

'They've Always Been There for Me': Grandparental Involvement and Child Well-Being

Julia Griggs*

Centre for Parenting and Children, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, Oxford

Jo-Pei Tan

Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Putra, Putra, Malaysia

Ann Buchanan

Centre for Parenting and Children, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, Oxford

Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz

School of Social Work and Social Welfare, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

Eirini Flouri

Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University of London, London

With diversifying families, increased life expectancy, growing numbers of dual-worker households and higher rates of family breakdown, grandparents are now playing an increasing role in their grandchildren's lives. Despite growing importance there has been little empirical research exploring how grandparental involvement impacts on young people's well-being. This national study, which includes a survey of 1596 children (aged 11–16) and in-depth interviews with 40 young people, aimed to address this deficit. Multivariate analyses demonstrate that grandparental involvement is significantly associated with child well-being – results that are reinforced by qualitative evidence. Findings suggest grandparents may be under-recognised in the policy agenda. © 2009 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2009 National Children's Bureau.

Introduction: the increasing importance of grandparents

Changing demographic trends mean that today men and women may spend longer being grandparents than parents (Harper and Levin, 2005). Alongside growing life expectancies fertility has been declining, from 2.93 in 1964 to 1.80 in 2005 (ONS, 2005). This shift from a high-mortality/high-fertility to a low-mortality/low-fertility society has resulted in an increase in the number of generations alive at one time and a decrease in the number of children within each generation. This has become known as the 'beanpole' family (Bengston and Martin, 2001). Thus, the number of individuals who will live for part of their lives as

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members of three and four generation families is increasing. At the same time a growing proportion of mothers now work and grandparents have an increasing role in caring for young children (The Grandparents' Association, 2006). As a consequence grandparenthood and its associated roles are achieving growing prominence.

Growing interest in child well-being in the UK

Following the publication of the UK Government's Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters' (HM Treasury, 2003), the Department for Children Schools and Families is now working with Bradshaw at York and Noble at Oxford (Bradshaw and Noble, 2006) on measuring child well-being at the neighbourhood level. Bradshaw was also involved in the UNICEF (2007) report on *Child Well-being in Rich Countries* which developed a range of well-being measures. Furthermore, The Young Foundation in partnership with the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) are currently involved in a major project assessing interventions that enhance the well-being of parents and children. In this context, any study that contributes to the child well-being debate is likely to be of interest within the current policy arena.

Grandparental involvement

Involvement can be seen as a continuum; at one end there may be no contact, whilst at the other there is full-time care of grandchildren. The Grandparent Association estimate that the 13.5 million grandparents in the UK provide some 60% of all the childcare, be it full-time or part-time (2006) and one child in every 100 lives with a grandparent. The Department for Education and Skills (2006) noted that in March 2005, 12% of all children who are legally in the care of their local authority in England and Wales, lived with family members. Whilst it does not disaggregate the figure of those being cared for specifically by grandparents, it is believed these form the majority of placements. Children under formal kinship care (being looked after by relatives), however, generally come from highly unusual and complex family situations and are not typical of children in the general population.

A study by Clarke and Roberts (2004) of 870 grandparents, found although only 0.5% of grandparents had custodial care of grandchildren, 61% looked after them during the day and over half of the grandparents surveyed were involved in regular babysitting. Three in five grandparents saw at least one grandchild on a weekly basis and a similar proportion lived within half an hour of one or more of their grandchildren.

Grandparental involvement and child well-being

The dilemma is that research on grandparental full-time care, which represents the far end of grandparenting involvement spectrum, presents a mixed picture of the benefits for children, possibly because of the unusual circumstances in which this takes place. Hunt (2001), in a review of the international literature on kinship care, notes that it is not possible, because of the paucity of research evidence, to say whether kinship care promotes the well-being of children. In the US, studies have shown significant emotional and general health problems amongst grandchildren being raised by their grandparents (Caspar and Bryson, 1998). In the

UK, very recent research (Hansen, 2006) comparing outcomes for toddlers in both formal care (nurseries/playgroups) and grandparental care found that children under grandparental care had the worst behavioural scores.

