

Surviving Intervention: Grandparents' Struggle to Maintain Relationships with their Grandchildren Following Contact with Child Protection Services

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Grandparents play an important role in families, contributing to the maintenance of intergenerational relationships. Recent literature has identified increased incidence of grandparents raising their grandchildren, often after family breakdown. Less evident is the literature highlighting Australian grandparents' experiences of reduced or lost contact with their grandchildren. Lost contact can result from many factors including family disputes, separation or divorce of adult children, or children being taken into State care. The primary aim of the Honours research project reported here, a component of a larger project, was to explore the lived experiences of Queensland grandparents who had reduced, lost or denied contact with their grandchildren after contact with child protection services. In recent years, almost 8000 Queensland children have reportedly been living in out-of-home care arrangements annually. In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of seven (7) grandparents. An emerging key theme was that grandchildren were very important to grandparents, but that grandparents struggled to maintain contact with their grandchildren after families came to the attention of child protection authorities. These findings can help inform social work practice with families for the wellbeing of both grandparents and grandchildren.

■ **Keywords:** grandparents, grandchildren, state care, child protection, lost contact

Introduction

Families are important in the lives of children, and grandparents are significant members of extended families. Some isolated or disadvantaged families struggle under a range of modern living pressures and conflicts, and in some cases their children come to the attention of child protection authorities (Gladstone & Brown, 2007; Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013). For some grandparents in families who come to the attention of child protection, commonly known as “the Department” or “DoCS” in some Australian States, contact with grandchildren may be maintained, including when grandparents take on a primary carer role (Horner, Downie, Hay, & Wichmann, 2007; Kiraly, James, & Humphreys, 2015; Lever & Wilson, 2005). Yet some grandparents lose contact after their grandchildren come to the attention of the child protection system.

Ongoing relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are most often mutually beneficial (Gladstone &

Brown, 2007). When grandparents lose contact with their grandchildren they may suffer grief and loss that impacts on their health and wellbeing (Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Kruk, 1995). Limited literature appears to document the experiences of grandparents who have reduced, lost or denied contact with their grandchildren. In this article, findings are reported from a recent social work Honours study exploring grandparents' reduced or lost contact with grandchildren after contact with child protection authorities, including the impact on grandparents' wellbeing. This Honours project was a component of a larger study looking more broadly at Queensland grandparents' experiences of reduced or lost contact with their grandchildren.

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Background

Grandparents are important in the lives of children. Modern living pressures have led to isolated family units, often a factor contributing to family breakdown. Isolated and vulnerable families can struggle to meet the needs of children, sometimes leading to families coming to the attention of child protection services. In 2012, there were almost 8000 Queensland children living in out-of-home care because of intervention by child protection authorities (Queensland Living Away from Home Report, 2014). Child protection services intervene on behalf of the State to safeguard children deemed to have been harmed or be at risk of harm (Queensland Child Protection Act, 1999). Increased numbers of children have entered State care in recent years, and a most recent Inquiry found that the Queensland child protection system is overloaded (State of Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013). The Inquiry recommended new directions in child protection policies and procedures over the next decade.

Families are Important

Children ideally grow up with strong relationships with immediate and extended family including grandparents. Attachment bonds are important for children, and in an ageing society grandparents can have long term relationships with their grandchildren over decades. However, reduced or lost contact between grandparents and grandchildren can be an unintended consequence of events such as family breakdowns, separation and divorce, closed or forced adoptions, and when families become involved with child protection authorities (Bridges, Roe, Dunn, & O' Connor, 2007; Kivett, 1991; Poehlmann, 2003; Triseliotis, Feast & Kyle, 2005). In turn, separation can affect the wellbeing of grandparents. Drew and Silverstein (2007) revealed that grandparents' wellbeing decreased due to loss of contact with their grandchildren.

Grandchildren Going into Care

The Queensland Child Protection Act (1999) provides the legal mechanism for the protection of children in Queensland. The Act (1999) is the primary legislative mechanism by which State authorities can intervene in the lives of family members. The Act (1999) acknowledges the importance of maintaining kinship ties. Children go into care because they are deemed to be at risk of neglect, emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or harm. According to the recent Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry (2013), more children are living in out-of-home care now than in the past. The literature identifies that children benefit from ongoing supportive relationships with their families (Gladstone & Brown, 2007; Kruk, 1995). Yet some grandparents lose contact with their grandchildren after coming to the attention of the child protection system.

