

GRAND

LOVE

Grandparents

Raising

Grandchildren

Judy Turner

First published in 2011

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**Dedicated to all grandparents
and the grandchildren they are raising**

Note:

The grandparents and grandchildren quoted in *Grand Love* have given permission for their stories to be published. Names have been changed to protect their privacy.

I have tried to keep information accurate but entitlements, benefits and provision of services may have altered due to the changes made over the years in both Federal and State Departments related to Human Services.

Judy Turner

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I am very grateful for my husband's patience and understanding during the long writing process and to my granddaughter for her inspiration and love.

I could not have written *Grand Love* without the willingness of the grandparents and grandchildren to tell their stories with honesty and courage in the hope of helping others in similar situations and of raising awareness in the community of what their situations are really like.

I thank all the members of the Support Group GAPS (Grandparents as Parents) for their strong support. All of us at GAPS owe a great deal to Kinship Care workers, Karen Lizasoain and her predecessor Samantha Gasse, for their vision and commitment in supporting grandparents in difficult situations.

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GRAND LOVE

INTRODUCTION

They looked like any other group of grandparents but their stories stunned me. Some grandparents were desperate. They were facing incredible hurdles from agencies that were supposed to be there to support them. It seemed that some of the workers in these agencies had no idea what was happening in these grandparents' lives.

All of us were grandparents raising grandchildren. While every story was unique we shared much in common. We talked and listened, vented our feelings, cried and laughed together. The Support Group GAPS - Grandparents as Parents - sustained us, nurtured friendships, gave us vital information and helped us as we did our best to raise our grandchildren.

Until I started raising my granddaughter I had never given any thought to grandparents in this situation. Occasionally I had seen a report in the newspaper about a family tragedy and had been heartened to read at the end that the children were now being looked after by their grandparents. That was comforting. The children would be all right. End of story.

Not so. For the grandparents and the grandchildren a new life begins. A family life still, but a family life where very different dynamics operate.

Across Australia 35,000 grandchildren are being cared for by their grandparents. These grandparents experience a dramatic change in their lives, sometimes overnight, when they go from being doting grandparents who can 'love them and leave them', to parenting grandparents with the full responsibility of raising their grandchildren twenty-four hours a day.

The causes are varied - the tragic death of one or both parents through illness, accident or crime, or the inability of parents to care for their children because of marriage break up, mental illness, or, the major reason of grandchildren for coming into care, drug and alcohol abuse.

To some grandparents it is no surprise when they become carers. They have watched the parents struggle with mental illness or addiction, seen their lives deteriorate and worried about the inadequate nurture of their grandchildren. Along the way they are often threatened, abused or maligned.

When grandparents become carers because of the death of their loved child it is devastating. Traumatized and shocked, they are forced to put their own grief on hold to care and support their grandchildren.

All of the grandchildren, whatever their background, suffer from grief and loss. None of them are living with their parents. Some grandchildren begin their lives as methadone babies, others have disabilities. Separation from parents, and sometimes other siblings as well, makes them feel insecure, confused, inadequate, abandoned, angry and resentful. They are affected socially, physically, psychologically and academically. Some bear scars that will never heal.

Support groups give the grandchildren the opportunity to meet others being raised by their grandparents. No longer do they feel they are the only ones.

Grandchildren can arrive with nothing but the clothes they are wearing. Finances can be stretched to the limit and it is not uncommon to hear of grandparents dipping into their retirement funds, or even selling their home to make ends meet. Some are forced to accept help from charities for the first time in their lives. For working grandparents, child care arrangements are vital but very hard to obtain.

All grandparents are entitled to financial assistance from government agencies but in many cases it is extraordinarily difficult to access these funds and far too much time can elapse in the process. Coordination of all the services and staff is needed so that grandparents receive positive, efficient and effective responses.

Unlike foster carers, grandparents receive no preparation or counselling and little help in finding out what assistance is available. Respite care scarcely exists even in dire circumstances.

Many grandparents endure the painful experience of having to go through the court system to gain custody of their grandchildren. They can pay thousands of dollars in legal costs while their court adversary, sometimes an irresponsible drug user, receives Legal Aid.

Lives are further complicated when grandparents are still having to deal with difficult adults, the children they had nurtured from birth, who are suffering from mental illness or drug or alcohol addiction. Access visits so that the grandchildren can see their parents can be disturbing, stressful and inconvenient.

Younger grandparents may have one or more of their own children still living at home. It hurts these children to know it is their own sibling who has caused the problem. Their lives are turned upside down seeing their parents spending so much time and attention on the grandchildren.

Grandparents raise their grandchildren even though it means they cannot see their other loved family members as often as they used to. A generation older than most parents, grandparents can have significant health problems, reduced mobility, aging parents or a partner with dementia.

They may be caring for anything from one to nine, or even ten grandchildren. They may be doing it all on their own or with a partner. Sadly the strain of raising grandchildren has caused marriages of many years to break up.

For me, the stories are incredibly moving, the more so because young children are involved. How would I have coped if I were that grandparent? How would I have felt if I were that grandchild? The stories raise many questions about early intervention in the lives of innocent children who are living in danger, the support and management of emotionally disturbed children, the role of government departments, the rights of parents in addiction, the support of the mentally ill, and the needs of grandparents who have become the children's primary carers.

Depending on their age when the grandchildren come to live with their grandparents, and factors such as the history that they bring with them, their personality, their resilience and the kind of support they receive, grandchildren have varying chances of successfully growing into fully functioning adults who are able to make responsible decisions and live wholesome, caring lives. The grandparents I have met are doing everything in their power to help this happen.

I am in awe of their enduring commitment and love.

The Kinship Care Worker

Throughout *Grand Love* the reader will see comments by the Kinship Care Worker, Karen Lizasaoin. Her job has been to assist grandparents, and any other relatives who are raising grandchildren.

As a full time officer, Karen has been listening and responding to grandparents' needs and liaising with relevant departments, agencies, and organisations. This gives authenticity to her observations, particularly as she does not have the personal involvement of the carers, but can take a broad view across the whole region.

Without Karen, and the efforts of her part time predecessor Samantha Gasse who formed the first GAPS Support Group in the Hunter Region, grandparents raising grandchildren would be struggling completely on their own. Instead, there are over 250 families with whom contact has been made and the numbers are steadily increasing. One article on the front page of a local newspaper attracted twenty new grandparents. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare recently issued statistics showing that the area of kinship caring for children has risen 45% in the last 5 years. That's a huge increase. There has been a 47% rise in foster care as well.

Karen's job has been funded by FAHCSIA, the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and she has been working through the Samaritans Organisation. Up till recently, with funding on a yearly basis, Karen never knew if her time was going to be extended. As each year came to a close she felt some stress and a sense of urgency to do as much as possible. To the good fortune of everyone in her area which covers the Hunter Region, and the Manning and Port Stephens Regions, her tenure has now been extended for three years. That is stunning particularly as Karen is the only paid Kinship Care Workers in New South Wales. Is it possible that when it is seen how effective her work is, that other positions like hers will be set up in every region? Can grandparents dare hope?

Karen acts as an advocate for grandparents in difficult times and organises seminars, gives talks to raise awareness in the community, and talks to workers in various departments like DoCS, Centrelink and Legal Aid. She has also set up a Volunteer Group supporting GAPS (Grandparents as Parents).

Along with Helen Fielder-Gill from Samaritans Karen produced a DVD 'Raising Others Children' to raise further awareness and to help workers understand what grandparents are going through. She has also organised a number of highly successful camps for grandparent families.

It is encouraging to see that government departments are beginning to recognise that grandparents have unique needs. Centrelink is beginning to provide specialist workers, in four trial areas, and hopefully, in the future, in every office. The steps being taken, however, are too slow, too small and not wide-reaching enough.

Every region needs a full time Kinship Care Worker like Karen, with an intimate knowledge of all the agencies that can offer assistance and support, who can meet beyond the office walls, guide grandparents through the maze of red tape and legal issues, and make life easier, not harder, for grandparents.

GRAND LOVE

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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PART 1

A PRECIOUS GRANDDAUGHTER

Home Invasion

*'Oh she'll have to sleep with Grandma when she comes,
Scratch, scratch
Oh she'll have to sleep with Grandma when she comes,
Scratch, scratch...'*

The sound of Sophie's singing, often in an excited pitch, drifted through our house. Shower time was a wonderful releasing time for her. She traced pictures on the glass screen, stomped in the puddles, and blocked the outlet so the water made delicious gurgling noises when set free. Her shower washed away more than dirt. It was so therapeutic.

Sophie was the essence of what made childhood precious. Dancing, rainbows and catching lizards gave her joy. She loved setting the table for visitors with flowers, bright serviettes, candles and home-made place cards. She went to bed surrounded by dolls and teddies tucked up in little beds she'd made from boxes. She adored pretty clothes and loved experimenting with hairstyles.

From the minute she arrived she challenged the ordinariness of what our lives had become. She upset our routine. She changed our lifestyle. We had to consider a third person in everything we did. She took us out of our comfort zones, she disturbed our peace and she interrupted our conversations. We did things we hadn't done in decades, like skipping, throwing balls and stepping over toys.

I loved her warm hand in mine as we went shopping. I loved the flash of her brown eyes lighting up her face in laughter. I loved her bubblyness. I loved her snuggling up to me to hear a story. I marvelled at how much I loved her when I had only known her for six months. I treasured the trust and love she gave me.

She tried hard to please us because she had learned that people liked 'good' children. She wanted to impress us with her beautiful dancing, her quick friendliness and her chatty behaviour because she had learned that people liked 'cute' children.

Sometimes in company she ignored me to make herself liked by the new people. How could she know who would remain in her life? She had learned that the way to go was forward, to look back hurt. Yes! Here was a resilient child.

Some friends and relatives thought she was attention-seeking and overactive. I thought she was desperately trying to cope. When she really understood that she was going to stay with us permanently, that our love and care was lasting, and that we loved her for who she was, she would stop trying to earn our love, she would relax and be the beautiful child she really was.

And that's what happened.

BEFORE CARE

Sophie's Dad

Sophie is so firmly welded into our family life it is hard to believe that she has not always been with us. My son Sam is her father. Sam got into drugs and alcohol when he was in his teens and wasted about fifteen precious years of his life. We always kept in touch, he knew we loved him and he knew the door was open if he decided to change his lifestyle. I never gave up hope that the good person inside him would emerge if he gave himself the chance.

That, in fact, did eventually happen and for years now Sam has been leading a clean and responsible life. His past is behind him and he has no wish to revisit it. Suffice it to say that they were turbulent years. At that time the facilities for helping people with addiction were few and inadequate. The only live-in centre near our home provided a two weeks' residency, not nearly long enough. The only other place was some distance from home, but the residents were old men, confirmed alcoholics, or metho drinkers. Not a good place for Sam.

On one occasion Sam and I went to a clinic in a large hospital. He was interviewed by a young man who was supposed to be a counsellor but who was quite inept. He was like a talking textbook. He had read the chapter on reflective listening and he turned everything we said back to us, 'So, you're saying...' There was no empathy. What a waste of time. I was very disappointed and Sam left discouraged and less likely to ask for any help in the future.

A little girl

With the lifestyle Sam was leading, he couldn't live at home but every now and again he'd come back to stay for a while. He ended up travelling quite extensively, at one stage going right around Australia. It was in this time that he met Cindy who had two young sons. In their brief relationship he became the father of their daughter Sophie. He was present at her birth but moved on shortly afterwards.

My grandparent friends used to talk about their young families' pregnancies and their own joyful anticipation of new grandchildren. We'd meet for coffee and they'd proudly display their Brag Books with photos of the new arrivals and the beaming parents.

What could I say about my first grandchild? She lived hundreds of kilometres away. I didn't think I'd ever meet her or her family. In the circumstances I didn't even feel like a grandmother. There was no Brag Book for this Nanna. The first photo I ever saw of Sophie was taken when she was about three and a half years old.

Eventually when Sam was in his early thirties he voluntarily admitted himself into a long term rehabilitation centre in another state. Residents went through

the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and they had to earn privileges to reach a more trusted level. If they failed to do this they returned to living under stricter rules or were asked to leave.

Rehabilitation wasn't all plain sailing. Sam broke rules, challenged restrictions and lost privileges. I am forever indebted to the wonderful lady who was the director of the centre and to her staff. Her name was Mary but it might well have been Magnificent. She was wise, understanding, firm and fair. She recognised Sam's good qualities and always gave him encouragement to move forward. He spent more than a year there, and in a halfway house in the community.

The day came when my husband George and I received an invitation to attend Sam's graduation. It was a very happy day and intensely moving for the three of us. Now we could all look forward to a brighter future.

During Sam's rehabilitation he made a commitment to become an important part of Sophie's life as her Dad. He started visiting her regularly and gave her time to get to know him. He realised how much he loved her. She had two more brothers by then. The five children and their mother Cindy were living in a caravan but there were not enough beds to accommodate all the children.

The conditions were so chaotic that Sam contacted DoCS. He discovered there were already many complaints in their files. This time they acted and took four of the children away from their mother. They left the remaining boy Travis with Cindy. His father had died and he had no relatives who could care for him.

Being removed from their mother without any warning was a terrible shock for the children. None of them understood what was going on. Sophie has told me they were all screaming and crying and her big brother Stephen put his arms around her to comfort and protect her. She and Stephen were placed in short term care with one set of foster parents and the two younger boys went to another until the courts resolved where the children would live on a permanent basis. Sophie felt loved and cared for by her foster family and she remembers the months spent there as a happy time.

Sophie's mother Cindy and her parents have said since that they were given to understand from DoCS that it was a temporary move and, if Cindy could get her lifestyle back in order, the children would be returned to her. This didn't happen. Tragically the children never lived together as a family again



Sophie with her Mum and four brothers

We meet Sophie

In order to settle placement of Sophie and her brothers DoCS prepared a case for court in which they recommended that Sam become Sophie's full-time carer. By then he was living independently in the community and was very keen to care for her so DoCS allowed Sophie to live with her Dad.

So it was then that George and I travelled up to meet our granddaughter for the first time. Would she like us? Would we like her? Would she be wild and undisciplined? Friendly? Shy? Our questions were quickly answered. We instantly loved her. She was a very engaging, bubbly five-year-old, warm and friendly. We had a wonderful time together. But George and I could only stay a week. Back home we kept in touch as best we could by mail and phone, we sent parcels, and visited when we could.

Caring for Sophie

Around this time Sam fulfilled a long-held wish. We had adopted him as a little baby and he'd wanted to trace his birth parents. First he was successful in making contact with his mother, a kind and loving lady whom we met later and liked very much. Sadly though, by the time he found out where his father lived, he was too late. His father had died just the previous year. One of his father's best mates wrote him a very special letter describing the kind of person his father was and telling him something of his life. Sam appreciated that information very much. All in all, knowing about his birth parents at last was a very emotional experience for Sam.

On our next visit it was clear that Sam was finding it hard to manage. He was dealing with the emotional upheaval of tracing his parents, and he was working out his identity as a person. At the same time, he was continuing his recovery from addiction and he was trying to raise his five year old daughter on his own.

To his eternal credit he recognised that Sophie needed a mother figure in her life and he rang to ask if George and I would consider having Sophie live with us permanently. It came as no surprise, we'd talked about that possibility after our last trip. We didn't hesitate to say yes. We felt deeply honoured to be entrusted with her care.

I admired Sam for putting Sophie's needs above his own. When the time came it was utterly heart-wrenching for him to give up the daughter he loved so much, probably the hardest decision he'd ever made.

We drove interstate again to pick up Sophie and pack the car with her belongings. The reality of parting with his Little Princess affected Sam deeply and he was grief stricken. He considered moving back down to live near us but the support of his church group was something he really valued in his recovery time and with torn feelings he decided to remain where he was.

So six months after we first met Sophie, she came to live with us. George was 65 and I was 64. We were her fourth family in five years.

And what was Sophie thinking? She couldn't stay with her mother, she couldn't stay with her foster parents, she was separated from her brothers and she couldn't stay with her father.

EARLY TIMES

Seeing Mum

Our granddaughter Sophie's access visits to see her mother Cindy could only take place in the school holidays because she lived so far away. The first time my husband George and I saw Cindy was just a quick glance before DoCS smuggled us into an adjoining room at one of their offices. They wanted to avoid any kind of confrontation with her. Cindy was still hurting from having four of her children taken away from her. She wasn't going to take kindly to us. We were the people DoCS was recommending to become carers for her only daughter.

At the time I was very judgmental. I couldn't understand how any mother could neglect the beautiful child I had grown to love so much in such a short time. I didn't know the extent of the neglect but I knew it had to be bad for DoCS to remove the children.

A number of access visits followed. For a young girl, I thought Sophie handled these visits extremely well. After travelling for two days she would meet up with her mother and her four brothers whom she hadn't seen for months. I remember her arriving in the DoCS reception room at the same time as the boys. The children hugged each other in a squealing, loving, seething mass until they collapsed in a laughing heap on the floor. They were very fond of each other. They had been very close. It was a devastating loss for them to be separated.

DoCS workers would take the children to have time together and with their mum at the park, the beach or a shopping centre and then the children were returned to their 'homes'. One boy to Cindy, three to foster parents, and Sophie to us in the motel.

It was no surprise that Sophie came back over-excited, silly, wriggly, loud and showing off, but after we bought her a favourite mango, played ball games with her or went collecting shells along the beach she settled down and was calm and easy to get on with. The next two days were similar and then we journeyed the 600km back home again. Once at home, we had no contact with Cindy, not even by telephone. Letters Sophie sent did not receive a reply.

What a rollercoaster of emotions for Sophie to deal with but how wonderfully she coped.

'Resilient' was a word that I was to use often for this remarkable little girl.

Bedtime

Sophie and I always had a chat and a story at bedtime. It was a special time for the two of us. Even when a favourite aunty or uncle read to her at bedtime, she still wanted *our* bedtime story 'just with Nanna and me'.

When she'd lived with her father I'd sent her books about fathers so that she and her Dad could enjoy them together. Now she was living with us I still had to be careful of our choices because, time after time, the stories ended up with the main character, whether a child or an animal, being cradled in its mother's arms. Except for infrequent access visits Sophie had no contact with her mother. As time passed it didn't seem to matter about the stories' endings because Sophie was seeing me as her substitute mother.

And grandparent books! Many were about a grandparent dying! That was the last thing we wanted to think about! Other books pictured fat ladies in rocking chairs and stooped men with walking sticks. Books with an alternative view had grandmothers riding motor cycles and jumping out of planes in a parachute and other crazy things. I wasn't fat and decrepit nor was I into extreme sports!

Happily some books were just right. Mem Fox's *Possum Magic* was a favourite. Its two main characters were Hush, a young possum, and Grandma Poss and they did wonderful things together. It was a good opportunity for us to talk about our feelings. I wanted Sophie to be able to do that.

Grandma Poss looked miserable.

"Don't worry Grandma," said Hush. "I don't mind."

But in her heart of hearts she did.

Bedtime was the time when Sophie needed extra comforting. Some nights after our chat and story she didn't want me to leave her room. 'I feel frightened.' Or 'I want you to stay.'

Sometimes she had bad dreams. On one occasion she came out and said, "A man was smashing on the house. He wanted to come in and he had some broken glass and he was going to hurt me.'

I remember one time when she had been unsettled all the evening. After our bedtime story she didn't want me to leave her to go to sleep saying she was scared of the dark. I turned off the lamp and stayed with her with a torch. I still felt something was not right so I turned on the lamp again and asked her if anything was on her mind.

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

She talked about not seeing the rest of her family very often. I promised her I would contact DoCS and try to arrange telephone contact with at least some of the family members. She asked me to stroke her forehead gently as I had done sometimes before, and to sing to her. I made up little songs about her family, and

Grandad and me loving her and keeping her safe. I stayed in her room on the understanding that we wouldn't keep talking, I would just be there, and in ten minutes she was asleep.

We did all sorts of things. We hung up a dream catcher to catch her lovely dreams and to send the bad ones away so they would never come back. We left the lamp on, or we played spotlight or kept a torch by her bed. For a long time she listened to quiet, gentle music as she fell asleep - lullabies, orchestral, piano, guitar, flute, music for meditation, and choirs.

She took her furry teddy to bed pretending he was her baby brother. She'd been a little mother to him and she was missing him. So that she could feel that I was with her all night I put my jumper on her bedcover and draped the arms over her. I was still hugging her the next morning.

Her anxiety lasted for varying periods over a number of years but I think all the things we did together helped her to cope with the loss of her family and the insecurity she was feeling. I wanted her to understand that her Nanna was going to be there for her whenever she needed.

We used to play 'Good News, Bad News'. She liked to end with the good news. She loved me telling her 'bad' things I had done as a child, like falling into a creek when my mother had told me not to go near it. It helped me to find out if anything was worrying her. In her early school years it opened the door to talking about her relationships with the children at school and I was very pleased that she was able to tell me how she felt.

Maybe some of the things I did, particularly staying in her room until she was ready for sleep, I might not have done as a first time parent, but then my children didn't have the insecurity and loss that Sophie had to deal with. I might have regarded that as spoiling but second time around I had the confidence to go with my feelings. Here was a little girl who needed that little bit extra.

Tucking Sophie into bed became a warm, contented, sharing time. I'd walk away afterwards with a smile on my face, she was so endearing.

She often went to sleep excited at the prospect of something she'd looked forward to that was going to happen the next day. She would snuggle in happily. 'I will go to sleep because I want the day to be tomorrow.'

Years later and I still tuck her in bed.

Child minding

I thought it would be easy to get someone to mind Sophie when George and I wanted to go out but this was not the case. When we were first time parents we were able to call on *our* parents to mind our children but for us and many grandparents in our sixties or seventies this has not been an option. Indeed it's

the reverse for a number of grandparents. They are caring for their parents as well as their grandchildren.

We couldn't ask our own children because they lived too far away. Nor could we ask our friends because they spent a lot of time minding their own grandchildren (after which they could hand them back and have a rest!). They were away on trips or caring for elderly relatives. Some were in poor health or finding it physically difficult to mind young children. Most were in the habit of going to bed fairly early. Some didn't really want to care for kids any more anyway.

As Sophie grew older she was happy to be minded by a very pleasant, reliable high school girl being raised by her grandmother whom we had met through the Support Group.

How much to tell?

When Sophie was about six years old, a kind gentleman in a cafe innocently inquired about her family. Next minute she was describing in detail her life history, how she couldn't live with either of her parents and how she had four brothers and how they were widely separated, and how...and how... His jaw dropped as he heard about her dislocated family.

Then, as she got older, she became aware that some people, not all of them strangers, asked far too many personal questions about her background. They wanted to know every last detail about her mother, her father and her brothers. It made her feel very uncomfortable but, out of courtesy, she felt she had to keep answering. A hairdresser was so nose-y we left her and found a new one.

I resented this grilling by people who should have known better so I suggested to Sophie that she didn't have to explain everything to everyone. She could choose whom she would tell and how much she wanted to tell them. Maybe she only wanted to tell close friends. To others she could say, 'It's a long story, I'll tell you later.'

This served her well, she was relieved to have a way out when she needed it.

*

CLEVER MOTH

Sophie had a tendency to baby talk which I put down to insecurity but I noticed that, instead of saying 'th' in her speech, she said 'fick' instead of 'thick' and 'wif' instead of 'with'. A speech therapist told me that nothing was usually done about this till children were seven but suggested that I could make Sophie aware of the correct pronunciation by modelling the correct sound back to her and correcting her, with discretion, in conversations. I could also give her little exercises to practise.

Sophie was adjusting to a radically different life, at school and at home. I wanted her to feel free and confident whenever she talked to me. Correcting her would make her think something else was wrong in her life. At the same time, I knew it would be better, for her reading, writing and speech, if she could say 'th' correctly.

She was a little girl who loved songs, rhymes and clapping games. Together we had had great fun with 'The Alligator Purse' rhyme, and she loved playing clapping games with her friends in the school playground.

I made up a nonsense rhyme loaded with the 'th' sound that she and I could chant together. We poked our tongues out in an exaggerated way for each 'th' and had a lot of fun. In the process, she learned to say 'th' painlessly in a few weeks.

CLEVER MOTH

I think three brothers
Who were very, very thin,
Filled up their bath tub
And threw a moth in.

Clap knees, hands, partner's hands
" " " " " " "
" " " " " " "
" " " " " " "

The moth thought, 'Gee!
If I don't have a bath,
I'll fly through the window and
I'll flutter down the path.'

Clap knees, hands, partner's hands
" " " " " " "
" " " " " " "
" " " " " " "

Clap hands, clap hands,
(2)
1 2 3
The moth's in the bath tub
Hee, hee, hee.

Clap own hips, then own hands
Clap partner's hands 3 times
Clap own hips, then own hands (2)
Clap partner's hands 3 times

Clap hands, clap hands,
Number 4
There's nothing else to say
'Cause there isn't any more.

Clap own hips, then own hands (2)
Clap partner's hands 3 times
Clap own hips, then own hands (2)
Clap partner's hands 3 times

Assessment

After DoCS decided to transfer their support, from Sam as Sophie's carer, to George and me, we had to undergo an intensive assessment with a DoCS psychologist. Once again this meant driving 600km from home to the DoCS agency handling Sophie's case.

A psychologist interviewed George, Sam and me separately for two hours at a time. Then he talked to all of us together, and then to George and me together. Whoever was not being interviewed minded Sophie.

The psychologist said he wanted to watch the three of us the next day interacting with Sophie. We needed a game that a five year old would engage in. That was a bit of a challenge because, being away from home, we had few toys to keep her occupied. On the way back to the motel I bought cardboard, coloured pens and a dice and that night I made up a board game like snakes and ladders. As Sophie was going to be starting school when we took her back home, I called the game 'Sophie goes to school' and I put in captions like *Teacher liked my new uniform. Move forward two spaces* or *Hurt my knee and needed a band-aid. Miss a turn.*

The next day we all sat down on the floor playing our new game while the psychologist observed us. Then we had to go to a nearby park where the psychologist watched us helping Sophie play on the playground equipment.

It still wasn't all over. George and I each had to do a two hour written assessment answering about three hundred multiple choice questions about our attitudes towards drink, drugs and behaviours. I hadn't done any tests for decades.

Throughout the proceedings the psychologist remained very professional and gave nothing away, but on the final day when it came time for his verdict, he relaxed and was warm and friendly and very positive in his report.

The whole assessment lasted three days. I wasn't used to all this scrutiny and I found it stressful and tiring. Still, I knew it had to be done and I didn't mind. I think placing children in the permanent care of people other than their parents is an enormously important decision which has to be made wisely and responsibly. Our assessment was certainly thorough! After we got back home an officer from our local DoCS branch came to inspect our home.

A DIFFERENT LIFE

As the person Sophie depended on most I had to give her a great deal of my time. I stopped playing tennis at night and dropped out of the choir I'd been in with George. I was lucky that my friends were very accommodating and we arranged to meet within school hours. I might have seen some of them less frequently but I didn't lose any friends as many grandparents do. Where I had been in a Book Group that met in different members' homes, now everyone came to my place each month. Sophie loved having a chat with them before she went to bed.

If these changes in my daily life seemed big to me they are nothing to what some grandparents experience. I can't imagine what it is like to have four highly disturbed grandchildren suddenly come to live with me, as has happened to a number of grandparents in GAPS. Suddenly the grandparents are having to provide extra clothing, bedding and food, their financial resources are stretched, and their emotional reserves tested to the limit as they cope with distressed, unsettled, and misbehaving grandchildren.

I seemed to be in an unusual state of shock after Sophie's arrival. I felt different to be walking around with my grandchild knowing I'd become her parent as well. It was a strangeness that lasted more than a year as I adjusted to my new life. I don't give it a thought now but at the time I was very sensitive to my changed world.

Enrolling Sophie at school was a time when I was very conscious of how much older I was than the mothers in their trendy clothes. I felt sorry for Sophie. She saw other children with their young parents but she had an old Nan. I got to know quite a few grandparents who waited at the school gate to collect grandchildren for working parents. The mothers of Sophie's friends were very friendly towards me. In later years when we had rosters for driving children to functions like dance concerts, they often offered to do the night shifts. Some advantages come with white hair! That's how Sophie picked me out of the audience to wave to me when she was on stage.

When we went shopping, smiling shop assistants would say, 'Oh, Nan's taking you out today,' or 'Is Nan minding you?'

If Sophie said, 'I live with my Nan,' they would look at me and invariably, as I found so many other people did too, they would say, 'Oh, that'll keep you young.'

It was such a commonly repeated phrase to all of the grandparents in the Support Group that it became a standing joke. We felt anything but young, especially by the end of the day! I found it interesting, though, that more strangers spoke to me when I had a little girl with me. She was good at talking to them and they liked that.

I was a bit concerned that I didn't know what 'her kind of music' was. I soon learned. These days I can recognise the singing of Taylor Swift in the shopping malls as quickly as the teenyboppers!

Sophie was my first grandchild. I had to update my knowledge about what children of her age wore, what they gave each other for birthday presents, what toys were 'in' and so on. A few people, including a taxi driver, had warned me, 'You know, you will have to get *her* kind of music.'

I bought Sophie some popular dance music and songs which she loved. I also bought 'children's music', only to find much of it disappointingly trite - every tune on the tape had the same simplistic treatment, with the same synthetic sound. Some 'Classics for Children' that should have been worth listening to were travesties as though a child would not have the intelligence to appreciate the proper version. As soon as I substituted real music which we had in abundance in our home, I found that Sophie responded readily to all kinds of music - choirs, African music, musicals, classical, jazz - to name a few.

None of her young friends seemed to call adults 'Mrs'. They used first names. That was never done when I was growing up. I didn't mind. It was easier for them to use my first name as my surname was different from Sophie's. Some people raised their eyebrows when they heard children being so 'familiar' towards me but the children were always respectful and that was what mattered to me.

When my three children were young they had each other to play with and the neighbourhood children were always in and out of our house. They'd grown up and moved on. Sophie, always very social, missed having other children around and was having to get used to the fact that she no longer had any of her brothers to play with. We had to make phone calls to organise visits with friends and I'd drive her to and from their homes.

George and I had been married for 42 years when Sophie came to live with us. Our children had long ago left home and established their own lives. We had retired and were free to do whatever we liked and go wherever we wanted. We'd fallen into comfortable habits like reading the newspaper and doing crosswords, and we had plenty of interests, some of which we did together, like going to concerts, and some we did separately, like belonging to our Men's and our Ladies' Probus Clubs.

THAT'LL KEEP YOU YOUNG

I met a friend from years ago
She said, 'Since I stopped work
We've been on planes and coaches,
Next week we go to Bourke.

And what have you been doing?
Have you been to lands far flung?'
'I'm bringing up my grandchild.'
'Goodness, that'll keep you young!'

Keep me young, I muttered
As I hurried home by three,
Leaving her to meet her friends
For coffee at the quay.

'Hullo Nan, guess what,' said kid,
'Tomorrow's fancy dress.'
I cut and sewed till midnight
And exhausted left a mess.

I was drifting into dreamland
When I heard a ghastly scream.
'Nanna, Nanna, help me!
I've had an awful dream.'

I calmed kid down, went back to bed
Then woke with lots to do.
'Please explain my maths,' said kid
'I think my homework's due.'

We multiplied with Nutrigrain
Eight pieces on each plate,
We couldn't finish spelling
'Cause the kid was running late.

'Where's my socks? Can't find my
cap!
Not vegemite for lunch!
Can't wait for you to iron that shirt,
Don't care if it is scrunched.'

Kid gone, did loads of shopping,
Checkout chick saw kid's cream bun.

'Bringing up your grandchild? Wow!
That'll keep you young!'

Just got home to answer phone
'Appointment dear at four.
A dental checkup for your kid.'
And then I heard a roar.

Kid's dog was shut in bedroom
He had shredded up some paper,
He'd done a woopsie on the floor
I got the dog poo scraper.

Meditate, play music,
In bliss I settled down.
The phone - a free vacation
At a pretty coastal town.

'You're joking!' I screamed loudly
In hysteria by this time,
'My kid's grand final will be then!'
I hissed back through the line.

'Oh lovely,' said the caller
'Raising grandkids must be fun.
I'm sure you have a lovely time.
That'll keep you young!'

I frothed and seethed and ranted
And I boiled and fumed till night.
I tucked the grandkid into bed,
Read book, turned off kid's light.

'I love you Nanna dearly.
You're the best,' kid softly said
'Will you stay with me a little?'
So I stayed and stroked kid's head.

'I love you too,' I whispered
As the kid slept with a smile,
I tip-toed out a happy Nan,
That made it all worthwhile.

Sophie's arrival brought more changes to our lives than we had imagined. Every time we thought of doing something we had to consider a third party. Our ability to go on trips, visits, or to places of entertainment was suddenly curtailed and our social contact with friends suffered. We found ourselves turning off the television news at tea time because it was so unsuitable for a young child. That time became a social, talking time again.

I took a record one night of what was on the TV news. 21 out of the 24 stories were negative. There were deaths (from road accidents, bombs, uprisings, flood, suicide and drag racing), injuries (from shooting and bashing), ill-feeling (provoked by vandalism, and a false fire alarm), hardship (from drought and overcharging), as well as a political resignation, a police scandal, a virus in bank accounts, imprisonment, and speeding fines. There were disturbing images that, years ago, children would never have been exposed to. In the whole hour there were only three mildly good stories. Weather and sport followed and that wasn't all good news either!

Although we'd had the experience of raising a family, raising our granddaughter presented new challenges. We were older and we got more tired. We couldn't hope to be like the young parents other children lived with. Fashions, music, technology, food habits, entertainment - we were out of touch. Two generations out of touch! Even the language had changed!

'Don't slip with those scissors on the table.'

'I'm not that unco.'

When Sophie was ten she emerged from her bedroom ready to go to Sunday School wearing red lipstick. I said, 'Grandad wouldn't like it if he knew you were wearing lipstick.'

'Come on, Nan! It's the 21st Century!'

When she was thirteen her homework was about polymers. Plastics like that weren't invented when we were at school!

One of the greatest challenges grandparents like us face is raising grandchildren who have suffered trauma. George and I were lucky that Sophie had managed to cope as well as she had with the events in her young life but some grandchildren have been so grievously hurt by their earlier experiences that it takes many years to restore peace, love and trust in their lives and sometimes that aim is never fully realised.

Being retired meant that I had time to give to Sophie. Because of my lifelong interest in children, first raising them, and then as a teacher, I hadn't stopped thinking about children and their development, experiences and learning. When I met with my friends we talked about children, family, friends and relationships. That's what women generally do. For me, raising Sophie was something I really wanted to do.

Most grandmothers who find themselves raising grandchildren, albeit with little or no choice, switch into their child-rearing mode and get on with the task. Arguably many adjust to their new role more easily than their husbands. That was so for George and me. He didn't jump in fully clothed to raise Sophie as I did. When he was parenting for the first time he was going to work each day. Now he was retired and having to deal with a young child on a day to day basis. As with most other grandfathers, nurturing and raising children finished for George when our children grew up. His interests were about how things worked and all things technical, his job had been in repairing motors and making machines work. When he got together with friends these were the subjects they talked about.

Of course, these interests are an asset too. A grandfather told me, 'Use people's strengths. Don't try to make them into something they're not.'

"Being a grandfather to a grandson full-time when never having a son of my own has advantages. Being able to pass on my knowledge and experiences in my life is very rewarding and fulfilling. For example, I showed him how to sharpen a chain saw blade and how to mix two-stroke oil with petrol to make the right blend of fuel. We went out in the bush with a trailer on the back of a truck and cut wood for the slow combustion fire. I showed him the difference between ironbark and stringy bark gums. He is not only learning things, he is a good companion, helper and mate."(Paul)

The same grandfather who got such pleasure from being with his grandson was also the first to admit that 'grandfathers needed their shed', a place to get away from it all, a place of peace and quiet, a place where a man could think.

Recently I was talking with some grandmothers who were not raising their grandchildren. One remarked that her husband, as he has aged, has become less patient and more single-minded so that he is much less able to tolerate an interruption from his grandchildren when they want to tell him something. Two other grandmothers were talking about their grandchildren staying with them during the school holidays. They both said their husbands were getting edgy towards the end of the week and were glad to know the grandchildren would be going home soon. The men had had enough. They loved their grandchildren dearly, but they weren't as able to give the sustained attention to the children that their wives could.

Our admiration, then, for grandfathers who hang in there and are raising their grandchildren. It mightn't come naturally but they're doing a mighty job

When Sophie came to live with us I was like many other grandmothers whose son or daughter had made poor choices in their lives. I'd thought long and hard, I'd agonised, over how this had happened. Now that I had a second chance, I

resolved to do whatever I could to help Sophie achieve a wholesome and satisfying life and I had clear views about how I wanted to do this.

I didn't care about toys strewn around the house or having the bathroom invaded by hair ties and bobby pins, there were more important issues to attend to, like Sophie's well being. I wanted her to understand that she was really wanted by George and me for years and years to come.

I threw myself into the task of parenting for a second time. I enjoyed the challenge. I spent a lot of time with Sophie. Together we talked, sang, read, cooked, shopped, threw balls, drew, did craft, and made greeting cards. One day Sophie was making a fairy. When she finished the body and face she asked, 'What'll I do for hair?'

'You could use some cotton wool.'

'And make it look like an old grannie!'

Sophie and I enjoyed painting together. One day when I put up some paintings in the lounge room she approved of the brightly coloured ones. Then she looked at the one that was in tones of brown and said, 'Oh, Nanna! You're not going to *leave* that one up there are you? When the ladies in the Book Group come they will all say they like it because they don't want to hurt your feelings!'

When George came into the room he'd find us in the middle of a book, or playing a game of cards, or drawing together. After tea I'd help Sophie with her homework, read to her in bed, stay with her if she couldn't get to sleep. George helped by doing household chores, getting tea sometimes and washing up every night. I was lucky to have his help, lone grandparents don't have any support like that. The truth was, though, that I threw myself into Sophie's activities so wholeheartedly that I neglected George. Whenever he wanted to speak to me it must have seemed that I was always engaged with Sophie.

It was hard for me to find a balance because I wanted to make up for lost time. Sophie was behind the other children when she started school, she needed help. That was me. When she needed someone to play with, that was me. Having lost all her family she depended on me. I wasn't going to let her down.

Especially in the early years, if George wanted to go out, perhaps to a musical performance, he mostly went alone. Sophie was too insecure to leave with a baby sitter, not that we had one readily available, but in any case, I didn't mind staying home for Sophie.

George was able to carry on with the activities that he had been involved with before Sophie came to live with us. He participated in his church's activities. He was a member of a choir so he went to practices, and gigs which included singing in nursing homes. He continued delivering Meals on Wheels each week

and he visited friends in nursing homes who seldom received visits from other people. He has always had a strong sense of community service.

All grandparent couples have to work out how best they can raise their grandchildren. Quite often it is the grandmother who assumes the principal role, as it was in our case. Sometimes grandfathers pitch in and share a very active part in raising their grandchildren. Sometimes the grandfather is the sole carer, and a fine one too. But it is a sad fact, and not uncommon, that for some grandfathers, even after thirty or forty years of marriage, raising grandchildren becomes all too much and they move out leaving their wives to cope with raising the grandchildren completely on their own.

George and I were never at risk of separating because of Sophie's arrival but that is not the case for every grandparent couple. I had a desperate phone call from a grandmother. Everything was collapsing around her. Two of her daughters were on drugs, her granddaughter was being neglected, the grandmother couldn't get any assistance from DoCS, and her husband had announced that he was not prepared to raise any more children. The grandmother was the only person available to raise her granddaughter. If she didn't do it her granddaughter would be taken out of the family and placed into foster care.

This was an untenable option for the grandmother. She knew that her husband was old enough and capable enough of looking after himself and she knew that her granddaughter was not. To keep her granddaughter in the family the grandmother was on the brink of deciding to raise her granddaughter and that meant separating from the man who'd been her husband for many, many years.



Grandad singing in the choir

George and I needed to make sure we spent time as a couple, even if it was just in school hours when we could go to a movie or have lunch out together. When Sophie was away on a three day trip with her school George and I went out each night for dinner, a quiet, uninterrupted dinner for two. When she had a sleepover at a friend's place we had time together as a couple.

We both needed time for ourselves as well. For George that was gardening, or working on a project like installing our tank system. For me it was meeting friends for lunch or coffee, or going to the Support Group, or doing some painting, reading or writing. I also continued to learn the Alexander Technique because I found it very beneficial to my well being. I think everyone needs to fill up their cup of pleasure and personal satisfaction, not just for their own good but for the happiness that spreads to the people around them.

More grandmothers attend GAPS meetings than grandfathers, not only because quite a number are raising their grandchildren on their own, but also because women seem to appreciate the chance to talk about their lives and share their feelings. In general, grandfathers don't express their feelings as often or as easily. They grew up in a time when men were not encouraged to express their feelings so it is less common for grandfathers to talk about how raising grandchildren is affecting their lives and there is a danger that resentment of their changed lifestyle can build up and have a negative effect. Men who do come to GAPS gain a lot from it, including having a good laugh.

Because I had George's support there were many things I didn't have to worry about. He looked after the maintenance of our house and garden and car, he was the practical one when we went camping, he was there when storms were raging, he looked after Sophie's pets, and a whole lot more. I always had someone I could lean on. Lone grandparents have none of that.

Sophie enjoys cooking and I encourage her to do things for herself so that gradually she can be reasonably independent, if only for the reason that George and I have lived the major part of our lives. More than other children she probably will have to learn to have more patience if George and I cannot hear, see or remember as well as we once did. Time will tell.

It's not a bed of roses

It would be nice if I could say when raising a child for the second time around, that I displayed heroic dedication and utterly wise parenting skills. If only! I got irritated by trivial things, I lost my cool, I said things I afterwards regretted, and said things that weren't always positive. I wasn't always the rapt listener to everything my granddaughter was telling me, especially if I had just sat down for a quiet moment.

Nor did I unconditionally accept the loss of my former lifestyle. There were times when I resented the fact that I couldn't do what I wanted, whether that meant doing some art, visiting my other children, or simply reading a book. Lone grandparents must long for some respite.

Meeting other grandparents raising grandchildren helped me put it all in perspective. If I indulged in a morsel of self pity I only had to think what they were coping with, like bedwetting, psychological disorders and major behaviour problems.

What grandchildren miss

'Doctor! Doctor! there's a strawberry growing out of my head!'

'I'll give you some cream for it.'

There was nothing Sophie liked more than having fun with her aunties and uncles, who were of similar age to her parents, rolling around on the floor, wrestling, chasing, teasing, having piggyback rides, and playing fun games. She could make rude noises at the bottom of her drink, pull faces, swap funny jokes and riddles, and indulge in more cuddles and longer bedtime stories. She was always sad when they had to leave.

Times like Christmas were bliss. Yes, she liked the presents but she adored having all the lovely relatives around and having fun. One birthday, instead of a children's party, she opted for a celebration with relatives because she loved the sense of a whole, big family around her.

To Easter buny

I bet you wille be bisy to nite I Do not now that the Easter bunny is a gile our boy I thingk it is a boy I thingk I am rite because I have herd it in stoorys I like Easter not because I

wont Easter eggs I like it my flamly gets to gefer I love the
Easter bunny

ps I left out sum caris for you and sum water.

Sophie

To (the) Easter bunny

I bet you will be busy tonight. I do not know that the Easter bunny is a girl
or

boy. I think it is a boy. I am right because I have heard it in stories. I like
Easter not because I want Easter eggs. I like it (because) my family gets
together. I love the

Easter bunny.

PS I left out some carrots for you and some water.

Sophie

Always attracted to little children, I heard her telling her friend about her new
cousins, 'One cousin's just born, the other one is 16 months and a bit naughty.
They are both she's.'

Generally the level of laughter and fun in a grandparent household is less than in
the usual parent household. With less energy, grandparents don't feel much like
a riotous romp with their young charges. Grandparents who do engage in
rollicking games with their grandchildren are most likely to be the love-them-
and-leave-them ones who can rest and recover afterwards.

We take Sophie to our Probus Club's annual Christmas picnic. All the other
people there are old. The first few years a few people joined in a game of cricket
with George, Sophie and me but this year no one did. They stayed sitting and
talking. A lot of them have bad legs or hips and can't move very easily. The
saving grace is that another Probus member has started bringing his
granddaughter and she and Sophie have become firm friends.

For grandchildren like Sophie who have had to live away from their siblings
there is a big adjustment from having brothers and sisters around all the time to
becoming an only child with no one to play with.

Not living with a parent leaves a big hole in a child's life. To cope with the
separation from her Dad I found Sophie had put a cloth over his photo. On
another occasion I found the photo frame face down.

She told me about questions she gets, like, 'Are you still seeing your brothers?'
'Will you see your Dad at Christmas time?'

She said, 'Other kids don't have to deal with all this!'

ACCESS

Seeing Sophie's Mum

Following the final court judgment which determined where Sophie and her brothers would live, everyone had to adjust to new lives. Sophie's mother Cindy moved with Travis, the only son she had left, so that she could live near her parents and the two boys in foster care. For Sophie to see her family, she had to fly with George and me to that state twice a year, as did her youngest brother Tommy who had moved to a third state to live with his father.

We still had no contact with Cindy. Sophie and Jack were picked up from our motel by staff from the DoCS equivalent in that State and taken to meet their mother and brothers. Usually they went to a play area, a park, or the beach, even on one occasion a zoo, or, in poor weather, to a shopping centre.

They were meetings fraught with difficulties. Having been completely out of touch with each other, the children met for just three days under the eyes of DoCS staff, then they returned to their distant homes for another six months. All very unsettling! I heard of unruly children but nobody could expect otherwise. In later visits DoCS arranged for the children to meet with their mother in smaller groups to make the meetings more manageable and satisfying.

George and I often asked DoCS if we could meet Sophie's brothers because we had become part of their family and we wanted to get to know them. We also offered to have any of them stay with us for a holiday but in the first few years this didn't happen.

Then one visit Cindy decided she and Travis would not participate and George and I were allowed to meet Sophie's brothers Stephen and Mark. This time the meeting took place in the home of Barbara, the hospitable foster carer of the two boys. The DoCS workers, as they had done before, came to supervise.

They couldn't believe what they saw. The 'unruly' children were relaxed, cooperative and friendly. No fights. No uncontrollable behaviour. Just brothers and sister playing very happily together. Two things were apparent. The natural environment of a home was a much better meeting place than a crowded shopping centre, and Cindy's presence had disturbed the children more than had been realised.

In Barbara's home the children were a family again and we all had a very satisfying and pleasant time together. George and I liked the boys and got to know them well and, from then on, George and I were welcome to be with the children for all access visits without supervision.

Cindy and her son moved interstate again, which meant that she wasn't near any of her other children. She still made no contact with Sophie. She did, however,

keep in touch with Barbara who had always given her support and friendship. Cindy respected Barbara's wise counselling.

One visit I told Barbara how hard it was for Sophie having no contact at all with her mother. Sophie felt Cindy had rejected her and didn't love her. That night Barbara rang Cindy and asked her to ring Sophie the next morning. To everyone's delight she did. Sophie was over the moon to speak with her mother and to hear her say she loved her. We have had telephone contact ever since and we have always been on good terms. These days Cindy rings Sophie occasionally and we can arrange to see her Mum if we travel through the area where she lives. Sophie seems satisfied with this degree of contact.

Seeing Sophie's Dad

Sam takes his responsibility of being a Dad very seriously. Even though he, too, lives in another state, we have always kept very much in touch. Without fail he rings up a number of times every week and we've been able to visit each other. He never misses family birthdays and loves seeing us at Christmas time.

From the marriage he had after Sophie came to live with us he shares equal custody of his son Jack who is now six and he has been able to bring him down for holidays as well. It is especially good for Sophie to see her little brother as he grows up.



SCHOOL

It was obvious when Sophie came to live with us that, with just six weeks of the school year left, she was starting Kindergarten at a great disadvantage. She'd come from another state where she'd attended a preschool for part of the week. Other children face this predicament, too, but Sophie had to come to terms with much more than that.

She had been separated from both parents and four brothers, the most loved people in her life. She hadn't yet become used to her new life with us, in fact, she was yet to learn that her new life with us would be lasting. She didn't know a soul in her new school, and at this late stage of the year, all the friendships were firmly established.

Children will always have a wide range of abilities and come from diverse backgrounds but they have a head start if their parents give them their time, value what they say, encourage them and engage with them in interesting ways, like sharing stories together. Many grandchildren living with their grandparents have missed out on all that. Until Sophie was four, I doubt that she ever owned more than a few books, or had many stories read to her. She started school not knowing all the alphabet and being barely able to count to twenty, and she was going to turn six in four months time.

Notwithstanding, Sophie was delighted to be walking up to school in her new school uniform. She settled in quite well but it was quickly apparent that all the work was too hard for her. She could be a smart little girl but I'm sure she didn't feel like one. I was glad it was only six weeks till the end of the year so she could have some respite.

