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Listening to Grandparents

Informal Childcare Research Paper One

Jill Rutter and Ben Evans





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About the Informal Childcare Research Series

Since the late 1990s the uptake of formal childcare – in nurseries and from registered childminders – has increased in the UK. Initiatives such as the roll out of children’s centres and subsidies for childcare costs through the Tax Credit system has increased the availability and affordability of formal childcare. Despite these changes, the number of parents using informal childcare remains high. Daycare Trust defines informal childcare as childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control,

child protection or taxation purposes. In the UK, many families use informal childcare provided by relatives, friends, babysitters and unregistered nannies, but research on this issue is very limited. To fill this knowledge gap Daycare Trust is undertaking a major research project on informal care, funded by the Big Lottery Fund. *Listening to Grandparents* is the first research paper in a new Daycare Trust series on informal childcare.



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Executive summary

Despite the recent expansion of formal childcare across the UK, many families continue to use informal childcare provided by relatives and friends. Of those who provide informal childcare, studies have shown that grandparents undertake the most. Despite the importance of informal childcare to families, little is known about this practice. To fill this knowledge gap, Daycare Trust is undertaking a two-year research project on informal childcare. *Listening to Grandparents* is an output of this research project. The report draws on two new Daycare Trust surveys: of parents and carers, as well as interviews with grandparents. Our findings and policy recommendations are given below.

Grandparents' childcare contribution

- Some 36 per cent of British families with children use grandparents as their main form of childcare, although many families combine formal childcare with grandparent care.
- Daycare Trust research suggests that there are nearly 4 million grandparent carers in the UK, out of an estimated total of about 14 million grandparents.
- Daycare Trust research suggests that grandparent carers provide an average of about ten hours childcare every week.
- Most childcare provided by grandparents helps parents to work: 56 per cent of parents who use informal childcare use it in the working day to enable them to work.
- Many grandparent carers are actively involved in their grandchildren's learning: meeting teachers, supervising homework, cooking, painting and reading with their grandchildren and going on outings.

Why families choose informal childcare

- Parents generally choose grandparents over formal childcare because formal childcare is unaffordable. Additionally, many parents prefer informal childcare because they want their child to be cared for by a trusted relative in a home setting.
- Overall, parents tend to use grandparent childcare in four different ways:
 1. Some parents use it as the main type of childcare for babies and young children.
 2. Many grandparents provide wrap-around and holiday childcare for school age children.
 3. Parents may use it in combination with formal care – to supplement the 15 hours free early education, for example.
 4. Parents also use informal childcare as an emergency or back up when regular arrangements break down or are insufficient.

Patterns of use of grandparent care

- Low income households and lone parents in work rely much more on grandparent care than do higher income households and couple families.
- Daycare Trust's survey of parents showed that 34 per cent of white British parents had used grandparent childcare over the previous six months, but only 13 per cent of parents from minority ethnic groups had done so. This is because the process of migration has separated many migrants and longer-settled members of minority ethnic groups from their close relatives who would have been their main informal carers.
- Daycare Trust's survey showed marked regional differences in families' use of grandparents to provide childcare. Some 51 per cent of Scottish families had used grandparents to provide childcare during the previous six months, compared with 32 per cent of all British

families. In London just 18 per cent of families had used grandparents to provide childcare during the previous six months. London's population includes high proportions of internal and international migrant families who do not live in close proximity to grandparents.

- A further outcome of migration is families' greater use of grandparent carers who normally live outside the UK. Some 5 per cent of parents in Daycare Trust's survey had used a grandparent or relative normally resident abroad to provide their main form of childcare in the previous six months.
- Many demographic, social, economic and political factors have the capacity to affect the future use of grandparents to provide childcare. These include the labour market participation of older women, the extent of internal migration in the UK, retirement migration, formal childcare affordability and broader levels of employment. The rising state pension age for both men and women has the capacity to affect the level of grandparent care.

Who are grandparent carers?

- Many grandparent carers are below retirement age: the mean age of grandparent carers in the Daycare Trust survey was 62.5 years and the median age was 63 years. Some 40 per cent of grandparent carers were aged 55–64 years and 41 per cent were aged 65 years and over.
- While 53 per cent of grandparent carers in Daycare Trust's survey were retired, some 35 per cent of them still worked. Significantly, retired carers only undertook slightly more care than those in part-time work – an average of 9.74 hours for retired carers, 9.35 hours for a carer in part-time work and 8.29 hours of care per week for a carer in full-time work.
- Daycare Trust's survey showed that 40 per cent of grandparent carers were male and 60 per cent female, indicating that grandfathers are playing a more active role in caring for their grandchildren than previously thought.

Grandparents' experiences of looking after their grandchildren

- Most grandparents are very happy to care for their children and the great majority of them report that looking after their grandchildren has a positive impact on their lives.
- There is little evidence of a demand among grandparents for registration as childminders and their payment for childcare services. Some grandparents in Daycare Trust's research felt that financial reward and registration would undermine their relationship with their children and grandchildren, or oblige them to provide more care than they wanted to undertake. Other grandparents were concerned that registration would require them to care for unrelated children.
- While grandparents largely did not wish for a formal payment system, some grandparents in Daycare Trust's research wanted other forms of support such as flexible working and access to grandparent and toddler clubs.
- Some grandparents in Daycare Trust's research felt uncomfortable attending stay and play sessions at existing Sure Start children's centres.

Policy recommendations

- Local and central government must acknowledge the role that grandparents play in providing informal childcare and support them to a much greater extent than at present. Rather than seeing informal childcare as an inadequate alternative to formal childcare, we need to see informal childcare as being complementary to formal provision in many families and greatly valued by them.
- Local authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments need to give much more attention to informal childcare, as its use can affect the demand for formal childcare.
- Not all families have grandparents who live nearby and some parents may not wish to rely on informal childcare. For these groups affordable formal childcare is essential. This is a particular issue in London, which has a higher proportion of families who are internal or international migrants.
- Government needs to consider greater transferability of parental leave to working relative carers. To this end we urge the Government to evaluate Hungary's transferable parental leave system with a view to adopting a similar system in the UK.
- As significant numbers of grandparent carers are working, we would also like to see the Government extend the right to request flexible working to grandparents and other relative carers.
- UK visa policy must continue to make grandparent visits to the UK an easy process.
- Sure Start children's centres should review the way they interact with grandparents and older friends and relatives who provide informal

childcare. Given the greater involvement of grandfathers, it is essential that male carers are made to feel as welcome as women.

- Sure Start children's centres should increase the number of grandparent and toddler support groups on offer, targeted at grandparents and other older relatives who provide informal childcare.
- Schools and Sure Start children's centres should also consider informal carer-focused home learning programmes, learning from such work in the United States. These programmes need to be targeted at informal carers who are least likely to promote a positive home learning environment.



Introduction

“My son is a merchant seaman, so he works away. He has three weeks at sea and three weeks at home. My daughter-in-law works part-time. So, for the three weeks he is at sea, I have the boys for 2.5 days in the week. Two-and-a-half days every other three weeks. I also have them on Friday night when my daughter-in-law goes on her own, so she gets a Saturday to herself. It’s lovely. It’s great and we love it...This isn’t a job. This is a labour of love.”

(Grandmother interviewed by Daycare Trust, 2010)

Until the late 1990s, childcare was seen as a private matter in the UK, with limited government investment or intervention and with patchy access to early childhood education and care. In many parts of the UK, the absence of formal childcare meant that working parents relied on their family and friends to provide informal childcare. Since 1998, formal childcare has become both more affordable and more available across the UK as a consequence of initiatives such as the free entitlement to part-time early childhood education for all three- and four-year-olds, the development of Sure Start children’s centres and subsidies for childcare costs through the Tax Credit system. Despite investment in formal childcare, the number of parents using informal childcare provided by relatives and friends remains high. A new survey from Daycare Trust suggests that 38 per cent of all children receive some form of informal childcare. Analysis of the 2008 local authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments showed that in 65 out of England’s 158 local authorities, informal childcare was the main form of provision in terms of the type of childcare parents used.

When informal childcare is broken down by who undertakes it, numerous studies show that it is grandparents who undertake most informal childcare. New Daycare Trust research suggests that there are nearly 4 million grandparents carers in the UK, providing about 10 hours care every week.

Some grandparents give much more than 10 hours of weekly childcare. There are a significant number

of children in the UK who are cared for full-time by their grandparents, because their parents have died or are unable to look after them. Literature refers to *kith and kin care* and *kinship care* – residential care provided to a child by a non-parent family member (Broad et al, 2001; Farmer and Moyers, 2005). Such care arrangements usually arise as a consequence of parents’ inability to care for their children usually because of illness, death, addiction, family conflict or imprisonment. This group of grandparents is not typical of most grandparent carers and often requires specific types of support, for example, legal advice. For this reason, kinship carers are not the prime focus of this report, although many of the policy recommendations, if implemented, would benefit kinship carers.

Although informal childcare is crucial to many families, central and local government has largely focused on formal childcare. However, informal childcare is rising up the political agenda, both in the UK and internationally. In 2008, the Centre for Social Justice, a think tank, argued for grandparents to be allowed to register as carers and for Childcare Tax Credits to be used to fund informal care, albeit at a 20 per cent lower rate than funding for formal care (Centre for Social Justice, 2008). Grandparents Plus, the UK-based pressure group, has also called for grandparents who take on caring responsibilities to be rewarded, through payment, pension contributions and rights to flexible working (Grandparents Plus, 2009). *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare*, the then Government’s 2009 update on the childcare strategy makes substantial reference to the role of grandparents as informal carers. More recently, in 2010, the Department for Work and Pensions announced a consultation which is expected to conclude that parents can transfer National Insurance credits to the grandparent or other relatives providing childcare. This will mean that informal carers will not face state pension penalties caused by fewer National Insurance contributions (Department for Work and Pensions, 2010).

Internationally, September 2010 saw a strike by some Spanish grandparents who wanted to draw attention to their key role in providing free

childcare. Indeed, half of all Spanish grandparents look after their grandchildren every day and one in eight provides unpaid childcare for more than nine hours a day.¹ In many parts of the world grandparents and relative carers have formed their own lobbying organisations. Across the world civil society groups representing older people are calling for a greater recognition of the childcare provided by grandparents.

Research methodology

Clearly, informal childcare is an issue of importance to policymakers, in both local and central government. But policymaking is impeded by a lack of knowledge about the use of informal childcare, about carers and the impacts of informal childcare on children, families and wider society. Over the next two years Daycare Trust is undertaking a large-scale research project about informal childcare in the UK. For the purposes of this research Daycare Trust defines informal childcare as:

childcare that is largely unregistered by the state for quality control, child protection and/or taxation purposes.

Using this definition, informal childcare is provided by a range of different people: grandparents, siblings, other relatives, friends, neighbours, au pairs and unregistered nannies. Although illegal, some parents use unregistered childminders and this is another form of informal childcare.