Australia has a long history of removing Aboriginal children from their families, resulting in what has been termed the Stolen Generation (Atkinson, 2002; Australian

Human Rights Commission, 1997; Bessarab & Crawford, 2013; Queensland Child Protection Commission of Inquiry, 2013). Currently, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are over represented in the Queensland out-of-home care system. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2015, p. 26) report that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children aged between 0–17 years have significantly higher substantiated reports of harm or risk of harm per 1000 children than those for non-Indigenous children (38.8%, compared with 5.7%).

In large part, this outcome has been seen as a reflection of the status of Indigenous Australians as the most disadvantaged groups in Australia, a legacy of Australia's violent colonial past. This past includes the forced removal of people from their traditional lands, and the forced removal of thousands of children. Ongoing contemporary issues include discrimination, racism, and intergenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002). Kinship care is a specific policy response to the cultural needs of Indigenous children unable to live with their biological parents, where children reside with extended family members including grandparents (Horner et al., 2007; Kiraly et al., 2015).

Grandparents Raising their Grandchildren

Grandparents appear increasingly to be undertaking a primary carer role for grandchildren (Connor, 2006; Cox, 2014; Kiraly et al., 2015). In a study by Minkler and Fuller-Thompson (1999) grandparents identified reduced wellbeing, lack of support, and a burden of care in carrying out the primary carer role, while Cass (2007), and Gladstone and Brown (2007), identified that often grandparents are a wonderful resource, but increased support is needed in the caring role for their grandchildren. Lever and Wilson (2005, p.171) argued that many "grandparents raising their grandchildren are receiving limited assistance and little to no social support". Of interest, Drew and Silverstein (2007) identified that grandparents who have regular contact with their grandchildren, but not their fulltime care, maintained balanced health and wellbeing.

Grandparents with Lost, Reduced or Denied Contact

According to Kivett (1991), grandparents have a significant role in bridging generations and transmitting culture and values. Goodman and Silverstein (2001) found that strong interconnected links between grandparents, parents, and grandchildren resulted in grandparents' increased wellbeing. Conversely, Drew and Silverstein (2007) found that there were adverse effects on grandparents' emotional wellbeing, both immediately after losing contact with their grandchildren, and ongoing effects. These included an "increase in depressive symptoms . . . associated with a sudden event resulting in loss of contact" (Drew & Silverstein, 2007, p. 378). Drew and Silverstein (2007, p. 372, citing Boss, 2002) noted negative health outcomes for grandparents when grandchildren are "physically absent but psychologically present", resulting in feelings of ambiguous loss

similar to that felt by families of missing persons. Grandparents' lost contact with grandchildren is not commonly discussed in the available literature.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach underpinning this study incorporated critical theory, loss and grief theories, and a strengths perspective. A critical approach understands power within the structures and narratives of dominant groups in society, and critical social work is concerned with structural, gender, race, and class inequalities (Healy, 2005). As noted, the available literature suggests grandparents can suffer grief and loss due to lost contact with their grandchildren, including experiencing ambiguous loss, as if the grandchildren were missing persons (Boss, 2004; Parkes, 1986). A strengths perspective engenders the values of respecting the inherent dignity and worth of persons, including self-determination, empowerment, social justice, and working alongside people sharing power and creating change (Saleebey, 2002). The strengths perspective is evident in a "Murri-Way" of working alongside Indigenous peoples by yarning, caring, and sharing (Lynn et al., 1998).

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used in undertaking this study, underpinned by a critical approach, and incorporating empathic validity. A qualitative methodology enables researchers to capture and honour the lived experiences of participants, and rigor is maintained through transparent processes (Liamputtong, 2007). This research incorporated a critical agenda to identify needed reform that can help change lives (Creswell, 2009). This Honours study was a component of a larger exploratory study documenting the experiences of Queensland grandparents with reduced or lost contact with grandchildren. Empathic validity was important in this study. Dadds (2008) stated that "research that has empathetic validity and that can bring about . . . connectiveness, growth, and healing in human relationships . . . has a special contribution to make" (p.281). Dadds asserted that incorporating empathy into the research design promotes validity and transparency in research processes (Dadds, 2008). Equally, Gair (2012) found that empathy enriches qualitative research and can assist researchers "to hear, feel, understand, and value the stories of others" (p.134). In this study, narratives were gathered through in-depth interviews.

