as primary carers and grandparents providing child care while the parents were at work. The following section is structured around these topics. We wish gratefully to acknowledge the contribution of Anne McLeish, Grandparents Australia, in the preparation of this work.

2.1 Dimensions of the issue

Primary care-giving. Grandparents become carers often because of a parent's drug or alcohol abuse, relationship breakdown, mental or physical illness, incarceration or death. They often face difficulties in taking on parenting at an older age and in accessing assistance. This situation, combined with their own ageing, can result in unexpected social, financial and health problems.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2006-07, there were 14,000 grandparent families in which the grandparents were guardians or main carers of co-resident children aged 0 to 17 years¹. Almost half (47%) of grandparent families were lone grandparent families (compared with 21% of other families with children aged 0-17 years being lone parent families)². Eighty-nine percent of grandparent families had one or two children in their care, and 11% had three or more children³.

In about one-third (34%) of grandparent families, at least one grandparent was employed, and 62% received a government pension, benefit or allowance as their main source of income. Most of this income was received from the Federal Government, with only a quarter of children living with grandparents receiving State/Territory financial support for the costs of care. Children living in grandparent-headed families were about four times more likely than children in any other family type to live with an unemployed parent/guardian⁴.

The support for children in out-of-home care and their carers, including grandparent care, is the responsibility of State and Territory governments. Each State and Territory government determines the level of support that carers, including grandparent carers, receive. Two of the key determinants of whether, and to what extent, a grandparent carer receives financial and other support are the pathway by which the child enters their care and the State/Territory in which they live. 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.

Grandparents and other relative carers are increasingly called upon by State/Territory child protection agencies to take in children as the numbers of foster carers continues to diminish, yet grandparents are not always recognised as foster carers and so do not receive the same level of financial

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4442.0 Family Characteristics, Australia, 2006-07.

² Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Functioning: Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren*, Australian Social Trends, 2005, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Characteristics Australia*, June 2003.

and other support. In addition to the issue of financial support, training and casework support provided to foster carers is often not extended to relative carers and may depend upon whether or not a child has been legally ordered into the care of a grandparent. If there are no court orders in place, it is less likely that the grandparent/s will receive assistance.

The Federal Government provides family assistance to all grandparent families on the same basis as other Australian families. Federal Government initiatives for grandparents include the opportunity for grandparents to access Family Relationship Centres (FRCs), additional funding for legal aid commissions to involve grandparents in family group conferencing and the introduction of the Grandparent Child Care Benefit (GCCB). These grandparents are also exempted from the need under Federal Government rules to "return to work" or fulfil requirements demonstrating they are actively seeking work.

Cases where a child is placed in the care of a relative under the guidance, or with the knowledge, of a State or Territory government, but outside of the care and protection system, are referred to as 'semi-formal' care arrangements. These carers are normally not given 'registered and active' status. However, there are provisions in the Guide to Social Security Law where a carer is not considered 'registered and active' by a State or Territory, but a 'semi-formal' arrangement is in place. In these situations, a carer may be eligible for a temporary exemption from participation requirements where the State or Territory government provides a letter explaining the situation.

In some cases, the child is placed in the care of a grandparent through the Family Court. These cases involve a judgement that the grandparent is the most appropriate person to provide care for the child. As the current guidelines rely on documentation by the States or Territories, these carers are not considered to be in a similar situation to those grandparents that the States/Territories recognise.

In cases where a child comes into grandparent care through a private arrangement with the child's parent/s or with the involvement of a non-government organisation, these grandparents do not meet the criteria for being a 'registered and active' carer. It may be possible for these grandparents to formalise their care arrangements through State/Territory authorities or the Family Court.