The overall aims of our research are to map informal childcare use and achieve a greater understanding of this form of childcare in the UK, and, where applicable, its interplay with formal childcare usage. In relation to grandparent carers,

the focus of this report, we were interested to look at the following questions:

- Who uses grandparent childcare, to what extent, and for what purpose?
- Who are grandparent carers and what are their experiences? How much time do they provide, are they happy doing this and are they paid for it?
- Why is grandparent childcare used in preference to formal childcare in some families and not in others?

In addition to a literature review, the research we undertook for *Listening to Grandparents* draws on:

- an analysis of the English Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents from the Department for Education;



1 Eurostat data cited in the *Daily Telegraph*, 26.09.10 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/spain/8025992/Spains-babysitter-grandparents-to-join-the-strike.html>

- a representative survey of 857 informal carers undertaken at the end of 2010 and in January 2011, of whom 493 people (57.5 per cent) looked after their grandchildren, with a further 52 people who were aged over 45 years and who cared for the children of their relatives;
- a representative survey of 1413 parents undertaken in January 2011; and
- 40 semi-structured interviews of grandparents undertaken in 2010.

The Department for Education's **Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents** is an annual survey that samples about 7,500 families with children. The survey provides an in-depth analysis of parents' use, views and experiences of early years and childcare provision in England. The survey largely interrogates formal childcare, but it does probe informal care to some extent. A major limitation of this and other surveys that look at childcare concerns parents' understanding of what comprises childcare. A summer holiday break spent with grandparents, for example, may be seen as a holiday rather than childcare. Similarly, arrangements to supervise older children during the school holidays may also not be reported as childcare. This may lead to some under-reporting of informal childcare arrangements in surveys. A further limitation of this survey is that significant longitudinal analysis is not possible as the first year of the survey in its present form was 2004. The survey is also limited to England, so it does not analyse childcare usage in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales. It also gives limited information about informal childcare.

In order to supplement the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, Daycare Trust has carried out its own surveys on informal childcare. We interviewed 857 carers through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori between December 2010 and January 2011. The survey used a quota sampling method to recruit a representative sample of about 6,000 adults and children over 15 years old. Daycare Trust drafted survey questions which were incorporated into the omnibus survey. It was conducted face-to-face and in the homes of respondents who were selected from 180

different sampling points in England, Scotland and Wales. (The survey was not undertaken in Northern Ireland.) While we could disaggregate grandparent carers, we chose to do most analysis by age band. This was because both our survey and qualitative research highlighted a number of great-grandparents and great aunts and uncles who also provided informal childcare and very fewer older people who cared for unrelated children.

We also interviewed 1413 childcare users – most parents – through an omnibus survey conducted by IPSOS Mori in January 2011, during different weeks to the carers' survey. Again, Daycare Trust drafted questions which were incorporated into the omnibus survey. Analysis of both the carers' and parents' surveys was undertaken by Daycare Trust.

Additionally, we also undertook qualitative research that comprised 40 semi-structured interviews with grandparents who cared for their grandchildren. Grandparents were recruited through advertisements placed on Netmums (an online network for parents) and *Mature Times* (a free print and online magazine with an older readership). Additionally, we also contacted grandparents through four support groups organised by the Grandparents Association and located in Stevenage and Letchworth in Hertfordshire, Canvey Island in Essex and in central London. Some 20 per cent of our sample were grandfathers. Although we set out to recruit grandparents, our sample included one great-great grandmother, as well as two great-aunts who provided childcare for their nieces' and nephews' families. An interview guide was used to ensure consistent questioning and each interview took between 30 minutes and one hour. Interview data were coded and analysed manually.

Grandparents in the UK: Demographic and social context

Over the last 100 years the UK population has enjoyed increased life expectancy. As a consequence, the numbers of people aged over 50 years is growing in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total population. By 2009, some 21.1 million people in the UK were 50 years old or over – 34 per cent of the total population. These trends mean that far more people live to be grandparents and many more children in the UK have four living grandparents who have the potential to provide childcare. Although there is limited population data on grandparents, one estimate from the Grandparents Association suggested that there were 14 million grandparents in the UK (Broad, 2007). Estimates put the age at which a person first becomes a grandparent at between 47 and 54 years and one in ten grandparents is under 50 years old (Grandparents Plus, 2009; Grandparents Plus 2011).

Historical studies of childcare show that grandparents have always played a major role in caring for children in working class households who lacked the resources to pay for servants and nannies (Baldock, 2011; Roberts, 1984). Grandparents either cared for children full-time when mothers were at work or after school. *Family and Kinship in East London*, Young and Willmott's (1957) study of life in a working class community, describes a number of these childcare arrangements:

"Mrs Trimble is more usual. Both her children are at school but have mid-day dinner and tea with their grandmother. Mrs Trimble calls there every morning on her way to work, and leaves some food for the children's meals"

(Young and Willmott, 1957).

More recent surveys highlight the continued importance of grandparent care in the UK. Research undertaken between 1990 and 2001 put the proportion of UK children regularly cared for by their grandparents at between 17 and 46 per cent (Dench et al, 2000; Gray, 2005a; Meltzer, 1994; La Valle et al, 2000; Wheelock and Jones, 2002; Woodland et al, 2002). In 2004, the first Childcare and Early Year Survey of Parents estimated that 26 per cent of families with children used grandparent care in the reference week of the survey (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009b).

Since 1998, and more rapidly after 2003, formal childcare provision has increased across the UK. In the period 2003 to 2009 there was a 50 per cent increase in childcare places offered by childminders, day nurseries, sessional care and in breakfast, after-school and holiday clubs (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009a). The expansion of formal childcare has the capacity to decrease the usage of informal childcare provided by grandparents. In addition to changes to formal provision and increased longevity, a number of other demographic, social and economic factors have the capacity to influence the use of grandparent childcare in the UK, such as the labour market participation of older women. All the factors that affect both the supply of grandparent care and demand for it are summarised in Table 1.



Table 1: Factors affecting the supply of and demand for grandparent and relative childcare in the UK

Supply side factors affecting the use of grandparent childcare	Demand side factors affecting the use of grandparent childcare
Changing birth rates c50 years prior to present	Present birth rates
Increased longevity and better health in old age	
Changes to the state pension age and other pension policy changes	
Labour market participation of older workers	Labour market participation of mothers and lone mothers
The extent of internal migration in the UK	
The extent of retirement migration	
Parental divorce and separation	Children living in lone-parent households
	Parental prosperity and their ability to pay for formal care
	Formal childcare subsidy policy
	Formal childcare availability

As noted in Table 1, changing birth rates in the UK have the capacity to change both the demand for grandparent childcare as well as its supply. The birth rate increased between 1999 and 2009; in 1999 the fertility rate stood at 1.7 children per woman and by 2009 it was 1.95, which may lead to increased demand for all forms of childcare.

Previous trends in birth rates may affect the supply of relative carers. Historically, the period from 1870 to 1915 was a period when well over 800,000 babies were born every year in the UK. Birth rates fell from 1915 onwards and it was not until after the Second World War that birth rates again began to rise. Some 881,026 live births were registered in 1947, more than any other year since 1913. This post-war baby boom means that there is now a larger stock of older people in early retirement able to care for grandchildren, great-grandchildren, great nieces and nephews.

Increased longevity is another demographic factor that has the capacity to affect the usage of grandparent care. Although greater numbers of older, healthy grandparents may mean greater numbers of potential grandparent carers, previous studies argue that grandparents provide most childcare when they are in their late 50s and early 60s (Gray, 2005a; Hawkes and Joshi, 2007). This trend has also been identified in the United States (Guzman, 2004). Additionally, 62 per cent of

grandparents are no longer the senior generation in their family and caring duties for very old family members may limit grandparents' ability to care for their grandchildren, although evidence on this is inconclusive (Dench and Ogg, 2002; Jonsson, 2003).

The labour market participation of older women also has the capacity to decrease the supply of grandparent care. The 1990s and early years of the 21st century saw an increase in the employment rate of older women from 49.9 per cent of women aged 50–64 being economically active in 1993 to 60.2 per cent in 2009.² Arguably, working grandmothers are less likely to be able to provide childcare, although a number of research studies challenge this assumption (Gray, 2005a).

Changes to pension policy will also mean that in future grandparents will have to work for longer. Women's pension age will be increased to 65 years by 2018 and from 2020 the state pension age for both men and women will be increased to 66 years. Changes to the Pension Credit system will mean that poorer couples can no longer retire as a couple when a man reaches 65 years. These changes to pension age have the potential to reduce significantly the capacity of grandparents to care for their grandchildren during the working day.

The employment rate of mothers, including lone mothers, has also increased over the same period, a factor that has the capacity to increase the demand for informal childcare. Among women aged 25–34, some 70.9 per cent were economically active in 1993, growing to 76.5 per cent in 2009.³ In 2009, some 57 per cent of lone-parent households were in work, up from 48 per cent in 2009.⁴

Rates of internal migration within the UK have the capacity to affect the proportions of children who live close to their grandparents and thus informal childcare usage. Internal migration patterns are complex, but a north to south movement of people has been a constant trend over the last 50

years, as is rural to urban migration. An analysis of recent census and National Health Service GP registration data suggest that between 9–11 per cent of the population move home every year and that about a third of moves are greater than 10 kilometres (Champion, 2005). One consequence of long distance internal migration is that fewer children now live close to their grandparents than was the case 50 years ago, limiting the capacity for grandparent care.

The 21st century has also seen unprecedented retirement migration as a consequence of growing prosperity. By 2006, 5.5 million UK nationals lived overseas and in some countries the UK national stock comprises large numbers of older people. In Spain, for example, the estimated population of UK nationals was 990,000, some 53 per cent of whom were over 50 years (Rutter and Andrew, 2009). Retirement migration, like internal migration, is an aspect of population change that has the capacity to lower the numbers of grandparents able to provide childcare.

Parental divorce and separation is a further demographic factor that can affect the use of grandparent childcare. It has the capacity to disrupt grandparent-grandchild relationships, with a resulting decrease in the supply of informal childcare, but at the same time an increasing demand for childcare through the growth of lone-parent households (Grandparents Plus, 2010). Today, 24 per cent of all children are being brought up in lone-parent households. Although this figure has increased since the 1970s, it has remained fairly constant over the last ten years (Gingerbread, 2010).

Multi-generational living is a further demographic factor that has the capacity to increase informal childcare, with grandparents living in the same household as their grandchildren (Grandparents Plus, 2010). In the UK, some research suggests that there has been a recent increase in multi-generational households, partly as a consequence of high house prices, reversing an earlier trend towards two generation households. For example, a 2010 study for Lloyds TSB Insurance indicated nearly 500,000 three generational households in 2009 – a 7.6 per cent rise in multi-generational

2 Office for National Statistics time series data from the Labour Force Survey.

3 *ibid*

4 Labour Force Survey data

living since 2005.⁵ Areas with the highest proportions of multi-generational households are inner city areas with higher house prices, areas with large populations of South Asian origin and areas experiencing severe poverty where multi-generational living is a survival strategy.