A three-stage coding process of thematic analysis helped identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The research question for this qualitative project was "what are the experiences of Queensland grandparents who have experienced lost, reduced, or denied contact with their grandchildren due to child protection processes"? The primary aim of the study was to explore and document the lived experiences of grandparents with reduced or lost contact, and explore the impact of lost contact on grandparents' wellbeing. James

Cook University (JCU) human ethics committee approval was granted for this study.

The sample consisted of four grandmothers, one grandfather, and one grandparent couple, a total of seven (7) participants. One female participant identified her cultural background as possibly including Aboriginal heritage, while other participants were non-Indigenous Australians. Participants were aged 55–80 years of age, and were from the North Queensland geographical region. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the exception of two participants, who moved south for family reasons after committing to the research, so telephone interviews were conducted for these participants. All names used are pseudonyms. Participants were recruited through newsletters, a support group for parents and grandparents, public flyers and network sampling (Neuman, 2011). The main limitation of this study is that it is a small Honours exploratory research project, and caution therefore is needed in generalising the findings to all grandparents. However, the findings can illuminate the experiences of these grandparents.

Findings

Overall, grandparents' stories revealed their struggles to maintain contact with their grandchildren. The five key emerging themes are discussed below.

Grandparents Struggle Against Powerful Systems to be Seen and Heard

This theme reveals grandparents' struggles to maintain contact with their grandchildren when their adult children became involved with child protection authorities. When some grandparents sought help, it seemed to them their requests were downplayed or disregarded. Grandparents spoke of not being heard or valued as legitimate stakeholders in the lives of their grandchildren. For these grandparents (and grandchildren), the need to connect was strong and sometimes provoked desperate measures as Maria highlights:

They were taken out of their mother's care . . . for three months we didn't see them at all . . . just in the schoolyard . . . through the tennis wire fence. They would come and put their arms through the tennis wire fence like this to try and get a hug, and . . . would say, "When is "down the track" when we can be together again?" (Maria)

Similarly, Pauline shared her experience of striving to regain contact with her grandchild through the carers and a known respite carer. She felt that her efforts were being thwarted:

They (carers) wouldn't let me see him . . . They are unable to have children of their own and so their intention was to move anybody out of this little boy's life, including the respite carer. (Pauline)

Some grandparents found themselves struggling simultaneously with the Australian Family Law Court, child protection authorities and Queensland police. Bob and Mary,

a couple interviewed together, described official disinterest after revelations and denials of sexual abuse of their grandchildren while in the care of the father that, in turn, resulted in denied contact.

The father claims that (adult daughter) was sexually abused by the brother when she was young, and she said she wasn't and when it got to court the father subpoenaed the mother's medical records and she had been having counselling because she had been abused by her brother, and they used that to take the kids off her. They said . . . "she's imagining the kids are being abused" . . . The courts haven't done anything! . . . The Children's Commission in Brisbane is supposed to be independent, but they won't even answer our letters . . . and the Police, and Department of Child Safety, no it's not right . . . Why won't they interview us? (Bob)

We went to Department of Child Safety five times . . . They said, "They'd get back to us", but they never ever have, it's just ludicrous . . . it's diabolical what is happening! Why can't somebody do something to these supposed authorities? . . . They should be answerable to someone! (Mary)

Another grandparent described a sense of shame and powerlessness as several child protection workers and police officers removed her grandson:

Humiliated, labelled and no chance to answer . . . it's just a statement and they're here, so they know what they're doing, they got their clipboards. All of a sudden, it's not nice and we are not to have the little girls for many months. (Maria)

The grandparents above appeared to convey that child protection officers had set their minds on a course of action, and grandparents were not seen or heard as legitimate in those processes.

In contrast, the grandparent below had a different outcome, albeit costly, when she became involved in legal proceedings. She expressed anger at being treated as an outsider rather than a family member in these processes:

He went into care at six weeks of age, it took eighteen months . . . the Department of Child Safety denied me contact to see my grandchild. Then when I was finally awarded (custody), it took me four months to get into the court hearing, because I was not permitted, I was an outside person. I had to fight the legal system to be part of the system and that cost me about \$35,000. (Pauline)

It seems evident that these grandparents have struggled to maintain contact, and be seen as a legitimate key stakeholder in their grandchildren's lives, although a legal avenue was a solution for one grandmother above.

