

THE SENATE

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY AFFAIRS

References Committee

Inquiry into grandparents who take primary responsibility for raising their grandchildren



This submission is written on behalf of an independent support group in Perth, Western Australia.

GRANDPARENTS REARING GRANDCHILDREN WA (INC)

Grandparents have always taken on the role of caring for their grandchildren as they have done throughout the ages. Over the last twenty years or more we have seen a rapid increase of grandparents raising their grandchildren on a full-time basis. These are not grandparents that provide childcare for their own children. These are grandparents who have become the primary carers of their grandchildren because the parents are unable to care for their children. The grandchildren are at risk when their parent/s have a mental illness, addicted to drugs, alcohol, illicit drugs, abuse, and violence. Grandparents are asking the State and Federal Governments to work together to help them. The present system is too complex with different legislation, protocols, policies and procedures and very little co-ordination between governments, their departments and each state.

They would like more recognition of their rights and needs and a much better understanding/awareness from staff in child protection agencies, Centrelink, Child Support and any other government agencies.

There are three ways the grandchildren can come into care of the grandparents:

- Federal Family Court
- Department of Child Protection
- Informal arrangements

Chance or luck seems to play a huge part in determining what help a grandparent receives throughout this journey.

Grandparent's financial status falls into three categories

- Centrelink single parenting, disability, aged pension, new start, parenting payment
- Grandparents still working full-time
- Self-funded retirees

RECOMMENDATION # 1

That the State and Federal Governments together recognize grandparents raising their grandchildren as a special group requiring assistance. E.g. Centrelink a new criteria for grandparents be created and a different income or asset tested. "Means tested" to be used so grandparents are not treated like they are the parents. We are not the parents.

RECOMMENDATION # 2

That the Centrelink criteria for disability allowances be reviewed and extended to cover emotional and psychological disability suffered by the grandchildren



Financial issues need to be resolved. Grandparents working full-time, pensioners or limited retirement incomes, self-funded retirees have difficulty providing for babies, young children, teenagers, particularly as majority of grandchildren arrive with little or no notice, and very few possessions. Basic furniture, beds, clothes, toys, school uniforms/fees/books etc. pose great financial hardship on all but wealthy grandparents. Many, many grandparents are raising grandchildren with disabilities and their special needs and circumstances need to be addressed without red tape. Means testing of Financial and Assets should be disregarded.

Grandparents are saving the taxpayers a tremendous amount of money each year because if the grandparents did not raise the grandchildren they would become the responsibility of the government.

These payments and services have been identified and should be granted to help and support all grandparents:

- Fortnightly payments not means tested or taxed
- Immediate lump sum payments for initial set up costs, medical and dental expenses for grandchildren
- Help for major items bigger car, house renovations to accommodate grandchildren
- Annual payments for recurring items like school fees/uniforms/books/other education expenses
- Access to counselling, other children's services e.g. speech therapy, psychology tutoring and assistance to school work. So much new modern technology available
- Access to counselling for grandparents in their full-time role of caring for traumatized grandchildren
- Access to immediate and ongoing support child protection agencies and more early intervention agencies.

RECOMMENDATION # 3

That State and Federal Governments work together to give grandparents raising grandchildren the same payments and support services as foster carers.

Grandparents desperately need free, quality respite options. Respite places where grandchildren can enjoy activities while the grandparents take a break and still be on the same premises

In-home respite care to allow grandparents to go out while the grandchildren have the security of being at home

Back-up respite in case of emergencies, in-home care essential

Camps for both grandparents and grandchildren with activities together and separately

RECOMMENDATION # 4

That there be a range of respite options be available to grandparents raising their grandchildren expanding existing respite programs and new funding options for independent grandparent support groups and community service providers



Grandparents trying to find information in their situation is hard to access, inconsistent, not promoted, there is no one central access point to seek information, an office provided by staff who are trained in and understand grandparent issues could be set up in each state to provide information on

- Legal matters
- Financial matters
- Respite and child care matters
- Services available for grandchildren
- Services available for grandparents
- Support groups-contact details
- Source of advice, information about community services

