

# **Grandparents and teen grandchildren: Exploring Intergenerational Relationships**

**Report of a Study funded by the  
Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
and  
The Economic and Social Research Council**

**By**

**Nicola Ross, Malcolm Hill, Helen Sweeting and Sarah  
Cunningham-Burley**

**Centre for Research on Families and Relationships**

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all those people, young and older, who took part in the study. We are also grateful to a wide range of people in a range of large and small organisations who made it possible to gain access to young people and grandparents. The study would not have been possible without the financial support of CRFR and the ESRC.

## **Affiliations**

Nicola Ross was employed on the project as Research Fellow based at the Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society, University of Glasgow, and member of CRFR.

Malcolm Hill is Director of the Glasgow Centre for the Child & Society and Associate Director of CRFR.

Helen Sweeting is a researcher (Higher Scientific Officer) at the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow and Associate Director of CRFR.

Sarah Cunningham-Burley is Professor of Medical and Family Sociology at the University of Edinburgh and a Director of CRFR.

## Summary

The study aimed to understand, from the perspective of both grandparents and teenage grandchildren, the nature and implications of their evolving relationships. A total of 148 people took part in the research, 58 in individual or joint interviews, the rest in group discussions.

Grandparents generally spoke positively about becoming and being a grandparent, using terms like *'love'*, *'enjoyment'* and *'happiness'*. When grandchildren were younger, time was spent together on outings and playing together, or with the grandparents teaching skills and providing childcare. As grandchildren grew older, the relationships were more likely to revolve around talking, giving advice and support. Most grandparents did not report any major problems in their relations with their grandchildren. A few had more responsibilities for care of their grandchildren than they desired. Some grandchildren saw their grandparents as fitting stereotypical images of the elderly, as frail or out of touch, but others said they were *'modern'*, describing them as *'fun'*, *'caring'*, *'active'* and *'up to date'*.

Both generations described how grandparents usually played a key role in *'listening'* to grandchildren. Many young people said they could share problems and concerns with their grandparents and referred to the way grandparents would sometimes act as go-betweens in the family, particularly when there were disagreements between themselves and their parents. Grandparents provided a bridge to the past by acting as sources of family history, heritage and traditions: storytellers who kept grandchildren aware of their own family experiences and their culture. They were also active in keeping wider sets of relatives connected. It was commonly accepted that grandparents tend to spoil their grandchildren and give them treats. Grandparents often referred to providing financial support to assist their grandchildren, ranging from pocket money to school fees.

Grandparents and grandchildren normally had a sense of obligation towards each other, but this was seldom specific. Grandchildren were encouraged to keep in touch, work hard at school and get a good job. Great importance was placed on grandchildren being healthy and happy and on grandparents supporting them in their interests. It was a common ideal that grandparents should maintain good relations by not interfering in parenting practices or taking sides in family disputes. It was stressed that grandparents ought not to show favouritism and that that they should treat all of their grandchildren equally and fairly, even if a special bond did exist with a particular grandchild. Young people of Scottish-Pakistani and Scottish-Chinese backgrounds expressed views similar to others, but placed a special emphasis on respect and responsibility towards their grandparents. Appreciation was shown for the part grandparents had played in providing for their family and creating opportunities.

Gender and lineage were important influences on relationships, with more young people citing closeness to grandmothers and especially their maternal grandmother. The relationships were also influenced by past contact and care, geographical distance, frequency of meeting, feelings of connectedness, and overlaps in interactions between family and friends. Although grandmothers were often described as more involved, a notable result was the emotional closeness and active involvement of many grandfathers in their grandchildren's lives – close bonds clearly existed. There was a strong focus on maternal grandmothers by grandchildren from less affluent and Chinese backgrounds in

particular. These grandmothers were often very involved and had played a large part in bringing up their grandchildren. This is an interesting finding, particularly for Chinese families, where links through the paternal line are traditionally seen as more important. In certain cases, closeness was maintained despite considerable distance or very infrequent meetings. Appreciation was expressed for grandparents who lived further away, because less regular contact meant the relationship was seen as special and not taken for granted.