Mueller and Elder (2003), who conducted a series of studies in the US exploring young people's relationships with their grandparents, found emotionally 'close' grandparents were likely to live nearer their grandchildren, have younger grandchildren and be the maternal grandparent. Those with higher incomes, as might be expected, provided more financial assistance to their grandchildren. Just as parents develop different relationships with different children so did grandparents. Grandchildren who were outgoing, happy and caring might encourage grandparents to be more interactive, but children with problems might also prompt grandparents to become involved in their lives.

The nearest study to the one undertaken here is that by Bridges and others (2007) of 385 children from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children. Children were asked how close they were to grandparents and given a four-point scale on which to base their assessment, whilst the child behaviour checklist (CBCL) measured child adjustment. At the first time point when children were on average nine years old there was an association between grandparental closeness and child adjustment, but five years later when the young people were on average 14 years old there was not. It was felt that this was due to drop in contact. Unfortunately, there was no indication of what the grandparents actually did for, or with, their grandchildren.

Rationale for the study

Although there is a considerable literature on parenting and child well-being (Maccoby, 2000; O'Connor, 2002), and an increasing interest in fathering and child well-being (Flouri, 2005), to date there has been no large scale research in the UK from the perspective of young people on the links between grandparental involvement and child well-being. Grandparents have always been central to supporting families, particularly in times of need or family disruption (Buchanan and Ten Brinke, 1997), but there is growing evidence that grandparents today are playing an increasing role in rearing the next generation. In this rapidly changing family scenario, it is important to hear young people's voices on the benefits or otherwise of grandparental involvement. This kind of empirical evidence is needed to inform both policy and practice.

Methods

This study comprised two stages:

- A survey of a national representative sample of 1569 young people in England and Wales.
- In-depth interviews with 40 survey respondents.¹

Stage one: survey

Young people aged 11–16 (school years 7–11) were recruited by a survey company (GfKNOP) from schools drawn from the School Government Publishing Company list using

probability proportionate-to-size sampling. To ensure that young people of different ages participated, surveys were sent to specific school years, allocated at random. A total of 70 schools returned the questionnaires for analysis.

Surveys included questions on: respondents' [family type, Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) scores, Special Educational Needs (SEN) status, free school meals eligibility] and grandparents' characteristics (health status, level of education, geographical distance from the grandchild); the nature and quality of the grandparent–grandchild relationship; the level of grandparental involvement (caring for the child, social and school activities) and the role of the parent in supporting the relationship. Questions were derived from an earlier pilot study, theoretical knowledge and existing scales, such as Elder and Conger's (1994) four-point emotional closeness scale. Well-being, as measured by psychological adjustment, was assessed using the self-report 25-item Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This measures four difficulties: hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct and peer problems, as well as prosocial behaviour² and has been widely and successfully used in studies around the world (see Goodman, 1994, 1997).

Questions on contextual risk were also included in the form of Tiet and others (2001) Adverse Life Events Scale, a list of 25 difficult life events such as, 'someone in the family died', that the young person may have experienced. Additionally, the school's postcode was used to identify the level of local disadvantage, measured on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) – England (Noble and others, 2004) and Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005)³ – providing another measure of contextual risk.

Analysis was conducted using SPSS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) and regression models were run to explore the association between grandparental involvement and adolescent well-being whilst controlling for a range of factors including family type and experience of poverty.

Stage two: qualitative interviews

The purpose of the qualitative element of the research was to expand and help explain the 'how' and 'why' of the quantitative findings. It was an iterative process where the results from the survey influenced the focus of the interviews. Details of 60 young people willing to take part in qualitative in-depth interviews were collected during the survey process, permission being sought by the survey company from adolescents and their parents. Of these, a total of 40 interviews were conducted (most of them lasting between 40 min and an hour). These took place at the adolescent's home (or in a small number of cases another family member's home) and were tape-recorded. Participants were reassured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they provided in the study, and interviewers underwent a Criminal Records (CRB) check before fieldwork began.

