



Grand-parenting for healthy ageing in women: Fact or fiction?



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ABSTRACT

Globally our populations are ageing and with this trend, there is a rise in chronic disease. We know that lifestyle and environment are significant contributors to risk for disease, quality of life and function. Despite this representing an opportunity to improve health and quality of life in ageing, there is a paucity of research in this field. The social aspects of this period of development which have been most researched include employment, function and disability. Grand-parenting is one of the most popular sources of childcare in the world and therefore research investigating this role is of vital significance.

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1. The importance of grandparents to families

Never before in our history has there been a majority of adults over 40 having living parents. Children today will know their grandparents and even their great-grandparents. There is an increase in grandparents, particularly grandmothers, taking on the care of their grandchildren throughout the world. Financial strain on families has resulted in a rising number of parents obliged to take on full-time employment. In Western countries, the low availability and/or high cost of childcare means that grandparents are often the best alternative for working parents [1]. In other parts of the world, multigenerational households are common, and grandparents are intrinsic to family function and structure. In some countries with high rates of parental absence or death, orphans are often cared for by grandparents [2].

Grandparents now represent a large proportion of childcare around the world and more adult children are living with their older parents than ever before [3]. Therefore the impact of caregiving responsibility on ageing health and well-being is important to examine.

2. The pros and cons of grand-parenting

Being a grandparent encompasses a number of features that makes the role both rewarding and challenging. Grandparents and grandchildren share a unique bond which can be mutually beneficial. Grandchildren receive particular love and attention from their grandparents that is outside of what would be expected in a formal childcare arrangement [4], whilst grandparents are offered an opportunity to engage in stimulating activities that can promote health. In addition, the ability to watch your grandchildren thrive and grow and to be involved in that process is singularly fulfilling for a grandparent. However, some concerns have been raised

about commencing what can be viewed as a “second parenthood” phase at a time when many older adults are experiencing a rise in morbidity and are otherwise winding down their responsibilities [5].

3. Current research on grandparents

Research on grand-parenting has found a number of effects on physical and emotional health in ageing (see Table 1). Whilst there are positive effects on mood, social inclusion and cognition the amount of time spent with grandchildren is an important factor. Highly frequent grand-parenting can be associated with stress which can negate positive effects. While spending time with grandchildren can have benefits for healthy ageing, too much can be detrimental. The effects on physical and emotional health in ageing are therefore largely dependent upon the context and intensity of the care required.

Prolonged periods of care, greater than five days per week in Australia and associated with co-resident care in China and the USA, were associated with increased stress, feelings of time restraints, poorer mental health and an associated decline in cognition.

Taking on the sole-carer role clearly only includes high intensity and duration care and research has focussed on African-Americans and those from Sub-Saharan Africa. These studies represent two groups, grandparents caring for orphaned grandchildren as a result of the AIDS epidemic and grandmothers obliged to take on full-time care due to the absence of their children as a result of death, incarceration or substance abuse. Amongst those grandparents in Sub-Saharan Africa, personal resilience and social and financial resources were seen as beneficial. Poor physical health was a particular concern amongst African-American carers, potentially due to some who, despite lacking the physical and personal resources,

Table 1

Summary of the key findings of various studies investigating the impacts of grandparenting on health and wellbeing. Articles were obtained from the previous decades review (Silverstein, M. and R. Giarrusso, *Ageing and Family Life: A Decade Review*. *J Marriage Fam*, 2010. **72**(5): p. 1039–1058.) in addition to a PubMed search conducted using the term “grandparent”, restricting to human studies within the last 5 years which produced 384 results. “Caregiving” was added to the search term, limiting results to 31 items. A total of 25 studies relevant to the current topic are outlined.

