



## COTA NATIONAL SENIORS

### **GRANDPARENTS PLAY A FUNDAMENTAL ROLE IN BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY – RESPONSE TO YOUR PARLIMENTARY INQUIRY**

In response to your Inquiry into Balancing Work and Family, COTA National Seniors Partnership (CNSP) would like to take this opportunity to express our insight and position in the related issues.

CNSP is the largest seniors membership organization that operates both nationally and in every State and Territory. With its individual membership of over 270,000 and organisational membership of over 800, representing all aspects of Australian seniors' interests, CNSP has a pre-eminent role in representing, advocating for and serving senior Australians. CNSP develops policy based on membership input, including through Branches and member organisation forums. Policy Councils in each State and Territory, and our National Policy Council, determine CNSP policies and positions.

Recent research studies (Weston, 2004, Goodfellow, 2003, Backhouse and Lucas, 2003, de Vaus, 2003) identified a range of issues that are relevant to this Inquiry, particularly to the disincentives to starting a family and what would make it easier for parents who wish to return to the paid workforce. Among the findings, the following appeared to be more significant:

- 1) the higher participation rate of females in paid workforce, which has contributed to the delay of childbearing and fewer number of children in a family;
- 2) changes in family structure due to divorce and family breakdown increases financial pressure on parents and the demand for on-going reliable child care, including ad hoc and casual child care that is not available in the current formal child care services or not at an affordable rate;
- 3) social and cultural changes, for instance, life style changes, put more financial pressure on couples when starting a family as well as increase expectations or demand that will discourage childbearing.

CNSP commends your attention to the fundamental role that grandparents play in the younger generation's balancing work and family and the support they provide to their children in dealing with the related issues.

Increased longevity of the population creates greater opportunities for intergenerational engagement and availability of family support. ABS statistics

(1999) indicated that grandparents, as part of regular childcare arrangements, currently care for over 20 percent of children below school age in Australia.

Recent studies found that:

- 1) grandparents become increasingly the provider of child care while parents work (Goodfellow, 2003);
- 2) grandparents provide flexibility and continuity of informal child care that is unpaid and may incur costs to themselves but financially benefits the parents (Backhouse and Lucas, 2003, de Vaus, 2003 )
- 3) grandparents' voluntary support in child care and other support such as moral support encourage and strengthen parents' commitment to childbearing (Backhouse and Lucas, 2003). Their support also increases the confidence and security of the younger generation in their decision-making on starting a family.

While grandparents are making a significant contribution to society through their support to their families, there are some emerging issues that need to be investigated further, including:

- With Australian population ageing, more and more seniors will stay in the workforce longer. This will have an impact on capacity/ability to provide informal care to grandchildren;
- When grandparents have to stay in the workforce themselves as well as provide support to parents of their grandchildren, it might limit senior Australians' opportunity or choices of employment at a later stage, which will have an impact on their retirement income;
- As more and more grandparents take the role as the major childcare providers, it might require immediate attention to the special need they require, such as educational programs for grandparents in regard to communication with very young children and support needed in emergency situations.

We recommend the Commonwealth government:

- recognize the fundamental role that grandparents play in balancing work and family life,
- recognize the economic contribution they make through their unpaid work,
- address their needs as the regular informal carers,
- address the negative economic impact on grandparents (potentially reduced workforce hours and retirement savings) that can occur as a result of care responsibilities,

- further investigate, on a national scale, the significance of their economic and social contribution.

CNSP would like to bring to your attention one of our key strategic policy documents – Strategic Ageing - Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Vol 17/2004, a report of the project commissioned by the Hon. Larry Anthony, Minister for Children & Youth Affairs (<http://www.cota.org.au/StratAfiles/SA17,2004.pdf>). While it focuses on the grandparents who are the primary carers of their grandchildren, some of the issues and recommendations are valid to this Inquiry, for instance, Recommendation 7 and 17.

#### Recommendation 7

That a community awareness campaign for grandparents raising grandchildren be developed and implemented, supported by reliable, accessible and consistent information about financial and legal issues and support services and available in a variety of formats – booklets, telephone information services, website, print media and community service announcements on radio and television.

#### Recommendation 17

That parent education programs be developed to include the specific needs of grandparents raising grandchildren.

While many grandparents provide various types of supports to their adult children, many are also in need of supports themselves. Their children often provide this support. People in the workforce may have various caring responsibilities simultaneously, thus conflicting work and family priorities. Workplaces must recognise that elder care is a growing phenomenon and that it must be given the same status and recognition as childcare needs.

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