Negotiating Contact with Adult Children

In some situations, grandchildren were not removed into care but remained in the care of their biological parent(s) after coming to the attention of child protection authorities. In these situations, grandparents needed to negotiate contact through the parents. However, sometimes strained

relationships with their adult children made it difficult to maintain ongoing relationships with their grandchildren:

We're not allowed to see them! (Mary)

We can't even ring them up on the phone . . . well, there's only one reason and that's because it's the people they love and trust [that] they talk to! (Bob)

We don't have a very close relationship with them (adult children) so it's very hard . . . We just try and bite our tongue . . . but it's . . . kind of like walking on eggshells . . . (we) try and stay in contact as much as possible and do what we can. (Tanya)

The grandparents above suggested that tenuous relationships with adult parents made negotiating contact with grandchildren difficult and at times impossible. One grandparent implied that denied contact was related to a parent's fear of what grandchildren might disclose to trusted grandparents.

Struggling to Support and Protect Grandchildren

Under this theme, grandparents specifically identify the struggle to support and safeguard their grandchildren. Below, a grandparent couple identify a specific incident to exemplify their experience:

I was up the road one day . . . and here they are locked in the car in full sunshine . . . with the engine not going and he's (father) in shopping. So I waited until he came out, he flew into a rage and sped off. (Bob)

The grandmother added:

We've lost so much faith in the law, in DoCS, . . . They just all seem to be pushing for these children to stay with their father . . . we can't give them [grandchildren] any support! (Mary)

The grandparents above revealed their hurt, frustration, and bewilderment, but also the father's power to withdraw the grandchildren.

Below, a grandmother highlights her emotional response after the initial removal of her baby grandchild:

I'll always remember [adult daughter] saying, "Mom it's just not fair I was just still in my bed socks . . . and taken away . . . through locked doors" . . . away from baby. "They're [Department workers] all dressed up, they're prepared, and I'm bleeding and in my bed socks, and just given birth, and told that my baby's been taken" . . . it was terrible . . . absolute shock! (Maria)

The above grandparent conveyed the trauma of the situation for her and her daughter when child protection authorities removed her newborn grandchild, in her presence, at the hospital. Under very different circumstances, the grandparent below struggled to provide ongoing support to an adult child and protection to his grandchildren, prior to child protection intervention:

The father and mother were not very good housekeepers at all, you know involved with drugs they just were not capable of looking after the house or the children . . . We would have to clean up after them, mow the lawns, clean the house . . . but after cleaning up after three or four houses, I couldn't keep cleaning up after them. (Adam)

With similarities to previous quotes and themes, the grandparent below struggled to protect her grandchildren, leading her to take action that, in turn, resulted in reduced contact with her grandchildren:

The year that she (granddaughter) was born and [daughter] was covering in the corner with the baby in arms, and the father had a great big television set holding it . . . ready to throw it at them, . . . that's when I contacted Child Safety . . . I was expecting to get support, for her and the children, I was not expecting them to take them away from her . . . I felt that they were judgmental, not really supporting. (Meg)

The above grandparent further revealed that her action resulted in severely disrupted contact with her grandchildren over many years.

Suffering Grief, Stress and Loss

As evident in the previous themes, grandparents had experienced unexpected, shocking and frustrating events after their grandchildren had come to the attention of child protection authorities. Participants' stories below identify stress, loss, distress, and trauma, including the impact on a great-grandparent:

I was ill from the shock . . . my mother was about 87. She was all excited and greeting us at the door and "tell us about the baby" and I had to tell her there was no baby . . . and this is a lady who has had three strokes . . . she just sat there shaking, she was shattered by it . . . just the horror of what happened. (Maria)

Equally, the grandparents below described the distress of denied contact with their grandchildren, and the lack of sleep and other health impacts:

No good . . . gutted . . . yeah well it's knocking us around a bit . . . not sleeping of course and worrying about the girls all the time. (Bob)

We were so worried . . . talk about health, we had bad health that time, for us it was like post-traumatic stress disorder . . . just awful! (Tanya)

I was devastated . . . sort of floundering around. In the middle of all that I actually left my job . . . I went on sick leave . . . but there was still this underlying uncertainty not knowing how this happened . . . in amongst that I was going downhill. I wouldn't have been eating like I am now, no I wasn't sleeping . . . extremely difficult. (Meg)

It seems apparent that for these grandparents there was significant impact on their health and wellbeing as a result of reduced or lost contact with grandchildren.