Broader economic and political factors also affect demand for informal childcare. The overall employment rate, income levels and inflation have the capacity to change the demand for all forms of childcare. In situations where parents are less able to pay for formal childcare, the demand for informal care may be greater. Changes to state subsidies for childcare may also affect demand for informal care, by making formal childcare more or less affordable. It should be noted that from April 2011, the childcare element of Working Tax Credit was reduced to pay a maximum of 70 per cent of eligible childcare costs, rather than the previous 80 per cent. This change, alongside other changes to Tax Credits and Child Benefit, and increased inflation have reduced the spending power of low and middle income families in the UK (Brewer, 2010). It will be interesting to monitor childcare usage in these families and to see the extent to which families switch to using informal childcare as their spending power decreases.

The above demographic, social, economic and political factors will continue to operate. We predict that in the next five years changes to the Tax Credit system will increase the demand for grandparent care. Should the present inflationary trends continue to limit families' spending power, this, too, may drive the greater use of grandparent childcare. In the longer term, the increased pension age may lead to a fall in the proportion of families who use grandparents as their main form of childcare.

Why parents choose informal care over formal care

Although formal childcare places have expanded rapidly and childcare has become more affordable, many parents still use informal childcare over formal provision. Both Daycare Trust's parents' survey and interviews with grandparents examined the reasons that informal care was used in preference to formal care. Our quantitative and qualitative data supported much previous research and suggested that economic factors, and preference and greater trust for relatives were the most important reasons that parents' chose relatives to look after their children. The perception that a child is too young to attend nursery was another significant reason given by parents. Daycare Trust's parent's survey cited the following reasons why parents preferred informal over formal childcare:

- want child to be cared for by a relative or friend (24 per cent of parents);
- trust relatives and friends over strangers (24 per cent);
- informal childcare is free (20 per cent);
- want child to be cared for in their own home (14 per cent);
- child is too young to attend nursery (13 per cent);
- need to save money and informal care costs less (11 per cent);
- cannot afford formal care (7 per cent);
- informal care costs less (8 per cent);
- no formal care at hours when needed (3 per cent); and
- cannot find suitable nursery or childminder (2 per cent).

5 <http://www.insurance.lloydstsb.com/personal/general/mediacentre/three-generation-households.asp>

Other research has examined the many factors that cause parents to use informal over formal care (see, for example, Brown and Dench, 2004; Brown-Lyons et al, 2001; Gray, 2005a; Vincent and Ball, 2006). Rutter and Evans (2011) have categorised these many driving factors for informal care into eight categories:

1. **Structural factors relating to childcare** – cost of childcare, lack of information about formal childcare affordability.
2. **Employment-based factors** – family income, working status, atypical hours working patterns.
3. **Demographic factors** – household structure, age of children, age of mother.
4. **Inter-relationship factors** – relationship between generations, density of social networks.
5. **Spatial factors** – density of social networks, proximity of carers to children and residential mobility.
6. **Logistic factors** – proximity to carer, flexibility and convenience.
7. **Child development and child welfare factors** – linguistic development, parental non-coping.
8. **Value-based factors** – trust for carers, peer attitudes towards formal childcare and female employment.

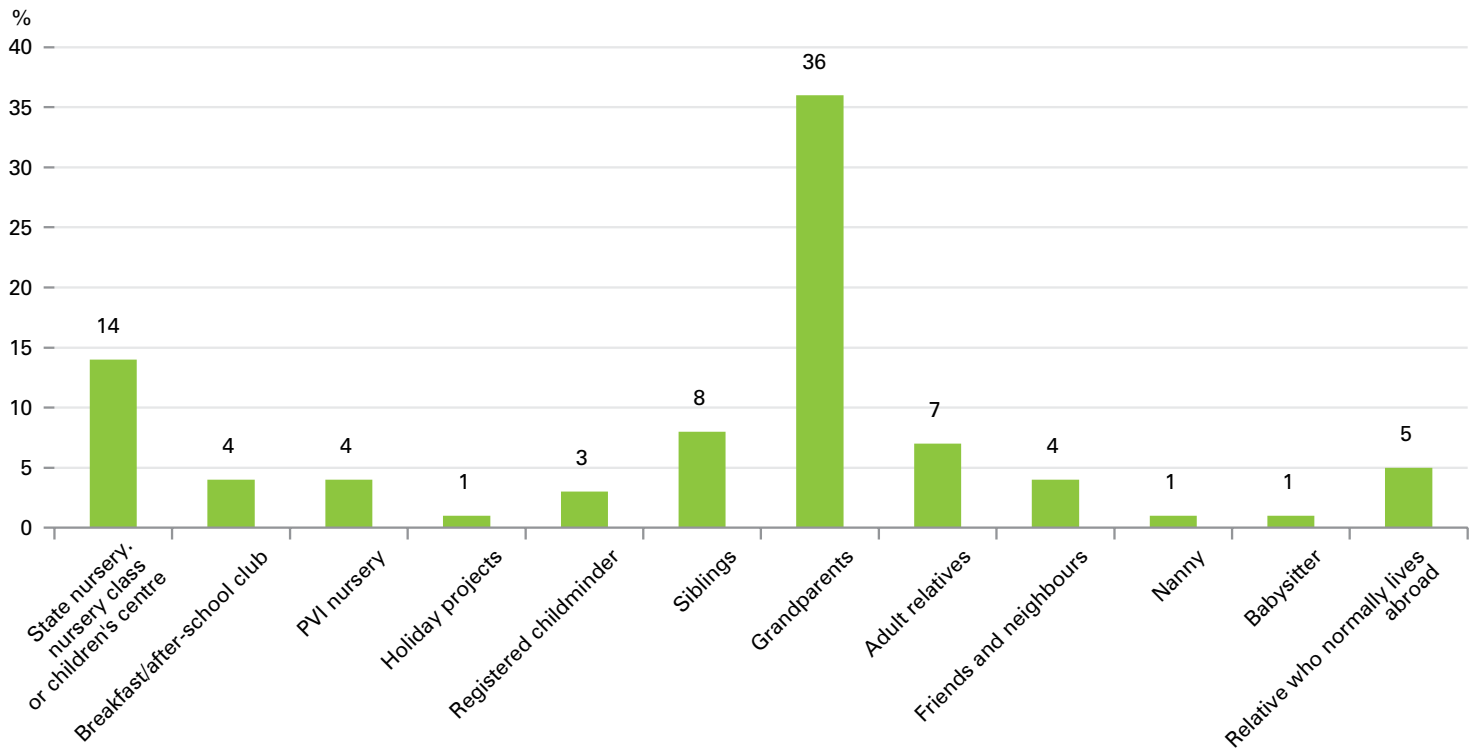
Of all these factors, existing research suggests that it is the cost of formal childcare, logistic factors, in particular, the proximity of the child to the carer and trust for informal carers such as grandparents that determine informal childcare usage. *Informal Childcare: Choice or Chance?*, a literature review for Daycare Trust, provides a wider discussion of these factors (Rutter and Evans, 2011).

Patterns of grandparent and older relative childcare today

We have previously highlighted the many demographic, social, economic and political factors that have the capacity to affect the use of informal childcare. We have also showed that the cost of formal childcare and the greater trust for friends and relatives drives many parents to use informal over formal care. Given these drivers, what are the patterns of informal childcare use in Britain? Which families use the most grandparent care? How many hours of childcare do typical grandparents provide and at what time of the day?

Our survey indicated that grandparent care is the main type of childcare used by parents, with 36 per cent of families stating that grandparent care is their main type of childcare for their youngest child (see Figure 1). Most parents, however, use packages of childcare, where nursery provision is combined with grandparent care and babysitters to create an overall package (Skinner, 2003; Smith et al, 2009; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). The 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents supports this finding and shows that in total, 35 per cent of parents of children between three and four years old and 20 per cent of school-aged children were using a package of childcare that included both formal and informal provision.

Figure 1: Main type of childcare used in last six months for youngest child, by percentage of parents using it



Source: Daycare Trust Parents' Survey, 2011

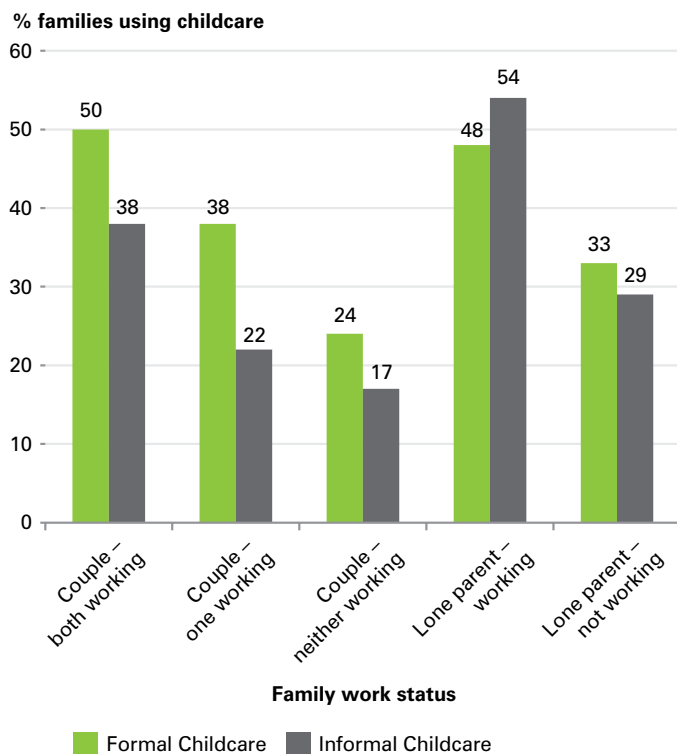
Household structure and working status

The 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents show differential usage of childcare by household structure. Lone parents use more childcare than couples (see Figure 2 below). Lone parents in work are the biggest users of all childcare and informal childcare, an observation also noted in most, but not all, qualitative studies. However, couples in work use most formal childcare. And lone parents who are not working use more of both formal and informal childcare than does a non-working couple.

Crucially, too, a lone parent in work uses more informal childcare than formal childcare, a trend not observed in any of the other household types who all use more formal than informal childcare. This observation may be a consequence of the lower income of lone-parent families driving them towards free forms of childcare. The need for at least one type of flexible childcare may also drive the greater use of informal childcare in lone-parent families.

Daycare Trust parent's survey examined childcare usage by parents' working status and its findings were very similar to the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents.

Figure 2: Percentage of families using informal and formal childcare by household structure and working status



Source: Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, 2009

Employment status and income

Figure 2 shows the differences in childcare usage by employment status, with working households being more likely to use more formal and informal childcare than workless households. These findings are supported in Daycare Trust’s parents’ survey, with Figure 3 giving data on the proportion of parents who had used grandparent childcare in the previous six months. This survey suggests that part-time work is associated with the greater use of grandparent childcare. One possible explanation for this is that part-time workers have a lower income than full-time workers and thus cannot afford formal childcare, instead relying on grandparent care.

