



Early Years

Primary

# The silver lining of my life

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Learning with Grandparents:  
A report of the work of the National  
Development Project 2005–2006  
funded by the Basic Skills Agency

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# Foreword

The idea for developing work around the role of grandparents in supporting their grandchildren's literacy and language development came to us about 18 months ago, as we became aware of the number of children being looked after by their grandparents for a significant amount of time. We also heard, first hand, that many grandparents didn't know how best to support their grandchildren.

As we developed the resources and worked with colleagues on the National Development Project we began to realise the dearth of research in this field. This report could be seen to be at the start of what we hope will be a new field of research about grandparents and literacy, language and numeracy – their own and their grandchildren's. It outlines clearly, concisely and movingly the sorts of activities that grandparents are engaged in, how they feel about what their grandchildren are doing and how they feel about their role. What is clear is that all of them want to do their utmost to give their grandchildren the best start in life.

As this report was developing we also commissioned a separate piece of work from the Institute of Education. We asked them to interrogate the data from the British Cohort Study (BCS70 London: National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy) to see if we could establish a link between the literacy skills of grandparents and their grandchildren. This short report is published as *'Literacy performance and practice across the generations'*.

Together with the materials available in the *'Learning with Grandparents'* programme, this range of resources and reports offers a suite of materials for those interested in the role of grandparents.



Carol Taylor, *Joint Interim Director, Basic Skills Agency*

Ask me about my grandparents and I will tell you of toast without crusts, having my own wheelbarrow, playing backgammon and visits to the river to feed the ducks. Grandparents often play a crucial part in our development and sense of who we are and where we belong, but it is a relationship which can be taken for granted. Grandparents Plus aims to raise awareness of the importance of grandparents and the extended family, especially in the lives of vulnerable children. We are therefore delighted to have led this project for the Basic Skills Agency, building on Goldsmiths College's research and working with grandparents to produce materials to support them in their play with grandchildren. This report by Salman Al-Azami not only describes the work of the project, but is a celebration of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren.

We are grateful for the foresight of the Basic Skills Agency in commissioning this work, for the generosity of the grandparents who helped develop the materials, for the support of our partners – The Grandparents' Association and Goldsmiths College – and for the wise guidance of the advisory group.

Diana Whitworth  
*Co-director, Grandparents Plus*

I never knew my grandparents but I can now boast of five grandsons and can talk for hours about all of them to anyone who cares to listen! The joy that they bring to us all, and all that we can learn from each other, never fails to both amuse and amaze.

The Grandparents' Association was established 20 years ago and our advice line receives over 8,000 calls per annum from grandparents who are not so lucky, as they have problems. We have been successful in raising many of these issues in the media and with policy makers and we hope that grandparents will start to get the recognition that they deserve.

I was delighted, therefore, to be invited by Grandparents Plus and the Basic Skills Agency to join this project along with Goldsmiths College. This positive and exciting report by Salman Al-Azami has not only made me realise what I missed as a child but enables me to enjoy my grandchildren to the full! It has been a pleasure to be part of the advisory group and I am sure that using these materials will prove to be fun and informative for all ages.

Lynn Chesterman  
*Chief Executive, The Grandparents' Association*

The Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths College, London, is very pleased to have had an advisory role in the 'Learning with Grandparents' project. The project builds on our original research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, into children's learning at home with grandparents in families from different cultural backgrounds. We found that children develop a range of concepts and skills that complement their school learning, through activities such as storytelling, cooking, gardening and using the computer together with their grandparents. We welcome the decision by the Basic Skills Agency to conduct further research in this little-investigated area. The 'Learning with Grandparents' project has led to the production of practical tools that will benefit children and grandparents, and facilitate links between home and school.

Dr John Jessel and Dr Charmian Kenner, *Lecturers in Education*  
Eve Gregory, *Professor of Language and Culture in Education*  
*Goldsmiths College, London*



# Introduction

Last year Lydia visited her birthplace, Barbados, and brought back a map of the Caribbean island. Eric, her grandson, has never been there, but is eager to know about his grandmother's native country. Lydia shows him different places in Barbados on the map. She has helped Eric to understand how a map works so he can now follow a map of his local area.

Christina swaps story reading with her grandson. Sometimes she reads a story to him and at other times she asks him to read her a story. Through this she helps him to develop reading skills, particularly the art of reading a story aloud.

Gloria takes her grandchildren to beaches where they collect stones and shells, and build sandcastles together. Coming back home, they colour the stones or paint them to make decorative objects. In this way, her grandchildren learn about different colours, shapes and sizes.

Through gardening with her grandmother, Samantha learns about different colours, the names of plants and seeds, the names of pests that might harm the plants, and the role of sunlight and rain in the growth of plants. Samantha dreams of having her own garden when she grows up.

Eric's grandfather teaches him through fun and games. He is very conscious of his role as a grandfather and considers his 'teaching role' to be different from that of parents or teachers.

Simon's grandmother gives him some money to buy his own chosen items when shopping. He is told that he has to buy the products by looking at their price on the shelves and then calculate how many items he can buy.

These anecdotes show some of the ways that grandparents may help children to learn. Grandparents and grandchildren often share a very special relationship, different to that between parents and children.

Grandparents are usually part-time carers, rather than having the full-time responsibility of parents. Grandchildren often value their grandparents' involvement and they enjoy their time together in an informal setting.

In today's multicultural Britain, children grow up within an enormously varied range of family situations. Grandparents are an important source of daycare, allowing parents to go out to work. They can be seen at the school gate delivering and collecting their grandchildren. Often grandparents have their grandchildren to stay overnight or for the weekend to give the parents a break. Some children live with their grandparents due to a family crisis. Many children, especially within ethnic minority communities, grow up within an extended family of three or more generations in one household. Frequently, grandparents are themselves working, live far away from their grandchildren, or don't have time or want to provide regular daycare. Often these grandparents keep in contact with their grandchildren through occasional visits and outings and telephone calls, emails and letter writing.

