Childcare and children's health

HEALTH CARE INFORMATION FOR CHILDCARE STAFF AND FAMILIES
FROM THE ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, MELBOURNE

Grandparents are family too: Insights from the experience of grandparents

About one fifth of all 0-4 year olds in Australia are cared for by grandparents on a regular basis for a number of hours each week. Factors that have contributed to this more extensive use of grandparents include:

- changing family and workforce patterns;
- the significant increase in the percentage of children who have been assigned by the courts to the care of relatives (particularly grandparents);
- and a greater appreciation of the importance of the early years for learning.

Grandparents are a diverse group. While the reasons behind their acceptance of a grandparent/carer role may reflect a degree of negotiated and entrusted responsibility, that responsibility sometimes comes at a cost in terms of time, effort and unfulfilled life expectancies. Some grandparents find that their children expect them to be available to care for grandchildren, others give up work to do this and others manage regular care of grandchildren while still in employment. Life for many grandparent carers is not necessarily how they expected it to be – *'It's turned our life around'... 'My friends have faded away; who wants to go for a cup of coffee with a three year old crawling around your feet.'* (Grandmothers).

Grandparents who provide regular child care are most likely to be caring for children younger than three years of age. While many of these children may not be attending formal child care such as long day care or family day care, some children will be involved in formal child care with grandparents supplementing that care. In many instances, carers in services will be aware that grandparents are caring for young children because they visit the service to drop off or collect their grandchildren. There will also be grandparents who care for grandchildren on days other than those that the child attends formal care. Carers in services may only become aware of these arrangements through casual reference to that arrangement by the child or parent.

GRANDPARENTS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN CHILD CARE PROVISION

It is important for carers to appreciate the role that grand-parents do play in child care provision. Grandparents should be included when considering communication strategies with families, family friendly policies and family involvement in planning, programs and operation of the service. Stories that grandparents tell about their role in providing regular care for their young grandchildren gives insights not only into the important role that grand-parents play in the lives of young children but illuminate aspects of child care that also warrant the attention of in service carers.

The following are some of the themes that emerged from recent research documenting the experiences of grandparents as regular child care providers:

- Child care is not just 'minding' or 'babysitting'
- The joys and pleasure of grandparenting
- A physically and emotionally demanding role

Child care is not just 'minding' or 'babysitting'

Grandparents often drew a distinction between 'care' and 'just minding'. 'Care' is about making a contribution. It is

AN INITIATIVE OF THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH, ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL, MELBOURNE

SUPPORTED BY AN EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM Johnson & Johnson PROFESSIONAL & EDUCATIONAL SERVICES Health Care for Life

SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL CHILDCARE ACCREDITATION COUNCIL

about being intimately engaged in a relationship with the young child; it is being flexible and *'tuning in'* to the child; it is about being responsive to the child rather than just being concerned with the routines of the child's day; it is also about taking responsibility for such things as toilet training and behaviour management. 'Minding' is like looking after an object. Grandparents felt *'put upon'* when it was assumed that they were readily available for babysitting in addition to their regular child care arrangements.

Grandparents argued that because they 'know the family' and the child they are more readily able to pick up the child's cues with respect to the child's needs. They worried that, in other forms of care where child: adult ratios were high, carers were not inclined to read and attend to the subtle messages conveyed through the young child's behaviour – *'With strangers he's just another fee. With us he's family'* (Grandparent couple).

The joys and pleasure of grandparenting

The relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are most often ones of trust, responsiveness and expressions of love. Grandparents talk and listen to their grandchildren. They demonstrate affection through hugging, holding and cuddling the younger children and engage in social interchanges such as smiling, talking, touching, and singing. It is also very rewarding for grandparents to observe their grandchild's excitement in new discoveries and achievements. Grandparents gain pleasure in knowing that they were making a difference through supporting their own children and adding to the quality of family life – *'I get a real buzz to see their excitement in learning'* (Grandmother).

