

Australian Psychological Society Senate Inquiry into Grandparents with primary responsibility for raising Grandchildren: Hearing 10/6/14

Stability and continuity of care

One of the biggest problems for children removed from their parents is instability of care. Children in foster care frequently experience many changes of placement, compounding the trauma they have already experienced. It is very difficult to provide effective psychological services to children whose placements are constantly disrupted. Grandparents have a high level of commitment to their grandchildren. Stability of care is a major benefit of grandparent care; it is also unique among 'out of home care' options in that it is usually based upon a loving, pre-existing relationship.

Mental health issues for all parties

Where parents are unable to provide a secure home for their children, the children, parents and grandparents all experience mental health issues. Children frequently experience behaviour disorders and educational difficulties. Parents' mental health issues frequently emanate from chronic substance abuse; this predisposes them to physical health problems, interpersonal conflict family violence, unemployment and poverty. Grandparents frequently experience anxiety and depression emanating from difficulties managing the children and their relationships with their own children (the parents of the grandchildren), from fatigue and stress in their marital and other family relationships, from physical health problems, and from social isolation. Adversarial legal processes often compound family tensions. While many grandparents struggle to cope, they feel unable to relinquish the care of the grandchildren.

Poverty is a key mental health issue.

Poverty can lead to family conflict, overcrowding, lack of access to health and other essential services and deprivation of social and community contact. Court cases regarding the children's care are compounded by lack of funds for legal representation. Poverty leads to anxiety and depression.

Financial support is needed for grandparent carers.

A national grandparent carer allowance is needed, similar to the sole parent's benefit.

For statutory kinship carers, that is, those recognised by the State Children's Courts/Child Protection services, full parity of payments with foster carers is needed. COAG should also work to ensure that these allowances become uniform across Australia, rather than varying state by state.

Counselling services should be freely available to all parties to grandparent care.

Mental health services need to prioritise these most vulnerable families. Medicare rebates need to be available for these services as required. Specific allowances may be needed to assist with out of pocket expenses.