The dynamic nature of grandparent-grandchild relations was affected by stage of life and changing circumstances, such as death, divorce or separation within families. The death of a grandparent often brought greater closeness between grandchildren and the widowed grandparent, as they saw each other more often, were coping together with the death, or could relate to them as an individual rather than part of a pair. Widowed grandparents also mentioned the consolation and support provided by grandchildren. Divorce or separation affected contact with grandparents related through the non-resident parent, with bonds more likely to continue if a good relationship had existed between the parent and the grandparents before the separation, there was recognition of shared experiences, and it was believed that continued contact was important. The direction of care and support altered during the teenage years, with some grandchildren taking greater responsibility for their grandparents. Grandchildren also talked about spending more time with friends, studying or working. However, many suggested that closeness with their grandparents remained, even though contact may have declined.

These findings convey the strong emotional bonds and support existing between some grandchildren and grandparents and the ways in which these close relationships are developed and maintained, providing greater awareness and a sometimes unique link between the two age groups. Results are relevant to policy, particularly concerning inter-generational support, understandings of which will be developed through further research on grandparenting and family transitions.

## MAIN REPORT

# GRANDPARENTS AND TEEN GRANDCHILDREN: EXPLORING INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Nicola Ross, Malcolm Hill, Helen Sweeting and Sarah-  
Cunningham-Burley

### Background

This research focused on the nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships, exploring the ways in which family and societal contexts are impacting on this kinship relation. The focus was on grandparent-grandchild relations when grandchildren are in their teenage years, as little research has been conducted on this phase of the grandchild/grandparent relationship, particularly on the range of help and support provided by grandparents to older grandchildren, or vice versa. Much previous research on grandparenthood has been based upon large-scale surveys, highlighting various predictors of relationship strength and quality. However, such studies are limited in their ability to shed light on how grandparent-grandchild relationships are actually experienced. Information has mainly been gathered from grandparents, parents and young adults, with few studies including the views of children and young people or containing the perspectives of *related* grandparents and grandchildren. This research redressed the balance by adopting a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of both grandparents and grandchildren. It conceptualised grandparent-grandchild relationships as ‘particularistic’ rather than ‘global roles’ (Matthews & Sprey, 1985; Kivett, 1991). It considered variations in the same person’s relationships with several grandchildren or grandparents, placing these in the context of each individual’s family, social networks and socio-economic environments. The study emphasised the dynamic nature of grandparent-grandchild relations by examining perceived changes related to life stage and the implications of various family transitions, formations and mobility.

### Objectives

The main aims and objectives of this research were to:

1. Understand the nature and implications of grandparent-grandchild relations when grandchildren are in their teen years, from the perspectives of both generations.
2. Assess the meaning and qualities of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.
3. Investigate the flow of emotional, social and practical care and support between grandparents and grandchildren.
4. Examine the impact of the relationships on each others’ lives currently, in the past and potentially the future.
5. Explore the significance of such factors as gender, ethnicity, family history and mobility.
6. Offer methodological insights to gathering data in different ways from both young and older people.

The qualitative approach generated rich data, analysis of which permitted a nuanced account of relations between the two generations to be recounted. The following analysis brings to the fore key findings that emerged from discussions and interviews held with young and older people. The research aims and objectives shaped the topic guides and analysis; key findings are presented thematically, although these are also underpinned by the specific research objectives.

## Research Design

The research adopted a qualitative approach to explore in depth the meaning and significance of grandparent-grandchild relations. Interviews and group discussions were held with respondents from both generations and included related and unrelated grandparents and grandchildren. Those with related pairs enabled comparison of views of the same relationship, while those with unrelated participants provided more general comparisons within and across generations. Altogether 148 respondents took part in the study, 75 young people and 73 older people with at least one teenage grandchild. Half the young people were aged 10-14, half aged 15-19. Grandparent respondents ranged in age from early 50s to late 80s. Respondents were chosen to provide a social spread, and were drawn from affluent and less affluent, urban and rural areas. The sampling was also intended to include participants from minority ethnic backgrounds. This is a key strength of the study as very little British research making inter-ethnic comparisons on this topic is currently available. In total, 68 interviews and discussions were held: 24 individual interviews and 10 group discussions with young people; and 18 individual and 8 group discussions with older people. Joint interviews were also conducted with 8 grandchild-grandparent pairs. Details are set out in the sample summaries below. It should be noted that this ESRC small grant provided part of the funding for the overall project, so numbers of achieved interviews is higher than would normally be expected as the project lasted for two years.