Grandparents' involvement with their grandchildren will depend on the wishes and needs of the parents and

grandchildren, as well as on the availability and willingness of the grandparents. The love and support they give to their grandchildren is in many ways complementary to that of parents. They may be able to transmit knowledge from their own unique experience and perspective, while reinforcing the child's sense of identity, heritage and continuity. More importantly, grandparents like to be 'friends' with their grandchildren. Waggoner (2000) stated, 'The most common role we want to play in the life of a grandchild is that of companion or friend. We're also advisers, family historians, storytellers, tattletales ("When your daddy was your age, I once caught him...") and confidants. But mainly we want to be good pals' (p.91).

The purpose of this report is to investigate in more detail the learning that takes place between children and grandparents, and how it can best be supported and encouraged.

# The context

Recent research studies show that there are approximately 13 million grandparents in the UK, with one in every three people over the age of 50 being a grandparent. Three-quarters of the UK population is part of a family of three or more generations and over one-third of grandparents under the age of 60 still have a dependent child of their own living at home.

One in five children under 16 years old in the UK are looked after in the daytime by grandparents. Children in two-parent families where both parents work are the most likely to receive daytime care from a grandparent. More than a third of grandparents spend the equivalent of three days a week caring for their grandchildren. In the past two generations, the number of children cared for by grandparents has jumped from 33% to 82%.

The contribution of grandparents to childcare is well appreciated, with nine out of ten people in the UK agreeing that grandparents have a lot to teach their grandchildren. Three-quarters of UK adults believe that, 'With so many working mothers, families need grandparents to help more and more.' But the grandparents themselves do not

like to be overburdened with responsibilities: 39% of grandparents would like to have a life free from too many family duties. Understanding the financial implication of childcare, most of the population (64%) agrees that a government subsidy should be offered to grandparents who are involved in regular childcare (data from Grandparents Plus).

Recent research by Goldsmiths College, University of London, found that grandparents play a very significant role in developing the linguistic and cultural knowledge of children. For example, grandparents strengthen children's language and literacy level through recitation of poems, reading stories and writing. These, and additional instances of grandparents supporting their grandchildren's literacy and numeracy development, are described later in this report.

*Interrogation of the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)*, by Bynner and Parsons, shows that 33% of the 5,207 children involved were looked after by a grandparent at least once a week, and 'the grandparents were in a position to make a vital contribution to the development of their grandchildren's reading skills' (p.3).

# About this project

In recognition of the important role grandparents play in grandchildren's learning of language, literacy and numeracy, the Basic Skills Agency funded a one-year project in order to support grandparents as carers to improve the basic skills of their grandchildren, and to disseminate materials and good practice. The project was managed by Grandparents Plus, a charity that raises awareness of the role of the extended family in children's lives. The partners in the project were the Department of Educational Studies, Goldsmiths College, which supervised the research aspect of the project; and The Grandparents' Association, which provided the support to access grandparents' groups. A project officer was employed to lead the project.

Building on previous research conducted by the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths College, London, on intergenerational learning between children and

grandparents in Bengali-speaking and English-speaking families in London's East End, the project investigated what kind of support would help grandparents as they develop children's learning in the informal setting of the home. The project focused on developing the basic skills of literacy, numeracy and language in primary-age children, with some attention to pre-school children.

The first endeavour was the search for relevant literature. The task turned out to be quite challenging, because despite an extensive study of books, research papers, newspaper articles, dissertations, survey reports, booklets and websites, nothing substantial could be found on learning with grandparents. A full literature review is included in Appendix 5. However, the most recent research acknowledges the growing recognition of the role grandparents play in supporting their grandchildren's development, progress and achievement.

# Grandparents' groups

Having explored the theoretical and academic evidence surrounding grandparents and learning, the project turned to grandparents themselves to begin the process of discovering exactly how they support the basic skills development of their grandchildren.

- **What do they really enjoy doing with grandchildren?**
- **How do they include the learning element while their grandchildren have fun with them?**
- **Are these learning activities carefully chosen by the grandparents or do they do them spontaneously?**
- **How did they help their grandchildren with the basic skills of literacy and numeracy?**

Here, the project encountered a challenge in getting grandparents together for discussions. This proved to be much more difficult than anticipated. Grandparents can be busy people with jobs, homes to run and many other interests. However, four groups were visited. They were selected from the north and south of England, including London, representing the white indigenous population, Black African and Caribbean communities and Asian communities. The composition thus aimed to be as representative as possible. The meetings with all were successful and lively with a lot of ideas

for activities emerging from the discussions. The first group developed materials, thereby acting as a 'focus group', and its suggestions were then discussed with and elaborated by the other three groups.

The first – and focus – group is based in Tower Hamlets in London. All are grandmothers, mostly from Goldsmiths College's earlier study on intergenerational learning. Four sessions with this group developed 28 learning activities to support basic skills development. A questionnaire was also prepared for grandparents to try new activities with their grandchildren and give feedback.

Three grandparents' groups in Portsmouth, Tottenham and Doncaster were visited to test the activities. The first group is attached to a junior school in Portsmouth. Two members of the advisory group, who lead the 'Generation Game' project in the school, volunteered the group to pilot the materials. The second group is an African and Caribbean church group based in Tottenham, London, which is part of The Grandparents' Association's network. The third and final group is comprised of individual grandparents in Doncaster who take their grandchildren to the same primary school; through this they have become friends. All groups concentrated on how they

helped their grandchildren with literacy and numeracy.

The grandparents were given the choice of answering the questionnaire either in writing or orally at the feedback session. This aimed to cater for people's preferences and skills. Some

grandparents preferred to discuss what they already did with their grandchildren, some tried new activities and came back with filled-in questionnaires, while some of them were more comfortable describing orally the new activities they tried with their grandchildren.

# The activities

In this section, we first discuss the literacy, numeracy and language activities involving grandparents and grandchildren, which are usually embedded in other activities, followed by some other issues raised by grandparents during the discussions. We also address some learning activities that are not directly related to literacy or numeracy. The activities that emerged from these discussions have been used to develop resources for grandparents, which are available from the Basic Skills Agency ([www.basic-skills.co.uk](http://www.basic-skills.co.uk)). They complement earlier material published by the Agency including a good practice guide for schools, and a set of materials for grandparents to help them keep in touch with their grandchildren.