Interviews were transcribed and entered into Nvivo for analysis using a cross-case thematic 'framework' approach. This approach is of particular use in studies where objectives are pre-set and there is a need to link the analysis to quantitative findings (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). A thematic framework was constructed and systematically applied to interview transcripts; the results were then charted according to key themes for researcher interpretation (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Interviewee profile

Interviewees were broadly representative of the total survey sample (and, in turn, young people in England and Wales) in terms of gender (just over half being male) and age (mean = 13.4, range = 11–16). Young people taking part in the interviews were primarily white British ($n = 29$), the remainder: black African ($n = 3$), Asian ($n = 4$) and white European ($n = 4$). The proportion of white British adolescents taking part in interviews (72.5%) was considerably lower than the survey (89.5%) and the population as a whole (83.4%). Most of the young people lived in urban/suburban ($n = 28$) areas with the remainder ($n = 12$) residing in rural areas, villages and small towns. The majority of interviewees lived with both biological parents ($n = 27$, 64.8% in the survey) with roughly equal proportions of the remaining interviewees living with just their mother ($n = 5$, 17.4% in the survey) or their mother and her partner ($n = 6$, 15.3% in the survey) – two were living with their grandmother, but had regular contact with their mother.

Survey findings

Grandparental characteristics

The majority of young people had at least one living grandparent: 79.4% maternal grandmothers, 64.5% maternal grandfathers, 69.3% paternal grandmothers and 53.5% paternal grandfathers. Almost 30% of respondents had all four. Most of the grandparents in the study lived near to their grandchildren, approximately two-thirds lived less than 10 miles away. Furthermore, there was a high frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren; over half the young people had daily or twice-weekly contact with maternal grandparents and over 40% daily or twice-weekly contact with paternal grandparents. Most of the grandparents were in their 60s and 70s, were married (>75%), retired (>65%), in good health (>75%) and living in their own home (almost 90%).

The descriptive statistics displayed in Table 1 demonstrate that grandparents were highly involved in many aspects of their grandchildren's lives. Table 1 also shows clear differences in involvement for different grandparents with the maternal grandmother proving the key person for providing all kinds of support.

Table 1: Proportion of respondents answering 'usually' or 'occasionally' to involvement questions

	Mum's mum	Mum's dad	Dad's mum	Dad's dad	All grandparents
Do your grandparents					
Get involved in things you like	72.2	69.4	61.7	59.1	65.6
Come to school and other events	55.1	50.7	43.1	37.4	46.6
Talk to you about problems you have	54.0	44.5	42.7	35.4	44.2
Share things you can't talk to parents about	34.9	26.0	25.6	20.1	26.7
Talk to you about future plans	80.0	76.4	75.9	71.3	75.9
Advice when you have a problem	84.0	76.0	75.6	68.9	76.1
Give you money etc.	90.7	85.2	85.3	81.6	85.7
Tell you what you can and cannot do	70.8	62.5	60.1	53.8	61.8
Do you respect what they say?	93.8	83.0	84.6	78.0	84.8

Grandparental involvement and child well-being: multivariate analyses

Regression models were run to test the relationship between the involvement of the closest grandparent and child well-being (SDQ scores) whilst controlling for:

- Child characteristics (gender, age, SEN status, free school meal eligibility and ethnicity).
- Adversity (distant and proximal adverse life events and IMD rank).

Analysis revealed that dimensions of grandparental involvement were predictive of young people's psychological well-being. Involvement in hobbies and interests was significantly associated with a lower incidence of total difficulties (-0.9^*) and peer problems⁴ (-0.10^{**}); involvement in schooling or education with a lower incidence of total difficulties (-0.7^*) and conduct problems⁵ (-0.9^*); and talking to grandparents about future plans with a lower incidence of total difficulties (-0.9^{**}), emotional symptoms (-0.8^*) and peer problems (-0.10^{**}) (see Table 2).

Table 2: Regression models: grandparental involvement and child adjustment/well-being

