

book reviews

Grandparenthood

Ruth Westheimer and Steven Kaplan

Harper Collins, Sydney, 1999

Dr Ruth Westheimer, aka 'Dr Ruth', 'loves being a grandparent' and, with her co-author Dr Steven Kaplan, wants others to embrace the role with similar enthusiasm. Their book, *Grandparenthood*, is a highly readable introduction to many of the issues pertinent to grandparents today. Westheimer and Kaplan discuss a range of issues and concerns – from the personal (feelings of 'not being ready' or being 'too young' to be a grandparent) to the very practical (gift giving, financial and health care questions and social and cultural issues of family tradition, religion and education). All these topics and many more are tackled in the frank, down-to-earth manner for which Westheimer is well known in her 'Dr Ruth' persona.

Westheimer and Kaplan see an opportunity for grandparents in an age of globalization and enormous social change to be a source of stability. They acknowledge that the shifts in the shape and nature of families in Western society will mean that many grandparents will find themselves in unfamiliar and sometimes challenging territory. Issues of adoption, guardianship, divorce and death are all dealt with in a way which encourages grandparents to think broadly about the way that their role might develop in their particular family situation.

The authors are keen to reinforce the point that their book is not about parenting. Understanding and accepting the parenting style of a child may be a difficult but important step in grandparenthood. The question of child care and issues about working mothers are acknowledged by the authors as potential areas of conflict or concern. Westheimer and Kaplan are clear about the role of grandparents on these and other

parenting and life issues: 'As a grandparent, your goal is to respect and support your children's choices so there will be no needless guilt' (p30). The authors stress the importance of the special role that grandparents can play as keepers of knowledge of a family's history and traditions. They argue that far more important than material gifts are the time and love grandparents can give their grandchildren. These are the things which reinforce the unique nature of the relationship and provide the kind of stability or consistency that Westheimer and Kaplan are concerned is missing in many families.

The book will appeal to Australian readers although it is frustrating that the authors so frequently resort to using references to American television programmes as shorthand to describe some complex issues of family dynamics or conflict. What is however impressive is the way in which the authors have managed to cover such a wide range of issues without seeming to gloss over any. Lists of suggested further reading are provided at the end of each chapter. Westheimer and Kaplan succeed in showing the potential of grandparenthood to be a rich and rewarding role and relationship.

Reviewed by:

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On the move again?

What works in creating stability for looked after children

Sonia Jackson and Nigel Thomas

Barnados, Ilford, Essex, 1999

Professor Sonia Jackson (University of Wales at Swansea) and Nigel Thomas are well known British researchers who have contributed to the literature on child care practice. They were invited by Barnados to contribute to their *What Works?* series of publications, a series founded on the belief that children are entitled to services which are based on the best available evidence of effectiveness. The authors differentiate stability from continuity, pointing out that a placement can provide continuity without necessarily providing stability. Interestingly, they found that the greatest

efforts are made by services not constrained by conventional bureaucratic boundaries.

The authors point to compelling research evidence of the damaging effects of instability on children but there is little on how instability can be avoided. Reports and enquiries have highlighted inconsistencies in planning, policy and practice which are frequently reflected in poor outcomes for children. Among these concerns is the recurring one about the number of placements that children experience and the consequences of change for their educational and emotional