



Relationships between grandparents and teenage grandchildren

Little research is available on the range of help and support grandparents and older grandchildren provide to each other or of the importance and quality of this relationship. Through individual and group interviews, this study explored the relationship between grandparents and teenage grandchildren, looking at the ways teenage grandchildren and their grandparents say that they relate to each other, how they care and provide support and how the relationship changes over time. The research also considered how this relationship might be influenced by family, gender, ethnicity or mobility.

Key Points

- Grandparents generally spoke positively about becoming and being a grandparent, using terms like 'love' 'enjoyment' and 'happiness'
- Some grandchildren saw their grandparents as fitting stereotypical images of elderly people, as frail or out of touch, but others said they were 'modern', describing them as 'fun', 'caring', 'active' and up to date
- Both generations described how grandparents often played a key role in 'listening' to grandchildren
- Many young people said they could share problems and concerns with their grandparents and referred to the way grandparents would sometimes act as go-betweens in the family, particularly when there were disagreements between themselves and their parents
- More young people said they were close to grandmothers than grandfathers and especially their maternal grandmother. The relationships were influenced by past contact and care, geographical distance, frequency of meeting, feelings of connectedness and overlaps in interactions between family and friends
- The dynamic nature of grandparent-grandchild relations was affected by stage of life and changing circumstances, such as death, divorce or separation within families
- Divorce or separation affected contact with those grandparents who were related through the non-resident parent, with bonds more likely to continue if a good relationship had existed between the parent and the grandparents before the separation, if there was recognition of shared experiences, and if it was believed that continued contact was important
- Some grandchildren suggested that close involvement with grandparents affected their views of older people in general, usually in a positive way
- A few grandparents reported that they had more responsibilities for care of their grandchildren than they desired

Background

This research focused on the nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships, exploring the ways in which family circumstances and social contexts impact on this kinship relation. The focus was the relationship between grandparents and their teenage grandchild from the point of view of the adult and the teenager. There has been little research on teenage grandchildren and this study was particularly concerned with the range of help and support provided by grandparents to older grandchildren, or vice versa.

The project aimed to improve our understanding of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren from both perspectives by:

- Understanding the nature and implications of grandparent-grandchild relationships when grandchildren are in their teen years
- Assessing the meaning and qualities of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren
- Investigating the flow of emotional, social and practical care and support between grandparents and grandchildren
- Examining the impact of the relationships on each others' lives currently, in the past and potentially the future
- Exploring the significance of such factors as gender, ethnicity, family history and mobility
- Offering methodological insights to gathering data in different ways from both young and older people

The study

Seventy-five young people (aged 10-19) and 73 older people (aged early 50s to late 80s) participated in the study. The majority of participants were unrelated and were interviewed individually or in small groups. A few interviews were held jointly with a related grandparent-grandchild pair. Schools, community organisations and clubs were contacted to access participants, who were drawn from a range of backgrounds (affluent and less affluent, urban and rural areas, and urban Chinese and Pakistani Muslim backgrounds).

Main findings

Grandparents generally spoke positively about becoming and being a grandparent, using terms like 'love' 'enjoyment' and 'happiness'.

"I love my grandchildren. My life would have been absolutely empty without them, they're just very, very important to me. Very important part of my life, they really are. I just love them to bits." (Grandmother, rural area)

When grandchildren were younger, time was spent together on outings and playing together or teaching skills and providing childcare. As grandchildren grew older, the relationships were described as more likely to revolve around talking, giving advice and support. Most grandparents did not report any major problems in their relations with their grandchildren, although that may partly be a feature of the recruitment methods. A few said that they had more responsibilities for care of their grandchildren than they desired.

Some grandchildren saw their grandparents as fitting stereotypical images of the elderly, as frail or out of touch, but others said they were 'modern', describing them as 'fun', 'caring', 'active' and up to date.

Both generations described how grandparents usually played a key role in 'listening' to grandchildren. Many young people said they could share problems and concerns with their grandparents and referred to the way grandparents would sometimes act as go-betweens in the family, particularly when there were disagreements between themselves and their parents.

"They look after you when you're growing up and stuff like that and they care for you and if you need to talk to anyone, they're always there for you." (Girl, aged 12, Scottish-Pakistani background)

"They are like your second mum and dad really. Like you know when you were younger if you fell out with them you would always go running to your grandparents and sit and talk to them. Sometimes you can speak to your grandparents more than you can speak to your mum and dad about things." (Girl, aged 19, rural area)

Grandparents seemed to provide a bridge to the past by acting as sources of family history, heritage and traditions: storytellers who kept grandchildren aware of their own family experiences and their culture. They were also active in keeping wider sets of relatives connected. It was commonly accepted that grandparents tend to spoil their grandchildren and give them treats; grandparents often referred to providing financial support to assist their grandchildren, ranging from pocket money to school fees.