In the following year she had a young teacher, sensitive, enthusiastic and very kind. At our parent/teacher interview her teacher probably thought I would be pleased to hear Sophie's behaviour in class described as 'perfect' but for me it rang alarm bells. I wanted my granddaughter to be her natural self, to relax, to take risks and not be afraid of getting into trouble. I didn't want her to think she had to be perfect. Not surprisingly, as Sophie's confidence grew, the 'perfection' disappeared. And I was glad.

Coping with schoolwork

As a former teacher it might be expected that I'd want to coach Sophie and help her catch up on her reading but I didn't want to put any more pressure on her. I didn't want her to see me as her teacher. I wanted to preserve my grandmother role, and any learning we did together I wanted to be enjoyable. It is such a warm, comfortable feeling when grandmother and granddaughter snuggle up and enjoy a book together. It is a special time I was not prepared to surrender.

At school she was getting very thorough grounding in the technical aspects of reading, particularly learning the sounds and doing worksheets. Instead of doing more of the same at home we threw ourselves into the world of books. We delighted in the humour, in rich and glorious language, in the rhythms and rhymes of words, and we met happy, horrible, funny, fearsome, engaging characters and let our imagination take us to new and exciting places. Sophie was attracted to books with beautiful illustrations so we looked at a lot of these and tried many of techniques the artists used when we painted and drew together. I tried to make sure everything we did together with reading was positive and would give her success.

A challenge we faced was in Year 1 when Sophie was given homework - a home reader daily and weekly worksheets and spelling. I resented the homework sheets because they were too hard and time consuming but Sophie wanted to do homework like the other kids so I told her what to write on her worksheets and got her to copy her spelling words. There was no point in spending time trying to memorise words she couldn't even read. I had to sign the homework and occasionally I was bold enough to write 'too difficult' alongside it.

People should not be fooled into thinking that difficult homework assignments are good for children. Homework that is too hard often leads to stress between the adult and child and I didn't want that. Remember that the time that children do homework is after a busy day at school, often after tea, when they are tired.

After the lovely books we were savouring at home, the readers, especially the early level ones, were boring and because of their limited vocabulary the story didn't flow like a real story. The magnetism wasn't there. If the readers were too hard or uninteresting to her, I'd read them to her and then we'd spend the rest of our time on real books.

When Sophie and I read real books - not readers - we had a wonderful time. We loved some of them so much, books like Mem Fox's *Possum Magic* (about Grandma Poss and her Grandchild), and Pamela Allen's *Mr McGee and the Blackberry Jam* that we knew them by heart and relished every word. I could have recited *Go, Dog, Go* in my sleep, but Sophie loved the fun of it, and the security of easy reading.

A purist might have said we weren't really reading. Sophie didn't 'know' every word, she was repeating words she had heard. That didn't worry me at all. She was absorbing stories and how they were structured, seeing how print works and being exposed to all kinds of language. And loving it.

For a long time Sophie wouldn't take risks, she didn't want to have a go at a new word that looked difficult, she didn't want to be 'wrong'. Most of the time I supplied a word if she didn't know it. That kept the continuity and interest of

the story flowing. I didn't say, 'Sound it out,' because I wanted her first thoughts to be about what the word would probably mean. As her understanding of reading grew, her knowledge of sounds grew accordingly. Sometimes she would reach a word I thought she could have worked out or predicted because of the meaning in the rest of the sentence, but she was reluctant to have a try. I never forced the issue. It was my role to be a supportive fellow reader who loved books, with the story being the important thing, not to be someone who was correcting and judging with the focus on getting everything right. As she became more confident she took more and more of the reading over for herself, she couldn't help it.

We shared our reading in any way I could think of to give Sophie success:

- I read to her.
- I read most of a story, but when we reached a favourite part, she read, 'Wheeeeeeee!' or 'LOOK OUT!'
- I read one page and she read another.
- I read a lot but when I saw a simple passage coming, she had a turn.
- She read a lot but if I saw a hard page coming I'd say, 'It's my turn.'
- She read the part of one of the characters.
- She read until she got a bit tired then I finished the story.
- We read together.
- One of her strengths was her delight in reading dramatically. If I didn't read with the required expression (which I sometimes did on purpose), she would take over and do it properly.

When I first took Sophie into a bookshop she wasn't very interested in books but as her interest grew, she started sitting down on the floor looking at them. As she became a reader, she couldn't resist mouthing some of the words. She started picking out books she would like to buy. I never said, 'No'. She could have any book she asked for. It was cheaper than paying for coaching! More fun too!

By this time she was starting to read the menu when we went out to dinner, to refer to a craft book to find out how to make something, and to read books we were choosing as gifts for younger cousins. Gradually she was reading more and more.

The day came when she saw a series of fairy books with chapters. They were the *Rainbow Magic* series by *Daisy Meadows*. She was hooked! When she finished one *Cherry the Cake Fairy* she wanted another, *Melodie the Music Fairy*. After each chapter we couldn't wait to find out what happened next. She proudly told her teacher that she was reading *chapter books* and her teacher agreed that she

could read them each night instead of a reader from *level 23* or whatever she was supposed to be up to.

Sophie's reading ability was expanding. I still supplied a word if I thought it was too difficult for her. Or, 'If you read it in chunks I think you will get it' *mis-er-able*. She was so proud of herself she tackled new words with increasing confidence. Our past reading, where I had preserved the meaning of a story by telling her a word so that she could keep on going, was paying off. She corrected herself if her reading didn't make sense. She was understanding so much of what she was reading, that she worked out quite difficult words, e.g., *curiously, ruined, absolutely*. She reached the stage where she would say, 'Don't tell me. I'll get it!'

Sophie could read and she knew she could read, all without drill or boredom. There were no tears, or being forced to read, or feelings of 'can't'. Instead, she had become a girl who could sit up in bed and read a book if she couldn't get to sleep.

I don't in any way take all the credit for her reading. Her teachers at school were all doing a great job. I just didn't repeat what the teachers did. The reading Sophie and I shared complemented what was being done at school. What I was pleased about was that I remained a grandmother who could share lovely stories with her granddaughter.

When we went shopping I gave her the grocery list, first using drawings and later the words.

The Tooth Fairy left page-long letters strewn with glitter. (I remember waking up in the middle of the night and having to write another sparkle-filled letter so that the Tooth Fairy didn't forget her!)

We left notes to each other all around the house. They went from simple messages *I love you* or *Thank you for making your bed* to full page letters.

One time she used her birthday money to buy a lovely coat with a furry collar. She paid me back when she got home from the shops.

Later I found a note on my pillow.

Dear Nanna

I wod lik mor mune ples

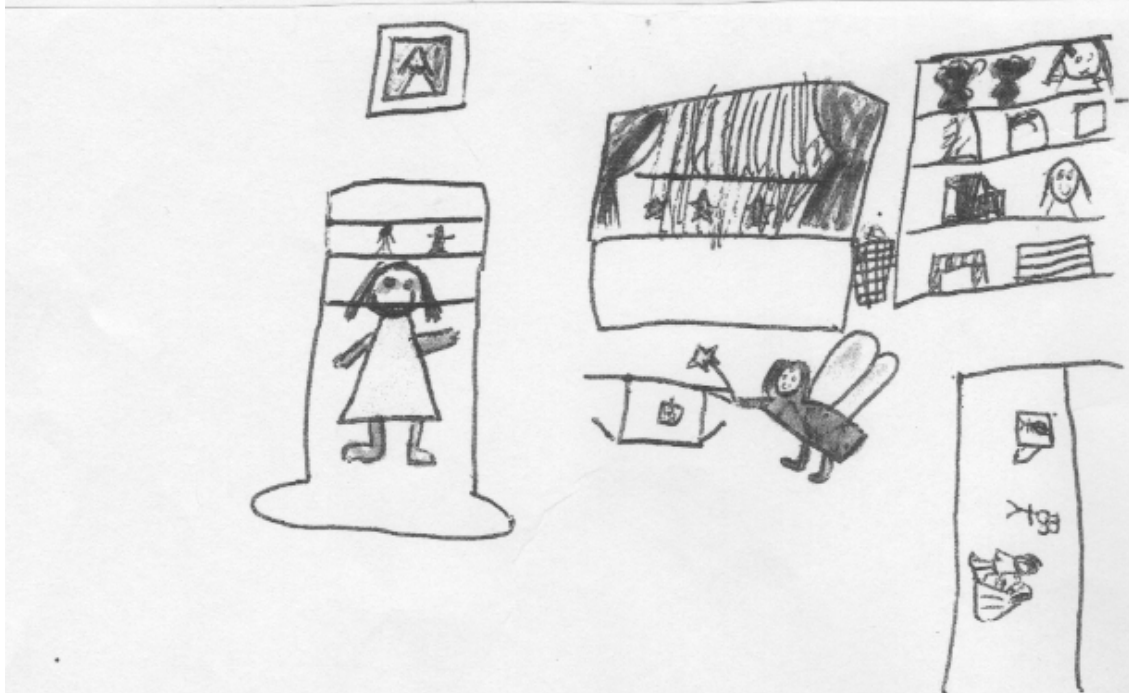
Love Sophie

She made numerous mail boxes out of old cardboard boxes so that we could post letters to each other.

I printed out the words of her favourite songs and rhymes. She used to bring them with her in the car for a singalong.

Dear Miss Tooth fery you are very bisy doing things and making oue hose out of teth I have lost 7 teth you go to my hose a lot I pade this toth out my sefe I have never seen a fery in all my no! life if I have lost 7 teth it mens I ~~my~~ got 7 letters from the tooth fery can you ples leve the tooth so I can show it for nos. tomoroe love
Sophie

Dear Mrs Tooth Fairy, You are very busy doing things and making our house out of teeth. I have lost 7 teeth. You go to my house a lot. I pulled this tooth out myself. I have never seen a fairy in all my life. If I have lost 7 teeth it means I got 7 letters from the tooth fairy. Can you please leave the tooth so I can show it for news tomorrow. Love
Sophie



Of course Sophie couldn't help noticing how much Grandad and I read. We read the newspaper daily and we'd draw her attention to a photograph or story that she might enjoy. My Book Group met at our place. We always had novels and

reference books lying around the house. We did crosswords regularly so we frequently consulted a Thesaurus or a dictionary. She saw us writing and using the computer.

In the process of helping Sophie:

- I ignored most mistakes and praised her for what she did well.
- I backed off when I knew she was tired.
- I praised something she was doing well in reading when I was talking to my friends, knowing full well that she could overhear me!
- In her Riddle Book I highlighted the jokes that I thought she could read as well as where she could understand the punch line.

Because of her scattered family Sophie liked to write to them occasionally. At first she drew a picture, later she added a few words, and then she wrote letters. If she needed to thank people for birthday gifts I only got her to do the one sheet or so, then I made copies for the various relatives so that writing remained a pleasure not a chore. Unknown to her, I sometimes included a correct version as well, so that Great Aunt Bertha wouldn't raise her eyebrows at the strange words!

When Sophie was ten years old her willingness to read decreased. Although she had improved considerably, she found many of the worksheets at school difficult. Hard, often uninteresting, worksheets can be daunting for a less proficient reader. With more worksheets for homework, she didn't want to do any more reading. She stopped bringing books home from the school library because the teacher got very cross if books were not returned on time. Even when we went to the local library, it wasn't always easy to find books that would engage and enthuse her. At bedtime she would say, 'Let's just have a chat.'

I didn't force the issue and for a while we didn't have many books. I wasn't proud of that, I thought I should have been able to do better. If we were in a bookshop though, I still bought books to lure her. One day her friend was shopping with us and she showed Sophie some books, 'These are really, really good.' We came home with a Geronimo Stilton book by Elisabetta Dami which instantly appealed to Sophie. There were plenty of pictures and she liked the characters and the story line. The variety of print which was colourful, zigzag, stretched or in different sizes appealed to her artistic nature. She started reading enthusiastically and asked for more.

The next improvement came with the computer. I had bought a laptop which we could use anywhere in the house, including a warm sunny room in winter. She

had learnt how to use Powerpoint at school and now she tried it out at home. This was something she could do much better than Nanna. Being able to influence the colour, and layout, and play with the images was all very appealing to her. I was replacing colour cartridges at a fast rate but it was worth it. She was writing letters, and making cards to send to relatives everywhere and writing adventure stories. Her spelling improved because she was writing. Growing in confidence she started to read an occasional newspaper item and recipes. On the computer she produced her own illustrated pamphlet on Tasmania because she wanted to go there for a holiday - maybe it would persuade Nanna and Grandad to take her! Making her own Design Book, she read about various fashions. She asked me to buy a women's magazine so that she could look at the fashions. She read a book in bed until she felt tired enough to go to sleep. Sophie was not totally hooked on reading but she was getting there.

"I attended an Information Session for parents of students who were entering high school. The principal observed how much high school had changed since the parents went to school. Clearly the oldest person in the room, I thought, if you think things have changed for them, go back another generation!

He rounded off the evening by speaking about the future. He couldn't tell what the future would be like but he hoped to produce students who would be able to meet the challenges that lay ahead. He said that with a life expectancy of 80, students the age of my granddaughter would be living in the year 2078.

I'm in the audience thinking, I'm 71, with a life expectancy of 80, I have 9 years to go!"

Homework! Help!

Sophie was in primary school. I was about to tuck her in bed and relax for the night.

‘Oh, Nan, I just remembered. Mr Johnson said we have to do this extra homework question with our parents and you have to sign it.’

It was something about David’s clock not working properly, the hour changed every 40 minutes instead of 60 minutes. It was correct at 12.00 am. His clock showed 1:00am when it was 12:40.

It now showed 4:15am. What was the correct time? Then followed four options. When I went to school we called questions like that ‘problems’. That’s what they were to me! Definitely not my strong point. The more I thought about it the more confused I got. It was not something this Nanna wanted to think about at that time of night. If it was giving me so much angst to solve, how could I possibly explain it to Sophie?

First time around as a parent I probably would have tried to work it out. Instead, I signed the sheet to show I had seen it and mumbled under my breath, ‘Let him work it out himself!’

A few days later I had to go to the school for the half-yearly parent/teacher interview. Her teacher’s first words were, ‘Don’t worry about the maths homework. I don’t expect you to do it. It was just for extension.’ Well it certainly extended Nanna!

Enormous changes in methods of teaching and subject matter have taken place over the last few decades. Advances in technology have resulted in many children being ahead of their parents. Except for a few aged wizards, there’s an absolute abyss between grandchildren and their grandparents, Grandchildren are so comfortable with using technology that they can and do teach their grandparents much, but they usually do it at such a rate of knots that grandparents are left gasping.

Like many older grandparents, I grew up using the imperial system. The decimal system was introduced when my first child was born. Mathematics was taught to me rigidly and by rote. It never occurred to me that I could think creatively and try different methods to find solutions. Sophie, on the other hand, was being encouraged to think and apply her knowledge to solve problems in whatever way she could. She was also encouraged to do this mentally. All good, but hard for me to get my head around.

In the Support Group we tackled our struggle with maths, by inviting an enthusiastic teacher to talk to us. She was extremely helpful and explained how

the new methods worked but, I have to say, my lifelong habits have remained and I have little facility in the new maths.

Get a group of parents and they all have different ideas about homework, whether it's good or bad, appropriate or not, too much or too little, but they usually help their children to get it done. Second time around, many grandparents don't want to waste time with homework if they think it is unsuitable. Grandparents are tired at night and need to conserve their energy for important things.

Homework should be achievable, hopefully interesting, seen as having a good purpose and within children's understanding. Seeing some of Sophie's assignments makes me think how hard it must be for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and how impossible it must be for a tired grandparent having to care for a number of school-age grandchildren.

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FOOD

Food intolerance

A lot of grandchildren like Sophie arrive at their grandparents with poor eating habits. If drug or alcohol abuse or mental illness is involved it raises questions about the effects that the mother's diet and lifestyle during pregnancy have on their unborn baby. In their important early years these grandchildren had only what was available, maybe bread, milk (if it wasn't 'off') or cereal, or junk food. It is a challenge for grandparents to extend their grandchildren's diets to include a range of healthy food.

When Sophie was ten a food problem arose that I didn't know anything about. She was getting migraine headaches, complained of a sore tummy and was often tired and unwell. She started missing days at school. Doctors found nothing wrong with her and I felt like an overanxious grandmother. Yet I knew that she wasn't thriving. Children should be energetic, happy and eating well. Sophie wasn't.

Not satisfied, I sought a referral to a specialist, a consultant physician and allergist, who detected food intolerance. Different from an allergy where there is an immediate reaction, food intolerance can take hours or even days before some of the ill effects are evident. To find out which foods affected Sophie, she was placed on a very restricted exclusion diet.

It had a powerful effect on her. For two weeks she had very unpleasant withdrawal symptoms (headaches, poor breathing, tummy pains, aching limbs, irritability...even bleeding nose) and she couldn't get to sleep until well after her usual bedtime. She was also very sensitive to chemical smells. After two weeks of physical symptoms her underlying fears came to the surface. Could DoCS make her go to live with her Mum or Dad? Would she ever have to go alone to spend a holiday with one of them? What would happen to her if Grandad and I died? (She was reluctant to use the word 'die'.) She was concerned that in the event of not living with us she would have to change schools and lose all her school friends. She didn't want to lose the extended family she had grown to love so much, and she missed the maternal side of her family.

All this gushed out in a flood of emotions and immediately afterwards she experienced a sharp pain in her tummy, as though she couldn't physically hold her fears in any more. After that she turned the corner, felt well and occupied herself beautifully, and worked for an hour or two in her bedroom on a school project.

To my surprise, from the second day of the exclusion diet, Sophie started eating a greater quantity of food than ever before despite the fact that it was so restricted and bland. Then we had to introduce new foods gradually and note any adverse reactions. The process was long and slow and sometimes discouraging

but it was much better for Sophie than feeling sick. It turned out that she was intolerant to a wide range of foods i.e. those containing amines, preservatives, colourings, flavourings and some additives. In the next four years she remained on a restricted diet which presented problems whenever she had a meal away from home. In that time I became an expert in reading labels and finding compatible food and meeting the challenge of making the small range of bland food more palatable

As she approached her fourteenth birthday Sophie found that she could occasionally eat some of the banned food with little effect. She tried more and more with success and now she can eat much more. including a lot of healthy food which contain amines, such as broccoli, tomato and a lot of fruit. It was very gratifying to see her rewarded for her years of self control. She was a different person - healthier, stronger and happier. She could be 'normal' like her friends! It was such an improvement!

A most helpful book I referred to in those years was Sue Dengate's 'Fed Up - Understanding how food affects your child and what you can do about it', published by Random House. I still refer to the Food Intolerance website from time to time.

Health checks

Soon after Sophie came to live with us I took her to the doctor, dentist and optometrist for health checks. When I took her for a dental checkup I was met by a new dentist who had bought the practice. He had no chairside manner at all. He glared at her, then at me, and complained that she needed a couple of small fillings and accused me of loading her with lollies.

On her card he could have noticed that she was in the care of her grandmother. With a little communication he could have found out that she'd suffered neglect, that she'd grown up in a region where there was no fluoride in the water supply, and that coming to live with us was her first experience of a sugar-restricted diet.

Yes, I found a new dentist!

GOING TO COURT

Knowing nothing about the way the legal system works I thought that once matters went to court they would be finalised within a short time. Not so. There were hearings, delays, mentions, postponements, and more hearings. I'd never heard of a 'mention'. Time dragged on, costs rose, tensions increased. Mostly there were delays.

It was always a waiting game. Sometimes, instead of starting at the scheduled time, the magistrate's first act was to sort out his day's business behind closed doors. Everyone waited. They stared into space, or they stared at the clock. There was no effort to have any idle conversation. Whenever an officer came to call the name of a person due in court everyone looked up expectantly. It was always someone else.

Young parents tried to keep their children quiet, giving them a bottle, rocking their pram, and chasing toddlers until they slumped in boredom.

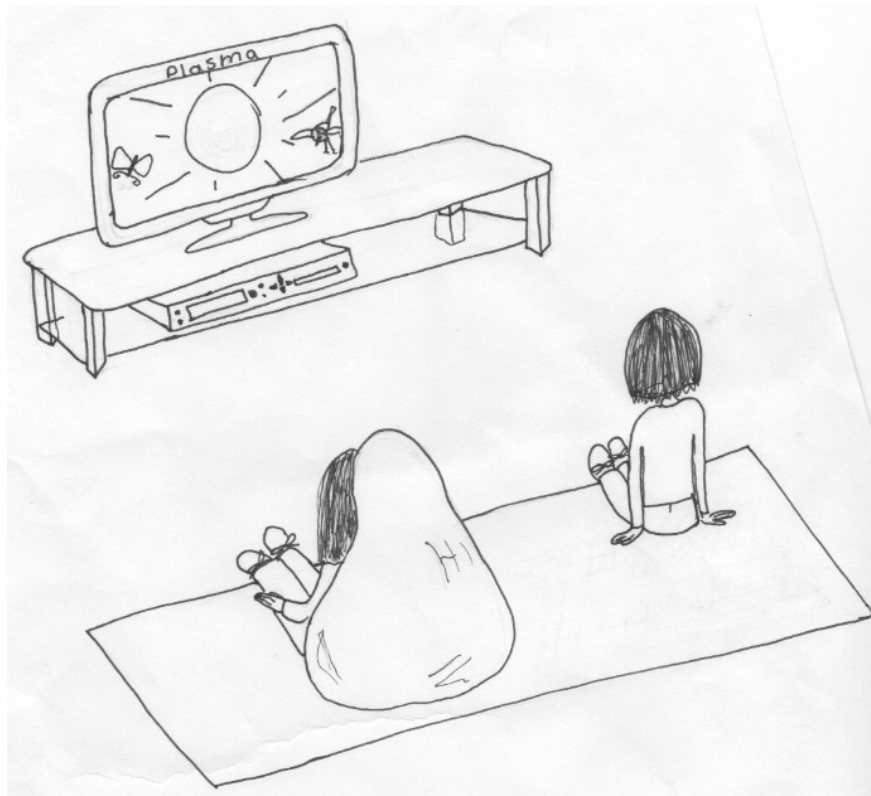
Occasionally a flourish of legal robes, black brief cases and clutched papers wafted past. It was just another day at the office for them. Occasionally a waiting person would spring to life and chase after one of them. They would sit down, whisper together earnestly until, all too soon, the legal person had to leave and disappear down the hallway taking their client's hopes and trust with them. Everyone waited.

I had never met Sophie's mother Cindy before, I'd only seen her from a distance. Now we were in the same waiting area while the court was in session and I was the woman seeking custody of her daughter. She was very agitated so I avoided all eye contact because I didn't want to risk any kind of confrontation. I felt sorry for her. It was an enormously stressful time for her with four of her children about to be taken away from her permanently

We made about six trips either for access visits so that Sophie could see her family or for court matters. Every time it was a 600 kilometres journey each way. We were lucky that Sophie was a magnificent traveller. She usually sang to tapes for the first hour, played car games, and slept. She'd arrive feeling much fresher than we did! Good Grandad always took her for a swim in the motel pool on arrival.

The final court hearing was spread over three days. It was in an unfamiliar town, an hour's travel from the motel where we were staying. While I attended court George kept Sophie occupied. Fortunately the weather was fine. He took her fishing - she caught her first fish - shopping and to parks. He looked after her well. I remember travelling back to our motel to the squeaks and wheezes of a new tin whistle he'd bought her. Just what I needed after a frowzy day at the court house!

At last the judgment was made and Sophie was placed in our care and that of the Minister of the State until the age of eighteen. From now on we could give our granddaughter enduring stability and love. She would learn we were there for the long haul and she would never be taken away again. I've not been inside a courtroom since.



THE SUPPORT GROUP - GAPS - Grandparents as Parents (sometimes known by different names in other regions)

I urge any grandparents who find themselves raising grandchildren to join a Support Group. The practical and emotional support is exceptional and grandparents and grandchildren are able to make unique and satisfying friendships. See 'Raising Others' website for list of Support Groups.

When Sophie was six we went to a barbecue for families raising grandchildren that was organised with the intention of forming a Support Group. That was a new idea for me. I hadn't thought of seeking any kind of help from anyone. I was coping, wasn't I? A few other grandparents turned up, and I was particularly pleased that Sophie met other children who were also being raised by their grandparents. She hadn't lived with us for very long and she missed having friends to play with.

Encouraged I went to the first meeting of GAPS. I was shocked. I was hearing stories from people whose lives were like no others that I'd ever come across. I'd never experienced anything like the pain, upheaval, even horror, that the grandparents were telling me about. They weren't complaining and they weren't into self-pity. They were just determined to get on with their lives and do the best they possibly could for the sake of their grandchildren they clearly loved. They might have had depressing stories but they weren't depressing people.

I was very moved. I drove home thinking about these heroic people. For the whole week I thought about their courage and their love and their commitment. I had to go to the next meeting and I've gone to almost every meeting since. I get something worthwhile out of every meeting. We talk about anything and everything - teething, behaviour, eating, birthday parties, fashions, school.

We talk about changes in our own lives. Some of our stories are not the kind we want to broadcast, especially if they are about our own sons or daughters who have alienated themselves because of thoughtless, abusive, drug or alcohol-driven behaviour. Here they can be spoken about and instead of judgment there is understanding.

We have plenty of good laughs, and goodness knows some of these grandparents need that. I am reminded of the Young Wives Group I belonged to when my three children were little. In GAPS we are doing it all over again, though the difference is that we are much older, and the children in our care have all experienced trauma.

Whatever is on our minds that week we talk about. Take nits, for example. We have had very animated discussions about nits. We know all about the chemical versus the bio-friendly treatments. No matter what product is used, the process

of nit extermination is time-consuming and messy. We hate it and the kids hate it. After kicking and screaming the kids emerge, heads scrubbed, hair purified and glowing, while we mop up the bathroom and collapse in a wet heap on the couch, only to repeat the drama the next week because the perpetrators at school still have the little beasts crawling around in their locks. Never planned on doing that when we were sixty or seventy!

A few newcomers don't reveal much at all about their situation until after a number of meetings when they see we respect their privacy and they feel they can trust us. But more often than not, new members arrive so stressed that they pour out their story in a torrent of tears and despair. Many of them are utterly frustrated with agencies like DoCS and Centrelink. Some are in dire straits financially. Simply finding out at our meeting that they could be eligible for an allowance lifts a huge weight off their shoulders. Nobody is there when their grandchildren first arrive to ease their path and tell them about their entitlements, or to tell them about various organisations that might improve their own and their grandchildren's lives.

The format for running meetings varies with different groups. Ours are informal, flexible and friendly. We have no office bearers - been there, done that - we are all equal. Whenever new members come we follow the custom of going around the group in turn and saying a little bit about our background so that the newcomers feel comfortable about talking with us. As our group has grown we have to make sure that everybody gets the chance to talk about what is important to them. All deserve to be listened to and supported.

It is a tremendous comfort to mention something of concern and hear someone else say, 'Oh, I'm having that trouble too.' For example, when one of us said, 'My grandchild is talking a lot of baby talk,' the response was, 'So is mine,' from a number of other grandparents. We realised it was a sign of our grandchildren's insecurity and not just an annoying childish habit.

We talk about taking on the role of being 'parents' to our grandchildren. We are the ones who are managing their behaviour, helping them to learn responsibility, governing how much freedom they should have. A big challenge.

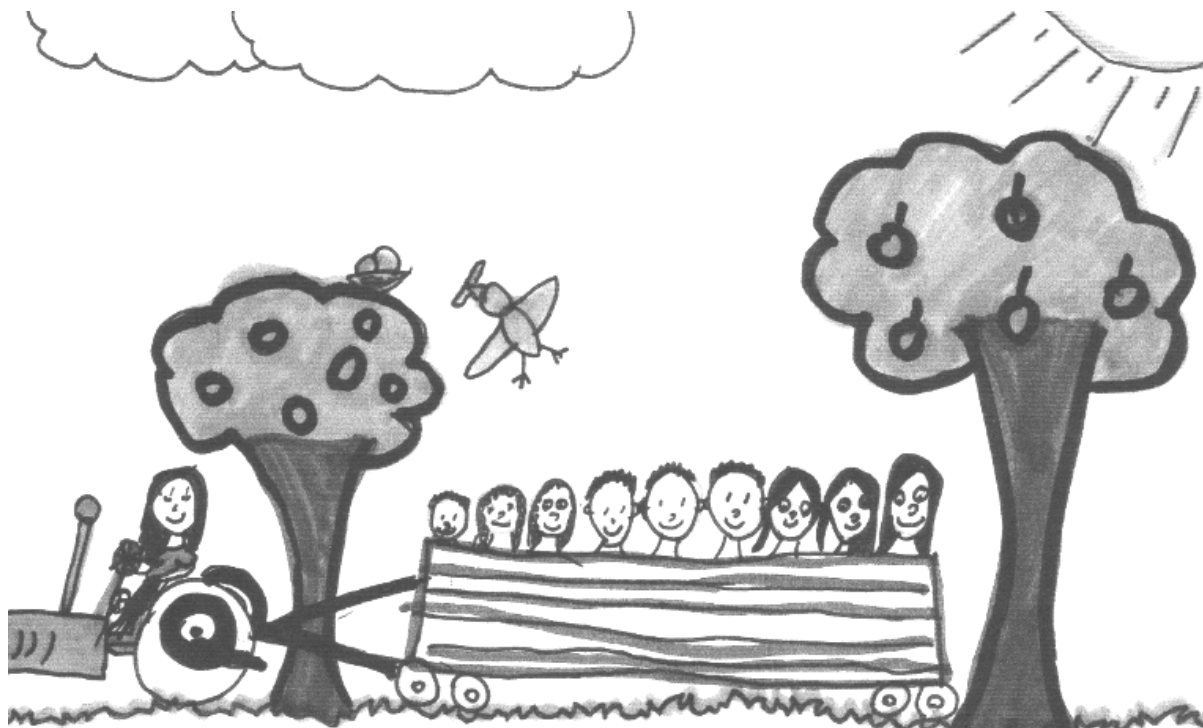
Telling our stories is a healing process. Feelings that we carried, rightly or wrongly, of guilt, shame, anger, pain, disappointment or self-reproach are eased. No matter how we feel, there is always someone worse off than ourselves. For a person who 'didn't need' the group I'm not doing too badly. Over the eight years I've made lasting and cherished friendships and I seek answers to different questions as my granddaughter grows

SUPPORTING THE GRANDCHILDREN

One of the most valuable outcomes of belonging to a Support Group is that our grandchildren get to know each other. They enjoy Christmas parties, outings to parks, animal farms, tenpin bowling and ice skating and, best of all, camps for grandparent families. Grandparents who are working or cannot attend meetings bring their grandchildren to the social activities. It is very heartening for the grandchildren to meet others like themselves. It's an eye opener for them to hear stories worse than their own. They form a unique relationship and get along remarkably well with each other.

On her way home from an animal farm, Sophie told me how she and her friend Emma, an orphan, had talked about their lives, their parents, living with grandparents, and their feelings. Sophie went on to talk about her own feelings, how she thought about her parents and the fact that she couldn't live with either of them. I couldn't think of a better outcome for the day.

Eight years later and Sophie continues to enjoy her friendship with Emma. It is a different kind of revealing where she can talk about the shortcomings Grandad and I have, and about living with the 'olds', and perhaps about her disappointments and dreams.



FOSTER CARE AND GRANDPARENT CARE

Foster care

George, Sophie and I have always been grateful that Barbara, the foster mother of two of Sophie's brothers, has cooperated generously in encouraging our contact with the boys. She clearly loves the boys and wants what is best for them, they are well settled in a warm, homely environment with lots of pets.

Barbara's role in restoring a sense of family has been considerable. She has a warm relationship with us and the maternal grandparents, and is a wise and caring friend for the children's mother Cindy with whom she has always kept in touch.

Barbara has welcomed us into her home during access visits and advocates, as we do, that wherever it is suitable for foster parents to meet up with family members, including grandparents, it should be encouraged, primarily for the sake of the children, but also for the benefit of everyone involved.

My other experiences with foster care came initially through the Foster Care Association (FCA) now known as Connecting Carers. FCA came about after years of persistence and lobbying by very committed foster carers. It is now a strong organisation. The challenge for grandparents is to strengthen and connect all groups of grandparents raising grandchildren across the state so that they, too, become an effective lobby group for change.

Connecting Carers is funded by DoCS auspiced by Karitane and in partnership with the Foster Parents Support Network to provide support and training for foster, kinship and relative carers - all carers of children under the age of 18 - across NSW. Grandparents raising grandchildren have been encouraged to participate in their activities, notably the camps and information sessions relating to issues with children living in out of home care. These have been very positive and worthwhile initiatives because up till then grandparents had little recognition for their work in raising grandchildren.

I was blown away when I went to my first foster parent/grandparent weekend camp. GAPS was only small at the time and most of the people at the camp were foster families. I met amazing people, selfless and loving, all caring, either on a short term or a long term basis, for children who couldn't live with their parents. They were inspiring. I truly admire people who can put their own lives on hold and give so much of themselves to raise children who are not related to them in any way. The children at the camp were noticeably considerate and very well behaved - a credit to their carers.

Noise, excitement and entertainment

I accept that my granddaughter is growing up in an entirely different era to the one in which I was raised. There are significant advancements, for example, in technology that improve our lives and add to our enjoyment.

I guess, because I'm a grandmother, I notice other additions to modern living which seem to me to detract from the quality of our lives. Additives detract from the quality of our modern foods, the once harmless ice block has become loaded with additives, colourings and artificial flavourings. Now there are additives to the environment, not there when I was growing up, that I consider harmful to health.

I have taken Sophie tenpin bowling where I would expect the sound of bowls rolling and tenpins falling, the voices of players enjoying themselves and an occasional announcement. But that's not enough! Music thumps constantly through the speakers and strobe lights twitch jarringly. To speak we shout above the noise. Noise Plus! Muffled messages scream through a loud speaker and pollute hearing.

We go ice skating. The natural noise of people skating in a confined space is not enough.

Amplified 'background' music takes front stage and assaults our ears. Here, too, distorted announcements screech over the top. Noise Plus!

I take Sophie to dance lessons where her teacher shouts instructions over multi-decibelled, pumping, thumping music. Noise Plus! The in your face, or I should say, in your ears loudness is even present at school discos and concerts.

Go to children's entertainment at any shopping mall during the school holidays and invariably there's a person with a microphone shrieking, 'Are you having a good time?'

'Yes.'

'Can't hear you. Are you having a good time?'

'YES!'

'That's better!' More shrill, distorted noise screams through the microphone. Over excitement!

And now in the teen dress shops in the mall more beating music assaults our ears.

This attack on the senses seems to have become an ever-present intruder at children's functions. My generation cringes, the next generation condones it, and the next generation - the children - don't know anything different. Why the over excitement? Why the noise? Why can't children be able to enjoy without this excessive stimulation?

An audiologist told me that if we must shout to be heard, the noise is likely to be causing hearing loss. It is known that hearing loss is occurring more frequently and at a younger age. Yet if I as a grandparent were to complain, I'd probably get a polite response followed by a whispered aside, 'I don't know what she's on about. Everybody else likes it. Nobody else has complained. She's a bit behind the times.'

It is already happening that, with current exposure to multiple sources of excessive sound, including listening to iPods at high volume, more and more people are emerging with hearing problems at an earlier age. I don't want my granddaughter to be subjected to this. Will it be like smoking? Until major health problems occurred little was done to deter smoking. Do we wait for major hearing problems before we act?

With Excitement Plus and Noise Plus comes Attention Minus. Entertainment comes in short bursts. Like cartoons or advertising, it has to grab attention, or children will lose interest. The notion of concentrating for a sustained period is disintegrating.

The grandmotherly part of me remembers that Excitement Plus, Noise Plus and Attention Minus used to be only occasional companions when I was young. My friends and I could spend hours, gloriously unentertained, skipping, catching tadpoles, playing make-believe games, or simply playing with friends. Adults left us to play. They didn't think we had to be entertained. We made up our own games. We liked it that way. The noise then was the sound of children's voices and the natural sounds of the environment. We benefited from being able to explore and feel the textures of grass, mud, and bark, and smell hay or wattle, or taste blackberries. We invented, created, and experimented. We socialised as we used mud, blocks, cardboard boxes - anything - to create imaginative games that could be refreshingly different every time we played.

We listened for sustained periods to the radio using our imagination to provide our own mental images. We didn't have the Big Productions, the theme parks, the mega malls. We didn't have months of commercial hype before special occasions like Christmas and Easter. We didn't have the glitz of the huge shopping centres with their glut of visual and aural stimuli competing for our attention.

This is where we grandparents raising grandchildren may have an edge over today's generation of parents who are used to all of these 'advancements'. Growing up in different times we experienced much more outdoor play. Our eyes focused on things near and far in the natural environment, not on little boxes of electronic wizardry. In Japan the eagerness of the population to embrace technology has produced a noticeable rise in short-sightedness. Australians are following this trend.

Recently two boys stayed with us for a fortnight in the holidays. Each day we did something interesting and different, at least I thought they were interesting and different, dolphin watching, putt putt golf, a beach walk, ice skating, tenpin bowling and a bush walk where we found good modelling clay. Despite this, every day the boys wanted to hire videos. The older boy pleaded with me to hire a Playstation. He came from a household with one adult and three children, six television sets and three Playstations. Each boy had a TV set and a Playstation in his bedroom. (They told me that when they misbehaved they were sent to their rooms!)

I'm not advocating a ban on all technology and a return to the dark ages, but moderation and balance should feature in our children's lives. Grandparents may be older, less physical and not so 'with it' but we know what encourages kids to be kids, in calm, satisfying ways, using their creativity and ingenuity. Oh, and if there's a blackout, we will be able to fill in our time productively without withdrawals until the power comes back on!



Teenager after a pop concert, 'I was a bit deaf the next day and I was worried I'd stay like it.'

PLAY

Sophie's dolls' house

Sophie's dolls' house symbolised for me the value of play. She bought it with money she had been given for Christmas. We added some wonderful wooden furniture which included beds, cupboards, a toilet, wash basin, oven and a TV set. Nanna couldn't resist buying a delightful wooden family of grandparents, parents and children to live there. It was a durable but attractive set-up, utterly different from a look-at-me-but-don't-touch ornamental dolls' house.

Sophie and her friend assembled the house, with a little help from Grandad, and then they organised the furniture, made more out of cardboard, cut out cloth furnishings and glued paddlepop stick ladders. When she wanted more rooms she made another storey from boxes.

She already had an interactive TV game in which she could create houses and virtual characters, but her hands-on dolls' house added the dimension of being able to hold and feel real objects. She could dress the characters in clothes she had made, and she could transport herself physically into the imagined world she had invented. Her game had many more variations and was far less predictable than her TV game. She could drive her toy Kombi van to and from the house with whatever characters she wanted to use, and she could visit a community playground she made with Lego.

With her wooden family she could explore relationships, she could decide who looked after whom, and who went out together. Her three generation family could live harmoniously together and have fun. She could fantasise about her ideal family. They would do what she wanted them to do, she could be the boss, in control, or she could be the baby that everyone loved.

Many of her friends enjoyed playing with her dolls' house which could accommodate any sort of family. One friend shared half her time living with her dad, stepmother and new baby, and the other half living with her mother. Another friend's dad shared some of his time with his son from a previous marriage. Another friend who'd been raised by a lone mother was adjusting to living with a stepfather. I was glad they were all free to talk to each other about how they lived, and I know it gave Sophie comfort to realise that not everyone came from a conventional family.

A number of grandparents in GAPS have remarked that their grandchildren have loved playing younger games, games they missed in their earlier years.

I loved Sophie's dolls' house. It was creative, restorative, satisfying and liberating. I didn't care if she played with it for years to come.

In her later primary school years, Sophie discovered the joy of playing soccer, a

team game where she has to cooperate, consider other players and follow rules. It is a lot of fun and fitness. All good. I love watching her play. However, it is structured play organised by adults, controlled by adults and with rules set by adults.

Unstructured play, like her dolls' house or building a cubby, has different qualities. It allows children to release their emotions and use their imagination. Free from adult expectations they can take risks and make mistakes. They can make their own rules and resolve their own conflicts. They can make discoveries, be themselves and socialise. Play is essential for all children, but for those who come from unsatisfactory backgrounds, it has even more value.

Play isn't just for little kids

Sophie showed me that unstructured play isn't just for little kids. When she started high school she bought a video camera with money she'd saved and a generous contribution from her Dad. It opened up a wonderful new world of possibilities. Days were spent making funny faces, devising dance routines and making up songs. A glorious time was had by all when she and her friends dressed up in wigs and old clothes and spent the day planning scripts, acting, adding sound effects and having incredible, split-your-sides fun. Afterwards came the editing, captions, background music and presentation, and - Dah! Dah! - the acclamation of the audience.

The camera work developed her observational skills. She captured a wattle bird visiting our grevillea and a spider web jewelled in raindrops. And the thrill of the scoop, 'Nan! I got the pelican just as it swallowed the fish!'

It was a very creative, infinitely variable, imaginative and satisfying way for her to use her time. And highly educational, though I didn't tell her that!

FAMILY

Brother and sister

For a fortnight I watched Sophie and her brother Mark enjoying each other's company. Mark had flown more than a thousand kilometres to visit us. They got on very well together, as they'd always done before the family was split up. I compared their relationship with that of my brother and me. We also got on extremely well and have continued to do so throughout our lives. The difference, though, was that we were never separated, and as adults, we have always lived close enough, so that should one of us be in need, the other would be there in an instant. That will never happen with Sophie and Mark.

How precious was the time the two of them had together. There were funny voices and laughter when I tucked them into bed, two very happy kids. I imagined them talking softly together, and as the days went by, perhaps they talked about their family, their parents and their lives.

Most days were spent at the beach where the extra boogie board Grandad bought for Mark to use was never dry. In the car they shared, 'Remember when we used to ...' There was an ongoing game of Monopoly in the lounge room. Grandad made adjustments to a battery-operated car and checked the two bikes for them to use.

Best for Sophie was that she had a brother in her home to play with. She hadn't had that since she came to live with us. They played hide and seek, practised soccer skills, played board games and computer games. Any differences were easily patched up. They did kid stuff, burped, asked riddles, played rough and tumble and shared modern things Grandad and I knew nothing about, like pop singers, teen movies and 'in' words.

While Mark was here Grandad and I celebrated our 50th Wedding anniversary with our family.

Not many couples are raising a 12 year old when they celebrate their golden wedding anniversary!
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At the end of the two weeks it was time to say goodbye. It would probably a year or more before Mark and Sophie would see each other again.

There are many brothers and sisters who cannot live together.

A life restored

I am a very lucky mother. Where my son Sam has earned back the trust he lost during his wayward years and now leads a very decent life, other sons and daughters have died, suffered irreparable damage to their health, or they continue to have volatile, worrying or strained relationships.

Sam's gift

Years ago I had not the remotest idea that I would ever raise Sam's daughter. When she came to live with us I talked with her about her family in simple terms to suit her age but one night when she was older she was thinking about her parents and her brothers, all far away. I asked her did she understand why she wasn't living with her Mum and Dad. She had more questions so I described in greater detail what had happened and why. We talked about how mental illness and too much alcohol affects the way people think and behave and stops them caring properly for their children.

We have always talked together about our experiences and feelings, the good times and the bad. I think that's one reason we are great mates.

Sophie is now fourteen. In her high school reports I read words like 'capable,' 'enthusiastic', 'positive about her learning', 'courteous' and 'conscientious'.

She knows Grandad and I love her very much and I know she appreciates what we do for her.

I'm glad she took us out of our comfort zones and I'm glad she disturbed our peace. I wouldn't have it any other way. She has enriched our lives and I can't imagine life without her. I feel just as much a mother to her as I did with my three children.

What more could a Nanna want?

MY LOVELY NANNA

I have a lovely nanna who tucks me in bed each night and blows me a kiss wich makes me sleep very well. She reads me stories that sound like an angel has red it. She tucks me in so I am snug as a bug in a rug. I love it when she tucks me in at night.

GOING SHOPPING

when I go shopping with my Nanna I get tired of walking and I get thirsty. So I ask her if I could have something to drink and have a rest. So she ses ok and I go and have a drink. How nice is that.

Then when we have finish having a drink we go shopping and when we go and look at things I see something that I like have a look at it and sometimes Nanna likes it aswell so she ses would you like it and I say yes and we buy it how nice is that.

AT NIGHT

At night we watch TV and we snuggle up with each other and we keep each other warm. Then the dog comes and snuggles up as well. My Nanna is great to snuggle up because she is very warm. How nice.

NANNAS ARE GREAT!

Now there all the good things about my Nanna. I will always look up to her even in heaven. How great is Nanna.

PART 2

CHALLENGES

STRESSFUL TIMES BEFORE TAKING ON CARE

Many grandparents endure years of stress before they take on the task of raising their grandchildren. It can be caused by their own child's mental illness, marital problems, addiction or lack of maturity, or it might be due to a terminal illness. All of that sets grandparents apart from first time parents.

85% of grandparents are raising grandchildren because of addiction to alcohol or drugs. They struggle with the profoundly disturbing experiences caused by the addicted person, the child they raised so lovingly. They can do little to help as they watch their child's life going downhill, destroying relationships and health along the way.

Mental illness takes a heavy toll on the sufferer and those around them:

- One grandmother's daughter nearly died while giving birth and she has suffered depression ever since. Not only has the grandmother had permanent care of one grandchild and frequent care of two others, she is also on call for her daughter whose health and lifestyle are very fragile.
- Mental illness of various forms is hereditary in another grandmother's family. Her daughter suffers from two mental illnesses and lives in an abusive, volatile relationship. It took years for the grandmother to get her granddaughter into her care and give her a safe, stable upbringing.
- When another set of grandparents visit their daughter who has a mental illness she is welcoming and pleasant one day and abusive and critical the next.
- It was a terrible shock for another grandparent couple when their daughter's mental illness showed up at a very young age. It has led to enormous stress for them. (See Marilyn's Story Part 2)

The stress continues when the grandparents start raising their grandchildren because of having to cope with the unpredictable, turbulent relationship with their own child at the same time. They love their own child and they grieve for the adult their child may have become.

When addiction is involved grandparents ask how could they have done things differently? What did they do wrong? Question after question until they realise that they did the best that they could with the knowledge that they had at the time. Somewhere along the way the self questioning has to stop. The children become adults who are responsible for their own decisions and they are the ones who must bear the consequences.

The innocent victims are the grandchildren. Their scars are long-lasting and difficult to overcome.

Kinship Care Worker:

Grandparents report that their son or daughter may have started on one addiction, alcohol, and then got on to hard drugs. They notice the difference in the level of mental health of their children according to what they're on. The longer into addiction, the worse mental health issues arise, including psychosis. I've spoken with health people who say that the horrible, chemically produced drugs are using dangerous compounds which are causing mental health problems. The health effects and costs on society that these drugs are having are huge. It's long term and it's going to be generational if we don't do something in prevention. We've already got a 45% increase in children coming into grandparent care. It will only get worse.

Isabel tells how out of control her daughter's life became once drug taking started:

"You never heard of drugs, only in an American movie, but not the girl down the street. You just didn't hear about them. Even marihuana, you knew the young kids were smoking it, but it wasn't like hard drugs. Now I realise marihuana is just as bad as the hard drugs. The only drugs we knew were Bex powders or Vincents APC.

When you find kids sticking needles in themselves you think, 'How could they do that?' especially into their veins.

I worked in an office not far from where I lived so it wasn't as if I was away all the time. I'd come home and find my daughter, just a young teenager, missing and I'd have to go looking around the neighbourhood, her friends' places. They all covered for her. Sometimes she didn't come home of a night.

This went on for years. I thought she'd come good. I was very naive.

I'd say, 'You're not on drugs, are you?'

'No, I don't touch them any more.'

And I wanted to believe it.

When she was sixteen she met another boy (it was always different boyfriends) and she went to live at his house with his parents. His mother said, 'Oh, I'd rather they were here so I can keep an eye on them than out somewhere else.'

I couldn't make my daughter come home anyway.

That boy ended up dead. He moved up the coast about seven years ago and he was found dead in a motel from an overdose.

When I found out there was a vacancy at a rehabilitation centre I took my daughter there straight away. She was happy to go. The next day she'd gone. Her boyfriend had gone up and they'd taken off. I didn't know where she was.

She'd come in and out all the time. By the time she was twenty she was living in Queensland and she was on drugs really bad. She was running amok but there was nothing I could do. I flew up to see her but although she knew I was coming she didn't turn up for two days. Her flat was a mess, dirty underwear everywhere. I had to clean it up because I had to sleep there that night.

