

Childcare

and Children's Health

A national program developed by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne with support from Johnson & Johnson. This publication promotes current expert advice on child health and wellbeing and current policies and practices for those who work with young children and their families.

Grandparents and Childcare

The new *Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (2009) highlights the critical importance of families in children's lives. Not only are families children's first and most important teachers, but also connections to family create a strong sense of identity and belonging. Grandparents are important members of the families of many of the children in your care and play a crucial role in their lives. As Nyland et al. state, grandparents contribute to "home education of the young, workforce support for parents, cultural identity within families and community capacity building".

Many children in early childhood education and care settings are cared for by their grandparents on a regular basis. If they are authorised for pick up and drop off they may be regular visitors to your service. Research has shown that around a fifth of Australian children between birth and four years old are regularly cared for by their grandparents (Goodfellow, 2006) as part of their usual childcare arrangements. Children aged under three are the group most likely to have grandparent care (Goodfellow, 2003).

Grandparents have a range of reasons for taking on some or all of the childcare responsibilities. They also have a range of opinions about the role of formal childcare in their grandchild's life. Some grandparents take on childcare responsibilities because they want to and are able to; some do so more or less willingly in order to help the parents; and others will have become fulltime caregivers for their grandchild when circumstances have led to the parents being unavailable (Goodfellow, 2003).



Grandparents are as diverse as modern families are. Some may be quite elderly and others around the same age as the older parents of children in your care. Some will still be working, while others will be retired. Some may have step-grandparent or honorary grandparent roles. Many grandparents play an important role in their grandchildren's learning and development, and they need to be considered when creating family-friendly policies and communication strategies and encouraging family participation in

programs, planning and operations (Goodfellow, 2003). Activities such as an annual Grandparents' Day can be a special day, but if this is the only opportunity for grandparent involvement this can also feel tokenistic and patronising to those grandparents who have a very active role in their grandchild's upbringing.

Grandparents may have fulltime care of their grandchildren

There is an increasing number of children in Australia who are in the fulltime care of their grandparents – in 2006-07 nearly 20,000 children (Raising Children Network, 2009). Grandparents in the role of fulltime caregivers often face significant legal and financial pressures and may have been 'thrust into the role' with little consultation or prior notice (Ochiltree, 2006). Such grandparents and children are likely to need additional and specialised support.

A report prepared for the FaHCSIA by the Council on the Ageing (COTA) in 2003 contained a number of recommendations relating to grandparent caregivers' needs for additional support. The recommendations highlighted some of the unique stressors for grandparents in the role of fulltime caregivers:

- Grandparents raising grandchildren do not necessarily receive the same State and Commonwealth payments and services that foster carers would. If the care arrangement is informal, getting assistance is likely to be even more difficult.
- Respite options are limited.
- Under State and Commonwealth legislation, grandparents do not always have the status and rights accorded to primary caregivers – even when they are performing that role.
- Grandparents can find it difficult to obtain Health Care and Medicare cards for their grandchildren.
- Grandparents – who are usually older than parents – may feel isolated at parent events held at early childhood services.

Part of the reason that grandparent-headed families are increasing in number in Australia is the growing number of parents for whom drug addiction or mental illness is a major issue (Horner et al, 2007). Children who have spent at least part of their lives living with mentally ill or substance-abusing parents may be born with or develop a range of problems because of their

early environments. The children's developmental difficulties add to the pressures placed on the grandparents who care for them and increase the complexity of your task as an early childhood educator.

The role of the grandparent

The Early Years Learning Framework states that 'Experiencing *belonging* – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence' (p.7). Horner et al (2007) found that "traditionally grandparents have played a fundamental role in family life as sources of wisdom, stability and family identity, as well as babysitters, mediators, friends and listeners."

Grandparents have a particular role to play in providing cultural continuity for their grandchildren and teaching them about where their family comes from, their traditions and their family's expectations. For children from some cultural groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, there is a cultural expectation that the grandparents will play a significant role in child rearing (Horner et al, 2007).

