Relationships between grandparents and grandchildren

RUTH WESTON AND LIXIA QU
Grandparents can play many important roles in children’s lives. They can be loving companions, caregivers, mentors, historians and sources of various other forms of support. In some cases, they also can become surrogate parents.\(^1\)

While many grandparents appear to welcome the opportunity to commit to frequent, regular and lengthy periods with their grandchildren, others prefer to pose heavy restrictions on the time they spend with them, and still others live too far away from their grandchildren to see them frequently, if at all (see Ochiltree, 2006). And, like all relationships, those between grandparents and grandchildren evolve and are not always beneficial to one or both parties. The relationships would tend to change in response to the grandchildren’s increasing maturity, the ageing of their grandparents, and other changing circumstances such as parental separation and/or residential relocation.

Parental separation represents a key circumstance that has the potential to change the roles of grandparents and the strength and quality of their relationship with their adult children and grandchildren. For some families, grandparents’ involvement with their grandchildren may increase under these circumstances, as their adult offspring seek assistance in coping with the consequences of the separation. For instance, the resident parent and children may move in with the grandparent at least for a time.\(^2\) For others, involvement with grandchildren may lessen or cease.

This article explores the closeness of relationships between grandchildren and their paternal and maternal grandparents, as well as the impact of separation on these relationships, as perceived by the children’s parents. The analysis is based on the General Population of Parents Survey (GPPS). The GPPS is a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 5,000 parents (with a child under 18 years old) living in private dwellings. The survey was conducted in 2006 and funded by the Attorney-General’s Department and the then Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA). This survey collected information on the perceptions of all parents on the closeness of their children’s relationship with their grandparents. Respondents who had separated from their children’s other parent were then asked to indicate whether the children’s relationship with each set of grandparents had changed and, if so, the impact of such changes on the children.

Current relationship between grandchildren and grandparents

Respondents who had at least one living parent were asked to indicate whether the relationship between their own parents and children was “very close”, “close”, “not close” or “non-existent”. Reports that the relationship varies were recorded, although this response option was not suggested to respondents. Partnered respondents were also asked the same questions about the relationship between their partner’s parents and their children. It is worth noting that no distinction was made between specific children in the family, nor between grandmothers and grandfathers. For simplicity, the discussion below refers to “maternal grandparents”, “paternal grandparents” and “children” or “grandchildren” (i.e., plural terms are used). Figure 1 summarises the patterns of answers provided by fathers and mothers.

- Most mothers and fathers described the relationship between their children and their maternal and paternal grandparents as “close” or “very close” (67–85%).
- Both mothers and fathers were more likely to consider that their children had a “very close” relationship with their maternal grandparents than with their paternal grandparents (mothers: 56% vs 32%; fathers: 46% vs 39%).
- However, views appeared to be influenced by whether the grandparents were on the respondents’ side or their partner’s side. Specifically:
  - mothers were more likely than fathers to describe relationships between the children and their maternal grandparents as “very close” (56% vs 46%)
  - similarly, fathers were slightly more likely than mothers to report “very close” relationships between the children and their paternal grandparents (39% vs 32%).

Figure 2 summarises the views of separated parents and of parents who had never experienced separation regarding the closeness of the relationship between their own parents and children. The separated parents are divided into three groups: resident and non-resident fathers, and resident mothers.\(^3\)

- Of the five groups of parents, “very close” relationships between their own parents and children were most likely to be reported by mothers who were not separated (58%), followed by resident fathers and resident mothers (51–55%), then fathers who were not separated (41%).
- Of all groups, non-resident fathers were the least likely to report that the relationship was “very close” (19% vs 41–58%) and the most likely to describe the relationship as either “not close” or “non-existent”, or one that “varies” (41% vs 13–20%).
- Patterns of responses of resident fathers and mothers were very similar: 51–55% of resident fathers and mothers described the relationship between their children and their parents as “very close”, while 13–18% described it as “not close”, “non-existent” or “varies”.

![Figure 1](https://example.com/figure1.png)

**Figure 1** Perceived current relationship between grandchildren and their grandparents, by gender of parent, as reported by parents
Perceived impact of separation on relationship between grandchildren and grandparents

Separated parents were asked to indicate whether they believed that the relationship between their own parents and children had become closer or more distant, or whether the relationship had not changed since their separation. Figure 3 shows the pattern of answers of separated fathers and mothers to this question, according to their residence status.

- Both fathers and mothers most commonly maintained that the relationships between their own parents and children had not changed since separation (51–58%).
- However, perceived changes in the relationship between their own parents and children varied according to parents’ residence status. Specifically, resident fathers and mothers were more likely to maintain that this relationship had become closer rather than more distant (closer: 36%; more distant: 6–8%), while the reverse applied to non-resident fathers (closer: 13%; more distant: 36%).

The closeness of a relationship does not necessarily reflect how beneficial that relationship is for each party. Nevertheless, most parents who believed that relationships had become closer also believed that such a change had beneficial effects on the children (66%). On the other hand, of those parents who considered that the children’s relationship had become more distant, 58% described the impact as being minimal or mixed, while 34% considered the impact to be negative.

Summary

This article looked into the quality of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, and the impacts of separation on these relationships, as perceived by parents with a child under 18 years old.

Most mothers and fathers described the relationship between their children and their maternal and paternal grandparents as “close” or “very close”, with relationships with maternal grandparents being more likely than those with paternal grandparents to be portrayed as “very close”. Respondents’ perceived relationships between their own parents and children differed according to whether (a) they had separated from their children’s other parent, and (b) they were living with the children. “Very close” relationships between the respondents’ own parents and their children were most likely to be described by mothers who were not separated, followed by separated resident fathers, and separated resident mothers. On the other hand, “very close” relationships were least likely to be reported by non-resident fathers (only one in five).

At least half the separated fathers and mothers maintained that the relationship between their own parents and the children had not changed since they and their partner had separated. However, non-resident fathers were more likely to suggest that relationships between their own parents and children had become more distant than closer, while the reverse applied to resident fathers and resident mothers.

Endnotes

1. According to the ABS (2004), around 1% of all Australian families with children under 18 years are headed by grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.
2. Gray, Misson, and Hayes (2005) found that 24% of infants and 8% of children aged 4–5 years who had a parent living elsewhere were living with a grandparent, compared with only 4–5% of other children in each age cohort.
3. There were only 12 non-resident mothers in the sample. Most mothers who had a child living elsewhere also had resident children (n = 66). It is important to note that all parents in the GPPS had at least one child under the age of 18 years.

References


Ruth Weston is General Manager (Research) and Principal Research Fellow, and Lixia Qu is a Research Fellow and Demographic Trends Analyst at the Australian Institute of Family Studies. An earlier version of this paper appeared as a chapter in Qu, L., & Weston, R., (2008). Snapshots of Family Realationships. Melbourne: Australian Institute of Family Studios.