Predictors	Total difficulties	Emotional symptoms	Hyperactivity	Peer problems	Conduct problems	Prosocial behaviour
<i>Background variables</i>						
Child's age	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02	0.01	-0.04	-0.07*
Child's gender (male)	-0.06*	-0.28***	-0.00	0.09**	0.11***	-0.32***
No special education needs	-0.11***	-0.06	-0.05	-0.13***	-0.08**	0.00
No free school meals	-0.06*	-0.04	-0.02	-0.06	-0.06	-0.02
Ethnicity (non-white)	-0.08**	-0.08**	-0.07*	-0.06*	-0.01	-0.03
<i>Adversity</i>						
Proximal adverse life events	0.29***	0.13***	0.21***	0.13***	0.27***	-0.04
Distal adverse life events	0.06	0.09**	0.02	0.03	-0.02	0.07*
Country (Wales)	0.05	0.03	-0.00	0.10**	0.02	-0.03
Standardised rank score of IMD ³	-0.01	0.00	-0.00	-0.04	-0.00	-0.01
<i>Grandparental involvement</i>						
Frequency of care taking	0.04	0.04	-0.03	0.02**	0.05	-0.01
Hobbies/interests	-0.09*	-0.07	-0.03	-0.10**	-0.02	0.04
School involvement	-0.07*	-0.04	-0.04	-0.01	-0.09*	0.06
Problem-sharing	0.03	0.05	-0.04	0.07*	0.01	0.03
Career planning	-0.09**	-0.08*	-0.02	-0.10**	-0.04	0.05
Advice	-0.01	-0.02	-0.02	0.01	0.00	0.07
Financial support	0.04	-0.02	0.08*	-0.05	0.08**	-0.08*
Authority	0.06	0.01	0.06	0.06	0.04	-0.02
Respect	-0.07*	0.04	-0.11***	0.02	-0.11***	0.16***
Adjusted R ²	0.18	0.13	0.08	0.09	0.14	0.17
F	13.94***	10.06***	5.84**	7.14***	10.74***	12.85***
n	1078	1080	1079	1079	1080	1080

*** $P < 0.001$; ** $P < 0.01$; * $P < 0.05$.

³Lower rank denotes a higher level of deprivation, rank 1 = the most deprived LSOA.

Qualitative findings

Findings from the qualitative interviews were used to elaborate the results of the survey. First, factors influencing grandparental involvement were explored, then the three types of involvement strongly associated with child adjustment in the regression model (hobbies and

interests, education/school and talking about future plans) were examined in more depth. The following reports the results of qualitative interviews with grandchildren, using excerpts from their accounts to illustrate dominant or important themes.

Factors influencing grandparental involvement

Involvement varied considerably between and within families. For a small minority (three respondents) there was little or no involvement whilst at the other extreme (two respondents) there was full-time residential care of grandchildren. In keeping with other studies (Bridges and others, 2007) findings suggest a number of key influences on involvement: the amount of contact between grandparent and child (and therefore geographical distance); level of care-giving; feelings of connectedness (emotional closeness); the gender and lineage of the grandparent (young people often reported feeling closer to their grandmothers than their grandfathers, particularly maternal grandmothers) and the age of the grandchild.

Interviewees generally described active grandparental involvement in their education, interests and career-planning. However, the findings demonstrate that involvement varies a great deal, and that it is particularly closely associated to levels of contact. For example, grandchildren who reported that their grandparents saw them more than once a week also reported that their grandparents were often involved in helping with homework, whereas those with lower levels of contact more frequently asked unspecific questions about grandchildren's results and progress over the telephone or during sporadic visits.

Involvement also appeared to be closely associated with the grandparent's responsibilities for childcare. Grandparents reported to be involved in the adolescent's daily routine were more likely to be involved in their interests and education. This level of day-to-day contact also appears to have promoted open discussion on a range of topics, including the adolescent's plans for the future. For some grandparents providing high-level of care for their grandchildren (including residential care) educational involvement might also involve taking on what are traditionally seen as the parental responsibilities regarding their grandchildren's education:

Because my mum was sick on the day that I had my parents evening Gogo came with me and then she saw my teachers [female, 14, black African, living with grandparent].

In keeping with the literature (Ross and others, 2005) maternal grandmothers were more often reported as the grandparent young people felt closest to, thus the most emotionally involved. This did not, however, mean grandchildren did not feel a bond with paternal grandparents; indeed, most adolescents reported feeling close to all their living grandparents. Interviewees who did not feel close to their grandparents were typically those who had little or no contact with them often following parental divorce and separation.

Grandparents promoting well-being: participants and supporters in grandchildren's hobbies and interests

Grandparents, particularly those in frequent contact, were reported to be regular attendees at school events (e.g. school plays) and sporting matches, providing emotional support and

'cheerleading' their grandchildren's extra-curricular activities. For a small majority of interviewees, grandparents were also participants in hobbies and pastimes.

