

## Grandparents – the unsung heroes of childcare



**It's meant to be a time to kick back and pursue all those interests you put aside while you worked and raised a family. But increasingly, grandparents are being called on to fill the gaps in Australia's formal childcare system while their adult children go out to work.**

Grandparents provide a staggering 23% of all childcare to children under 12 in Australia, according to a recent AMP NATSEM report. The figure is even higher for pre-schoolers because of the high cost of formal childcare and restricted opening hours.

And in a small but growing minority of cases, grandparents are the sole carers of their grandchildren. For the estimated 63,250 grandparents in this position, the financial burden can put severe strain on their limited retirement income.

### **Know your limits**

In most cases though, grandparents are only too happy to help out for free and regard looking after the grandkids as a joy, not a burden. But it seems joy has its limits.

According to research from the University of Melbourne, older women who took care of grandchildren one day a week had better memory and faster cognitive speed than those who didn't.

The study found that good social, emotional and mental health is associated with reduced likelihood of getting Alzheimer's Disease. Lively grandchildren certainly provide all these benefits in spades. But so does a game of bridge or a day out sailing, and these activities are arguably less taxing than chasing after a two-year-old.

Indeed, the Melbourne study also found that women who cared for grandchildren five or more days a week had significantly less processing speed and planning scores, possibly because they felt exhausted. These women were more likely to report anxiety and stress because they felt their children were being demanding.

### **A difficult dilemma**

Ian Yates, of National seniors advocacy group COTA Australia, says this poses a difficult dilemma for grandparents who often feel they are not living the life they thought they would.

"We find that some grandparents, usually the grandmother, stop work to look after grandchildren so their children can go to work. Premature departure from the workforce is not good for your physical, mental or emotional health", he says.

Arguably, it is not good for your financial health either. This is especially so at a time when governments are winding back pension entitlements and encouraging everyone to stay in paid work for longer.

So what can grandparents do to strike a balance between helping the family and enjoying an active retirement?

### **Have a conversation**

Right from the start you need to have an explicit discussion with your children to set out what you do and don't want to do. Unless you speak up they may not know when you feel your time is being encroached upon.

**Look for alternative solutions**

Is there another set of grandparents or family members who could help out? If formal childcare is not flexible enough, perhaps an au pair or nanny could step in a few days a week.

**Put your own health first**

Prevention is the best medicine for healthy ageing, so make sure you know your physical and emotional limits. Minding children five days a week is stressful, even for young parents, especially when you are trying to juggle other activities in your life.

Spending time with the younger generation, free of the demands of parenthood, is one of the perks of being a grandparent. But care needs to be taken that it stays that way and doesn't become an imposition on the older generation, their health and wellbeing and their hip pocket.

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