Reference	Study Period	Key findings	
Casual Grand-parenting			
<i>Cross-Sectional</i>			
Anderson, S. G., et al. (2013). <i>J Women Aging</i> , 25(3), 242–259	XS	High reports of enjoyment & psychological benefits caring for grandchildren, difficulties such as age-related constrictions and time restraints.	+/-
Arpino, B., & Bordone, V. (2014). <i>European Demographic Research Papers</i> , 76(2), 337–351.	XS	Minding grandchildren associated with higher verbal fluency Negative association between frequency of grandparenting and cognition	+
Arpino, B., & Bordone, V. (2016). <i>Review of Economics of the Household</i> , 1–40.	XS	Regular grandparenting predicted lower participation in other social activities	–
Bigbee, J. L., et al. (2011). <i>J Rural Health</i> , 27(3), 2089–296.	XS	Grandparents who were primary caregivers had poorer mental health than other caregivers	–
Bordone, V., & Arpino, B. (2015). <i>Journal of Aging and Health</i> , 0898264315618920.	XS	Caring for grandchildren lowers subjective age in adults over 75	+
Burn, K. F., Ames, D., Henderson, V. W., Dennerstein, L., & Szoek, C. (2014). <i>Menopause</i> , 21(10), 1069–1074.	XS	Peak cognitive performance associated with grandparenting one day per week	+
Burn, K. F., Ames, D., Henderson, V. W., Dennerstein, L., & Szoek, C. (2014). <i>Climacteric</i> , 17(S1), 39.	XS	Minding grandchildren predicted better cognitive function High-frequency predicted poorer cognition and increase in demands	+/-
Musil, C. M., & Ahmad, M. (2002). <i>Journal of Aging and Health</i> , 14(1), 96–121.	XS	Grandparents minding grandchildren report higher stress levels than non-caregivers	–
Pruchno, R. (1999). <i>The Gerontologist</i> , 39(2), 209–221.	XS	Grandparents report that caring for grandchildren provides happiness and purpose. Less privacy and time for other relationships – time constraints	+/-
Sands, R. G., Goldberg-Glen, R., & Thornton, P. L. (2005). <i>Journal of Gerontological Social Work</i> , 45(4), 65–82.	XS	Grandparents reported lower stress and greater wellbeing is they received support from friends and the community	+
Whitley, D. M., & Fuller-Thomson, E. (2015). <i>American Journal of Men's Health</i> , 1–13.	XS	Poorer physical and emotional health in custodial grandparents compared to single parents	–
Whitley, D. M., Kelley, S. J., & Sipe, T. A. (2001). <i>Health & Social Work</i> , 26(2), 105–114.	XS	Grandparenting associated with greater life satisfaction	+
<i>Longitudinal</i>			
Blustein, J., Chan, S., & Guanais, F. C. (2004). <i>Health Services Research</i> , 39(6p1), 1671–1690.	6 years	Full-time grandparents have higher probability of depressive symptoms	–
Chen et al. (2015). <i>J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci</i> , 70(5), 793–803.	12 years	Caring reduced frailty, Coresidence resulted in health deterioration Financial and social resources and higher frequency determine outcome	+/-
Chen, F. & Liu, G. (2012). <i>J Gerontol B Psychol Sci Soc Sci</i> , 67(1), 99–112.	15 years	Grandparents in three generation households show more rapid decline in health. Lower intensity grandparenting has protective effect on health	+/-
Song, L., & Li, L. (2014). <i>Paper presented at the XVIII ISA World Congress of Sociology</i> , Yokohama, Japan.	11 years	Positive relationship between grandparenting and cognition overall Decrements in cognition associated with intense grandparenting	+/-
Tsai, F.-J., Motamed, S., & Rougemont, A. (2013). <i>BMC Public Health</i> , 13(1), 567–575.	14 years	Living with grandchildren protects against depression and loneliness more than other familial relationships	+
Xu, L., et al. (2012). <i>Fam Community Health</i> , 35(4), 287–299.	8 years	Decreasing grandparenting intensity led to increased life satisfaction over time	
Primary Carer-role Grand-parenting			
<i>Cross-Sectional</i>			
Crowther, M. R. et al. (2015). <i>Ageing Ment Health</i> , 19(9), 844–852.	XS	Rewards/gains most common theme reported by custodial grandparents Some challenges reported, such as feeling overwhelmed, health concerns interfering with abilities	+/-
Kelley, S. J. (2013). <i>Res Nurs Health</i> , 36(4), 373–385.	XS	40% of caregiving grandmothers reported elevated psychological distress levels.	–
Ice, G. H., et al. (2012). <i>Soc Sci Med</i> , 74(12), 2020–2027.	XS	Grandparental caregivers had higher perceived stress than non-caregivers.	–
Mhaka-Mutepfa, M., et al. (2015). <i>J Aging Health</i> , 27(3), 454–479.	XS	High personal and social assets increased resilience in grandparent caregivers	+/-
Mhaka-Mutepfa, M., et al. (2014). <i>Health Care Women Int</i> , 35(7–9), 1022–1039.	XS	Personal and social assets related to better physical and mental health in custodial grandparents	+/-
Shaibu, S. (2013). <i>J Nurs Scholarsh</i> , 45(4), 363–370.	XS	Caring for grandchildren fraught with difficulties, especially financial issues and poor health.	–
Sprang, G., et al. (2015). <i>Ageing Ment Health</i> , 19(4), 315–324.	XS	Child-grandparent conflicts associated with lower emotional wellbeing in custodial grandparents	–

feel obliged to take on a greater intensity of care than they would have chosen.

Universal health and wellbeing benefits, irrespective of the duration and context, were reported with grand-parenting in

Taiwan, and in the United States improved abstinence behaviours in those with alcohol and drug problems was noted, presumably due to the focus on the needs of others and the requirement for sobriety when caring for children.

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