Joint activities, such as, cooking, drawing and shopping, were reported as things that both generations enjoyed, an interest that they shared or a pastime that had been taught/passed down to the grandchild by the grandparent:

Me and my nan have like got the same hobbies, I like to make things, I like to make cards and stuff and cakes and my nan likes to do exactly the same [female, 13, white British, single-parent family].

Participating in shared activities with grandparents was more common amongst younger, female participants, who regularly spent time with their grandparents. Older adolescents (14+), particularly males, were less inclined to spend time with their grandparents in this way, their peer relationships having become increasingly important in their lives:

We always used to do things like fishing ... go for walks and the fair and things ... I probably did see them more when I was younger because now I do other things, so my weekends are taken up by stuff that I go off and do [male, 14, white British, living with both biological parents].

Involvement in activities and hobbies took the form of both emotional and practical support; in many cases it was the grandparents' 'being there' that was important. Approximately, two-thirds of interviewees referred to their grandparents' emotional presence in their lives, and although many of these young people struggled to define exactly what 'being there' meant for them, referred to grandparents as providing support by being in an audience, at the end of a telephone and providing an emotional and practical a 'safety-net' when they were needed.

Also important in terms of emotional support was the interviewees' perception of their grandparent's motivation for involvement; that whatever the type of extra-curricular activity or hobby, young people felt their grandparents *wanted* to be involved:

They always wanted to come and cheer for me ... Whenever my grandmother's visiting she'll want to go to everything! [male, 15, Asian, living with both biological parents].

A large number of interviewees were very aware that when spending time with their parents they were not the sole focus of their attention. This was not the case when it came to spending time with grandparents, who were able to dedicate their time entirely to their grandchildren.

If your mum and dad look after you then they're never relaxed and they've got to do other things like work and clean, whereas like your grandparents they can spend the whole time with you [female, 12, white British, living with both biological parents].

This may well reflect the pressures of the dual-earner households that many of the interviewees belonged to.

Related to this, young people from large families with two or more siblings felt that time alone with grandparents was particularly valuable. These interviewees all reported that their grandparents had set aside time to spend with them away from the rest of the family. For the small number of interviewees with very difficult relationships with their siblings or parents, grandparents and their homes offered solace from these difficulties:

If I'm stressed out then they'll let me go over there at the weekend or something just to chill out [male, 15, white British, stepfamily].

Time with grandparents also represented an opportunity for relaxation, fun and treats; a change from the regular routine. Whilst it was not the case for adolescents who saw their grandparents daily or several times a week, approximately three quarters of all other interviewees associated time with their grandparents with a break from the 'strictness' of the parental regime, and an opportunity to relax and enjoy their leisure time:

With my granddad its, I feel more relaxed and he spoils me more, what my dad doesn't do, he gives me. My dad doesn't let me have a coke at half-time whereas my granddad does. Its good fun [male, 12, white British, living with both biological parents].

Grandparents promoting well-being: involvement in grandchildren's education

Grandparents were often involved in their grandchildren's education as teachers/educators, as homework assistants, as career-advisors and as general supporters. This educational support was usually provided in addition to that of the parents; however, approximately a fifth of the sample (all in regular contact), felt that their grandparents played the key role in supporting their education.

My mum helps with my homework as well, but because I go to my grandma's straight after school, which is where I usually do my homework, they kind of help us a bit more [female, 13, white British, stepfamily].

In some cases, the role grandparents took on as an educational helper, with homework or certain projects, extended so that the grandparent became a teacher or educator; this was particularly true for those spending extended periods with their grandparents. This type of support was more regularly reported to come from grandmothers rather than grandfathers; men more commonly becoming involved with their grandchildren's education in a less formal way.

This 'informal' education typically involved historical or nature trips where grandparents (usually grandfathers) would broaden their grandchildren's education by passing on their knowledge about a place, an historical event or the natural environment. Two interviewees referred to their grandfathers 'reading-up' prior to the visits so that they might better impart information. Thus, we find the subject the child is 'educated' in is often something that the grandparent is interested in personally.

My granddad was very into geography and history ... They're always telling us things about that and he used to take us on like historical visits ... I do think that helped at school and like I'll choose to do those subjects now [female, 13, white British, living with both biological parents].