The children in your care are likely to come from a broad range of backgrounds and their family lives will vary. Their parents and grandparents are likely to have an equally broad range of expectations around the role grandparents will play in their grandchildren's lives. While it is important to avoid generalising and stereotyping, grandparents' contributions to children's lives are generally very positive. It is important to ensure practices in early childhood services acknowledge and support that contribution.

Grandparents may have particular concerns

Some grandparents have strong feelings about formal childcare and its appropriateness for their grandchild. They may disagree with the parents' decision to place the child in formal care and this could influence their interaction with educators. While this concern is by no means universal, it is important to be aware that grandparents may feel uncertain about 'strangers' caring for their grandchild.

Goodfellow (2003) found that grandparents made a clear distinction between 'minding' or 'babysitting' and the sort of care that they as grandparents provide.

Grandparents may believe that the care they offer their grandchild comes from greater involvement and a stronger relationship than the care offered by an

educator. Goodfellow also found that grandparents “worried that, in 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.’”

Collaborating with grandparents

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) highlights the importance of partnerships between educators and families that are based on open communication and mutual respect. Strong partnerships are crucial to children’s wellbeing and learning. When grandparents are involved in children’s lives, partnerships that extend to them, as well as other important family members, will benefit all involved. As is true of parents’ knowledge and perspectives on children, educators can learn more about children by encouraging and paying attention to insights from grandparents.

Educators can help to alleviate grandparents’ concerns and worries about childcare and their grandchild. Goodfellow suggests that educators consider putting the following into practice:

- Ensure that you consider the role of grandparents when developing or revising your service’s family-inclusive policies and practices.
- Expect that many grandparents – as well as parents – would like to make contributions to the program and service delivery, and ensure that the opportunity is available to them.
- Take grandparents’ care environments and practices into account in your efforts to ensure continuity of the child’s experiences outside and inside your service.

Unless the grandparent has legal or primary care responsibility, parents are the first or primary focus for the partnership. However, incorporating grandparents into your partnership policies will assist you to work out your relationships and communication with both parents and grandparents. When there are differences between parent and grandparent care it is important to know about these and have open communication in order to provide continuity.

Stonehouse (2009) makes suggestions for establishing partnerships with new families at your service. Some

of these are particularly relevant to ensuring grandparents are included:

- “Invite families to bring all key family members to the initial visit if they wish.”
- “Encourage families to share information about what they want for their child, what is important to them about their child’s experience and the child’s interests, needs and abilities.”
- “Talk about partnership and what it means – what responsibilities and rights it involves for both families and carers.”

Not all children have available grandparents

Some children in your care may not have living grandparents or may have grandparents who live interstate or overseas. Other children may have grandparents who are not involved in their lives for one reason or another.

Both older people and children can find lots of value and joy in opportunities to interact with each other. Children without available grandparents of their own may particularly benefit from the opportunity to interact with older people as part of their childcare experience. Community groups for older people, such as the University of the 3rd Age and other senior citizens’ groups may be interested in participating in activities in your service (subject to police and Working with Children checks).

In summary

Grandparents are a diverse group – in age, cultural backgrounds, life experience, interests and talents, and views about professional childcare. Grandparents often play very important roles in the lives and raising of young children. By incorporating them in policies and practices, and forming strong partnerships with them at your service, you can help to develop continuity for the children in your care and enrich their early childhood experiences.

QIAS – 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 7.1

FDCQA – 1.2, 1.3, 6.2

A full list of references and the Parent Fact Sheet (available in different community languages) can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website: www.econnections.com.au

Case Study: Grandparents as Primary Caregivers

The Grandparents Support Network was created due to the growing number of grandparents in the ACT taking on the role of primary caregiver for their grandchildren. There are many reasons grandparents may take on this role; the parent/s may have died, become ill or have a serious drug or alcohol abuse problem. Grandparents can find themselves in the primary caregiver role without warning and without resources or support.