I flew up another time when she took an overdose and the doctor said, 'Leave her. There's nothing you can do about it. There's no way she's going to pull herself together, she's been on it too long.' They pumped out her stomach. When she came to the airport to see me off she was out of her brain, running around like a little fairy, pulling all the magazines out of the racks.'"(Isabel)

Feeling safe

Many grandchildren have experienced disturbed and frightening nights and irregular bedtimes because of their parents' behaviour, strangers in the house, noise and violence. When they come to live with their grandparents their fears come with them.

"To me it's all about the boys. What's best for them. Damon woke up in the middle of the night, 'Where are you? Where are you?' He was freaking out. Does his mother leave him at night? Does she go off as a prostitute? Is she phased out on drugs?

He called out when my sister was minding him, 'Hey! Hey! Are you there?'

'Yes,' she assured him.

That grieves me."(Rachel)

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"My car had broken down and I was stranded with my two grandsons aged three and six. We had to wait in the dark and cold till my daughter could come and get us. The boys are really scared of the dark but they seemed fine when we got home and they had tea and a shower.

Ben came in to me at midnight.

'I'm scared, Nanna, I'm scared.'

I assured him everything in the house was locked and nobody could get in but it didn't help. It was being out at night. They just don't settle.

That's one reason I hardly ever go out at night. I know they won't settle till I get home."(Cecily)

My husband Pete was wonderful when Annette was off her face. He could keep a cool head and calm her down. I got too emotional. After it was over I used to marvel how he could switch off and go to sleep while I'd be on red alert churning everything round and round in my head. I felt like shaking him and saying, 'Hey! Wake up! Share this with me! You should be upset like I am!' (Shirley)

She amazes me because she never gets sick. She's very thin, she looks quite haggard. I don't think she eats much at all. (Evelyn)

She stole our money and she hocked our belongings so she could buy her drugs. We often didn't find out till we went to get something and it wasn't there. It's terrible when it's someone in your family and you can't trust them! (Shirley)

DRUNKENNESS AND DRUGS

I used to hate the stages of drunkenness. Wayne would be all over me, 'I love you Mum. You've been so good to me.' And I'd think, 'I wish you'd say that to me when you're sober.' Or he'd be angry, blaming John and me for the way he had turned out, 'If you and Dad hadn't... I wouldn't be...' He'd make us listen to a long sermon about our shortcomings. Or he'd be wallowing in self pity, 'I've never had the chance...' Or he'd be in tears, 'I'm sorry I've put you through all this...' (Kay)

One night the police rang to say they had locked him up and did I want to come and get him. I was fed up with him. No, he could wait till morning and get himself home! Next day when he arrived home, 'Why didn't you come and get me? Fancy leaving me in a cell all night! Breakfast was foul!' (Kay)

We'd go to pour out a drink for visitors and there'd be none left in the bottle. I warned him that if he ever got out of hand I'd call the police, so when he knocked a hole in his bedroom door with his fist, I rang. They came straight away. I was very impressed with how they dealt with him. He was very agitated. He looked like he was going to hit them but the two policemen kept speaking quietly to him until they got him to walk away with them without anything else happening. (Clare)

It is this insecurity that makes it hard for grandparents to have much time for themselves.

They can only ask someone to mind their grandchildren if that person is very well-known to them. Most grandparents save asking their own children for times of emergency because their children are usually fully occupied with their young families, going to work and school and to out of hours activities.

If it is hard to find one person to mind one grandchild, how much harder it is for grandparents raising two, three, four or more grandchildren! And how much harder still if the grandchildren have emotional or behavioural problems as so many of them do! The grandparents who need the help most get it least. In general most grandparents raising grandchildren don't go out much at all without the grandchildren, except in school hours. They don't visit places far afield and they give up interests they used to pursue. By the time they've looked after their grandchildren all day they're too tired to go out anyway!

“Some people breezily invite me to something, even involving a day or two away from home, as though it's no trouble to get my grandchild minded while I'm away.”(Virginia)

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“I'm a widow and my four brothers have died. So there's only my other son and my sister. There's no back-up at our age. I could call on a good neighbour next door, she's retired, but she's out all the time. She's got a lovely life.” (Maria)

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“I would love more of my friends to offer to mind my grandson. Then I would know they really didn't mind doing it.”(Dawn)

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“My husband and I always said we're having our children when we are young so that when they're off our hands we can go out and enjoy ourselves. So many times when we had the two grandchildren we got asked , ‘Do you want to come to...?’

‘No, we haven't got a baby sitter.’

‘Oh, come and we will go away to...’

“No, we can't. We can't have time off school, it has to be in school holidays.’

Little things like that make it hard but after twelve years we're used to it.”(Delia)

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“One of my relatives used to mind my grandson sometimes and when she gave him back she said, ‘Oh, he's got behaviour problems.’

‘Wouldn't you have behaviour problems if you'd gone through what this boy's gone through!’

All he wanted was love and support. A lot of love, a lot of support and a lot of help.”(Anna)

“We stopped visiting some of our friends because they didn’t really welcome children.” (Virginia)

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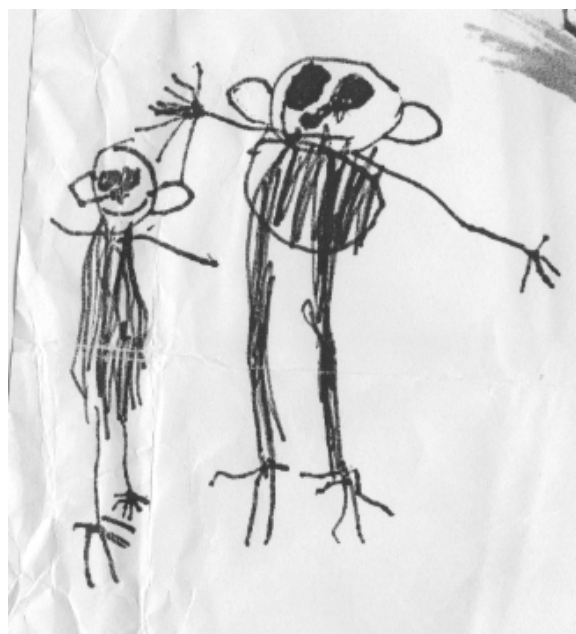
“Every holidays we go to the same caravan park where our caravan and annexe is on site. We’ve made a lot of friends there. Many of them are my age. The people at the caravan park do have grandchildren but they give their grandchildren back after a day. They know I have a commitment but they don’t understand what that commitment means. Their lifestyle is different to mine. They’ll go out for tea. Their everyday talk is so different to the young mums I mix with at the school canteen. Often they talk about their illnesses. Sometimes I think ‘You old fogeys, get a bit of life into you. I’d probably be like that if I didn’t have Carolyn. When you’re raising your grandchild you haven’t got time for that.’”(Elaine)

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Kinship care worker:

Yes, these grandparents do need babysitters because some of them never manage to go out, or go to dinner in the evening, or have time with their spouse, or have time with other members of their family. They’re not getting respite from anywhere, services are not recognising any of this.

But it’s not like babysitting other children. When children come into care they don’t want to go anywhere else and meet another person. They want the security of staying with Nan and Pop or their carer. It is very important that they get to know and feel comfortable with the babysitter first.



GRANDPARENTING

With or without warning

A sudden fatal accident and grandparents become 'parents' overnight. Or, years of watching their own child deteriorate because of a tragic illness or mental health problem or addiction, until the time comes when grandparents have to take over.

Often when the time comes to care for the grandchildren there is little choice

"There was an argument between the mother and her ex-boyfriend, a very loud argument, drugs, alcohol, plus there were about four or five other people there too.

I could hear Tom the baby inside absolutely screaming and screaming. I was yelling, 'Get the baby! Go and get the baby! Bring him out to me!'

Finally I got the mother's attention. She brought the baby out and we took him home straight away. We kept him that night and the next day.

I got in touch with the mother and asked, 'What's happening?'

'I don't want the kids. I can't have them. He (the boyfriend) doesn't want them and I want him. That's it.'

'Think about it.'

'No. If you don't want them they'll have to go to DoCS. They'll have to be fostered out. DoCS are good people, aren't they?'

I thought she'd get over it but it just got worse until eventually she ended up taking off because people were after her for drug money. She left a three bedroom house, a housing commission place which I'd fought to get for her. I didn't know until I went over there the next day and the neighbours said, 'She's taken off to Queensland.'

I found a contact number. We waited to give her time to think about it, to see if she would come good again but, no.

We said, 'We'll get custody of the children now because she could come back in six months time and want them back after we've got them all settled and she or the boyfriend will want the kids' money.'" (Delia)

There are many lone grandparents

They are raising their grandchildren without the support of a partner. Like any lone parents they do all the driving, minding, worrying, and whatever it takes, but unlike lone parents they are a generation older. As grandparents they do this when they are tired, unwell or less mobile.

"I was working but I had to give it up because of my grandson Brett's emotional problems. If he was awake, I was awake and I couldn't get up and function properly the next day. I'd been a single parent and I'd worked full time when I was raising his mum and I thought, 'This little boy really needs me around.' I didn't want to go on the pension, because your pride

gets in the way, but I thought, 'No, I have worked since I was fifteen till now. I'm 55, I've paid plenty of taxes over the years,' and I thought, 'No, I'll stay at home for Brett.'

I can't get over how much Brett has come along. This little boy has come on in leaps and bounds. I think all grandparents put their heart and their soul into it. Somebody said to me, 'You do too much for Brett.'

'No, you can never do too much for a child. If you can't help them when they're little, you can't help them when they're big. You've got to help them with their learning, whatever it is while they are young. You've got to put all your energy and time in, otherwise it's too late when he becomes a teenager.'(Anna)

There is no choice

Grandparents assume the role of parent again because their grandchildren need them and there is no one else to turn to. They don't contemplate foster care because that would take the grandchildren out of the family.

From then on grandparents do their best to provide a safe, loving and happy home.

But it comes at a cost.

- Grandparenting changes the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. The grandparents lose their precious 'love them and leave them' role and become parents.

"Sometimes I forget I'm a grandparent because I'm always being the parent. Recently my granddaughter was being a bit hard to get on with so I decided we'd do something special together and I'd spoil her like grandmas do. We went up to the shops together and I said it was her special time with grandma. We only looked at whatever interested her and we finished up with a donut and a milkshake. It made a big difference."(Clare)

- It restricts grandparents' ability to lead the life they had become accustomed to for so many years.

"Terry had always planned to go travelling when he retired. Once our grandchildren arrived we couldn't do that any more, we could only go in school holidays. That restricted the time we could be away, how far we could go and it cost more. Even day trips were limited because we had to be home when school finished."(Dawn)

- Holidays are not the same.

"What kind of holiday can you have when you've got four lively boys?"(Alison)

- It is time consuming, tiring and stressful.

THE GRANDPARENTS

Grandparenting puts a big strain on a couple's relationship.

- Both partners are having to do things they never planned on doing in their retirement.
- Some have to give up work to cope with their grandchildren.
- Finances can be suddenly stretched, particularly when couples are living on a fixed income or are still paying off their house.

One partner, usually the grandmother, may be much more prepared to become a parent again than the other. This is not a criticism. Everyone is different.

Grandmothers say little about how hard it is for their partners to be parenting for a second time because they want to remain loyal to their partner.

Privately grandmothers have expressed the following views:

- *Yes, I was spending much more time on my grandchildren than on my husband but they needed so much.*

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- *He doesn't have a great deal of patience but he can see that and he walks away to 'regroup' when things get too heavy. He feels pressured when he's helping the children with maths for instance. He thinks they should understand it easily when he explains it, and if they don't he becomes agitated. They feel this and it pushes them away.*

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- *A little girl talking about her girly relationships is not exactly spell-binding to a male. It's different if you are a grandfather who can 'love them and leave them', but every day of the week?*

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- *I have to understand that everyone has different tolerance levels.*

*

- *Ron tries his best but he resents sharing the time the two of us had together with a third person. It's like our grandson has come between us. Ron can't help showing this sometimes and I know my grandson notices and feels hurt.*

*

- *As my partner ages he is less patient, and less aware of the feelings of others. He doesn't realise how this affects our grandchild.*

*

- *If grandmothers are busy they still have time for the kids. If grandfathers are busy, stay away.*

*

- *Bob and I have different ideas about raising children. He wants to do what his father did, 'Do as you're told,' and that's that, but he never had a close relationship with his father, or his kids for that matter. I don't want that to*

happen to my grandchildren. I want them to feel free to talk about whatever is on their mind and they'll only do that if I meet them half way. Bob thinks I'm spoiling them but I'm not going to chip the kids for holding their fork the wrong way when they are in the middle of telling me something I think is more important, like how they are getting on at school.

*

- *When I went to the GAPS family camp I was surprised at the number of grandparents I met whose marriages had broken up - even after years of married life. It just became too much for some of the men. They couldn't cope with their grandchildren being there day after day and their wives' having to give so much attention to the kids all the time. When they left, their wives had to manage everything on their own. It was worse still if there was a lot of ill-feeling between the two. Then it ended up that the grandmother had to find other accommodation and sometimes she was left without any money. Mind you, some of the grandchildren behaved terribly, especially in the beginning. It's not surprising that some people can't handle that. Grandparents don't get any training or help to manage these kids and there is no respite.*

But don't underestimate grandfathers

- *Like the old story - two heads are better than one. Between the two of us we are making progress. I find family talks are very beneficial to all of us. Communication is vital to all our well-being. It brings happiness and peace of mind to unload or to be built up and stabilised, it's such a great comfort.*

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- *I'd hate to be without my partner. I feel sorry for grandmothers who have to raise their grandchildren on their own. They don't get any help.*

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- *My husband supports everything I do. We used to travel whenever we wanted to before and I know he misses that. He never complains about it.*

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- *My husband adds a balance to what I do. He does a lot to help in his own quiet way. I couldn't do without him.*



Kinship Care Worker: *The grandfathers and the husbands of kinship carers should not be forgotten. They're all affected by having grandchildren in their care. I admire the aboriginal community where they have groups for men and for women and the men talk men's business and the women talk women's business. At the respite camp the grandfathers actually got together and they were able to benefit by offloading their concerns. Meeting others like themselves helped. Generally they don't talk so much about their own issues or about the loss of their retirement and what it has meant. Most don't ask for help of any kind, or seek counselling.*

Only a few brave men come regularly to Support Group meetings. In general it is the women who go to Support Groups and do most of the raising of the grandchildren. The grandfathers are good with support, transport and sport. It's a generational thing. The father's role was being the breadwinner while the mother raised the children. The grandfathers have remained in those roles. I know of a couple who went to a relationship course together to talk about these issues, but they're in the minority.

Because they've taken a child on a second time they've made enormous sacrifices and they've not been able to do in their retirement the things that men have looked forward to all their working lives. What a loss that is. I've got so much admiration for the way they support their partners in what they're doing but they are definitely an isolated group

Some grandparents are caring for their own parent at the same time, or a partner who is in poor health.

"I do everything with the boys. I don't put any loads on my husband John. He's had one thing after another. He's been in and out of hospital, he's had a back operation, and he has had difficulty walking. In a few months time he has to have an operation on his leg. He has brain damage and short term memory loss. He can't do a lot of things but he helps me with mum. She thinks of him as a son. She'll help me with John."(Roslyn)

THE GRANDCHILDREN

No matter what their parents are like, they are still the grandchildren's parents. The grandchildren want to believe the best of them. For years they harbour the hope that they will one day have a normal life, that one day they will be able to live with their parents. It is rare for their wish to come true.

- *“Kids say, “Oh it’s awful. My parents were away and I missed them,” and I think, ‘That was only for two days, what have you got to worry about? I don’t ever see my parents.’”(granddaughter Madeline)*

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- *‘I haven’t seen my mum for a year.’ ‘How do you feel when your friends have their mothers?’ ‘Sometimes I feel jealous.’(granddaughter Jacinta)*

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- *“We don’t have the luxury of spoiling our grandchildren. You see grandparents everywhere out with their grandchildren. Because I am raising a grandchild day by day I think that’s where Carolyn misses out. She doesn’t get that treat from grandparents who take a grandchild out for the day, she can’t have that special sleepover with her grandparents. Some of her friends do that, they go for tea one night a week with their grandparents. Generally grandparents participate in less active pursuits and they enjoy peace and quiet more, especially if they are raising grandchildren.”(Elaine)*

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- *“My unit is in a group for the over 55’s. It’s not the best place for Susan. She used to get on really well with Audrey and Allan, they thought the world of each other, but they both died. That must go through her mind. They’re older. Grandma’s older. I think kids have more fun in younger families.”(Maria)*

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- *“My granddaughter had a sleepover at her friend’s place and the next day she had a swim in their pool and a barbecue with the family. It was because she’d had such a fun time that she came home very out of sorts and sad. She was thinking how lovely it was to be surrounded by a very happy family - mum, dad and kids - a young mum and dad - who all cared for each other. Then she came back home to us - quieter, much older (grand)parents. There are just the three of us. We can’t have many family gatherings because our relatives lived too far away.”(Clare)*

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- *“Everyone’s got their mum and dad. Their mum and dad are ‘normal’ - all that. It makes it hard. I used to get on with Mum but now, the last few years when she’d come and stay here, we used to fight because I was continually yelling at her. It was like talking to a brick wall. She’d blame everybody else. When my friends ask why do I live with Nan and Da there’s not really much I can say. Don’t want to live with Mum. Don’t get on with Mum. Something like that. It’s the easiest thing instead of going into it all.”(granddaughter Leanne)*

WHEN THE CHILDREN ARRIVE

Kinship Care Worker: *Grandparents are not parents having difficulty, they are grandparents having to re-parent, start all over again, but with a lot more issues like age, health, finances, and emotional challenges to deal with.*

“Tom was a very, very crying baby. I couldn’t settle him, I took him to the doctors and specialists and tests were done. I never realised till later on that he was probably going through withdrawals. I could not settle him day or night. I’d put him down, get him to sleep, I’d just get the water in the sink to wash up and he’d be awake again, crying.

‘Oh, no.’

It took about five months before he settled. Then he flourished.”(Delia)

These are tough days. The grandparents, with huge disruption to their lifestyle, have to provide food, clothing and accommodation, catch up on the routines of homework, appointments and sport, and deal with a myriad of other parental tasks that clamour for attention.

The grandchildren, wrenched from their accustomed lifestyle, have to adjust to a new discipline, moving house, maybe losing friends and changing schools. They have to struggle with the grief of losing, or being separated from, the most loved people in their lives. It is no surprise that emotions are ragged and behaviour suffers. The younger they are the less they understand what has happened.

“A two-year-old grandson came into his grandmother’s care because his mother had died in an accident. Night after night he couldn’t get to sleep, he kept crying for his mother.

‘How can you explain to a two-year-old that he will never see his mother again?’

His grandparents were struggling with their own grief, their inability to soothe their grandson, lack of sleep, and, in the daytime, caring for a very active little boy.”(Vi)

Coming into care may be some grandchildren’s first experience of bathing regularly, sleeping in clean beds, wearing fresh clothes and eating regular, healthy meals. And being nurtured!

“I just wanted to pick him up. He had a nappy on and a dirty white singlet, his hair was long and unkempt and he just looked the saddest, saddest little boy. Brett was one when his mother died from an overdose.

Later when I became his official carer, I flew up to bring him home. The father was drugged to the eyeballs. His girlfriend twice tried to attack me, calling me names and using all sorts of language. Two guys had to pull her

off me. Then she threw the dirty pram at me, and the toys. The baby was handed to me in a dirty nappy, no shoes, dirty track suit pants - that was it! Finally they left.

I washed his clothes in a bucket and got them clean and the motel owner put them in the dryer for me. Luckily I had taken nappies. I wasn't game to go shopping in case the father was there.

I got pulled out of the line at the airport because Brett had no shoes on. It was a safety issue. I explained what had happened.

'As long as you carry him on and off the plane that will be fine.'

My sister had to go shopping for a dressing gown, pyjamas and slippers, and the next day I had to take him to buy shoes."(Anna)

It is new for many grandchildren to sit around the dinner table and be encouraged to talk about their day. Some eat as though it is their last meal, or hide food in their bedrooms. It takes a long time to learn to live without fear, criticism or anger and to get used to living with routine, rules and responsibility.

"The first six weeks were really hard. Brett was two years old when he came to live with me. He'd been taken out of the environment he'd been used to, and living with me was a complete change. He'd say, 'Do you love me?' It went on constantly.

He hated getting dressed and undressed, he'd be kicking me and thrashing his arms around until my shoulders and my neck were hurting. I remember picking him up, putting him in the cot and saying, 'No, you have your tantrum, mate, and Nanny'll dress you when you stop.' I was always firm and consistent and gradually he settled down and dressing was not a bother any more.

He was used to having junk food. He would have a tantrum in the morning because he wanted biscuits for breakfast, so I got rid of the biscuits. No biscuits, no tantrum. He drank a lot and I was wondering if he had diabetes. All he ate was sausage rolls, cakes, biscuits and baked beans - his staple diet. I watched him as I gave him a small piece of sausage roll and he'd try to push it and try to squash it in his mouth and he'd drink. Then I'd give him small amounts.

'Come on.'

This is when I discovered he couldn't chew.

His weight was so far under what was normal for his age that it took three years to bring it up to the level where it should have been. Very early on I

took him to a paediatrician who diagnosed him with ADD and put him on medication.

I arranged for him to see a speech therapist because he wasn't talking. She confirmed that he couldn't chew. She explained that the muscles for chewing and talking were the same ones and that was why, at two years of age, he couldn't talk.

I used to sit there. 'No Brett, go up and down, up and down.'
He's better now but sometimes I say, 'Not so much food in your mouth mate. Remember, chew it.'

I was constantly helping him to learn to talk. We'd be walking down the street and I'd see a brick fence. I'd say, 'Somebody's building a brick fence. What's this? Look at my mouth, 'a letter box'.'
I'd see a postie coming. 'Who's this coming? Where's he going to put his mail?' and I'd connect the dots for him. 'He's going to put that letter in the letter box.'

We'd sit for hours watching people build a house. He was fascinated. He loved the big truck with the cement and I'd talk to him and tell him all these things, what it was and all this. Now I sometimes wish I'd never taught him to talk, he chatters on like mad! We used to do a lot of counting too."(Anna)

Stretched to the limit

"Nathan's behaviour was right off the wall. He was seven and he'd had those really awful years with his mum and stepfather. He was stealing, he couldn't get on with other children, he was disobedient, he was really at the high end of an emotionally disturbed child.

His father was into six months of marriage with his wife Lee. Nathan told me when he got older that he thought that if he was really badly behaved that would get rid of Lee and he could have his Dad all to himself. To try to save his marriage I had Nathan over with me.

I was the main breadwinner because my husband has very been sick since he was 33, I had a house to pay off, and I'd moved around the corner from my mother to look after her. She was in her late 70s. I was the supervisor at the child care centre. It was a big job, I had programs, phone calls and bookwork to do at night. And so I was juggling work, Nathan, Mum and John."(Roslyn)

Grandparents may not only have the stress of managing difficult behaviour or meeting the needs of three new arrivals with very pressing needs, they may be simultaneously having to cope with their addicted child, parent of their grandchildren.

“Just recently she tried to commit suicide, she’s done that twice. The police have been called numerous times to her house - violent arguments, things that go on.

People say, “That’s terrible. What if she does commit suicide?”

“There’s nothing I can do. Not a thing. We’ve tried to talk her out of it.”

We say to her, “Get out of it, you don’t need that stuff. Come up here and stay near us.”

She gets back with another fellow and she’s straight back on to drugs.”(Delia)

When grandson joined a soccer club he knew neither Grandad or I wanted to go up early to set up the goal posts or work on the canteen.

We were talking about it the next day and I said, ‘I really don’t want to serve in the canteen. Been there, done that.’

My grandson chirped up, ‘It’s all right Nan, you won’t have to. I told the coach you couldn’t do it because you were too old.’

There are some advantages in being a grandparent!

Grandmother and grandchild were about to go out.

Grandchild: Are you nearly ready?

Grandmother: Yes. I’ll be quicker still if you dry up the knives and forks.

Grandchild: No thanks.

Grandmother: Just a thought.

Grandchild: Just a dream.

When the grandchildren arrive

Practical support

- If it's urgent or you don't know where to turn: Ring DoCS helpline 132 111
- See list of support services in Appendix
- Carry out health checks eg., dental, optical, hearing and general health - even if everything appears to be all right.
- Have your grandchild's name put on your Medicare card and Pensioner Concession card.
- Find out your entitlements from Centrelink and DoCS. Take someone with you and record and date all meetings.
- You might not be used to asking anyone for help or contacting a charity group, but if it helps your grandchildren, it's worth it. If you can't afford clothes, basic furniture etc. speak to organisations like the Samaritans, Smith Family, Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul. They are there to help people like you.
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- And later, if you're thinking of travelling overseas, apply well in advance for your grandchild's passport. The process can take a long while.

Quite a few grandparents are caring for their elderly parents as well as raising the grandchildren.

“Mum's very deaf and she's nearly blind with macular degeneration and she's got arthritis but she's good for ninety. We built her a little home at the back of our house. In her own home she knows where everything is. She likes her two great grandsons coming and telling her things. My mum's a very intellectual lady. She was a head librarian, very clever, with a retentive memory. If they needed help with their homework she was the one to go to. She's very good at maths and English and history. She reads ten big print books a fortnight and she's got aids to help her read

It's good for my two grandsons to appreciate old people and to realise if you're old it doesn't mean you're dumb. The boys both respect deafness. They know to speak clearly, not loudly. They've been very good at making themselves understood and telling her little things from school.”(Roslyn)

When the grandchildren arrive

Emotional needs

- **Because of their emotional needs grandchildren need more of your time than the children you first raised Give constant assurances of your love.**
- Join or contact a Support Group GAPS. You will get incredible support, even if you think everything is fine.
- It takes patience. It takes a long time for children who have lived their lives in fear to learn to trust, to learn that you are there for them and will always help them.
- Give them fun in their lives. Everyone needs a good laugh.
- Read a million books together
- Encourage quiet activities where your grandchildren feel relaxed and peaceful with no demands on them. Play quiet or meditational music. Enjoy being in quiet places like the bush.
- From when they are young, and all the time they are growing up, encourage your grandchildren to talk to you and to express their feelings. This includes listening to them when you don't feel like it. You'll be glad you did when they are teenagers.
- Don't assume they understand why they are living with you and don't assume one explanation will last. As they grow they need to learn more about their lives and their relationships
- **No one is Superman. Be kind to yourself. Seek whatever will benefit your situation. That may include counselling, not just for your grandchildren, but for you.**

New arrivals put a strain on the household accommodation.

“When the grandchildren came we still had our eighteen-year-old daughter and she had a room, we had a four year old girl and a baby boy, and us. We sold that house and bought a four bedroom house which was a more costly for us but it would have been expensive to add on anyway.”(Delia)

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“Without warning I had four boys to care for. Their mother didn't want them any more. Suddenly I needed clothes, beds and furniture.’(Kay)

ACCESS

Problems with access

Access visits so that grandchildren are able to see their parents can be formal arrangements as part of a court order, or informal arrangements between the parents and grandparents. Either way, they can work anything from very well to simply awful.

There is no easy answer for access visits, particularly as each grandparent family's circumstances are unique. It is important for children, as they grow up, to know their parents, but that should be balanced with the degree of stress that access causes. If it is not working it should be reviewed, arranged differently or stopped altogether. The decision should be one that is in the best interests of the grandchildren. Their lives should be as happy, safe and free of stress as possible.

Access experiences

- Some grandchildren have parents who are not even slightly interested in their own children, never make any effort to be part of their lives and yet, out of the blue, they ring up years later and expect to be welcomed with open arms.
- Some grandchildren are subjected to physical or emotional abuse, sometimes even danger, whenever they see their parents.
- Others are very unsettled by the shabby, irresponsible, uncaring lifestyle their parents are leading.
- Some addicted parents who can't control their own life, intrude on their children's lives, trying to influence the way they behave and they make promises they will never keep.
- With a history of unsatisfactory relationships, some grandchildren simply don't like the parent they are meant to continue seeing.
- Some have the difficult experience of trying to understand and deal with a parent with a mental illness

Visiting lax or unpleasant parents is very unsettling. (Divorce situations can be similar.)

The grandchildren eat nothing but junk food, watch TV all day, go to bed whatever time they like and do nothing to help. While that might seem good to them it is offset by lack of nurture and unsatisfying interactions. When they return to their grandparents where there are rules and responsibilities they feel confused and angry and rebellious.

'If I was with my Dad or Mum they would let me do it!' (grandchild)

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"Whenever my grandson visits his mother she makes personal comments, derogatory ones, about his weight and his hair. He has become quite self-conscious. She doesn't seem to be aware she's hurting his feelings. It's all 'me'." (Gloria)

Disturbing phone calls

"I just get the children settled and their mother wants to speak to them on the phone. She stirs them up. Then they get angry and start fighting."(Cecily)

A teenage granddaughter Leanne and two of her brothers live in the care of their grandparents who have never made their care official. Joanne has been worried for years by the troublesome calls made by her Mum who is in alcohol addiction:

She rings Leanne's Nan:

"Last school holidays Mum rang up Nan, 'Can I have the boys for the week?'

Nan was trying to decide whether to let her but I said, 'Nan just do it. Save the arguments. They'll ring up when they're ready.'

Two days later, 'Come and get us. We don't want to be here.'

They were so happy to be back home. They just didn't want to be with her."

She rings Leanne:

"You can't switch off. Whenever my mobile rings past seven o'clock at night my stomach turns. I'm like, 'Oh my God.' Or if it rings early in the morning my stomach turns. When I'm with my friends I just think, 'Oh, no.' Sometimes the police pull up near you, or you hear sirens. 'Oh boy!' It's a scary thought thinking Mum mightn't be around for much longer because she drinks so much.

Since I barred her from ringing me I'm not stressing as much. If I talk to her on the phone she goes off her head and I stress for the rest of the day. Yes, I still wake up worrying, what's today going to bring and all that but it's much better."

And she makes more calls to Leanne's Nan:

"A few weeks ago Mum rang up Nan saying all this stuff about killing herself.

I said to Nan, 'She won't kill herself. She has said that heaps.'

It's an attention thing. We all told Nan that.

When Mum says to me, 'No one cares about me. I might as well die,' I say 'Whatever.'

No. Nan had to ring the police and they went over to Mum's to check.

Mum told them, 'No, it was just to hurt my Mum. She won't let me see my kids.'

So then they had to ring us, 'Is she allowed to see her kids?'

Nan says, 'Yes, she can come every second weekend, or every week but she's not keeping the children at her place.'

So the police said Mum just wanted to get to us."(granddaughter Leanne)

Kinship Care Worker:

Access is a very complex matter. Every carer probably has a different story to tell but in my experience, seeing what it does to the child and the carers, access is not working. I know the court and DoCS try to maintain the bonds between the children and their parents and I recognise it is important for children to understand what their parents are really like but the bonds are very difficult to keep with many parents. If they're drug or alcohol addicted they are often making unreasonable demands on the children and the carers.

For DoCS it is a damned if they do, and damned if they don't situation. I don't know how we solve this problem. Yes, bonds do need to be kept between the natural parent and the children but the pendulum needs to swing in favour of the children.

Often access orders force grandchildren out of routine and stability and into insecurity. In some cases the care plan and court orders require the children to be in one place one weekend and somewhere else two weekends later. One grandparent had to print out a calendar and colour it for each weekend, nearly down to the hours, where the child is, and who that child is with - the grandparents, the parent, the second parent, the other grandparents.

It's very unsettling. Children can't get into sport if they're forever going to different places for access. Their lives don't have regularity. We've just had a case where a fourteen year old boy has finally said, 'No, I'm not going to Dad's one weekend and Mum's the next weekend. I want to stay with Nan because that's where my school friends are and I can go to my sport.'

When parents in addiction have a child I sometimes wonder whether they should have the right to so much access. Children usually have to continue visits until they are old enough to say, 'I don't want to see my parent any more,' but DoCS insist on the rights of the parents. This sometimes results in the parents being granted access even in circumstances which are clearly not in the child's best interests.

Most carers, whether foster or kinship, report that when children visit their parents for any amount of time - an hour, a couple of hours, or overnight visits - on return, these children act out and their emotions are off the scale. It's the only way the children know to deal with this confusing and unwanted situation. They go through things like bed wetting and tantrums as well. There has to be some method of access which reduces the stress to the children and doesn't undermine their stability.

SCHOOL

“The oldest one had been in eight schools by the time she was ten.”(Virginia)

Many people in addiction change addresses often. Each time their children are uprooted and forced to go to a new school and make new friends. This not only impedes their educational progress, but their social and emotional well-being as well.

- *“My brother’s ex-partner Christine lived with her mother for a while until she stole from her. I think she works as a prostitute now so she can get her drugs. Their son Harry is just an inconvenience to his mother. She only wants him when it suits her. He wasn’t being looked after, he was dumped in front of television while she did what she liked. He has no stability, he gets thrown from pillar to post. His mother has moved all over the place so he has been to a number of schools and he has trouble settling down. His education has been affected because he’s had all the emotional upset as well. Since he has lived with my parents full time he has been at the one school for a year and a half, which is really cool.”(Rachel)*

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- *“When my granddaughter first went to my daughter’s she was frightened to go to a new school. It was about the sixth school she’d been to, in all different areas. She chose her school. She has settled in well this year, Year 11, and she has new friends. She’s doing really well at school. The difference is because she’s in a family where there’s no stress, there’s no, ‘Oh! Are mum and me going to be kicked out tonight? What’s going to happen?’ One time she needed a ruler and a pencil. ‘Oh, I’m not buying that, can’t afford it,’ from her mother’s boyfriend. ‘It’s a waste of money.’”(Delia)*

Grandchildren’s behaviour can be very challenging. They may lack awareness of the needs of other people, or be withdrawn, or attention-seeking, rebellious or defensive. The patience of grandparents and teachers is tested.

- *“Grandparents don’t condone outrageous behaviour but they understand why it is happening and where it is coming from.”(Clare)*

These grandchildren have trouble paying attention or getting on with their peers. Lack of concentration makes it difficult for them to learn, some lose interest and don’t even bother. Many are behind their peers. Once behind, it is very difficult to catch up.

- *“One’s 7, the twins are 9 and the oldest is 10. All four boys are dreadfully affected by their Dad’s death in a house fire. It’s worse because he was their lone carer. The reaction’s coming out at school. All of them at some time or another. I’ve had notes home. In one week I had the four of them in trouble. Their concentration doesn’t last. The oldest is quite bright, he reads everything, but he’s away with the birds. He was always a bit like that but since his father died he switches off completely. I’m talking to you. ‘Oh, what do you want? He’s getting into a lot trouble. He gets so angry at home and at school. They’re all the same. The twins play up and one had to write out two hundred times ‘I must not retaliate,’. If the youngest one doesn’t want to do something he just won’t do it.”(Dawn)*

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- *“It’s hard for my schoolfriends to understand. A lot of them hear me arguing with Mum but I don’t worry about it. I tell them, ‘It’s not that easy. I wish it was,’ or, ‘Forget it. She’s an idiot.’ ‘She is, but she’s your Mum.’ ‘You haven’t lived that kind of life.’ It was always you’re the different one at school as in you weren’t going home to a mum or dad, or it wasn’t your mum dropping you at school or picking you up, or cooking dinner, none of that. So you did sort of think, ‘I wish Mum was here,’ or something like that. You’d see your friends and they were heaps close to their mums and their mums would take them shopping, all that sort of stuff. You think, ‘Oh, Mum, OK, I wish I had that.”(granddaughter Leanne)*

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- *“My Year 6 teacher is the first teacher I’ve had who thinks I’m smart.” (granddaughter)*

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- *“I think GAPS grandparents are more likely to go up to the school and go into bat for their grandchildren. They know where they’ve come from so they want to help the teachers understand why their grandchildren are acting out. They usually say how good the teachers are. We’re all trying to help the kids.” (Julia)*

The Benevolent Society is to be congratulated for carrying out research into what intervention strategies they can implement into their early childhood

programs to help disadvantaged children get back on track. It could benefit thousands of children, particularly those being raised by grandparents.

“It was hard having to take Jenny to primary school and pick her up every morning and afternoon. I did that from kindergarten to year six because they told me to change as little as possible after her father died. He had been her lone carer. I went along with it but in hindsight I can see it was a mistake. She was with her friends but as time went on I think I should have changed her to a school in the area where she would have made local friends. Her friends came from all over the place. Her high school was another mistake. She was chosen to attend a specialist high school, she’s happy there but she’s got no friends in the area.” (Maria)

It is a wonder that students who are living in drug and alcohol or abused environments are able to do any schoolwork at home. Apart from having no resources and no encouragement, and inadequate sleep or food, there is a constant drain on their emotional and psychological states which blocks their ability to pay attention and to learn. Grandchildren don’t readily shed this burden when they come to live with grandparents, especially if their parents are still causing trouble. Sensitive teachers can be very important people in these grandchildren’s lives.

- *“It was always you’re the different one at school as in you weren’t going home to a younger mum or dad, or it wasn’t your mum dropping you at school or picking you up, or cooking dinner, none of that. So you did sort of think, ‘I wish Mum was here*

All the tension affected my schoolwork for a while. At school you stress, you can’t concentrate, you can’t think, especially if something’s happened at night and you go to bed and you wake up and you’ve got to go to school. It’s so fresh and it’s so there and you get into trouble a lot more from your teachers because you’re so stirred up.

I wasn’t really bad at school but I got kicked out a few times because it’s, ‘Do this, do that!’ They are so pushy. Just wait a minute. Just shut up. Stop. There’s so much more in my head than maths at the moment. So it’s do this and do this until I’d explode and get kicked out. And I’d go, ‘Oh, man. All because of my Mum and she’s not even here!

No one at school did anything to help but in Year 9 we got a new principal and I got on really well with him and he knew. I’d get sent to him and he’d say, ‘Hullo, Leanne’. That happens with my brother Ian now. He gets into a lot more trouble than I did when I went to school but he’s still living with Mum. I used to go to school every day and he doesn’t. I used to wear school

uniform and he doesn't, but when he's in trouble, he doesn't get into trouble with the principal because the principal knows what's happening. You don't want teachers knowing. You don't want them to feel sorry for you. You want to be like every other kid, so you try not to tell them or whatever. Sometimes if they know, they won't talk about certain topics. In Child Care the teachers talk about the blended family, living with your grandparents, or aunties and uncles, and they go into it, why and stuff. My teacher didn't do that because of me. I used to think, 'Just do it and get it over and done with!' I know they know.

TAFE was harder than school. Child Care was fairly easy but at the very end of the year there were so many assignments, deadlines and tests, and my partner Ben and I were going bad, Mum was ringing me, and Dad was ringing me at that stage too. I was so over it, that's when I said, 'Mum, Dad, go away! Just leave me alone.'

I got high marks and did well but I would probably have done better if I hadn't been stressing so much."(granddaughter Leanne)



Breakfast in bed - Mothers Day

SEEKING LEGAL CUSTODY OF GRANDCHILDREN

Note: The names DoCS (Department of Community Services), CS (Community Services) and now FACS (Family and Community Services) - in that order - are the names used for the Department that oversees children's well-being and protection. in NSW. Those used here were current at the time of interviewing and writing.

Caring for grandchildren can be an informal arrangement made by members of the family, or a placement through the Children's Court via the child protection authorities, or a parenting order by the Family Court of Australia (Federal). Each kind of placement involves different financial and legal arrangements. Only children, who come under the notice of DoCS because they are living in *significant* risk of danger or abuse, go through the Children's Court, and the rest including some who can also be considered at risk of harm, go through the Family Court.

When grandparents enjoy a very harmonious relationship with parents it hardly seems necessary to make their care legal. However they can be at a disadvantage if laws and entitlements are changed. Seeking legal custody is usually a straightforward process if nobody is contesting the case.

Some reasons for not formalising care

- Some grandparents just want to be independent
- Some cling to the hope that the parent will change their ways and become responsible enough to regain care of their children
- Some are intimidated by the legal process or the cost.
- When mental illness is involved grandparents may be reluctant to go through the courts. Their relationship with the parent may have become quite a delicate one due to the effects of the illness so, rather than risk making matters worse, they choose to keep the status quo.

Leanne's grandmother has always remained independent and self supporting.

"I'm seventeen and my twin brothers are eleven. Nan and Da don't have us through the courts so Mum's welcome to come and see the boys but we don't like them going over there because it's not the best place. The boys say they like living here but they still miss Mum and want to see her, which is only natural. You can't stop them. Back that age I did too. When she's here the boys tend to get cheekier towards Nan and Da because they follow Mum's rules. When she leaves it changes. That isn't fun. We have about a week straight of the boys being feral.

Legally Mum could come and take the boys away at any time but she wouldn't. It would restrict her life too much having to look after them.

I do wish Nan would get custody of the boys. It would be so much easier. Mum could still see the boys until the time comes when they will probably decide not to see her any more.

Nan won't go to DoCS even though she could get an allowance for raising children in her care. She's doing all right. The kids have everything they need for school but it's all the other stuff like Nintendos, brand new bikes and things but Nan saves up or ends up going without something for herself to get what they want." (granddaughter Leanne)

Without a custody order there is nothing stopping a parent from taking away the children at any time.

It is better to be proactive and initiate custody rather than wait until a crisis happens. Knowing their future with their grandparents has been made legal gives grandchildren a better sense of safety and stability, especially if they are old enough to understand what's going on.

An aunty to two grandsons, tells how her mother learnt the hard way the consequences of not having legal custody of her grandsons.

"I kept warning my mother that she should make the care of the boys legal but she never did. Then years later the boys' mother did exactly what I'd feared. She wouldn't let the boys go back to Mum.

Mum knew that they were in danger, their mother had been on drugs for years. Mum had no choice but to report what happened to DoCS, and the only thing that DoCS could do until it was all sorted was to take the boys away and put them into temporary foster care.

It took several weeks before the boys could go back to Mum, but it could have taken months. You can imagine how upset the poor kids were. Mum too. It would all have been avoided if Mum had sought legal care years ago." (Rachel)

Custody should be sought if children are living in danger:

- if they are being exposed to mental, physical or sexual abuse,
- if they are suffering neglect which includes inadequate diet, lack of supervision, lack of hygiene, being left without an adult in the house,
- if they are exposed to an unsafe environment where there is drug-taking, drunkenness or violence,
- if there is too much instability and unpredictability,
- or if they are not receiving adequate love and nurture.

Some parents are simply not fit to be parents and the consequences are appalling.

Grandmother Delia cares for two of her daughter Mandy's children. With poor health and limited finances, that is all Delia can possibly manage. A third grandchild Jason is the son of Mandy's ex-boyfriend.

"Jason has always lived with his mother. She's been on drugs for years. Jason is going to be fourteen this year. His mother has changed his school that many times. He's had a lot of trouble. Couldn't read or write properly. He was bashing the kids, ripping their work up, wouldn't let them concentrate, he'd be hitting them. He'd have a couple of kids waiting at school. They were going to hit this one, bash that one. He's been suspended so often he's going to be expelled. It's gone on and on and on.

The father's in and out of gaol all the time. He has threatened to put Jason into foster care, and that he'll get DoCS on to him and DoCS will take him away. Jason has ADHD and they just let him run wild. I fear for the boy's future. It's a never ending worry but there's no way I could take him." (Delia)

What's best for grandchildren?

Whether to seek custody or not is answered by asking, 'What is best for the grandchildren?' The parents are adults who have already made choices and are responsible for their own actions. They will survive with or without help. If they cannot provide proper love, nurture and safety, the children shouldn't be in their care.

A rocky road lies ahead for many grandparents

With so many grandparents caring for grandchildren because of parental addiction it's not uncommon for grandparents to have to oppose their own son or daughter, or their child's partner in court. That's an invidious situation for grandparents to be in. The grandparents might not like what their child is doing but that child is still the person they gave birth to and raised with all their love and best efforts.

Some grandparents have had to get an AVO (Apprehended Violence Order) against a parent because of the parent's adverse reaction at the prospect of losing the children. Again, that parent can be their own child. An AVO can be a wise safeguard because, if it is breached, it is an illegal act that comes immediately under the notice of the police.

Going to court comes at an extremely emotional and difficult time for many grandparents. They are desperate to remove their grandchildren from horrific

circumstances or they are already caring for very emotionally troubled children. Some are grieving terribly. The court case is being held at the same time as grandparents and grandchildren are having to adjust to a completely new way of living and when they are stressed, overtired and emotionally charged.

“My Mum died in August, my Dad in December and my daughter Jeanette died from an overdose the following April. Not even a year. In the year that followed I had to go through all the legal business so that I could gain custody of my grandson who was living in awful conditions and was terribly neglected. Then I had to get on with life and do my best to raise him. He was two years old.”(Anna)

Most grandparents are inexperienced when it comes to court issues

Most have never been to court in their lives. The process of taking action in court can be time consuming, frustrating, stressful, even intimidating.

“It’s awful sitting in court hearing lies about yourself. There were also lies in the witness box about my daughter’s supposed reformed lifestyle and her ability to look after the grandchildren. That was a joke! I found it all terribly upsetting. I was emotionally drained. Even though I’d had my granddaughter for years I started having serious doubts that I would get custody. I never want to go through that again.”(Shirley)

Grandparents pay tens of thousands of dollars in legal fees just to get their grandchildren out of danger.

The court case might cost nothing if DoCS have already initiated court proceedings but that has not been the case for many grandparents. In one GAPS group some grandparents paid \$6,000, some \$9,000, and another couple paid \$22,000 to get custody of their four grandchildren.

“One set of grandparents paid \$80,000 because there were five children involved. They took in the first three children and there was a court case to get custody, then the next child, and a fifth child came into their care, so there was further action to gain custody.

Before this the grandfather had been granted worker’s compensation after an accident had forced him to give up work. After the court case, \$80,000 of this was gone in legal fees. This made such a drain on their resources that they had to ask Centrelink for help. Their request was refused on the grounds that, because they had compensation money, they were not entitled to any Centrelink benefit. That is a standard rule for Centrelink. With five little ones under ten, this couple are stressed all the time. The grandmother has had to go back to work to help.”(Kinship Care worker)

Kinship care worker:

If there was one court case to put the children into care grandparents might accept that, but the fact is that the mother of the children can go back to court two years later, or further down the track. Some grandparents have to go through new court cases. It may be because their son or daughter meets a new partner and they try to get the children back. That's a legitimate reason. Or it may be that the parent doesn't have a legitimate case, she may still be having positive urine samples which indicate she's still in drug addiction, but she still has the right to go to Legal Aid and go to court.

Often grandparents feel they have to have a solicitor, a legal representative, to make sure they don't lose the case. That costs money. It can be about \$17,000 or \$18,000 for a case that might go through without hitches. Every situation is different.

Costs rise. Sometimes, when parents of the children are supposed to appear in court, they don't turn up, so the case is adjourned. The solicitor for the other side will still put fees in for that day.

There's even more money involved when the mothers keep having children. I don't know how many times one grandmother in our region has been to court. She is caring for nine grandchildren. It got to the stage where the hospital would ring her up and tell her that her daughter had had another baby. When she went for the most recent child she was told by Legal Aid that the Supported Care Allowance was an income and that she was not entitled to Legal Aid. That is not so. The Allowance is non taxable and non assessable. It's disturbing when workers give out the wrong information.

Why should grandparents have to pay to get their grandchildren out of a dangerous environment?

If they didn't step up to look after their grandchildren, the children would go into foster care. That would cost the government much more money and take the children away from their family network. Just looking after hurt grandchildren is enough without grandparents having to use their life savings.

People can represent themselves in court

Kinship Care worker:

Grandparents, or the parents for that matter, can represent themselves. Two grandparents I know did that. It's a lot of paperwork, gathering the affidavits for court. Magistrates are listening to persons who represent themselves. They have told the chief executive officer of the Children's Court to tell grandparents to represent themselves. That way they don't have the big cost. Legal Aid does help people to put their paperwork together. That's a way of overcoming the big cost of getting the first temporary custody order which lasts twelve months for the children.

It's a right that people can get representation but it's not fair that grandparents who have worked all their lives, bought a house, and have assets behind them, are penalised because they've got that asset. They may be an aged pensioner now but owning their own home makes them ineligible for Legal Aid. Yet a drug addicted person who has no assets, hasn't been working, is homeless or has other qualifying circumstances has this right to full legal advice. There's an injustice there.

The parents of the grandchildren are able to engage legal services as many times as they want without any concern for the system or the grandparents or the government agencies which are trying to protect the children. I don't know how many of the grandparents go into debt.

Legal Aid has been set up to provide services for disadvantaged people.

It is a commonly held view that Legal Aid cannot be given to each of the opposing parties. In fact, Legal Aid can help. For example, after a means test and assessing the merit of a case Legal Aid may represent one party and pay a private solicitor to represent the other.

Grandparents can find out how much help they are entitled to receive, by ringing a Legal Aid office. If an interview is advisable, they will be able to have one for 20 minutes at no charge. As each case is different, they will be advised what course of action will best suit their needs, and what, if any, financial outlay will be required.

