

The experiences and needs of grandparents who care for their grandchildren because of parental substance misuse

Lorna Templeton
Independent Research Consultant, Bristol

SSA Annual Symposium 2010

Background

- ▶ Estimated £12 billion of savings to the statutory sector as a result of kinship care (Grandparents Plus).
- ▶ Over 200,000 grandparents in the UK care for one or more grandchildren.
- ▶ Parental substance misuse (PSM) is one of the most common reasons for kinship care.
- ▶ Impact of PSM on children is well known; their particular needs places extra pressure on kinship carers.
- ▶ Kinship care can bring many benefits for grandchildren.
- ▶ However, often kinship carers are more disadvantaged than, for example, foster carers and the benefits of kinship care can be cancelled out if adequate and appropriate support is not in place.

Policy Context

- ▶ “Local authorities have a duty to make arrangements for looked after children to live with relatives or friends where it is consistent with their welfare” (DCSF, 2010), and for this to be the first option considered.
- ▶ Yet, kinship carers receive very little help and support; kinship care generally is affected by big gaps in policy.
- ▶ A survey of local authorities concluded that policies and services to kin carers varied substantially and that, overall, the response was “grossly inadequate” in a range of areas including assessments and financial support (Family Rights Group, 2009).
- ▶ Some evidence of change, for example, the Families and Relationships Green Paper, draft Family and Friends Care guidance from DCSF (2010) and Scotland’s National Fostering and Kinship Care Strategy.

