



Third generation parenting

Verna Schofield examines the impact of kinship care in later life

A vivid memory from my practitioner days is the anguish of an older Māori woman deciding whether to commit herself to full-time parenting of a grandchild. This pressure had arisen from a family group conference. Although my client was motivated by a strong sense of duty to take on the caring, other factors were barriers. She was 72 years old, in poor health and looking after a husband with dementia. Her financial resources and support systems were limited. The issues that arose for her in making her decision have much in common with those faced by other ageing kinship carers.

Although any person from within a wide extended family network could undertake kinship care, grandparents are those most frequently involved (Connolly, 2005; Westheimer and Kaplan, 1998). At present, more than 4,000 people nationwide have legal guardianship of grandchildren (Ministry of Social Development, 2004). There will also be formal and informal parenting arrangements in which children reside with their grandparents and other older kin fulltime or for extended periods. The overall number of older people responsible for raising dependent children is unknown, and likely to be very much higher. The raising of children by their grandparents or older relatives is not a new phenomenon. The practice of shared parenting

has been long established in Māori custom with atawhai, adoption in which a grandparent takes over the care of a child at an early age (Metge, 1995). The difference in today's world is the increasing incidence of grandparents parenting and the complex situations needing to be managed within contemporary society.

An Australian Government report attributes a recent escalation in the number of custodial grandparents to a marked increase in substance abuse among parents and also points to the significant problems resulting for the

children of abusers and their kinship carers (COTA National Seniors, 2003).

Kinship relationships are distinctive in the strength they derive from blood ties. Intergenerational obligations within these relationships are negotiated over time according to commonly accepted norms of giving and taking assistance (Finch and Mason, 1993). The value placed on obligations varies across cultures depending on how these are defined. Māori and Pacific families promote strong intergenerational bonds between extended family members. In contrast, British research indicated that grandparents there feel strongly obligated towards assisting their grandchildren, but this tends not to be reciprocated by the grandchildren (Finch and Mason, 1993). When

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family members agree to custodial arrangements, the experience can be mutually rewarding for grandparents and grandchildren. Older people are in a position to provide children with a safe and stable home in time of strife (Ferguson, 2004). They have an extensive base of life experience from which to draw in tackling any difficulties. Nurturing children's development provides a sense of purpose in life and an opportunity to invest in the future generation.

However, the role of a 'second time around' parent is complex. There are particular challenges for older people that relate specifically to their phase within the human life cycle. Physiological changes to the body as well as people's range of life experiences are likely to impact on their abilities to look after dependent children. Third generation parents have a unique set of issues to contend with, ones that are not always well recognised.

As people age and mature they take on new social roles that are associated with their phases in life, such as grandparenthood or retirement. These roles create expectations about how people will act and how their lives will progress (Ferraro, 2001). Untimely divergence from these roles can cause uncertainty and put people's lives out of kilter with those of their peers.

Two general characteristics of third generation parenting are that the care is usually unplanned and the caregiving role is ambiguous. Children often come into the care of grandparents or other older relatives when there is a crisis in their home situation. Grandparents are then precipitated into taking on additional responsibilities at a time when their lives are moving in other directions and they are mostly unprepared for these major changes in their lives. As a result of the usual sequence of life course events being altered, older kinship carers

may experience generational dissonance with other parents. When surveyed, grandparents have noted their social isolation, low energy levels for children's activities and lack of knowledge of modern parenting practices (Fitzpatrick and Reeve, 2003). Due to rapid changes in society in latter years, grandchildren often need help with experiences that grandparents have not encountered previously.

In addition, the new role of second time around parenting is often confusing. In many cultures the tasks connected with parenting and grandparenthood differ – Māori perceive the parental role as building children's character and basic skills, whereas grandparents are expected to develop the cultural knowledge and self esteem of their mokopuna and enhance their verbal communication skills (Metge, 1995). Forms of disciplining are also different, and the roles of grandparent and parent can be difficult to reconcile when they are both performed by the same person.