**Table 1: SAMPLE SUMMARY**

### a. Number of discussions and interviews

	Young people		Older people	Total
	<i>Aged 10-14</i>	<i>Aged 15-19</i>		
Group discussions	10		8	18
Individual interviews	12	12	18	42
Joint interviews	8			8
<b>Total</b>				<b>68</b>
<b>b. Gender of respondents (N = 148)</b>				
Female	24	18	64	106
Male	13	20	9	42
<b>c. Type of area and ethnicity (N = 148)</b>				
White: Affluent urban	8	9	8	25
White: Less affluent urban	7	8	23	38
White: Rural	5	9	24	38
Scottish-Chinese: Urban	7	6	12	25

Scottish-Pakistani Muslim: Urban	10	6	6	22
----------------------------------	----	---	---	----

Recruitment for the study proved to be time consuming and necessitated use of multiple strategies for accessing participants; many more organisations than originally anticipated had to be contacted to gain the desired number of respondents. Grandchildren were recruited through schools and community groups. Sheltered housing complexes, day centres, church groups and bowling, golf and rotary clubs were contacted to access grandparents. Recruitment was most successful when an individual in a local area or organisation acted as an advocate for the research, usually on account of a particular interest in the study topic. Community organisations proved more successful than sporting clubs for recruiting older people. Recruiting individual participants was easier than recruiting related grandchildren and grandparents.

### **Methodological insights**

This section focuses on the influence of the methods themselves on the data generated. The recruitment and interview processes themselves reflected the nature of relationships being investigated. For instance, it was harder to recruit grandfathers to take part in the research than grandmothers, though during interviews with grandfathers the importance of this aspect of their life became apparent. The methods used affected the direction of the interviews and their content. For example, nearly all the grandchildren taking part in individual or joint interviews identified one or a pair of grandparents they felt closer to. However, young people interviewed in groups often would not identify themselves as having a particularly close grandparent, possibly due to the dynamics of the group situation. Additionally, sometimes grandchildren did not initially select one grandparent they felt closer to, but would do so as an interview unfolded. For some, reticence suggested a discomfort with overtly favouring one grandparent.

Some grandparents needed little prompting to speak at length on evolving relationships. They elaborated upon the ways in which they actively worked at maintaining relationships with their grandchildren within the context of changing family circumstances. Others found it hard to talk about their relationships when asked, because these seemed so integrated into their everyday lives. In such instances it was helpful to base discussions around more specific associated issues, notably significant transitions (changing health, deaths, employment patterns, mobility etc.), then place their family relationships within this context. In this way the conversational style adopted, and flexibility built into the interview process, proved useful in illuminating understandings of changes over time and the evolving nature of grandparent-grandchild relationships.

The combination of methods brought understandings of both specific grandparent/grandchild relationships as well as general views reflecting cultural norms and values. Interviewing both sides of an intergenerational relationship proved viable and produced useful data, whether these interviews were paired or not.

### **Defining grandparent-grandchild relations**

This section reports on overall views about the nature of the grandparent/grandchild relationship and its meaning and significance. Grandparents reported generally positive associations with becoming and being a grandparent, expressed, often more

readily by grandmothers, in terms of 'love' 'enjoyment' and 'happiness'. With grandfathers, the enjoyment derived from being a grandparent was often revealed more gradually as they recounted their experiences. More of the grandmothers indicated they had been looking forward to becoming grandparents. When grandchildren were younger, respondents reported that time was spent on outings and playing together or with the grandparents teaching skills and providing childcare. As grandchildren grew older, talking, giving advice and support characterised the relationships to a greater extent. Some had everyday routine contact with their grandchildren; for others, contact was more infrequent, based around family celebrations and holidays. Few grandparents mentioned any problems with their relations with grandchildren, though it should be borne in mind that people with strong negative feelings about their grandchildren may well have declined to take part in the research. Those problems that were referred to were raised in instances where grandparents felt they were taking on more childcare or parenting of grandchildren than they desired. This altered their idea of what it meant to be a grandparent, reducing or eliminating the fun and increasing the likelihood of resentment with respect to relations with the parent generation.

