
Time to care: generation generosity under pressure

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Introduction

New research by Ipsos MORI, jointly commissioned by Grandparents Plus, Save the Children and the Family and Childcare Trust, investigates the impact of being a grandparent on people's attitudes and choices, and whether these are further influenced by the amount of time spent caring for their grandchildren.

The research shows that, although being a grandparent in itself does not significantly influence people's actions and attitudes, being a grandparent who spends a substantial amount of time caring for grandchildren is often associated with different attitudes and behaviours.

A key issue that arises from the polling is the considerable contribution that millions of grandparents are making to provide much needed informal childcare and financial support for their grandchildren.

1.9 million grandparents have given up a job, reduced their hours, or taken time off work, to look after their grandchildren. In some cases this means a loss in income.

These statistics reflect the strength of grandparenting ties and challenge the notion that the extended family is no longer important. There is strong support among grandparents and the public for the extension of some workers' rights, currently available to parents, so grandparents are able to look after their grandchildren while remaining in work. There is also a clear need to increase the affordability of formal childcare to reduce the pressure on grandparents to fill the gap.

Key findings:

- 1.9 million grandparents have reduced their hours, given up a job, or taken time off to care for a grandchild.
- 2.2 million grandparents who look after their grandchildren do so to allow the child's parents to get to work and 1 million do so because the parents cannot afford childcare.
- Of grandparents who provide childcare, 64% support an entitlement to unpaid leave from work to care for a sick grandchild, and 56% support unpaid leave to help parents with childcare.

- Both policies have support from the wider public, with 59% supporting grandparental leave to look after a sick grandchild, and 51% supporting unpaid leave for childcare.
- 7 in 10 grandparents say the financial, practical, and caring contribution they make is not recognised.

Our poll raises serious questions about the attitudes towards the childcare provided by grandparents, the unseen contribution they make to society and the economy and their rights in the workplace.

The situation is summed up by Julie, 46, a grandmother from Manchester, who reduced her waitressing shifts from full-time to part-time in order to look after her 2 year old grandson and help her daughter, who is also a waitress, stay in work.

“Oh my daughter wouldn't be able to go to work if it wasn't for me. By not using a paid nursery she said she was saving £400 a month. I thought gosh is that how much it would cost if I didn't do what I was doing?”

Financial support and flexible working

Financial and employment issues are at the heart of the findings, with many respondents saying that they had either given up their job, reduce their hours or taken time off work. The poll also finds that those providing the most care are also more likely to provide financial support.

When asked about financial contributions including support for education and childcare costs, 12% of grandparents say they have spent over £1,000 on their grandchildren in the past 12 months. A further 17% of grandparents say they have spent between £500-£1,000 in the past year, with a further 34% having spent up to £500 over the same period. This equates to £8 billion of financial transfers from grandparents to grandchildren in just one year.

How grandparents are making significant contributions to their children and grandchildren, and are seeking to balance care and work commitments:

- 14% of grandparents have either reduced their hours, given up a job, take time off sick, or taken annual leave, in order to care for a grandchild. For those who spend significant time caring for grandchildren this figure increases to 23%, and rises to a staggering 34% for those caring for more than 10 hours per week.
- 37% of grandparents see it as their responsibility to support their grandchildren financially if they are able to, with only 12% believing the reverse to be true and seeing it as their grandchildren's responsibility to support them financially.
- 12% or 1.5 million grandparents say they feel under pressure to financially support their grandchildren.

- A higher proportion, 1 in 3 (33%) – equivalent to roughly 4.4 million grandparents – say that they would like to be financially able to support their grandchildren but cannot afford to.

The financial pressure on grandparents to contribute towards support for their grandchildren combined with being denied workplace rights currently reserved solely for parents, such as leave entitlements, leads many to feel that their contribution is not recognised.

Grandparents who are combining work with childcare for grandchildren strongly back the introduction of the kind of workplace rights currently reserved for parents, including the right to take unpaid leave to provide care.

Susan is a teacher from London aged 38. She is the mother of a 7 year old girl and 2 year old boy, and her mother commutes from Brighton one day a week to help out with childcare.

“Because my mother has done it with each child there is always a slight expectation. She shouldn’t really have to do it now, and yet we are all struggling financially and there is a massive pressure. It feels like we are pushing things on grandparents, the Government could come up with better things like give grandparents more paid time off.”

Intergenerational fairness

The poll also highlighted support for government action to ensure intergenerational fairness and finds that grandparents providing care for grandchildren tend to have the most positive attitude towards government expenditure on children and young people.

- 50% of all respondents said that it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that younger generations do not have a lower standard of living than their parents’ generation. However, only 44% of people feel that this will actually be the case.
- Support for the Basic State Pension and other benefits for older people is high with 88% of all respondents agreeing that benefits for older people should be protected. Significantly, this drops to 54% if this is at the expense of benefits for young people and children.
- The divisive issue of support for young people vs older people is further highlighted by 77% of all respondents agreeing that benefits for children and young people should be protected, but this drops to 32% if this meant that benefits for older people would be reduced.
- Grandparents who spend time caring for their grandchildren are more likely to agree that benefits for young people and children should be protected if it does not affect older people’s benefits, with 88% of all respondents agreeing compared with 67% of those who spend no time caring for their grandchildren.

- A similar difference emerges when people are asked whether the government should spend more money on supporting children and young people if it does not affect older people's benefits, with 84% of grandparents who spend time caring for their grandchildren agreeing. This is a higher proportion than in the wider population (76%), and significantly higher than the two thirds (66%) of those who do not spend time caring for their grandchildren.

Conclusions

The findings point to millions of grandparents providing invaluable childcare, which in turn allows parents to remain in the labour market and contribute to the economy. However, a perfect storm of rising living costs, inflexible work practices and increased financial commitments means they are a generation under pressure to give an increasing amount of time, care and money to their grandchildren.

And at a time when our ageing population requires grandparents to stay in work longer, the reliance on grandparents as providers of childcare presents a challenge to government and a risk to parents, particularly working mothers of an emerging care gap.

It is imperative that the contribution of grandparents as providers of childcare is fully recognised and supported by government, and that they get the flexibility they need to allow them to remain in work and contribute to the economy. By introducing an entitlement to grandparental leave we would help both working parents and grandparents to stay in work.

But it is also important to ensure that services such as formal childcare and financial support are in place for families as relying on grandparents to fill the gap is both unsustainable and inequitable as it is not an option available to everyone.