Support and obligation

Both the grandparents and grandchildren expressed a general sense of obligation towards each other. Grandchildren were encouraged to keep in touch, work hard at school and get a good job. In rural areas this was sometimes related to leaving the area to enter further education or open up better employment prospects. Grandparents emphasised the importance of grandchildren being healthy and happy, and of their own role in encouraging and supporting them in their interests.

"I would like to see them all doing well. In saying that, it doesn't need to be any great ambition as long as they're happy doing what they're doing and they're healthy. I would say I would wish them good health more than anything else." (Grandmother, rural area)

It was a common ideal that grandparents should maintain good relations by not interfering in parenting practices or taking sides in family disputes. Grandparents perceived non-interference in the ways parents' parented their grandchildren as important to maintain good relations across the generations.

It was stressed that grandparents ought not to show favouritism and that they should treat all of their grandchildren equally and fairly, even if a special bond did exist with a particular grandchild. Overall young people of Scottish-Pakistani and Scottish-Chinese backgrounds expressed views similar to others, but seemed to place a special emphasis on respect and responsibility towards their grandparents:

"Particularly in Asian communities they do (respect of their grandparents). They have to kind of, because

they're like, because they have cared for our dads and all that and we have to do the same to them because they are elderly ... It's kind of like in our religion that is, it's quite compulsory to do that ... You have to respect your teachers, your parents, especially your mum and your grandparents or the elderly. Definitely. No matter what religion they are you have to respect your elderly people." (Boy, aged 15, Scottish-Pakistani background)

Gender and lineage

The interview data suggests that gender and lineage were both important influences on relationships, with more young people citing closeness to grandmothers than grandfathers, and especially their maternal grandmother. This is consistent with much of the literature on grandparenting (e.g. Brussoni & Boon, 1998). The relationships were also influenced by past contact and care, geographical distance, frequency of meeting, feelings of connectedness, and overlaps in interactions between family and friends. There was a strong focus on maternal grandmothers by grandchildren from less affluent and Scottish-Chinese backgrounds in particular. These grandmothers were often very involved and had played a large part in bringing up their grandchildren.

Although grandmothers were often described as more involved, close bonds also clearly existed between grandfathers and their grandchildren:

"He used to take me to school and to nursery with my pal and pick us up after school. He's always been closer to me than anyone else." (Boy, aged 16, less affluent background)

"When they come over and they look at you and say granddad. You can see the love in their face and it's amazing that. The wee one, she'll say come on and we'll play dominos and then they'll dress up. I wish I had a photograph to show you. She got a medal for that carry on flinging, you know she's one of those cheerleaders and she's only five. But she's a wee angel and that's what makes you happy." (Grandfather, less affluent background)

Changing families

The dynamic nature of grandparent-grandchild relations was affected by stage of life and changing circumstances, such as death, divorce or separation within families. The impact of such changes over time and the significance life events on grandparent-grandchild relations has been noted elsewhere (Holladay et al 1998). The death of a grandparent was reported as bringing greater closeness between grandchildren and the widowed grandparent, for whom grandchildren could provide consolation and support. Young people who had experienced such a death discussed the ways in which it had affected relations with other grandparents. Sometimes it brought them closer to the remaining grandparent of the pair, reference being made to increased contact (making more time for a grandparent now they were on their own), shared experiences (uniting through coping with the death), or changing context (relating to one grandparent rather than a pair permitted a different relationship to emerge).

"My mum's dad only died a couple of years ago. Because he lived with us, he'd had MS for a lot of years, so we got really, like we all went through that together. So I think that's how I'm closer to my mum's

mum because we all went through my granddad dying together." (Girl, aged 16, less affluent background)

"They seemed to try even harder to be better grandparents because they were the only ones then. Before they were always close but they could step back a wee bit. Whereas now they are the only ones they try really hard to be part of us because we don't have any other ones." (Girl, aged 16, rural area)

Divorce or separation also affected contact between grandparents and grandchildren. In this study, for some families contact with grandparents related through the non-resident parent did decline after divorce, however, in other families contact and closeness increased.

"A lot of my friends their parents are divorced and they don't see one parent or their grandparents on that side. But there's never been a problem with that. I've always been very close to my granny (paternal). I suppose even more so because of what happened with my mum and dad ... My granny was in the same situation. Her husband left her with two children and it's a bit like history repeating itself. She knows what's going on and what mum's going through and how to deal with it. She was always there for my mum." (Boy, aged 16, affluent background)

As in this case, bonds were more likely to continue if a good relationship had existed between the parent and the grandparents before the separation, there was recognition of shared experiences, and it was believed that continued contact was important.