## 1. Shopping

Most grandparents like to take their grandchildren shopping with them. They find shopping a useful way for children to learn about the range of things they can buy as well as helping them with their oral, written and counting skills. Children enjoy shopping with their grandparents. *'I take my granddaughter to the supermarket because she loves to find and choose the items she likes,'* said one.

Mahmuda helps her grandmother write the shopping list. Then she looks for the items on the shelves. This helps Mahmuda to improve her reading skills.

Phil's granddaughter looks to see what's missing from the fridge and then writes the shopping list for him.

Christina makes her grandchildren write the list of what they'd like for Christmas or for their birthdays and they look at catalogues for ideas.

## 2. Cooking

Cooking is popular with both generations. For most grandmothers, cooking is a daily activity, which attracts grandchildren into the kitchen. In some Bangladeshi families, cooking may involve all the family members, as observed in the Goldsmiths' research on intergenerational learning. Through cooking, children learn how to weigh, measure and use kitchen equipment.

Simon loves cooking with his grandmother. His grandmother teaches him to read the names of different ingredients, shows him

how to use the equipment and helps him to measure using the scales and measuring jug.

When Erica cooks, her granddaughter comes to the kitchen and asks her the names of different types of food and ingredients. Erica loves to tell her the names and asks her later if she remembers them.

Jasmine is keen to learn how to cook, so her grandmother buys her cooking equipment and shows her how to use it.

### 3. Gardening

Gardening introduces children to natural science. Through the process of planting seeds, watering, pruning, hoeing, weeding and picking flowers and fruit, grandparents teach their grandchildren gardening skills linked to an understanding of the seasons, plant cycles and photosynthesis.

Samantha and her grandmother spend a lot of time gardening. Samantha learns a lot from her grandmother: about the different colours of leaves and flowers, the names of plants, and the slugs, snails and greenfly that might harm them. She finds out how important sunlight and rain are to make plants grow.

Rahela takes so much interest in gardening that she brings plants from school to grow at home. Her grandmother helps her to look after the plants.

Christina loves to find out about plants with her grandchildren. If they find something unusual in the garden, they go to the Internet or search a book to find out what it is.

### 4. Keeping in touch

According to these grandparents, children can learn from their grandparents even when they are away from each other through letter writing, emails, texting or telephone conversations. When grandchildren are not in physical contact, frequent telephone calls can be a useful way of staying involved. *'I think a lot of learning activities can take place over the telephone,'* remarked a grandmother. Sometimes, when their grandchildren are with them, they help the children to communicate with their parents.

Anisa calls her grandfather every day to tell him what she has been doing. Her grandfather tells her what he's been doing too.

Jane helps Samantha to write letters to her mum. Jane also helps Samantha send text messages from her mobile saying things like, 'I love you Mum' or 'I miss you'.

Jennifer's granddaughter writes letters in her notebook and asks her grandmother to check them. The child emails them to relatives.

## 5. Drawing and painting

Grandparents love to draw and paint with their grandchildren. Many of them keep drawing materials for their grandchildren to use when they visit. Grandparents in the Generation Game in Portsmouth were involved in a lot of drawing activities together with their grandchildren. Most grandparents feel that this is one of the first things they do with grandchildren.

Sophie's grandmother helps her with her drawing. She has a collection of crayons, pencils, glue, scissors and paper in a shoebox for when Sophie comes to see her.

Julia loves to help her grandson with his drawing, particularly when he puts his hand on a piece of paper and draws around the fingers.

Phil sketches for his grandchildren and asks them to colour the pictures.

## 6. The world around you

Grandparents enjoy taking their grandchildren on trips to museums, the seaside and zoos as well as encouraging children to learn about the world around them. During these visits, grandparents too learn a great deal.

Gloria takes her grandchildren to the beach where they collect stones and shells, and build sandcastles together. Coming back home, they colour the stones or paint them to make decorations. Gloria teaches them about different colours, shapes and sizes.

Elizabeth's granddaughter likes to read street and shop names. Elizabeth asks her granddaughter to count the number of shops she finds during a journey. She also asks her granddaughter if she can guess what type of shop it is from the name.

Emily often takes her grandchildren to the zoo. Her grandson loves animals. Emily regularly receives emails from the zoo, which her grandson reads to find out about the events taking place there.

## 7. Reading, writing and reciting together

Grandparents find children's literature an important tool for learning. Whether being read to or reading together, story books and poems help to develop children's vocabulary and understanding of language, and have always been very popular with children. Some grandparents regularly use poetry as a means of helping their grandchildren to increase their vocabulary, to develop their listening and recitation skills and to understand and enjoy the power of rhyme and rhythm. They emphasise that reading poetry also helps children learn to read. *'Poetry helps develop children's reading. They read poems better because they rhyme,'* observed one grandmother. Some grandparents feel that bilingual children should also read and listen to stories from their own language and culture.

Kerim's grandfather reads him a Turkish version of 'Snow White'. Sometimes they read the story in English. He often asks Kerim to spell or write a word.

Phil writes poetry with his grandson. His grandson composes poems, which he helps to develop.

Samantha's grandmother sings the nursery rhymes she learnt when she was a child.

Iqbal's grandmother often reads Bengali poems and her grandchildren repeat them with her. Through this, children learn rhyme, rhythm and new words.

## 8. Playing together

Most grandparents and grandchildren enjoy playing all sorts of different games together, many of which support the development of counting and language skills.

Gloria plays dominoes with her grandchildren. She helps to develop their counting skills as they play.

Phil plays 'schools' with his grandchild, where the child is the teacher and he is the pupil. He also plays 'countries' names' with his grandson. One says a letter and the other has to say a country beginning with that letter.

Lizzie and Katie play with their grandmother, singing and dancing to the 'a b c' song.

## 9. Fun with counting

All the grandparents in the project engage in counting activities with their grandchildren. These help children to develop a variety of numeracy skills.

Simon's grandmother gives him money to buy his own things. He looks at the price on the shelves and then works out how much he can buy. His grandmother helps him to work out how much they cost.

Obuya's grandmother taught him to recognise coins. Obuya has a 'piggy' bank and saves silver coins. His grandmother sometimes helps him to count them.

Jane plays a card game called Uno with her grandchildren, where the children learn to count in their heads when adding up their scores.

grandparents also realise the importance of new technology.