Grandchildren's images of grandparents clustered in the following ways:

- **Kinship** - family; to be respected, as elders; less disciplining than parents.
- **Positive characteristics/behaviours** - unconditional love; spoil you, give you treats, gifts and money; look after you and care for you; always there for you; confidante; babysitter; reliable; kind; nice; funny.
- **Negative characteristics/behaviours** - stubborn; annoying; embarrassing; moaning; interfering.
- **Age-related issues** - old; need care and support; deteriorating health; muddled or forgetful; difficulty hearing; grey hair; wrinkly; glasses; old fashioned; pills; slow; traditional.
- **Associated activities** - knitting; baking; cooking; sedentary lifestyles.

Although more often slanted toward the positive, these also included negative aspects and stereotypes. Some young people saw their grandparents as fitting stereotypical images of the elderly, as frail or out of touch, but others contrasted their grandparents with this, saying they were 'modern', describing their relations as 'fun', 'caring' 'active', of grandparents using mobile phones, as adapting and keeping up to date.

### **Important aspects of grandparent-grandchild relations**

This section focuses on what were described as important aspects of grandparent-grandchild relationships, including discussion of the quality of the relationship. The analysis particularly focuses on those defined themselves as 'close'. Both generations viewed the relationship as emotionally significant, mutually supportive and an important aspect of their identities. A recurring theme in interviews with grandchildren who had close relationships with a grandparent, particularly those who indicated their grandparents had played an important part in their upbringing, was the mediating role grandparents played between them and their parents, particularly when there were disagreements. In these cases grandparents were usually described as 'less strict' than parents and their influence in families might be drawn upon by grandchildren to lever greater independence. These grandparents were often treated as



confidants, with whom young people said they could share problems and concerns. Crucially, it was sometimes easier to confide in grandparents than parents or other people, because of the long-established relationship or sensitive way of responding. The key role that grandparents played in '*listening*' to grandchildren, the impression that they always seemed to just '*be there*' for them was centrally important, with such grandparents often referred to as a '*second mum and dad*'. Grandparents were also constructed as conveyers of family history, heritage and traditions, storytellers who kept grandchildren aware of their own family experiences and culture. They were a bridge to the past, and a link to the extended family, active in keeping families connected. They were associated with spoiling or giving their grandchildren treats. Grandparents often mentioned their role in providing financial support to their families, ranging from pocket money to school fees.

Grandparents and grandchildren seemed to have had a general sense of obligation towards each other, but this was seldom specific. It was expected that grandchildren should keep in contact, work hard at school and get a good job. In rural areas this was sometimes related to leaving the area to enter further education or open up better employment prospects. Grandparents emphasised the importance of grandchildren being healthy and happy, and of their own role in encouraging and supporting them in their interests. This suggested a minimising of kin obligations and duty (except for mutual concern) and strengthening of individualisation, but through supportive relationships. Young people of Scottish-Pakistani and Scottish-Chinese backgrounds expressed views similar to others, but placed a special emphasis on respect and responsibility towards grandparents. Many, but not all, expressed a more explicit sense of duty regarding care, gratitude and respect, showing appreciation for the part grandparents had played in providing and making opportunities for their family. It was framed as an important part of their Asian cultures to look after and respect the elderly. Some contrasted these values with a perception of greater emphasis on individual gains through self-improvement and career-building in wider Scottish society. However, reference was also made to changes in these traditional beliefs and practices within Scottish-Asian families.