Resumed Contact

For some grandparents contact was resumed after previously reduced, disrupted or lost contact. Ironically, because of the changing dynamics of families' circumstances, resumed contact sometimes took the form of primary care. The impact of undertaking the primary carer role triggered different stresses and losses regarding health, lifestyle, and finances for grandparents:

Well . . . (grandparent as primary carer) has its good points and its bad points. I have to go along with the bad points at this stage . . . we had three grandchildren and they were ages from one year old, seven year old, and eleven year old . . . now when you look at the situation as far as grandparents are concerned, once you become a grandparent caring full time or part time for your grandchildren it becomes a burden . . . I'd retired and we were going to go on our little trips away and . . . that all stopped. (Adam)

Another grandparent experienced different stresses with regained contact, and a pattern of lost and regained contact seemed evident in this interview:

He had been assessed as a child suffering traumatic stress from her (parent's) drug use . . . they (child protection authorities) finally awarded me care of him . . . On the way up on the aeroplane he started thumping, and screaming and biting, and he broke my collarbone . . . when he was three and a half, I had a heart attack and he went (back) into care. I was told that I could apply for supporting him 12 months after my heart attack, as long as I had good health. Nearly twelve months to the day, I had a severe angina attack and I think a lot of it was brought on by DoCS. (Pauline)

These grandparents appeared to reveal unexpected circumstances and stresses after resumed contact in the form of fulltime care of grandchildren, including a very significant impact on one grandparent's health, and other wellbeing and quality of life implications.

Discussion

As identified above, five key themes emerged from this study. Overall, participants struggled to maintain contact with their grandchildren after their adult children came to the attention of child protection authorities. Grandparents in this study described how powerful systems and adult children/partners often thwarted their access to grandchildren, and they described their ongoing struggles to be heard and seen as legitimate family members in their grandchildren's lives. They perceived that child protection structures and systems made it difficult and even impossible to gain access to their grandchildren at times. This surprised some grandparents who thought they might have gained support after seeking help to safeguard and protect their grandchildren. Being constrained or excluded from undertaking their grandparent role had an impact on grandparents' health and wellbeing.

As noted earlier, theories of loss and grief may be useful in understanding grandparents' experiences. Grandparents in this study provided some evidence that they experienced grief and loss after reduced or lost contact with their grandchildren. Part of the role of a grandparent is to provide support and to protect their grandchildren. However, when grandchildren are removed into State care, or they are living with adult children who are deemed by the grandparents to be unsafe, grandparents struggled to maintain their role. Lost, reduced or denied contact with grandchildren resulted in perceived loss of relationships with grandchildren, loss of the grandparent role, shame, and loss of social and personal self-worth. Kruk's (1995) research found a majority of grandparents had experienced a "grief reaction . . . related directly to the absence of their grandchildren and role loss, subsequent to initial access difficulties" (p. 748). In some cases, when grandchildren came to reside permanently with grandparents, after periods of lost or reduced contact, grandparents experienced different types of losses. For the majority of grandparents in this study, worrying about the wellbeing of their grandchildren had meant their own reduced wellbeing, including sleepless nights, ill health and changed quality of life. Stress and worry was common, including emotional, psychological, social, and financial stresses.

Considering a strengths perspective is useful in relation to these findings. According to McCashen (2010, p. 207), a strengths perspective "challenges many assumptions and conventions in human service practice, it also challenges ways in which people often go about problem-solving in society". Overall, the stories from grandparents in this study demonstrated strength and tenacity in seeking to maintain a presence in their grandchildren's lives in the face of powerful systems and individuals who were able to act as gatekeepers to such contact (Mahne & Huxhold, 2012).