There are also psychosocial effects of older kinship care that relate to feelings of reduced control over life and freedom, and to emotional stresses. The scrutiny from official agencies that is associated with kinship care becomes another intrusion. For example, most third generation parents in New Zealand are likely to have contact with Child, Youth and Family social workers. A survey of people attending grandparents' support groups found 75 per cent of participants had past or present involvement with the Department (Worrall, 2001).

When children move into a grandparent's care, they are likely to be in need of special support to work through their losses and grief. Grandparents, too, are emotionally vulnerable because they may have the added worry of the reactions of the children's parents and other

family members (Fitzpatrick and Reeve, 2003). They are trying to manage their own losses and changing family relationships while dealing with their grandchildren's insecurity.

Another frequent research finding is the disruption caused to existing and expected lifestyles. When assuming care, older people will already have ongoing commitments in their lives. Employment, retirement activities, future plans, and physical health can all be adversely affected. Grandparents may need to forgo work opportunities, or their usual employment routines may be interrupted through childcare responsibilities. Those who have not been in the workforce are similarly hampered in continuing their social or recreational activities when fitting in with a child's daily regime (Fitzpatrick and Reeve, 2003).

These demands on time, together with stresses from caregiving, can affect the grandparents' ability to exercise and maintain their physical and mental health. This is particularly significant for older people when advancing age increases the risk of ill-health and disability. Māori carers could be particularly at risk because Māori experience age-related health problems some five years earlier than non-Māori (Cunningham, 2000). Furthermore, Māori women aged 45-64 years old have a higher rate of disability than others in the general population (Ministry of Health, 2002).

Perhaps the greatest concern of older kinship carers revolves around their economic situation. The cost of educational fees, clothing and extra-curricula activities for school-age children quickly mount up. Financial assistance for kinship care is provided through the unsupported child benefit, but that is less generous than payments available to foster parents (Worrall, 2001). Although most older New Zealanders manage reasonably well on

their income (Fergusson et al, 2001), the annual median income for older people is substantially lower than that for other adults (Statistics New Zealand, 2004). Outgoing expenses incurred in looking after children are liable to erode older custodial parents' retirement savings and restrict their standard of living. This in turn reflects through to the care given to children.

However, the potential for family conflict always exists. If there were strains within families that contributed to children entering an older relative's care, these often continue into the longer-term care arrangement. Grandparents then find themselves caught between parent and grandchildren, and subject to threats and abuse from a hostile parent (Fitzpatrick and Reeve, 2003; Westheimer and Kaplan 1998).

Interestingly, research into divorce and grandparenting has lately highlighted a norm of non-communication in families that are regarded as close (Ferguson 2004). When there are divided loyalties across generations, grandparents, parents and children refrain from disclosing information to each other about their relationships. The practice has been observed in children as young as eight years old and can be a useful coping strategy in avoiding distress or embarrassment to other family members. A downside is that the norm can lead to important information being left unsaid. Professionals working with children and their older relatives may not be fully aware of these silences nor realise the possible implications for their practice (Ferguson, 2004).

The status of grandparenthood bestows no special rights in this country. Adoption by grandparents is comparatively rare (Kent, 2003). Even if guardianship or custody orders have been granted by the Family Court, grandparents' legal standing may be shared with parents and other

guardians. For example, guardianship orders in favour of grandparents may be challenged in some circumstances by other parties and lacks the permanency of an adoption order. When caregiving is an informal arrangement without a court mandate, the parents retain their legal rights and responsibilities over children and may remove children from their grandparents' home at any time (Worrall, 2001).

These kinship carers who take on the responsibility of raising children are likely to encounter significant issues related to their stage in the life course and its associated norms and expectations. The way that these issues are resolved will influence the upbringing of children in their care.

As in other developed countries, changing family structures and an aging population are speedily increasing the prospect of kinship care for older New Zealanders. Social workers are likely to work with third generation kinship carers much more frequently in the future. This relationship can be positive and rewarding, and an understanding of the experience of caregiving from the perspective of grandparents will assist practitioners in providing sensitive and constructive assistance to achieve a good outcome for the children in their care.

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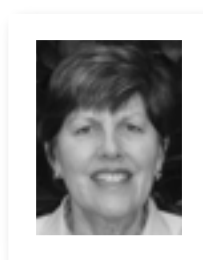
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