Good networks are critical for grandparent carers, enabling them to combat isolation, share knowledge and access support services. The Moonee Valley Carers Network (MVCN) is one example of a local model whose findings may inform other such initiatives. Families Australia, through Grandparents Victoria, is acting as critical friend to this project, which is sponsored by Moonee Valley City Council in Melbourne. This project is examining the feasibility of establishing a network of carers based on local government boundaries. The network will bring all carers together, irrespective of whether they are caring for older people or young people and no matter what may be the needs of the person being cared for. This includes foster carers and grandparents raising grandchildren. The network will work with local government to decide on appropriate services that meet the needs of all carers as one group as well as the specific needs of groups of carers and individuals. The outcome will be cost effective ways of delivering these services through collaboration between the local government and the community at a local government level.

Child care. Grandparents are Australia's largest providers of informal child care, and one of the main reasons parents use this and other forms of informal care is to participate in the workforce⁵. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in 2002, almost one in five children aged 0-11 years (19% or 592,000) had been looked after by grandparents in the survey week (equivalent to the proportion who had been in formal care, 597,000). Grandparents provided 31% of the total hours of care provided in the survey

⁵ Australian Government, Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Family Functioning: Informal Child Care Provided by Grandparents*, Australian Social Trends, July 2006, 1, 5.

week⁶. Most children who had been in grandparent care (98%) had been looked after at no cost to parents⁷.

In 2002, of the 591,600 children in grandparent care in the week prior to the interview, just over half (51%) had been in care because their parents were either working, seeking work, or attending work related training or study⁸. The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that “while grandparents may enjoy this caring role, it has the potential to affect aspects of their lives such as their income, health, or access to free time, particularly if they provide large amounts of care.”⁹

2.2 Key concerns

Families Australia’s consultations revealed the following points in relation to the role of grandparents as primary carers:

- Some participants acknowledged that the Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) have the potential to assist grandparents in the context of family breakdown or in other dispute resolution issues relating to their grandchildren. While some grandparents cannot access Legal Aid due to means testing requirements, the three hours of counselling offered on a non-fee basis at the FRCs was seen to be potentially helpful to grandparents. It was also noted that recent amendments to the Federal Family Law Act to include grandparents as “significant others” had usefully recognised the important role grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren.
- A Centrelink initiative in Western Australia where a Grandparent Liaison Officer is based in a Centrelink Office was widely viewed as being successful.
- Options apart from grandparents taking over full-time care of grandchildren were discussed by some participants, including the use of ‘open adoption’ (where grandparents had ongoing access and contact with their grandchildren), and increased use of high quality foster care.

⁶ *Op.cit.*, 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

- Some grandparents stated that they have found it difficult to access information about matters such as financial and legal entitlements and support services for themselves or their grandchildren.
- Support groups for grandparents providing primary care for their grandchildren were widely viewed as being beneficial to grandparents.
- Some participants considered that income support payments which are assessed against assets, which may include home ownership depending on individual circumstances, disadvantaged retired grandparents with little disposable income who unexpectedly found themselves caring for grandchild/ren.
- While the Family Tax Benefit was available to all grandparent carers, it was noted that not all eligible grandparents were applying. Possible reasons for this include fear that the child would be taken back by the natural parent/s, lack of awareness of their eligibility, and inability to provide evidence that the child was in their care.
- It was stated that grandparents who have no care and protection orders for grandchildren in their care do not receive State or Territory financial support, whereas support is available in cases where orders exist. Thus, even where equal amounts of care are provided by those operating under orders and those without orders, grandparents are unequally treated by the system.
- Some grandparents stated that they had missed out on financial support either as a result of not knowing about the availability of support or as a result of the child's parent/s not being prepared to "sign the child over" as they (the parent/s) would lose their Centrelink payments. This can place grandparents in a difficult position, as some believed that to seek financial support could bring their situation to the attention of government, resulting in the child being returned to the parent/s.

The main points raised about the role of grandparents providing child care were:

- Grandparents often filled gaps by providing child care, including in situations where the parent/s undertook shift or evening work or when the

parent/s could not afford, or were dissatisfied with the quality of, available care.