Grandparents perceived not interfering in the way parents' parented their grandchildren, nor taking sides in family disputes, as important to maintain good relations across the generations. It was important for grandparents not to show favouritism, with fairness characterising how relations were enacted, even if a special bond did exist with a particular grandchild. Grandparents often described how the relationships evolved in response to changing family circumstances and saw their contact with grandchildren as life course/stage related; this was viewed as a natural change. Thus, it was accepted that older grandchildren are entitled to spend more time outwith the family.

### **Influences on grandparent-grandchild interactions**

This section focuses on influences on interactions between grandparents and grandchildren centring on accounts given of close relationships. Although contextual influences are referred to, including gender, lineage, proximity and contact, it is clearly necessary to consider individual contextual influences in combination (Boon & Brussoni, 1996).

### *Gender and lineage*

Most grandchildren identified one grandparent, or one side of the family that they felt a particular closeness to. Consistent with much of the literature (e.g. Brussoni & Boon, 1998; Van Ranst et al, 1995; Mills et al, 2001), gender and lineage appeared important in grandchildren's selection of a closest grandparent. 48% cited a grandmother as most close, compared with 11% choosing a grandfather. The others selected a set of grandparents or expressed no preference. Similarly more than twice as many favoured maternal grandparents as paternal. It has been suggested that this may be explained by women's role as 'kin-keepers' (Eisenberg, 1988: 215). Some young people elaborated on this, referring to the importance of relations through the maternal line (of their mum's relationship with her mum), this closer bond often resulting in more regular contact and involvement with maternal grandparents. Some described grandmothers as more involved, with grandfathers as background figures, or more reticent in expressing emotions. However, an interesting finding to emerge from this research was the emotional closeness and active involvement expressed by many grandfathers and by grandchildren of their grandfathers – close bonds clearly existed, concurring with findings from another study adopting a qualitative approach (Roberto et al, 2001).

About a fifth of grandchildren did not identify a grandparent they felt particularly close to. A few said they felt close to all their grandparents and did not think it appropriate to identify just one in particular. The idea that it was inappropriate to choose a most close relationship, a 'favourite', was more pronounced in the interviews and discussions conducted with grandparents. However, many did refer to particularly close relationships, often the firstborn grandchild, or a grandchild that, due to family circumstances, they had played a large part in the life of over the years.

Some variation across the groups was evident. Nearly all the grandchildren from less affluent backgrounds identified a maternal grandparent as their most close relationship, the majority selecting their maternal grandmother. Grandchildren from more affluent backgrounds and rural areas were evenly divided with regard to lineage in their selection of a most close grandparent, although the majority identified a grandmother as most close. Those from rural areas were less likely to identify one grandparent in particular, more often identifying pairs of grandparents or saying that they were close to all of their grandparents. Grandchildren from Chinese backgrounds who selected a most close grandparent all chose a grandmother (usually maternal). In contrast, most Scottish-Pakistani grandchildren did not cite a grandparent they felt particularly close to.

The strong focus on maternal grandmothers by grandchildren from less affluent and Scottish-Chinese backgrounds (particularly) is interesting, as a theme to emerge from interviews with Chinese grandparents and to a lesser extent grandchildren was the traditional importance placed on links through the *paternal* line. However, working against this was the very great involvement that a number of Chinese maternal grandmothers had in the lives of their grandchildren, taking on responsibility for

childcare to allow parents to work or to fill the role of absent parents. The experiences of grandchildren from less affluent backgrounds paralleled this, many recounting the large part their maternal grandmothers had played in their upbringing, often seeming to take on more of a parenting than grandparenting role. Demography and economics play a part here as the grandparents of young people from less affluent backgrounds tended to be younger, with fewer resources. Partly as a result mothers were more likely to live with their own parents while raising children.