The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents breaks down childcare use by income (see Figure 4), enabling an examination of the relationship between this factor and childcare use. Overall, Figure 4 suggests that low income working households rely on free informal childcare to

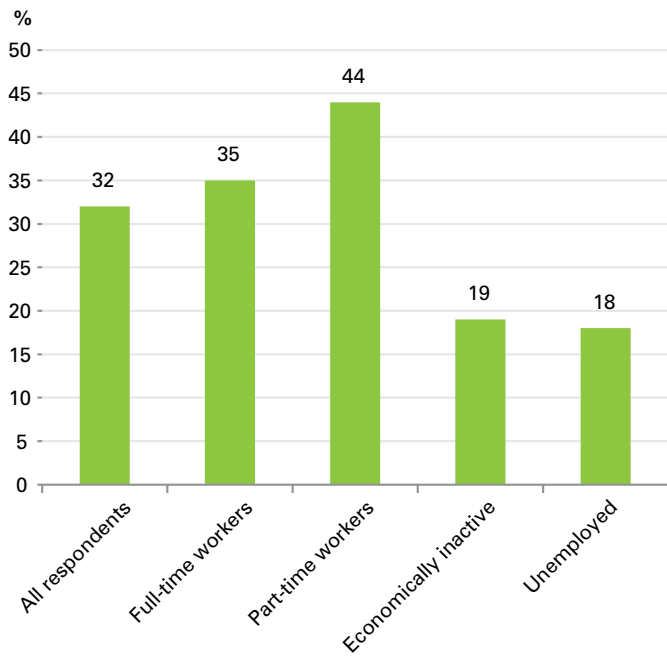
a greater extent than higher income working households. For low income working households the proportional usage of formal to informal care is about the same, but in very low income (presumably workless) households and higher income groups, much more formal childcare is used than informal childcare. (The greater use of formal care in very low income households may be a consequence of free early childhood education for all three- and four-year-olds.)

It should be noted that the greater use of informal childcare in low income working households is a trend that is highlighted in almost all qualitative research on informal childcare in the UK and elsewhere in the developed world (Himmelweit and Sigala, 2004). Daycare Trust’s own interviews with grandparents also suggested that family income – and the cost of formal childcare – was a major factor associated with grandparent childcare. One grandfather explained:

“My daughter used to work five days a week, but after the baby was born she wanted to cut down to part-time work. So, I always did two days and the other grandparent did one day. Before she cut down she paid the nursery for two days. But the only way she could afford to cut down on work time was to cut the nursery out.”

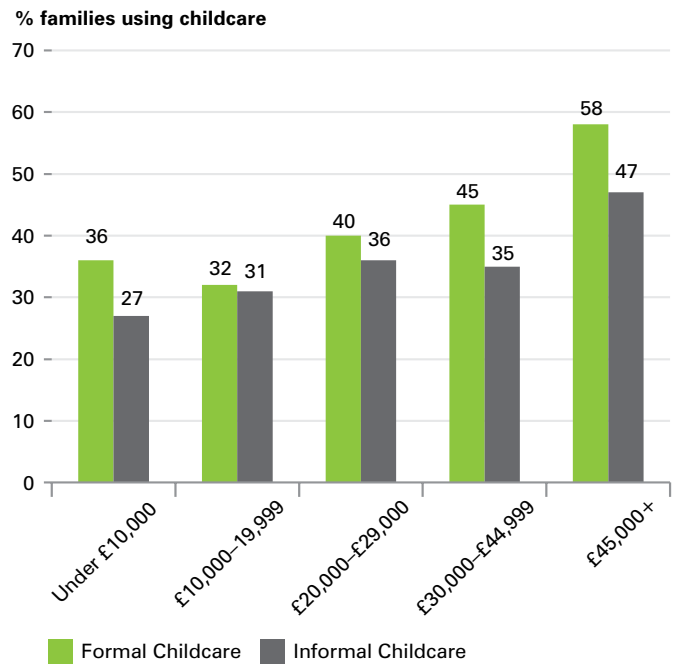
Using the Registrar-General’s designations of social class, Daycare Trust’s parents’ survey showed differential use of grandparent childcare by the social class of parents, with grandparent childcare use declining in social classes D and E. An explanation for this is that with increased unemployment, semi-skilled and unskilled workers are more likely to find themselves without work and no longer needing childcare.

Figure 3: Percentage of parents using grandparent childcare in last six months by employment status of parents



Source: Daycare Trust Parents' Survey, 2011

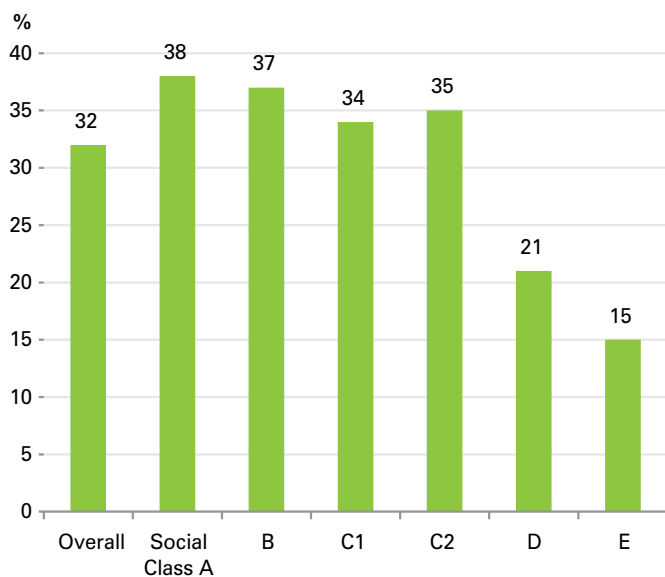
Figure 4: Percentage of families using informal and formal childcare by income band of parents



Source: Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, 2009



Figure 5: Percentage of families using grandparent childcare by social class of parents



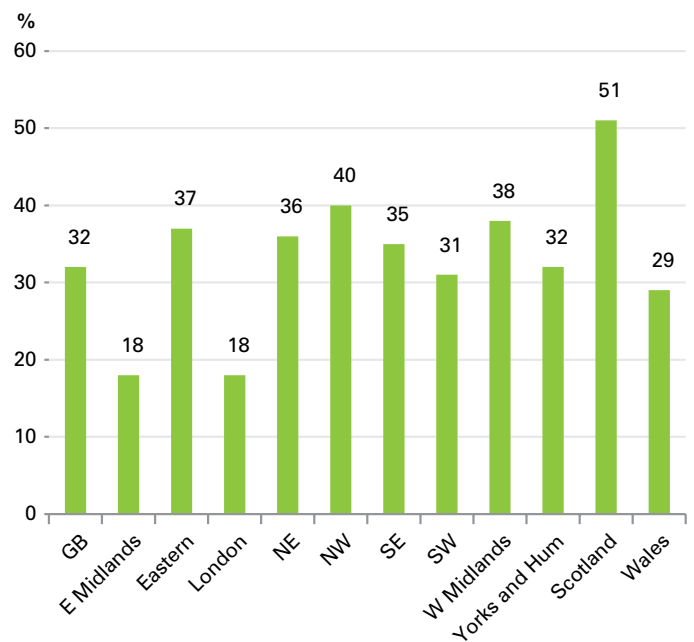
Source: Daycare Trust Parents' Survey, 2011

Grandparent care by ethnicity and by region of residence

An examination of grandparent childcare use by ethnicity also shows some striking differences. Daycare Trust's survey of parents showed that 34 per cent of white British parents had used grandparent childcare over the previous six months, but only 13 per cent of parents from minority ethnic groups had done so. The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents shows similar trends. We believe this is because the process of migration has separated many migrants and longer settled members of minority ethnic groups from their close relatives who would have been their main informal carers, a finding supported in small-scale qualitative studies (Brown and Dench, 2004; Rutter and Hyder, 1998).

The lesser use of grandparent care by those from minority ethnic groups is one of the contributory causes of big regional and national differences in grandparent childcare use across the UK. Figure 6 presents data from the Daycare Trust parents' survey of those who had used grandparent care during the previous six months by British region and nation.

Figure 6: Percentage of families using grandparent childcare in last six months by region of residence of parents



Source: Daycare Trust Parents' Survey, 2011

Figure 6 shows that grandparent childcare use is lowest in London and in the East Midlands region. Very similar trends are highlighted in the 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents, with just 20 per cent of London families using informal childcare in 2009 compared with 33 nationally (Department for Education, 2010).

The lesser use of grandparent care in London may be a consequence of international and internal migration. In 2010 an estimated 34 per cent of London's population was born abroad. It is also a region experiencing net internal migration of young people: many young UK-born people move to London to study then remain there to work and start their family. Data from the Office for National Statistics showed 178,100 people moving into London from elsewhere in the UK between March 2009 and March 2010. Recent international and internal migrants are two groups who may have fewer relatives living in close proximity to care for their children and thus be lower users of informal childcare provided by relatives.

The lesser use of grandparent childcare in London raises an important policy issue. There may be an unmet need for certain types of childcare in

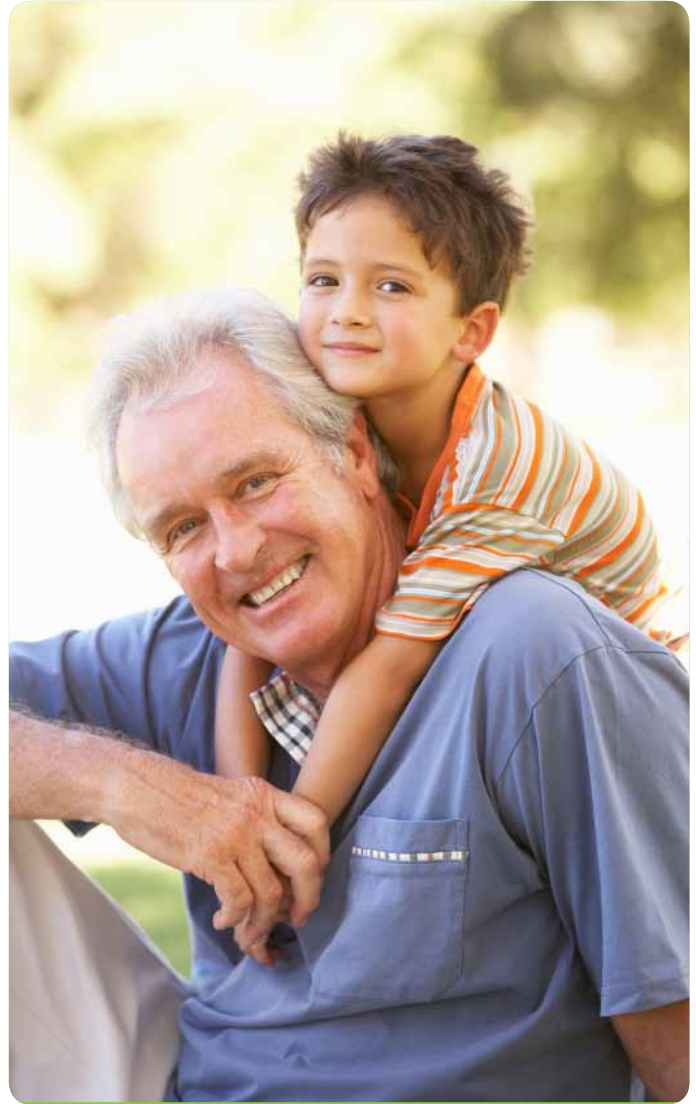
London – before and after the school day, and in the evenings and weekends – among families who cannot afford a nanny and have no nearby relatives to call upon. (The nature of London’s economy and travel patterns in the capital also mean a greater demand for childcare outside the 8am–6pm weekday norm.) It is worth noting that of the regions and nations of the UK, the rate of female employment is lowest in London at 61.9 per cent of the working age population in November 2010. The cost of formal childcare and the absence of relatives to provide childcare may be factors contributing to lower female employment in the capital.