RECOMMENDATION # 5

A full-time advocate paid by the State and Federal government be implemented to assist grandparents raising grandchildren on all matters within their State

Legal issues, the inequity regarding access to Legal Aid raises many questions. Grandparents have a very long legal battle to keep children in their care usually without legal assistance as many Grandparents have assets e.g. "owing their own home "making them ineligible, while the abusive/neglectful parents are granted Legal Aid drawing out the process. Once again financially disadvantaging the grandparent. Grandparents need to be recognized in family Law and state legislation as having rights and status in relation to the grandchildren in their care to keep safe at all times

RECOMMENDATION# 6

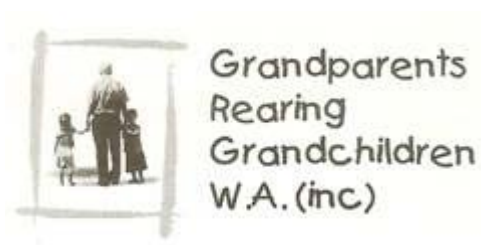
The Federal and State governments ensure that independent complaints mechanisms or ombudsmen be available to oversee child protection departments and have the power to investigate complaints and these are well publicized

RECOMMENDATION# 7

That Legal Aid be available to grandchildren and grandparents involved in Family Court matters

All children involved in the legal system have an independent advocate or a child's legal representative paid for by Legal Aid

The income and assets test for legal Aid have the same eligibility as the aged pension



RECOMMENDATION #8

The status and rights of grandparents be recognized by the Federal Family Law and State legislation relating to the protection of children, teenagers, the family Court, Children Courts, child protection authorities, particularly to the existing grandparent's role as the primary carer of the grandchildren

RECOMMENDATION# 9

That the issues of repeated non-attendance at hearings by recipients of Legal Aid be addressed

RECOMMENDATION# 10

That the legal situation of grandchildren following the death of the custodial grandparent be clarified, including the extent to which the grandparent/s may provide for their safety and security
Many grandparents who do not have formal custody arrangements need an easy way to establish entitlements to allowances. This would then establish the grandparent to obtain a birth certificate, Medicare and Health care Cards for the grandchildren

RECOMMENDATION# 11

That procedures be set up to establish the eligibility for assistance of those grandparents who are raising their grandchildren with the informal agreement of parents or child protection authorities or without a formal court order

RECOMMENDATION# 12

That the grandchildren be eligible for a Health Care Card or Medicare Card in their own right obtained be the grandparent

RECOMMENDATION# 13

That the grandchildren be eligible for State education subsidies and allowances in their own right and that grandparents be informed of those subsidies and allowances

Grandparents raising their grandchildren often speak of being too old to be doing the same things young children want to do. Grandparents worry about the capacity to keep going. Discipline is a worry, what is acceptable in this day and age? Also many grandchildren's early experiences mean they have many behavioral and many emotional problems which grandparents probably didn't encounter when they were parenting their own children.



Grandparents have the knowledge and experience of parenting but this time around a different approach may be needed. Parenting courses could be modified to meet the special needs of these grandchildren.e.g. 123 Magic and Triple P programs as these grandchildren often show a range of Traumatized behavior problems, are very insecure, extreme attention seeking, acting up traits. These grandchildren need routine and security and an enormous amount of encouragement. The need for family counselling is rarely offered or just not available depending where the grandparent resides.