Legal Aid and the Community Legal Centre offer valuable assistance:

- free advice
- what records to keep
- help with the preparation of documents
- information about court proceedings

Some grandparents do qualify for Legal Aid.

“I was the maternal grandmother. As soon as I got back home to Sydney from Queensland I went to a couple of lawyers and explained my situation. I had to go through the Queensland court. I was lucky to get Legal Aid. I got in first.

We had to go through mediation, Legal Aid is required to do this, but I wasn't going to give in.

When mediation didn't work we had to go to court.

I got a marvellous solicitor in Queensland, a really young bloke. He was brilliant. Most of my business was done between Sydney and Brisbane by telephone. Because I worked four days a week he would do any phone work on my day off. He'd send things to me through the fax machine.

The court case came around but I couldn't afford to keep going up there. I thought, 'They'll probably adjourn it again, I'll just give my solicitor an apology.'

He rang me at work, 'Guess what Grandma, You've got him!'" (Anna)

Grandparents who choose to represent themselves in court will receive a fair hearing.

“We'd heard reports that my daughter Penny was having these parties and all sorts of people were in the house. The house was a real mess.

Then she was going to drive two thousand kilometres to my granddaughter Shelley's father in northern Queensland.

'You can't take Shelley in that, no seat belts!'

'I'll leave her with you then.'

I thought, 'You're not getting her back this time. I don't care what you say.' Shelley had been living with me over the years so she was used to me.

I went to solicitors to see how I'd go if I kept Shelley all the time. They advised me against it because they said the courts preferred the babies to be with their mother. I kept Shelley anyway and didn't bother with the courts until she was nearly six and then I had to get my own solicitors. It cost at least \$5,000. Penny contested it. She got Legal Aid.

I'd had Shelley for about two years and Penny went to court again. The second time was going to cost \$7,000 (I got a second quote but it was the same). So I thought, 'I'm going to do it myself. I could do what they did.'

My other daughter and I went and I represented myself. I interrupted a couple of times, the magistrate didn't seem to be taking much notice. Then he asked who was my solicitor.

'I haven't got one.'

'The court will award you a solicitor for the next trial.'

From then on I got Legal Aid in the Family Court. The Legal Aid representatives were very good and it was a very good experience. My first

solicitor had typed up all my case so I had all that paperwork ready from way back.

After that we had to go back regularly, twice a year for three or four years.

'Next court hearing will be...'

They never said, 'You've got her...'

They just said, 'The child will stay with her grandmother.'

Penny was getting Legal Aid all the time.

The year before last we went to mediation, it wasn't in court, but we still had to have a solicitor. Penny had her solicitor, she was a nice young lady, but I just went with my other daughter.

'There will be no more court proceedings. The child stays with her maternal grandmother.'

I've got a big bag at home thick with legal court papers.

I did it but it was very stressful." (Isabel)

A terrible ordeal

A grandmother tells of the dreadful experience her granddaughter Kylie had to go through to prove sexual abuse against Kylie's father

"At 15 my granddaughter Kylie finally revealed to her pastor that she was being sexually abused by her father. He took her to the police where she, very hesitantly, recorded a statement to this effect.

In the meantime I took custody of her from her mother, who had also been abusing her both psychologically and physically.

Then Kylie had to make a second statement to the police as the first had been accidentally wiped from the record. The police said that she reported more information at the second interview.

Some many months later I took her to the office of the prosecutor who had prepared a case against her father for two incidents of sexual abuse, for one of which a witness had agreed to give evidence against him.

At her briefing with the State prosecutor, the day before the scheduled hearing, Kylie once again told her story which I personally heard for the first time. At this meeting she told the prosecutor that her father had not only sexually abused her on two occasions but had been doing so for some ten years since she was five or six years of age. That he had first shown her pictures of "what he wanted her to do" and had then proceeded to abuse her for some nine or ten years when she had been too frightened to tell anybody else what was going on. He had taken every opportunity to

take advantage of her whenever they were alone both in cars and anywhere he had access to her alone.

The prosecutor took me aside, as her then guardian, to ask if the case should be dropped for the current two charges to make a new case for continued abuse over many years.

Having seen the state that my ward had been in for the past many weeks leading up to this hearing date, I felt it best to go ahead now even with just the two incidents as I didn't think that poor little Kylie would have been able to cope mentally with any delay at all. She having geared herself up for this ordeal for many months.

Her subsequent victim compensation was probably halved due to this. But I was not prepared to put her through any further months of delay prior to confronting her father in court. On top of this, her father had retained one of the top counsel in the city and Kylie would have had to submit to cross examination by them. There is no saying whether she would have been able to cope with this in her fragile state of mind.

As it turned out, Kylie insisted on being in court for the hearing, she knew he had agreed to plead guilty to the one charge where there had been a witness, because she said the one thing she wanted was to hear him say "guilty" and this she did. Throughout the entire time she was in court she wept continuously because, despite everything, she loves her father because he was nicer to her than her mother. She just so wished he would stop all that nasty stuff. But he wouldn't."(Audrey)

Sign on a grandchild's home-made money box:

MONEY - Do not open unless your me

WRITTEN EVIDENCE

It is crucial that grandparents keep a record of everything that happens. It may be the only way they can support their claims.

“If Mum and Dad had taken the boys’ mother to court to gain custody it would have been their word against hers because they never kept any record of what was going on.

From when Harry was born I told Mum she needed to document and date what was happening - everything that Harry said, for example, about not wanting to go home, how the boys’ mother was behaving, every detail, so that she had evidence to take to DoCS. She never did this even though I gave her all the information that would help. She wouldn’t do anything to change the situation.

I even contemplated making a report to DoCS myself but I would have had to make sure I knew what I was saying and it was too hard for me to get the appropriate evidence when I didn’t live near my parents.” (Rachel)

Authorities cannot act without evidence. Start keeping records as soon as any problems arise. All entries should be dated. **A very effective way is to use a diary with a page per day.** The records are there for the grandparents’ own protection and may become vital for the protection of their grandchildren, especially in court.

Include all relevant details:

- how the parents are behaving,
- what conditions the grandchildren are living in,
- what happens when grandparents visit government departments,
- how events affect their grandchildren emotionally and behaviourally.
- what various people say,
- telephone calls,
- threats or accusations,
- what grandchildren report e.g., after an access visit.

Records over time reveal a broad picture, such as the frequency of incidents, harassment or telephone calls, and the patterns of actions. For example, every time the children return from their access visit, it takes two or three days for their behaviour to settle back to normal.

If grandparents didn't keep a diary when unpleasant events were happening, at least they can write an account of what happened in the past and give examples.

Gather supporting statements:

- From a neighbour who has seen the grandchildren at the grandparents' house, or who knows what's going on.
- From the family doctor who can give supporting evidence with dates of consultations involving the grandchildren that show the grandparents have been caring well for their grandchildren's health.
- From the Department of Corrective Services to show that the parent was in their system over a certain period and so the parent could not have been caring for a child in that time.
- From a friend who can make a statutory declaration about the care that the grandparent gives all the time, or at weekends.

Records are valuable in other circumstances:

- They can show that a parent has been falsely claiming financial benefits for the grandchildren when the grandchildren have, in fact, been living with their grandparents.
- If grandparents' believe their contact with Departments or agencies is unsatisfactory, they can safeguard their interests by recording all requests, messages, phone calls and promises together with the name of the worker at the time, and the date.

A RECORD OF A GRANDMOTHER'S JOURNEY

- It shows the frequency of disruption in her grandchildren's lives
- It saves valuable time - many times when she went to DoCS she saw a different caseworker and was forced to waste valuable interview time going through the family history
- It confirms the inadequacy of the parents

(Note: The grandmother used the name 'DoCS' for the departments responsible for child protection in other States.)

Early years:

- Grandmother Eve recognised problems early when her baby granddaughter Lucy, had dirty clothes, no food, the milk was 'off' and more.
- The parents (drug and alcoholic affected) were evicted from numerous houses in NSW for failure to pay rent.

- After a second grandchild was born the family moved to Queensland because DoCS were starting to investigate.
- Another grandchild was born but the family moved to South Australia when DoCS in Queensland started to investigate.
- A fourth child was born in South Australia and the family moved back to NSW when investigations began again.
- A fifth child was born in NSW.
- The parents split up.

After the parents separated:

- The father had the two eldest children and the mother had the three youngest.
- The mother went to gaol for 2 years on drug related charges.
- The father got the 5 children and went to live with the grandmother's sister
- The sister reported the father to DoCS because he was not coping with the children.

Grandmother Eve:

- Eve was constantly reporting to DoCS because she didn't want to lose track of her grandchildren and she was very anxious about their neglect.
- Because DoCS could not access files across state borders they didn't have enough evidence to take action.
- Eve contributed to the Wood Royal Commission where she told of her experiences of what was happening when children were taken to other states. After the Inquiry DoCS was able to use all the documents in court.
- At this stage Eve's granddaughter Lucy came into her care in an informal arrangement.

On the move again:

- The sister reported the father to DoCS as there were more problems
- After *one* week of investigation DoCS gave the 5 children, all under the age of 8, back to the father in spite of numerous reports to the contrary, including from the preschool and from the father's drug and alcohol counsellor. The children were all under the age of 8.
- The father took the 5 children to South Australia, including Lucy, aged 18 months. Grandmother Eve could do nothing to stop him because, with only an informal agreement, there were no court orders to the contrary.
- DoCS from South Australia rang Eve twice to say the father was not coping and they were thinking of taking away the children, but for the moment, they were trying to help the father so that he could manage the children.
- The father returned to NSW to the sister's house with 5 grandchildren *plus* a girlfriend who was an alcoholic and later became a drug addict.
- When DoCS started further investigations he moved again, not interstate,.
- DoCS went to the children's school to talk to the children to follow up a report they had been given *three months previously* and decided to take away the children.

Going into care:

- The 5 children went to the sister, then 2 of them stayed with a niece and the other 3 went into foster care.
- Grandmother Eve was not told by DoCS that they had removed the children. She found out from her niece.
- Meanwhile, in the 2 years after she came out of gaol, the biological mother had 2 more children with her current partner - a total of 7. By then she was 26 years old.
- There was an attempt to allow this mother to have the other 5 children but it didn't work. Just one child stayed with her.
- After three months of foster care Lucy and brother Alex came to live with Eve. The other three went to Eve's sister.

Time:

- All this took place over 9 years - 9 years of DoCS involvement and 9 years of Eve's involvement.
- The DoCS investigations were more difficult because they covered three States.

In the nine months prior to living with her grandmother, Lucy had numerous placements:

- Overnight emergency placement
- 4 weeks at the sister's place
- 3 months with a bad foster carer who has since been deregistered. Lucy said her sister 'cried every night'.
- A weekend with her mother who couldn't cope so that meant:
- Another emergency placement
- 7 weeks with her mother
- 2 weeks in emergency foster care
- Placement with a good foster care mum. However, when the foster carer wanted to go on a holiday with other children she was caring for, she couldn't take Lucy because the case worker didn't get Lucy's birth certificate.
- Emergency care

Why didn't Eve get her grandmother sooner?

- She couldn't apply earlier for the care of her granddaughter because DoCS was helping the mother with management with the view to restoring the children to their mother. In that time DoCS wouldn't consider Eve.

Now:

- Eve's granddaughter Lucy has been living with her for 6 months and one grandson Alex for 4 months.
- Eve still has no birth certificate, no medical cards (only the numbers) and no immunisation certificate.

The granddaughter:

- Lucy was nearly 5 when she came to live with Helen.
- She has serious attachment issues
- She is suffering grief and loss for her siblings
- She finds it hard to make friends
- She has severe behavioural problems
- She rarely cuddles

Her brother:

- Alex is the reverse of his sister. He is overly compliant.

Another court case:

- Eve's sister has to go to court next week because the father is applying for the return of two children who are in her care
- Eve has had to hire a lawyer because she wants to retain contact with her grandchildren. She is getting no information from DoCS because the case is related to her sister, not Eve herself.

Grandmother Eve:

- Eve has endured enormous stress for nine years worrying about her grandchildren. The worst stress for her is seeing how damaging it has been, and continues to be, for her grandchildren.
- Now she is caring for two very disturbed grandchildren.
- Throughout that time she has had the good fortune to have the full support of her partner who loves the grandchildren.
- Going through the court has cost Eve \$22,000. The current court case will cost a further \$2,000
- *Both parents have received free Legal Aid every time they asked.*

Postscript:

Granddaughter Lucy has just been diagnosed as suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

(*Note: How could Eve's granddaughter cope at school with her experiences of moving constantly, of living with unstable parents and different carers, and of being exposed to such emotional and psychological upset? How could she cope with life?*)

WRITING HAS MANY BENEFITS

Evidence

It is very beneficial for grandparents to write about what is happening in their lives. Many keep a diary. In any adversarial situation or where grandchildren are at risk, it is vital that a record of events, with dates, is kept.

“My son Tony always had a different perception of what happened, what occurred was never his fault, so I started writing everything down so I could show what was really going on.”(Clare)

One grandmother takes notes while she is talking to professional workers. It unsettles them but they know she means business. It's hard to remember everything during an interview, especially if there's a young child present causing distractions.

Concerns

When grandchildren come into their grandparents' care, anything that is a cause of concern should be noted.

“My granddaughter developed an occasional facial tic from stressful events like access visits. One of the reasons I recorded these things was that I wanted to be able to show her father when and why they were happening. I didn't want him to say that it was my fault because it hadn't happened when she was in his care. Her tic gradually disappeared after a year or two when things settled down and she felt more secure.”(Shirley)

Changes

It is very satisfying to look back over a period and see improvements.

“Especially in the first year or two, I wrote down all sorts of things. How my grandson reacted to living with us, what his mother did and said, things that happened in his dreams. Now I can say, ‘His mother's leading a much more responsible life now,’ or, ‘He hasn't had any bad dreams for ages’.”(Clare)

Anecdotes

Jot down funny things grandchildren do and say and when they are older they love hearing them.

“One day she came home from school and told me that she was sitting next to a different girl. ‘She's really clever, Nan. She got an extinction in maths!’.”(Dorothy)

Personal story

Some grandparents just want to write an account of their grandchildren's lives. Little personal details help to give the grandchildren a sense of identity, and fun times add to their pleasure. It has the potential to become a treasured, personal history.

Therapy

Many things happen in grandparents' lives that they wish didn't happen, and some of them they would prefer to forget. The experiences cause stress, poor sleep and ill health and affect the way grandparents function and interact with everyone on a day by day basis. The stress of going to court, a confrontation with a drug-affected relative - the memory lingers far after the event. How to get this awful experience out of the mind? Writing is a therapeutic way of releasing these feelings.

"My son would be very drunk, ranting and raving and pacing through the house. One morning at two o'clock he was so high he started swinging an axe and trying to chop down a tree on our footpath. I found that if I wrote it all down (it poured out!) I had a chance of going to sleep. Once I wrote a poem. When I read it the next day, it was so raw that I tore it up. But it was a good feeling when I did that."(Clare)

Writing is therapy for the grandchildren as well.

"One night my granddaughter couldn't get to sleep she was so upset about her family situation. I gave her a little book and told her to write down everything that was disturbing her. I told her it would help get the thoughts out of her head.

She did that. She came out rather pleased with herself. She'd written four pages and she described with wide sweeps of her arms how she'd used strong physical marks and slashes and dashes to express her anger.

'It really works!'

She felt much better. She trusted me to read a few passages from it, the good ones, about the people she could rely on. The other pages were private. After that she had no trouble getting to sleep."(Shirley)

Loving notes

Grandchildren love it when there is an exchange of notes between them and their grandparents. A note on the pillow like *'Thank you for making your bed. Love Grandma'* or *'I love you heaps.'*

COMMUNITY SERVICES (formerly known as DoCS) and CENTRELINK

Kinship Care Worker:

When I tell people these complex, disturbing stories they look at me strangely, they think I am exaggerating. I'm sure they think people can't be going through all this trauma and it can't be this bad. But it really is this bad. It's so big that nobody knows where to start to help. My frustration is that there isn't nearly enough help and support for kinship carers, especially grandparents.

With the growing number of grandparents raising grandchildren all services should be easily and quickly accessible and come into effect as soon as the grandchildren come into their care. Sometimes there is no provision for grandparents on official forms. Grandparents don't fit into boxes.

Community Services

Community Services website 2011:

'Community Services (formerly DoCS and now Family and Community Services) promotes the safety and wellbeing of children and young people and works to build stronger families and communities. We provide child protection services, parenting support and early intervention, foster care, adoption services and help for communities affected by disaster.'

Reading this gives the impression that DoCS is the department to visit for assistance with human welfare issues. In reality, this assistance is not available to many grandparents. With DoCS' attention being forced to focus on the most dire needs, there are insufficient resources and personnel available to meet grandparents' needs when raising their grandchildren.

"One grandmother had three young grandchildren - one a preschooler, and two of primary age. Her daughter was having marriage difficulties. The father got into drugs and his behaviour grew more and more psychotic. One day the grandmother received a phone call from the police to say the father had shot his wife in front of the children. Suddenly she was caring full time for the three children, trying to deal with her own terrible grief for her daughter and having to go through interviews with the police.

There were two court cases during which it emerged that the father had often made threats against the children. It really upset the grandmother because that was the first time that she'd heard about that. Her daughter had hidden so much of what had been going on.

The father was given 17 years non parole. His mother, the paternal grandmother, even though her son had shot her grandchildren's mother and caused so much heartbreak, still wanted the relationship between her son and the children to continue. She sent letters to that effect to the children. That was very insensitive of her.

Before it all happened the maternal grandmother, in her early fifties, had been living on her own and going to work. With all this upheaval she said, 'There's enough to do as the sole carer looking after the children. I'm too scared to tell DoCS that I can't work any more. They might think it's too much for me and take away the children.'

She has been forced to work three days a week to pay for a car to accommodate her grandchildren. When she tried to get a reasonable vehicle big enough to carry the children around, the banks wouldn't give her a loan because she didn't have an income. They wouldn't recognise the Supported Care Allowance as an income.

She had to take out a personal loan and use her credit card to get a loan, yet it is known that in some circumstances DoCS have supplied vehicles, especially to big families. There are discrepancies between what they do for different carers. DoCS should be there assuring the grandmother that foster care is not an option, that they will support her in every way they can. The grandmother should be applauded for keeping the children in the family. They've suffered grievous loss and damage. It would be cruel for them not to be with their grandmother.

From the early stages the grandmother has been helped by the Victims of Crime but she doesn't always like to go to their meetings because she hears too much trauma in one place. Victims of Crime have supplied a counsellor who comes to the house to support the children and also talk with her but counselling is a long term process.

Victims of Crime compensation is probably available but having endured two court cases to gain custody of her grandchildren, the grandmother may not feel ready to face any more official matters. Compensation will come but it all takes time. She needs the money for the car now so she doesn't have to work." (Kinship Care Worker)

Of course 'there is enough to do as the sole carer looking after the children'! If four people living in a household, in this case the grandmother and her three grandchildren, are all suffering acutely from trauma, loss and grief, and are having to adjust to a massive change in their daily living, they need sustained,

compassionate, practical, professional help immediately and over the longer term. *Where is this help? Are they expected to go and find it themselves? They don't know who go to if they can't go to DoCS!*

You can't please everybody. There are cases where DoCS is damned if they do and damned if they don't.

"Six children in care were encouraged to keep in contact with their mother who had had various relationships and had used drugs and alcohol. She did her best but it was obvious there was a big difference between the quality of lifestyle the carer was able to provide and the kind of life the natural mother was living, a barely surviving kind of existence as she struggled to care for her seventh child.

Inevitably as the children grew older and experienced how much more satisfying their lives had become, they grew away from their mother. Their contact was reduced to two hours a month which was all the children wanted.

Their mother could see that her children were less attached to her than they used to be and she resented it. She couldn't afford the things the children had in their carer's home. She had no car to take them anywhere and was tied down by her seventh child.

She blamed DoCS for taking her children away and she blamed the carer for alienating the children who, she said, were starting to talk 'posh'. Not once did she blame herself for the choices she had made that had set her on a downhill course and made her incapable of caring for her children." (Val)

Not all grandparents in need receive the same degree of help

One grandparent couple have a custody order through the Children's Court till the grandson they are raising is eighteen. They receive the higher levels of Family Tax Benefit and the Supported Care Allowance because of the boy's ADHD. They are in good financial circumstances. DoCS have always paid their grandson's private school fees, and recently they paid for a new bed when the thirteen year old boy had outgrown his other one.

Beryl, another grandmother, had her four grandsons land on her doorstep without warning when her drug addicted daughter decided she didn't want them any more. Suddenly needing beds, and extra cash for food and clothing, Beryl sought help from DoCS but she was turned away, even though DoCS had complaints about her daughter in their files. There was no custody order at the

time and DoCS could not act unless the children came to the grandparents through the Children's Court.

Later, when the care of the boys was settled, Beryl did get DoCS' assistance but help should have been available when the emergency arose.

At the same time that the boys arrived Beryl was also on call for her elderly, ailing parents who needed her time and attention. It wasn't long afterwards that her husband suffered a stroke and was dependent on her as well. Of course DoCS wasn't responsible for all that was happening in Beryl's life but her situation demonstrates what an immense load some grandparents carry. Referrals to agencies that might assist her are of little help for someone like Beryl. She hasn't a spare minute or the energy to approach them. This is an instance where the availability of a Kinship Care Worker is essential.

Grandparents raising grandchildren are ineligible for financial assistance if the parent of the grandchildren lives in the same home.

Sometimes grandparents are having to support their own child, for example, the father of their grandchildren, because he hasn't the capacity to look after himself. This may be because of mental illness or the effects of a past addiction. The grandparents still love and want to help him as much as possible but this places them in very adverse circumstances financially if they are raising grandchildren because it cuts them out of financial assistance for their grandchildren. If the father does not live with them he may become homeless. That adds terribly to the grandparents' distress.

The work of DoCS and Centrelink would be much easier if there weren't people in the community who are cheating the system.

Propping up addicts doesn't help.

Some parents are claiming Centrelink money while their children and their grandparent carers get nothing. The financial consequences for grandparents can be disastrous.

"A couple got themselves into serious financial difficulties. They were looking after two grandchildren who came voluntarily to them for safety. The father was never on the scene and the mother was into drugs. The eldest boy came to the grandparents first. He was good at school and he wanted to continue with his schooling and do well, but he was disrupted by his drug addicted mother's lifestyle and she was imposing all sorts of other partners into the children's lives.

'I can't live there any more.'
Later the 14 year old girl came too.

The grandparents could not ignore their daughter, the grandchildren's mother, and they continued to support her with food and money when she got herself into difficulties. At the same time they were looking after, feeding, clothing and getting these two grandchildren to school - all on a disability pension.

Although the two children were living with their grandparents, their mother was still getting money for them from Centrelink.

The grandfather had not paid the mortgage on his house so he decided to go back to work but he only made himself extremely ill. He was reluctant to ask for help because the minute he went to any financial institution it would mean that his daughter would have a huge debt to pay back wrongly claimed money from Centrelink and he didn't want to do that to her. If he went to DoCS they would tell Centrelink and vice versa. It was all for the protection of his daughter. He was trying to keep everybody happy.

So with trying to feed and support his daughter financially, and the grandchildren as well, he got so far behind financially that he has now gone into liquidation, he has lost his property and he's now renting. The oldest grandson turned 18, actually completed the HSC in all this and he qualified for university but he has taken a gap year to work to get money for his grandparents, neither of whom are well, and for his sister who is still with them.

That grandparent couple lost their property because they could not 'divorce' their daughter. That's what some other grandparents have had to do in order to look after their grandchildren. That's an awful thing to have to go through."

Some grandparents are living with blackmail.

The parents stand over the grandparents and illegally use government money for themselves and their own decadent lifestyle or drug habit. If the grandparents, who are already minding the children for nothing, want to legalise their care, they leave themselves open to threats, harassment or violence.

*'You go to Centrelink (or DoCS) and I'll take my kids away from you!
You'll never see the kids again!'*

or

'I'll set fire to your house!'

Threats like this make anyone think twice before taking any action

"Jim and Bella didn't get the Family Tax Benefit to help them raise their grandchildren because their son, the children's father, was using it to pay off his car. (The mother had remarried and had another baby. She saw the children once a fortnight at the weekend.)

Jim wanted to apply for the Supported Care Allowance but Bella was worried that DoCS would get in touch with Centrelink who would then stop paying their son the Family Tax Benefit. Beside that, their son would want the Allowance as well.

He suffered from bipolar and had angry outbursts that disturbed Jim and Bella. She was scared that he would do something awful if he no longer got the Family Tax Benefit.

Jim and Bella needed the money for their grandchildren. To keep everything on an even keel, she continued to go without the money, her son continued to deceive Centrelink and the grandchildren continued to miss out on the benefit that was rightly theirs.”(a story from a GAPS group)

Many grandparents have found staff unhelpful.

They have been given inadequate or misleading advice, or advice which is just plain wrong. There are queues, paperwork and interviews to endure.

“A grandparent couple, Betty and Carl, came new to our GAPS meeting with a disabled two-year-old girl in a stroller. They were very attentive to her special needs and the girl was obviously loved and well cared for.

They were seeking guardianship but were worried because a DoCS worker had told them they were ‘too old’ to raise children. Betty was in her late fifties and Carl was in his early sixties. Among those listening to their story was Eve 75, Jill 70, Kay 66, Joe about 78, I was 71. I’d met grandparents who were 80 who were still doing a great parenting job.

We were all bristling. Why were they being told this? No one had ever told us we were too old! Just let them try!

The couple went ahead with their court case, despite having to argue against the DoCS’ legal team, and won!”(Shirley)

It would help if the messages that came from DoCS were all the same.

Some grandparents are told they are eligible for financial assistance and get it straight away while others are denied financial help, even though they are entitled to receive it. When they have gone back, sometimes years later, it has been granted, though not backdated to the original request! Some get it only after months of persistence, or, as a last resort, going to their local member of parliament. Once again, keeping records, particularly of unsatisfactory interviews and unkept promises, is crucial as supporting evidence.

One of the most common complaints is that grandparents are not told about their entitlements.

It is 2011, nine years since our first GAPS group was formed. At our last meeting a grandmother who has had the custody of two of her grandchildren for the last three months reported that no one at DoCS told her that she could receive a one off payment up to \$1400 to cover setting up costs. She found out on the web.

Grandparents don't know their entitlements and they don't know who to go to.

There is help from various departments and organisations but none of it is coordinated. Each body is working in isolation.

Kinship Care Worker:

When Centrelink and DoCS workers were asked could grandparents access both forms of assistance, the Family Tax Benefit and the Supported Care Allowance, neither of the agencies knew what the other agency was doing. In fact, the position was that some grandparents were entitled to access both the Federal and the State allowances which equated to what foster carers had been getting for years.

There's little or no coordination between Departments, Medicare a bit, but not Centrelink which is Federal, DoCS which is State, or legal services or the department dealing with passports.

I've talked to the head of Centrelink in our region about the problems grandparents face. I'm virtually training the staff, telling them what grandparents are entitled to. That's why we produced a DVD 'Raising Others Children' so that the staff of these agencies can get their head around what these grandparents are going through and deal with them more sensitively when they come for help.

I am very anxious to see what recommendations will come out of the Justice James Wood Inquiry. I admire him as a man with a great breadth of understanding of the issues involved. He has had an incredible task and a mountain of material to go through. His report on DoCS was finished in 2009. It came about because DoCS was not coping with what was going on. It was running out of money. Its workers were burning out they were so overworked and overcome with the stresses of the job, and trying to deal with the high numbers of the cases. In addition, the sheer number of reports of children in

danger meant something more had to be done. DoCS were condemned if they acted and condemned if they didn't.

I organised two public information forums, which were widely advertised, where I invited DoCS workers, Centrelink workers, Legal Aid representatives and some other service providers. Those sessions were immense eye-openers for everybody concerned. We found some grandparents were raising three or more grandchildren on an age pension without any assistance. Some might have been getting Centrelink assistance like the Family Tax Benefit but were not getting the DoCS Supported Care Allowance which had been introduced in September 2006. Few grandparents knew about it.

Grandparents can't ask for something if they don't know it exists.

"I found Centrelink don't tell you that you might be eligible for a payment from DoCS. I'd got this new child in my life and I should have been informed.

I'd had him for two years and now he was four. When I went to a picnic for grandparents one grandparent asked me, 'Do you get the Support Care payment?'

"What are you talking about?'

She told me about the Supported Care payment. She advised me to write, telling them that I was raising my grandchild.

Within a couple of weeks I got a phone call, 'Yes. You need to do this and this. We want to see Brett. We want see all of your bills.'

They came out and saw him and within two weeks they told me I was entitled to it.

I could have been getting it sooner! It should have happened when my grandson came into my care. There's no connection between Centrelink and DoCS. They don't work together. Not all the workers know. It should come up automatically on their computers. It's like the best kept secret."(Anna)

Not knowing they could be getting more money, some grandparents use their savings or retirement funds.

"Financially it can be hard. Grant and I had our own business and we were told we wouldn't get any pension. We learnt that Grant had cancer so to make the most of our lives together we spent four years going around Australia with our granddaughter. We lived off our own money so our funds dropped a lot. Then about nine years ago we were told we could apply for

the pension, we also learned we could have applied for it a lot sooner. Sadly it was not long afterwards that Grant died.

The pension doesn't go far. There's not much left after I buy basic things like fruit, vegetables and milk, and then there's petrol, and fees and gear for school and sport. As a lone parent I have to drive everywhere. I drive Carolyn to and from high school every day as I did when she was in primary school. In summer she has swimming three times a week and in winter she's in the development squad and they travel all over the place every fortnight. She also has netball practice one night and she plays in the competition at the weekend.

As Carolyn gets older she needs more money for clothes, shoes and general living expenses. She's into women's clothes now, and adult size shoes. Carolyn won't be able to learn to drive on my car because it's a V8. I will have to put her into a driving school and that will be very expensive. She will need transport if she goes to TAFE.

At the Support Group I found out that I am entitled to receive the Supported Care Allowance, in fact I could have been receiving it a couple of years ago but I didn't know that. At first I was worried I would lose my pension and my medical card if I applied for the Allowance but that is not so. It will be a big help when I get it. With painting the house I have had to dip into my superannuation. I haven't got much left in the bank." (Elaine)

Grandparents need to persist

If grandparents are not happy with what occurs with government agencies, they can ask for an appointment with the supervising officer or the manager. They should not be deterred. It is wise to be accompanied by another person who can give them confidence or act as a witness to the conversation. It is even better if the other person is someone like the Kinship Care Worker who knows what rights the grandparents are entitled to.

In sheer frustration some grandparents have sought help from their local Member of Parliament. Action usually happens within days!

Sympathy and assistance for health problems would go a long way.

Some grandparents fear that, if the authorities find out about their poor health, they won't be allowed to continue raising their grandchildren. There are plenty of grandparents with poor vision, health or mobility problems but they are raising their grandchildren very successfully in homes where love and nurture is plentiful.

Kinship Care worker:

Grandparents have never been to a court room before, grandparents have never had to go and deal with a government department like DoCS, so it's all traumatic for them. Some of them can't do it. I have delivered Supported Care Allowance forms to a grandmother living in social housing who couldn't afford false teeth. She's been looking after grandchildren on an age pension for about seven years. She doesn't know of any services, she doesn't have the capability to access them but she has the love for those in her care. Her 18 year old granddaughter is still living at home so she can look after her grandmother and her younger brother.

Grandparents like this lady live in fear because if they admit they haven't got good health DoCS might take the children away. Normal parents can have health problems but nobody comes and takes away their children.

It is so important for grandchildren to live with the best arrangement there is for keeping them within the family. Otherwise, who have they got?

Families are struggling.

"I worked of a night so my husband was there to look after my grandson and that was fine. We used that money for his school and clothes and other things he needed. After I got ill and I was treated for cancer, my bones went all brittle and I got fractures in my spine and in my foot. I've got osteoporosis but I'm very careful. I had to retire from work.

Now we're struggling. I get the Family Tax Benefit but nothing else. I was older than other people when we bought our house because I stayed home with my kids until my youngest was ready to go to high school. So we were in our late thirties when we bought a three bedroom house.

When the grandchildren came we still had our eighteen-year-old daughter and she had a room, and now we had a four year old girl and a baby boy and us. We sold that house and bought a four bedroom house which was a bit more costly for us but it would have been expensive to add on anyway.

I never knew about the Supported Care Allowance. I didn't think I was entitled to anything because my husband works. I've applied for it now. One of the ladies in GAPS told me about it. Our Kinship Care worker gave me two forms, one for my daughter who is caring for my granddaughter now, and one for me because I've got my grandson Tom still. My daughter's struggling. She has her big lounge room divided with wardrobes at the moment, half for my granddaughter and half for her youngest son.

I put my application in four weeks ago but DoCS haven't even looked at it. The DoCS worker said that more than likely we won't be entitled to get the

Supported Care Allowance because we went through the Family Court, and as well as that, we have to prove to them that if Tom and his sister Tegan went back to his mother they would be in danger.

It's going to take months. There will be an independent assessor. Because the mother has always had one child with her, that's Jason, who had a different father, we also have to prove, if she's parenting that child, why she isn't capable of parenting the others.

DoCS said, 'Why didn't you take him too? If you'd got him from when he was a baby, maybe he'd be a completely different boy now.'
I said, 'He probably would have.'

We've got years and years of things that have happened. We have to write them down. There have been so many it's hard to remember them all. Then I think of something else later that was important.

The father's threatened the boy that DoCS would take him away and he would go into foster care. I fear for the boy's future. It's a never ending worry but there's no way I could take him.

About eight months ago I got a letter from DoCS which said they were reviewing families raising grandchildren with the aim of returning some of the children to their parents. DoCS are thinking the two grandchildren my daughter and I are caring for, who feel safe and loved with us, can go back and live with their mother whose on drugs, with the drunk, abusive boyfriend and with their out of control brother Jason!

For twelve years my grandson Tom has had stability with us. He knows we're always there, we've got a home to live in. He's bonded to us. If he had to go back and live with his mother it would be the end of him. What would happen to his sister? She would go out and live with the first boy she could find, just to get out of it. (Delia)

POSTSCRIPT: Five months after applying for the Supported Care Allowance, the grandmother received it! It was backdated but the family was financially strapped in the meantime."

For the nine years I have been associated with the Support Group, grandparents' entitlements have been a very grey area. There have been improvements, particularly the Supported Care Allowance introduced in 2006, only to be placed in jeopardy by a review by DoCS which stated that grandparents who had not come through the Children's Court would be assessed and may no longer be able to receive the Allowance. There was also the suggestion that some grandchildren might return to their parents, even though they had lived with their grandparents for many years and had formed strong bonds. That caused enormous

consternation particularly when the backgrounds of the grandchildren were so awful.

All grandparents received the letter whether it applied to them or not. Anyone coming through the Children's Court received the letter, yet they were exempt. Grandparents who were raising an orphan received the letter! The parents had been killed in a murder/suicide! What an affront!

No communication regarding this matter has been received since, even though the one-size-fits-all letter was sent out to all grandparents nearly two years ago! Assessment trials were instigated but there has been a long silence. Not good enough!

Also in the past nine years grandparent affairs have been in a state of change. With horrific child neglect and abuse cases reaching public attention, the Woods Commission was set up. Recommendations followed. Promising initiatives were introduced but on a trial basis in a few selected regions of the State. Whether they will lead to overall and significant change is still unknown. In 2011 elections have led to a change of government. At this point in time nobody knows what changes, proposals or funding will be made.

Working for DoCS must be one of the most challenging jobs there is.

Over the last nine years DoCS has been understaffed and underfunded and consequently unable to do the job their officers would like to do.

In the last year I have attended a Regional Foster Care Advisory Group as the sole grandparent representative. I have met caring and capable workers. They have to work with all kinds of people, some cooperative and honest, others offensive and abusive. They see young children suffering shocking neglect, irresponsible parents spaced out on drugs, and highly dysfunctional families, and the number of families coming under their notice is rising every year.

To deal with each family as thoroughly as they would like would need a massive injection of funding and staff applied to early intervention, mental illness, addiction, family relationships - the list goes on. An injection of astronomical proportions, but unless the focus shifts to prevention little will change.

There are positive signs:

- The best move is that our Kinship Care Worker's tenure has been extended for three years through funding from FACHSIA. That's extremely pleasing. But it is tempered by the fact that her position is the only one of its kind in NSW (perhaps Australia?). Perhaps it is the beginning of better things to come.

- Connecting Carers is including courses specifically for grandparents.
- A number of the support services listed in the Appendix are catering for grandparents raising grandchildren.(The trouble is that most grandparents don't know which service is the right one for them and they haven't the time or energy to find out.)
- Organisations like Samaritans and the Benevolent Society offer a specific Kinship Care Support Services
- The Council COTA (Council on the Ageing) supports grandparents and is making good progress in coordinating Grandparent Support Groups across regions to be known as GRAKCA Grandparents and Kinship Care Association
- Centrelink is trialling specialist grandparent staff in a number of regions with a view to expanding this assistance
- A lot more help is becoming available via the computer. Unfortunately there are many grandparents without computers or who are not computer savvy.

Improvements are coming but they are too slow for many grandparents who find themselves in crisis.

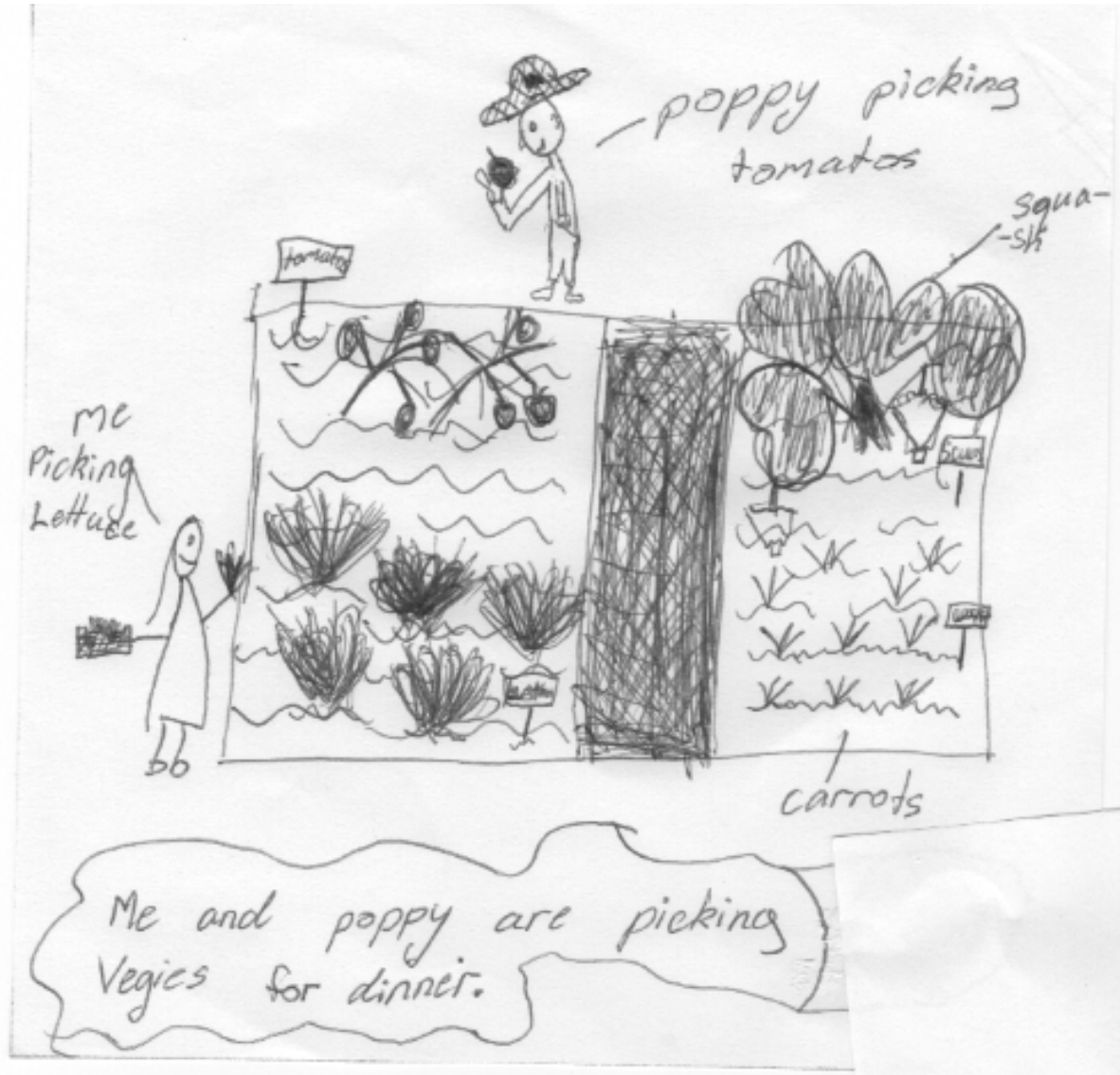
There are still many areas that need urgent attention.

- A grandparent at a recent meeting told us that, after a long struggle and very little help from Community Services, her second grandchild Beth finally came into her care. Beth is extremely difficult to manage, stretching every last ounce of her grandmother's patience and care. *Before coming to her grandmother Beth had nine different placements in seven months!* How can this have happened when the grandmother had wanted to care for Beth from the beginning? What grandparents are saying about their grandchildren should be attended to very carefully because they are often the first people to recognise that children are living in danger.

The last three new families, two sets of grandparents and a kincarers (aunt), who came to our meeting recently were disillusioned about Community Services.

Among their complaints:

- Once the grandchildren were placed in the care of their grandparents, Community Services showed a complete lack of interest in them.
- Each time the grandparents went to the Department they encountered a new case worker and had to go through their entire family history, again and again, even though it would have (or should have) been on file.
- They were not told of their full entitlements.
- None of the grandparents were offered early intervention to support their grandchildren.



WISH LIST

1. **The appointment in each region of a specialist Kinship Care Worker for grandparents raising grandchildren** with a sound understanding of financial, emotional, legal etc. matters . The Worker would liaise with Departments and agencies and advocate on behalf of the grandparents. Ideally this specialist would meet grandparents new to raising their grandchildren and lead and support them in obtaining all necessary assistance in order to avoid added stress in the grandparents' lives. The Kinship Care Worker would also be available for ongoing assistance and advice, facilitate Support Groups and organise forums and speakers to meet their needs.
2. **Immediate and long-term counselling for grandparents and grandchildren** who are having to lead a completely different lifestyle involving trauma, grief, stress, loss, emotional upheaval, financial, legal and housing problems, and educational disadvantage. Support through the teenage years is vital.
3. **Co-ordination of all services and agencies**, especially communication between Centrelink, Community Services and DADHC, and **assisting workers to understand the needs of grandparents** so that grandparents are given full respect and all appropriate support and entitlements without barriers or undue delays, and so that stress is reduced instead of being added to.
4. **Legal Aid for grandparents without means testing** to assist them to take legal action to gain guardianship of grandchildren living in danger of severe harm. Consideration of remuneration for grandparents who successfully gain custody of their grandchildren.
5. For all grandparents - not just those who have come through the Children's Court: **The provision of respite, childminding, emergency relief or contingency money in a crisis.** It may be for hardship or a serious episode of ill health, or having to pay specialist bills for their grandchildren, suddenly having to attend a funeral of a close relative, or buying new car seats for newly arrived grandchildren. Ageing may add to the need for respite.
6. **Ongoing support, counselling and group therapy for grandchildren being raised by grandparents** and support to enable them to meet other grandchildren like themselves, particularly at family weekend camps where grandchildren and grandparents all benefit from sharing stories.
7. **The strengthening of early intervention programs for 'at risk' pregnant mothers, including ongoing and close monitoring** before and after birth, especially for those on drugs, or underage, or with a mental illness, or all of these, to ensure that the baby is not in danger. Decisions should take into account the observations of grandparents and other significant people to gain a balanced view.
8. **Support services for parents/grandparents of aberrant underage children.**

9. **Equal rights for grandparents** as it can seem that the rights of the neglecting parent of the grandchildren get preference. Some grandparents feel that they have to prove their worth, and fitness to raise grandchildren, far more than the neglecting parent.
10. **Satisfactory access agreements that work in the best interests of the grandchildren and do not cause excessive disruption to their lives or the lives of their carers.**
11. **Raising awareness in the community of what it is like to be a grandparent raising grandchildren and to be grandchildren who cannot live with their parents.**
12. Where grandparents are aware of serious risk of harm to their grandchildren, and are willing to take them into their care, **early assessment and checks of grandparents should take place to allow them to take their grandchildren out of danger much sooner than currently occurs.** This would reduce the terrible disruption and damage caused either by unnecessary, sometimes numerous, temporary foster care placements, or by continuing abuse, before affairs are settled. It would also reduce the awful distress suffered by grandparents witnessing the suffering of their grandchildren.

THE PATH OF THE GRANDPARENTS AND THEIR GRANDCHILDREN SHOULD BE MADE AS SMOOTH AND AS STRESS-FREE AS POSSIBLE.

Note: Just the appointment of a Kinship Care Worker in every region of the State (preferably all States in Australia) has the potential to improve the lives of many grandparents and their grandchildren in a very short time and in a cost effective way.

**Grandparents who need assistance should ring 132 111
the Community Services Helpline.**

GRANDPARENT SUPPORT GROUPS

Kinship Care Worker:

My project has enabled a lot more Support Groups for grandparents to be established. The best support that grandparents or kinship carers can get is meeting other people who are going through the same situation. Despite their problems and the way they've been treated, they can be so loving and compassionate to other carers. It's a privilege to witness. When new people come into the group every grandparent stops and listens because the newcomers have so much to talk about and download. They're so glad that at last there is somebody there to talk to that they might spend the three hours of the group's time getting all the stressful issues off their chest. It's often the first time they've been able to do that.

The Support Groups are there week after week listening and caring for each other, providing information and referrals. When somebody asks a question there is usually someone in the group who has been at that point and can answer that question or suggest where or how the problem might be resolved. The members give each other courage to face the huge decisions they have to make, because as people get older they can lose confidence.

I can't describe how important these groups are. They act as a lifeline. In a couple of groups that have been going for a few years beautiful friendships have been made. It's nothing to do with me as the coordinator. The longest-running group is existing on its own now and I am confident it will continue because of the friendships that have been forged.

Not all carers want to come to a Support Group. Some access financial assistance through the Supported Care Allowance and I don't hear any more from them. Some move to another area to be with other family members for help, while others are experiencing such a stressful time from the parents of the children that they don't make any further contact.

Grandparents go to a meeting whenever they can. Some of them do go every week and give support which is another sacrifice on their behalf. There's usually a cup of tea and something nice to nibble on and the opportunity to sit quietly to talk which they probably don't get at home with all their dealings with the grandchildren. Whether grandparents have one grandchild in care, or nine grandchildren, or any number in between, they've all got challenges to meet every day.

"I've noticed that after the grandparents have had their grandchildren for a while, quite a few start doing something nice for themselves. It might only be going for a walk, or seeing a movie or meeting a friend for coffee. You

can't do any of that when you first get the children but it's good to do something special for yourself.”(Shirley)

*

“All of us love it when we hear a pair of little feet run across the floorboards towards our meeting room. A beaming little boy bursts into the room and we all call out, ‘Hullo, Byron!’ The three year old greets us happily, gets some cuddles, then heads for the toys. He plays on the floor contentedly making soft noises for the characters in his imagined game. Sometimes his grandfather sits down to play beside him. Then Byron’ll sit up at the table and eat his little packed lunch. An entrancing, delightful boy who has endeared himself to all of us. When a three month old baby granddaughter was brought to our meeting Byron brought out a doll’s high chair for her to sit in.

His grandparents are doing an amazing job with him. Nobody would guess that his mother has a serious mental illness, lives on the streets, mixes with addicts and prostitutes, and carries knives. She visits him every now and then, but never does anything with him in a loving, personal way. She never takes any interest in the way he’s growing up.”(Shirley)



Weekend camps

Weekend camps at a beautiful lakeside setting are generally held each year if funding can be found. (Sometimes it is funded through Connecting Carers.) They are a resounding success for all family members. Accommodation is in lodges with good facilities and all meals are provided. Trained instructors take the grandchildren through challenging experiences, kayaking, rock climbing, archery and swimming and on the high ropes.

Free from parenting tasks grandparents relax, and choose whether to participate in planned activities designed to meet their needs, or whether to go off for a walk, read a book, or just chat. Grandfathers have a unique opportunity to talk with other men like them.

For grandmother Elaine the camp proved to be a turning point. She was going through terrible stress at the time. At the camp she heard harrowing stories from other grandparents yet they were still managing to have a laugh and struggle on with their lives in very positive ways.