Hours of childcare undertaken by grandparents

There is substantial variation in the amount of childcare used by families in any given week. Factors that are associated with the amount of childcare used are household structure and the age of the child. The Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents suggests that children from lone-parent families tend to spend more time in both formal and informal childcare than do children from couple families. However, the survey categorisation of non-resident parents as informal carers may skew the finding about hours of informal childcare usage. (Daycare Trust’s definition of informal childcare excludes non-resident parents, as we consider them to be parental carers.)

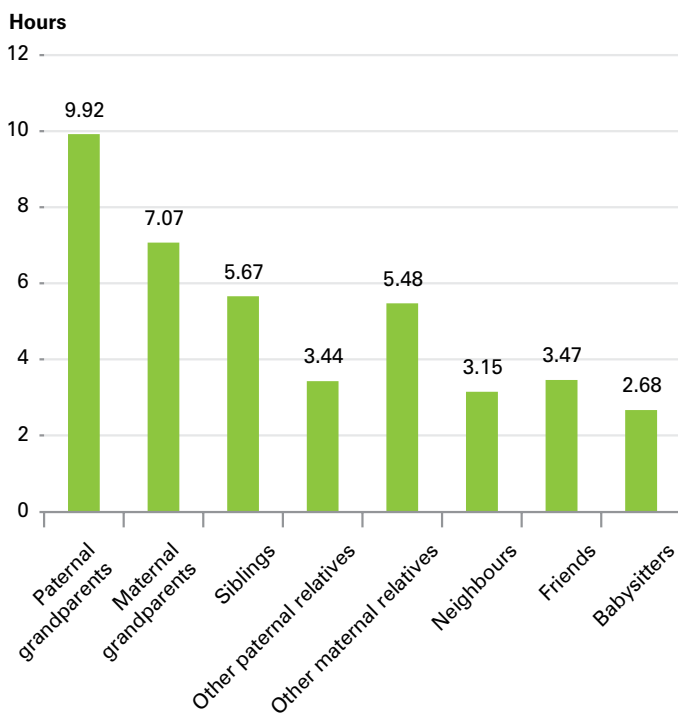
A child’s age also influences the overall amount of childcare used by families, with very young babies and older children tending to use less childcare.

Data from Daycare Trust parents’ and carers’ surveys also indicate that parents tend to use different types of informal carers for different amounts of time, according to their relationship to the parent (see Figure 7). (This is a trend that the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents also highlights.) Figure 7 gives the hours of childcare provided by different informal carers, as reported by parents. Daycare Trust’s carer’s survey suggests that grandparents are providing a little more childcare than reported by parents – an



average of 11.2 hours per week. But, despite this small discrepancy in reported hours, grandparents provide the most childcare hours every week of all informal carers, giving around ten hours care. Compared with other informal carers, grandparents are more likely to look after children in the daytime, when parents are at work. Other relatives, friends and neighbours are more likely to be used for shorter hours, to babysit occasionally, or provide emergency back-up, perhaps when a child is ill and cannot go to nursery.

Figure 7: Mean hours of childcare used in a typical week for youngest child, by childcare provider, as reported by parent

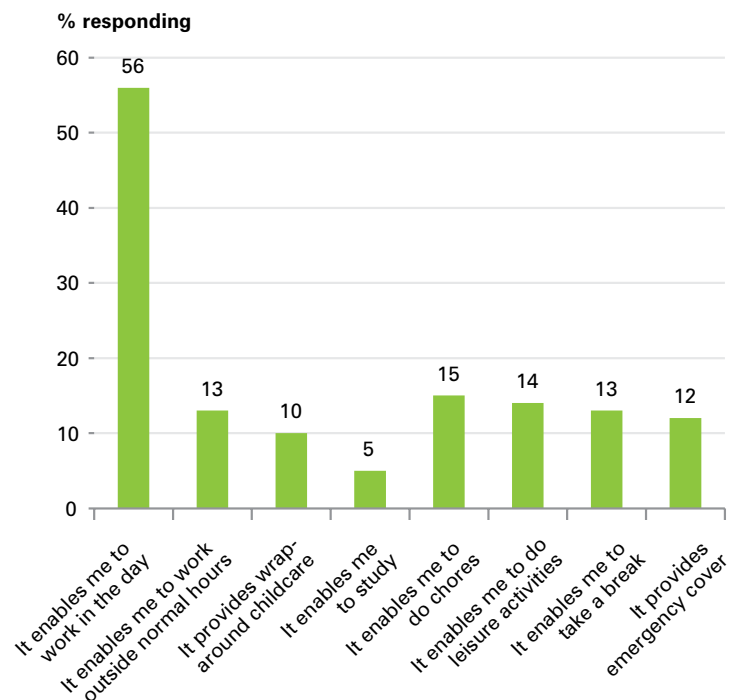


Source: Daycare Trust Parent’s Survey, 2011

Why grandparents are needed

Grandparents’ role in enabling parents to work is highlighted in both Daycare Trust surveys (of parents and carers). The parents’ survey explored what informal childcare was used for by parents. Some 56 per cent of parents stated that they used informal childcare in the day to enable them to work. Figure 8 gives more data on why families use informal care.

Figure 8: Reasons for informal childcare given by parents who use it



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–11

Among informal carers aged 55–64, some 42 per cent were providing childcare during the working day. This suggests that despite the expansion of formal childcare since 2003, many parents still rely on informal carers, particularly grandparents, to look after their children while they work. This finding challenges, to some extent, the assumption that since the expansion of formal care, most grandparents now largely provide wrap-around childcare at the start and end of the day or undertake emergency childcare. However, as Figure 9 shows, grandparents also play an important role in providing weekend and wrap-around childcare. Our survey of parents also shows that grandparent childcare is also used in emergencies and when a child is ill.

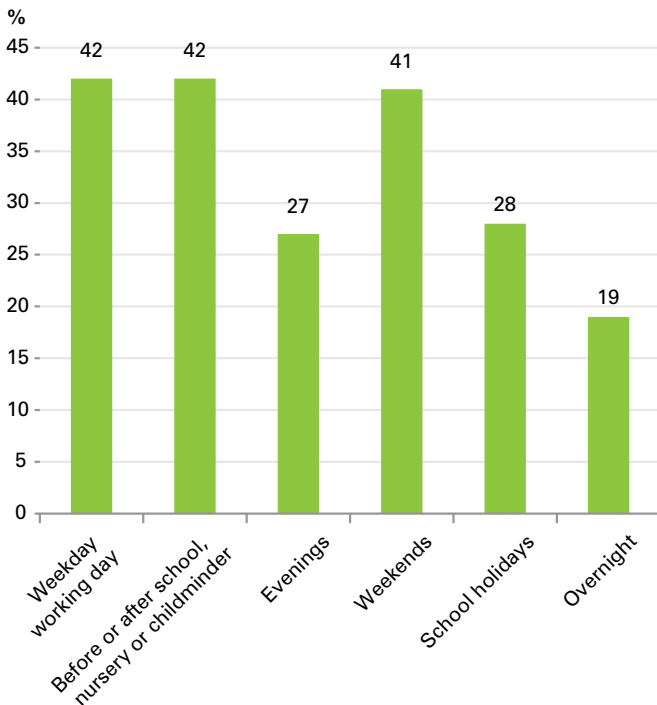
Overall, parents tend to use grandparent childcare in four different ways:

1. Some parents use it as the main type of childcare for babies and young children.
2. Many grandparents provide wrap-around and holiday childcare for school age children.

3. Parents may use it in combination with formal care – to supplement the 15 hours free early education, for example.
4. Parents may also use informal childcare as an emergency or back up when regular arrangements break down or are insufficient.

Given this essential role, it is important that policymakers do not underestimate the importance of grandparent care. While many parents continue to see formal childcare as unaffordable, grandparents will continue to be important providers of informal childcare.

Figure 9: Time of day when childcare is given, by percentage of 55–64 year old carers giving childcare at this time



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–11

International comparisons on grandparent childcare

The OECD family division collates data on childcare usage in its member states, including data on informal childcare, and like Daycare Trust, defines informal childcare as unregulated childcare offered by relatives, friends, neighbours, babysitters and nannies. These data show big differences in both formal and informal childcare across OECD

member states.⁶ More than half of children in Greece and the Netherlands are looked after by informal carers, usually grandparents, while in Scandinavian countries, informal childcare usage is very low. The OECD argue that in Denmark, Finland and Sweden, comprehensive formal childcare provision has replaced the need for grandparent care in almost all families, although other studies suggest that informal childcare is still used to complement formal provision in Scandinavian countries (Hank and Buber, 2008).

The high use of informal childcare in some EU states has generated a number of policy responses to support grandparents and other relatives who provide childcare. Hungary allows the transfer of parental leave and allowances to grandparents. In the Netherlands, with its tradition of high levels of relative care, informal relative carers have been able to register as childminders since 2005 with parents able to claim an income-related childcare tax credit. However, take-up of this initiative has far exceeded the Dutch government’s prediction. There are also concerns that there are fraudulent claims for the childcare tax credit, by parents and complicit relatives (Lloyd, 2008). As a consequence of a budget overspend, as well as concerns about fraud, from 2011, relatives will no longer be able to register as childminders unless they agree to care for children from outside the family. They will also have to care for children for a specified number of hours per week.

6 The OECD data are available from http://www.oecd.org/document/4/0,3746,en_2649_34819_37836996_1_1_1_1,00.html

Profiling grandparents and older relative carers

There have been very few research studies that have attempted to profile grandparent carers. The few studies that have been undertaken have largely focused on grandparents who are providing kinship care to their grandchildren, in the absence of these children's parents (Grandparents Plus, 2010). The small number of studies that focus on childcare stress the gendered nature of informal care, suggesting that the vast majority of grandparent carers are female and that they are more likely to be maternal grandparents (Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Although retired grandparents may have greater capacity to provide childcare than those in a younger age bracket and still in work, existing research also shows that grandparents provide most childcare when they are in their late 50s and early 60s (Gray, 2005a; Hawkes and Joshi, 2007). Daycare Trust's survey of carers has enabled us to build a more nuanced and up-to-date profile of grandparent and older relative carers in the UK, with our main findings given below.

