

# Too old to care?

The experiences of older grandparents  
raising their grandchildren.



## About this report

This report focuses on the experiences of older grandparents (those aged over 65) who are raising their grandchildren. It finds that many older carers experience isolation, discrimination and a lack of support, and often have health difficulties of their own. They are often reluctant to approach children's services for help because they do not want interference or fear children may be taken away because of the attitude that people over 65 are 'too old to care'.

Despite the many difficulties they face older grandparent carers make good parents. They provide children with love and stability and help maintain relationships with the wider family which are crucial for children's sense of security and belonging.

The report highlights the urgent need for local and national government action to provide more financial and practical support for these families, including through trusted sources which are independent from children's services.

A full version of the report is available at:  
[www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/reports-and-publications](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk/reports-and-publications)

# 1. Introduction and methodology

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**25,000 family and friends carers are aged over 65.**

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**The aim of the study is to provide an insight into the circumstances of older kinship carers (over the age of 65), and the challenges they experience, in order to bring forward recommendations for improving the support provided to them and the children they are raising<sup>1</sup>.**

In 2001 there were approximately 173,200 children in the UK living with family and friends carers<sup>1</sup>. Other estimates suggest that the present number is higher, between 200,000 and 300,000<sup>2</sup>. A high proportion of these children are unable to live with their parents because of very difficult family circumstances such as parental drug or alcohol abuse, disability or long-term illness, death, child abuse or neglect, imprisonment or domestic violence. It is estimated that around 25,000 family and friends carers are aged over 65, most of whom are grandparents<sup>3</sup>. Demographic changes, a shortage of foster carers and increased levels of parental drug and alcohol misuse suggest that increasing numbers of older people will be needed to step in to bring up children.

The law firmly establishes the wider family as the first option for children whose parents are unable to bring them up themselves. The Young People's Act 2008 states that family and friends care should be the first option when children cannot live with their parents. Other options are local authority care or adoption.

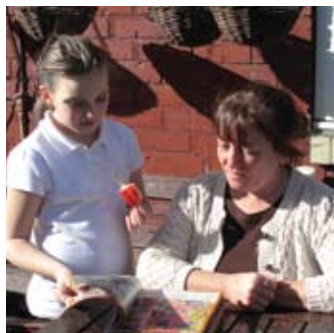
Research on children placed with family and friends foster carers<sup>4</sup> found that the children had similar outcomes to those placed with unrelated foster carers, despite the fact that family and friends foster carers were much more likely to be facing financial or health difficulties, and that they received significantly less social work support. Earlier research found that children placed with family and friends carers did better on virtually all measures than those placed with stranger foster carers<sup>5</sup>.

## **Methodology**

The first stage of the research involved a survey of family and friends carers who are members of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network run by Grandparents Plus and funded by the Big Lottery Fund. The survey was carried out in August and September 2010 using both postal questionnaires and an online version via Survey Monkey. 255 valid responses were received, of which 32 were from carers aged over 65.

The second stage was the interview and focus group stage. We interviewed a total of 18 grandparents for this project, all aged over 65. Twelve were interviewed over the phone between December 2010 and February 2011 and a further six took part in a focus group conducted in February 2011.

## 2. Findings from the survey



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**Over a third have at least one child with emotional or behavioural difficulties**

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### About the carers

- 74% are women and 26% are men.
- 58% are living with a partner, while 22% are single carers.
- 56% are managing on incomes of £300 a week or less.
- 38% say they also get welfare benefits to help with living costs.
- 24 of the carers (75%) have a long-term health condition or disability.
- 57% of those with a health condition describe its impact as “moderate or severe”.
- Eight respondents say their partners have a long term health condition, for whom four are providing care and support.

“I get very tired and I get very stressed sometimes. A lot of people who know me say, ‘You must take some rest, make time for yourself’, but where? When? I’m managing though, I’m managing.”

### About the children they are bringing up

- Two thirds (21) of the carers are bringing up one child, 10 are raising two children and two are raising three children.
- Most of the children (63%) they are bringing up are aged 12 and over.
- 18 (58%) of the respondents have been looking after the children for over five years.
- Over half (17) of respondents are raising at least one child with special needs or a disability.
- Over a third (11) say at least one child they are looking after has emotional or behavioural difficulties.

### Legal orders

- 19 of the carers have residence orders for the children they are looking after.
- Six have special guardianship orders.
- Two are foster carers.
- Six have no legal order.
- 22, or 71%, say they were involved in legal proceedings.

### Contact with children’s services

- 11 are currently in contact with children’s services.
- Nine have never had any contact.
- Nine say they requested help but didn’t get what they needed.
- 13 say they are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with children’s services.

“We’re a bit scared of local authority stuff because they tried to take him away in the early years...When they come near us from time to time it’s very scary because obviously we don’t want him to be taken away.”

### Support

- Eight of the grandparents said they needed respite or short breaks.
- Five said they would like help for their family from a volunteer.



