



Provenance and peer review

Is grandparenting a form of social engagement that benefits cognition in ageing?

Katherine Burn, Cassandra Szoeki*

University of Melbourne, Grattan St, Parkville 3010, VIC, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 October 2014

Accepted 30 October 2014

Keywords:

Grandparenting

Cognition

Caregiving

ABSTRACT

Social engagement is a lifestyle factor that has received much attention in preventative research. Numerous studies in the current literature have argued the importance of social engagement in ageing, particularly for cognitive health. One key example of social engagement in later life is the role of a grandparent. This role promotes a socially active lifestyle that may be beneficial to cognitive ageing. Recent research has found that spending some time with grandchildren is beneficial; however, the pressures and responsibilities characteristic of this role should also be taken into consideration, as they may have opposing effects on cognitive health. Given the current popularity of grandparenting as a form of childcare, the interests of the grandparents and the impact on ageing health need to be carefully considered.

© 2014 Published by Elsevier Ireland Ltd.

Contents

1. Introduction	122
2. Grandparenting and its role in cognitive ageing	123
2.1. Activity maintains cognition in ageing	123
2.2. Grandparenting and cognitive maintenance	123
2.3. The impact of grandparenting on cognition	123
2.4. Possible influence of carer burden	123
3. Discussion	123
4. Conclusion	124
Disclosures	124
Contributors	124
Competing interests	124
Acknowledgements	124
References	124

1. Introduction

With the growing length of shared lifespan across multiple familial generations and an increasing number of parents in full-time employment, grandparents are now vital providers of childcare for parents in the Western world. In Australia, parents' work commitments are the most commonly reported reason for

childcare needs [1]. However, with the rising costs of childcare and few places available, most parents opt for an informal childcare arrangement, such as grandparental care [1]. Similarly in Europe, the use of formal childcare is inversely proportional to the number of children being cared for by a grandparent [2]. According to census data in the U.S., nearly 40% of the population over 30 years of age report that they are responsible for their grandchildren's care [3]. Parents in Britain have reported heavy use of informal childcare rather than market-based childcare, with most relying on grandparents [4]. Across Europe, approximately half of grandparents have cared for their grandchildren in the past 12 months [2].

* Corresponding author at: Royal Melbourne Hospital, PO Box 2026, Parkville 3050, VIC, Australia. Tel.: +61 4 09 039 533.

E-mail address: cszoeki@unimelb.edu.au (C. Szoeki).

With such an overwhelming reliance on grandparents as child-care providers in the Western world, it is no surprise that research is now turning to grandparenting as a key factor in ageing health. Studies investigating grandparenting and cognitive health in particular have recently emerged in the literature. Their findings have highlighted the positive and negative attributes of the role which have unique impact on ageing cognition. This paper brings together recent findings examining the impact of grandparenting on cognition and highlights areas for further research.

2. Grandparenting and its role in cognitive ageing

2.1. Activity maintains cognition in ageing

One of the key theories for the prevention of cognitive decline and dementia in ageing is the disuse hypothesis, which states that decreases in activity with age leading to the disuse of cognitive mechanisms can accelerate age-related decreases in cognition [5,6]. Sustaining an active lifestyle, and consequently using cognitive mechanisms, protects against cognitive decline and dementia [7–10]. Social engagement may be viewed from this perspective as a form of everyday activity that is cognitively stimulating [11].

There have been numerous studies illustrating the effect of social engagement on cognition in ageing. Research has demonstrated that older adults who have a large number of social contacts or who reported greater engagement in social activities had higher cognitive function than those who were less socially engaged, independent of other factors [12–19]. Furthermore, highly socially engaged individuals also experience less cognitive decline and have a reduced risk of developing dementia over time [11,20–30].