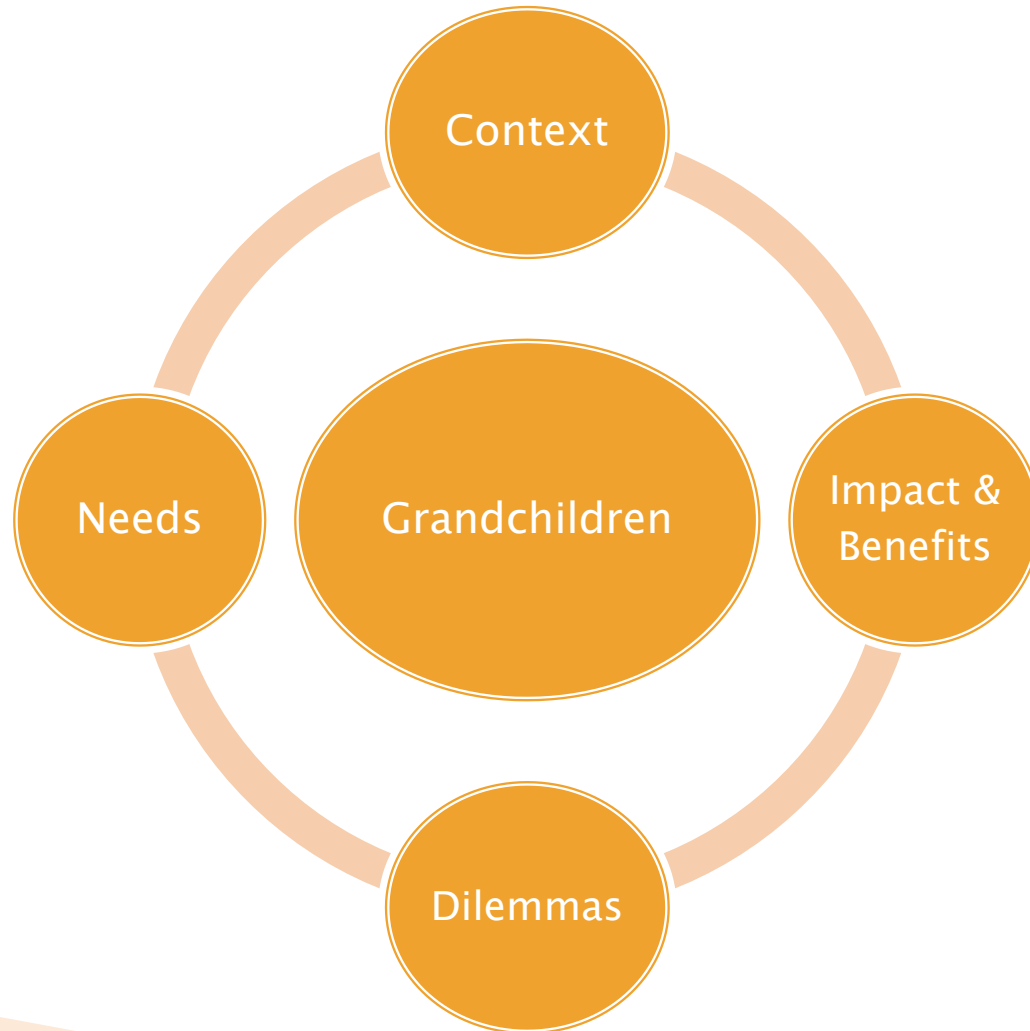
The Study

- ▶ Gap in research in this area.
- ▶ Study commissioned by Aquarius as part of it's ongoing development of family focused ways of working.
- ▶ Study aim: to explore the experiences and needs of grandparents who care for their grandchildren because of PSM.
- ▶ A two phase qualitative study was conducted in Birmingham.
 - Part 1: interview study grandparents.
 - Part 2: group discussions with grandparents and professionals.
- ▶ Presentation focuses on data from the grandparents.

The Grandparents

- ▶ Part 1: interviews with 12 grandparents.
- ▶ Part 2: group discussions with 12 grandparents (5 of whom had taken part in Part 1).
- ▶ So, 19 grandparents:
 - 4 couples, 11 grandmothers.
- ▶ Grandparents look after 1 or 2 grandchildren:
 - Total of 21 grandchildren.
 - Age range 1-12yrs
 - 11 female & 5 male (gender of two grandchildren missing).

Qualitative Analysis: Key themes




Context: grandparents lives

- ▶ Grandparents lives affected by:
 - Serious ill health, bereavement and disability.
 - Changes to personal and work circumstances, financial difficulties.
 - Ongoing substance misuse including threats to grandparents and grandchildren – violence, aggression, chaos, crime.
 - In some cases the grandparent was actively trying to get their child into treatment, or supporting treatment itself.

Context: care arrangements

- ▶ Informal care:
 - In about a third of cases; usually involving weekend care with grandparents having less contact with grandchildren.
 - Sometimes the care provided was to support contact arrangements between child and their parent(s).
- ▶ Formal care:
 - Residence orders (most common), interim care orders, special guardianship order and adoption.
 - Often at the request of social services.
 - Negative experiences of the care system.
 - Sometimes a last resort to prevent child(ren) being taken into care.

Impact on Grandparents

- ▶ Life is often a double-edged sword for grandparents, as they cope with their child's substance misuse and with caring for their grandchildren.
 - ▶ Grandparents talked about all areas of their lives being affected through caring for their grandchildren.
 - Financial difficulties and lack of financial support.
 - ▶ Some were affected because they had less contact with their grandchildren, or because they couldn't see other grandchildren as much.
 - ▶ Overall, the grandparents had given up a lot to care for their grandchildren, and did this because they felt it was in their grandchildren's best interest that they did so.
- 

“I’m a 52 year old woman looking for a babysitter on the odd occasion I do want to go out and it’s ridiculous really, I get quite angry sometimes, think about my daughter”

“the financial side has had a massive impact on my life”

“I had to change my whole life....I was with somebody for 14 years who I had to give up when my grand-daughter came to live with me”.

“I give up my life for them, plain and simple....I really have absolutely no life whatsoever, I never go outside the door and any little bits of money I’ve got is spent on them, it’s not that I mind that....”

“I don’t think I’ll ever ever forgive her, not for what she’s done to me but for what she’s done to them”

Impact on Grandchildren

- ▶ All areas of grandchildren's lives affected by PSM.
 - Parental absence: rejection, non-contact, loss.
 - Confusion about not seeing parent(s) and why they can't see or live with them.
 - Impact on education and being at school.
 - Disrupted lives e.g. sleep and routines.
 - Developmental delays e.g. wearing nappies, using dummies.
 - Emotional impact – e.g. anger, fear, confusion and distress.
 - Being picked on by others e.g. at school and being embarrassed about their grandparents caring for them.

“I don't think she knew if she was coming or going or who she was”

“I think she is confused and you can see she's spiteful.....but she's polite, she's intelligent, very intelligent but I think her poor little head must be spinning with what goes on”

“you can see it in him when he gets into one of his rages, pure frustration”

Benefits to Grandparents

- ▶ Involvement in their grandchildren's lives.
- ▶ Knowledge that they are safe, loved and cared for.
- ▶ Help through difficult times e.g ill health or bereavement.

"I wouldn't change anything....I don't know what I'd do without her....I don't know what my life would be like without her"

"she got me through the last 6 years [since my son's death], that's all I can say....I don't think I would have done it without her, I don't think we could have done it without each other to be fair...I think it was a time that we needed to have together....she's been my rock and she still is"

"the fact that I know that he's safe, that he's being cared for, that I'm not worrying what's going on down at Mummy's house"

Benefits to Grandchildren

- ▶ e.g. stability, security, love, routine, fun, discipline, basic needs met, keeping siblings together, moral guidance, keeping children out of the care system.