A physically and emotionally demanding role

Grandparenting usually occurs between 25 and 35 years after the commencement of parenting a child and at a time when grandparents are considerably older and less inclined to be as physically able as they were 30 years earlier. Grandparents are also emotionally involved with their grandchildren. This means that grandparents who are regular child care providers may seek some respite from the demands of having the entrusted responsibility of grandchildren – *'The hardest thing is being tied down...Oh, for the 5 day weekend when I could go fishing'* (Grandfather).

Understandings gleaned from the stories told by grandparents suggest that grandparents are in a prime position to offer high standards of other-than-mother care that are of considerable benefit to the very young child.

However, the stories also reveal the need for parents and carers within more formal child care services as well as society as a whole to recognize and more carefully consider the contribution made by grandparents to children's early development and family well-being.

Tips for carers

- Ensure that family inclusive policies and practices are mindful of the role played by grandparents in caring for young children.
- Have an expectation that grandparents as well as parents have a significant contribution to make in relation to the program and other aspects of service delivery.
- Be aware that children may be cared for in a range of environments with different expectations and routines. There is a need to guide children through the expectations in the context within which you are caring for the child.
- Be mindful of the need to provide as much continuity as possible between the child's experiences outside your care environment and what occurs within it.

Tips for grandparents

- Negotiate your role, set boundaries and clarify responsibilities so that there are clear understandings between yourself and your grandchildren's parents regarding your more regular child care arrangements and any incidental 'baby sitting' activities in which you choose to engage.
- Be clear about what your expectations of your children and the grandchildren are and communicate these to your children at the time of making arrangements to provide regular care.
- Be aware that not all grandparents wish to accept the role of regular carer of young grandchildren and feel comfortable about this.
- Carefully consider the demands of balancing the care of grandchildren and work if you are still in employment.

Tips for parents

- Remember that your parents are people too. They have rights, responsibilities, privileges and personal interests that are associated with being a family 'elder'. Do not take it for granted that 'grandparents' are readily available to meet your needs.

Joy Goodfellow PhD, University of Western Sydney

The research referred to was funded by an ARC Grant in Partnership with NSW Department of Community Services.

NCAC – QIAS Principles 3.1; 3.2
FDCQA Principles 1.2; 1.3

Supporting children's transition to school

Starting school is a "big deal". There are lots of changes and adaptations to be made by all concerned. Communicating with the children and their families involved in the transition can help make this a positive time.

Communicating with children

Children have lots of ideas about what school will be like. These can come from many sources, including television, children's books, older siblings, family and friends. Not all of this information will be positive or accurate, so it is important to encourage children to talk about what they think school will be like and what they think they might do there. Some strategies for prompting conversations include:

- Placing some school uniforms in the dress up area and encouraging play about school. Reflective discussions about the play can provide a great deal of information about children's expectations of school.
- Reading children's books about starting school.
- Inviting children who are already at school to visit the early childhood setting. The recognition of a familiar face at school can provide a great support for children.
- Visiting a school and talking with teachers. This can be in an organised transition program or an informal visit.
- Play some games like "What would you do if...?" to help children work through possible problems and strategies.

Children report feeling excited about starting school, but also a bit scared. Talking with children about what school is like can help reduce their anxiety, and can assist adults realise what it is that bothers some children.

Communicating with families

Families experience considerable change when children start school and it is important to recognise and respond to their concerns. Some suggestions are:

- Invite families to an information night about school or the schools children will be attending. Invite teachers and before and after school care staff.
- Develop ways to build up family networks, for example by inviting all parents whose children will attend the one school to a gathering.
- Promote contact with families whose children have already started school.
- Share information about schools and the people to contact.
- Listen to the concerns and issues of families.
- Recognise that families often want to know about children's school readiness. Be prepared to discuss the elements of a high quality early childhood program that support readiness in informal and meaningful ways. For example, discuss how children follow a daily routine in early childhood settings, how they use skills such as name recognition and other literacy skills, ways they use numeracy throughout the day and the learning that takes place.