### 3. Findings from the interviews and focus group



**A clear majority felt deeply unhappy with the support they had received, or not received.**

#### **Relationships with the children's parents**

- Relationships with the children's parents are often difficult but most of the grandparents maintain contact with the children's mothers.
- In most cases the fathers are entirely absent or contact is very infrequent.
- Of the 12 grandparents interviewed, four of the children's mothers have died. Six have difficult relationships with the children's mothers, five of whom are substance misusers.
- Several of the grandparents are trying to support their adult child with learning difficulties, mental health problems or substance misuse, as well as bringing up the grandchild.

“The caring never ends. Our [adopted] daughter is still like a child of ten in some ways. We still have to help her with her money and take her shopping; you can't leave her alone at home. You've still got a daughter with learning difficulties and mental health problems at 50, even though you're 20 years older and poorer.”

#### **Relationships with children's services**

- A clear majority felt deeply unhappy with the support they had received, or not received.
- Eight of the families actively avoid contact with children's services, because they requested help and did not receive it or because they perceived them to be interfering.
- Grandparents who had contact with children's services at the time of the children's placement with them generally have no on-going contact following the granting of a residence order.
- Grandparents generally found schools supportive, although some found relationships with schools problematic because of generational differences.

“I didn't want [children's services] involved because I worked for them for 30 years and they often make the wrong decision. I was very fearful of losing him. It is the quality of the social worker on the day.”

#### **Grandparents' health and wellbeing**

- Ten of the 12 grandparents interviewed had health problems of some kind.
- In most cases the problems are relatively minor and do not have a significant impact, however for a few it did have an impact on the physical activities they are able to engage in with their grandchildren.
- Several grandmothers commented on being reluctant to ask for help when they were unwell.

#### **Caring for a partner as well as grandchildren**

- Four of the grandparent are caring for disabled partners as well as bringing up their grandchildren.
- They have an attitude of “just getting on with it” and not expecting anyone to help them.

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**Only four of the fifteen families receive a financial allowance from the local authority.**

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#### **Grandparents' financial situation**

- Several grandparents are struggling financially, and one is experiencing severe hardship.
- Only four of the fifteen families receive a financial allowance from the local authority.
- Several mentioned having spent all their savings on their grandchildren.
- Two of the grandparents who took part in the project said they are not claiming benefits to which they were entitled, including child benefit and tax credits.
- Grandparents are unable to enjoy the kind of retirement activities which their friends take for granted.

#### **Grandchildren with difficulties**

- Seven of the grandparents are raising one or more children with special needs.
- Some grandparents commented that their grandchildren may have been damaged by the alcohol and other substances which the children's mothers had been taking in pregnancy.
- Grandparents perceived that their grandchildren have emotional difficulties of some kind, often as a result of experiencing neglect or trauma with their birth parents.
- Many of the grandparents felt the children have improved enormously during the time in their care.

“People don't always realise how damaged the children are. Social workers and GPs say they are not children in need, but... they don't appreciate the lasting impact of their experiences.”

#### **Grandparents' experiences of the courts: applying for legal orders**

- Generally grandparents found the experience of applying for legal orders to secure their grandchildren's living arrangements stressful, and expensive if they were not entitled to Legal Aid. This is often the case for older grandparents who may be managing on a modest pension but have capital tied up in their home.
- One of the grandparents in the focus group, who worked for social services for many years, waited until her grandson was ten before applying for a residence order because of her fear that he would be placed for adoption.
- Two of the grandparents have no legal order for the children they are looking after, even though in one case the grandmother has been looking after her grandchildren since birth.

“We found getting the residence order very, very stressful. When I went to court I was terrified they would say you are too old. It was clear that they had one thing in their minds, adoption.”

#### **Grandparents' support networks**

- Grandparents who felt they were coping least well are less likely to have strong support networks.
- Grandparents in touch with support groups generally found them to be hugely helpful.

“I have a friend who used to be my daughter's social worker before she passed away....She is my rock, she is fantastic.”

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**Contact with the wider family is one of the real strengths of family and friends care.**

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#### **Support from the wider family**

Most of the grandparents said they felt supported by other family members, and also feel their grandchildren benefit enormously from the relationships they have with cousins, aunts and uncles. Contact with the wider family is one of the real strengths of family and friends care.

#### **Where would children be if they were not with their grandparents?**

- Several of the grandparents believed their grandchildren would be in care if they had not stepped in to bring them up.
- Adoption was felt to be equally undesirable, because of the loss of contact for the children with their family.

“Some people say, ‘How do you do it?’ Well, we just get on with it; it's a case of having to. The alternative wasn't very good, was it, to be adopted? The psychologist even wanted to split the older one from the younger two.”

## 4. Conclusions

**Older grandparent carers are often reluctant to approach children's services for support and actively avoid engaging with them. Some fear that the children they are looking after will be taken away and placed with foster carers or adopted.**

Many older carers take on multiple caring roles, for their son or daughter, or their partner, as well as their grandchild. Many have chronic health conditions and find ways of coping so they can carry on looking after their grandchildren. Many also struggle financially and have lower incomes than family and friends carers as a whole.