She was so impressed that she decided to take charge of her life, which had seemed out of control. She recognised that improving her own well being would benefit her family too. She joined a meditation class and deliberately included more things in her life that gave her pleasure. In a short time she was noticeably happier and more relaxed.

Comments from grandparents and grandchildren after a weekend camp:

- *“It’s a perfect balance of leisure time and planned activities. A rare time to smell the roses. For many of us it is our only respite in the whole year.”*

*

- *“We never went to grandparents meetings till last year. There are so many more kids out there being raised by their grandparents than I realised, it’s just that in our area we don’t know of any. Nan and I are so glad we went to the camp for grandparent families. I met lots of other kids and I realised we weren’t so different.*

*

- *‘At the camp my granddaughter was in bed - top bunk of course: ‘Granny, sometimes at school I feel out of it. I’m the only one in my class being brought up by my Grandma and living in a flat. I was talking with the other kids at the campfire. They were talking about why they were with their grandmas. I feel like I belong in this group. I’m lucky because some of the other children have had dreadful things happen to them.’She told me she had spoken about why she was living with me. It was spot on with reality. I think it was the first time she had ever spoken about it with other children.”*

*

- *“The grandchildren can do activities with younger carers that we as grandparents are not capable of physically doing.”*

- *‘I’m carer of my nine grandchildren and I can’t tell you how wonderful it has been for me to watch how my children have enjoyed the weekend. The time we have spent here this week has been a fantastic, relaxing weekend. It gave me time to be with adults which I rarely have.’*

*

- *“The weekend camp was especially helpful for my granddaughter as, up until then, she had thought herself to be the only girl in the world who had been sexually abused by her father from a very early age. For girls like her, just knowing this goes a long way towards helping the healing process. They come to the understanding that they are not alone nor are they to blame. It helps with their inevitably low self-esteem.’*

*

- *“My four grandsons thought it was great. They said the food was wonderful because it was kids’ food not old people’s food’.”*

Wow! The birthday parties Sophie was invited to! There were horse riding parties, tenpin bowling parties, parties at fast food restaurants, ice skating parties, theatre parties and pool parties. When I went to pick her up from yet another party I found her with ten other girls - swathed in filmy scarves, beads dangling from their waists, a ‘diamond’ in the middle of their forehead - a picture of concentration as they copied the graceful, swaying movements of the belly dancing lady in front of them. What bliss! Nobody wanted to go home. Nothing I could do would ever match that!

When it came to Sophie’s sixth birthday, her first with us, the vintage grandmother part of me came to the fore. We would have an old-fashioned birthday.

We had traditional food including fairy bread, Sophie made party baskets and put up decorations. We had old-fashioned games like Pass the Parcel and Sophie painted a magnificent lion for our version of Pin the Tail on the Donkey (I framed it afterwards). We hid goodies all around the garden for a Treasure Hunt.

All had a wonderful time, it was a success *but* I had forgotten that I was nearly forty years older than when I held my last children’s birthday party. I was exhausted. Now I knew why the other mothers had gone for the everything-provided party. Next birthday would be easier!

FOOD

Behaviour and emotional problems

Some grandparents have found that behavioural and emotional problems are considerably reduced by excluding foods which have a detrimental effect on their grandchildren.

“When Ryan was very small, anything artificially coloured and flavoured made him very emotional and he’d bring up all sorts of things from the past and cry about them and it would last for ages. We had to cut out all artificial colours and flavours. I’d send a plate of food if he was invited to a party or if there was something on at school.

Working in child care I came across a lot of children with food intolerances, and other children who were displaying the behaviours that indicated food intolerance to me. I loaned books to parents so they could try eliminating some of the harmful foods but some parents couldn’t be bothered. I always pointed out that the bother was worth it to control their children’s behaviour. The people who did bother thanked me a million times over. It allowed their children to show what beautiful children they could be. Food intolerance is cumulative so the effects are not apparent straight away.

It’s not easy being on a restricted diet but it’s all worth it and as people get older they realise. A few times I’ve realised when Ryan’s been emotional that he’s eaten something wrong and I’ve said, ‘What did you eat? You’re very emotional, very teary?’

‘I had something at my friend’s place, or Nanna’s.’

I say, ‘How do you feel now about that? Do you think it was worth having that?’

‘No, I don’t.’

Even at nine he can see how it makes him feel.”(Roslyn)

Neglect and food

“Clare, the mother of my other grandson Nathan, had a big drinking problem. I worked a split shift in child care. I had to be up at 5.30am, and at work at 7.00. I came home from the first shift about 10.30, and left home at 2.00 for the second shift and got home about 7.00. Between shifts I used to go around to attend to my grandson Nathan. I’d get to his mum’s flat and she’d still be asleep. I had to bang on her bedroom door, and I could hear Nathan crying because there was no milk. He hadn’t had anything since the bottle the night before and he’d still be in the same nappy. After the first visit I always brought milk and food with me. It was a terrible worry.

When I came home from work I had to get everybody's tea and then I'd have to go and get her out of the pub, Nathan would be there with her. I'd take her to her home, get her up the steps and into bed. I'd put a nappy on Nathan, give him a bottle, get him to bed and then I wouldn't be able to get there until 11 o'clock the next day. I'd be nearly sick knowing he was running round hungry and not being looked after.

As soon as I finished work Friday night I'd come and get him and I'd have him at the weekend until I got Clare out of the pub on Sunday night. Nathan got that way he screamed as I drove up close to his home. I kept doing that till he was three.

When he was only one year old she'd leave the pub and get fried rice and give that to him for tea. They didn't have breakfast at all because she doesn't eat breakfast. When Nathan's sister Chelsea was a baby, Clare even had Nathan getting out of bed and warming up the bottle for the baby because she didn't want to get up.

He was so difficult to feed I was glad to get anything in his mouth. His mum only gave him snack food and junk. He still snacks on junk food. He's nearly seventeen and six feet tall but he's bone thin. I don't think he's having the right nutrients. Nathan's grandfather is worried about what Nathan eats. It's the psychological aspect of his background. When he was in his mother's womb she was having drugs, junk food, and cigarettes."(Roslyn)

Trauma and food

For some children, the trauma of their early lives has a devastating effect on their eating habits. Jean faced terrible challenges when her four grandchildren came to live with her. Terrible for her and terrible for her grandchildren. (See 'Jean's story' in Part 3)

Concerns

It is worrying to see the excessive amounts of foods and drinks containing chemicals that can be very harmful to children. High on the list are the energy drinks with their high range of caffeine, sugar and sodium. Young boys and teenagers are consuming numerous cans of these particularly at sporting events.

"A grandson who is under medication for ADHD was drinking a can of 'Mother' at a barbecue. It is energy-dense, nutrient-poor, full of sugar, full of caffeine. Kids become hyperactive, they can get dizzy and it makes their heart beat quicker. Teachers say just one can will cause noticeable behavioural disturbances. Afterwards the kids are sleepy and not listening as well." (Clare)

Questions

Hyperactivity, asthma, skin problems, learning problems, mood swings, behavioural changes, headaches and more ... They may not all be caused by food, but it is worth exploring whether food has an adverse effect on grandchildren's health before going down the medication track.

Further research into intolerances and how food affects children's health, behaviour and emotions could be very revealing and have significance in improving the lives of many children.

Does intolerance to amines, a group of vegetables and fruit but also including beer and wine, have any connection with parental alcoholism?

Many grandparents are battling with grandchildren who have had only a very narrow range of food in their early childhood, and mostly junk food. What long term effect has this on children's eating habits? These children are reluctant to try new food.



GRANDPARENT CARE AND FOSTER CARE

Foster carers are doing a magnificent job of raising children who are not related to them in any way and who have suffered greatly from their adverse backgrounds. They face many challenges unique to foster care.

There are significant differences between grandparents who are raising their grandchildren and foster parents.

One is a matter of choice

Intending foster carers consider all the consequences of taking on others' children, talk about how their care could affect other family members and gather as much information as possible. After that many of them undergo training, they receive support from Connecting Carers (and before that from the Foster Care Association) which includes a Hotline, and support from government agencies. The government needs more foster carers and actively seeks them out.

Grandparents feel they have no choice but to take on the raising of their grandchildren. How could they give the care of their grandchildren to strangers when the children are their loved family members?

Without choice, few grandparents fully consider the effects of taking on the rearing of their grandchildren. Circumstances can suddenly arise, for example, after a car accident where their urgent help is needed. They are the only ones available to care for their grandchildren.

Many grandparents feel they don't get enough assistance, especially if they haven't come through the Children's Court. Unless they ring the Helpline they have to find out for themselves what, if any, assistance is available, and prove they are eligible to receive it. The exception is where a Kinship Care Worker who knows the most appropriate action to take to meet their particular circumstances.

Connecting with kin enhances grandchildren's sense of family Nothing can replace that. It is why foster parents have more contact with the children's family than they did in the past and this can work extremely well to the benefit of all parties. Grandparents have the advantage of being able to provide many opportunities for the grandchildren to enjoy satisfying, loving experiences with their wider family including cousins, aunts and uncles. The grandchildren have the opportunity to see role models who exemplify how family members relate to and feel about each other. For grandchildren the love of other family members is priceless and it strengthens their sense of identity and belonging.

Access

Foster carers, like grandparents, have to pick up the pieces when the children return from stressful access visits. However, if relations with other family members get too upsetting, foster parents are usually able to reduce the frequency of contact and possibly cease it altogether.

That's not always an option for grandparents. Even under very trying circumstances they may be bound by a court order to continue access visits that can be very damaging and confusing for the grandchildren. If the cause of all the upheaval is the grandparents' own son or daughter, or an irresponsible in-law, it is so much harder for grandparents because of their own personal and emotional involvement. Coping with access visits, phone calls, troubled parents, disagreeable situations and the aftermath of disturbed grandchildren is a very heavy load on top of the child-rearing role. Few grandparents receive assistance or counselling to help them cope.

Many grandparents have already established a unique relationship with their grandchildren before the grandchildren come to live with them.

They may have already minded them a lot, been a confidant and given them love and encouragement. This should be a vital consideration when the placement of grandchildren is being considered.

Grandparents offer the extra dimension of being able to give their grandchildren an understanding of their history. They have photos to share and stories to tell. They know what binds family groups and generations together.

Grandparents, often the grandmothers, have a special role in family dynamics. They can be the glue that holds the family together. They can be the confidant of their spouse, their own children and their grandchildren as well. Many grandparents cherish the special relationship they have with their grandchildren.

There is another side to this role, however, when family friction arises, as it does when addiction is involved. Grandparents, while trying to support the grandchildren, are often trying to support the parents as well, and indeed, other members of their family. In trying to be peacemakers they become the meat in the sandwich. It's a difficult line to tread but it can lead to healing and better harmony if the grandparents are able to help family members understand each other better.

Parenting at a later age

With some exceptions carers are not generally encouraged to take on foster care past the age of sixty. Many grandparents, on the other hand, *start* raising their grandchildren around this age and beyond, though of course there are younger grandparents too. Considering the age of most grandparents it is obvious they will suffer more health problems yet it is rare to find any assistance, respite or

emergency care available for grandparents

Health care

For young children up to the age of five who are coming into foster care there is a Health Care plan Pathways that automatically comes into operation at one level, for everyday concerns such as immunisation and health checks, and at a higher level, for children with special needs like ADHD, or psychological counselling. There are plans for this to be extended in the future to cover children up to the age of twelve. This plan is only available to those children coming into grandparent care, who have come through the Children's Court and through DoCS. Other grandchildren, including those who have come through the Family Court, are not covered even though they may be no less needy.

At the very least, all grandparents and their grandchildren should be receiving the same level of support as foster carers.

Both grandparents and foster parents are raising disadvantaged and hurt children in the hope of giving them a better life.

Grandparents are managing to keep the children in the embrace of their family despite obstacles like age, poor health, stressful family relationships, grief, lack of financial assistance and more. It is agreed that grandparent care has better outcomes than foster care. Children in out of home care stay longer with grandparents than they do with foster parents. That is not to say that foster carers are not doing a magnificent job. They are. But if there's an opportunity for children to stay within the family network then that's clearly preferable.

Kinship Care Worker:

Every single phone call I take is a new story, a traumatic story and there aren't enough services out there to support these carers. In the absence of enough foster carers you would think that the government departments would support these kinship carers but they don't. Time and time again I've found DoCS is using kinship carers as an easy way out. I think the workers in DoCS are overworked and understaffed. They are doing a very difficult job and making difficult decisions, so when a kinship carer comes along they think, "Oh, here's an answer to the problem. We don't have to look for foster carers any more. Well, good, we'll give this one to the kinship carer," and then they leave them on their own, without support. That's terribly unfair. Research shows that kinship carers save the government money because they do it a lot more cheaply than foster carers do.

The legal system also uses kinship carers, particularly grandparents, as an easy way out. Not enough lawyers are considering the family law aspect, they're viewing it from the criminal law side.

Grandma is very kind. She cares about me
but most of all she is the best. she is
not selfish or mean and she is also intelligent.

by Lauren.



PLAY

Sadly, some grandchildren arrive at their grandparents' having never learnt what it is like to have fun and play with other children.

“Within a week of coming to me I put Brett into family day care because he'd had no contact with children of his own age and no concept of how to play with them. He just stood. He'd have a toy in his hand and he'd just look at them. He had no idea. He was slow to interact. If kids came up and took a toy off him he'd just let them. It was such a shame. He'd missed out on so much. He was right behind the eight ball to start with. After about a month it was, 'No! Mine!'" (Anna)

From environments of fear and neglect, where survival is the name of the game, grandchildren haven't had normal childhood experiences. Parents in addition give little or no thought to how their lifestyle impacts on their children. Children who have moved from house to house with just a handful of possessions have had little chance of making strong friendships or of practising valuable life skills through play.

“Tegan's fifteen. She celebrated Christmas this year. She wasn't expecting to get presents when she got up in the morning. For Christmas two years ago she got a school bag and soap and washer. The year before she got a little CD stereo. Two weeks later her mother had hocked it on her. Another time her mother hocked her play stations and X-boxes. Tegan had a beautiful collection of porcelain dolls. I went to see her after she'd gone back to her mother. She came out screaming, 'Mummy hocked all my dolls, and my Teddy and my videos!'" (Delia)

Some children have had to take on the adult role of minding their siblings at the expense of their own childhood needs, while others have never had an adult sit down and play with them.

“Children need to be played with, you need to do stuff with them. I remember Mum never did that. I wish she had. It was always, 'Go away, go away, watch telly, sit down, shut up.' Whatever. I can't stand that especially when she used to do it to the twins. She'd say, 'The two of you go and play.' Being twins doesn't mean they have to play together all the time, or that she can't play with them, a puzzle or a book or something.” (granddaughter Leanne)

Perhaps grandparents have an advantage living before computers, and before the advent of sophisticated toys, in freer times when children built cubby houses in the bush, got dirty, rode billy carts, kept tadpoles, played cricket on the street and filled their time inventively. Grandparents understand the value of real,

hands-on play. They are not in a rush to make their grandchildren high achievers. They are pleased if they have happy, well-adjusted grandchildren who can get on well with their peers. If that happens the grandchildren will probably do well enough at school anyway.

It is interesting to note that some signs of play deprivation are stress, anxiety and depression. These are not relieved by a diet of computer games!



GRIEF

It is an unimaginable burden to carry when grandparents are struggling with grief for the loss of a loved one at the same time that they are having to care for grandchildren.

“My son was the lone carer of his four boys when he died in a house fire. We were all traumatised. Such a shock. One day we’re talking, the next he’s dead. What worried the eldest boy was that he’d had a row with his Dad before he went to school. It’s worrying him. He’s a mess, in deep, deep depression.

The boys were dreadfully unsettled when they first came.

After about six months the kids realised Dad wasn’t coming back and all hell broke out. They just collapsed. The lot of them, I was picking up kids all over the place.

‘I haven’t seen you cry Nan,’

‘I have cried, but I cry in the shower where nobody can see me.’

I didn’t want to upset them any more.

The grief counsellor said, ‘Well, cry in front of them.’

One day it just took me and I bawled and bawled, I couldn’t stop, and I’m streaming. The grief counsellor said, ‘I want to see 75 more hours like this.’”(Dawn)

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“It was very sad when my husband Don died of cancer. I had counselling and my granddaughter Carolyn who was seven went to a course run by Relationships Australia. When the children were asked to draw something that frightened them she drew a coffin. She was frightened of what was going to happen to her. She hadn’t really talked about Don’s death until then but after that she was quite comfortable.

She used to go to sleep every night on his lap and he would put her to bed. They were very, very close. He used to spoil Carolyn and leave all the disciplining to me.

He’d say, ‘I don’t want her to remember me as a cranky old man.’

She’s fourteen but she still loves to hear stories about the things he used to get up to and she likes looking through our photos and remembering good times together.”(Elaine)

Rosemary's story

“People say, ‘I thought you’d be over it by now.’ How would they know? They don’t have a clue what it has been like. Neil and I miss Jan every day of our lives. She was our beautiful, loving daughter one day and the next she was gone. In the blink of an eye.

One terrible Thursday our world fell apart. On that day Jan had decided to leave Evan, her partner of nine years, and come home to live with us. He was domineering, moody and jealous, and he was drinking heavily. She’d had enough. About five o’clock she rang to tell us she hadn’t finished what she wanted to do and asked us to continue minding her daughter Emma.

Later Evan’s mother rang us to say he had just rung her and said he was going to kill himself. Neil rushed straight over. When he went inside he found Evan dead at the kitchen table. Neil raced through the house looking for Jan. I can’t imagine the panic he must have felt. He found her in the bedroom. Evan had shot her first! Our precious daughter! The sight haunts Neil to this day.

At home, it seemed like Neil had been gone for hours. I was waiting and waiting, wondering what he was doing. What I didn’t know was that Neil was sitting in the car across the road here for ages. He didn’t want to come in because he didn’t know how I would take the dreadful news.

The police were coming and going most of the night. We had to wait for an autopsy and a coroner’s report. I felt so sorry for Neil. On top of what he had already been through he had to go to the morgue. He identified both bodies to save Evan’s mother having to go through it.

The forensic cleaners cleaned the two crime rooms, but we were left to clean out the rest of the house. We had to go through all of Jan’s clothes and belongings and do all the packing. It was far, far worse than when someone dies in ordinary circumstances. We were both in utter shock. Numb.

The year ahead was hard. Neil couldn’t get on with his life, he was deeply depressed, he lacked any sort of motivation and he had awful nightmares. Really he’d lost his spirit. I had my own grief, I was trying to cope with a severely traumatised husband and I was raising a granddaughter who had lost both parents. If Emma hadn’t been with us she would have been shot too.

Before it all happened we’d ordered a new caravan so that we could go travelling. Now, under different circumstances, and much later than we had planned, we set off on a trip. We were able to take Emma because she didn’t have to start school until the following year. We came across lots of grandparents who were all missing their own grandchildren so Emma was spoilt

everywhere we went. It was so good for her. We were away three months and the trip gave us some desperately needed respite.

We didn't just lose a daughter. We lost a granddaughter too. We couldn't spoil her. We'd become her parents. If my mum and dad were alive they would have been buying Emma little treats. They left some money after they died and sometimes I buy her things and say, 'That's from my mum.'

Victims of Crime is a wonderful organisation. The police rang them when the crime happened and a member of the group contacted us. The members are very sensitive to our situation. They are the only people who genuinely understand how we feel and how the tragedy affects us. They arranged counselling for the three of us. Emma only needed one session but the psychologist said that she would probably need counselling as she matures and I think that'll be true.

When she was little she hid her father's photo but now that she is twelve she is realising more what Daddy actually did and she'll say, 'Why did it happen to me? It's horrible for her to have to live with the fact that her father killed her mother.'

So now we're getting on with our lives as normally as we can. The pain might dull but it never goes away. I still find it unbelievable that it could have happened. Neil couldn't sleep well for ages, but he has coped pretty well considering what he went through. He resents losing his retirement and all the plans that he'd made.

Sometimes I wonder when is it going to end. The whole affair did affect our health. A year later, almost to the day, Neil had a pulmonary embolism and all the clots went to his lungs and enlarged his heart. He was in hospital for three weeks and the cardiac specialist said he was very lucky to have survived. Fortunately he'd been very fit.

I was determined when Jan was killed that it was not going to affect my health. I had to be well and I had to cope for Emma's sake but eventually I paid the price. I can't say it caused my condition because I already had a tumour on my pituitary gland before Jan died, but where other people have been cured, that didn't happen in my case. I have to have a needle at the hospital every three weeks to keep it under control.

I had to have my thyroid taken out when it started pressing on my voice box, and that's when the doctors found it was cancerous. Later on I developed a hot spot of cancer in my right pelvis. I had treatment with radioactive iodine so that it could absorb and kill the cancer. I've had four doses of that.

I get put in the isolation ward when that happens and Neil can only visit me two

hours a day because of the radioactivity. For three weeks he made the two hour drive to Sydney every day, then he drove back home, did my washing and repeated it all the next day. In that time Emma couldn't see me at all because children aren't allowed in the isolation ward. She still had to go to school too.

One time when I was there I picked up an infection that caused septicaemia. I had two blood transfusions, I got hypo on too much insulin, my internal organs shut down and I had to be put on dialysis because my kidneys stopped working. I was given forty-eight hours to pull through and over that weekend Neil was told I had a fifty-fifty chance of living.

I was not aware of what was going on but I had an incredible experience. I heard a voice that said, 'What are you doing here? You go back, you still have a job to do.' That was the turning point. I had to be there for Emma, and not only for Emma, for my son Dean too. He and his partner were expecting a baby at the time.

So in the eight years we have had Emma, Neil and I have both nearly died. No grandparents who are raising grandchildren are able to get any respite or extra assistance. Neil and I are at least fortunate that when one of us has been very sick, the other one has been well enough to cope. I don't know what we'd do if we both needed health care at the same time. Our few remaining relatives are not well enough and live too far away to be of any help. That leaves our son Dean. His partner has three children and they have their young baby, and Dean has to go to work. Grandparents should at least be able to get emergency help.

Emma doesn't show it but I know it is a worry to her whenever I am in hospital, especially that last time, and I know she is aware that Neil and I are old, and old people die, something most children don't think about in relation to their parents. Some days I feel quite tired but the next day I get up and I am all right.

We're not going to be here forever to support her. That's the worry, lasting the distance. I think, what will happen to her if something happens to us? The important thing is getting her to the age when I can say, I've done my job, she is capable of looking after herself now. She's a good kid, I know my son Dean will take her, but that will mean he'll be looking after five children. It's a big ask. Fortunately his partner is a good mother. I've got no worries.

GAPS has been really good for Neil and me and for Emma too. We've made good friends with other grandparents who are raising grandchildren. Neil has gained more out of belonging to GAPS than from his twenty visits to the psychologist. He enjoys the support and the company. The grandkids have made good friends too. They can talk about their problems with each other as well.

To this day it still doesn't seem real. Neil and I had a sheltered upbringing with

no experience of 'bad' people. We had never had anything remotely like this happen in our lives. People don't think it can, but it can happen to anybody. Jan had a lovely nature and she was robbed of rearing Emma, the beautiful girl she loved. We lost future grandchildren and the special close relationship we had with our daughter. We miss her every day of our lives.

Neil and I are left to raise an orphan. Emma's memory of her mother is fading and her thoughts of her father are of anger and betrayal. How can anyone say, 'I thought you'd be over it by now!' "

Postscript

Further radiation for the cancer in Rosemary's hips was delayed so that an eminent surgeon in Adelaide could carry out the delicate procedure of removing the tumour on her pituitary gland which for so long had affected her immune system. As with her grandmother's previous hospital visits, Emma stayed with friends so that she could continue going to school.

Everyone was elated when the tumour surgery was completely successful. But the feeling was short-lived. In the next few weeks the pain in Rosemary's hips became so severe that she had to be admitted to hospital. A scan revealed that the cancer had spread throughout her body and Neil was told that the proposed radiation treatment would be ineffective.

'I've lost my daughter, I've lost my retirement, and now I'm losing my wife.'

The news was shattering. Friends in GAPS were devastated. Always in the past, Rosemary had bounced back. Always she'd beaten the odds. This time was different and she died at the age of 64, a courageous, compassionate, inspirational lady who, had remained positive and cheerful despite all her suffering.

Emma turned thirteen less than a week after her grandmother's funeral. Neil raises her on his own without his loved wife of 43 years by his side and Emma, already an orphan, will grow through the teenage years to womanhood without the guidance of her loved grandmother.

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Grandparents express another kind of grief

The children they raised who suffer a mental illness, or who succumbed to addiction, are unable to lead a fulfilled and happy life. They cannot raise their own children, and are unlikely to ever achieve their potential.

"The sad thing is, my son can't be like other fathers. He can't raise his own daughter. Even though he has recovered from his addiction it's too late. His daughter's been with us too long, she's too settled. She wouldn't want to go

back to him anyway. He can still see her. He knows she is best with us. But it hurts.”(Clare)

“I push it out of my mind but every now and again I think of what my daughter could have been. She had so much potential . She was so clever. Now she’s not good for anything. It’s a terrible shame.”(Mavis)

“My son used to be strong and healthy but because of drugs and drink,that’s gone. His mind’s affected. He’ll never work. It’s a waste. It’s tragic.”(Roger)

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FAMILIES

Growing up with a troubled brother or sister.

Brothers and sisters lose trust and respect for siblings who choose bad lifestyles or become addicts. Some resent seeing their parents having to spend so much time, worry and energy on the sibling who doesn't appear to deserve it. They resent seeing their parents' lives change and become fully taken up by having to raise their sibling's children. These feelings carry over into their adult lives.

- *“Owen has created a lot of issues for our family. Mum and Dad have bailed him numerous times. Every time he goes to gaol he writes them the soppiest of letters saying how much he loves them. They always take him back. Generally the longest he has stayed out of gaol is six months, but this time it has been nine months and he has stayed clean. Mum and Dad say he's doing really well but I am pessimistic because it never lasts long and he goes off the rails again and gets back on to drugs. He has schizophrenia now which came from drugs without a doubt. They have spent thousands of dollars on him. He has stolen from all of us and I will never trust him. I don't think my brothers and sisters respect him. I am convinced one of my brothers went through depression. I think he felt quite neglected. He moved out of home for a while and didn't want to know Mum and Dad.”(Rachel)*
- *My daughter Sonia's addiction has been going on for so long her two sisters are used to it. They're just waiting for the next thing to happen. They've both been wonderful. They have supported me in everything that has happened and have been loving and generous towards their sister's children. My nineteen year old daughter Cherie went to stay with Sonia for six weeks to help her when she had a baby. The baby would be waking up screaming, and Sonia wouldn't get up to feed him. Cherie had to go in and wake his mother up. 'Get up! He needs feeding!'"(Delia)*

The other children grandparents raised are very much affected by their sibling's lifestyle and its effects.

- *“I think my daughter felt jealous because I had my son Bruce's children more than hers. Even before she had children she resented the amount of time I spent on my two grandsons though she has never said that. Now that I don't have the boys with me she has wanted me to babysit more and more. I can't say no, I don't feel I have any option. It's a seventy minutes drive for me to her place. On top of that I have the two hour drive weekly to see the boys at Bruce's.”(Roslyn)*
- *“My daughter resented the fact that so much of my attention was on my grandson. It had to be. He was just a baby when we got him. She and I couldn't get on with talking a lot and I think she was jealous and it caused us to drift*

apart. I felt sad that our relationship had changed and things weren't right between us so I made a conscious effort, a special time, to be with her. Now we meet regularly for a cuppa and a chat and everything's back to normal."(Helen)

- *"My son has been very supportive and understanding about what I've had to do for my grandchild but my daughter shuts her resentment inside. She needs to get it out in the open and talk about her feelings. It's like a block. I think she would be better in many aspects of her life if she could express openly what it has been like to have a sister with a severe mental illness."*(Vi)
- *"Raising my granddaughter has meant that I have seen less of my other two children. They live some distance away, and I can't visit them whenever I like. That hurts when one of them is sick. I know grandparents whose children barely speak to them because they are raising a grandchild. That is so sad. I am very grateful that my children and my close family have all accepted my granddaughter with generosity, love and kindness. That has been the most precious gift she could have received from them."*(Clare)
- *"There was an aunty in our Group raising her nephew. Her sixteen year old daughter was almost driven to leave home because her whole life was turned on its head when the boy came into care. She was constantly being used as a baby sitter because her mother still had to go to work. The teenager felt displaced by this young child."*(Barbara)

The grandchildren

It is quite common for GAPS grandchildren who have brothers and sisters not to share the same father or mother. There is a grandmother in our GAPS area who has been raising nine grandchildren - the same mother but different fathers. She has had to fight to keep so many grandchildren in her care but she has been adamant that if the children couldn't be raised by either of their parents, at least they had the right to grow up with their brothers and sisters and know them as family.

In some instances brothers and sisters don't even know each other.

*"My ten year old asked me, 'Have I got an older brother?'
'Yes, your Dad had a little boy from another lady.'"*(Delia)

Picking up the pieces

“Clare is the mother of my eldest grandson Nathan. My son Bruce has always helped her but he never lived with her. Clare’s 43 and I look after her. She can’t look after herself, she can’t look after her money, she can’t clean the house. I can’t just leave her out there. I have to go down physically and do stuff. She chain smokes, she drinks and takes drugs. She’s had such a bad cerebral haemorrhage they had to induce a stroke. One of her arms is paralysed now.

She’s quite happy. We always have her for Christmas and Nathan’s birthday, and I bring her over for dinner and I try to look after her. People might say she’s brought that on herself but she grew up with an abusive, alcoholic father.

The two mothers of my grandsons must feel like failures. Ryan’s mum, even though she’s wealthy, she must feel a failure as a mother. And Nathan’s mum has told me she’s failed him. She has no self esteem whatsoever. She hasn’t even got her little girl Chelsea any more, she was taken away from her when she was seven. When Chelsea’s father found another woman he took Clare to another town, put her in a flat and said, ‘Don’t try to get your daughter. I’ll just tell them what a drunk and drug addict you are.’

I couldn’t leave her there in this strange town, she had no skills to help herself. Everybody said I was mad but I got her a flat near us. ‘He was wealthy. He’s got to leave you something.’

He wangled it so that she only got \$30,000 and he put it in a fixed fund that she couldn’t touch, like a superannuation fund.

I said, ‘You know you can’t work any more. If we can prove that, you will be able get your super.’

I took her to various doctors and neurosurgeons and eventually I had a folder of documents to say she’d never work again. I got her superannuation for her and she bought a little home in a mobile village. She’s so proud that she owns her own home. That did a lot for her self esteem. She said, ‘I’m the only person in my family that owns their own home.’

Nathan and I used to go and do her yard but now he has moved away for his apprenticeship John and I do it. It’s only small.

Clare’s at my place every Tuesday and we have a baked dinner, lots of laughs, she tells me about what she’s been doing. Otherwise where would she be?”(Roslyn)

It goes on and on

“I’ve still got feelings for my daughter but I’ve got to be on my guard all the time and make sure my granddaughter doesn’t have too much contact with her mother. It’s very hard a lot of times. They disappoint you all the time. I know she can’t do the right thing for any length of time. It’s her way of life. She’s still into drugs. I think she likes the alcohol too now. She didn’t once. She’s always got boyfriends but she can’t have proper relationships with them.

I don’t have much to do with her any more. I try to shut it all out because I can’t cope with it. She doesn’t want to change, she can’t really, she’d have to be very strong. It’s an ongoing story. She’s been on drugs since she was thirteen or fourteen. It’s her way of life. I can’t see her changing.”(Isabel)

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“You’d think Mum would wake up to herself. No. She got worse and lost her licence for drink driving. How can Mum not see that she’s not going to be around if I get married or the boys get married? She probably won’t be there when I’m twenty-one either. I’ve accepted that fact. After she got drunk and carried on the way she did at Nan’s 70th birthday, I told her she’s not coming to my eighteenth, I’m just having dinner with Nan and Da, and my partner Ben’s family’s coming. She was a bit cranky about that.”(granddaughter Leanne)

When my grandson went beyond the limit I said, “Right! Time out! 1, 2, 3!”

Grandson, “But I love you.”

No response.

Grandson, “Nan, I’m talking to you. I love you.”

I was in a shoe shop the other day with my three year old grandson. A woman was trying on shoes.

Grandson: Take them off. They’re too big.

Woman: Do you think so?

So they’re having this little conversation and trying on more shoes.

Woman: What about these?

Grandson: Yes, they’re much better.

Woman: Thank you very much for your help.

Grandson: You’re very welcome.

AN UNWANTED LEGACY

It seemed to me there was a much higher proportion of GAPS grandchildren who were suffering problems that required extra parental care than in everyday families. Out of curiosity I made a list of the grandchildren I had come to know through the Support Group. I noted attachment disorders, ODD, ADD, ADHD, eating disorders, food intolerance, self harming, different kinds of autism, memory loss, anxiety problems, as well as severe low self esteem and social and relationship problems. None of the grandchildren I knew were unscathed. Even for grandchildren described as being 'easy to raise', bouts of depression or excessive anger were common as they grew older.

When I compared these grandchildren with children in everyday families there was a noticeable difference. It wasn't a scientific study but it clearly showed the huge challenges that grandparents face when they are raising their grandchildren.

"I am raising my granddaughter. Her mother left when Courtney was one and Courtney hasn't seen or heard from her since. That left my son Trevor, a single dad, to raise his daughter on his own. You could not fault him as a father, he did a wonderful job there.

When Courtney was six her Dad was diagnosed with leukaemia. We lost him when she was eight. She had two years of visiting him when he was in hospital having a lot of different treatments. Whenever he was too sick I'd have Courtney here. I think it would have been worse for Courtney if he had died suddenly.

I took her to a counsellor for a while to help her. That was good. I thought everything was all right but it hit her last year. She was sixteen. She went quiet, stayed in bed, at weekends too. It was different from just staying in bed like a lot of teenagers do.

I took her to a counsellor again but Courtney didn't take to her, so I took her to the doctor. The doctor didn't want to prescribe anything. She asked Courtney could she get herself out of it and I think Courtney has come out of it but not fully.

She has said she wouldn't mind finding her mother, just to hear what went wrong. A herbalist lady asked her, 'Do you think it would be the right time? You've got Year 11, I think really you've got enough on your plate. If you did search it may cause a problem.'

Courtney seemed to accept that

She doesn't talk much about it. She'll be 18 next year. If she wants to find her mother it will be up to her. I think she'll be in for a big disappointment.

She just wants to find out why her mum left. The mum could say anything. She could put the blame on the dad. Courtney idolises her Dad.

Children in other families also have issues to deal with as they grow up, but they live with at least one parent. They talk about that at school. There are so many different families. There's a mum and a dad, mum has a partner and dad has a partner. I think it's different for my granddaughter, none of her friends live with a grandparent. The others - they're going off to spend the weekend or holidays with their dad somewhere, then back to live with mum and her partner.

Courtney's mum was in touch with me once when Courtney was three. Could she send Courtney a birthday present? The present never arrived. She hasn't been in touch again. I've always been in the phone book. If she wanted to she could have made a phone call, but she doesn't." (Maria)

Most grandparents are faced with the challenge of raising children who are suffering major, long lasting damage. Moreover, many grandparents aren't looking after one affected grandchild, they are caring for numbers of affected grandchildren.

Toxins, drugs and alcohol and high levels of stress have a very detrimental effect on the brains of unborn babies. In their early childhood children's development and learning are adversely affected by trauma, abuse, neglect or insufficient nurture and stimulation. That's the background of many grandchildren being raised by grandparents. Some have suffered the whole package. Separation from both parents also has a serious and long lasting effect on children's lives.

Many grandchildren's basic needs were not met in their early years. Instead they learnt that the person who was supposed to be their nurturer, was someone they couldn't trust, someone who didn't give them adequate attention and love, or someone who could be angry, moody or abusive. The children were on constant alert and fearful. In some cases there was no bonding between child and parent. By the time these children come into grandparent care they feel rejected and insecure and they bring behavioural and social problems with them.

Kinship Care Worker:

There are the stories that break your heart. A child born into alcohol induced mongolism, or born with a cleft palate, developmental delay, hole in the heart, all sorts of health issues. Some are born with addiction and start life as methadone babies. The parents can't deal with the problems so they leave the grandparents to raise these damaged children.

Some grandchildren come to their grandparents so traumatised they don't eat,

they don't sleep, they have nightmares, they can't socialise, they can't bear to leave grandma's sight to go to school or pre-school.

They may eventually, with love, care and attention from the grandparents, find some level of normality, sit down and eat a normal meal. They may eventually be able to go to pre-school without causing such screaming episodes that even the child care workers can't handle it.

Sometimes the children regress into themselves and become quiet and depressed. They go through the motions of normality so the trauma is hidden but it comes out a number of years later, especially in teenagers, where suddenly things like self-harming starts happening. Up till then the grandchildren haven't received any counselling because the grandparents thought they were all right. They were quiet and there were no outward signs.

But even for the children who do get counselling as youngsters, their past experiences continue to affect them in different ways, at different developmental stages. It can be anger, it can be behaviour disorders of all kinds, there's lots of Aspergers. The aggression that's coming out in these children may be diagnosed as Aspergers which is on the autism spectrum but maybe it's a symptom of what they've been through.

Teenagers from normal family life are not exhibiting the behaviours of these children in care. It's all hearsay because nobody is doing the long term research on these kids. There are a couple of long term studies but I don't think they've included enough of the children in our category in kinship care who are coming from drug addicted parents.

Some of the grandchildren who are past the age of seven when they come to their grandparents have had many years of trauma. For them to be able to find stability and normality and learn to trust and feel secure and know somebody loves them, to even accept that love, is a big, big thing to come to. If we can help one child to have stability in life and reach their full potential then that's a reward. If we can help a lot more children, as many as we can, then all the effort is worthwhile.

There is an urgent need for early intervention

While grandparents are experienced in raising children and can be very perceptive, they lack the training to recognise and deal with serious psychological issues. They need professional intervention and long-term assistance to help their grandchildren make the best of their lives, yet I have heard of no instance where this kind of help has been offered to grandparents, and no instance where a professional body has been proactive in doing any sort of screening and follow-up. Mostly, any help for grandparents is whatever they find for themselves. Often that's not enough.

The ideal position would be to have professional help available from the time the grandchildren arrive. For example, in the case of Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), a professional could anticipate from knowing particular grandchildren's history if RAD is likely to occur, and recognise the symptoms if they did occur. They could help grandparents understand why grandchildren are behaving in the way that they do, and give them management strategies to help their grandchildren in the most effective ways. Had some of the grandparents I know had this kind of help it would have saved many years of torment for them and their grandchildren.

Just how badly grandchildren are affected becomes evident in Part 3 where their stories are told in detail.

HURTING GRANDCHILDREN

“Byron made a comment to me on the way home in the car. He said, “Mimi, I live on an island with all the other children who have no mothers.”

He said their mothers told them they could go and that their mothers don't miss them.

I sat on his bed with him that night and told him that I loved him very much. He said someone took the plug out and all the water went away from the island.

This coming from a three and a half year old is amazing to say the least. What is even more amazing is that he recognises there are other children who, as he puts it, have no mothers. He is so tuned in to what's going on around him and in his little world.

I just find it incredible. My heart breaks when I see the pain, disappointment and confusion on his face when his mum doesn't see him, especially when she says she will. It is so cruel.

I read him a story and he gave me a hug and said, “You are my mummy. Can I call you ‘mummy’? I love you mummy.”

I had to fight back the tears. It is so hard and I know it is going to get a lot harder.”

We love this little boy with all our hearts and we just want him to be the best that he can be and we will fight to give him the life he deserves.” (Brenda)

See Brenda's full story in Part 3.

***“Even if the parents aren’t bashing or hitting them, it’s all the damage they do in their kids’ heads. Are the kids safe to go back to them?
What’s going to happen here?
How many of them are going to end up on drugs themselves because of what’s in their head, or commit suicide or turn out in their life the same as their parents?
What’s it going to do to them?
Yet people seem to think it’s safe for kids to go back because their parents are not physically hurting them?” (Delia)***

*‘My heart hurts all the time.’
That’s a sad thing for a kid of fifteen to say, isn’t it. (Yvonne)*

What happened in the past?

“When I said I was going shopping and granddaughter could stay at home with Pop, she said, ‘I want to go with you. Somehow I don’t feel safe when you’re not here.’

I said, ‘I think, before you came here, you must have been left on your own and you were scared. Do you think that happened?’

‘My mum sometimes left all of us kids on our own’.” (Shirley)

*

“He must have had a bad experience about dying. I didn’t know that until we visited a cemetery once and he went crazy. He hates any talk about death.” (Clare)

*

“Whenever we walk past a hotel or a group of young men my granddaughter comes close to me or changes sides.” (Shirley)

*

Even when parents have successfully rehabilitated, any action that reminds grandchildren of the past can trigger a fearful response:

“Mark got quite anxious at Christmas time. He was counting how many drinks his father had. His father didn’t have too many but poor Mark couldn’t help remembering what it was like when his Dad used to get drunk.” (Pam)

Rejection and anger Yvonne talks about her grandson Luke:

“My daughter Rebecca already had a son Luke when she married Vince. As soon as their baby daughter Jodie was born Luke was put on the bottom level. As he grew up the relationship between stepfather and son got worse and they were always at loggerheads with each other. Vince used to say Luke was a pain in the arse, Luke was an idiot.

Luke said, ‘If you’re told often enough you’re an idiot, you start believing it.’ That’s true. It was continual humiliation.

When he was fourteen Luke couldn’t bear it any longer so he came to live with us. He hasn’t set eyes on his stepfather since. It’s only in the last month that he’s spoken to his mother. He calls her ‘Rebecca’ or ‘her’ because he blames her for marrying Vince. ‘She married that idiot. He’s done nothing but screw up my life. He’s done nothing to help me.

The same day Luke left, Vince put Luke’s bed on the dump. I feel for that boy. If he wanted to spend the night at his parents’ he hasn’t even got a bed there! The next bad thing they did was they knocked his bedroom wall down to make one big room.

So Luke is not going home. He said, ‘They definitely don’t want me!’ It’s sad. He’s a good kid.

Luke wasn’t getting one ounce of attention from his mother or his father. He’d get out of bed in the morning, get his own breakfast, never packed his lunch because there was never any bread or milk in the house, and he’d get himself off to school in clothes that stank because they hadn’t been washed.

In Year 7 he had to walk a long way to school. ‘I’d get home in the afternoon and I wouldn’t be in the door a minute before Dad would say, ‘Get the washing off the line. Sweep the floor.’ If I said, ‘No,’ it would be on for young and old. He’d start screaming and calling me a ‘nasty little bastard’ and then he would say, ‘Go and talk to your Nan and Pop. They think the sun shines out of you’.

Luke’s always been treated badly by his father. To get attention he started graffitying the walls of the house at night. Luke did that! He put a bottle straight through his bedroom window. That brought Vince to his feet. He’s jumping out of bed thinking, we’ve been bombed! He got in his car and went looking for the mad kids that did it. He had no idea it was Luke who was in bed! It was a cry for help.

Next

They had the police there. Did Luke bat an eyelid? Not one! He just wanted his father to feel what it was like to be humiliated. I don't blame him. Good on you, mate, go for it. Luke sees kids being angry with their mother or father on TV and he'll say, 'That's my mother,' or 'That's the arsehole she's married to'.

I tend to raise my voice. That's one thing you can't do in front of Luke. It sends him into a panic. There's a lot of anger there and he hates people yelling at him. My husband Brian has warned me not to raise my voice. 'Just let it go.' So we say nothing. He's got enough hurt inside. He doesn't need us nagging and screaming.

One time when his sister Jodie was there I said, 'Get out of my way please Luke, I'm trying to get Jodie her lunch.'

He went ballistic, he stamped upstairs and little Jodie was terrified of the noise. I wasn't game to go up.

Brian said, 'It's jealousy.'

Brian went up and Jodie crept up behind him. I had this dolls' house, an antique dolls' house I'd made years ago. It was my pride and joy. It wasn't used. It plugged into electricity. Luke picked it up and he threw it! Everything! Smashed! All the lights smashed, the furniture smashed! When little Jodie came downstairs she had a handful of broken bits for me, and I said nothing. I thought, 'Say nothing.' I wanted to scream!

When Brian went up, Luke had got his watch and he was twisting it and it just crumbled through his fingers. He did the same with his sunglasses, twisted them until they snapped. That's the anger he's got in him. Brian didn't say anything.

When Brian went up later on, he said, 'Are we over this?' Luke had his face in his hands and he said, 'I thought I was over this!'

'No, you're not mate. It'll take a long time to get over it. You've just got to try. Take some deep breaths before you act.'

Luke is really good now. I don't give him any time to get angry. He's home from school then up for guitar lessons. Monday night it's karate. Thursday night he gets dressed and goes to work. His boss says he's wonderful. Although Luke finishes work at 8 pm he doesn't leave till 8.25 because he escorts the girls to their cars, he just feels responsible for everybody. He's a good kid.

Many grandchildren have parents who either take no part in their lives, or, if they do, their efforts are unsatisfying, inadequate or damaging.

“You’d see your friends and they were heaps close to their mums, and they would go shopping together and all that sort of stuff. You think, That’s something Mum and I should be doing.”(granddaughter Leanne)

“He wouldn’t sign a Mothers Day card and I wasn’t going to force him. His parents never gave him anything for his sixteenth birthday, not even a card.”(Yvonne)

“I didn’t ring Mum on Mothers Day. She’s more interested in drinking than me.”(granddaughter Leanne)

“Carolyn is fifteen. A few months ago, out of the blue, her father rang to ask if she wanted to go to his ‘wedding’ where he was renewing his vows. Carolyn said no, she wouldn’t know anyone and he had never got in contact with her since she came to live with us when she was eighteen months old. So he hung up. That’s all we’ve heard from him.”(Elaine)

“Tom has been living with us virtually all his life. He knows us as Grandma and Pop but he thinks of us as his parents. But there’s still that longing for his mother. He would love to have his mother, all the children would love to have their mother on their own without any of the boyfriends around and all live together and be happy, but they know that will never happen. She promises but it never happens.”(Delia)

“Kids say, ‘Oh it’s awful. My parents were away and I missed them,’ and I think, That was only for two days, what have you got to worry about? I don’t ever see my parents.”(granddaughter Madeline)

Lying

“I wish my grandchildren would not lie. They learned to do this to survive in their previous life. It creates problems and is taking a long time to work through.” (Julia)

Broken promises

“His sister turned 17 and Tom had his 13th birthday a few days before. Not a phone call, not a text message from their Mum. Nothing.

I used to ring her a few days later, ‘Why didn’t you ring?’

Then she would ring him and say, ‘Hullo darling, I love you. Happy birthday. What did you get?’

At the end she’d say, ‘I love you,’ and then Tom would be upset for the rest of the day because she said that but she didn’t really mean that. So I just leave it now.

This time his sister said, ‘Never heard from Mum.’

Tom said, ‘Doesn’t worry me.’

But it does. The promises she made. The kids just feel disposable.” (Delia)

*

“She promises the boys so much. She promised yesterday to come over and see them. She said, ‘Four o’clock.’

She rings up at five to four, ‘Oh, I’m not coming.’

‘Why?’

‘I can’t be bothered.’

Then they get cranky and mean and carrying on to the point that we had to send one of the boys to his room. Mum was the one that started that and then let them down!” (granddaughter Leanne)

Unanswered questions

“I took my grandson to counselling and he was asked, ‘Have you ever seen your Dad?’

He turned to me and said, ‘Grandma, have I ever seen my Dad?’

‘When you were born.’

He has always wanted to find his father and to know what he looks like. He asked could he go on the TV program where they trace your family.” (Delia)

Violence and cruelty

“When he first came into care, he’d duck every time I raised my hand. He thought I was going to hit him.” (Evelyn)

*

“It was not until about eight years after my granddaughter came to live with me that she told me how she used to get beaten when her father got drunk. She showed me little scars on her arms and legs.” (Vi)

*

“Mum used to put chilli on our tongues when we were naughty.” (granddaughter)

*

“There was a lot of friction between Nathan and the stepfather. He’d belt him, he’d send him to bed without his dinner. He would do really cruel things like going on a family picnic, taking Nathan’s little sister Chelsea and leaving Nathan alone in the house for the day. Very cruel discipline.” (Roslyn)

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Mum lived with my twin brothers’ dad for about two years. He turned out to be violent. Then she was living with a man who was really bad, a dead-set idiot of a guy. Sometimes the guy would follow us behind trees to the shop. Mum couldn’t go anywhere, do anything, and us kids, we were always wondering if he was going to turn up. Where is he? If Mum was late getting home the guy would start going off at her. He was controlling and he used to bash her. Thank God my younger brothers don’t remember. I saw violence but when some of it happened we were sent to our room.