David loves to play computer games. His grandmother is now learning about the computer so that she can use it as a tool for doing creative learning activities with her grandson.

Gloria bought some CDs of educational programmes for her grandchild.

Elaine bought a computer program called 'Play and Learn'. Every month a new program comes, which teaches children counting, and how to use the computer keyboard. Elaine plays the games with her younger grandchildren and helps them to use the program.

## 10. Fun with computers

The younger grandparents in the project showed more willingness to adapt to the changing world. One said, *'I strongly believe that as grandparents we should be well equipped with modern technological know-how, which will bring us closer to our grandchildren.'* That is why some of them try to keep one step ahead of their grandchildren so that they know what they are doing with their computers. Some older

## 11. Watching television together

Grandparents are well aware that children love watching television, so they take advantage of this medium to help children learn. Games and quiz shows are a popular way of engaging their grandchildren in interactive learning. They use them to help the children improve their vocabulary and general knowledge. Television is also used by some grandparents to help children learn a language.

Phil watches 'Mastermind' together with his granddaughter who is in Year 6. They also watch 'Countdown' together, because it's easier for them to answer the questions.

Penny and her grandmother watch 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' together and try to find out how many questions they can answer.

Rahela speaks English at school and Bengali at home. Her grandmother helps her to learn Bengali through watching Bengali TV channels together.

# Broader intergenerational learning

The grandparents spoke freely about what they do with their grandchildren, their general attitude towards grandparenting and the challenges grandparents face in the modern age. Grandparents expressed deep satisfaction with their role and considered themselves to be an important part of their grandchildren's learning. They found grandparenting to be a wonderful experience and those with fewer grandchildren wished they had more.

These grandparents are conscious that they can contribute a lot to their grandchildren's learning, yet they are not ready to compare their role with that of teachers. *'We have a very loving role to play, which is far different from the homework-driven activities children are bombarded with,'* said one grandmother.

Apart from language, literacy and numeracy activities, grandparents from all the groups also talked about several other issues that came up spontaneously during the discussions. We include here some of these issues as they are relevant to the context of the project. These aspects are embedded in the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren.

## Family history

Most of the grandparents feel that family history is very important.

Children love to hear stories of their ancestors. One grandparent felt that grandparents *'have an important role here not only to inform the children about their own family history, but also as storytellers of past historical events'*.

A common practice among the Bangladeshi grandparents is to tell their grandchildren stories about their family history and culture, about their home in Bangladesh, and their own childhood. *'It is essential for the children to know about their roots, so that they feel proud about their ancestors,'* emphasised one Bangladeshi grandmother. They all said that the children listen to these stories with deep interest and often ask their grandparents to repeat them.

## Ethnic origin, language and culture

Grandparents from different ethnic groups are conscious of their ethnic origin and think it is important to teach young children their history so that they can understand their own origins as well as those of other people.

All the grandparents agree that learning the culture and language of their ethnic origin is very important and, here, stories play a very useful role. Two grandparents of German and Turkish

origin settled in the UK long ago. As a result the language and culture of their ethnic origins are almost lost. They are disappointed that they couldn't maintain the language, but find it very difficult to teach their grandchildren a second language as they have been brought up as monolingual English. The Turkish grandmother is also a Muslim, but her half-Turkish grandson has not retained any Turkish or Muslim culture, which she finds very frustrating. The parental generation has assimilated into English society, as they did not have the environment to maintain their language, religion and culture. English grandparents disapprove of this monolingual environment; as one of them observed, *'We are the worst country in the world for expecting children to learn only one language.'*

Some of the grandparents in Tottenham regret that their language, patois, is being forgotten in the younger generation. *'We lost our original language as English was forced onto our forefathers and their own language was taken away,'* regretted one grandmother. Unlike other ethnic minority communities, there is no TV channel for patois speakers. But they insist that even if the language is lost, there should be a serious effort to maintain the culture of one's origin.

## Religion

Another thing that came up was the role of religious books in learning. Some feel that by reading religious

books together, children understand the religion better, which eventually will help them to become better human beings. They think that having religious books at home and sometimes reading stories from them is beneficial for children. *'No one can ignore the positive role religion plays in children's upbringing,'* commented one grandparent.

Some grandparents also see religion as an important resource for improving children's linguistic skills. They say children love Bible stories and often ask questions about events and words they don't understand. Sometimes, they read the Bible together. One grandparent said, *'Bible stories teach children virtues like obedience and help them grow up as good human beings.'*

The importance of teaching children about life and death also came up during discussions. *'I explained to my grandchildren about life and death after my mother died. The children witnessed everything and understood that their great-granny has gone to a better world to live in,'* recalled a grandmother. The other grandparents also agreed that these things should be passed on to the children.

## Words of wisdom

One of the most important contributions grandparents can make is wisdom, which they have acquired through their experience of life. They help children learn valuable things that

cannot be learnt elsewhere. Carson (1996) suggests that grandparents have the advantage of looking back and remembering what it was like for them as they travelled through life's stages, the stages their grandchildren are in now. According to him, the hindsight grandparents enjoy is called wisdom (p.72).

Grandparents in this project also feel that, apart from teaching many skills, grandparents' words of wisdom may help grandchildren when they grow up. A grandmother recalled an incident concerning her own daughter. *'When my daughter went to the Caribbean to meet my father (her grandfather), he said, "Never let a man fool you. Always look and listen to what he has to offer. Don't settle for marriage until you know the best about him." My daughter said she would never forget the advice of her grandfather.'*

## Television

Despite the concern that children may become addicted to television, most grandparents involved in the project enjoy watching educational programmes with their grandchildren. *'It generates conversations of a creative nature and brings the family together as well as helping family bonding,'* remarked an elderly grandmother. The children ask a lot of questions while watching television and the grandparents answer them from their own experience. One

grandmother suggests, *'We can satisfy children's inquisitiveness by answering their questions giving examples from our own experience.'*

## Adjusting to the changing world

Most of the grandparents find it difficult to adjust to a changing world and are not sure what activities the children's parents approve or disapprove of when they are with grandparents. *'I do not think that it is a matter of tension with the children's parents, yet I do not want to disappoint my own children by doing things they do not approve of,'* said one grandmother. According to most of them, the generation gap is bigger now than before. There is also an element of concern about some aspects of current family life. As one of them said, *'The family concept has changed a lot from our time and family values are going down day by day.'* A grandmother pointed to the structure of modern housing. *'One reason is the lack of space in houses for everyone to spend time together on a regular basis. So, it's very hard work to keep the family together.'*

Though everyone accepts new technology as a positive development, most grandparents find children's over-dependence on computers an increasing cause for concern. *'Nowadays no one wants to write, but prefers to use computers, which is a shame because they are not learning the art of handwriting,'* said one regretfully.