The Grandparents Support Network (The Network) provides a monthly support and information group to grandparents who are caregivers for their grandchildren, as well as advocacy, counselling and referral services. The Network is an ACT government-funded partnership between Marymead Child and Family Centre (where it is based), Canberra Mothercraft Society-Queen Elizabeth II Family Centre and Relationships Australia Canberra and Region.

According to the Network's coordinator Mary Ford, the key to developing more grandparent-inclusive programs or policies is to acknowledge the changing and varied role of grandparents in early childhood education and care programs. Mary says that many grandparents are unsure of their role in family day care or long day care programs. They can feel isolated when mixing with younger parents, or they might feel a sense of judgement because of their family circumstance. Developing inclusive policies or programs that recognise the parenting role that grandparents might play is crucial. For example, when you create opportunities for parents to visit your service and assist with reading to children or other experiences, ensure that grandparents are given the chance to be involved too. Mary says it is also important to recognise that while grandparent caregivers will share parents' needs, they have additional ones of their own. (Please see the main article for more detail on their specific needs.)

The Network recognises that grandparents' roles are diverse, complex and changing. Their monthly support and information groups provide an opportunity for grandparents to ask for the support they require, in whatever form that might take:

guest speakers, a community outing, or just the opportunity to be a grandparent for a few hours.

Some grandparents accessing the Network are working through grief and seeking support, understanding and freedom from judgement. The Network also serves a social function; grandparents can participate in a non-judgemental setting, share their stories and listen to those of others. Mary notes that the insights grandparents can gain through word of mouth and shared experiences are invaluable. These shared stories led to the publication of *The Grandparent's Story*; a compilation of quotes and stories from ACT grandparents who were caregivers for a grandchild.

The Network's advocacy and information service may refer members to Relationships Australia for counselling, or provide information regarding financial and legal entitlements.

One of the greatest achievements of the program, Mary says, is to lessen the social isolation many grandparents may feel in a caring role. "I thought it was just me" is a common statement expressed at the support group meetings and, for many grandparents, the chance to voice their grief and concerns in a safe, supportive environment is invaluable. Mary notes that most grandparents accessing the Network have two simultaneous roles: grandparent and parent. Juggling these responsibilities can be challenging, especially when the extended family is involved.

Early childhood services may like to seek out organisations like the Network in their own area and build links with them. There may be opportunities to provide information about early childhood services and your service specifically, to promote your inclusive policies, and to welcome grandparents who haven't used your service before. If you have grandparents at your service who are not connected with grandparent-specific services in your area, you may like to refer them.

For a copy of *The Grandparents' Story* email info@cmsinc.org.au and for further information about the Network, visit marymead.org.au

Young Children and Burns

Young children need to explore and play in order to develop and grow, but this may inadvertently lead children into danger. It is our responsibility to support children's development and to provide a safe environment for them.

One of the greatest dangers to children is the risk of burns and scalds. In 2007, burns and scalds from hot drinks, foods, fats and cooking oil were the most common cause of burn-related hospital admissions among children under four (SunSmart, 2009). Liquids at 60°C – the temperature of many hot water systems – take just one second to cause a potentially life-threatening scald. But the risk of burns is not limited to those caused by hot liquid. Children are at risk from burns and scalds from chemicals; hot appliances, such as kettles and heaters; matches and lighters; hot foods and cooking vessels; steam; and sunburn. Early childhood education and care services are governed by regulations and quality assurance practices that prevent or minimise the risk of many injuries, but it is important to remember – particularly in family day care settings – that other people may not be conscious of the risk. Be alert to the actions of other adults around you.

What are burns and scalds?

A burn or scald is an injury to the skin caused by contact with hot fluid, flame or chemicals. Burns can also be caused without direct contact, such as by radiant heat or steam. More than other common childhood injuries, burns have the potential to lead to long hospital stays and scarring. A **superficial burn** is limited to the outer layer of the skin and will be dry, red and painful but without blistering.