Mum would say, ‘Don’t tell Nan.’

I’d come back thinking, ‘Oh, my God, you have to know what I’ve seen,’ but I couldn’t say anything. I was always wanting to go and see Mum and the boys but I hated coming back to Nan and Da and not being able to say anything to them. There were so many things I wanted to tell.’ (granddaughter Leanne)

Anger and hurt

“My brother blocks out a lot of what’s happened and then one day he explodes, out of nowhere, and I think, Wow! and he tells me everything that happened over the past few weeks. I think that’s why he spends a lot of time over here too, because he gets away from there and what Mum’s doing.

I get annoyed when Mum says stupid little things that aren’t even close to the truth. Like she tells people, ‘They (the grandparents) won’t let me see my kids. They want them for the money.’ I’ve heard her say those things and I’ve thought, ‘Oh my God, where did that come from?’

Not even close. It’s bad enough to tell us, but to tell strangers who say, ‘That’s bad.’

She just wants it for attention but strangers think, ‘Oh, what mean grandparents,’ which they’re not.

A few weeks ago she rang up saying all this stuff about killing herself.

I said to Nan, ‘She won’t kill herself. She has said that heaps.’

It’s an attention thing. We all told Nan that.

When Mum says to me, ‘No one cares about me. I might as well die,’ I say ‘Whatever.’

No. Nan had to ring the police and they went over to Mum’s to check.

Mum told them, ‘No, it was just to hurt my Mum. She won’t let me see my kids.’

So then they had to ring us, ‘Is she allowed to see her kids?’

Nan says, ‘Yes, she can come every second weekend, or every week but she’s not keeping the children at her place.’

So the police said Mum just wanted to get to us.”(granddaughter Leanne)

Religious zeal

“Her father had extreme religious beliefs. He told her there was no Tooth Fairy and no Santa. He said ‘Santa’ had the same letters as ‘Satan’. He talked about the ‘Dark Side’.

When she returned from staying with him for a couple of days she took a very belligerent stance and said, ‘Santa’s not real is he, Gran?’

I said something like, ‘A lot of people get a lot of happiness out of him and that’s a very nice thing.’

She softened straight away.”(Shirley)

Shame

(Leanne's mother is an alcoholic.) "My mother only came to netball once or twice. I was embarrassed by her. In the end I said, 'Please don't come to netball.'

My Pop watched every game. I was happy he was there but everyone else had their Mum or Dad there.

The other day my twin brothers were down at football and they saw two parents carrying on and embarrassing their kids and they said, 'Oh, we know how that feels.'

I think, 'They're only eleven, poor things. I remember that sort of stuff but I don't want them to remember that.' (Leanne)

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"He's very embarrassed his Mum's in prison. If we say anything he says, 'Don't want to talk about it.'" (Helen)

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS

“Gran, is it all right not to like your Dad?”

“I used to get on with Mum but over the last few years, when she’d come and stay here, it was like talking to a brick wall. She wouldn’t listen. She’d blame everybody else.

I used to look up to Mum. My aunties and uncles would say something about her and I’d defend her, ‘She’s my Mum.’ But I’ve reached the stage now where I’ve told her not to bother me, especially now I’m older. I’ve got my own life. I don’t need her stuff.

She says I’m not helping. ‘No, I’m not Mum. I’m your daughter. You’re supposed to be helping me get my life started. Why should I be helping you? You’re forty-two. Sort yourself out and fix yourself up, then come and talk to me. Until then I don’t want anything to do with you.’

The same with Dad. He rang me up after seventeen years.

‘Come and have lunch. You never want to see me.’

‘You live twenty minutes away and it takes you seventeen years to ask me to lunch? No. I’ll ring you when I’m ready. Sorry that’s not my fault. You weren’t there.’”(granddaughter Leanne)

Many grandchildren still have an abiding love for their parents despite their failings

“My granddaughter Tegan always wanted to go back to her mother no matter what her mother did. She loved her mother so much. I put her through preschool and then got her into primary school but after four years with me, when she was eight years old, she still wanted her mother. Since then she has been in and out of lots of houses as her mother moved around, and she stayed with us and another daughter quite a few times and sometimes we took her at the weekends. She always went back to her mother but we said, ‘If anything happens, you know you can always come to us.

Eventually Tegan had to move out when she was fifteen because her mother’s boyfriend was being so horrible towards her. She’s living with my eldest daughter now and she’s the happiest she’s been since she lived with me. My eldest daughter loves her and is like a mother to her now. Tegan talks to her, tells her everything, where she can’t talk to her mother.”(Delia)

If grandparents keep talking to their grandchildren as they get older it helps the grandchildren come to terms with their mix of emotions and the unique situation they are in. Just because grandchildren don’t ask, it doesn’t mean they don’t

think a lot about their history.

One grandchild raised this subject about her friend:

“A young teenager, an orphan, knew very little about the circumstances of her parents’ death, she was only very young when it happened. She knew, however, that the memory of it caused awful grief in her grandparents. Now she was at an age when she wanted to know more. But how could she ask without causing more distress? She’d never heard her grandparents talking about the actual event. What could it have been like?” (Shirley)

I believe most grandchildren being raised by their grandparents would benefit from professional counselling over the years if for no other reason than that they cannot live with their parents. It is important that they see themselves as worthy, loved and wanted people. Some grieve for parents who have died. Some grieve for the ‘normal’ parents they didn’t have and they need to understand that it is all right for them to have negative feelings.

“I love Mum but I don’t like her.” (grandson)

Exposed to a different life of love and safety with their grandparents, the grandchildren’s attitudes often change.

It’s not always ‘happily ever after’.

A lot depends on the age of the grandchildren when they come to live with their grandparents. It’s a big concern for grandparents wondering, after all their hard work, what lifestyle their grandchildren will choose. Especially in the teenage years, some grandchildren are drawn to the easy life, and they return to their unfit parents and adopt their lifestyle.

We have heard more than one story like this in our Support Group:

“Without notice, Lynne and Leon’s grandson Jacob literally arrived on their doorstep at the age of fourteen. He got sick of living with his slack, disagreeable family. His grandparents invested considerable energy into improving Jacob’s attendance at school and his way of living.

It was too late. Despite the efforts of the grandparents Jacob couldn’t accept that he had rules and responsibilities. To their deep disappointment he returned home where he could do whatever he liked. He dropped out of school, got into drinking and drugs and kept poor company.”

Through the good times and the bad grandparents are there for their grandchildren

As they get older many grandchildren begin to appreciate how much the stability and love their grandparents means to them. They begin to realise they enjoy more satisfying experiences and relationships with their grandparents.

“A lone grandmother was caring for her granddaughter Shay who had come to her at the age of ten, from a neglectful, dysfunctional home. There, her mother was struggling with two mental illnesses and her mother’s partner was vindictive and abusive. Shay showed a lot of promise but was not easy to manage. When she was fourteen she went wildly off the tracks. She was extremely rude, stayed out, tried drugs, broke rules and refused to do schoolwork. She was self-harming daily.

It was a harrowing time for the grandmother who was in despair. Nevertheless she hung in where others would have given up, and while remaining firm, she never stopped loving. She understood that her granddaughter was going through anger, confusion, rejection, depression and lack of self worth.

Unexpectedly the grandmother had to go to hospital. Her granddaughter realised just how much her grandmother meant to her - she was the person, the only person, who had always been there for her.

In addition there was a very compassionate medical specialist in her life who recognised the girl’s potential and gave her encouragement and material help to undertake a modelling course. There was also wise guidance from an astute young psychologist.

Shay made a remarkable change. She applied herself at school achieving high distinctions, filled her time with healthy, active pursuits and chose sound friends. She achieved regional success in a modelling competition and gained a contract with a reputable agency in Sydney.

While the importance of the support from the specialist and psychologist cannot be underestimated, there is no doubt that the transformation in Shay’s life would never have occurred without the constant love, support and wisdom of her grandmother.”

Grandparents have a lot to offer

“We can’t change the past but we have an influence on the future.”(Vi)

Grandparents have a great deal to offer the grandchildren they are raising, particularly because of their life experiences. They know the value of regular

meal times, home cooked food, ample sleep, setting boundaries and filling in time without television. But beyond all that, most know what makes for a satisfying life and what things are important.

“I have always wanted to get Carolyn interested in live theatre so I usually try to take her to one show a year though tickets are very expensive. We went to Phantom of the Opera and this year one of my friends took her to the Rocky Horror show. Carolyn was delighted and it is so pleasing for me to see she is developing a love for the theatre.

I’ve always enjoyed craft and now she’s starting to do some too . On Mothers Day she set up a beautiful breakfast tray with a pretty cloth on it. She made scrambled eggs in a ramekin dish with a hash brown at the side, she put a yellow - my favourite colour - serviette around the knife and fork, a little dab of butter on a dish and a chrysanthemum at the top. She got my friend to make me a mug with a frangipanis on it with my name. She didn’t wrap it up because she didn’t want me to put it away for good, she wanted me to use it.”(Elaine)

They work hard to prepare their grandchildren for the future.

“I’ve learned to accept now that he’s ADD. I do know that he will survive. He’s classified as a high functioning intellectually disability. He can do a lot of things for himself. I have taught him a lot. He has his own money. I don’t buy toys for him. He buys his own things. We’re here to help these kids, not spoil them. As much as we’d love to, we can’t. We’ve got to make them self sufficient in life.

I’m showing him how to use the gas oven to heat up some hot chips. I show him how to turn the washing machine on. He’s in for a shock soon. He’s going to learn how to use the iron. But this is what he’s got to do. He’ll get a job. I’ve no idea what, but he’ll get one.”(Anna)

Four generations can be involved

“Mum’s very deaf and she’s nearly blind with macular degeneration and she’s got arthritis but she’s good for ninety. In her own home she knows where everything is. She likes the young ones coming and telling her things. It’s good for them to appreciate old people. My mum’s a very intellectual lady. She was a head librarian, very clever, with a retentive memory.

It’s good for the boys to realise if you’re old it doesn’t mean you’re dumb. If they needed help with their homework she was the one to go to. She’s very good at maths and English and history. She reads ten big print books a fortnight and she’s got aids to help her read

The boys both respect deafness. They know to speak clearly, not loudly. They’ve been very good at making themselves understood and telling her little things from school.”(Roslyn)

THE FACT IS GRANDPARENTS ARE OLD

One grandchild being raised by a grandmother to another grandmother:

'How old are you?'

'One hundred.'

'I'm not surprised.'

They don't want to hear it. They say, 'You're not going to die.'

"My grandson Tom would never leave us, because of security. He's very insecure. He says to me, 'You can't die. What will happen to me if you die?' I can't promise but I say, 'I'll try to stay healthy as much as I can.' He gets really upset and actually cries some nights. Then he gets over it for six months and it comes back again. He has to know there is someone there for him. He knows we're there the whole time. He doesn't like change. Like going to school, he was very nervous and worried about it, though he is no trouble at school. We have explained that he would go to live with my daughter and her husband. He's quite happy about that. In the minds of grandchildren like Tom there is an underlying fear of us getting older and them being left without us - fear of what will happen to them, and us not being there for them." (Delia)

*

*"The worst thing is Nan and Da are not going to be there in a few more years. At least I'll be older. I'm nearly eighteen now. But the boys - I don't think they get that their grandparents don't have years and years left. Da's 72 and Nan's 70. The boys think they're going to be around. They'll be here another five years? More hopefully? Who knows?
When I was the boys' age Nan and Da were in their late fifties and I used to think, 'Oh, they're going to die soon.' I used to worry about that.
After Nan and Da, it's just me and the boys. All they'll have left is me. That upsets me. My aunts and uncles will be around if we need help but I'm happy to take the boys on. It's a challenge but we can do it.
If they are with Mum they won't do their homework, won't go to school, won't go in clean clothes if they do go - and that's all stuff Nan's really big on. She has to iron everything before you walk out of the house. So there's no point in Nan spending all this time, helping them with school and doing all this work to take them on if Mum's just going to take them and wreck everything anyway. Once they're able to stand on their own two feet I can get on with my life and have my kids. When the boys get a house, or live on their own, I'll still be there if they need any help. I admit it's not something I really, really, really want to do. I wish Mum would be able to have them so I can have my life but there is no other choice. There's no way the boys*

are going to DoCS or foster care. I couldn't let that happen. I'll put my life on hold for a couple of years. That happens. That's life.

The thing that upsets me really bad is that by the time I have kids Nan and Da probably won't be around and they're not going to get to see them. I want my kids to think about my Mum and their Nan the same way as I adore my Nan. They never will with Mum!

I absolutely adore Nan, everything she's done, and it's sad that my kids aren't going to know her. Or they'll think with my Mum, 'What a loser!' It's going to happen, I know! It sucks that it has to be like that.

The only reason I'd have kids young would be to know Nan and Da but it's not possible to be a good parent and give them everything they need when I'm only seventeen. No way. But hopefully they'll be around."(granddaughter Leanne)

*

"I worry about my age. I think all grandparents do. If anything happens to me what happens to my granddaughter? I try to keep myself on the ball. I said to Carolyn 'If anything ever happens to me...' but she just kissed me on the forehead and said 'You're going to live to be a hundred.' I've also asked her, 'Does it worry you that I am so old compared to the other mums?' She just says. 'You're not old.'" (Elaine)

*

"I had to go to a phone court where they would connect us - my lawyer, myself and the mother and somebody independent.

We had to explain to the kids where I was going - to a conference where we'd sit down, work everything out and I would come back and explain everything to the boys (just as much as they need to know).

So as we were going into the lounge room so I could tell them, the youngest one, seven years old, said,

'Who's died?'

'Nobody's died, darling. We've just got to tell you why Nanny's going into this court.'

'Last time we had a conference and you told me to sit down and we'd talk, you told us Dad had died.'

We had. They're very conscious of this death thing."(Dawn)

Yes, grandparents are old.

"Usually it's in the car when I'm concentrating on the roads. They'll be discussing something in the back.

'Isn't that right, Nan?'

'What's the matter?'

'You're getting old. You're not going to last much longer.'

*Really great thoughts! I feel really confident about that!
'I want to last quite a while. I want to see you when you all grow up.'*”(Dawn)

In most circumstances children don't think of the mortality of their parents. They are more likely to wonder about death in relation to their grandparents because they know that old people die. Should anything happen to their parents, the first people to step in and fill the breach, more often than not, are the grandparents. They will care for them. How different it is for grandchildren being raised by their grandparents.

*“Nan, have you been eating healthy food all your life?”
“Pretty much. Why?”
“Because I want you to live for a long time.”*(Shirley)

Having already lost their parents, for one reason or another, their very sense of security lies with their grandparents. They are very dependent on them. Who else have they got? That is the question that is on their minds. Grandparents are reluctant to ask their own children and put a greater load on them because their lives are already busy caring for their own young families and going to work.

Making provisions

*“My eldest daughter lives a couple of streets away, she's got three boys of similar ages to Tom. They're like extended brothers and sisters. Tom goes there and they come here all the time. My youngest daughter is like his older sister. They are very close. If anything did happen to me she's always said, 'He comes to me.'
I've told Tom, 'She'll have you, she wants you. You don't have to worry, darling.'”*(Delia)

For their peace of mind, it is worth grandparents talking to their grandchildren about what options there are and what would the grandchild like to happen.

*“My neighbour Kerry is a registered foster carer. She knows Brett and thinks he's a nice kid.
I put it to her, 'God forbid that anything should happen to me. I'd hate to think he would have to go into foster care. I know it's a big thing to ask but my family haven't had anything to do with Brett since he was born. They don't really know him and I don't want him to go to his father's side of the family, it would be a disaster. Will you talk to your family, have a long think about it?'
She did and she came back and said, 'Yes.'
So I need to go to a lawyer so that if anything happened to me before Brett's 18th birthday he would go to Kerry. She said he would be part of the family.”*(Anna)

One grandmother who works with teenagers suggested:

"Yes. It will happen one day. We don't know when. In the meantime we've got this time together to make sure you have your life. What are you going to do with your life? Where are you going to live? (the functional things) How?

Give them that comfort and security, 'This is what Nan helped me set up.'"(Marilyn)

Dear Nanna
Happy Birthday
your looking younger
every day. I love
You so much
can not describe
it love you

Reflections

I sometimes think about what would have happened to all the grandchildren had they not come to live with their grandparents. And then I think about the other children, the ones who are still living in bad environments. And I think too, that even in a 'rich' environment, material things can't replace a lack of connection and bonding between parents and their children.

"I don't want my retirement back. I'd rather still have my grandchildren. I'd love to see what they make of themselves in the future."(Julia)

*

"I can't imagine my life without her; I'd be on my own, I'd be so lost and so lonely. I think to myself, Carolyn's fourteen now. There are no problems yet. I don't know how I'm going to handle it when she's eighteen and she starts going out at night time. I'll have to stay up and I'll have to go and pick her up, and I'm always so tired after tea already. And then I worry about what will her choice of boys be like, especially because her mother didn't make good choices. Some girls get pregnant when they are quite young. That would make life much harder."(Elaine)

Alcohol

"She said she was a bit scared what might happen when she was an older teenager because both her parents drank too much."(Shirley)

*

"It all comes from alcohol. It's given me a hatred of alcohol after all this. Alcohol causes so much unhappiness and poverty. I think drink is responsible for drug abuse but because drinking is very much socially acceptable with our young people that they think it's almost the done thing, that you can't be socially acceptable if you're not seen to be partying and drinking. You must not get offside with the in crowd so they drink, and when they're drunk, that's when they have their first drug experience. They wouldn't normally do that, they'd know what was going to happen down the track, but when they're drunk they don't care, it gets rid of their inhibitions so they have those drug experiences when they're drunk then they're hooked and they can't go back. I feel sorry for young people growing up and I think maybe that's why my grandson Nathan doesn't socialise. When he was in high school he'd get invited to parties. 'Are you going to that?' 'I wouldn't fit in because I don't drink.' 'Surely they have parties where they don't drink.' 'No, Nan they don't.'"(Roslyn)

“Alcohol. She’s turned me right off that. Drinking is all Mum does. If I drink I feel like my Mum. I don’t want that. I probably drank twice last year. Yes, I’m eighteen soon. I’m happy to go out and party but drinking just doesn’t figure. If I drink I’ll end up exactly like her. I want to be the complete opposite of Mum.

In Year 10 there was a lot of drinking, especially around the School Certificate time, and there was peer pressure but I think if you don’t want alcohol, you don’t want it. I admit there were parties I went to but I’d be home by twelve and I wasn’t drunk. Maybe I had one drink. People, even Mum, say, ‘It blocks out ... whatever.’ Well that drink I had didn’t block anything. I had friends who said they wished they’d done better in Year 10. They’d been drinking. They blamed peer pressure. No it’s not. People can hassle you as much as you want but if you don’t want to do it, you won’t. My brother Ian says, ‘All my friends were drinking,’ and I say, ‘That doesn’t mean you have to.’

I think all this has made me a stronger person. I don’t want that life, the drinking and the alcohol. I wouldn’t even bother trying drugs. They’re worse than alcohol and they affect you worse. With my birthday coming up my friends say, ‘You can get smashed,’ but I won’t.”

“Mum has an addiction but I don’t get that. When you’ve been clean for six months or more and then you go back to that life, that’s just ridiculous, that’s being completely stupid.” (granddaughter Leanne

Reward for the Kinship Care Worker:

“Just knowing all of these carers and the sacrifices they have made is an absolute privilege. To play a part in this has given me a purpose in life. It has been an all consuming job for me. If I die tomorrow, having known these people, then I’ll die happy. It’s such a worthwhile cause and these people are so fabulous, so wonderful.”

THE REWARDS

Many grandchildren really appreciate living with Nan and Pop

“My granddaughter’s sixteen. She hasn’t seen her mum since the Christmas before last though we hear from her every second week by phone. She would never go back to her mum. Even when she was four she wouldn’t go back to her mum, ‘Oh no no no!’”(Elaine)

*

“My son Bruce eventually got himself back together, he met a nice girl Christine and he went to live with her. But by this time my grandson Nathan had already been in two step situations and he said, ‘I’ve done this twice before and I’m not doing it again. I can’t go and live with your girlfriend and her little boy. I don’t want to be a stepson again. I just want to stay with Nan and Pop.’”(Roslyn)

*

“I love my Nanna and Grandad so much well I can’t imagine what it would be like with out them. I love them just like they were my mum or dad.”(grandchild)

*

“When you think about it, it makes you a different person. It’s much better that it’s happened like this. Heaps of grandparents have said to me, ‘What does it feel like being raised by your grandparents?’ There are all different feelings, but at the end of the day you know where you’re safe and where you’re most happy.

You get to an age where you realise your grandparents are the only ones that have been there for you, they are the only ones who are going to be there, they’re the ones when you need something. In my eyes Nan and Da are my parents not her. I have no idea where I’d be without Nan and Da. They’ve made me who I am. It’s made me want to do the complete opposite to what Mum’s doing.

I have a tattoo on my foot ‘Nan’ and ‘Da’. I didn't even want a tattoo, I just did it and came home. It was just that my grandparents had done so much for me. They were a bit cranky but it’s only little, it wasn’t something stupid all the way up my arm or leg.

I haven’t had the best life. I haven’t had the worst either. Hopefully it’ll just get better. And I think, ‘Thank God we have Nan and Da.’(granddaughter Leanne)

*

“The best reward is to see your grandchildren flourishing, especially when you know where they’ve come from and what they’ve had to deal with.”(Julia)

Luke had been utterly rejected and put down by his stepfather:

“Luke is doing well and I think we’ve been doing a good job with him. We hadn’t had kids in the house for years. Brian’s sister-in-law says he’s the only kid she can talk to. Most kids his age don’t talk, they grunt. ‘You can have an adult conversation with Luke.’

He has a lovely friend called Josh whose father and mother are really horrible. He is not allowed to use the phone, not allowed to leave the home.

Luke says, ‘He gets treated like I used to get treated. I know how he feels. We sit together at school.’

Luke talked Josh into going to see the counsellor. That was a good thing to do.”(Yvonne)

Nathan had been neglected by his alcoholic mother, cruelly treated by his stepfather and came to his grandmother’s with severe behaviour problems:

“When he first went to school his reports said he was a very disruptive child and the class pest, all those sorts of comments. By the time he went through the HSC, ‘what a lovely boy’, ‘Nathan gives 100% to everything’, ‘Nathan is a helpful class member’. It was lovely to see this.

He had the most wonderful High School Certificate. In Year 11 he had done two placements and he was immediately offered apprenticeships but I think he felt he should go up to Queensland after the HSC and look after his grandfather. He could still do a good apprenticeship in his grandfather’s horticultural business. So that’s what he’s done and he’s started a TAFE course.

Nathan has grown into a very caring young man. Last year we went to his aunty’s funeral in a country town where he used to live when he was a young boy. At the wake he disappeared and when he came back he told me he had been round to homes in the town and thanked all the people who had looked after him when he was young. After all those years he still remembered where they all lived. They would have remembered a poor little boy whose mother was on drugs and alcohol and whose father was so unkind to him. They would have seen a child in need. I’m glad that sense of gratitude has been brought out in him.

In preschool care we were taught that it’s very difficult to turn children around once they turn seven but I had a lot of interaction with him when he was young and then of course when he lived with me, and he’d stayed with his other grandma in his first year. That might have made a difference.”(Roslyn)

*

“I was watching my teenage granddaughter celebrate her birthday with her friends. They were all lovely kids. They were friendly and caring. They

were sharing stories of funny experiences they'd had, laughing and joking and having a great time. I was so proud of the way she was growing up." (Shirley)

Grandparents gain deep satisfaction knowing they are providing a home where their grandchildren feel safe and loved. The rewards are many as their grandchildren gain confidence, lose their fears, make good friends, behave responsibly and show consideration for others. And this is happening. Just go to one of the family weekend camps and the evidence is there.

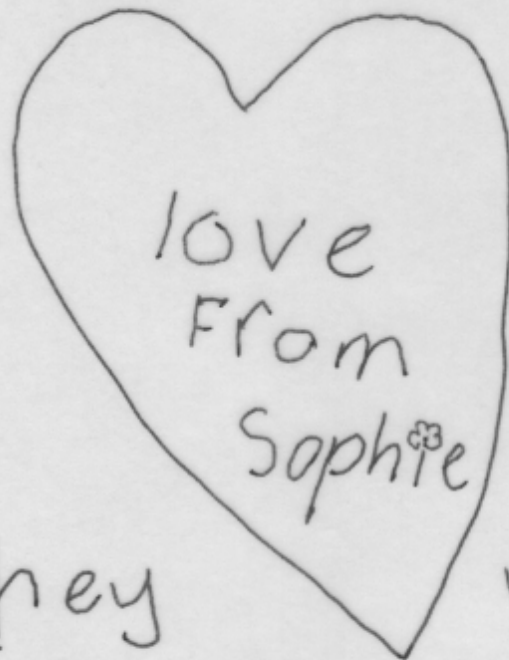
Grandparents cherish the bonds of love and trust between them and their grandchildren, especially if it was missing in the grandchildren's early lives. None of the grandparents complain about the huge investment they put into preparing their grandchildren for their lives as adults. They have supported their grandchildren through adversity and kept them in the family. They have given them hope and enduring love.

When the time comes their grandchildren will go forth into the world. They will carry the values and love of their grandparents with them.

Will the grandchildren succeed? My feeling is that many will. Time will tell. At least the grandchildren have been given the chance.

Love

Love is sumthing
you shae with
ather pepol. showing
you love sumone
you and give a ciss
a CUdOL



they will
give a smiol 😊

PART 3

LIVES

The Whole Story

It is only when their stories are told in full that the magnitude of what grandparents are coping with is truly evident - -the worry, the intensity of care, the hurting grandchildren, the lack of time for themselves, the stress of their own child's circumstances and the lack of support.

The stories were collected from grandparents I met in the normal course of my participation in GAPS. I did not seek out the exceptional, though indeed they are, but having met many other grandparents at GAPS camps and courses, I know there are hundreds, more likely thousands, of equally disturbing tales. We hear some of them whenever new members come to our Support Group.

Many grandchildren show great resilience. They are rising above the trauma of their early lives, the most important years for shaping who they will become. They begin to prosper in the security and love of their grandparents.

I continue to ask, "How on earth did these people cope? How different might it have been with readily available early intervention and ongoing professional help?"

BRENDA'S STORY

“If I wrote a story I would use the title ‘Quicksand’ - you get to the surface and you’re pulled back down again.”

Our daughter Hayley began taking drugs when she was ten years old. That was incredibly young. My husband Terry and I were devastated. I didn't know anything about drugs. I didn't know where to look for help. I didn't know drug support groups existed. I didn't have a clue.

We had adopted Hayley from Korea when she was eight months old. We already had two biological children in their teens and an adopted daughter aged seven. Hayley grew up in a warm, loving environment and was adored by everybody. She never smiled a lot and as she grew older she became very annoying especially towards her sister. Sometimes she bit and kicked her.

Suddenly she changed. Overnight. It was like one night she went to bed, gave me a kiss, said, ‘I love you,’ loved all the family, and the next day she was telling us, ‘I wish you were all dead.’

Or, ‘I hate you, I hate all of you. I wish you weren't my family.’

That's when all the problems really began and her behaviour deteriorated. It wasn't the normal rebelliousness associated with childhood.

She was all right at school until third class. We were getting letters home to say that there were problems, she was disrupting the class, talking loudly, she wasn't doing the work. She started missing school, we had to go up and see the teachers and we tried to sort everything out but to no avail. We had no idea what was going on, or what was causing it, no idea whatever. We changed schools but it made no difference.

Then Louis and I discovered she was taking drugs. We were devastated. How could our daughter be taking drugs? She was ten years old! That was incredibly young! I didn't know anything about drugs. I didn't know where to look for help. I didn't know drug support groups existed. I didn't have a clue. Not only was Hayley taking drugs, she was sexually active. Her life was spiralling out of control.

Our feelings were of total disbelief and anger and guilt. This couldn't be happening to our child! We'd provided a safe environment, we knew where she was at all times and we'd always met the parents of her friends before leaving her with them. We were to learn later that it wasn't anything we had done wrong and it was not something we could have stopped but at the time we felt we had let her down.

Hayley began wanting more and more time away from home and would scream for hours if we said no. Her behaviour towards us became unbearable. As time went by she refused to go to school and refused to use or take any form of contraception. We offered her love and support but she wanted none of it. I joined a drug support group and vowed I would do anything to help our daughter.

She was constantly in trouble and became well-known to the police. When she was older she was staying away from high school more than she was attending it. I'd get her dressed in the morning and I'd assume she was going to school. I had no idea that she wasn't attending until I got phone calls from the school reporting her absence. I started making notes on the calendar so I would know exactly what was going on. It was a horribly stressful time.

In desperation we sold the house we had lived in for twenty three years and moved so we could get Hayley away from the people she was associating with and give her a fresh start. We turned over backwards to get her into a school that catered specially for children like her but she only went for a short time and then she refused to go and she went back on the streets.

It became even more serious. Hayley was running away from home and not wanting to come back. We couldn't stop her, we'd would walk the streets looking for her, we would bring her home and she would run away again. I listed her as a missing person at one point when she went missing for four days. The police couldn't do anything either. They'd find her more often than not with a group of boys and bring her home but they couldn't make her stay. When she did return she'd be kicking and screaming and carrying on. Later she joined in with other teenagers who were going around the streets vandalising and smashing buildings. She would break into buildings and sleep there until all hours of the morning.

Suddenly it's out of control and nobody is there to help you. If kids want to leave home at thirteen, all they have to do is fill in a form and there's little the parents can do. It was a rude awakening for me. I thought it would have been dead easy to get a kid as young as Hayley back home. It was a hell of a blow to learn we didn't have the right to protect our child. The kids are out on the streets at two o'clock in the morning doing God knows what, creating havoc. The parents get the blame, get the fines. We're the ones it falls back on.

One night she physically abused her sister. She was so awful I was forced to call the police and watch her being carted off in the back of a paddy wagon.

We began to realise we were powerless to protect our daughter from a life of drug abuse and crime. Hayley persisted in going back to the town where we used to live. Sometimes she would hitchhike there. We spent years going to counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, youth workers and

making court appearances. She refused to take medication even though it was strongly advised.

At fourteen years of age Hayley was raped at knife point and left on the streets. Terry and I weren't notified until three days later because of the privacy act, even though DoCS had been called and she was a minor. We were the parents yet we weren't told!

At the time of the rape Hayley was seven weeks pregnant. She'd been talking about wanting babies since she was eleven so we weren't surprised. Rodney, the father, and we're still not a hundred percent sure that he is the father, was thirteen. It was too much. I threw my hands in the air. 'I'm not having anything to do with it. I've raised four children and I'm not going there again!'

It was extremely difficult having our very young, pregnant daughter living away from home and spending most of her time on the streets. Hayley was unable to take care of herself. How in the world was she going to cope with a tiny baby? I desperately wanted her home. The police said they couldn't do anything and to ring DoCS. DoCS said they couldn't do anything and to ring the police. I fought to get DoCS to take on our case, I was in constant touch with our local members of parliament, was constantly reporting to the DoCS Help line, wrote numerous letters. My husband Terry and I reached a terribly low point. We felt utterly helpless. Lots of groups offered help for children but I couldn't find any group that offered any help to parents like us who were caught up in these problems. When I took her to our family doctor I was amazed he didn't even mention abortion. He knew what we were up against. 'Your daughter has serious mental health issues. I've seen the way she looks at you, the way she manipulates you, her defiant attitude towards you. It's huge. You're going to have a baby to care for on top of this. You're going to need loads and loads of help.' All I could say was, 'Where do I get it?'

Before this we had been so worried about Hayley's state of mind that we had taken her to the mental health professionals. They interviewed her for an hour and said, 'Oh, I don't think your daughter has a mental health problem. She's OK.'

With Hayley pregnant, we faced more challenges. We talked to counsellors, social workers and the hospital midwife. They took everything Hayley said at face value. She answered all their questions in the right way. They all said how sensibly she was handling her situation. When I wanted to know anything they looked at me as though I didn't have the right to ask them. They were treating Hayley and Rodney as adults when clearly they were just babies themselves.

They'd say to Hayley, 'What about your partner?'

I'm thinking, 'He's a thirteen year old kid! Where are your brains? There's this innocent little baby that's going to be born and there's no way on earth these twitty kids are going to be able to cope. They shouldn't have these babies!'

I came away tearing my hair out. 'Why isn't anyone listening to what I am saying?' It made me so angry.

There was a psychologist doctor at the hospital who used to work through problems with young girls who were pregnant. That is an essential service for these young girls. It needs to be mandatory that they go to all appropriate support groups, it shouldn't be left up to them. Hayley flatly refused to have anything to do with support of any kind. She knew nothing about babies and what was involved in their care. 'What's so hard about having a baby? It can't be that difficult.'

Terry and I wanted to protect Hayley and her unborn child but we were having to fight the whole system. The unborn baby could have been in danger and nobody seemed to care. DoCS wouldn't even recognise there was a child until it was born. I was anxious for some sort of plan to put into action for when the baby was born but I couldn't get anybody to do anything. Finally I went to two local members of parliament. That worked. I received a letter from DoCS saying the files had been reopened and they'd review all their information. Two weeks later a case conference was set up and one of the outcomes was that Hayley and the father were to be screened for drugs three times a week.

Although DoCS became involved they weren't very supportive. Staff showed no empathy, and many of them were not properly equipped to deal with our situation. Some were fresh out of university and they didn't have the appropriate experience. I had a twenty-two-year-old telling me I should have been doing this and I should have been doing that when she didn't have a clue what was involved in looking after children. It was insulting.

Terry and I did our best to support Hayley whenever we could but it wasn't easy because she wasn't living at home. I desperately wanted Hayley to stay with me throughout the pregnancy. I wanted her to be safe and I wanted to know she was safe, but she'd been prostituting herself since God only knows how long. She was living with a woman who was obviously encouraging her. There was goodness only knows what happening inside the house. The neighbours all said they wouldn't let a dog in that place.

I felt as though I had lost my daughter and I would be losing my grandchild too. I didn't know what was going to happen. I wanted DoCS to do something about it but they were no help. They said as long as Hayley had a roof over her head she was not considered homeless. They didn't care, they didn't care.

The police said all they could do was to send a car to check that Hayley was all right.

‘She’s not all right! You people have been telling me you’ve seen her on the streets at two o’clock in the morning. How can she be all right? She’s fourteen years old and pregnant. I want her home. Can’t you do something? Can’t you set up a camera in the park across the road from the house and get evidence? How many other children are in the same situation? I’ve been there. I’ve seen children walking in and out of that woman’s bedroom. She spends ninety-five percent of the day in bed. She’s got ‘Savage Pussy’ written on her door!’

When I went there she opened the door to me in her underwear which positively made me want to throw up. And my daughter’s living there! I told her, ‘I don’t want my fourteen year old daughter staying in your house unsupervised. Lock up your home! You let her father and me sort out what’s going to happen.’ The woman’s prostituting her own daughter as well. I got in touch with my MP and not long after, DoCS got involved.

When I complained to the police, the message I got was very much, mind your own business, stay out of it. It made me wonder, Where do drugs begin? Where do they end? How high up do they go? Who is involved? I walked out of the police station and burst into tears. I thought, if I can’t get any support from them, what do I do? All the time I was telling them, there are two lives here I am trying to protect, two lives!

Kids who are having babies and are on their own are totally vulnerable to vultures like this woman. This woman didn’t want a baby in her home, she only wanted the money. Drugs are the source of it. People like her prey on naive kids and they should be stopped. No way did I want our grandson living in that hovel.

When Hayley went to hospital to have her baby I was there with her and I was happy about that. I felt she wanted me there and I tried to comfort her as much as I could. I was by her side holding her hand all through labour and delivery. She had absolutely no idea what was going on or what was happening to her.

When our precious little grandson made his entrance into the world it was love at first sight. I marvelled at the tiny little miracle I held in my arms, counted his fingers and toes, cut his cord and placed him on my daughter’s breast saying, ‘Look what you did. Just look at your beautiful baby boy!’

Terry and I were relieved and very thankful that he was a healthy little baby. We hugged and kissed her and thanked her.

So, yes, as much as I jumped up and down and kicked up a fuss, said it wasn’t going to happen, when this beautiful little child she called Byron was born I was the one who cut the cord and dressed him and wrapped him all up and held him.

That was it! I knew there was no handing this baby over to anybody. Terry and I were going to keep him and be parents all over again. We were going to keep him safe and protect him. We knew his mother couldn't.

Hayley showed no attachment to her little son at all. From the word go she didn't want to hold her baby and it was probably two and a half hours after his birth before she actually had him in her arms. DoCS told Hayley she had to stay in hospital for ten days but she discharged herself after the second night. Nobody told her she couldn't. She and her baby had somewhere to go, they were both coming back to our place.

Once home Hayley appeared to be making a bit of an effort. The social worker was still involved, and the midwife came down and checked the baby but by the second week it was obvious Hayley wasn't coping.

She was waking up, 'I can't get any f...ing sleep. He won't f...ing shut up.'
By the end of that week we moved the cradle into our bedroom and I was the one who was getting up and feeding him and looking after him and changing him. I was the one caring for him and I've been doing that ever since.

The following weeks didn't get any easier. Terry and I were feeling alone, anxious and very tired at the thought of raising another child. I struggled to get assistance from Centrelink and fought for weeks to obtain a birth certificate in order to get my grandson's name put on to my Medicare card. We were unaware we were entitled to a Supported Care Allowance from DoCS. Nobody there told us.

Since then Hayley has been like a distant relative. She comes home, plays with Byron for short periods, she is quite happy to put him down, won't change a nappy, doesn't feed him, doesn't ask about what he's doing, what stages he's into, how he's progressing. No interest at all. It's all about her. She's too young, very immature and on top of that she has mental issues.

When she leaves there's nothing. Byron will look at a photo and say 'Mum' but then he'll look at a photo of a baby on a box and say 'Mum'. So what do I do? It's hard when there's no attachment. I wonder how it's going to be when Byron gets older. We're just going to tell him she was too young to look after him.

In the meantime Byron's fifteen months, an absolute delight, and no trouble at all but he's confused. He doesn't have anyone he can call Mummy or Daddy. He just stares at Rodney. He doesn't call him Dad because we don't know whether he is his Dad. Rodney has stayed around but I'm sure Hayley bribes him. She has bought him a bike, and she buys him knives and drugs. He was off his face the other night, his eyes were all glazed over. We knew he'd been using drugs.

After Byron was born I was horrified to hear from a social worker at Centrelink that Hayley would be getting about \$1400 a fortnight. Hayley had never seen that much money in her life. Terry and I had only given her twenty or thirty dollars here and there. At fourteen she was not able to handle that amount. Surely, as her parents, we should have had some control over this money to make sure it was spent responsibly to ensure that Byron got everything he needed.

The system's way out of whack. It shouldn't be hard for Centrelink to find out if the kids are living at home, or living with someone responsible. But with children living on their own it should be a different situation. Hayley was fourteen and having a baby but there were no checks on her.

Little Byron is a pure delight but I get scared, and think, am I going to have the energy? Am I going to be able to cope with raising a child all over again? As a female you are basically doing ninety percent of the work on your own. Your partner goes to work, you're at home, you're doing the disciplining, you are doing most of the upbringing. You're teacher, you're mother, you're nurse, you're everything all wrapped up in one. Raising a child is more tiring now I'm older. At the end of the day when Grandpa comes home Byron's quite happy to run to him because he's had enough of being with Grandma.

I'm beginning to appreciate things that I used to take for granted. It's a privilege to have a shower for more than three minutes, or to get dressed in peace, all the things that other grandparents take for granted. Byron comes into my room in the morning and he goes to the wardrobe with me, and by the time I'm dressed, I have to refill three drawers.

My husband Terry is an absolute marvel. I would be totally lost without him. He's my right arm and my left arm put together. He'll come home from work at six o'clock, he'll put tea on and he'll wash up. Before he goes to bed, he'll make me a cup of tea. Byron will wake up during the night and Terry will make up a bottle and give it to me for Byron. I don't want him to stay up after that because I know he has to go to work the next day.

I don't know how grandparents do it on their own. I think they're absolutely wonderful. Hats off to them because I'm totally exhausted. There's no time for me. And I've only got one grandchild. There are grandparents with three or six or nine grandchildren. I have one and it's a full time job. So I consider myself lucky compared to them. There are people much worse off than myself.

It has been a long hard road and it's still not finished. Hayley is totally obsessed with weapons and knives, and constantly talks about all the kids she knows who have weapons. Some of them even make weapons. She talks about how kids are

getting bashed and hurt, and she'll tell me all the gory details even though I don't want to hear. It's terribly disturbing.

When she was fifteen she went to Centrelink, asked for and got a \$500 loan and promptly went out and bought a \$350 bow and arrow, drugs I suspect, and alcohol. The arrows were made of steel! She gave the bow and arrows to her boyfriend.

I spoke to the shop owner but he denied any responsibility. I thought it was so outrageous that kids were allowed to possess such a dangerous weapon that I contacted my local parliamentarian. The police became involved as a result but the sergeant told me there was not much they could do because it wasn't an illegal weapon. A crossbow is considered an illegal weapon but a bow and arrow is not, even though both can maim and kill. It is ludicrous and the police agreed.

Because I had gone to my local MP, Centrelink became involved about their \$500 loan. They asked me, 'What do you think should happen?'

I said, 'For a start, underage children like Hayley shouldn't be able to walk off the street and ask for a \$500 loan without a parent's permission, especially parents like us who were looking after her child. The parents should be included in the decision.'

The response I got was, 'Oh well, she went for an interview, she obviously met the requirements and so she was given the loan.' I was furious about their lack of concern.

Now that Hayley's sixteen there's nothing we can do. That's a horrible situation to be in. With mental illness, taking drugs, and being able to obtain dangerous weapons and carry them around, it's a disaster waiting to happen. My local member advised me to speak to a solicitor because I could probably take out an Apprehended Violence Order against Hayley but we are in a difficult position because we have the baby here. We try to keep the situation as calm as we possibly can so we don't have to deal with all the rubbish and her abuse and all her anger. But it's a constant stress.

Our biggest fear is that one of these days she's going to be involved in a fight, and she's going to be seriously hurt or killed, or she'll be put in gaol. Even today she has a \$450 lay-by at the mower shop for all kinds of different knives, and sheaths. This is the mower shop. What the hell are they doing selling weapons? Last year she purchased an axe, a sword, and a deadly razor sharp knife. We found them in the boot of our car and confiscated them.

The manager at DoCS, told me kids seem to be able to buy them on the local street corner. It appears that kids as young as ten are thinking it's perfectly OK to go off to school carrying knives.

Along with all that, all these little babies are being brought into the world and they can't be looked after properly because the parents are too young and ill-equipped to manage.

It was only after I had kicked up a fuss about the \$500 loan that Centrelink started making Hayley become a bit more accountable. She knew somebody that worked there and she would only go and see that person. Centrelink was forever ringing me up saying that our daughter had an appointment, and that we had to get her to their office.

In the end I told them it was not my responsibility. She had to be responsible and get herself there. I was not prepared to put her in the car with a little baby who might be having problems with teething and take her such a long way. I needed life to be tougher for her, not me.

There's no link between Centrelink and DoCS. There's a breakdown in dealing with correspondence. Quite often staff didn't get back to me straight way and I had to make about ten phone calls before anything happened. I was doing the whole run around. It seemed like everybody was passing the buck.

Grandparents raising grandchildren should have all possible support but they don't get it. Instead their task is made more difficult and that only makes their problems much harder. I shouldn't have to make all those phone calls and contact all the different departments when we are looking after a baby.

Once you become a grandparent with a grandchild in your care, your affairs should all be handled by one department so you're not having to do all the running around. In our situation we were not only looking after a grandchild, we were trying to look after a sixteen year old daughter who was mentally ill. It was a huge problem. We kept meeting so many barriers. We were ringing up and being told, 'I really can't help you, try this person, try that person,' and that's been going on for us since Hayley was ten. She's very intelligent, very clever, can put on a good front. You have to be around her for a while to know the other side. She's like a split personality, Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde. She'll be charming one minute and the next minute she'll just turn.

And that's hard, especially for me. Quite often Terry has come home and I've been in absolute tears. She can be just horrible, absolutely horrible. She has put me down for such a long time that my self esteem has become very low and my confidence has dropped.

I feel fragile a lot of the times because I grew up in an abusive situation where I was physically and verbally abused by my father. Having grown up with that, then having my own child do the same thing to me, is very traumatic and very, very hard to deal with. It's debilitating.

Terry and I are in the process of gaining custody of Byron. Hopefully it won't take too long. That'll make me feel a bit better. I hate the thought of Hayley turning eighteen and wanting to take this little fellow. I can't bear the thought of his life being in turmoil and ruined, and it certainly would be.

If Hayley got her act together, and accepted help to get well mentally and look after herself physically, her Dad and I would be over the moon, absolutely rapt. We would love her to play a much bigger part in Byron's life but at the moment I don't even want her to be on her own with him. I can't trust her and I certainly wouldn't be letting her take him away for a day or letting the two have a night together.

I tried to get as much information as I could about Hayley's parents but all I found out was that her father was very unstable and had a very bad temper. Hayley has always been strange even when she was a little child. She was never a bubbly little girl. She'd always look at children with a funny look on her face, almost as though, I want to bash you, or I hate you, kind of look.

Very bizarre behaviour, and crying and screaming. She didn't have a great many friends at school, and as she grew older she wore everybody out because she made them feel exhausted. She was very abusive with her friends as well. When I have tried to talk to her about relationships she hasn't had a clue what I'm talking about. It's always the other person's fault. The conversation is all about her.

People like her live in the clouds, the world of make believe. They can't see reality at all. I don't know what it's like to be in her world. That's what she had written in a book once, 'I wish people could see what I see and feel what I feel.' She knew she was different. She'd write things like, 'It's terrible living in my head.' She drew demonic figures, horrible things with knives going through eyes, awful, awful drawings. When she drew them I got a sense of her wanting to be good, of trying to be good, but the bad was overtaking the good.

She did lots of drawings where one part would be crying, unhappy, and the other part would have a slight smile. You see, she never smiles. In all the photos we have there are none of her smiling. She always has a very unhappy, very troubled look on her face.

As Hayley got older we couldn't leave money around because she'd take it. She has stolen our camera, lots of things. She has stolen makeup and rings from her cousins. She shoplifts. I wonder how she gets away with what she does. I wish she would get caught. She can look me straight in the eye and lie. I used to believe her once.

If Hayley couldn't come home to us when she wants to, where would she go? Who would look after her? I was dismayed to learn that drugs are such a big part of our society that all the rehabilitation centres have waiting lists.

Other people have the attitude that none of this could ever happen to them. With my other children I used to think how lucky we were. I used to feel sorry for people who had children on drugs, never dreaming in a million years that it would ever happen to us. Certainly I never anticipated Hayley's whole personality would change. I don't know half the things she's done.

It's a hard job being a parent. It doesn't come with a manual, it's trial and error. We raise our children to become responsible adults. If they fall by the wayside we pick up the pieces, yet there is no help for the parents who are trying to do the right thing. All the rights and privileges go to the child. It makes you feel like it's your fault, you're to blame, you've got no right to be asking this.

Our local member of parliament helped us locate a grandparent support group. Going along to GAPS has made a huge difference to the way I think and feel. I no longer feel alone and it's comforting to know there are people around to offer advice, support, understanding, friendship and a shoulder to cry on. Our stories may be different but we are all there for the same reason. We love our grandchildren.

The group has been marvellous, my lifesaver. It's therapy for me. I come away and I feel refreshed and glad that I've been. I was blown away when Karen, the Kinship Care worker, said, 'I'll take you to DoCS,' and 'I'll take you to Centrelink.' I never knew such a person existed. More people like her are needed. It was so comforting. I think everyone in the group is lovely, really really nice. I look at the couple who lost their child in tragic circumstances and I think losing a child is the worst thing, they would never get over that. Their hearts would break every day. When I heard their story I came home and cried. I whinge and complain about Hayley but at least I've still got her.

I was thinking over my life and what it has led up to and I thought, if I wrote a story I would use the title 'Quicksand'. You get to the surface and you're pulled back down again. If our stories as grandparents were written into a play and acted in schools it would be a real life drama. The students don't think of the outcomes of their actions. It needs to be put right under their noses.

It makes me angry to think of the scars some grandchildren grow up with. Drugs are at the source of a lot of the trouble. It's a huge, huge heartache to be going through. Then I look at my grandson, he's such a beautiful kid, and I think, I can't be too angry.

Update

We now have custody of our grandson Byron through the Family Law Court of Australia. He is 2 1/2 years old. We delight in him every day. He has filled our hearts with love and joy and our home with fun and laughter and we simply adore him.

Our daughter Hayley has very little contact with him and still spends most of her time on the streets. She has serious mental health issues and is suffering the effects of drug and alcohol addiction. She tried to commit suicide and spent time in a closed ward at the hospital.