Average age of grandparent carer is 62.5

Some 40 per cent of grandparent carers were aged 55–64 years and 41 per cent were aged 65 years and over. The mean age of grandparent carers was 62.5 and the median age was 63 years. The ages of grandparent carers in our survey ranged between 37 and 85 years. Figure 10 presents further data on the age distribution of grandparent carers. This is a little older than indicated in previous studies. We attribute the older age profile of grandparent carers to an ongoing increase in the average age that a mother first gives birth – from 26.8 years in 1979

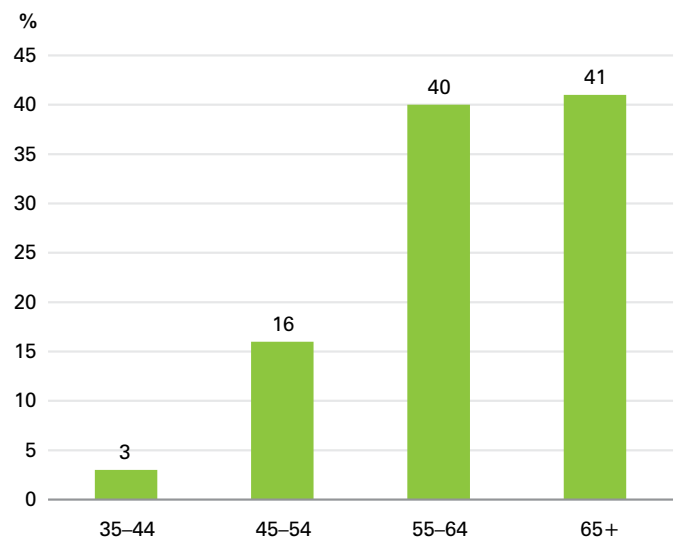
to 29.4 years in 2009.⁷ Obviously, an older cohort of parents will tend to be associated with older grandparents.

Over one-third of grandparent carers still work

While 53 per cent of grandparent carers were retired, as well as 16 per cent of relative carers, our research showed that 35 per cent of grandparent carers were in work. Figure 11 gives further information about the economic activity of grandparent carers. Among those we interviewed, over two-thirds of grandparents worked, mostly part-time:

"I work, I look after older people, so I sort my work hours around looking after them. It's quite flexible. I'm working....But a lot of grandparents that I know can't afford to [give up work] and look after grandchildren. It's all the little things that add up and cost money."

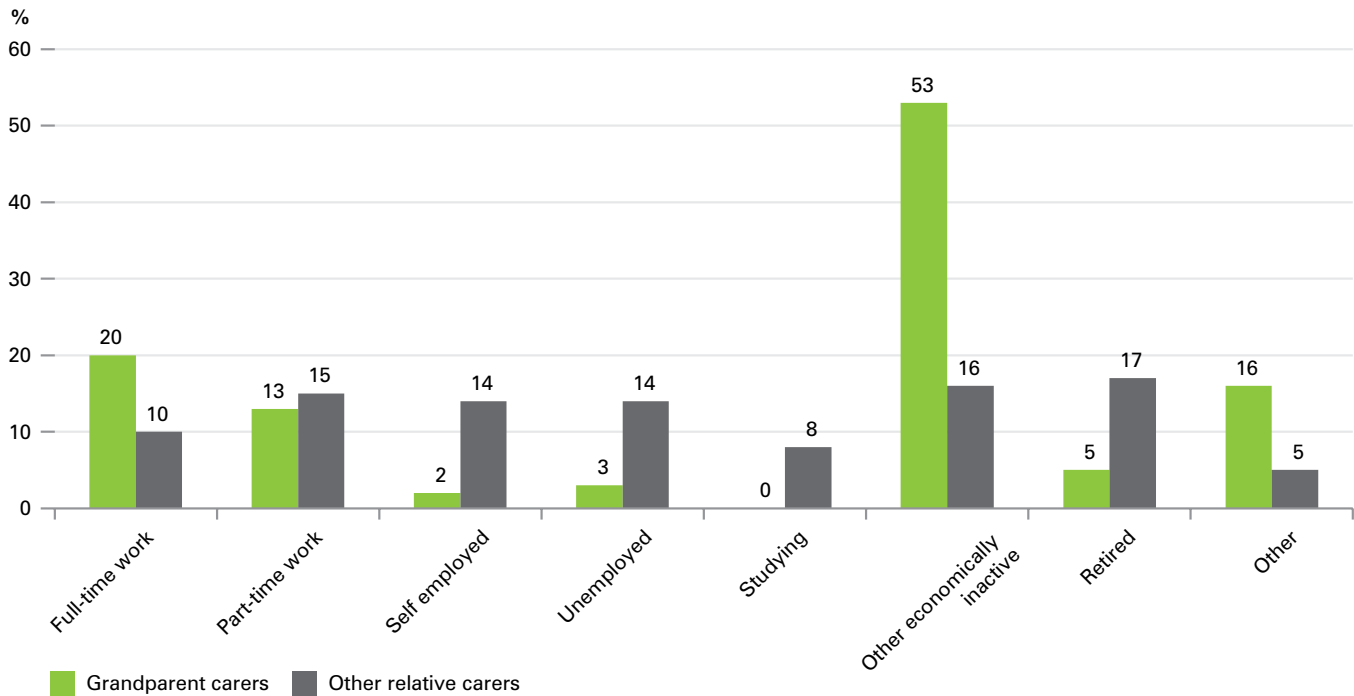
Figure 10: Age distribution of grandparent carers



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–11

⁷ Office for National Statistics data on the mean age of childbirth. The data are standardised to reflect changes in the composition of the population.

Figure 11: Economic activity of grandparent and relative carers



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–2011

Some interviewees who worked part-time or had given up work to care for grandchildren were experiencing some financial hardship. That the majority of grandparent carers are under retirement age and still working raises important policy issues. As noted above, these relative carers offer an important service, particularly to parents of very young children and those working atypical hours (Singler, 2011). Government needs to consider ways that it can support working grandparents who provide childcare. One approach would be to enable the transfer of parental leave from parents to relative carers. Government could also extend the right to request flexible working to grandparents and other relative carers.

Younger grandparents provide more hours of care

Daycare Trust research shows that there are some marked differences in the average hours of care given per week by grandparent and relative carers. Grandparent and relative carers aged 45–54 years reported that they offered an average of 11.75 hours of care per typical week, those aged 55–64 offered 11.39 hours of care per week and those aged 65 years and over undertook 8.33 hours of

care per week. Significantly, retired carers only undertook slightly more care than those in part-time work – an average of 9.74 hours for retired carers, 9.35 hours for carers in part-time work and 8.29 hours of care per week for carers in full-time work.

Our interviews highlight the substantial commitment of grandparents, with the majority of those interviewed providing more than ten hours care per week. This big time commitment suggests that there is no large-scale displacement of grandparent care since the expansion of formal childcare, an assertion that is also supported by our interviews. Here, many grandparents described their considerable time commitment with one stating:

“Together we are doing five days a week for our grandchildren, eight to five. And in the holidays I’ve got a ten year old as well, my son’s child. I have them all in the holidays.”

Grandfathers play an active role in caring for grandchildren

Our survey showed that 40 per cent of grandparent carers were male and 60 per cent

female. This does not support Wheelock and Jones' (2002) assertion that grandparent carers are overwhelmingly female. Moreover, our survey showed that there was no significant difference in relation to the average hours of care given between male and female grandparent carers. Our interviews also supported the view that grandfathers play an active role in caring for grandchildren. Grandfathers told of their involvement with childcare; interviews with grandmothers also highlighted the active role of grandfathers:

"My husband, he retired before I did, so he used to have the boy...He does as much as I do, changing nappies and everything. And my son does the same."

Much recent research highlights changing gender roles in the British families (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2003). Fathers' care of infants and young children has risen by 800 per cent between 1975 and 1997, from 15 minutes to 2 hours on the average working day – at double the rate of mothers', despite the fact that over this period fathers' time spent at work was also increasing. A father who had young children in the 1970s, when gendered attitudes towards childcare began to change in the UK, is now likely to be a grandfather who also has a more involved role in childcare.

These changed gender roles raise important issues for formal childcare staff and schools. While many children's centres welcome male carers, our interviews indicated that not all do so. The gendered language used in notices, newsletters and everyday speech can exclude fathers, uncles and grandfathers. One grandfather who was interviewed talked about the exclusive and unwelcoming nature of a parents and toddler group. He felt excluded because he was male and a grandfather. It is important that children's centres and other settings are seen to extend a welcome to all carers – male and female, parental and non-parental.

Maternal relatives more likely to provide childcare

Almost all research on relatives who provide informal childcare suggest that it is maternal rather than paternal relatives who are more likely to provide informal childcare, perhaps as a consequence of a mother's closeness and trust of her own mother (Brown and Dench, 2004; Clarke and Roberts, 2003; Wheelock and Jones, 2002). Our survey supported this, but the privileging of a daughter's children over a son's children was not as marked as we expected. Some 30 per cent of informal carers had looked after their daughter's children over the last six months and 27 per cent had looked after their son's children. The interviews also suggested that there was no marked preference for caring for a daughter's children over a son's children.

Proximity to grandchildren determines care

Proximity to grandchildren is another factor that previous research has associated with the greater likelihood of grandparent care (Brown and Dench, 2004). Both our survey and qualitative research supported this. Some 54 per cent of families lived within 5 miles (8 kilometers) of their main informal carers. All but one of the grandparents and older relatives that we interviewed lived close to the children for whom they cared.

Grandparent carers are less likely to come from minority ethnic groups

Among those of white British ethnicity, some 59 per cent of all informal carers were grandparent carers. Among the minority ethnic population just 22 per cent of informal carers were grandparent carers. This reflects the process of migration separating young adults from their parents. Children from some minority ethnic groups are also less likely to have four healthy grandparents than the overall child population which may also account for the lower proportion of grandparent carers among minority ethnic groups in our survey (Department for Education, 2010; Hawkes and

Joshi, 2007). It is important that central and local government recognise that some sections of the population are less likely to have grandparents who can provide childcare and ensure that there is sufficient formal provision.

The rise of the ‘flying grandparent’

While there are fewer grandparent carers in the minority ethnic population as a consequence of international migration, a further outcome of migration is families’ use of grandparent carers who normally live outside the UK. Some 5 per cent of parents in our survey had used a grandparent or relative who normally live outside the UK as their main form of childcare in the last six months. This figure rose to 7 per cent when parents were asked to list all the forms of childcare they had used in a typical week in the last six months. The use of relatives who live outside the UK to provide childcare is only slightly higher among minority ethnic groups, suggesting that both white UK and minority ethnic populations are using overseas-domiciled relatives to provide childcare.

Both retirement migration and the emigration of older working age people from the UK increased after 2000 and today many more children in the UK have grandparents who live abroad. In 2007, 17,800 UK nationals over the age of 45 remigrated back to the UK and the desire to help with childcare was a major reason for this population movement (Rutter and Andrew, 2009). (We interviewed one grandmother who had left Spain to return to the UK to look after her grandchildren.) Alternatively, children may be sent overseas to stay with grandparents while parents are working.