# Conclusion

When a Year 6 girl in a school in Portsmouth is asked to write about the person she admires most, she unhesitatingly writes a long poem about her grandmother, calling her *'the silver lining of my life'*. At the beginning, the girl writes, *'My Nan always looks out and cares for me. She is a great listener and is always there when I need her. My Nan gives great advice to help and she's always there to pick me up when I'm down.'* There is also wisdom in the young.

Grandparents are of all ages and are everywhere. A common place to find grandparents is in front of a primary school gate, as the number of grandparents taking children to and from school is increasing rapidly. Whether living in an extended family or not, grandparents are a vital part of our family life. Unfortunately, they are seldom recognised for their contribution by those outside the family. The present study is the first step in this largely unexplored field of research.

Grandparents are assets for children. The loving relationship they share with each other has a great impact on a child's future. They love to spend time together and, while being together, they do a lot of fun activities. The project, which is a small-scale study of these activities, found that through them children develop their literacy,

numeracy and language skills. Not only that, children also learn practical skills like gardening, cooking and art and design as well as learning about their family history, religion, ethnic origin, language and culture from their grandparents. These activities make learning fun, because they are done in an enjoyable manner. It is clearly evident from the discussions that the grandparents were not aware that they do so many things with their grandchildren, thus helping them to develop all these skills. The project not only helped them to know about new activities they can try with grandchildren, but also gave them reassurance that their role is key to their grandchildren's learning and it is now being acknowledged.

Grandparents can be different in terms of style and characteristics. Their style can be as varied as 'remote', 'companionate' and 'involved' as suggested by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) or their characteristics can be 'formal', 'funseeker', 'distant figure', 'surrogate parent' and 'reservoir of family wisdom' (Neugarten and Wienstein, 1964). In Asian countries or among Asian communities in the West, for example, grandparents provide vital assistance to their families by providing direct grandchild care, especially in three-generation families (Hermalin, Roan and Perez, 1998). Despite all these

differences, there is a common role played by grandparents in children's upbringing. They are providing vital training in different skills to their grandchildren in a very relaxed and loving atmosphere.

Visits to four grandparents' groups in different parts of England showed one common trend: grandparents are actively involved in the learning process of a child. The project also found that children's learning experience with grandparents is a widely neglected area in the UK and also around the world. Not only that, the study reveals that grandparents contribute to the development of language, literacy and numeracy of their grandchildren much more than they themselves realise. By looking after them and including them in ordinary, everyday activities, the grandparents are implicitly teaching and informally reinforcing the more formal aspects of learning that are taught while the grandchildren are at school.

The study observes that there are many areas of agreement among the grandparents though their backgrounds are hugely different. The general attitude towards grandparenting, the difficulties that lie in performing duties as grandparents, the deep bond of love and affection that characterises the grandparent-grandchild relationship and the process of learning that takes place in such a relationship are common aspects coming out of the project irrespective of ethnicity, culture or

religion. The overwhelming similarities are far greater than was anticipated. For example, there was an assumption that white, monolingual grandparents would not endorse the importance of religious books in children's learning as the 2001 census showed a sharp decrease in religious observance among the indigenous population; but the findings show that, whether religious or not, grandparents from all the groups strongly endorse the influential role of religion. Another assumption was that grandparents would find television a hindrance to learning, but these grandparents see television as a learning opportunity. However, the sample is too small to be generalised as a proper representation of all the grandparents in the country. This aspect will be worth looking at by future researchers.

A notable difference in this small sample is found in family structure. Many Asian families have three generations living together in the same house. The Caribbean and the English families tend to live in close proximity to each other, but not in the same house.

Grandparents in all the four groups spoke freely and enthusiastically. Their attitudes are mostly positive. Though they are critical about what they see as a decline in family values and an over-dependence on technology, which has a negative effect on children's learning, their tone is always positive and constructive. They are proud

grandparents who are keen to help their grandchildren.

There is a common disapproval of what is seen as a materialistic and mechanistic world. These grandparents are unhappy about the generation gap in modern society. They feel that they cannot help their grandchildren in learning literacy or numeracy as much as they would like, because the whole system has changed. Their fear of teaching children the 'wrong' things is preventing them from helping children more in their academic work.

There was some evidence of grandparents learning from their grandchildren too. But as the project's main concern was how children learn from grandparents, this issue was not considered in any detail.

The project was very helpful for the confidence building of the grandparents. The discussion meetings with the four groups helped us to know what they are doing and helped them to know what

other groups are doing, eventually giving new ideas to all of them. The 28 activities developed through discussions with the Tower Hamlets group were accepted well by the other grandparents' groups. Most of the activities were familiar to them, which gave them some reassurance. The activity cards were user-friendly and stimulated immediate discussions as each activity was presented in the form of a real grandparent actually carrying it out. The grandparents were given a choice of an oral or written response to the questionnaire. It was found that they clearly preferred speaking to writing. The project gave the grandparents confidence that what they were doing was right, and that although their activities might be informal and fun, they are helpful and important supporters of their grandchildren's basic skills development.

It needs to be mentioned here that all the views and comments made by the grandparents are their own. We have presented here only what we have been told by the grandparents.

# Role of the advisory group

The project is grateful to the advisory group, which gave key guidelines throughout the one-year period of the project. The group met every three months to monitor the development

of the project. The active participation of the advisory group members and their valuable suggestions were instrumental in completing the project.