I spent years feeling guilty and blaming myself and questioning whether Terry and I could have done anything differently. I now know in my heart we have done everything we possibly could, and as much as it breaks our hearts, Hayley has chosen her way of life. Out of love and concern for our daughter it is our hope she will one day seek the help she needs to become well.

These days we put our energy into staying healthy and raising our little grandson. I also hope that our story might help someone else in a similar situation. Grandparents of the Hunter Region have put together a DVD 'Raising Others Children'. It gives some insight into the many challenges people face when raising children other than their own.

Hayley's seventeen but I still look at her as a little girl because basically she's still only ten mentally. She hasn't been home for three weeks. It's hard on Byron and it affects him adversely when she does come home. He feels the tension in the house. He gets very loud and it takes a couple of days for me to settle him down after she's been here. Even at such a young age he's picking up on things that happen it.

She rang a couple of days ago and said, 'I want to speak to my kid.'

I said, 'Don't refer to him as a kid. He has a name.'

'I want to speak to Byron.'

I said to Byron, 'Mummy's on the phone.'

He said, 'No!' He pushed the phone down firmly and ran away.

The first time he's ever done that. Two-year-olds normally go to the phone and talk to whoever is on the phone. I found that amazing.

I told her, 'He doesn't want to speak to you.'

'What do you mean? He always wants to speak to me.'

'Well, he's saying 'no' and I'm not making him.'

When he said 'No' I thought, 'Good on you Byron.'

It was as though he was saying, 'You've had nothing to do with me, you upset me last time, and you walked out and you haven't been back.'

When she's present she doesn't give him any nurture. Nothing.

When she was here last, he got upset when she was going. It was the first time he has done that. She came in to say 'Good-bye,' and I was changing his nappy and he was crying, 'Don't go, Mummy. Don't go.'

My husband Terry was standing at the door with tears in his eyes. It was heart-wrenching. It really affects us. It hurts us much more than it hurts her. She had a tear in her eye but you never know if that's fake or is it real.

Any other mother would think, 'Oh, gosh. I've got to come back. I can't stay away too long.'

I told her, 'You've got to tell Byron you'll be back. He needs that.'

'I'll be back. I'll be back.'

But she hasn't been back for three weeks. She hasn't bothered to ask how he is, what's he doing. Not at all.

Hayley has a new boyfriend, another no-hoper. She is trying to fall pregnant. If that happens it's another hurdle for us to face. What are we going to do about that?

'I want a baby that's mine, that nobody can take off me.'

She's blaming me for not being able to fall pregnant.

'I'm scared of falling pregnant because you'll take the baby away. You'll get DoCS involved.'

She's only now come to realise if we hadn't taken Byron, DoCS would have taken him and put him into foster care. Up till now she's blamed us.

Watching Byron, watching his responses, we worry like any other grandparents, about how his mother's way of living, and what she's doing, will affect him. We worry that he may one day want to leave and go to live with her.

Hayley is quite frightening. My older daughter Lara is fearful that Hayley would try to hurt us and hurt Byron and then maybe take her own life. Hayley has become a lot more verbal about these things. She's openly talking about how she's feeling, what she sees and how she's thinking and she has said on a few occasions,

'I'd never hurt you. I'd never hurt my family,' but is she trying to convince me, or herself?

I don't think it's so much a cry for help. I think it's, 'I'm going to do this one day and I'm not going to be able to stop myself.'

I'm very worried.

For that reason I am trying to pull back. I don't ring Hayley, I let her ring me. I've realised I've got to stop using my heart and start using my head, for Byron's sake first of all. But it's hard and I struggle with it.

Byron is gorgeous, he's absolutely beautiful. You certainly wouldn't think he was Hayley's little boy. He's nothing like his mother at all, which is a good thing. He just plays and amuses himself and runs around all day - a laughing,

happy little boy. He's so bubbly and we want to keep him that way. He goes to kindy gym once a week, which he loves, and he has started swimming lessons. He loves interacting with other children. He's talking more and more and says the funniest things. Just a delight. He really is. We just want to give him the best life that we possibly can, a happy life.

Postscript

Hayley is now eighteen years old. She is pregnant again.

LENORE'S STORY

“I've been looking after people my whole life.”

My daughter Melissa was popular, attractive, clever and a promising writer but after she tasted drugs her life was all downhill. She first had drugs before she did her HSC but they took over her life when she went to university. She dropped out of uni and went to live at Kings Cross where she began working as a prostitute. I could see her getting worse and worse but there was nothing I could do about it.

Then she fell pregnant. She tried to do the right things, she went on a methadone program and got her dosage down to a desirable level, she seemed to have stopped smoking, but I was still worried that she was having a drink now and again.

At the same time that all this was happening my son Darren who was four years younger than Melissa, contracted meningitis. When he came out of hospital he had to learn to walk all over again. He had a number of health problems and he was facing surgery in the future.

It was all too much for my husband to cope with and he left. I was on my own to deal with a pregnant daughter on drugs and a seriously ill son.

I started going to Al-Anon, a group which helps relatives of people with drug and alcohol problems. All the people who go there need counselling. It was good. Everyone supported each other and I learned how to detach myself from Melissa's problems.

When Melissa's baby, Shane, was born she was living with Len, a lovely man, but a heavy dope smoker. Melissa, I found out later, was using again too. I was still propping up Melissa at this stage and I let them rent my house at minimal price. Len had lost his licence and he didn't have a car so every day I felt obliged to take them to get their methadone. It was a long drive from where I lived and it was all very upsetting. I remember waiting outside the methadone clinic one day when one of the dealers took hold of Melissa and started shaking her because he wanted some money. I got out, grabbed her and pushed her into the car. I reported the incident to DoCS but they didn't do anything.

You don't believe these things happen. Nothing like this ever happened when I was growing up. It was a new, unpleasant world.

Not long before Shane was two years old, Melissa and Len were going to his sister's wedding and they stopped at McDonald's to take drugs. After Melissa used, she waited in the car with Shane while Len went in to use. She waited and

waited but when he didn't come back she grabbed Shane and ran to look for him. She opened the toilet door and Len fell out. He'd died from an overdose.

So Melissa moved back to live with me but she was still on drugs. It didn't work out, it was too disruptive for her brother Darren who was trying to study for the HSC. In the end I had to tell her to leave and she took Shane with her.

After Len died Melissa met Alan. I still picked her up every day to go the methadone clinic, but the drug situation was getting worse. I rang DoCS again because I was worried about Shane but, even though Melissa was well known to them, they took no action. A lot of people knew her and they kept ringing me up about how she was acting out on drugs. They were all putting pressure on me to do something about it.

I warned Melissa I was going to ring DoCS again and she decided to go into rehabilitation and dry out while I minded the baby. My mother helped pay for that because it cost a lot of money. At the same time I had to keep working as an art teacher because I'd become the sole wage earner since my husband had left.

I was still looking after my son Darren. He was diagnosed with polycystic kidneys. He had some incredible attacks of pain. I was in tears, I was so worried about him. I used to walk around with him in the middle of the night because he couldn't lie down. It was a great shock to be told that within ten years he might be on dialysis. Fortunately ten years have gone and he's still not on it. Somewhere in this he managed to get his HSC, I don't know how.

Every day I took Shane to the rehab to visit Melissa so we could get him off her breast milk. As long as he was on it, he was absorbing everything she was taking. I spent a week at the end of her stay on therapy with her to try to help her and Darren came too, so it was a family effort. By the time she got out of there Shane was dried out but he was pretty full on because he was coming off the addiction as well as coming off the breast milk.

When Melissa came out of rehab Alan moved in with her and the next thing I knew they were both using again. They were stealing from friends of mine, or I'd be having dinner with friends and Alan and Melissa would come in off their face. She told me later he'd been smuggling drugs into her while she was in rehab.

Shane was looking shocking. He was thin, and he had a nappy rash like you wouldn't believe. The police were after Melissa and Alan and DoCS didn't know where they were. I don't know why the police couldn't have gone down to the methadone clinic and picked them up.

Anyway Melissa and Alan did a runner to Queensland but they got into trouble with the police there too. Shane was still with them. Then Melissa rang to say that she had broken her collarbone, her ribs were smashed and her cheekbone was broken. She said she 'fell down the steps'.

I was terribly concerned and I flew straight up there. I had to stay in a caravan park because Alan wouldn't have me stay in the house. There was poor Shane, not saying a word because he wasn't speaking yet, white as a ghost and having fits. All the neighbours were worried about his safety because they'd see him riding his little bike on the main road.

After I visited Melissa, Alan walked me back down to the caravan park and that night two of the caravans were broken into. I pleaded with Melissa to come home, I contacted the police and DoCS, and next thing Alan was in gaol.

Melissa returned to Sydney but she was living too far away for me to keep an eye on Shane. When Alan came out of gaol he ended up living with her again. He hated me because I had been instrumental in putting him in gaol, so he wouldn't allow me to see Shane. He was bashing Melissa, and I'm sure he was aggressive towards Shane too because the little fellow was very fearful. DoCS was still on their tracks.

Melissa decided to leave Alan and she came back home to me again, but she couldn't cope without drugs. Alan telephoned a few times threatening to commit suicide if she didn't come back.

And that's what he did! He jumped off a cliff! It was simply awful. We went to his funeral. That was dreadful. His parents weren't talking to me because I'd rung the police. It was a horrible experience.

I had been to numerous meetings with DoCS and I realised that every time I went with Melissa she was using me to say that I, her mother, was supporting her. I couldn't cope with it anymore. I was having too many problems, it was affecting my teaching so I sold my house and moved away from Sydney to where I am now. Darren came up here, successfully completed a design course at university, and went back to Sydney to stay at his grandmother's house.

Melissa still had Shane. She'd come up on holidays and I'd arrange for the local pharmacist to give her methadone. I also used to drive Shane up every vacation and a lot of weekends.

Shane's early years were disturbing. He was expelled from several preschools because he was so hard to manage. He took fits, he wasn't deaf but he wasn't talking. At age three he was diagnosed with Landau Kleffner Syndrome, often called autism - a rare form of childhood epilepsy which results in difficulty in

understanding and expressing language, and behaviour problems such as hyperactivity, poor attention, depression and irritability. Children also show impulsiveness which can result in dangerous behaviour, tantrums, rage and aggression and are sensitive to sounds, especially high pitched sounds. It is frightening for them when they are unable to understand what people are saying and unable to talk.

After his diagnosis Shane had to travel from one side of Sydney to the other, through thick traffic, to attend a special school for the deaf. He'd be picked up in a car with a DoCS worker. He didn't get home till quite late. It was too much for a little boy. When I complained, a DoCS person told me, 'At least he's safe in the car.' He was hard to handle and he couldn't travel without having a DoCS worker sitting beside him. One worker punched Shane in the stomach because he was so unsettled.

He didn't get any speech therapy. Once a week I'd go down to Sydney and a teacher would be there for signing classes. We'd all sign together.

The staff were having trouble with Shane at school. He was exposing himself behind the toilets. He was doing that at home too. I reported it to DoCS and so did the school. I was told that 'because of his behaviour, they do that.'

Melissa was moving around from one place to another. Local people who knew me would come up and say, 'I gave Melissa and her boy a lift, she was hitch hiking. I was so worried about her, she had no money so I gave her ten dollars.' I'd pay them back the ten dollars.

I'm quite hostile about DoCS. I went to meeting after meeting and I had thick files about everything that was going on. It was a joke. They should have stepped in. They didn't care.

Disability workers at the school complained that Shane never got enough lunch so I arranged for somebody to go into his home during the afternoon to get tea and to cut his lunch for the next day.

I was paying the woman at the local shop to give Shane fruit because he used to nick the food. 'I don't like saying anything because I know the kid needs it.' On Fridays I'd pay for what he'd taken. She'd put food in a brown paper bag and she'd give it to him so he didn't think he was stealing. But it was only the other day Shane and I were talking about stealing, because he had taken some money out of my bag, I said, 'You mustn't do that or you will go to the police. It's against the law,' and he said, 'Well, mum used to steal all the time.'

When people are on drugs they'll do anything. Shane was the one who had to take the goods out of the shop for his mother.

The DoCS workers were all backpackers. They were athletic so they could handle Shane where older people couldn't. Here was a little boy who couldn't speak English and he had a lady with a thick foreign accent. One time when I returned from taking Melissa shopping we found her sitting on the steps while Shane was locked inside wrecking everything. 'He took a knife to me. I didn't know what to do.' It was chaos.

His case worker changed from year to year. In the end I knew that if I got new young case workers I would get things done for a while till they learnt to conform to the system. I learnt to be as manipulative as they were. I used to get wound up, I still get wound up now talking about it, I'd be on the telephone and I'm sure they were saying, 'There's another mad grandmother!'

When Shane was a bit older I was able to manage taking him on little trips and we would go to places like the museum or the art gallery. He was starting to talk, but no one could understand him except his Mum and me. One day when we were travelling on the bus he talked about being sexually abused and disclosed the person who had been doing it. Thank goodness no one else on the bus would have understood him. I was devastated. Before that I'd had suspicions that abuse was occurring and I'd confronted his mother about it. It wasn't the person I suspected, it was one of Melissa's friends. They were just not fit people to have around Shane.

I told Melissa what he said, 'Either you ring DoCS or the police, or I will.' The Department got straight on to it and the sexual harassment people at Prince of Wales Hospital came in. I got on very well with the lady who was dealing with the matter. She told Melissa she would have to go into rehabilitation and let me care for Shane, or he would be right out of the family. Melissa agreed but it took ages to get her in there.

When Melissa came out of rehab, she moved into a caravan park up near me with the idea that Shane would be able to go back to her after a period of time here and attend a local school. From that time on she was dry. It was wonderful. But people who have been through what she has, don't get back to normal. That's really hard to accept. It was too late. She had cirrhosis of the liver. I was sleeping on her couch because I was worried that Shane would wake up and find her dead. I'd ring the ambulance, I couldn't have her dying at home, but they'd bring her back again. In the end she died of pulmonary heart disease. I felt like a part of me had died too.

My friends thought it was terrible that I'd brought Shane back home with me. I put it back on them, 'Wouldn't you support your grandchildren?'
'Oh yes, OK, but my grandchildren are different - they wouldn't do that.'

My family all said Shane should be institutionalised. 'You can't cope, you can hardly walk.' (I'd had polio as a child and some of the effects were returning now that I was getting older.)

'I've already been coping with him every weekend.'

They didn't realise there wasn't any choice.

My sister once said, 'I can't handle him, I can't have him more than half an hour.'

It upset me but I understood why she said it.

When Shane was little we had to have time out, a strict routine, and a special diet. We still do that. I'd pick him up at the pre-school and we'd call in for an ice cream. That was a treat. When we got home I'd let him play in the bath. His hair used to be long and matted and I used to try to brush it out or I'd put a beanie on him. It was a lot better after his mother let me get it cut.

I'd wrap him up tightly in a towel, he'd calm down and I'd sing to him and then I'd give him a foot massage. Before that I couldn't touch him, that was part of his autism. If I was lucky I'd get a cuddle. I'd get him dressed for bed and we'd have dinner. Then I'd read him a story and he'd go to bed. In that time I'd stay as calm as I could and I'd play a meditation tape.

When Shane came to live with me I used to take him to the park with my friend Ray and my son Darren, I couldn't take him on my own, he'd do runners, he'd hit people, demolish shops. We were the ones who got Shane talking. First we got him squealing to make his vocal chords work. Gradually he went from making noise to making words. He'd had none of that at school, or when he lived with Melissa.

At this stage he was still taking tablets for LKS. He was passing out all over the place. If he heard sirens he'd be petrified and he'd have a fit.

My son Darren was living back with me and he often had to help. No wonder he's had enough these days. We had to teach Shane how to play. We used to build tents out of sheets, and we'd have dress-ups. Because he couldn't talk, I used to draw for him what had happened that day, like a comic strip on little cards, so that he could show and tell at school what he had done. I even had a man give him one to one horse riding lessons. The hours and hours I spent retraining Darren when he was recovering from meningitis paid off. I'd had to go back to move forward and I used that approach all over again with Shane. The difference was that Darren was slow and withdrawn whereas Shane was full on.

As Shane grew older he used to get picked up here in a taxi and taken to a special school for the deaf because of his speech problems. He had settled down at school for a while but after his mother died he started getting into a lot of

trouble. He had too many behaviour problems and there were too many other kids at the school who had behaviour problems. The teachers were putting it down to the fact that they were deaf. I think the other kids were overprotected but Shane was different. He wasn't overprotected, he was streetwise. He was cunning and smart. He wasn't going to hold other people's hands when he went on an excursion. I had to get him out of the deaf school so I put Shane into the local school but it didn't last.

The breakthrough came when I got him into DALE, a Dynamic Alternative Learning Environment, a Christian school for Years 7 – 10 students who had difficulty coping with mainstream school life. There were programs for students with special learning or behavioural needs to boost their self esteem and reduce anti-social behaviour and feelings of anger. It has been an excellent school for Shane.

Shane's speech is worse if he's tired. The mind of people like Shane is active at night while they sleep, so they need a lot of sleep. That's why Shane goes to bed at 8.30 here. He wasn't getting much sleep when he was living at home, he was up all night. His mum, I still love her, because I know she had a disease where people lose all concepts of normal life, but in her place, you'd be up all night, sleepless. There'd be blokes breaking into the house.

Shane was scared. When he came here he wouldn't go to bed without sticks. He used to hide food. I'd go to the bookcase or in his bedroom and there'd be half a scone there. Even now he gets up at night and takes something to eat into his bedroom. I just let him do it and in the morning I take his bowl out. I think it reassures him that there is always food. He can't handle it if there's something missing out of the fridge.

The man who sexually abused Shane is still walking around today. At the time Shane wasn't able to talk so he couldn't tell his story. I had to get all the information for DoCS myself. I went through the health system, I arranged to see a psychiatrist. I was pushing for something to be done all the time. Shane and I both went to counselling, we still do, but not so often. Since then I've been to a solicitor and we had no trouble getting Victim's Compensation money awarded.

With my son Darren and my grandson Shane both living at home, my problems go on and on. Darren is very resentful of Shane and he has a lot of trouble with him. With ten years difference in age there's not a lot of bonding between them. Shane has experienced things that other kids never have. You can't take that out of him. Darren's 26 now and he still looks at Shane in a negative way, he doesn't see the positives. He acts up because Shane gets a lot of attention, and Darren wants it too. On top of this he knows he can't have children. Eighty percent of

people with polycystic kidneys pass it on and he wouldn't put any woman through that pain.

So the whole thing is really tragic. I know I'll just get Shane right and I'll have to deal with Darren. He'll be the next one. I worry how old I'll be and how much strength I'll have to look after him, especially if he has to go on a dialysis machine. How am I going to cope? At the moment I'm planning to put another room on here. That's a reason I came here so that he'll be able to look out on the river if he's on dialysis.

With money my mother left when she died we bought a place in town so Darren could do his photography. I'm not worried whether he'll make a million dollars out of it or anything, I just want him to be happy - and have whatever he needs.

Other money was left from my mum's and an aunty's will for Melissa and Shane. This caused bitter resentment with the other members of the family, and even involved a court case which was resolved in our favour. We had been ostracised before because of Shane's behaviour and the fact that Melissa stole from her relatives. With Shane and Melissa being left money, some of which has gone into a trust for Shane, it's like rubbing salt into their wounds. Because of this I have ended up with no family. I am on my own. I don't want to wallow in my family too much. It can be depressing.

I've been looking after people my whole life. I've cared for Shane and before that it was Darren. When Darren came out of hospital at the age of four from having meningitis I did a huge amount of therapy with him, threaded so many ruddy beads to get his hands moving. One hand is still not right. He's had it hard. Life's been a struggle for him. He's had to learn everything over and over again. It has been hard for him to get information in and hold it there.

If I hadn't tried to keep positive I would have drowned. I've always made sure I had a bit of therapy and I've always gone to Al-Anon meetings. You can get stuck with your own situation. You can't expect other people to understand unless they've been through it. Some people think you're overdramatising everything.

'Why does Melissa carry that big bag with the bottle in it?'
She couldn't walk a straight line!

I think there is a genetic weakness in our family. Darren has ADD and I have it. It is very interesting. There's a lot of anxiety, a lot of the women suffer from depression, I have a cousin who is autistic, my mother was bipolar and there are a few relatives I'd say verging on it. I think that's where the weakness is, so if something is going to go wrong that's where it is going to happen.

I believe that if my daughter Melissa had been on Ritalin she would not have been an addict. With hindsight I believe she had ADD. She was so quick, very active. I thought that was normal because I was the same. There was a difference though, I have a learning difficulty. I remember things associated with art but I don't remember other information well. Melissa was highly intelligent.

My son Darren has Aspergers. His learning difficulties are different again. He's very slow, he needs something to boost him up. He is interested in film, photography, and cars a bit. He's had various girlfriends but they've always been the mothering kind. I don't think they realise what Aspergers is like. Darren can't do anything spontaneously. He just gets traumatised.

Now we are treating Shane as autistic and as having ODD, Oppositional Defiance Disorder. The way Shane thinks is very autistic. He can't understand a joke. He will tell you a joke but he doesn't think it's funny. He has a joke book but he can't make up one. He doesn't understand a plot to a narrative and that's why I can't get him to read a story. He'll read a dictionary, he'll remember the facts. He is very good at maths and is a year ahead in that subject. He also likes lists and routines. He and I go shopping but he can get hyper at the shops and run around. A lot of friends find him hard to handle.

After Shane had been with me for a while I took him back to the hospital where he's always seen a neurologist. When the staff saw him approaching I heard them call out. 'Quick Shane's coming!' They remembered how wild he'd been and how he used to climb over the barriers in the children's ward. They could not believe the difference in him. They could not believe that he was the same person. They have never seen anyone make so much progress. Well, I understood Shane. I understood where he was coming from.

Shane's very settled here. To move elsewhere would be traumatic for him. He gets on his bike and he's off. I know that he's safe around here. Everyone knows him. He's very attached to me which is another worry at my age. If I get sick he gets quite upset. I'm the only person he's got. I'm not as mobile as I used to be. I'll have to stay well but it worries me.

I just hope, for Shane's sake, that I'm going to hang around for a bit longer.

MARILYN'S STORY

“We were left with this severely disabled little three-year-old who didn't know what was going on.”

My daughter Nicole got into the drug scene when she was very young. She'd always been strong-willed and the older she got the more she resisted anything we said to her. My husband Matt and I couldn't change her, we couldn't stop her, we couldn't do a thing about it.

She's still into drugs. She carries so much anger. It's awful. I have to be very careful that I don't upset her with what I say or how I say it. She has different attitudes and values. I can only hope that one day there might be a change.

When Nicole was only fifteen years old she had a baby. That's when everything became much harder to deal with. Emily was born 23 weeks premature and she weighed only 520 grams. She had massive health problems including severe pulmonary hypertension and chronic lung disease. She was an extremely sick little baby, few babies like her survive.

Nicole took this tiny baby home to her flat where she was living with her partner Bill. He was into drugs too. He was useless. He showed no attachment to Emily, no responsibility for her at all. He'd be on his computer oblivious of Emily crying, or needing food or a change of nappy.

As she grew older it became dangerous for her to be there. The flat had steps back and front, she was roaming around the place without any supervision, Nicole and Bill were constantly fighting and they were neglecting Emily terribly. She needed to see a whole range of specialists and to go to physiotherapy but her parents weren't bothering to take her. On top of her health problems she'd been diagnosed with severe autism and she was supposed to be going to an early intervention program at the Special Education Centre at the University.

Nicole left Bill and came back home. She didn't care about Emily. She'd disappear with her new boyfriend and Matt and I would be left literally holding the baby. She'd come back home and she'd be high on drugs, angry, and doing the stupidest things. Instead of looking after her daughter, she'd be asleep on the floor. She started saying. 'I don't want her anymore. Give her to DoCS. I can't do this anymore.'

She'd blame us for her problems, 'It's all your fault. When I have my own place everything will be fine.'

She found a place to live and about a week before Christmas she rang, 'Emily hasn't moved for three days, she's just been lying on the lounge. It's useless going to the doctors. They can't tell us anything we don't already know.'

Matt and I had often discussed what might happen if Nicole didn't change. We already used to have Emily every weekend. This time we had to act. I went over and picked Emily up and Nicole was more than happy for me to do everything that was necessary. So that's how it started. We were left to care for this severely disabled little three-year-old who didn't know what was going on.

Nicole turned up on Christmas Day. Made no apologies. She was totally off her dial. She'd had a hit. Then she left, left all the Christmas presents, left Emily. We didn't hear any more from her until the first week in January.

I felt I should notify the Department of Community Services (DoCS) that we were taking on the care of Emily. When we started going through the official process with them I discovered that I had been initiated into the Secret Service where they tell you nothing and give you nothing. It was frustrating and degrading. It took two weeks of phone calls to make the appointment!

DoCS wanted me to come to them so I had to organise a carer for Emily. There was no way that she could cope with an interview situation in a strange place with strange people. Instead of sitting still while I talked to a stranger Emily would have been screaming and crying and requiring my whole attention. She was utterly reliant on me to help her cope with all the stimulus in a new situation.

I found the experience very traumatic. I was going to DoCS, 'the people who take your child away'. But it was much worse than that. I was notifying them about my own daughter. That's one of the hardest things I've ever done. I only did it because Emily's needs overrode all other considerations, but it was devastating.

The lady I spoke to was very kind, 'We can help you out, we can give you a payment.' I'd gone there for help with the legal angle of caring for Emily. She needed medical attention and I had no idea at the time how to get through those legalities and enrol her at childcare. I hadn't gone there asking for any money so this was a surprise and I felt very grateful.

Two months passed before we actually received financial help. What I didn't know was that this was the minimum payment and because of Emily's disabilities I was entitled to a deal more. Nobody at DoCS told me that. It was like they just wanted to wash their hands of me and Emily.

Emily's health was getting worse and worse and she was in urgent need of medical attention. It was essential for Matt and me to have an authorisation

from DoCS stating that Emily was officially in our care because specialists wouldn't treat her without it. Court proceedings couldn't go ahead either without this proof. It took at least four long phone calls before we had success in getting acknowledgement, by which time I was getting frantic.

Emily had to have an urgent operation for massive sleep apnoea. The paediatrician rushed her through the hospital system to have her tonsils and adenoids removed. It was an emergency procedure because she aspirates, fluid can run down into her lungs instead of her throat and this can cause pneumonia. Children often bleed after this operation. After the operation she was placed in the intensive care unit (ICU) because of her heart and lung complications.

There, in the ICU ward, I found myself confronted by social workers, doctors and nurses. They asked me what right I had to have this operation done. This is after the operation! I've got Emily lying in bed just coming out of sedation, she's severely autistic and she's going to go right off when she wakes up in pain and sees so many people around her. I'm trying to explain that her mother's in active ice addiction and that it wasn't possible to get her mother's signature, and that DoCS was aware of Emily being in my care. I had even given them a letter from DoCS. For some reason, that wasn't enough, they wanted to speak to Nicole.

I was trying to get them out of the room and they were trying to get me out of the room. I was telling them to ring DoCS because DoCS knew all about it and I gave them phone numbers. They weren't accepting my right to have given consent. (Pointless argument seeing the operation had already been done!) That was extremely terrifying. I was scared stiff that if I went out of the room I wouldn't be allowed back in, and where would Emily be without the security of having me there?

Eventually I had to go out of the room but luckily I ran into a relative who was a Sister in another ward. She came back with me and stood with me while staff went in and out. Seeing her supporting me they backed off. Afterwards I wrote letters of complaint and got an enormous apology but as far as I was concerned it was too little, too late.

That was a life-threatening situation. If Emily had woken up in the middle of it all she could have died. It scared the living daylights out of me. It was ludicrous. Somebody had jumped on the legality of the situation rather than looking after the child. That's where our system really fails these kids and the grandparents who are doing their best to look after them. There's a grave lack of support.

The very next day I had to go to court where everything was settled! I could have done with a friendly hand there, especially after the ordeal the day before. It was a huge load. I'm so glad I'm through it. Looking back, it's such a daze.

I was continually frustrated by having to contact DoCS again and again and again. I understood that DoCS were extremely overworked and understaffed but, that wasn't our problem. I got sick of the never-ending battle. One day I rang for urgent financial assistance because I had to pay for Child Care, Emily had to have a number of operations and she had to go into the Intensive Care Unit again. I was told, 'If it's too much, give Emily up!' What an enormous slap in the face! By this stage we were thousands of dollars out of pocket and had nothing left.

It was months before I found out there was a Disability Carers Allowance. Nobody at DoCS had told us that either. We were entitled to double what we had been getting. The fees at the Early Intervention and Child Care Centre were approaching \$500 per week. That was a massive amount for us to find each month. We were entitled to have those fees paid as well. Meanwhile I'm thinking, what are we going to do? We're going to lose our house if we go on like this. I can't keep paying all her fees and medication as well. I was told if I couldn't pay my bills I would have to find a new Child Care Centre. The Early Intervention Centre was a home for Emily. It was much more important to her than to other children who could adjust to change. I tried to explain all this to DoCS but I got nowhere.

I found out exactly what my entitlements were when I spoke to a member of GAPS, and also, almost by accident, from a DoCS flyer sent out by the Director General of DoCS to all carers. That was incredible. Oh, look at this! I'm 'a registered carer'. I didn't know that. Every time I notified DoCS they would say, 'No we don't have you on record, you're not in our files.' I'd never been interviewed as a carer, I wasn't being paid as a carer. Now this letter was calling me that.

I have a list of calls I've made to DoCS but I got nothing back from them - no phone calls, no emails, nothing in writing, not a thing. I would advise everyone dealing with DoCS to put everything in writing otherwise they may find what I did, it was my word against theirs.

That's what I do. I write down conversations in front of the people I talk to. It unnerves them something terrible to start with. I couldn't rely on my own memory when Emily was running all over the place. It also had the effect of letting them know I meant business. I do it all the time.

I got sick of worrying how to pay all our bills. It wasn't until I jumped up and down, screamed and ranted and raved, and took my case to my local member

of parliament that I got action. Within two days we got promises of payment. That was ten months after Emily had come to live with us. We should have been receiving our full entitlements seven or eight months earlier but DoCS wouldn't backdate. In that ten months we had never been screened to see if we were suitable to be carers for Emily.

We were experiencing terrible financial difficulties. We had run our bankcard up to the hilt. DoCS wouldn't help us at all. We were continually on the phone waiting for someone to get back to us from different government organisations. I was doing all these things as well as working, raising my grandchild and looking after my own family that was falling apart! I look back and think, 'Wow! How did we do it?'

What people didn't realise is that I worked four days a week and every other bit of my time was taken up with Emily. To be able to make phone calls, to get in to do things meant running around with the phone while I was checking up on Emily or doing things with her. Caring for Emily involved constant vigilance. She didn't have a normal pain threshold; her body didn't always tell her when she had hurt herself. If she fell and really hurt herself how was I going to know? She was learning these things slowly but even today I have to be very watchful.

When DoCS started paying the fees it was an enormous relief. I had enough money to buy Emily new clothes on a regular basis. We'd had to start from scratch. She'd had basically no clothes, no toys, nothing. Funding for equipment she needed, a wheelchair, trampoline, an exercise ball, came through from Life Activities. We hadn't been able to afford it. That seemed ludicrous because we were both working.

The payment stopped at the end of the year!
'We told you. Emily's case has to be reviewed.'
How enormously frustrating!

For the first time since we'd had Emily with us DoCS were going to come to our house and interview Matt and me with our fifteen-year-old son Todd. We were very worried because we had no flooring down, the house was half finished, though the one room that has been done all the way along, that had been painted a beautiful pink, was Emily's room. It was traumatic for Todd to be interviewed in front of us. 'How do you feel?' Pretty uncomfortable because they were assessing whether we were suitable or not.

I could not contemplate the thought of someone else raising Emily. We were asked all kinds of questions, and personal questions with family listening. In some ways it was an eye opener to hear what my husband and son had to say. I

was really proud of the way my son spoke. It was invasive but we had to go through it or we wouldn't have been paid, and degrading to know we needed it.

If the State Member had not stepped in DoCS would not have done anything. Disgraceful. The DoCS woman who helped us through all the maze resigned. She couldn't stand seeing how we, and others, were treated.

As grandparents raising grandchildren we are providing this service for society as well as our grandchild. We are saving the government thousands of dollars a year. Where I work there is a significant percentage of students who are being raised by their grandparents. Are these families being treated like we were?

There should be someone at DoCS who welcomes grandparents, who understands how to help them, where to send them, their entitlements - the whole thing. Why can't there be someone who comes out to the home? 'OK. I can see what your situation is, let me help you. Let me fill in this form for you, I can see you're really busy and you're under stress...'

It is humiliating going from DoCS where you're treated so poorly to Centrelink where nobody seems to know how many forms you are supposed to fill in, who you're supposed to see, where you're supposed to go, and what you need. But you have to go through the system.

I hate to think what other grandparents have been through. I'm sure many would feel extremely intimidated. If I could see then what I can see now it would have been a lot easier but we were under enormous stress. While I was dealing with DoCS we had all kinds of decisions to make. We were both working full time, our youngest child was going to high school, we'd just bought our first home, we had a car loan still outstanding, and we were looking forward to the next phase in our lives.

The next phase was not what we anticipated. When Emily first came to live with us she wouldn't go outside the front door for weeks and weeks and weeks. That meant I wasn't allowed outside the front door for weeks and weeks. She would not let me out of her sight. She was absolutely petrified.

We ended up stopping all visits from her father because she got traumatised. She'd be violently ill or gasping for breath, and purple around the lips, she was so distraught. We had to bear her mother's visits but they didn't happen very often.

We ended up going to the Family Law Court with Nicole to gain custody of Emily. The father never showed up. I was supposed to notify Nicole of anything that happened to Emily, any medical needs, educational needs and so

on. For so long Nicole hadn't cared, it was almost a pointless exercise. A lot of the time I couldn't get in touch with her.

Once Nicole's boyfriend was in gaol, she started stabilising herself a lot more, she was going to work full time, and we were told she was stopping drugs. Emily was going over to Nicole's place on a regular basis every weekend or two and accepting those arrangements quite well but Nicole started getting more unsettled, she was asking when could Emily go and live with her and she was saying she didn't like work. I suspected that she didn't want to go to work anymore, she wanted Emily's money so she could stay at home.

One night I had a distressed call from Nicole, 'Mummy, Mummy, come and get me!' She had slit her wrists. She required stitches but it was a cry for help rather than a serious attempt. I tried to get her into a hospital for treatment but they were in recess over the Christmas period. I tried the mental health hospital but they wouldn't take her because she was a self-harmer, and she would do it again if she got the attention she wanted. So we had to wait till the following year.

In the interim I was continually trying to convince Nicole that she did need to go into hospital, she did need to get help and sort out her drug addiction and mental instability. If she could do those things her life might be a lot easier and more enjoyable. That said, she stayed in hospital a week and a half, then found out her boyfriend was coming out of gaol. She wanted her daughter back in her life so that everything would look like happy families when he came out. I did not want Emily to have anything to do with him and Matt and I wanted nothing to do with him as well. He had a bad reputation. From what I'd been told he'd been charged with a violent act, rape and armed robbery and was due to go back to court and gaol in the next few months. Nicole denied all those things.

Nicole's behaviour was obviously unstable and disruptive so I told her not to visit our house, we would have supervised visits with Emily at the park. How could I do this to her? We received abusive, manipulative phone calls and harassment. We were at the point of having our calls screened when she slowed right down. Now she's taking me to mediation because she believes we are stopping her rights as a parent. All I'm doing is protecting Emily's rights and my family's. I'm so angry about it because it's going to be a great big waste of time, and will only succeed in causing more stress and emotion.

With Emily's multiple health problems and autism it took four months to get her into the Child Care Centre and then I had to take four months of unpaid leave off work to be there with her.

There is not one single organisation that I could have gone to that would have been able to say 'OK, you've got a disabled child, you need...' and informed

me and linked me up with all the services that could assist. I had to laboriously find my way through a maze of government organisations, begging for help on the phone. It took me about six months to find out about the services that could help. We were able to access Newcastle Temporary Care Services which is a government funded organisation for children with disabilities funded through Department of Ageing Disability and Home Care (DADHC).

I am so glad we used their services. It depends on the kind of disability, but we got fifteen hours a month either in our home or in the carer's home care. I spread that out over the whole month - a half day at the weekend for my son's sport, I go to tai chi once a week, or I need to go shopping, or I attend meetings.

Emily loves her carer and it has given her another set of grandparents. They've been able to pass on so much information and help us out in many different ways. It was her carer who told me it takes a village to raise a child. That made me feel a lot more comfortable about asking for help.

It took four or five months after I got in touch with DADHC before I got a case worker. By then I was grovelling. I'd gone way beyond pride, 'You've got to help me!' The case worker said we needed a psychologist to help us cope with Emily's needs and to help our family settle after such a stressful period. That certainly helped. We got speech therapy, physiotherapy and all the assessments that were needed.

It was an amazing journey to meet all the people involved with Emily's placement in the Child Care Centre - getting funding and getting the psychologist out there to speak to the staff about Emily's needs and how best to cope with this tantrum and that tantrum. Emily's paediatrician believes that her developmental disorders are much higher needs than her autism needs. That tells me that intervention is miraculous and totally necessary.

Emily needs melatonin to help her relax and get to sleep otherwise she'll just fire back up again, or giggle at the light or run around crazily. Her medication should only be used for short periods but unless she gets enough sleep she's not productive the next day, and doesn't learn much. When I put Emily to bed I read her a story for twenty to thirty minutes. As she's going to sleep I sit on the end of the bed and read my book. That normally gives me a good half hour, sometimes an hour, sometimes two hours. Just stopping every now and again, and quietly getting Emily lying down, going to sleep, lying down, going to sleep. That's my time. Going to work is my time. Tai Chi once a week is my time.

Everything takes a long period of time with Emily. For three months last year she had an aversion to going to school. She would cling to me, scream, sob

uncontrollably, tears everywhere. The Child Care Centre bent over backwards to help and we talked with the psychologists a few times. They even changed their program and put on a DVD that Emily loved, to get her attention so I could leave.

Now today when I dropped her, 'See you later darling.' Hugs and kisses. 'Bye bye Nan.' She grabbed her teacher's hand and took her inside. One little insecurity dissolved for now. To see a child smiling and looking at you or just enjoying herself in play where before she used to be just lying there, doing nothing much, or going round and round in circles, it's amazingly pleasing.

I can't imagine Emily not being in our lives. It's a strange feeling. She's our grandchild but she's our little girl. There's still a great big pain in our heart because, what we are missing, and what Emily is missing is our own child, her mother. Perhaps love conquers all.

It has been a very hard time for my son Todd. I didn't understand how hard until maybe six months ago. He took having Emily living with us in his stride to start with, or as well as any fourteen-year-old boy would, but he didn't want to get involved. He would distance himself and he'd be in his room, and that was fine. He'd never been a demanding child, he'd always been self-sufficient.

What Matt and I didn't realise was how much anger, confusion and hurt Todd was feeling about his sister Nicole, and that reflected in his relationship with Emily. He also didn't understand the autism although we tried to explain it many times.

He resented strongly the amount of time we spent with Emily, but he also resented the fact that I didn't have a life. 'You're chained down to this child and it's not your fault, it's Nicole's fault. She's dumped this child. She's a junkie and she's dropped her child off and never come back to pick her up.'

At least saying these things started a process of healing. Todd himself requested that he go to see a psychologist because he recognised that he was getting really depressed. I thought that was extremely mature of him. He told me those things are discussed in personal development lessons at school. I praised him because praise was certainly due. He has found it very tough to go to a psychologist. The hope is that by doing these things now he will have a better lifestyle and a better future.

He still doesn't want a great deal to do with Emily but there's not a lot I can do about that.

'Look at the mess she's left.'

I try to point out gently, 'You used to do things like that when you were little.' Where he might have done things like that, he thinks it's different that I have to

clean up after his sister's child. He can't get past feeling that it is wrong that we're raising a grandchild because her mother is incompetent and selfish.

I can always go back through what has happened and think I could have changed this or I could have made that better but it just leaves me feeling fragile and not capable of doing the things that I've got to do.

Life will never be normal, it will be Emily's way. We appreciate each little win, every little thing that she gains. A five year old who doesn't use the toilet? You never imagine things like that but they're quite common with autistic children. Scouting out nappies for a child her size presented another challenge.

People talk about a television show. Oh, what's that? Oh the thing we play Hi5 on, or the Wiggles, or Sponge Bob. I do well if I can watch one television show a week. By the time I get Emily to sleep, and spend time with Todd, and Matt - it's bed! That's it. We get up very early too.

The Grandparent Support Group has been my saving grace. I remember hearing from a member of GAPS who said 'How about we meet for a cuppa?' That came at such a good time. To read about grandparents raising grandchildren was one thing but to be able to talk with people in a situation similar to my own helped me to put it all in perspective and helped point me in the right direction. It was also valuable to hear information which I needed to know in times of crisis.

We lost a few friends once Emily came to stay. I think it was just too much for them and they didn't understand. Oh, your daughter is a drug addict. She's dumped her child. Oh, the child's got special needs. Mmmmm autism. They think that means 'a naughty child'. They don't see the needs that are required for that child. They don't have anyone like that in their family or if they do it's ADHD which seems more socially acceptable. It's sad and it used to make me really angry that people didn't understand. It wasn't possible for me to pop around when I felt like it. A visit had to be planned so that when Emily was relaxed enough I could say, 'Come on, Emily, let's go for a walk, we're going to go and visit Helen.'

At a time when there's so much family turmoil you're not the same happy-go-lucky person you used to be. I was dragging myself from pillar to post. I was getting two or three hours sleep a night. I was a zombie. What kind of conversation can you have with a friend when you're like that? The friendships were not strong enough in the first place. We have made new friends, and formed much stronger relationships since then because there's understanding, so I don't really feel there's been a great loss.

DoCS did end up giving me a little respite but it was totally inadequate. It stressed Emily out so much and that was what I was worried about. Second rate care, no offence to the poor people who tried their best. It was horrible but we had to be able to prove that point to DoCS.

If I'd gone through the Children's Court, DoCS would have been involved, and a plan of management and funding would have been set up. DoCS kept telling me, that because I'd gone through Family Court, they had no jurisdiction and therefore they couldn't assist me or assist Emily either. I kept arguing that it shouldn't matter. If DoCS had stepped in and done their job in the first place, they'd have found there were more than enough reports saying this child was at risk. My daughter was a fifteen year old girl with a severely disabled child and yet she was allowed to leave hospital and go back to an inappropriate setting. Even DoCS workers were confused about how that happened. They were aware of it. That's why I rang the complaints line. It's really sad. No one in their right mind could have left Emily the way she was. No one. And that is no offence to my daughter at all. I had to intervene. There is an enormous amount of frustration about how the referrals are not acted upon.

I teach in a high school and as part of my job I do special provisions for the Board of Studies. I also assess students feeding into high school and collect data so we can cater for their needs. There is a high percentage of kids being raised by grandparents. One year I asked how many children were living out of home or with grandparents. I was surprised at the large percentage and I estimated that were at least 10% in that one intake. These kids are at a sensitive age, they don't want others to know they are being raised by their grandparents.

Our children have the support of GAPS, but others have none. I've handed out information about GAPS to a number of grandparents but most of them don't want to know. Early intervention is always the key. It would cost a fortune but imagine the difference that it would make in the long run. I come across a lot of addicts' kids in my work and many, many of them present with learning difficulties, social difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties. Besides being let down by their parents, society is also letting them down.

The schools are putting these kids out into society. Who's responsible? I really wish there was a way, a simple way, that could change the way society views our own children. It all seems to be tied in with mental health, with drug and alcohol addiction and the causes that run behind that, but it's society's attitude towards it all that makes it so difficult. Our legislation is a century behind what's actually happening.

Our region has the highest incidence in NSW for children living in out of home care. Why? I don't know, but these things need to be looked at. We've got

universities out there who could look at the enormous social impact on everyone's lives.

When Matt and I agreed to raise Emily we decided to do the best we possibly could to improve her life. Even so it was really hard for Matt to accept our new parenting role and it took a good six months for him to adjust. I think men and women deal with anger and disappointment differently. Matt will rant and rave and be furious, things like that, but he has always loved her.

Gradually I noticed he was really starting to bond with Emily, there seemed to be a significant change. I think it was when Emily began to interact more with other people. It took a long time for her to trust anybody else but me and her carer but once she did it was fine. There were certain games she had just with me and likewise there were wonderful games she and her Grandad played together. It was the funniest sight seeing this four year old with huge old boxing gloves on her hands. She didn't do any punching but she loved backing into Grandad and she'd giggle, giggle, giggle. It was such a fun game, and all the better because she was so sensitive to touch because of her autism. To get her used to touching we'd use firm holding and pressure to release the tension and her sensitivity to it.

Grandad hung lots of strips around the yard, with toys and bells hanging on the ends to attract Emily's attention. She'd follow Grandad around the garden. He'd be putting in the plants and she'd be pulling them up. He'd be sweeping and she'd be swinging a broom around. He'd be working somewhere and she'd sit alongside to be near him.

Matt helped bath Emily while I got the dinner. It was too difficult to do everything for Emily all on my own, in fact I was glad I went to work because it would have been all consuming trying to meet her needs and I don't think it would have been healthy for me.

Grandparents have been discriminated against compared to foster parents. According to the legislation foster carers can get respite once a month. We need some advocacy service, besides just a support service, that will be working for grandparents as parents or kinship carers. Unlike foster parents, grandparents can keep in touch with the extended family. Emily has cousins who adore her, and uncles and aunts and great uncles and aunts who dote over her and lots of friends and relatives.

Her birthday party this year was so different to the year before when it was a bit sad. She'd been living with us a few months and there weren't many people to invite, though with an autistic child you don't want to invite too many because there's too much happening. This year she was running up to everyone, looking

at them, engaging with them, laughing, playing games. That's only after a year! What will it be like in two years?

We're still standing. I thought we'd be blown over with stress-related disorders by now. It's a labour of love. It's not a battle. It's only a battle if you're doing something you don't want to do. It's a real labour of love that has enormous dividends.

Two years later

Two years down the track and, my goodness, has life changed. Some things for the better, some for the worse.

My husband and I separated. It all got too much for him caring for Emily, always me not having any time for him and all those sort of things. That was well over a year ago and that had been going on for a long, long period. He couldn't cope. He's about to remarry and get on with his life.

My daughter Nicole came back home four months ago and has now taken on the full responsibility of raising her daughter who's seven now. Nicole's coming along in leaps and bounds. She's clean of all her drug addictions, has been for quite a while, and I couldn't be happier, Emily couldn't be happier. It's absolutely brilliant. Nicole looks great. It's a wonderful situation. She'll be moving out soon and I'll be really sad to see them go. I'm sure I'll be going there for dinner every night, if not, they'll be here. If anything it's made our bond much, much stronger. Our relationship is the best it has been for a long time and Emily's absolutely ecstatic. She's got Mum and Nan so she can bounce from one to the other.

She's very much happier and more confident today. She was very sensitive to all the turmoil that had been going on in our household. It affected her just as it had affected us but she couldn't verbalise any of that.

With my son Todd, it's all taken a toll. By the end of last year he was in a psychotic state, couldn't cope with life any more, was admitted into the psychiatric unit. He's now on his third admittance. During that time I had to make another one of the hardest decisions in my whole life. I had to decide whether I was going to keep on caring for Emily or give her up. I had to weigh up - son, granddaughter, son, granddaughter. I couldn't do both. My son needed me more. I called my daughter over, sat her down and told her what I needed to do in life and without hesitation Nicole said, 'Well I'll move back in till I can sort something out for accommodation.'

Maybe it was just what she needed at that time. She'd been getting better before that. She'd been coming over three and four nights a week for a good six months and more, and had certainly turned everything around.

I think it was just her time. She'd gone to an all time low with drugs. She'd certainly had a lot of problems with the law, things along those lines, It's funny how your brain can block out all those nasty horrible things. But throughout it all, no matter how low she was, there was still that flicker of love going. I think that eventually overrode everything else. I could never write her off totally, no matter how angry and hurt I felt. It was, I'd better just ring and see how she's going, no matter how bad the relationship was going. There was a lot of resentment towards me for raising her child. She just kept coming, kept coming, the door was open, sometimes it was closed. She persevered, and she was encouraged to persevere. She was seeing the drug and alcohol counsellors, doing a lot of those things. At that stage as far as I was concerned it wasn't quick enough, it wasn't enough. Like most things with your children you want to make them all better. The love of your child is stronger than anything. Certainly it taught me to back off and get on with what I had to do, to relinquish other things but be there to provide assistance. She'd been coming for a long time and caring for her daughter, while she was giving me time for myself, and I think she started to see how hard it really had been for me.