A **partial thickness burn** involves blistering skin. It will be painful and the skin surface is likely to be moist rather than dry.

A **full thickness burn** means that all the skin's layers have been penetrated. The burned area will be white or black, charred, firm and leathery.

Sunburn is caused by too much exposure to the sun. Severe sunburn must be treated like any

other burn. Sun exposure in the first 10 years of life is a major determinant of children's lifetime potential for skin cancer (SunSmart, 2009).

Sunburn has the risk of dehydration, so you should ensure any sunburnt child has plenty of fluids.

Your service should have its own sun exposure policy covering shade, clothing and outdoor playtimes. If it's time for an update, or just to check that your policy's on the right track, the SunSmart program has a sample policy on its website for early childhood services.

Minimise the risk of burns to children in your care

If children in your care can access high risk areas – such as a staff tearoom or carer's kitchen – there are particular burn risks. However, even where children cannot access these areas there are things you can and should do to minimise risks:

- Make food preparation areas as inaccessible as possible.
- When providing cooking experiences for the children, ensure cords and saucepan handles or hot utensils are out of reach
- State regulations regarding maximum hot water system temperatures in early childhood settings vary. Ensure that you are aware of your local requirements and abide by them.
- If applicable, install guards around heaters, stoves and fireplaces.
- Ensure that dangerous and corrosive chemicals, such as dishwasher powder, are labelled, stored and secured in line with NCAC guidelines.
- If there is a special function or event, closely supervise children around barbecues.
- Test the temperature of soups, stews and other liquid-based dishes before serving them, particularly before feeding babies. It is preferable to use a bottle warmer but, if you heat food or drinks in a microwave: stir the food or shake the bottle after heating; leave it

to rest for a few minutes; and always test the temperature with a food thermometer before serving.

Hot drinks present a particularly high risk of burns and scalds for children. For these reasons, Quality Assurance standards require early childhood educators to only drink hot drinks in areas that are not accessible to children. If any other person or visitor at your service is consuming a hot drink, ensure that they also comply with NCAC requirements.

What to do if a burn occurs

If a child in your care is burned, you will need to administer first aid.

- If the burn is due to a fire, follow the service's fire and evacuation procedures.
- If the burn is due to a scald, remove the child's clothing and any jewellery as soon as possible. However, if any clothing or jewellery is stuck to the burnt area **do not** remove it.

In most cases, simple first aid will be all that's required, but you should call 000 immediately if:

- the child is unconscious
- the child has difficulty breathing
- the child has pain that you cannot control
- the burn is to the face, airways, hands, bottom or genitals
- the burn is larger than the size of the child's palm.

If none of the above conditions apply, provide first aid:

- Starting as soon as possible after the accident, spray, pour or gently sponge the burn area with cold water for up to 20 minutes. This treatment is still useful for three hours after the accident.

- Do not apply ice, iced water, creams, lotions, moisturisers, powders, butter, flour or ointments.
- Keep the child warm while you are cooling their burn by wrapping them in a blanket and/or heating the room to 28-30°C and do not cool the wound for longer than 20 minutes; small children can become hypothermic very easily.

Caring for a child with an existing burn injury

If one of the children at your service suffers a burn elsewhere and returns to the service with a burn wound, some basic tips for their care are:

- Keep any wound dressings on and keep the outside of the dressing clean and dry.
- Before administering any pain relief refer to your service's medication policy.
- Ensure children are not overdressed, especially at naptime, as excess warmth will make any itching worse.

Preventing burns and scalds is critical. It is important to note that the risk of burns and scalds is not just for children. Educators are at risk too and following the suggestions here will help to keep you safe.

Keep first aid qualifications up to date. All family day care staff must have current first aid certificates and as many staff in long day care as possible should hold up-to-date first aid.

FDCQA: Principle 4.1, 4.2, 4.6

QIAS: Principle 5.2, 5.3, 6.2, 6.5

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