Communicating with other educators

A positive transition to school is facilitated when educators work together to support children and families. Knowing teachers at school and establishing rapport is a big step in this process. This could be achieved through:

- Getting to know the names and contact details of school principals and teachers in the first year of school.
- Inviting them to visit the early childhood service, for information sessions for families, as well as to meet some of the children going to their school. This is a chance to share your philosophy and to demonstrate children's learning. As well, it helps teachers in schools recognise the differences in environment and expectations that children face as they start school.
- Arranging visits to the school, as a means of becoming familiar with the environment and the expectations of school.

Early childhood educators have a key role in helping children and their families to retain the excitement and to overcome the anxiety of starting school.

Sue Dockett and Bob Perry
Starting School Research Project, University of Western Sydney.

QIAS Principles: 3.1, 3.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6.
FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.7, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, 6.3.

Get down and dirty outside!

There are so many possibilities for play, learning and exploration outside. We are blessed in Australia with a beautiful natural environment – rivers, oceans, mountains, bush, and desert – as well as some wonderful urban and suburban areas. One of the values that most parents and others who care about children want to instil in children is a love of nature and enjoyment of the outdoors. It isn't actually a matter of instilling however – it's more a matter of nurturing and supporting the interest in the natural environment that very young children already have. Birds, butterflies, rain, puddles of water, leaves blowing in the wind, flowers, stones, dirt, sand, mud and grass are all sources of wonder and interest to babies and toddlers.

Sometimes the outdoors is thought of in relation to young children as mostly a space where there is lots of room for "letting off steam" or running around. The outdoors is indeed a stadium for the athletic pursuits of under three year olds, whether it is creeping through the grass on hands and knees, mastering the tricky business of maintaining balance while manoeuvring the little mounds and dips of the back garden, pushing a small pram in a reasonably straight line along the footpath, getting the hang of catching a ball or running and stopping, or simply moving around freely in a large space because it feels so good to be able to do it by yourself.

The outdoors is so much more than a space for "big body" activities however. It is a laboratory for eager babies and toddlers to experiment and find out about the world; it is a gallery full of beautiful, engaging and mysterious objects to admire; it is a concert hall filled with intriguing sounds.

If it is cold or rainy, or if there are several young children, it takes a bit of energy on the part of the adult to get children outside. The effort is almost always worth it however, and the "trade-off" for that energy is that the outdoors, wherever it is, is almost always a ready-made interesting setting for children. There is always something to do, something to look at, and something to listen to. It sometimes makes things more interesting when the adult adds something to what is there – containers for collecting leaves, spades for digging in the mud, trolleys to push, for example – but often the experience of being outdoors is enough in itself. Whether it is the garden at home, a walk to a nearby park, or a walk to post a letter or buy something at the local shops, children are much better than adults at finding things to marvel at, explore, and be interested in.

What is required of adults on these occasions is to slow down to baby and toddler time, and try to open their eyes and ears to how children are experiencing things – what they find interesting and engaging. Often it isn't the same thing that adults find interesting or expect children to be impressed with. The sticks on the ground may be a much greater fascination than the bulldozer in operation, the small puddle of water infinitely more fascinating than the waterfall in the distance, the ladybird more worthy of attention than the plane in the sky.

Almost any experience is more fun when it is shared with someone else who is sensitive and sensible. Adults sharing children's experiences need to be involved in a way that still lets the child be in charge of the experience. While there is so much potential in the outdoors for meaningful learning experiences, adults must not be pre-occupied with making everything into a "lesson". Sometimes the adult just needs to be there, showing interest, talking about what is happening, sharing in the surprise, discovery, amusement, and satisfaction. These are wonderful ways to assist children's learning.

Anne Stonehouse

QIAS Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6.
FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 3.7.

THE CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH Tel: (03) 9345 6150 Fax: (03) 9345 5900 Email: catherine.archer@rch.org.au