# Scope of the research

Pioneering work such as this involves trial and error, and some risk-taking. This is especially true in a small-scale project. Efforts were made to take the following points into account, but future projects would benefit if they could be addressed more fully:

1. The lack of grandfathers in the study. Most of the grandparents groups had few or no grandfathers, which means the views are predominantly from grandmothers' perspectives.
2. The lack of younger grandparents in the study. The majority of the grandparents attending the meetings were over 60 as the groups were visited during the day when working grandparents were unable to attend. (The average age of the first-time grandparent is just 49.)
3. The project did not cover the grandchildren's points of view. Children are the recipients of all the learning, but such a small-scale study could not address how much they enjoy learning from their grandparents.
4. The sample was chosen carefully to represent a diverse range of grandparents. The findings raised interesting issues, suggesting that it would be instructive to investigate an even wider range of cultural groups.

# Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for future research and development of practice.

## Further research

- A wide-ranging exploration of the basic skills needs of grandparents.
- A large-scale study on family learning involving grandparents from both grandparents' and grandchildren's perspectives.
- Ensure a greater representation of British society as a whole by covering a wide range of grandparents in terms of age, race, ethnicity, language and religion.
- Make more explicit links with the 1970 British Cohort Study.
- Explore connections with the current research and information project by The Grandparents' Association (Professor Bob Broad, Children's Research and Policy Consultant).

## Further practice

- Establish family literacy and numeracy programmes aimed specifically at grandparents in schools, extended schools, Surestart and Children's Centres.
- Develop 'Keeping ahead of the grandchildren' courses in schools, extended schools, Surestart and Children's Centres.
- Produce more resources to acquaint grandparents with the Early Years and primary school curricula so that grandparents acting as carers of their grandchildren can provide the children with proper academic back-up.
- Disseminate existing resources and material to grandparents so that they are aware of them and become more active in supporting the basic skills development of their grandchildren.

# Appendix 1: Objectives, principles and methodologies

## Objectives

The objectives of this project were:

1. To investigate the needs of grandparents who are supporting their grandchildren, with specific reference to the development of literacy, language and numeracy.
2. To develop innovative ways to engage grandparents in this work.
3. To develop innovative good practice and resources, which would support grandparents who are acting as the carers of their grandchildren.
4. To pilot any courses, materials or resources and evaluate their effectiveness.

## Values and principles

The following values and principles underpinned this research into the role of grandparents and their relationship with grandchildren.

1. **Child-focused learning rather than a didactic approach**
  - a) Learning through play and everyday activities;
  - b) Fun and not formal education;
  - c) Care, not supervision;
  - d) Support and develop 'playfulness' with grandparents.

## 2. Work with the grain of family relationships

- a) Build on grandparents' relationships and current activities with grandchildren;
- b) Acknowledge family heritage, culture and language – building on the strengths;
- c) Inform and support grandparents' needs for information about education system, discipline, risk and safety;
- d) Recognise and support the opportunities for grandparents to learn.

## 3. Clear and appropriate materials

- a) Emphasise using activities and material in and around the home;
- b) No expensive equipment;
- c) Reflect cultural, religious and language differences;
- d) Use plain language.

## Methodologies

1. Built on Goldsmiths' research on intergenerational learning between children and grandparents, 2004, that observed, described and analysed the extent of learning taking place where children interact

with grandparents in activities ranging from reading poetry to gardening and cooking.

2. Drew on publications, research and other evidence of grandparents' role in grandchildren's development.
3. Set up an advisory group including: grandparents, an expert on child development, primary school teachers and subject leaders of numeracy and literacy, the Basic Skills Agency and a representative from the Bethnal Green Museum of Childhood.
4. Selected grandparents for group work from a variety of established grandparents' groups (in Tower Hamlets, Tottenham, Portsmouth and Doncaster) willing to engage in developing their current activities to further support their grandchildren's literacy, language and numeracy, and to help them overcome barriers to learning. There were four groups each of between six and eight grandparents. Some of these groups were attached to primary schools. They had grandchildren with age ranges including pre-school and primary, and came from different cultural backgrounds such as White English, African, Caribbean and Bangladeshi.
5. The first group developed the materials. This group of grandparents was the Goldsmiths Intergenerational

Learning Group based in Tower Hamlets. The meetings with this group established the needs of grandparents for support and explored what sort of resources would be useful. Video clips from the recordings made by the Goldsmiths' project were used to stimulate discussions. These looked at what grandchildren were learning from different activities, found out about other relevant activities, identified how best to support grandparents in these activities, and identified any problems grandparents face. Four meetings were held with this group.

6. The activities and materials from these discussions needed to be developed and prepared for testing with three pilot groups of grandparents. The project officer discussed developing the materials with the supervisory team at Goldsmiths College. Though the literature review materials were at hand, including many learning activities downloaded from the internet, it was decided that the activities emerging from focus group discussions were more than enough to carry out the pilot group study. A total of 28 activities were finalised to take to the pilot groups.
7. The activities were printed on cards – one for each activity. The language, literacy, numeracy and other activities were put on to colour-coded cards without mentioning

which category each colour represented. All the activities were numbered. The idea was to give each grandparent a set of cards during the session. A questionnaire was prepared with four questions to be taken away by the grandparents and returned in the feedback session the following week.

8. The activities were then tested with three grandparents' groups based in Tottenham, Portsmouth and Doncaster. Each group was visited twice. In the first visit, the activities were introduced and the grandparents were asked to respond. After each activity was read out, the grandparents discussed what they did with their grandchildren that was similar to the activity under discussion. They also talked about the challenges they faced as grandparents and the ways they tried to overcome them. Each grandparent was given a set of activity cards along with a questionnaire and asked to try some of the activities with their grandchildren. They brought back the questionnaires in the next meeting the following week and talked about their own and their grandchildren's responses to the activities they had tried.

9. The activities and their corresponding skills included the following:

- i. Cooking – weighing, measuring, using implements;
- ii. Shopping – choosing, counting, oral language and written skills;
- iii. Gardening – using tools, understanding the seasons, plant cycles and photosynthesis;
- iv. Fun with counting – mental calculation, collecting coins, telling the time, costing, organisational skills, making choices;
- v. Reading/telling stories – listening, reading, oral language skills, vocabulary, second language;
- vi. Poetry – listening, reciting, rhythm;
- vii. Drawing, painting and crafts – hand-eye co-ordination, observation;
- viii. Scrapbooks/memory box/ photographs – heritage, writing, spelling, understanding history;
- ix. Keeping fit – exercise, hand-eye co-ordination;
- x. The world around you – visits to parks, playgrounds and museums;
- xi. Games and quizzes – vocabulary, creativity, alphabets, information and communication technology (ICT);
- xii. Family history – culture, heritage, ancestral knowledge;

- xiii. Collecting stamps, coins, shells, etc. – counting, knowing other countries, knowing sizes, shapes and colours;
- xiv. Keeping in touch – writing letters, texting, address book, writing

- emails, learning through telephone conversations;
- xv. Homework – reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary, counting, calculation.