Further, critical theory may be useful in understanding the experiences of these grandparents. Critical theory helps practitioners recognise power, powerlessness, and how power is used (Healy, 2005; Tew, 2006). Queensland's child protection authority is a powerful, state sanctioned child protection system. When grandparents sought contact with their grandchildren after involvement by child protection authorities, they spoke of feeling powerless in an interplay that involved child protection workers and adult parents, but appeared to exclude grandparents as legitimate family members. Grandparents most often felt unheard, excluded and helpless to influence the system or the determination of child protection officers. Their narratives identified power differences and powerlessness as important factors that created inequality and limited grandparents' opportunities to be heard and engage meaningfully with child protection authorities and with their grandchildren.

Navigating the child protection system to maintain contact was challenging for grandparents who may not have perceived they had the power, support, resources or legal

advice to secure ongoing contact with their grandchildren – although several grandparents in this study successfully sought legal avenues to secure access. Some grandparents said they felt silenced, ignored, judged, and shamed, and they implied these experiences influenced their communications with authorities who had the power to deny or further reduce contact with their grandchildren. Yet children, unless legally determined otherwise, appear to have a right to know and spend time with their biological families including grandparents.

According to Turner (2011), the position and importance of grandparents was strengthened by the 1995 amendments to the Family Law Act. Further changes to the Family Law Act in 2006 confirmed and emphasised the importance of the relationship of grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents are now specifically mentioned in sections 60B(b), 63C(2A), and S64B(2) of the Act. Grandparents were for the first time specifically mentioned in Section 65C as persons capable of making application for parenting orders under the Family Law Act. However, the Family Law Act is federal legislation, while child protection is State responsibility. Grandparents are not mentioned specifically in the current Queensland Child Protection Act (1999), although they could be considered under "significant others". Yet, grandparents in this study identified many difficulties, challenges, and financial costs related to maintaining their role as significant others in the lives of their grandchildren.

When grandchildren remained in the care of their parents, but child protection authorities had become involved, gaining access to their grandchildren was equally challenging for some grandparents because they needed to negotiate access with their adult children, or their partners or ex partners. Difficulties in accessing grandchildren appeared to be influenced, in some cases, by the actions of grandparents who had initiated contact with child protection workers because of fears for the safety of grandchildren. Critical theory may help explain how powerful structures and individuals (child protection authorities, Family Court, adult children and ex-partners) can disadvantage grandparents who may be made to feel like illegitimate or subordinate family members in relation to the welfare of grandchildren. Mullaly (2002) asserted that there is an important role for social workers in child protection to alleviate suffering, to challenge structural systems that function to preserve inequality, and to work for structural change.

Equally, Ife (2008) and others have argued for the upholding of the rights of vulnerable and silenced groups, including older persons (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2012). The wellbeing of older persons is a growing health issue, and grandparents represent a sizable majority of all older persons. Ife (2008) called on social workers to protect the human rights of older persons in their work with families. Similarly, Cox (2014, p.171) argued that social workers must be willing to assist grandparents "to challenge the system if they believe that their rights have been violated", and they must not contribute to their disempowerment.

As noted earlier, according to the available literature, ongoing relationships between grandchildren and their grandparents can contribute to grandparents' wellbeing, while reduced or denied contact with grandchildren can have a negative impact on grandparents' wellbeing (Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Goodman & Silverstein, 2001). Continuing relationships with grandparents are also good for children. Recognising this, child protection services could offer more support for grandparents who want to maintain their grandparent role when their grandchildren come to the attention of child protection. Ideally, this support would be incorporated and upheld in State legislation.

Conclusion

Grandchildren and grandparents are important to each other. For the wellbeing of both, grandparents should be viewed as key stakeholders in their grandchildren's lives. However, participants in this study struggled to maintain contact with grandchildren following child protection intervention. Findings from this research have relevance for social work education, social work practice, social policy, and future research. In an ageing society, social workers need to work alongside grandparents in ways that acknowledge their human rights, dignity, and worth. This is crucially important in both their work in statutory child protection and in other fields of practice in which social workers operate. Critical awareness of the impact of child protection interventions on grandparents, and more support for grandparents who seek to continue their role after their grandchildren come to the attention of child protection authorities, are key recommendations from this research. This small study has produced findings that suggest merit in a larger exploration of the benefits to vulnerable children and their grandparents of supporting the grandchild–grandparent relationship, and the costs to both parties when barriers are put in the way.

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