- There was an assumption that grandparents were available and willing to provide child care, which was not always the case.
- Many participants commented on the financial impact on retired grandparents with limited disposable income who provide significant hours of child care.
- Some participants considered that there was a broad lack of acknowledgement of the gap that grandparents filled by providing child care, and that financial support to grandparents who provided long term child care should be considered under the Child Care Rebate Scheme.

Comments on these themes included:

We are not important enough but we're saving them [governments] millions of dollars.

I'd hate to think that if all the children being raised by grandparents at the moment [were sent away from grandparent care], where would the system go? It would go into overload. It's time someone stood up and said these people are doing a job.

We are treated as foster parents but that's not so – we are parents.

All of us have a story of how inept the system has been.

We found out by accident what facilities were available to us.

I didn't know about this child allowance, this kinship allowance, non-parental care allowance – in eight and a half years I never received a thing even though they gave me [the grandchild] and said 'take this baby or we'll put it in foster care'. I couldn't see her going into foster care.

We are a lot older aren't we? and I don't think we are capable, like we took our kids to the football and netball, and soccer and hockey – we could do all these things – I'd love our (grand)kids to do all these things if someone could take them too...We're just not capable.

It cost me \$18,000 [in legal costs], but she [the grandchild's mother] got hers [legal aid] for nothing – how?

The assets accrued over a lifetime disqualify us from such things as legal aid, family allowance, carer's pension, health care cards etc etc, yet we are saving the welfare system millions of dollars by giving children care and safe haven.

2.3 Recommendations

To better assist grandparents in their various roles as carers, Families Australia recommends that:

1. A national grandparent information service (such as a 24-hour telephone line and/or a website) be established, which provides information about financial assistance, family law and other legal matters and referral to local services and supports. This 'one-stop-shop' would assist grandparents who, for example, unexpectedly find themselves in primary caring roles.
2. Grandparent liaison officers be placed within child protection and other support agencies to act as a contact point for grandparents; this would benefit grandparents, in particular those from culturally and linguistically diverse and Indigenous backgrounds, as well as other vulnerable grandparents who may be unfamiliar with, or who experience difficulty in navigating, government systems. This model could be extended to include all Centrelink Offices, as in the Western Australian model.
3. Emergency or discretionary payments from Centrelink or other State/Territory government agencies be provided to assist particularly necessitous grandparents in cases where children are placed in grandparents' care at short notice.
4. 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").
5. A review of Legal Aid income assessment processes for grandparents providing primary care of grandchildren be undertaken, so it is based on disposable income as opposed to assets; this could lessen the disadvantage that some grandparents face in accessing legal assistance.
6. Innovative ways be examined to provide information about grandparent carer eligibility for the Family Tax Benefit, to help grandparents access this benefit in greater numbers.
7. Options be explored, such as the use of 'open adoption' and increased use of high quality foster care, to reduce pressures felt by some

grandparents that they are obliged to take their grandchildren into their care.

8. A program, within the National Family Relationship Services Program, be developed which specifically targets the needs of grandparents to enhance the usefulness of the FRCs for grandparents and their grandchildren. FRCs could also play a role in the prior assessment of grandparents' capacities to cope with the caring role before children are placed with them. Dispute resolution services should be encouraged to include grandparents in parenting plans, as this may help to ensure that grandchildren have contact with both sets of grandparents after a family separation.
9. In the context of the current review of the requirements placed on people to demonstrate that they are actively seeking work in return for receipt of public unemployment benefits, that grandparents who are primary carers and foster carers continue to be exempt and that foster carers who are between placements for short periods are also exempted.
10. Further research be undertaken into the differing needs of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse grandparents to fill a gap in current understanding; this may lead to the development of specific interventions to assist these groups.
11. Improving the Internet website interconnectivity between the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Centrelink and Family Assistance Office to help to improve grandparents' understanding of and access to services and supports.
12. The provision by local councils and other community organisations of information materials about free, local activities grandparents can do with their grandchildren to assist grandparents when they are providing child care.

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