### *Contact and proximity*

Geographical proximity and frequency of contact have previously been identified as important influences on closeness in relations between grandparents and grandchildren (Kivett, 1991; Hodgson, 1992; Kennedy 1991; Creasey & Kaliher, 1994; Sanders & Trygstad, 1993). Physical distance may reflect as well as constrain family closeness. Many young people in this study reported feeling closer to grandparents who lived nearby. An important theme to emerge was the extent to which grandchildren were able to have individual contact with their grandparents, independent of their family. Some, when describing the context of their most close relationship, recounted regularly visiting grandparents separately, not simply due to geographical proximity, but to connections felt with grandparents and the degree to which they had been involved in their upbringing. Interactions, as part of everyday routines, activities and networks facilitated the formation of emotional closeness and reciprocity, building strong bonds over time. Grandchildren referred to this in terms of knowing grandparents were *'always there'* for them. This close contact was easier to maintain as they grew older if grandparents' homes formed part of their social landscape, incorporated into their everyday practices, such as visiting friends, or doing a paper round. In relations based more around family visits (sometimes expressed as more formal), grandchildren often indicated contact had declined over the years. This related also to how comfortable and relaxed they felt with grandparents, how grandparents interacted with their friends and vice versa.

While many young people linked close relationships with grandparents to geographical proximity, there were some exceptions. Some described relations with each set of grandparents as equally close despite difference in proximity affecting contact. This was sometimes framed in terms of a greater appreciation of grandparents with whom they were unable to be in regular contact, with the less frequent meetings seen as special and not taken for granted. Many Scottish-Pakistani or Scottish-Chinese grandchildren had grandparents who lived abroad, with whom they had little regular face-to-face contact, yet some recounted feeling a close bond as contact was maintained in other ways, by phone and during holiday visits.

### *Feelings of connectedness*

Perceptions of connectedness between grandchildren and their grandparents appeared to impact on the emotional closeness of the relationship. In part, this was fostered by overlaps in everyday routines, of frequent, casual encounters. However, connectedness bred from a sense of common experiences or shared values was also important. This was sometimes expressed in terms of greater affinity, perceiving backgrounds to be similar, speaking in the same way, holding the same values, understanding the contexts of each other's lives, with shared personalities, abilities or

interests (boys going to football with or supporting the same team as their grandfathers, both generations being good at music or art etc.). Also affinity was helped by shared forms of communication, as when grandparents took an interest in new technologies, using mobile phones, texting, and e-mailing.

The importance of connectedness was more clearly conveyed in conversations with grandparents. Thus, value was attached to family traits, shared physical characteristics or personalities, and having grandchildren named after them. Some believed they had an important role in transferring to their grandchildren family knowledge and a sense of kin history and continuity. This could be related to death of a partner or the prospect of their own death. Making their grandchildren more aware of those who had gone before was described as important, often through use of family photographs and stories, or by making stronger connections with the wider family. Celebrations were referred to where grandparents acted as the link, bringing different parts of the family together, as were visits made with their grandchildren to relatives living elsewhere to maintain family connections. Grandparents also mentioned making a record, via photographs and increasingly videos, of shared experiences with their grandchildren, to watch together now and for them to keep in order to remember those times by. Preserving memories of the past through conveying this to grandchildren as representatives of the future offered consolation for actual and expected losses and was associated with the importance attached to reminiscences for some grandparents.

### **Changes over time and significant events**

This section examines continuity and change in relationships through different events and life stages (cf. Holladay et al. 1998). Episodes such as the death or changing health of a grandparent, moves, or parental divorce, could lead to greater closeness or distance.

Previous research indicated that grandparent-grandchild relationships change as grandchildren grow up, with grandparents having greatest contact with, and more active roles in the lives of very young grandchildren (e.g. Dench & Ogg, 2002; Silverstein & Marengo, 2001; Ponzetti & Folkrod, 1989). Grandchildren talked about how the relationships had changed, noting that they spent more time with friends, or on school work, that they were working, studying elsewhere, or had left the family home, and that this affected contact. However, many suggested that closeness remained even though contact may have declined.