Despite the ageist assumptions that these carers may face, people over the age of 65 often make very good parents for children. They provide children with love and stability, a sense of identity and belonging, and continuing relationships with the wider family.

Children's and adults' services need to work together to ensure that support is available, and give kinship carers access to independent sources of support. In many cases placement with a grandparent will be a better option for the child, and more cost effective, than taking the children into care or placing them for adoption.

“Because you have slowed down, in some ways you are a better parent. You are wiser, better at knowing when to say something and when just to listen.”

## 5. Recommendations

1. **Social workers and local authority approval panels must not make ageist assumptions.** They should give greater weight to the importance of love, stability, family and cultural identity and attachment which family and friends carers can offer, in making decisions about where vulnerable children should live. The continuity of family relationships can be more important for children's wellbeing than the 'permanency' of adoption.
2. **Local authorities must provide support based on the needs of the children not on the legal arrangements they are living under.** Many children in family and friends care have experienced similar multiple adversities with their birth families to children who are looked after by the local authority.
3. **Local authorities must fully implement the statutory guidance on family and friends care.** This includes ensuring that family and friends carers can access financial, legal and practical support, counselling and support groups.
4. **Children's centres should prioritise family and friends carers and the children they are looking after.** They should be available for use by people of all ages, bringing together support services and social activities for all generations including young children, but also families with older children and older people.
5. **Local authorities should commission preventative services to support carers** before they reach crisis point to reduce the risks of children experiencing poor outcomes in adulthood or having to be taken into care.
6. **Local authorities should give grandparents practical and financial support in managing contact with the child's parents,** if needed, through using neutral contact centres which can offer supervised contact.
7. **Local authorities should ensure the needs of the whole family are assessed holistically in cases of family and friends care.** Family group conferences should be routinely used. Adults' and children's services should work together to achieve this.
8. **Care plans for children should take account of the needs of grandparent carers themselves,** particularly where they have additional caring responsibilities for a relative or partner or where they have health difficulties themselves. Care plans need to include access to respite and should include the option of direct payments as an alternative to services or respite.
9. **Social work training should ensure students are aware of the research findings on the benefits of family and friends care,** and challenge ageist assumptions that older grandparents are "too old to care".



- 10. Government should pilot the use of direct payments for family and friends carers** as an alternative to respite, to enable them to decide how best to meet the needs of the children they are bringing up.
- 11. The Government should review the financial support available to family and friends carers,** and ensure that welfare reforms recognise them and the children they are looking after, to avoid children suffering financial hardship or being taken into care.
- 12. Local authorities must implement the new equality legislation due to come into force in April 2012** and ensure that older carers are not discriminated against on grounds of age.
- 13. Family and friends carers who are involved in legal proceedings to secure placements for children who are in care, or would otherwise be in care, should be entitled to legal aid.**
- 14. All government agencies and service providers should officially recognise family and friends carers as carers** and give them access to the same support as other carers, including carers' assessments, respite and a national financial allowance.
- 15. Family and friends carers should be able to access services through trusted sources independently of social services.** Local authorities need to commission services for this group from independent providers. Health providers, schools and children's centres should recognise the needs of children in family and friends care and offer information and support to them.
- 16.** Voluntary sector organisations, especially those providing services to families, children, older people and carers **should have greater awareness of the needs of family and friends carers and the children they are looking after,** and prioritise them as a group.
- 17. Family and friends carer befriending programmes should be developed** by voluntary organisations with support from local authorities. Older carers who are struggling, either because of their own health difficulties, isolation or concerns about the children they care for, could particularly benefit from support from trained volunteers who can build a relationship over time with the family.

## References

1. Nady, S and Selwyn, J (2011), Spotlight on Kinship Care: Using Census microdata to examine the extent and nature of kinship care in the UK, Buttle Trust
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3. Wellard, S and Wheatley B (2010), Family and Friends Care: What if we said no? Grandparents Plus
4. Beaumont, J (2011) Population table 3, Social Trends 41, ONS
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## About Grandparents Plus

Grandparents Plus is the national charity (England and Wales) which champions the role of grandparents and the wider family in children's lives, especially when they take on the caring role in difficult family circumstances.

We do this by:

- campaigning for change so that grandparents' contribution to children's wellbeing and care is valued and understood.
- providing evidence, policy solutions and training so that grandparents get the services and support they need to help children thrive.
- building alliances and networks so that grandparents can have a voice and support each other, especially when they become children's full-time carers.
- providing advice and information for family and friends carers.

**Our confidential Advice and Information Service for family and friends carers can be reached on 0300 123 7015 or go to our website [www.grandparentsplus.org.uk](http://www.grandparentsplus.org.uk)**

Visit our website for details on how to get involved with our:

- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Network, which provides family and friends carers with opportunities to share experiences, meet together and access practical information.
- campaigns for more support for family and friends carers
- Kinship Care Group for professionals who are working in local authorities with family and friends carers.



We champion the wider family who care for children

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Charity number 1093975

FUNDED BY  
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