2.2. Grandparenting and cognitive maintenance

Grandparenting is a particularly good example of a social role that may maintain cognition due to its active nature. Caring for children can be hugely demanding on a carer, both socially and emotionally, and can require a relatively large cognitive resource [59]. A study of 128 older adults who were placed in primary schools to provide voluntary assistance to young students found that participants reported an increase in their physical, social, and cognitive activities [60]. Similarly, grandparenting may also increase daily activity, particularly for adults who may not otherwise be socially active. In one study of grandmothers who were providing regular day-care for their grandchildren, 35.4% claimed that their reason for caring for their grandchildren was that it provided everyday activity [33]. The social activity, and therefore cognitive stimulation, that is intrinsic to grandparenting can be linked to cognitive maintenance.

In addition, grandparenting also incites physical activity in older adults. Grandparents have claimed that playing with and caring for their grandchildren provided them with a form of daily activity and exercise, helping them to feel youthful and alive [31–33]. As physical activity is known to influence cognition and dementia risk [34–38], it may contribute to the relationship between grandparenting and cognition.

2.3. The impact of grandparenting on cognition

Studies investigating the role of grandparenting in ageing cognition have only recently emerged in the literature. Arpino and Bordone [39] studied women aged 50–80 years from the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE). They found that spending time with grandchildren was significantly associated with better verbal fluency performance, supporting the disuse hypothesis. Similarly, data from the longitudinal prospective Women's Healthy Ageing Project (WHAP) demonstrated optimal

cognitive performance in all domains in women who were minding grandchildren up to one day a week [40,41].

However, contrary to expectation, all of the studies in this area have consistently shown that highly frequent grandparenting is associated with a decrease in cognitive performance [39–42]. Burn and colleagues [40,41] investigated reported feelings of demand in grandmothers and found an association between the amount of time spent minding grandchildren and reported feelings of demand from children. These results suggest that while grandparenting may predict better cognition functioning, minding grandchildren to the point of experiencing demand may counteract the benefits to cognition. This hypothesis is supported by social perception research. Irregular social engagement in elderly individuals was found not to be a risk factor for dementia if the individual felt that the amount of social contact was satisfactory [22].

2.4. Possible influence of carer burden

It is impossible to investigate the impact without considering the influence of carer burden. A carer is any individuals who is provides ongoing, informal assistance to others in the community with restricted ability to care for themselves because of old age, disability, or frailty [43,44]. Although there are benefits to being a carer, such as providing a sense of purpose and a form of daily activity, the demands and pressures that are intrinsic to caregiving may have an opposite effect. Helping another person perform day to day activities, especially when that person is a relative, can be physically and mentally demanding. Numerous studies have found that carers have higher reported rates of disability, anxiety, depression, stress, fatigue, and frustration and lower social function than the general population [43,45–49].

Although the definition of a carer does not include grandparenting, it is clear that the responsibilities and demands that are characteristic of carer roles can also be seen in grandparenting. While grandparenting may have a positive impact on cognitive function, this effect may be negated by the pressures and responsibilities characterised by the role.

Research has demonstrated the varying influence of grandparenting on other aspects of ageing health. Grandparents caring for their grandchildren have reported improved mobility, overall physical health, and increased positive health behaviours [50,51]. On the other hand, grandparents have also been shown to have increased physical disability and exacerbation of pre-existing medical conditions [52,53]. Clearly, the positive and negative attributes that are characteristic to grandparenting have a multifaceted relationship with ageing health that requires further investigation.

3. Discussion

Grandparenting is a complex social role that has growing importance in Western society. While available research has illustrated a positive influence of grandparenting on cognitive health, the evidence also suggests that grandparenting to the extent that it becomes demanding may counteract the benefits. Balance needs to be achieved in order to achieve optimal outcomes.

Some questions remain in understanding the relationship between grandparenting and cognition. The studies reviewed provide a somewhat limited picture of grandparenting. None of the studies took into account factors such as the age of the grandchildren, how many grandchildren were being cared for, or what kind of activities grandparents engaged in with their grandchildren. For example, it would be expected that dynamic activities such as helping with homework or playing sports would be more stimulating than routine care activities such as bathing or feeding, and therefore may have greater impact on cognition. Furthermore, the type

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1917154>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1917154>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)