“she benefits from having stability in her life, knowing that somebody’s going to be here to support her and get her to school, and is going to understand her needs before their own needs, and also try and teach her some morals and the right way of living”

“I love to show them love, I love to show them love and I love them and I want them around and I want to be in their lives and I want them in my life....[I] smother them with love, I don’t know how else to put it, I give them everything that they want, I just love them so much”

Dilemmas faced by grandparents

1. Conflict of loyalties arising from dual identities as parents and grandparents.
2. Uncertainty about what the grandchildren know about parental substance misuse, and what, when & how they should be told about it.
3. Children love their parents, some stick up for them. This bond can't be broken, nor do grandparents want it to be. Grandparents were unsure about what to do to try maintain these bonds, and if it was the right thing to do.

Dilemmas faced by grandparents

“we should wash our hands of [my daughter]....but I will never let it get to that because at the end of the day she’s my daughter and I love her....and she’s also [my grand-daughter’s] Mum”

“we shouldn’t be telling a 5 year old that your parents are drug addicts”

“now’s the time, if she’s going to ask the question....I was always going to tell her but it was when she needed to know”

“I know that he wants mummy there....it’s mummy mummy....he talks about mummy all the time....he always likes mummy to be there as well”

“they do things together with the children....which is good for the boys.... they will deal with it together even though they are not together....I think it’s pretty good how they work together for the sake of those two boys and I really really like that so I encourage it”

Getting help

- ▶ Many were in touch with services, but through their role as parents of substance misusers; often specific needs as grandparents and kinship carers not considered.
- ▶ General lack of knowledge and awareness of services, at a local and national level.
- ▶ Surviving without help.
- ▶ Positive views of some services.
- ▶ But some very negative experiences, especially related to social services (mirrored by some professionals).
 - *“basically they wouldn’t believe what we were saying to them...a total lack of understanding....in normal circumstances why would a grandparent want to take their child away from their children...nobody would basically listen to us....most grandparents want their grandchildren to be with their parents”*

Isolation


“I felt embarrassed and so alone”

“it’s such a silent thing, it’s like you’re cast aside....you’re just isolated”

“we get no help from nobody, we just get on with it”

“there is no-one fighting your corner....when you’re doing this job because there’s nobody there”

What would grandparents like?


- ▶ Many grandparents found it really hard to think of themselves and what would help them.
 - ▶ However, many still had very helpful suggestions as to what they and their grandchildren would find helpful.
 - Help for their grandchildren.
 - Someone to talk to.
 - Meet other grandparents in similar situations.
 - Respite, on own or with grandchildren.
 - Knowledge, information & support, e.g. about rights, benefits and the care system.
 - Financial support and advice.
 - More knowledge and better advertising of services.
 - ▶ The thoughts of the professionals helped place these suggestions in the local context.
- 

Someone to talk to

“we’ve got [the Aquarius workers] but [she’s] got nobody....somebody who knows what to ask her...see how she feels....we might be asking the wrong thing”

“I’ve never had any support from anyone, we don’t have anyone that we can go and talk to....I didn’t think anyone really cared or felt bothered how we were feeling...if I only knew some other person, a grandparent going through what I was going through so I could at least have someone to talk to it would have helped....I can pick up the phone but who am I to talk to?....to be honest I wouldn’t have cared who it was, just someone to talk to, someone who would listen to me and be there, some sort of support”

Conclusions

- ▶ An overwhelmingly selfless group who place their grandchildren at the centre of their world, making huge sacrifices in doing so.
 - ▶ The care provided may protect grandchildren from some of the negative outcomes associated with children living with parental substance misuse.
 - ▶ Dissonance between roles as parents and grandparents.
 - ▶ Grandparents faced dilemmas about talking to their grandchildren about the parental substance misuse and in maintaining bonds between parents and children.
 - ▶ Grandparents were very isolated and found it hard to talk about what they would like, but made helpful suggestions of what would be helpful for them and their grandchildren.
- 

Impact of the Research

- ▶ Practitioners have considered how to improve support to grandparents through the relative's support group. As part of this, there have been discussions between Aquarius and a local CDT about re-starting a peer support group for grandparents.
 - ▶ Aquarius has developed a partnership with Birmingham Law Centre to offer specific support to grandparents who require legal and financial support.
 - ▶ Ongoing discussions about what else can be done; hope to continue the research agenda as part of this.
 - ▶ Dissemination of the findings locally and nationally e.g. local seminar and conference presentations.
- 