It was also apparent that the direction of care and support altered during the teenage years, with some grandchildren taking greater responsibility for their grandparents. Grandchildren related how the changing health of their grandparents affected closeness, some recounting how a grandparent developing serious health issues had changed the regularity of contact, or how their frailty had a negative impact on their relationship, affecting contact over the years. Grandchildren were sometimes acting as supports for the grandparent with health issues, or as emotional and practical support for the other grandparent of the pair. Again, this affected not only relations with the grandparent whose health had changed, but also influenced their relations with other grandparents, including how much they appreciated them, and the amount and context of time spent together. Grandchildren also talked about spending more time with friends, studying or working during their teenage years so that grandparents became less prominent in their lives.

"I don't see them as much as I used to because I am working and I've got my own flat now ... You drift apart, but not in a big way, you just don't see them as much. But when you go back you've always still got that bond there like, it is just like you've never left them. It is still the same." (Girl, aged 19, rural area)

Grandparenting today

Close grandparent-grandchild relations seemed to provide more general opportunities to link the generations via shared interests such as attending football matches or playing bridge. The children from less affluent backgrounds in particular talked of grandparents' homes as being places they would frequent with their friends (lack of resources affecting access to alternative spaces). Grandparents

(usually those with greater resources) mentioned taking grandchildren's friends on outings or collecting them from school along with their grandchildren when they were younger. Grandparents living in sheltered housing or care homes mentioned knowing grandchildren of fellow residents through visits, conversation and photos. Whilst it may have been common for grandparents and younger grandchildren to spend time outdoors together, it was more common for contact to be based indoors during the teenage years.

The particular grandparent-grandchild relationship also seemed to influence understandings of each other's generation. Some grandchildren suggested that through close involvement with grandparents they found older people less 'annoying', appreciated that they may 'need help' and would also offer this (for instance, carrying shopping for their grandparents' friends). A few grandparents felt restrictions were placed on their interactions with children and young people due to fears held of strangers and potential misinterpretations of their actions, and that less trust now existed between generations. Some contrasted their own (traditional) values with the more liberal attitude they perceived as current in society. These grandparents felt their grandchildren to be 'more sophisticated' and referred to the commercialism of entertainment and products aimed at a youth market, observing the powerful media influence, contrasting their grandchildren's lifestyles with their own. A common theme concerned money and a reduction in its 'real value'; reference was made to a lack of appreciation by their grandchildren of how much they had in comparison to earlier generations. Some grandparents talked of their own grandparents as more distant, strict and formal than they were with their own grandchildren.

"I think it's much nicer and I think they get more from the grandchildren than they did when I was a grandchild. My grandma, there wasn't the softness. I think they were afraid to be soft or give you a cuddle. My grandmother wouldn't anyway." (Grandmother, affluent background)

"It wasn't a warm relationship, and even with my grandmother, she was quite frightening to be honest. You must remember it was seen and not heard era." (Grandmother, rural area)

This was often associated with changing attitudes and of a 'willingness to listen to each other' that was thought to be more in evidence now.

Conclusions

By adopting a qualitative approach this study has developed an understanding of the ways in which grandparents and grandchildren relate. These findings convey the strong emotional bonds and support existing between some grandchildren and grandparents and the ways in which these close relationships are developed, challenged and maintained. It highlights the significance of young people's capacity to have independent relationships with grandparents, the importance of feeling connected, the ways in which family relationships and friendships link, and the impact on individual grandparent-grandchild relations of the various changes which families go through. It adds to understandings of grandparent-grandchild relations by viewing these relationships in the context of other family relationships and friendships and also provides some valuable evidence on cultural and social differences in a Scottish context.

References

Brussoni, M.J. and Boon, S.D. (1998) *Grandparental Impact in Young Adults' Relationships With Their Closest Grandparents: the Role of Relationship Strength and Emotional Closeness*. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 46, 267-286.

Holladay, S., Lackovich, R., Lee, M., Coleman, M., Harding, D. and Denton, D. (1998) *(Re)Constructing Relationships With Grandparents: a Turning Point Analysis of Granddaughters' Relational Development With Maternal Grandmothers*. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* 46, 287-303.

The Study

This study was funded by a CRFR Research Fellowship through a SHEFC Research Development Grant and by the ESRC through a research grant. It was based at the Glasgow Centre for the Child and Society, University of Glasgow.

Copies of the full report are available on their website www.gccs.gla.ac.uk and the CRFR website www.crfr.ac.uk

Authors

The research team comprised Nicola Ross, Malcolm Hill, Helen Sweeting and Sarah Cunningham-Burley. This briefing was compiled and edited by Sarah Morton and the research team.

Contact details for CRFR

CRFR The University of Edinburgh, 23 Buccleuch Place, Edinburgh EH8 9LN.
Tel: 0131-651 1832 • Fax: 0131-651 1833 • Email: crfr@ed.ac.uk