Greater life expectancy means it is increasingly common for young people, as they approach adulthood, still to have one or more grandparents living and often in good health (Silverstein and Long 1998). That said, many of the grandchildren in the study had experienced the loss of a grandparent. Some grandparents referred to the prospect of their own death and how their grandchildren would cope with this, a worry for those who identified their relationship as especially close. Young people who had experienced such a death discussed the ways in which it had affected relations with other grandparents. Sometimes it brought them closer to the remaining grandparent of the pair, reference being made to increased contact (making more time for a grandparent now on their own), shared experiences (uniting through coping with the death), or changing context (relating to one grandparent rather than a pair permitted a different relationship to emerge). Grandchildren also discussed repercussions for

relations within the rest of their family. There was also recognition of changes in the behaviour of their remaining grandparents towards them; that the death of one grandparent in some respects left a gap for remaining grandparents to fill. Grandparents who did so were altering their grandparenting in response to the changing context of the family. The consolation and support provided by grandchildren was mentioned by grandparents who had lost a partner. For instance, the birth of a grandchild was associated with continuation of the family and the presence of grandchildren required that they continue with everyday life, and mark celebrations and special events.

It was also apparent that the direction of care and support altered during the teenage years, with some grandchildren taking greater responsibility for their grandparents. Grandchildren related how the changing health of their grandparents affected closeness, some recounting how a grandparent developing serious health issues had changed the regularity of contact, or how their frailty had impacted negatively on relations, affecting contact over the years. Grandchildren were sometimes acting as supports for the grandparent with health issues, or as emotional and practical support for the other grandparent of the pair. Again, this affected not only relations with the grandparent whose health had changed, but also influenced their relations with other grandparents, including how much they appreciated them, and the amount and context of time spent together.

Divorce or separation was another common transition within families, affecting grandparent-grandchild relations. Previous research (e.g. Dench & Ogg, 2002; Mills et al., 2001) suggests that when families are disrupted by divorce, grandchildren may experience closer bonds with the maternal side of the family while contact with paternal grandparents decreases. The attitude of parents and grandparents to continued contact with grandchildren is important in maintaining links in families affected by divorce or separation. Contrasting situations were evident in this study. In some families, contact with grandparents related through the non-resident parent declined after divorce, but in others contact and closeness increased. Key influences in maintaining bonds between the grandchild and grandparents on the side of the non-resident parent were a good relationship between parent and in-law prior to the separation, and recognition of shared experiences. Wider family relations affected how any particular grandparent-grandchild relationship was affected by transitions like separation and divorce.

### **Grandparent-grandchild relationships in wider context**

This section brings together broader issues that were discussed in the groups and individual interviews that shed light both on the nature of the grandparent/grandchild relationship and broader social and lifecourse changes. Findings from this study suggest that connectedness between grandparents and grandchildren, through shared interests, personalities and ability to fit contact with grandparents into everyday routines was key in influencing whether there were overlaps in relations with family and peers. Close grandparent-grandchild relations provided more general opportunities to link the generations via shared interests such as attending football matches or playing bridge. The children from less affluent backgrounds in particular talked of grandparents' homes as being settings they would frequent with their friends (lack of resources affecting access to alternative spaces). Grandparents (usually those

with greater resources) mentioned taking grandchildren's friends on outings or collecting them from school along with their grandchildren when younger. Grandparents living in sheltered housing or care homes mentioned knowing grandchildren of fellow residents through visits, conversation and photos. Whilst it may have been common for grandparents and younger grandchildren to spend time outdoors together, it was more common for contact to be based indoors during the teenage years.

Some grandchildren conveyed that their general perceptions of older people was influenced by their particular experiences with their grandparents. Some suggested that through close involvement with grandparents they found older people less '*annoying*', appreciated that they may '*need help*' and would offer this (for instance, carrying shopping for their grandparents' friends). A few grandparents felt restrictions were placed on their interactions with children and young people due to fears held of strangers and potential misinterpretations of their actions, and that less trust now existed affecting relations between generations. Some contrasted their own (traditional) values with the more liberal attitude they perceived currently. These grandparents felt their grandchildren to be '*more sophisticated*' and referred to the commercialism of entertainment and products aimed at a youth market, observing the powerful media influence, contrasting their grandchildren's lifestyles with their own. A common theme concerned money and a reduction in its '*real value*', reference made to a lack of appreciation by their grandchildren of how much they had in comparison to earlier generations. Changing societal contexts were referred to by some grandparents, citing greater freedoms, rights and autonomy they felt young people now to have in comparison to their own experiences. Generational change in grandparenting style was also referred to. Some talked of their own grandparents as more distant, strict and formal than were they with their own grandchildren. This was often associated with changing attitudes and of a '*willingness to listen to each other*' that was thought to be more in evidence now.