Since the early 1990s the UK has also seen increased international migration, mostly as a result of asylum migration, sustained work visa flows and, more recently, labour migration from the new member countries of the European Union. In mid 2010, an estimated 11.4 per cent of the UK population was born overseas. The majority of international migrants are in the 18–35 age bracket on arrival in the UK – their childbearing years. In 2009 there were 174,174 live births to overseas



born mothers in England and Wales⁸ – a proportion of whom will bring their own parents to the UK to help with childcare. The primary immigration of non-British nationals into the UK, often for short periods of time, is another component of the ‘flying grandparent’ phenomenon. For grandparents who are nationals of non-EU countries, visitors’ visas are usually required to enter the UK. The UK Government is more generous to visitors than EU states that are part of the Schengen⁹ area, granting a six-month visitor’s visa instead of a three-month Schengen visa. This approach is welcome and the administration and extension of visitor’s visas for grandparents should remain a simple and speedy process.

8 Office for National Statistics data

9 The Schengen common travel area comprises the territory of 25 European countries that have implemented the Schengen Agreement. It excludes the UK and Ireland.

Overall profile

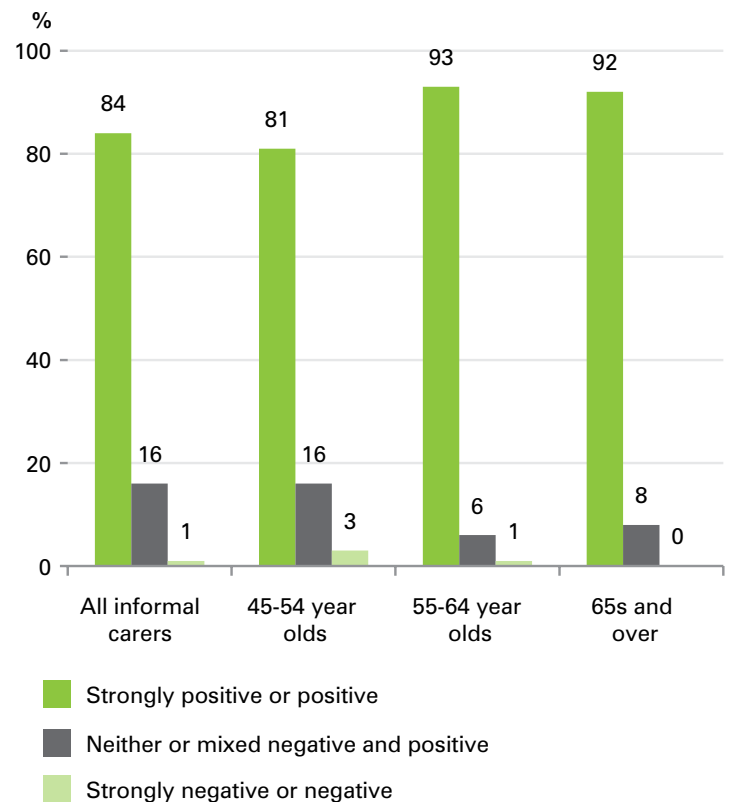
While grandparent carers are less likely to come from a minority ethnic population, in other respects the profile of grandparent carers reflected the overall population. Daycare Trust survey data showed that grandparent carers reflect the overall class composition of UK society. Patterns of housing tenure among grandparent carers reflect the overall population of a similar age band. Some 25 per cent of 55–64 year olds and 26 per cent of those aged 65 years and over stated they had a health problem. This is similar to rates in the overall population, as reported in the Census and Labour Force Survey. Overall, grandparent carers have many of the same characteristics of those in a similar age cohort in the UK.

Grandparents' and older relatives' experiences of providing care

One of our key research aims was to analyse grandparents' and older relatives' experiences of providing informal childcare. Both our survey and interviews highlighted that most older carers were very happy to care for children. Our survey indicated that 97 per cent of those aged over 45 years were happy providing informal childcare. All of the grandparents and other relatives that we interviewed told us how positive they felt about providing informal childcare, with one grandparent stating:

"It's a happy chore. But you know they are just lovely. You know we are so lucky that we have grandchildren that we look after."

Figure 12: Impacts of providing informal childcare on carers' life, by age of carer

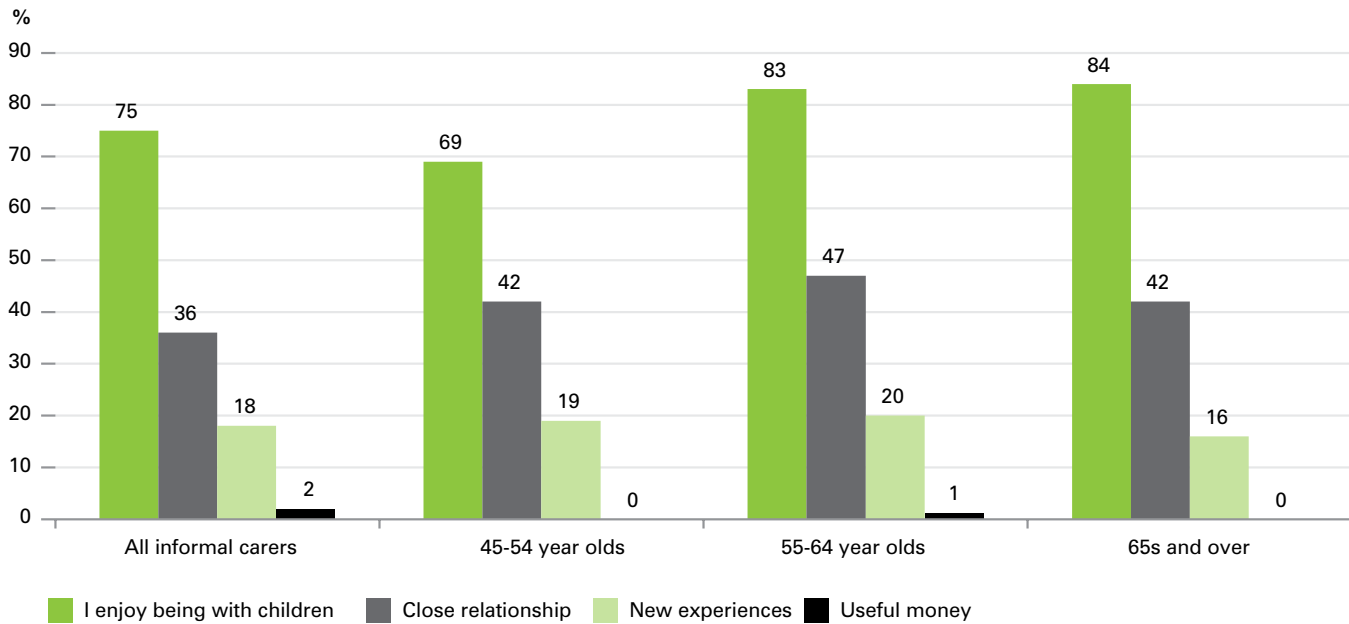


Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–11

The great majority of older carers reported that looking after children had a positive or strongly positive impact on their lives, as Figure 12 shows. Informal carers were asked about the nature of the positive impacts. The most often cited positive impacts among older carers were:

- I enjoy being with the children;
- I have been able to develop a close relationship with the children I care for; and
- I experience new things.

Figure 13: The nature of positive impacts by age of carer



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers 2010–11

Payments for grandparents

Our survey also explored the payment of informal carers. Some 97 per cent of those aged 65 years and over received no payment for the informal childcare they provided. Our survey findings were very much in line with the 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents which suggested that 6 per cent of grandparent carers were paid by parents. However, a higher proportion of grandparents who we interviewed in depth were paid for their time and expenses, with one grandparent describing how these financial arrangements arose:

“I was paid when I was looking after my daughter’s children full-time, as she was going to work and she would pay me because I wasn’t working. But now I am not. Now I don’t expect them to give me money. Now she gives a small amount of money because I use the car so much for the school run and pay for the clubs and things like that. So it covers costs, you know a token payment. Nothing formal.”

Our interviews also explored whether grandparents wanted a formal payment system. We asked them if they wanted a formal registration system to enable families to claim childcare costs through Tax Credits and thus pay grandparent carers. As previously noted, the Dutch government has

allowed the payment of relatives undertaking informal childcare. In the United States, too, some welfare-to-work programmes pay for childcare and allow the payment of relatives providing informal childcare. Grandparents Plus, the UK-based pressure group, has called for grandparents who take on caring responsibilities to be rewarded through payment. The Centre for Social Justice, a UK think tank, has argued for Childcare Tax Credits to be used to fund informal childcare, albeit at a 20 per cent lower rate than funding for formal care (Centre for Social Justice, 2008). At present, grandparents and other relatives are barred from registration with Ofsted as a childminder where they solely care for a related child, thus parents cannot claim Tax Credits for childcare provided by relatives, even if relatives are paid for their work. Our interviews led us to conclude that there was no demand among grandparents for registration as childminders and their payment for childcare. Some grandparents we interviewed felt that financial reward and registration would undermine their relationship with their children and grandchildren, or oblige them to provide more care than they wanted to undertake. Other grandparents were concerned that registration would require them to care for unrelated children.

These findings were broadly supported in similar studies in the United States, with just 40 per cent of relative care givers interested in childcare licensing in one study. In this same study, relatives most interested in licensing were those who already cared for non-related children (Drake et al, 2006). Given these findings, we have concluded that the registration of informal carers is not a priority policy intervention, although relative carers should not be barred from registering if they are willing to care for unrelated children and be subject to the same levels of regulation as childminders.

Supporting grandparent carers

While grandparents largely did not wish for a formal payment system, some grandparents who we interviewed articulated the need for other forms of support. Many grandparents and older carers found the parent and toddler or stay-and-play sessions at children's centres to be exclusive and unwelcoming, with one grandparent stating:

"I did use other clubs, but they weren't particularly ones for grandparents and I found them rather cliquey. There were obviously for young people."

We interviewed a number of grandparents who attended clubs specifically for grandparents and older informal carers. These groups were run by volunteers and made a small charge, usually about 50 pence, to cover refreshments. The grandparents groups were very much appreciated, enabling grandparents to discuss childcare issues with each other and gain advice and mutual support on issues such as behaviour, toilet training and early learning, with two grandparents noting:

"The group is a godsend, the facilities are lovely and everyone looks after each other's kids. I've made some really good friends; I didn't know anyone in the area. I felt quite isolated at home with the children. But they [groups] are so hard to find."

"I've found out about so many things, the toy library, all these things I can take him to now."

A 2005 evaluation of grandparent support groups described the value of these forms of mutual support and also noted that parent and toddler

groups did not always welcome grandparents and older informal carers (Gray, 2005). However, the evaluation also found that these groups did not attract lower income informal carers.

At the time of writing, information from the Grandparents Association suggested that there were only 30 grandparent and toddler groups across England. This contrasts with the United States where there are many more grandparent support groups as well as home learning programmes that work with informal carers. Indeed, more than one-quarter of states in the United States now fund programmes to support informal carers (Drake et al, 2006; Porter, 2007; Porter and Rivera, 2005). These interventions have included the distribution of written advice on child development, face-to-face training on child development, the distribution of children's books and educational toys to informal carers. Some programmes to support informal carers also undertake home visits, where informal carers receive advice and mentoring in the home. Additionally, there are many support groups for informal carers, where ideas and information can be shared and problems discussed, as well as play and learning groups for informal carers and children.