# Appendix 2:

## Literature review

The fact that there has not been substantial research on learning with grandparents had both positive and negative effects on this study. It was positive because it underlined how pioneering this study is. On the other hand, the present study was deprived of the benefit of a substantial literature review. That does not mean the explorations bore no fruit. Research on grandparenting, intergenerational learning, family education and learning and websites that suggest learning games for children have all proved useful for the study.

Grandparents' role in a family is manifold. Blau (1984) suggested that in a time of family crisis people turn to grandparents for help, because they instil a sense of family and communicate both social and moral values. Grandparents may have more time for their grandchildren, uninterrupted by the demands of domestic chores and other responsibilities. Not only that, they may have more time for leisure and fun. The research found that children with strong links to their grandparents are less likely to develop psychological problems during times of family disruption.

### **Learning with parents**

Grandparents' role as educators can complement that of parents. Parents

are the most influential teachers of children as they start educating the children as soon as they are born. As far as literacy is concerned, parents first introduce children to books by reading to them. Reading to children (particularly in the pre-school years) is a routine part of family life, a task involving both mothers and fathers, according to research by Nichols (2000).

The amount of learning that takes place with parents depends on how much time the parents give to their child. Troy et al. (2004) investigated how 223 mothers and 200 fathers of three- to six-year-old children from Taiwan saw their child-rearing strengths and shortcomings. It found that the variable that most significantly affected parent responses was the time spent with a child. They observed that parents who spent 10 hours or more per week interacting with their child demonstrated greater child-rearing strengths than peers who spent less time interacting with their child.

Nichols (2000) observed different patterns in terms of gender, with mothers spending more time reading books to children than fathers. Similar studies by Connie and Sharen (2004) found that mothers were the primary readers, mainly sharing books that were

easy in terms of language and concepts. Children responded to the books by relating them to their own experiences, noticing details in pictures, asking questions, labelling, reading aloud and enacting stories.

As children grow older and start school, the school staff gradually take responsibility for teaching the child and the parents' role in children's learning changes. Parents now play an important supportive role in learning and their relationship with school staff contributes significantly to the smooth transition of teaching responsibility. International research has consistently found that good staff–parent relationships in early childhood centres benefit children, staff and parents (Patrick and Glenda, 2001). The same is likely to be true of relationships with the extended family, including grandparents.

### **Learning with grandparents**

Most of the evidence relating to grandparenting emphasised grandparents as carers. Very little research could be found on grandparents' contribution to children's learning. Robert and Shirley Strom's (1995) article described the essential contribution that grandparents can make to their grandchildren in education. They highlighted the need for schools to have grandparent volunteers rather than relying solely on mothers. The authors emphasised that

elders and schools can work together in order to improve children's education. This will help grandparents to develop their own skills and to support parents in child-rearing.

Kenner et al.'s (2004) study on intergenerational learning, which is the basis of the present study, revealed that children's relationship with their grandparents involved a sense of mutual vulnerability. There was a close physical relationship between the generations and touch was found to be an important means of communication. There were learning exchanges around language, where Bangladeshi grandparents would teach their grandchildren Bengali and at the same time learn English from them. Similar intergenerational learning was also evident in the use of computers, though the method and content of computer use varied widely between Bangladeshi and English families as the former had less exposure to this technology. In both types of families, the study found similar roles played by grandparents who would sit quietly beside their grandchildren and play an important role in children's learning. Their findings predict future potential benefits if teachers widen their links with 'parents and carers' to ensure that the significant role of grandparents is recognised and built upon in home–school interactions.

Grandparents play a very significant role in developing the linguistic and

cultural knowledge of children. Grandparents pass on linguistic and cultural knowledge to their grandchildren by strengthening the child's language and literacy level through recitation of poems, reading stories and writing (Jessel et al., 2004). The research also found the grandchildren eagerly helping grandparents to use a computer. The researchers characterised the balance of learning in terms of 'synergy' (Gregory, 2001) rather than 'guided participation' as suggested by Rogoff (1990).

Grandparents can play a more effective part in children's learning if they are involved with their grandchild's school. With an increasing number of grandparents in Britain becoming involved in childcare, the confidence of grandparents rises when the school actively encourages their involvement, and the children benefit immensely from this (*Learning with Grandparents*, Basic Skills Agency, 2006). The case studies in *Learning with Grandparents* involved visits to a variety of settings: a nursery; a combined nursery and infant school; a combined primary and nursery school; and a junior school with a nursery. The study involved Grandparents' Day, training sessions, visits and helping in school. It also found that grandparents' involvement with schools was developing, but was at a very early stage in many schools. The visits to schools showed that 'grandparents are valued and that when they are involved the impact on the families, the children and the grandparents themselves, is significant'.

It is evident from the Basic Skills Agency case studies that there is an information gap for grandparents, especially regarding what happens in school and how things have changed. The study says: 'There is a lot of information for parents that could be very useful to grandparents but this tends to be accessed by grandparents only if they are the main carers of their grandchildren. Information from schools goes to parents and usually it is left to them to inform the grandparents. It is interesting that many of the grandparents in our survey where the school encourages the sharing of information felt they knew a reasonable amount about what was happening in school mainly as a result of good information from the parents and the children and from what was in the local press. When they had contact with the school or through newsletters they felt even more confident about what they were doing.'

Cooking is one of the most popular learning activities that grandparents and grandchildren can do together. Barhyte ([www.grandparentstoday.com](http://www.grandparentstoday.com)) says, 'Involving kids in the kitchen is an ideal way to create enduring memories and teach valuable lessons.' Houts (1993) feels that cooking with children teaches them a vital practical life skill, one that they can use all their lives and which builds self-esteem. According to him, the children feel they have made an important contribution to the family by preparing the food. 'In addition',

Barhyte adds, 'measuring, counting and weighing are hands-on activities to introduce maths concepts.'