For most of the interviewees (approximately three-quarters) it was important that grandparents felt that they were doing well at school and young people actively sought to make them proud of their achievements. This often meant contacting grandparents with test results or taking school reports with them on visits, an exchange that was particularly important for the third of interviewees whose grandparents were especially educationally focused, and regularly emphasised the importance of academic achievement for future success.

Grandparents promoting future well-being: assisting in career planning

Respected by their grandchildren, and seen as a source of knowledge and wisdom, grandparents were often called upon to help with some of the young persons' most important decisions.

For most interviewees discussions about the future involved information and advice from grandparents, who were thought to know more about the world and therefore about jobs, earnings and qualifications. Young people valued the opinions of their grandparents and appreciated the support they were offered:

They're very supportive and helpful when it comes to what career to take and that kind of thing, because they know which ones are bad and which ones are good and which subjects to take [male, 12, white British, living with both biological parents].

Grandparents proved a particularly useful source of information and advice when the grandchild's ambitions coincided with what the grandparent currently did or had done before retirement:

I'd like to be a policeman, a copper, something like that ... My mum told me to ask Gran about it, because as she's a barrister she knows a few things [male, 14, white British, living with both biological parents].

Whilst some interviewees felt that grandparents would be unable to offer anything more practical than good career advice, one interviewee felt that her grandparents would offer her material support so that she might achieve a long-term ambition:

I want to travel the world when I'm older. My gran respects that and says it's a good idea ... Like I want to travel the world and if I just had £xxx less than I needed then they would probably give us it to help us [female, 13, white British, living with both biological parents].

Grandparents promoting well-being by acting as problem solvers at times of difficulty

A particularly strong theme for those who had close relationships with their grandparents was the role they played during times of difficulty or crisis. Some young people reported that it was easier to open-up to their grandparents than to their parents, often because grandparents had shown themselves to be better listeners and more sensitive to the young person's concerns in the past. For one interviewee grandparents had become the first port of call during a crisis, her parents actively surrendering their role and authority to their daughter's grandparents:

If, like, I bunk off school then my mum tells me I've got to go to my gran and granddad's and sit down and talk to us ... If my mum and dad did that they just end up shouting at us and we'd have a massive argument. My granny and granddad, we just sit down and talk about it [female, 13, white British, living with both biological parents].

Moreover, approximately a quarter of the sample reported that their grandparents provided additional support at times of educational difficulty, when they had failed a subject or were finding some element of their schooling particularly difficult:

If I fail a test or anything they help me revise, even down the phone, they ask me like maths questions [female, 13, white British, single-parent family].

This kind of support, as we can see from the quotation above, was not offered exclusively by local grandparents but also by grandparents who lived further afield, who offered considerable support by telephone.

But in more general ways young people felt that grandparental involvement offered extra support; a safety-net in times of trouble. For example, one-fifth of young people referred to grandparents as an 'extra set of parents'.

It's someone to go to ... It's like a second set of parents, you know, its like having three sets of parents to all come and help you [male, 12, white British, living with both natural parents].

Discussion: links between grandparental involvement and child well-being

The key finding of this study, seen in both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the research, and in contrast to the rather mixed picture seen in the literature to date, is the positive association between grandparents' active involvement and child well-being as measured by psychological adjustment. Young people's narratives suggest they see grandparental involvement as normative and generally value, and feel they benefit from, the involvement of grandparents in their lives.

Caution is necessary in interpreting the findings. The results presented here are based on a cross-sectional survey design. Therefore, causal implications or directions between variables cannot be determined. Nevertheless the in-depth interviews suggest that in England and Wales there are links between what grandparents do and child well-being as measured by psychological adjustment.

Another important finding is the relationship between grandparental closeness and involvement. To date research has primarily been concerned with exploring the link between emotional closeness and well-being. However, Elder and Conger (2000) found no connection between these two factors and Bridges and others (2007) only found this with younger children. It is possible that closeness as such is not enough. It is what 'close' grandparents actually *do* that makes a difference.

One may surmise from the qualitative findings that the statistical associations seen between grandparental involvement in hobbies and activities, education, career-planning and reduced incidence of problems may be present because the child feels supported, perhaps feels a certain positive pressure to achieve, is encouraged in their decisions and given advice when making them.

In addition, busy working parents may have less time to support young people in their interests and activities. Indeed interviewees were often acutely aware of the multiple pressures their parents were under. Grandparents, who are often retired by the time their grandchildren enter secondary school, may have more available free time to participate in activities with their grandchildren.