Given the value attached to support groups by grandparents and their role in encouraging a positive home learning environment, we would like to see children's centres play a great role in helping set up these groups, as well as extending their work with informal carers.

Active grandparents

As noted above, a small number of grandparents were unhappy providing informal childcare. The most frequently cited reasons were:

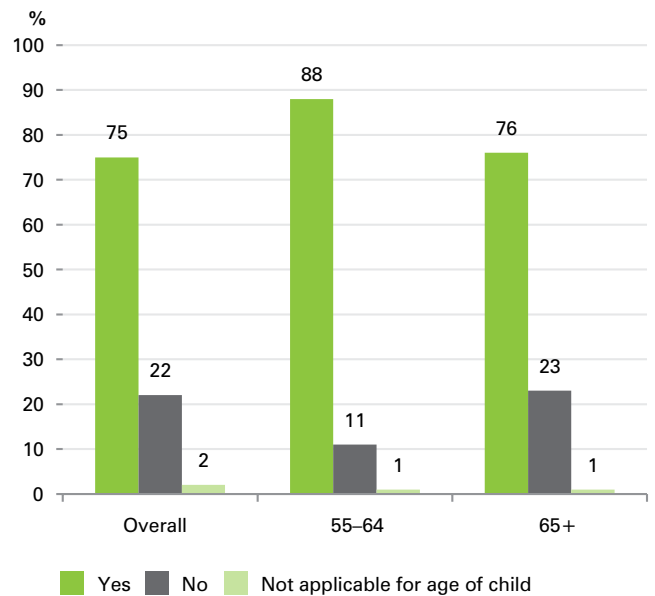
- I feel I am taken advantage of;
- too tiring; and
- too many hours.

While a small number of grandparents felt that the time commitment was too much, 35 per cent of carers aged 55–64 wanted to spend more time with the children for whom they cared. Indeed, our survey highlighted the active nature of many grandparent and older relative carers. Some 22 per cent of informal carers aged 55–64 got to meet the teachers or nursery workers of the children for whom they cared. Some 47 per cent of carers in the same age bracket supervised homework and 86 per cent read with the children for whom they cared. Figures 14 and 15 below present survey findings on other activities undertaken by informal carers. While interactions with the school, homework supervision and going on local walks and outings are activities undertaken consistently by carers of all social classes and levels of education, undertaking reading, painting and cooking with childcare is associated with an informal carer’s social class and level of qualifications (see Figure 15).

Many children looked after by grandparents and older relatives also attend nursery or school and will be exposed to a wide range of stimulating activities in these institutions. However, a proportion of younger children do not go to

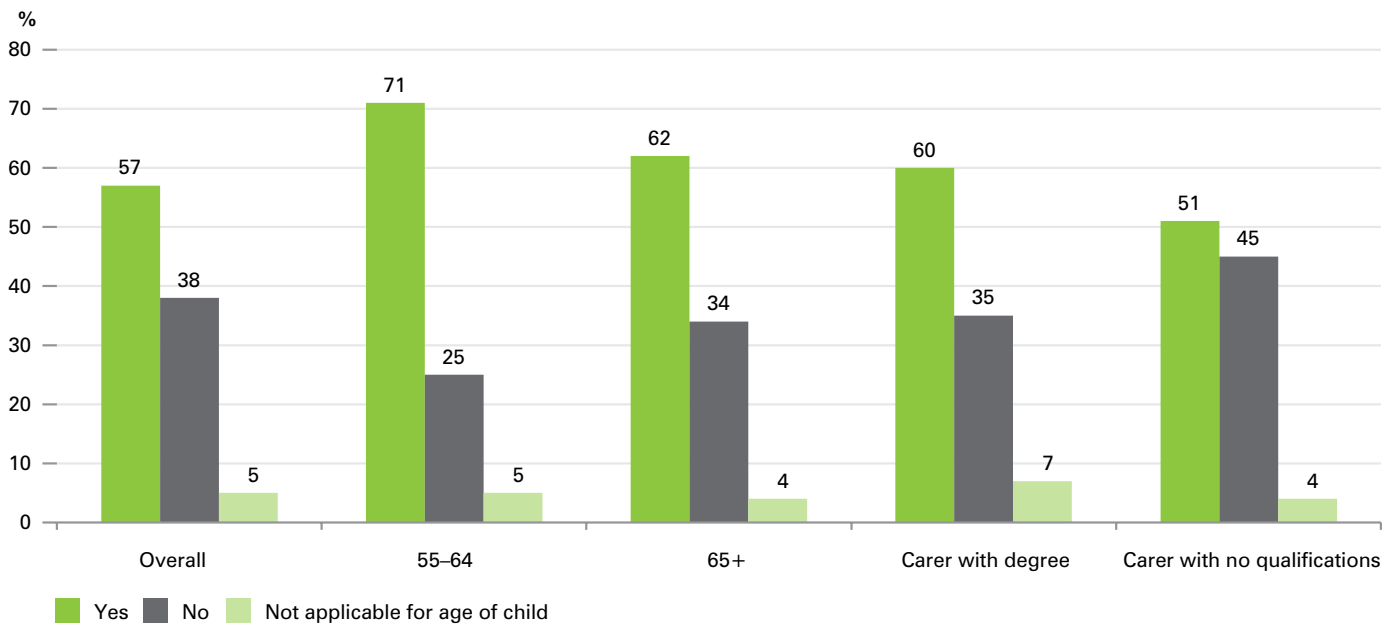
nurseries and do not take advantage of the 15 hours free early education for three- and four-year-olds. Analysis of the 2009 Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents showed that 23 per cent of children in the most disadvantaged families are not taking up the offer of a free place (Speight et al, 2010). This group of children is much less likely to be growing up in a stimulating home environment or to receive high quality childcare from informal carers. Public policy interventions need to focus on these disadvantaged children, enabling a greater uptake of free early education and promoting a positive home learning environment.

Figure 14: Percentage of informal carers going on local walks or outings with the children for whom they care



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010–211

Figure 15: Percentage of informal carers undertaking painting or cooking with child for whom they care



Source: Daycare Trust Survey of Informal Carers, 2010-211



Conclusions and recommendations

We set out to examine which families use grandparents to care for their children and to what extent. Our research also aimed to build a profile of grandparents who look after their grandchildren, great-nieces and great-nephews. What emerged is a picture of 'super-grandparents' who are often juggling their own jobs with looking after their grandchildren. The average age of grandparent carers in our survey was 62.5 years and 35 per cent of grandparent carers still worked. Our research highlighted many new trends, including the greater role of grandfathers in caring for their grandchildren. Perhaps this is evidence of changing gender roles in UK society.

But perhaps the most important finding that our research has highlighted is the essential role that grandparents play in making the economy function. Most parents use grandparent care to enable them to work. The hours of childcare they provide – an average of 10 hours every week – enables their children to remain in employment. And despite the expansion of formal childcare, 36 per cent of all British families use grandparents as their main form of childcare. Indeed, our survey data show that the expansion of formal childcare has not displaced grandparents' role as nearly half of all grandparents provide childcare in the working day and equal numbers care for their grandchildren immediately after school. It is ordinary working parents – those from the so-called squeezed middle – who rely most on informal childcare. Lone parents rely on grandparent care most of all. The cost of formal childcare is the most important driver of grandparent childcare use among ordinary working families. Despite progress to make formal childcare more affordable, it remains too expensive for many families.

But not all families have grandparents who live nearby and who can provide childcare. Families who have moved across the UK and those from migrant and minority ethnic groups are much

less likely to use grandparent care, for the simple reason that their close relatives are less likely to live nearby. This explains some marked regional and national differences in the use of grandparent childcare across the UK. Grandparent childcare is highest in Scotland and lowest in London as a consequence of international and internal migration.

Our research has built a stronger body of evidence that can feed into policy recommendations to support families. Our first recommendation is that public policy must understand, value and support the role of grandparent carers to a much greater extent than at present. Policymakers need to see informal and formal childcare as part of the same system. Local authority Childcare Sufficiency Assessments and other research need to give much more attention to informal childcare. More broadly, policymakers need to view informal childcare through a different lens. Rather than seeing it as an inadequate alternative to formal childcare, we need to see informal childcare as being complementary to formal provision in many families, and greatly valued by them.

Our second recommendation is that we still need to work towards affordable formal childcare, for those families who do not have relatives who live nearby, or who do not wish to rely on them. This is a particular policy priority in London with higher proportions of families who are internal or international migrants.

A number of lobbying groups have suggested that grandparents and other relatives be allowed to register as childminders and be paid for their services, with parents subsidised through the Tax Credit system. Our research has led us to conclude that there is no demand from families for registration of relatives who provide childcare. Instead, we believe grandparent carers can be supported in other ways.

Outside a formal payment system there may be other ways that government can support relatives who are carers. Our fourth recommendation is that the Government consider greater transferability of parental leave to working relative carers. In

Hungary parental leave and allowances can be transferred to grandparents. Such policies deserve further consideration in the UK and we would urge the Government to evaluate Hungary's parental leave system with a view to adopting a similar system in the UK. Fifth, as significant numbers of grandparent carers are working, we would also like to see the Government extend the right to request flexible working to grandparents and other relative carers.

Our research highlighted the role of the 'flying grandparent' with 5 per cent of British families using relatives who normally live abroad as their main form of childcare. This new trend is a consequence of greater migration, including greater British retirement migration. While many 'flying grandparents' are British or EU nationals, visa policy must continue to make grandparent visits to the UK an easy process. This is our sixth recommendation.

A significant number of grandparent carers we interviewed talked about their experiences of Sure Start children's centres. While some grandparents did have positive experiences of using the centres, the majority of grandparents in our study found parent and toddler groups and some other activities to be unwelcoming and exclusive. Our seventh recommendation is that children's centres review the way they interact with grandparents and older friends and relatives who provide informal childcare. Given the greater involvement of grandfathers, it is essential that male carers are made to feel as welcome as women. We would like to see the greater involvement of informal carers in the activities of Sure Start children's centres, through activities such as carer and toddler groups and informal carer-focused home learning programmes.

A number of grandparents that we interviewed did use Sure Start children's centres, often to go to grandparent and toddler support groups. For these grandparents, these groups gave them the opportunity to meet and share experiences and advice with other grandparents. But there are many parts of the UK without such groups. Our eighth recommendation is that Sure Start children's

centres increase the number of grandparent and toddler groups on offer, targeted at grandparents and other older relatives who provide informal childcare.

While our research highlighted the active role that many grandparents play in supporting their grandchildren's learning, not all grandparents are active in doing this. We need to learn from home-learning programmes in the United States that target grandparent carers. Our ninth recommendation is that schools and Sure Start children's centres should also consider informal carer-focused home learning programmes, learning from such work in the United States. These programmes need to be targeted at informal carers who are least likely to promote a positive home learning environment.

But ultimately, we are unlikely to achieve any of these policy changes unless there is greater recognition by central and local government of the role and importance of informal childcare. Perhaps our biggest policy demand is for a greater understanding of this very diverse practice by local and central government and a greater public recognition of the role of informal childcare in the lives of families.

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