### **Main concluding points**

These findings support previous research, for instance in relation to the importance of lineage, gender, contact and geographic proximity, to the nature and quality of relations. However, by adopting a qualitative approach this research uncovers a greater understanding of the processes through which particular relationships are enacted. It highlights the significance of young people's capacity to have independent relations with grandparents, the importance derived from perceived connectedness, the potential integration of family and peer relations, and the impact on individual grandparent-grandchild relations of the various transitions which families negotiate. It adds to understandings of grandparent-grandchild relations by placing particular relationships in the context of family and peer relations and provides valuable inter-ethnic and socio-economic dimensions in a UK context.

## References

- Boon, S.D. and Brussoni, M.J. (1996) Young Adults' Relationships With Their "closest" Grandparents: Examining Emotional Closeness. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* **11**, 439-458.
- Brussoni, M.J. and Boon, S.D. (1998) Grandparental Impact in Young Adults' Relationships With Their Closest Grandparents: the Role of Relationship Strength and Emotional Closeness. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* **46**, 267-286.
- Creasey, G.L. and Kaliher, G. (1994) Age-Differences in Grandchildrens Perceptions of Relations With Grandparents. *Journal of Adolescence* **17**, 411-426.
- Dench, G. and Ogg, J. (2002) *Grandparenting in Britain: a baseline study*. London: Institute of Community Studies.
- Eisenberg, A. (1988) Grandchildren's Perspectives on Relationships with Grandparents: The Influence of Gender across Generations. *Sex Roles* **19**, 205-217.
- Hodgson, L.G. (1992) Adult Grandchildren and Their Grandparents - the Enduring Bond. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* **34**, 209-225.
- Holladay, S., Lackovich, R., Lee, M., Coleman, M., Harding, D. and Denton, D. (1998) (Re)Constructing Relationships With Grandparents: a Turning Point Analysis of Granddaughters' Relational Development With Maternal Grandmothers. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* **46**, 287-303.
- Kennedy, G.E. (1991) Grandchildrens Reasons for Closeness With Grandparents. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality* **6**, 697-712.
- Kivett, V.R. (1991) The Grandparent-Grandchild Connection. *Marriage and the Family Review* **16**, 267-290.
- Matthews, S.H. and Sprey, J. (1985) Adolescents Relationships With Grandparents – an Empirical Contribution to Conceptual Clarification. *Journals of Gerontology* **40**, 621-626.
- Mills, T., Wakeman, M. and Fea, C. (2001) Adult Grandchildren's Perceptions of Emotional Closeness and Consensus With Their Maternal and Paternal Grandparents. *Journal of Family Issues* **22 (4)**, 427-455.
- Ponzetti, J. and Folkrod, A. (1989) Grandchildren's Perceptions of their Relationships with their Grandparents. *Child Study Journal* **19**, 41-50.
- Roberto, K.A., Allen, K.R. and Blieszner, R. (2001) Grandfathers' Perceptions and Expectations of Relationships With Their Adult Grandchildren. *Journal of Family Issues* **22 (4)**, 407-426.

- Sanders, G. and Trygstad, D. (1993) Strengths in the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship. *Activities, Adaptation and Aging* **17 (4)**, 43-52.
- Silverstein, M., and J. D. Long. 1998. "Trajectories of Grandparents' perceived solidarity with adult grandchildren: A growth curve analysis over 23 years." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 60: 912-923.
- Silverstein, M. and Marengo, A. (2001) How Americans Enact the Grandparent Role Across the Family Life Course. *Journal of Family Issues*, **22 (4)**, 493-522.
- Van Ranst, N., Verschueren, K. and Marcoen, A. (1995) The Meaning of Grandparents as Viewed by Adolescent Grandchildren: an Empirical Study in Belgium. *International Journal of Aging & Human Development* **41**, 311-324.