Shared activities with grandparents may present opportunities to share problems and seek advice, and young people with very involved grandparents may be subject to a greater degree of 'physical monitoring', e.g. taking or picking up from school which may limit

opportunities for problematic behaviour such as truancy. This is an interpretation of the findings that might warrant exploration in future studies.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) have shown that parental interest and active involvement in their children's education is the best predictor of a child's educational attainment. Overall interviewees' reports indicate that grandparents were very interested in their grandchildren's education, and in six of the 40 interviews young people's grandparents appeared to be taking on a more traditional parental role in their education, attending parents' evenings or helping with homework on a regular basis. It is possible that high levels of support coupled with 'positive pressure' encourage young people to raise their aspirations and provides them with a greater impetus to succeed academically.

Conclusion

This study, the first nationally representative survey of young people's perspectives, indicates that most grandchildren in England and Wales experience a high level of grandparental involvement. We have seen how they play an important role in supporting young people's education, helping with homework and perhaps filling the gap for working parents. The literature shows us that grandparents have always been involved in supporting the next generation, but it is possible that grandparents may be providing more support and exerting a greater influence on their grandchildren's future than in the past. A trend towards greater grandparental involvement may be a result of wider social and demographic changes: longer, healthier lives; mothers' participation in the labour market; large numbers of children living in lone-parent and step-families. Further longitudinal research is needed in this area. We also need to hear the views of grandparents.

Whilst in recent years there has been a growing recognition in the UK of the important role grandparents can play as kinship carers in complex/separated families, less recognition has been given to the large numbers of grandparents (such as those discussed here) who play important roles in their grandchildren's lives in a less formal way. Indeed the role of the grandparent is almost invisible on the UK policy agenda with care workers often recommending formal resources supplied by the state rather than exploring the possibilities and benefits of grandparental care. Given these changes and the high levels of involvement identified in this study it may be that the UK needs to reassess the importance of grandparents in policy.

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Notes

1 It is possible that participation in the survey one to four months prior the interview may have encouraged young people to reflect more on their relationship with their grandparents than they might otherwise have done, perhaps impacting on the qualitative findings.

- 2 Each of these five factors relate to five statements (positive and negative) contained within the questionnaire to which young people must answer 'not true', 'somewhat true' or 'certainly true'. The answers young people give are then translated into overall adjustment scores.
- 3 Each neighbourhood (LSOA) in England and Wales is assigned a score according to its level of multiple deprivation (an aggregate of scores within different domains of disadvantage, i.e. worklessness, low income, poor housing etc.) and these scores are then ranked in order.
- 4 Feeling isolated and lonely, unable to make friends.
- 5 Problems with anger, disobedience and fighting.

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*Correspondence to: Julia Griggs, Centre for Parenting and Children, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, Barnett House, 32 Wellington Square, Oxford, OX1 2ER, Tel.: 01865 280327; Fax: 01865 270324. E-mail: julia.griggs@socres.ox.ac.uk

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Contributors' details

Julia Griggs is a Research Officer at the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford. She recently completed a PhD exploring the experiences of adolescent mothers and fathers and the nature and sustainability of joint parenting in young families. Her research interests include: teenage pregnancy and parenthood; changing patterns of family formation (in the UK and internationally) and inequality, poverty and disadvantage.

Jo-Pei Tan has just completed a PhD from the University of Oxford. She is currently working as a lecturer at the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Putra, Malaysia. Her research focuses are primarily on the study of parenting, intercultural marriage, mixed-parentage children and intergenerational relationships.

Professor Ann Buchanan is the Director of the Centre for Research into Parenting and Children at University of Oxford. She has undertaken extensive research on parenting issues in particular fathering and children of divorce.

Shalhevet Attar-Schwartz is a lecturer at the School of Social Work and Social Welfare at the University of Jerusalem. Her research addresses issues relating to child well-being, including the effects of intergenerational relationships on child well-being, and children's rights.

Eirini Flouri is a reader in developmental psychology at the Department of Psychology and Human Development, Institute of Education, University of London. She has published extensively on the role of parenting in child development, and she is interested in the investigation of the multiplicative relationship between parenting and contextual and psychosocial risk in predicting child psychopathology.