RECOMMENDATION# 14

That grandparent education programs be developed to meet the specific needs of grandparents raising grandchildren

It has been shown that grandchildren being exposed to parental drug abuse can damage the psychosocial development of these grandchildren more than any other developmental area. It affects the way these grandchildren interact, think, and feel about themselves, others and society. If help is not found such thoughts and feelings can escalate into obstacles preventing the development of healthy adults. These grandchildren may develop anti-social behavior, depression, hostility and many more stressed related difficulties later in life. It has also been shown grandchildren have been wrongly diagnosed with Attention Deficit disorders after exposure to drug-using lifestyles when in actual fact these grandchildren are really suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

RECOMMENDATION # 15

That Federal and State government and community service providers develop coordinated early intervention and prevention programs for grand families at risk, to address children's well-being and safety within their family. These programs should be founded on evidence-based models and include adequate services for individual children and families, especially emotional and psychological services and therapies and promote understanding and sharing of information, between grand families, agencies and professionals in a timely manner without long waiting lists

Grandparents have found support groups invaluable. They give a wealth of information and personal support. Grandparents feel safe, relaxed and can gain confidence in raising their grandchildren. Many of these grandchildren can often be extreme, violent and exhausting all in one day. The support group can help grandparents with skills to better cope, regain their social and emotional well-being.

Grandparents come to rely on grandparent support groups for friendship, advice, understanding that each member can offer and the group keeps the grandparent "going " and keeps their "sanity"



Grandparents need to know the State and Federal governments recognize the importance of grandparents support groups and assist with the establishment and ongoing running costs of support Groups throughout Australia. Funds would be required at the local level to pay for group meetings, outings, social activities, regular camps for grandparents and grandchildren. This would provide the support and administration that is vital to prevent “burnout” with in grandparents.

RECOMMENDATION #16

That proportional funding be made available depending on number of members per annum in each state to assist grandparent independent support groups with resources, professional support, training of group leaders and administration.

No matter how much grandparents love and nurture their grandchildren, grandparents health is badly affected by the burden of raising their own grandchildren. They have to deal with their own stress and grief at the same time as the grandchildren come to live with grandma and granddad. Grandparents often do not have time to properly grieve for their loss of freedom, retirement plans. There is the constant worry about money , feeding more mouths, the normal cost of raising a child as well as the additional costs for these grandchildren’s particular needs, the threat and reality of expensive legal action. Parents drop In and out of the children’s lives causing major disruptions. Many parents are erratic in their contact and access visits with the children leaving the children confused and grandparents to pick up the pieces to return to a stable environment provided by the grandparents. Grandparents worry about ill-health and death. Many grandparents need home-based care services and worry about normal effects of ageing and the future. Many grandparents are also caring for their elderly parents as well.

RECOMMENDATION #17

That State and Federal government sponsor further research into the long term effects on the health and well-being of grandparents raising their grandchildren and the long term effects on grandchildren raised by their grandparents

RECOMMENDATION # 18

Within the next two years the Federal and State sponsor a conference on issues relating to grandparents raising grandchildren



GRANDPARENTS REARING GRANDCHILDREN WA (INC) has been operating since January 2000. We are an independent support group operating in the northern suburbs of Perth. Our policies and practices are consistent with our constitution in particular the committee (of seven members) who ensure guidelines are met for membership and the objectives of the constitution are adhered to. We join with other full-time grandparents seeking to provide a stable, nurturing environment for their grandchildren. Grandparents come to our group feeling isolated and overwhelmed, we provide the Grandparent with socially, emotionally, mentally and spiritually support. Information on dealing with government departments, budgeting, food relief and other services. The support group is extremely humble and are thankful to be one of the two MY TIME FOR Grandparents support groups set up by the Federal government in 2012 in Western Australia. Without this financial support the group would have closed. Presently we have 57 families consisting of 75 adults and 87 children. We are now finding the Federal financial support is not enough for the amount of families we are currently supporting and rely on grants (many grants we are unable to apply as we do not meet the criteria) as well as Wanslea Grandcare in WA to help with the needs of our members.

Despite the hurdles and hardships grandparents face, they are quickly to shout out that they love the grandchildren and do what it takes to protect them and nurture them. Grandparents are determined to give their grandchildren healthy, happy and well-rounded lives. Grandparents want to be able to have the financial and support services that foster parents are able to receive. Grandparents are asking the State and Federal governments to help them achieve this.

Kindest Regards

Kaye Bendle

President

On behalf of all our members of Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA (Inc)

Web site: Grandparentsrearinggrandchildren.org.au