Grandparents can make regular visits to the library with their grandchildren so that they develop a reading habit. Campbell ([www.grandparentstoday.com](http://www.grandparentstoday.com)) feels that by exploring different books in the library, children learn to think for themselves, compare and contrast different opinions and analyse what they see and hear.

Outdoor activities between grandparents and grandchildren can be a useful medium for learning. A course entitled 'Be a Time Detective', designed to bring grandparents and grandchildren together, was offered by Coventry City Council. It was comprised of a whole day of activities using the cars and the artefacts in the Museum of British Road Transport. This was an occasion where grandparents and grandchildren could spend a day out together and work together to write stories and gain information about the heritage of their city. There were two literacy activities for both grandparents and grandchildren at the end. Poremba ([www.grandparentstoday.com](http://www.grandparentstoday.com)) used the term 'grandtravel' to mean grandparents and grandchildren going out together camping, or visiting resorts, amusement parks, spas and other leisure destinations.

There are many situations arising from migration where a family's original language may be lost when they move to a new country unless grandparents help keep the language alive. Borey (2002) suggests, 'Grandparents can be some of the most influential people in helping children to learn a language.' The special relationship children enjoy with their grandparents helps them with things they would never think of doing with their parents. The grandparents can even teach children a language when they are far away from them. Giving an example in a Norwegian context, Borey feels that language can be taught by making correspondence a collaborative activity. The grandparent can read their grandchild's letter aloud to them over the telephone and pause to explain things and to check for comprehension.

As is evident from the literature review, most of the studies originate in North America. Apart from some studies on kinship care, not much work could be found in the UK context. The only two proper studies in the UK on grandparents' contribution to children's learning are the Goldsmiths College's work on intergenerational learning, which is the basis of the present study, and the Basic Skills Agency good practice guide for schools, which is a parallel project to this one. This illustrates the pioneering role the present study ought to play in this new area of research.

# Appendix 3:

## Grandparents' groups

### Tower Hamlets

This group of grandparents is the Goldsmiths College's Intergenerational Learning group based in Tower Hamlets. The meetings with this group established the needs of grandparents for support and explored what sort of resources would be useful. Video clips from the recordings made by the Goldsmiths project were used to stimulate discussions. These looked at what grandchildren were learning from different activities, found out about other relevant activities, identified how best to support grandparents in these activities, and identified any problems grandparents face. Four meetings were held with this group.

Four grandparents belong to the Bangladeshi community; one to the Caribbean community; and one is a monolingual English grandmother. Meetings with Bengali-speaking and English-speaking grandparents were held separately due to the Bengali grandmothers' lack of fluency in English.

### Portsmouth

The 'Generation Game' is a series of five afternoon family learning sessions based at the school. Each two-hour session focuses on an aspect of the curriculum, including literacy, numeracy, ICT, art and science, and helps

grandparents to understand how children are taught today and how best to support their grandchildren. The afternoons include time for the grandparents to discuss their own educational experiences and undertake a practical and fun activity with the children. The final section includes more practical ideas for the grandparents to try at home in order to make the learning more sustainable. The course has run for the past three years and has an average take-up of ten families, with an attendance and retention rate of around 90%.

The meetings were held in the school's 'Family Learning' room where six grandparents participated. Four of them are white, monolingual grandparents, while the other two are of German and Turkish origin. The feedback session the following week was a short one as most of the topics had already been discussed during the previous session. Only three grandparents attended. Some of them completed the questionnaire and sent it to the school. One grandmother, who was absent in the first session, also tried one activity and sent her feedback.

### Tottenham

The Trinity African Methodist Zion Church group in Tottenham is a member

of The Grandparents' Association and is comprised of between 10 and 12 grandparents. They hold a luncheon club once a week where they cook together and learn and practise knitting. This group possesses a rare combination of two generations of grandparents, with a young grandmother having her own mother present in the meeting. The first session discussed eight activities and the remaining 20 activities were discussed the following week.

While talking to them, it was clearly evident that the younger grandparents had different views from the older grandparents on some issues. However, the discussions took place in a warm atmosphere with all grandparents taking a keen interest in different topics and speaking freely.

## **Doncaster**

The Doncaster group is not a formal group of grandparents organised by an association or a school. They have developed a good rapport by meeting regularly at the gate of the school their grandchildren attend. Yet, culturally, they seemed to share common views and were very open in their discussions. They showed a keen interest in helping their grandchildren to learn basic literacy and numeracy skills.

The organiser of this group is an employee of The Grandparents' Association. All the grandparents are white, monolingual English-speaking

grandparents. Three of them come from Yorkshire and the fourth comes from the south, but settled in Yorkshire some time ago.

## **Strategies used by the project officer when meeting grandparents**

1. Make sure the grandparents are motivated to do all the talking during the sessions.
2. Enlist the children's interest and motivation rather than setting a homework environment.
3. Make sure that the discussions are based on everyday activities that children might be part of anyway.
4. Explore the interface between home activities and ideas from external sources.
5. Find out the range of things children do during evenings, weekends or any other time.
6. Get a portrait of home life, for example, everyday routine.
7. Find out the extent of grandchildren's participation in the kinds of activities mentioned in the methodology.
8. Find out what other activities the grandparents are competing with, such as children's obsession with TV and computer games.
9. Find out how the grandparents are coping with the changes in children in terms of age, interest, peer influence, culture and so on.

## Appendix 4: The advisory group

Dr Salman Al-Azami – *Project Officer*

Lynn Chesterman – *The Grandparents' Association*

Carolyn Chinn – *Museum of Childhood*

Jenny Cobley – *The Basic Skills Agency*

Ian Gyllenspetz – *The Basic Skills Agency*

Karen Harvey – *Administrator*

Dr John Jessel – *Goldsmiths College*

Dr Charmian Kenner – *Goldsmiths College*

Judith Stone – *Grandmother*

Karen Thomas – *Isambard Brunel Junior School, Portsmouth*

Deb Welling – *Isambard Brunel Junior School, Portsmouth*

Diana Whitworth – *Grandparents Plus*

# Appendix 5:

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