I had a lot of help, especially from Grandparents as Parents. I'd been able to talk about what was happening, and discuss it with them. I could appreciate it from her side as well as my own side, so the emotions didn't run wild, even though they were wild days. I could not have done any of this on my own. It was a long hard road and it will continue to be, but it's never as hard when you're not on your own.

Our lives changed dramatically with the breakdown of my marriage. I'm now a sole parent which is pretty good these days. My son Todd will be moving in with his father because it will be better for him. My daughter Nicole will be moving out with Emily, and I am going to have to find a life. I've gone from one extreme to the other, but throughout all of it, the one thing that seemed to make a difference, there was always some hope.

There were certainly many, many black moments where I truly felt that I couldn't go on, I couldn't do anything more. There were times when I felt very much on my own, especially with Emily being the type of child she is, such high needs, I was really ostracised. I ended up with one or two good friends who'd come and see me. I'd have those two second conversations while I'm running round with Emily or she's climbing over them or she's squealing or we're doing this or doing that at the same time. My work gave me some semblance of sanity because I'd be doing something normal on a day to day basis.

I kept a diary for a long time, I had to do that for the Disability Advocacy Services. Almost all of our time was taken up with Emily's well-being. DoCS and DADHC and other places wanted to know why a grandmother, the sole

carer of a disabled child, would need respite care on a regular basis when she was working full time. They asked me what a typical day was like. There was no typical day, it varied, but I did my utmost to ensure there was routine.

I might get up any time from three to six in the morning. When Emily was awake she was up. I'd change her nappy (including attending to her toileting program), fix her morning medications, prepare thickened juice and breakfast, and set up a DVD so that she could focus on that while eating breakfast. At 6:30 a worker from Home Care came in for an hour to help me get her ready. This included dressing her, doing her hair, brushing her teeth and getting her lunch ready which often took two of us – one holding her down while the other one tried to complete the job.

I'd have a quick shower, get dressed, the bus would come, she'd be out the door, then I'd be out the door. Or I might get the chance to put some washing on the line. I'd get to work, do the things I do at work, try and make phone calls in that time that needed to be made for specialist appointments or funding applications, for assistance here and there, or someone would want to know this or that about Emily.

In the afternoon she'd settle down, watch a DVD or use her computer, play on the trampoline. There were all sorts of physical activities she needed to do as well as wanted to do. For many years it was to strengthen certain muscles so that she could stand upright, work on her balance, teach her how to jump, simple things like that. Teaching her how to reach up so that her spine would straighten up. The way she was in hospital for so many years she had a curvature.

The saving grace was the computer. A technology review was done for Emily, as for other severely disabled children, through the Stuart Centre. We were able to define what kind of system she needed that would benefit her, what types of software and hardware she needed. We put in funding applications through Leapfrog ability which is funded through DADHC. It took a long time coming but about a year later we had a computer set up for her. She had a special mouse and a keyboard which she was learning to use at home and through school as well. It was amazing watching some of the things she could do and work out. I've never had to get that computer repaired.

For so long I'd been fighting for regular respite from Emily because of sleep deprivation, the need for some stability, the need for some time out for me, rest time.

Basically what it came down to was time for me to sleep. I'd been trying to tell them for ages, 'We need this help and we need it now!' I'd average three or four hours a night. That was it. You can't possibly expect someone to survive

with sleep deprivation, let alone rush round doing all the things that my diary showed - the amount of phone calls, the amount of begging, the amount of calls to politicians, writing letters to the Director of Community Services and to Disability Services, interacting with DAS, Disability Advocacy Services, getting them to come to meetings with DoCS. I was close a number of times to releasing our story to the press and highlighting the lack of assistance I had from DoCS and DADHC. What else could I do? If I didn't fight there was nothing left. I couldn't keep functioning the way I'd been functioning.

It was worth it, though nothing much in the Departments has changed. Today Emily has respite one night a week. That would never have happened if I hadn't fought so hard for all of this.

Emily has a pretty ordinary autistic diet. Yellow is her favourite colour with food. Dry food, she doesn't like mushy things, lives on vegemite toast, vegemite sandwiches, corn chips, pretzels, chicken chippies, sausage rolls, yoghurt, muesli bars. It's hard to get anything different into her. It's a challenge. She's not on a really healthy diet but there's not much you can do. You can't put different things on her plate. You can't say, 'If you don't eat this, you can't have that.'

She doesn't care, she'll just shut down. We seem to be able to get in one lot of new food but we lose another. We try to keep her fluids up, that's particularly important for autistic kids. I have to watch food colourings, as she becomes a very naughty, totally different kid. The foods that set her off are the ones she craves and wants the most.

Routines and structure are extremely important to Emily and enable her to function in a chaotic world. She's gone from a child who was totally reliant on someone else, that was me, to do everything for her, to a happy little girl who runs all over the place. Now she is able to interact with other children and to participate in life. She's changed so much from the child who screamed her head off whenever something happened that was different. That's because here, she's in a safe, stable environment, and because she's gently pushed to step outside that comfort zone where she's loved and appreciated for who she is.

Recently DoCS signed off from being involved in assistance to our family. That's massive! They actually turned out to be the good guys in the sense that they gave some assistance to Nicole for a number of months in her recovery period by asking what they could do to help, and giving her some support. Mind you, I had to remind them every day. But I suppose, with Emily now back in her mother's care, it's a happy outcome. DoCS were able to be there all the way until the end, even though it was a disaster in the beginning.

As I speak I can hear Emily in the background. She's more than happy playing with her Mum. Her Mum's cleaning the house. It's such a happy story, so different today from what it was then.

My assistance will always be required because of Emily's needs. I can be Grandma! I think I've earned that right with my grandchild. It's beautiful. Words can't describe what a good feeling it is.

When I look back there's nothing I've done that other people aren't capable of doing. I used every resource that I could find to help Emily. I really thought it was going to kill me. I still use a splint in my mouth to sleep at night because of the enormous amounts of stress I haven't learnt to get rid of out of my body. I'd wake up after a few hours sleep with nail marks all the way through my hands. I would be continuously running, running, running. When I was lying down I was continually waiting for Emily to wake up, for the next thing to happen.

To try to be at work, to hold down a job, while I was doing all these things, I was under an enormous amount of stress and distress. I was so worried about my grandchild, and I had my husband leaving and my son going off the rails. I refuse to let my mind go back and dwell upon what I could have done to change it. I do believe I did the best I could in the circumstances and made the right choices at the time. I believe my marriage broke up because it wasn't strong enough. It wasn't meant to be that way. Interesting statistics show that 80% of marriages fail with disabled children.

I have no regrets. That's just how it was. I was extremely distressed and resentful and really hurt that my husband wasn't strong enough to cope. Children come first. Even if partners aren't equipped to manage they can support in other ways.

I tried numerous, numerous times to get my son Todd psychiatric and psychological counselling and assistance. He did get some but he refused to go any further. He resented what I was doing big time. I believe a lot of that was following the leader, his father, what his father did. There was nothing I could do about that. As much as it breaks my heart.

I went to see him last night in the psychiatric unit and he's full of anger. Full of anger. I just hope and pray that he will find his way. My daughter did. He has a long way to come. He's had a lot of ups and downs in his life and a lot to deal with for his age. He's seventeen. Very hard. He's had to learn the hard way there are repercussions for everything you do. The warming part of it is he's still got some good friends who stick by him. He's only got to reach out. He's still got his family who'll stick by him too. Life just never turns out how you want, just how it's meant to.

I wish I had a magic wand to make everything all right. I think no matter how bad things get, as long as there's hope and people to share it with, it's OK. That's what our life is all about, the ups, the downs, the ins and outs. It would be lovely if one day my life was easy going. You see so many people whose lives don't get afflicted with these things but I wonder if they truly feel the richness of the world.

I can't explain how good it is when Emily came in the door this morning with her carer, and she's got her beautiful little smile on that she's learnt, it's not a natural one because it doesn't come that way with autism. A great big smile and she's beaming, running to her mother and hugging the way it should be, and then to me and hugging. It used to be the other way around, to run to me and then maybe to her mother. There's a part of me that resents that! Just joking. The logical part says that's exactly how it's meant to be.

Emily was getting so heavy at six and seven years of age. She'd climb up on me and want hugs. She wanted that security. Also some years ago I had a back injury and often I was so sore I could hardly move. I had to keep exercising, moving and using heat.

I managed to get Emily a companion dog from the Guide Dogs Association. A black labrador Valda. That was a joke. I ended up with two autistic children! It has been absolutely wonderful. They interact beautifully. They love rolling around on the floor together. Emily particularly likes Valda licking her and dragging her arms. If Emily moves in her sleep, Valda's there. Emily cries, Valda's there. Valda is able to bring Emily out of herself and interact with her where we can't.

When Emily gets really sick, her heart rate will go up really high, she'll get a cold and there is a very high possibility of lung infection. Her not being able to tell us what's going on and not being able to express anything makes it harder. She'll stop eating. Last year I had to take her into Emergency twice.

I was always taking time off work to care for her, I have no long service leave left, I have no sick leave left. Last year Emily had thirty six days off from school. That's the best she's ever had off which is fabulous.

The difficulty, when she got really sick and should have been in hospital, was that if I put her into hospital she was more susceptible to other diseases that could harm her. So we'd be caring for her at home. That meant no carers could come over because they weren't allowed to be exposed to a really sick child. That meant that the times when I needed carers the most were the times I didn't have any.

I'd be weeping tired, exhausted and so worried. I'd look at her when she was asleep and I could see her heart rate was much more than it should be. Whenever she got sick it was worse. She wouldn't drink, she wouldn't eat for days on end. I'd be at my wit's end knowing what to do. I couldn't get painkillers into her, she'd vomit them up or refuse point blank to take them. There's nothing like an autistic child who refuses to take or do anything. I had to find other ways around it. Throughout all of this, Valda the dog could always make Emily smile.

Many times I was up half the night. I was in a constant state of tiredness to the extent that I was off work for well over a month last year because I got a cold. I couldn't do it. I ended up really sick. Doctors thought I had chronic fatigue syndrome. I suppose there is a limit to what one person can possibly do. That's when my daughter Nicole became much more active. She'd end up sleeping the night sometimes and our relationship began to go back to what it was, but much better and much stronger.

Getting a disabled child into a disabled school - that's another whole story. Everything I've done I've had to fight for. It's not just the grandparenting, it's raising a child with a severe disability and the lack of services there, dealing with two different departments DoCS and DADHC. It's very, very exhausting on top of the day to day things. I could have lain down many, many times but why would you? Certainly thought about it! You just can't, you just wouldn't. My granddaughter's too precious.

The rewards were great. She was not in her own world so much, she was branching out, she was looking around her, she wasn't 'stimming' so much - autistic children tend to hand flap, throw things in the air, repeat motions and so on. It was amazing to see. Having the support of psychologists and professionals from the various agencies made a world of difference to how I dealt with all the challenges. They built up my confidence. I was getting feedback.

'Look at what she's doing now.'

'She's really progressed.'

She'll certainly tell us in no uncertain terms what she wants, whether it's verbally or physically. They're giant steps. The doctors thought that Emily would never walk, they thought that she'd never be able to talk, or do many, many things. And she does, and she loves it.

Emily's health is deteriorating. Because of her chronic lung disease and severe pulmonary hypertension the pressure in her heart is much higher than it should be. One side of her heart beats twice as fast as the other side. There is a large hole between the left and right ventricle which acts like a release valve. She's always lived with that but it's getting progressively worse.

Normally hypertension is a progressive disease in older people and it's life threatening but Emily has lived with it all her life. Because she's autistic she also has ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder), ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) and OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). That means she's a very active young lady. She can't have medication like other children, though that is a blessing I think, because probably she would have been put on something like Ritalin.

She's learnt to cope with her condition. Her lips will go blue. She knows when she's done enough and she'll stop herself. She'll run and run around and then she'll lie down for a little while. Any long distances she gets exhausted and she wants to be picked up. You've got to be kidding, she's seven years old! We have a wheelchair for her. The dog gets tied to the side of it and we go walking. Exercise for Nanny. It's good, you socialise, you need to get out and about, see what's going on in the world.

Emily's on one particular drug that has to be approved by the government to receive it. It doesn't seem to be keeping the pressure down in her heart but it does seem to be stopping the progression to some extent. It's always a big question mark whether the medication will or won't work for her, what will it actually do. With so few babies like her surviving there are very few others to assess her against. We are watching closely in case there are unwanted side effects. It's worth \$15,000 per month and the government will only subsidise one drug treatment per person no matter how terminally ill they are - young, old - only one. Her specialists want her on another drug as well to help to prolong her life.

We're waiting, as we've waited for so many things in the past. Hopefully the hospital will help or a drug company will donate the drug. We're hoping for a miracle. Luckily miracles happen.

We know her disease will eventually kill her. They can't tell us what to expect or when. It's really hard to ask. You just don't know. I do have a strong faith in the doctors and specialists she's been seeing. She's always had the best possible care. We just hope that she has whatever quality of life is necessary for however long she can.

Meanwhile, with her Mum and her Nan, Emily couldn't be happier.

HELEN'S STORY

“You don't plan any of this. It just happens and you keep doing it.”

Our grandson's mother Kirsten was on a methadone program during her pregnancy and as a result Mason was born a methadone baby. He had to stay in hospital for six weeks to be treated with morphine for withdrawals. His father was our son Brad.

When Mason came out of hospital I used to mind him each day while Brad took Kirsten in by bus to get her methadone dose. By the time they arrived home Kirsten was so tired from the effects of the methadone that she kept falling asleep. She couldn't look after her baby or get any work done.

Brad tried to look after Mason and do the chores but he couldn't manage properly. He was taking medication for a chronic back problem as well as medication for schizophrenia and all of that made him very tired.

To help out, my husband Graham and I started keeping Mason overnight. We'd go to pick him up and find that he had no clean clothes and we'd have to do his washing. Brad could see that his son needed better care and he asked us if we would keep the baby longer. We were getting more and more concerned as we realised that Kirsten was back on drugs again. She would take Mason out and not come home for a long time. Then she started leaving him with other drug addicts.

It was obvious Mason was in danger so I contacted DoCS to let them know what was happening. They told us to keep Mason with us and recommended that Kirsten spent some time in a rehabilitation centre. By the time she came out she and Brad had separated and she went to live with her mother Norma.

DoCS wanted Mason to bond with his mother, so they asked me to take him to see her every second day. I did that for several months. During this time Kirsten started doctor shopping. She would go from one doctor to another, get scripts for sleeping tablets and valium, and then she'd swallow up to a packet in one go. It was very disturbing. Sometimes I'd go to collect Mason and she wouldn't be there. When she finally arrived home she'd accuse me of all sorts of things that I hadn't done. It was very unpleasant.

Matters came to a head one afternoon when I went to pick up Mason. He had been taken with his mother to the police station where Kirsten was charged with presenting a forged prescription to the chemist. More charges were laid against her as well.

That was the end of trying to help mother and son bond. Kirsten could put on a big pretence that she was all right, but underneath she wasn't coping. Reality in her life was that every day she had to get her methadone before she could do anything, and while she was on methadone she could never look after Mason properly. Reality was that she had started using drugs again.

We had DoCS' approval to look after Mason permanently from then on. We felt very relieved about that because we had always been terrified that Kirsten would take him away and he wouldn't be safe or looked after properly.

At the time I was 59 and Graham was 61. Having a baby in the house was quite a chore. It stopped us having our retirement time but Graham just fell in with doing what he had to do. He was absolutely wonderful. He was my backstop, I don't think I could have managed without him. He did all the sterilising of the bottles. When Mason was on four-hourly feeds we used to do a roster between us. I'd be very tired after our evening meal so I would go to bed and Graham would do the ten o'clock feed, then I would get up in the early hours of the morning and do the next one.

Mason was always very active and needed a lot of attention. Getting through the baby stage was the hardest. When Mason was a toddler, he would have his afternoon sleep, and then he'd be wide awake and wanting to be amused while I had to get the meals. Waiting for him to go to bed at night was hard too. I'd be so weary I'd think, 'Please go to sleep so I can get to bed!'

Shopping was a trial. I had to lift Mason, and his stroller, in and out of the car and then push him around the supermarket. It was very demanding physically. I couldn't do it now with my sore back. You don't plan any of this. It just happens and you keep doing it.

As Mason got older we went into the next phase. We started to go to different places. I took Mason to the playgroup at church where he could get used to other children. I enjoyed being with the mums. When Mason needed to learn to swim Graham used to get in the swimming pool with all the young mums and their children. He helped with the learn to swim program until Mason was able to get in the water by himself. Graham enjoyed all that. Once a week we went to Kindy Gym where Graham used to help Mason go round the circuit.

Kirsten was still deeply in addiction and when Mason was nearly three years old DoCS told us it was time to go to court to make our care of Mason legal. We had to get a solicitor at our own expense to represent us. Kirsten didn't contest the case at all and we were granted custody of Mason until the age of eighteen.

We never had parents to call on to mind Mason like young families do. Nobody else ever minded him before he went to preschool. On the first day Graham and

I both went because we were worried that he wouldn't want to stay but he loved it and he told us to go. That was our first respite. For one day a week we had peace of mind. The next year we had two days a week. It was a very welcome break.

Graham would have liked to go away in the caravan while Mason was a baby but I didn't think I could manage a little baby in a van. When Mason was nearly four we tried staying in a camping area. He revelled in it. He could hop on his bike and ride all around the park. Our holidays began. Every Christmas we stayed there for six weeks. Since then we've been to Queensland and Victoria as well. Whatever caravan park we go to, Mason finds someone to play with. He also makes friends with the park maintenance man and goes around helping him empty the garbage bins. He loves doing that and he's a good worker.

Once we started caring for Mason our social life went downhill because we couldn't go out of an evening or do the things we used to do. In the end we didn't get invited any more, we couldn't join in with the things our friends were doing. That still applies today to a degree though we don't want to go out a lot of a night anyway. By the time we've had our evening meal we prefer to stay home.

Our son Brad started using marihuana when he was fourteen. Little was known about the damage it could cause in those days. He and his mates tried growing it a few times. Later in high school he got into heavier drugs. When he went on to university to study geology he left home and went to live with a number of other young fellows. They were all using drugs.

By the time he was twenty-two he had his first psychotic episode. He was suffering from schizophrenia. I'm sure it was the result of his drug-taking. It could be quite scary. In his worst bout he was talking at an incredibly fast rate, like speeded up speech on a record. We couldn't understand what he was saying. We called the doctor but he couldn't do anything. Brad had to spend a few periods in the psychiatric ward before he got his schizophrenia under control.

Those years were terrible for Graham and me, seeing what was happening to our son and not being able to help him. I found it enormously helpful to go to support groups where people understood what we were going through. They were able to give me very sound, practical advice. The first group I went to was Al-Anon, for relatives of people with alcohol addiction and drugs too. Then I went to ARAFMI, the Association for the Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill.

I learnt about detaching myself from Brad's problems and I learnt to use tough love. We had to say to Brad, 'We love you but you cannot live here if you don't respect our rules.' It was awful when he left home. For six weeks we didn't

know where he was or whether he was all right. At the end of that time he came home and said that he wanted to go into rehabilitation.

One stay in rehab wasn't enough. He ended up going four times before he fully changed.

He had another hurdle to overcome too. In his wild days he fell off a balcony two storeys above the ground and damaged his lower back. He suffered severe pain and for a long time he lay in bed and rested. Later, doctors advised him to exercise. He started getting fit, strengthening his muscles, and his back improved a lot though it has affected his ability to do anything strenuous and he remains on medication. These days he is very fit, does a lot of walking and exercise and eats a healthy diet so he has made a big effort to be as well as possible.

If I'm with other people, as we were at dinner recently, I can be really out of the conversation. They chat about what they do at bowls and their bowls trips away. When they talk about going away on holidays together I do feel a little bit downhearted. I think, it would be nice to do that.

I used to go walking but once we began caring for Mason I found that I couldn't go any more. My time was taken up meeting his demands, and in the evening I was too tired. I did neglect my physical activities for a while but since Mason started school I've had more freedom and I've discovered hydrotherapy. I enjoy going to that three or four times a week. Graham goes to Computer Pals one morning a week, he does some teaching and attends their meetings.

Mason's very demanding, more on Graham, for some reason. He'll walk up the path, 'Where's Pop?' He likes to think he's around all the time. He likes male company. I'm just there because I'm there, I organise him, but he prefers to be around the men. He's an outdoor boy. He's always asking Graham to have a game of cricket, or kick the ball. He's lucky that Graham is such a fit person for his age.

There are no neighbourhood children for Mason to play with and he can get quite lonely. We keep him very busy with sport which he loves. He is good at it too. He plays tennis and soccer in the winter, and he swims in the summer. Most days of the week he's at training. We all go to sport together at the weekend. Sometimes he and a special mate get together in the afternoon. Each Monday he generally does his homework, and one night a week he has tuition which he hates. Graham watches him play in the school soccer team on Fridays. Sundays we go to church. On Sunday afternoon we generally take him out near the lake for a bike ride. It is tiring but I'm very fortunate that his father Brad helps a lot with transport so I don't always go.

Mason is a very social boy. He loved school from the very beginning. Once he got into first class we noticed he wasn't attentive in his school work or in the classroom. A psychologist diagnosed ADHD and recommended that Mason see a paediatrician. DoCS paid for all of that

The first paediatrician didn't want him to take medication because he was only six, and we were advised to wait a year or so. By third class Mason's behaviour was unacceptable so we went to a psychologist. We spent a year working together to try to get his behaviour right before we decided to put Mason on medication. That was at the end of last year and he has never looked back. He has improved so much he is now above average in all subjects except English. He's good in drama too.

Before his medication it was very difficult to get Mason to do his homework and it was hard for him to do well. Since his medication he is a lot more responsible. Graham helps him and also helps with his projects.

When Mason was a young child he had eczema and then he developed asthma. I hadn't had any experience with asthma before. Once we learned how to control it, it was a lot easier but I had to get up a lot through the night to give him his puffer. We still check with the doctor frequently to make sure we are giving Mason the best treatment. It can be worrying when he gets a cold.

Once Mason was living with us we split our chores. Graham became the house person and took over the washing, the cleaning and the cooking. He is very thorough and does a great job. That took a load off me. I did some cooking and the shopping, and I had time to concentrate on looking after Mason. I got involved at his school. In Kindergarten I helped the children with little gymnastics and crafts, and I helped with reading for a number of years. Now I scribe for children with special needs when they have to do exams.

Mason has two half sisters, Tayla and Lauren, who each have a different father. For a couple of years their mother Kirsten raised the eldest daughter Tayla but then Norma, Mason's other grandmother, has raised her ever since.

Tayla has suffered. She used to take over the role of the mother and she'd boss her mum around. DoCS gave her mum a chance to have Tayla by herself for a while to see if she would come good but Kirsten let her down too much. She's now eighteen and she is very resentful towards her mother. Kirsten would stay away for days or a week, and leave Tayla by herself. Eventually Tayla left and went back to her grandmother.

Tayla has caused her grandmother a lot of worry. She stopped going to school when she was fourteen and ended up finishing her education through the WEA. Then she started going out and staying out late.

Her sister Lauren is fourteen. She has been completely reared by her grandmother. She has been affected too by all the drama in her family, she's very quiet and withdrawn. She spends hours in her bedroom and she's always on the computer. She's not having any kind of social life.

The grandmother Norma is 78. Her daughter Kirsten has lived at home a lot of the time as well so there have always been major problems. When Kirsten's there, there are always a lot of arguments because Norma gets upset with what they're going on with. They won't clean up after themselves. They take all the food that Norma brings into the house, they won't buy their own. I don't know how Norma has coped with Kirsten's addiction and raising the two girls on her own. She has had a dreadful time with fighting, tattoos and money problems. The girls don't show her any respect, they won't do as they are told, they don't give her any help. She has to walk a lot and catch buses and do all the shopping. It has just about worn her out.

Mason could only go to see his mother at his grandmother's house if his mother could look after him but she was in and out of addiction so much that he never went very often. He went each Saturday for a while and then he went less and less. Eventually there was hardly any contact. He only saw his mum twice last year and not at all this year. He doesn't talk about his mum and nor do I unless he wants to. He has no expectations. I doubt his mother would ever be able to look after him. She hasn't got anywhere to live and she's with other addicts. She would have to go back into rehabilitation to get her life in order. Mason wouldn't want to go back to her anyway.

There is a bond between the three children. When they get together they are very excited to see each other, especially the younger girl, but Mason plays up all the time and won't stop fooling around. The older girl left and got her own flat. She is into her own teen scene now and she's not wanting to see Mason although she's always happy if she does.

Norma can't cope with the way Mason and the fourteen year old girl behave. Because of Mason's behaviour we don't encourage visits much. When he was younger he used to be very unsettled after a day's visit and very hard to cope with. Now that he is older he just returns to his old self straight away. These days he's not seeing his sisters very much at all and doesn't ask to see them.

Mason has often asked what would happen to him if we couldn't look after him. We have explained that he would go to live with my daughter and her husband. He's quite happy about that. On one occasion we were watching a Christian documentary and at the end of it the speaker mentioned asking God a question. 'Yes there's something I want to ask God,' piped up Mason. 'I want to know when Nan and Pop are dying because I want to have my bags packed in time to go to my aunty and uncle's.'

In the minds of grandchildren like Mason there is an underlying fear of us getting older and them being left without us - fear of what will happen to them, and us not being there for them.

Mason's not a child who will go and do his own thing for long. He's always asking can we get a dog but I'm not sure how well he would look after one. He goes crazy. He'll go from one thing to another to annoy us. If he's inside all day we have to get him out for a while, even if it's just to go shopping. Whenever we go to the shops he loves to get down on his hands and knees under the cash registers at the checkouts and under the vending machines. He nearly always finds some money, quite a bit sometimes.

In the beginning, having Mason stopped us seeing our daughter. She used to come over to visit but Mason was such a demanding baby, and as a child he always wanted so much of our attention, that my daughter and I couldn't get on with talking a lot and it caused us to drift apart. I felt sad that our relationship had changed and things weren't right between us so I made a conscious effort to make time to see her and now we meet regularly for a cuppa and a chat and everything's fine.

My other grandchildren have all grown up. I was fortunate I was able to be with them a lot when they were young, because once we had Mason I couldn't see them nearly as much. Everybody finds him a little bit wearing after a while because he is so physically active. They are very good to him. He loves visiting them but they are all past the playing stage. He can go for a walk on the bush track near their place but it's mostly his uncle who takes him.

I'm glad I joined GAPS. It makes me feel I am not by myself doing what I'm doing. We enjoy each other's company. Each week we have different things to talk about, it's always interesting. Guest speakers are good and I like learning about our rights, and the services we can call on. I have found the group very rewarding to be in. The children all enjoy their social times together, especially the camp.

Mason's father Brad is leading a very stable life these days. Because of his schizophrenia he doesn't take the responsibility for Mason, but he likes to keep in touch. He comes over nearly every day and stays with us often as well. That's good because he takes the burden off Graham and me so that we are not doing everything, even if it's just to get the dishes washed up of a night or take Mason to school. He'll pick Mason up or take him to the skate park and that gives me an afternoon to do something. He can also mind him if Graham and I want to go out.

So Mason has two men in his life, Graham and Brad. He loves their company and he gets along with both of them well. He has a good relationship with his

father but Pop is the one he favours to do things. I think he looks upon his Brad more like a brother or an uncle.

Graham is 70 now and I'm 68. We notice a big difference as we get older. I couldn't do now what I did when Mason was a baby. Mason has reached the age of nine, and we have him till he's eighteen, so we say he's halfway there. Sometimes it runs through my mind, 'How will I look after him when he's a teenager?' but we'll just have to face that situation when it comes.

Three years later

We gave Mason a miniature black poodle called Ebony as a surprise last Christmas. She's a lovely pet. While Mason does have sisters, with us he is really an only child. Ebony has been very good for Mason, a great companion and another playmate. Mason teases the dog a bit but they enjoy a lot of time and fun together.

We continue to travel further afield in the holidays. When we went to Western Australia Mason didn't hang around us, he spent his time with the other people on the trip. We are going to New Zealand later on this year. It's just as well we started planning early because we've had a lot of trouble trying to get a passport for Mason. Other grandparents warned us that could happen. The passport people said to do it one way and the post office people said that was wrong and we had to do it again.

Much has happened in Mason's family over the past two years.

Tayla, Mason's oldest sister, now 20, kept partying and staying out late. She was a continuing worry to her grandmother Norma. She had a few jobs until she met her boyfriend. She didn't live with him, he drank a lot and his father was an alcoholic. They had a baby girl Paige but Tayla continued to live with her grandmother. She seemed to be a good mother and cared for her baby well.

One time Tayla took the baby over to see the father and she let him have her overnight. He kept the baby for more than three weeks. DoCS knew he got drunk frequently but they wouldn't do anything to help Tayla get her baby back.

Tayla stayed away from him for a while but then she was going back and forward. Each time she goes back he becomes aggressive towards her and she says she will never go back but she always does.

Her grandmother Norma has had a lot of problems coping with her because Tayla tells her off and is not very nice to her. Norma recently had an AVO against Tayla but she has let her come back this last time in the hope that her granddaughter will be able to get her own accommodation with the Department

of Housing. When that will be I don't know because there's a long waiting list. Tayla doesn't even look in the paper for accommodation. Meanwhile, when Tayla is home she doesn't do a thing. She stopped looking after little Paige properly and when she wants to go out, she just leaves the toddler with poor Norma.

Mason's next sister Lauren is sixteen. She just refused to go to school and left without doing her School Certificate. She shut herself in her bedroom and wouldn't come out. She was on the computer all day until Doreen took it away, then she did nothing but watch TV all day. She was never a good communicator and never socialised. The school couldn't do anything about it and DoCS couldn't do anything either. They didn't have the power to force Lauren to do anything, or make her become more social. So Lauren did nothing. She has no skills. Who would employ her? She wanted to go to TAFE but DoCS wouldn't pay for that. Centrelink wanted her to look for work but she wouldn't.

It was a terrible situation for the young girl and a terrible situation for her family. She did nothing to help at home. Sometimes she stood over Norma and bullied her, she even hit her! Her grandmother is just a frail little old lady. Not long ago Lauren moved out and Norma didn't know where she had gone. The police found her living with someone she'd met at her friend's place.

Meanwhile, Mason's mother Kirsten had another baby. When Mason first heard about his new sister his reaction was, 'What did she do that for!' but he soon got used to the idea. DoCS wouldn't allow her to keep her child and the little girl was put straight into foster care. Kirsten can keep in touch and visit her and we are able to see her too.

Kirsten was still on a methadone program and it appeared she wasn't using drugs for quite a while. She was back home with Norma and spending a fair bit of time looking after her granddaughter, Tayla's little girl Paige, especially, I think, because she couldn't care for her own baby once it was in foster care. When she's not on drugs she's quite a pleasant person. She likes nice things and, even after the way she has led her life, she doesn't look like an addict.

Then she started seeing her boyfriend, the father of her last child, and they both went back to drugs again. At the same time she was being irresponsible and Norma, the grandmother, wanted her out. Kirsten was getting into trouble with the police and had charges laid against her of stealing, because of her addiction. She was placed on a bond but in the process of waiting to go to court, and into rehab, she was stealing again, so she was put straight into prison.

Mason overheard Graham and me talking about how the police had been to Norma's house. Kirsten had been missing for a while and nobody knew where she was or what she had been doing, so Norma had asked the police to help.

When Mason heard his mother was in prison he got quite upset about it. I took time to explain how his mother might be able to get help while she was in prison. He had known she'd been in prison before but we hadn't gone into details. He hadn't seen her for four months.

Apparently he got quite emotional at school. His class was talking about the family at that stage and he got up and spoke about it. When his teacher saw us at the parent/teacher interview he said, 'What's going on with Mason's mum at the moment?' The teachers are concerned for Mason and want to keep an eye on him.

Mason said to us, 'Next time I see Mum I'm going to be angry with her and tell her not to live like that.'

Kirsten has since come out of gaol and is living back with Norma, mainly because there is nowhere else for her to go. She'll see the same people in the street and she'll still bump into addicts she knows. When her boyfriend comes out of prison they should never get back together. There's too much risk of going back to drugs when two addicts live together.

So Norma, who is now eighty-two, lives in her two-bedroom house with her daughter Kirsten, her granddaughter, Tayla, and her great granddaughter Paige. I don't know if Lauren will come back home. Norma still does all the work. She gets quite emotional about everything because she can't ever get enough peace. She has had a dreadful life, she has had such a lot of stress and disturbance and it just goes on and on and on. I feel so sorry for her.

Mason's in his teens and I face the future with the full support of my husband Graham, and our son Brad. We all pull together and contribute. Brad is doing very well, he's keeping fit and he's being very helpful. He always take his medication, not just for his sake but for ours and Mason's sake as well.

It's different for Norma who has no support. Kirsten had to return to prison because she broke her bail conditions. Then one day, without notice, she arrived back at Norma's. So, four generations are living in Norma's home whether the 82 year old grandmother likes it or not, and the cycle goes on.

JEAN'S STORY

“I had never dealt with abused, grieving and hurting children before.”

Paul and I each had children from our previous marriages but they had grown up. Paul's eldest daughter was Jane. She had twin girls Tracey and Kellie before she formed a relationship with Damian, a nasty, violent man who was a drug dealer. He beat Jane up frequently. He wasn't a father to Tracey and Kellie, he treated them cruelly.

When Jane became pregnant again Damian used to punch and kick her, and she would crouch in the corner with her tummy towards the walls. She gave birth to another set of twins, Gary and Laura and I minded Tracey and Kellie so that Jane could get into a routine with the new babies. Later I used to take the older girls to preschool.

When I'd call in to collect them I'd see Damian lying around on the couch doing nothing at all to help Jane. He was terribly demanding. Jane was continually rushing around trying to keep him happy. If he was happy everyone in the household escaped his wrath. Jane couldn't spend any time with her children so they had no real nurturing and they hadn't bonded with anyone.

Barely out of hospital Gary and Laura were left to feed themselves, one each end of the lounge with their bottles propped up by cushions. Nobody came to fix it if a bottle slipped, nobody came to burp the babies, there was no concern for choking. Later I saw Tracey when she was four years old, get a bottle, put it in the microwave and put a teat on it and give it to the babies because her mother was trying to keep Damian happy.

The house had to be spotless. The children weren't allowed to play inside because if they made a mess then Jane would get a hiding from Damian. I've visited there and seen the children, with their noses running and their faces chafed by the wind, having to stay outside and play on the swings and the trampoline.

Damian was horrible. Jane moved to different houses to get away from him but he always managed to find her. She suffered much more violence but she wouldn't press charges because she was so afraid of him. Most of the town feared him we discovered later when we tried to collect evidence of his abuse for the legal battles we found ourselves in. He had laws of his own. He used violence and intimidation to get whatever he wanted. We didn't know how bad it was until towards the end of Jane's life.

All the children saw was violence and anger. It was very sad. Little children should be the main ones. Run when they cry, see to them, change them, make

sure they're all right and not neglected. These kids had big holes in their clothes, and nappy rash!

Then, tragically, Jane became very ill with cervical cancer. It was a very aggressive cancer that was spreading through her body. She had a major operation and radiotherapy. That was terrible for her to endure but it was too late. She was told she only had two months to live. It was so sad.

Even when Jane was so sick and really, really thin, and in hospital with her catheter inserted, and hardly able to stand up, Damian would try to knock her around. Her aunty Marjorie used to get between them to protect her. Jane got an Apprehended Violence Order (AVO) against Damian. She didn't want him to bring the kids there to be caught up in it all. Whenever he came they'd cry the whole time because he wasn't caring for them, he'd yell and scream at them.

When Jane was unable to look after Gary and Laura any more they came to live with me - I'd been minding them a lot. Jane had wanted me to look after them because she was terrified Damian wouldn't give them good care. She went to live with her Aunty Marjorie who was wonderful to her. Marjorie had a baby monitor so she could hear Jane any hour of the night, she'd make her bacon and eggs at 1 o'clock at night, anything to help her.

I'd dress the children up to make them look pretty and take them to visit their Mum. She was very tall, about six feet, but she was so sick she looked like a skeleton, skin on bones. In the end Gary and Laura were frightened of her, they were only two years old. Jane's skin was all drawn back, it looked like she had big teeth and she was really scary to look at. It made me sick in the stomach to think that the kids wanted to see their mother and their mother wanted to see them but they were frightened of her and she knew. That was awful for her to handle, terribly upsetting.

Jane had thought about her children's future lives without her. It was very, very traumatic for her. She prepared a book for each of her four children with photos and specially written little notes for each child.

She also had to plan where her children would go. Because Tracey and Kellie had no contact with their father it was decided that Jane's younger sister Robyn who was twenty would care for them. They were going to school so she would find them easier to look after than the babies. Jane asked Paul and me to raise the little ones. We felt humbled and honoured. We agreed wholeheartedly. I didn't ask why she separated her children, she may have thought that four children were too much for any one family.

When Jane died, Paul and I were grieving for her, we were full time carers for Gary and Laura, Damian was causing trouble and we found ourselves involved

in legal matters we knew nothing about. All at the same time. There were so many things to think about we couldn't think clearly. We were overwhelmed.

After having the older twins, Tracey and Kellie, for about sixteen months, Robyn said she couldn't handle them any more and she asked us would we take them. They had a lot of psychological problems and were very damaged by what they had been through.

My husband Paul didn't know how we would cope. I hadn't known, but every time Paul came out in the morning he would talk to Jane's photograph, he was missing his daughter terribly. He hadn't said anything to me. Being the breadwinner he didn't know how he could look after six people and provide all the care they needed.

I said. 'We'll manage. We've always managed. Bring them out.'
So Robyn brought the older twins here with all their belongings.

Paul and I had to go to the court and start proceedings to protect the children. The court ordered that the children have four days a week with us and three with their father. That was a dreadful decision. We had to take them to McDonald's to meet him. He'd shake the kids or they'd be asleep and he'd scream right in their face and wake them up. Then they'd be crying and he'd say they were crying because they didn't want to leave him. They were terrified to go to access with him and they'd climb up on me, 'Don't make me go!' And he was their Dad!

I went to DoCS about it, our counsellor sent letters to parliament, so did our doctor. They got a ministerial letter but nothing changed. The twins didn't want to go to access visits but there was a court order stating that I had to send them or else I would have to go to court myself. I didn't know what to do about that. At the time we didn't have a very good solicitor.

As well as screaming at the kids and shaking them Damian used to kick them, and burn them with cigarettes. They got that they wouldn't tell me what was going on because I'd tell DoCS, then DoCS would speak to Damian about it, then he would rouse on the children for telling on him. It mucks their heads up about parents. Parents aren't supposed to be like that.

Damian's parents were living in the same area. They were the children's real grandparents, whereas I was the twins' grandparent by marriage, but they never did anything about the situation, they just let it go on. Nobody wanted to help the children. Paul's first wife had died of cancer. She'd been one of about twelve children in her family but none of them offered to help. Everyone left it to me to deal with.

I'd say to Laura who was the more articulate of the twins, 'Tell these special people (DoCS) what is happening. They will tell the judge. If you just tell the

truth and say what happens with Daddy they might say you don't have to go any more.' But she was too young. It was too hard for her to understand. DoCS actually believed that we coached Laura, or at least, that is what they said.

Then another nightmare. Damian decided to seek custody of Gary and Laura. He'd never shown any affection towards them, he didn't even feed or clothe them and he'd even claimed in the past that they were not his children.

The first time I went to court, apart from all the money it was costing and the stress of trying to plead our case and explain what was happening, we had to put up with listening to the children's Dad stand up in court and accuse us of all sorts of bad things we'd never done, like putting sugar in his petrol tank! We didn't want to be anywhere near the man.

We had to prove our innocence in a way. There was the judge hearing what the children's father was saying and what we were saying. We'd sit there and do our affidavits and have everything as honest as we could and hope for the best. The judge said, 'I want to see this case out, I'll stay with this,' but every time the hearing was to take place it was deferred because the children's father didn't turn up, or there'd be other reasons.

Supervised contact with Damian at the Rainbow Centre was organised through the court, but when we took the children down to familiarise them with the place, we were told that their father had already been in, throwing things around, and screaming he wasn't going to have an appointment to see his own kids. So that didn't work. We did everything that the court suggested but Damian would not comply.

Then we discovered that Gary had more cigarette burns on him. I took him to the hospital for attention and photos were taken as evidence. DoCS still did nothing. Gary had two very deep, infected cigarette burns on his ankle on returning from a contact. He cried when I started to bath him in the warm water. That's how I found them.

I received no satisfaction from the Department so I went to our local Member of Parliament. He was outraged. So then DoCS sent us to a hearing at the Children's Court but they did not send any of the evidence. No report. No photographs that I'd supplied them with. It was an open and shut case that should have stopped access there and then but it was thrown out of court through lack of evidence. Our local doctor was very angry. It seemed to me that DoCS were frightened of Damian so they just let things take their course in the Family Court. I'm sure if somebody burnt me that badly it would be called 'assault'!

Meanwhile, we all had to endure awful hardship at great expense to our health and our finances.

Despite all that had been going on, DoCS, because it was close to Christmas, organised that Gary and Laura have supervised visits with their father. I was getting really stressed and sick on the stomach because Damian was always so threatening towards me. DoCS told me to drive in the back way and he could come in the front. DoCS would bring the children home. Damian yelled at DoCS too and tried to intimidate them saying he'd 'have them' so DoCS were forced to keep terminating the visits.

One time we took Gary and Laura to McDonald's and Damian's mother took them to his house during the visit. It wasn't till a fortnight later, when I was about to get the car out, that the children said, 'Guess what, there was a man with a gun there. He was going to shoot Daddy. He didn't like Daddy Damian.'

I rang the police and they spoke to him. Damian told them it was a home invasion. I was mad at DoCS.

'You think there's a man with a gun and the children are not at risk?'

They said it could happen to anyone, it could happen to me.

I said, 'It won't happen to me because I don't sell drugs!'

It took nearly two years to go through the court, the children were all at school by then. Access with Damian was changed to every second weekend, and half the school holidays - that was three weeks! We weren't satisfied with the outcome at all because Damian was continuing to traumatise the children, so we had to go to court a second time to obtain proper protection from their father.

Altogether the legal battle took four years to finally free the poor kids! Gary and Laura were six by then. In that time we all suffered mightily. The little ones had been subjected to cigarette burns, been kicked and thrown around, and they'd not been fed at contact times with Damian, they'd been in the company of drug dealers and they'd been the object of their father's severe mood swings. He would pass out leaving the twins unattended.

Up till then Paul and I had never had any experience with legal affairs. The first solicitor cost us a fortune. He used barristers who charged exorbitant fees. He'd been recommended to us by Damian's solicitor. For our second time in court we employed a better lawyer who did his own barrister work and his charges were much more moderate.

Our fight to liberate the children from the terrible abuse and trauma of living with their father cost us in excess of \$35,000! We didn't have that amount of money. We had to borrow it and pay it back gradually. Justice for children shouldn't cost that much!

Damian didn't even turn up at the final hearing. It was like a game. He didn't want to have the children but he didn't want us to have them either. He was spiteful and abusive and he'd never had anyone stand up to him before, especially someone shy like me. It was really traumatic for me to have to battle a big drug dealer but I did it to help the children and it gave me faith in myself.

The judge in the Family Court had a psychiatrist do a family report on all of us. Damian was described by the counsellor as a sociopath. The judge said Damian wasn't safe to be around little children. He ordered that Damian have no contact with the children. If he wanted to get psychiatric treatment, he had to take some forms to the psychiatrist and he would have to prove he was safe. Only then could he apply to have access with the children again. Well, he didn't do any of that.

So the final verdict was that they live with us and we never heard from their father again. Gary and Laura are thirteen years old now. They won't ever have to see him.

The older twins, Tracey and Kellie, had changed schools when they came to live with us and had to make new friends. I had to be home before school came out at three o'clock each day. We were involved in homework once more. We were the oldest 'parents' at the school but the parents and teachers were very kind to us.

We began home renovations immediately because we desperately needed extra space. In the beginning the four children all had to share the same bedroom. We added two more bedrooms and a back room for the children. That cost us \$60,000. The only way we could pay for that was with money I had been left by my father who died in the same year that Jane had died. We got nothing from DoCS.

We involved the children in selecting colours, floor coverings and curtains so that they would feel cared for and included. The older girls had lived with their mother, their aunt and then with us. They were still grieving for the loss of their mother and they needed stability and care. The younger twins had to learn to trust. All four carried a terrible legacy from their early years.

When Tracey and Kellie first came they wouldn't go outside their room to play. We had dolls and blocks and activities they could play with inside. I'd say, 'It's a lovely sunny day, let's go outside,' but they preferred to stay inside and do each other's hair and all those girlie things because they'd never been allowed to do that at Jane's.

Paul and I suffered a big change in our lives. With our own children leading lives of their own we found ourselves parenting again. We lost our freedom. We

didn't have much time without the little ones just to be ourselves. The stress of the long court battle had affected my health. It took me two years to recover from all that had gone on in court. My sleep changed as I had to get up in the night to tend to the little ones, especially when Laura had nightmares which were really bad.

Our social life changed. We didn't hear very much from friends that we had before the children came to us. Tracey and Kellie had been left with lots of different people because their aunty had gone out every weekend and sometimes during the week. We didn't go anywhere without the children as they needed stability. Fortunately we had a seven-seater vehicle which we had purchased some time back mainly to assist Jane and the children. We really needed it now.

At home, the cooking and cleaning were one thing but I had never dealt with abused, grieving and hurting children before. It was a huge challenge. Because the children had witnessed daily the mental abuse and extreme physical abuse of their mother at the dinner table, three of them had eating disorders. The fourth one, Gary, had speech and learning problems. The children showed no personality. They were all timid and fearful, they had no self esteem and didn't know how to express themselves.

Laura was malnourished. She'd weighed only eleven kilos when she was almost three years old. Her condition was described as 'failure to thrive'. She had a terrible eating disorder. She would not eat. It was alarming. Sometimes she just sat staring. She would go into a really deep trance, I had to keep touching her arm to bring her out of it. She was the worst affected of the four children. She would sit at the table for ages and I'd re-heat her food. If she ate up her meal she'd get a star. Sometimes we'd play nice relaxing music.

She could be the life of the party and be bossy, or be having fun with Gary, but, if we went to McDonald's, or had a picnic or had anything to do with food, as soon as food was mentioned she'd go into this trance state. She couldn't help it. She said all she could see was 'Dad hitting Mum,' and I'd have to touch her because she couldn't hear me. When I'd get her out of the trance she'd have a quarter of a teaspoon of food and go back into the trance again. I've never seen anything like it. Her head was mucked up with all her past trauma.

We took her to a child psychiatrist who said she was having major flashbacks. Her condition was called 'dissociation'. He asked her, in her mind, could she see happy thoughts on a big TV screen. Yes. He told her to have the scary thoughts still there, but to one side. Know they were there but concentrate on happy thoughts.

The happy thoughts did help her. The trances became shorter and less often and we'd be saying, 'What happy thoughts have you got?' and we kept her mind on that. Today she is a slow eater but she's a good eater.

Laura also had severe night terrors, shocking nightmares. I didn't know how to help her. One night I was in her bedroom at bedtime and I said, 'What do you think happens? Is it like a scary shadow from the street light across the road, or like a witch's nose?'

She said, 'No, I know it's silly, but I think bad things are going to come up the hallway and get me. So if I face the wall I have bad dreams but if I face the door I can watch, and I don't seem to have dreams.'

I said, 'What about we shut them out?' and we shut the door and she never had bad dreams after that.

The nightmares she had would have frightened anyone. They were always about these things after her, she could be in a car and being chased. She'd suffer it all on her own and be terrified for hours. I said 'No, you come and tell me, then it's gone,' and I'd lie with her and get her back to sleep. I told her she could wake me up any time but the children were conditioned not to wake anybody in the night. Eventually though, she did start to come in and wake me.

Kellie, one of the older twins, used to eat as fast as possible to get the meal over and done with. She thought that it was better if she ate really fast before the thoughts came. The girls used to call them 'the thoughts'. She said, 'I was hungry, I knew I was hungry but I had a lump in my throat watching this happen to Mum and so I couldn't swallow my food.'

She was wetting the bed most nights but she was terrified of telling me because she thought she'd get into trouble. I knew it had been happening a bit and I said, 'It's OK if you wet the bed. I remember doing that when I was twelve. If it was all right for me, it's all right for you, you're only eight. What we'll do, you come and tell me when you've got a problem, don't tell anybody else, and I'll just put your mattress out to air, we'll put a protector on your mattress and you can have nice, fresh-smelling sheets and you'll have a nice comfortable bed.'

She said, 'If I did that before I came here, I'd get into trouble.' She used to hide the fact that it happened and the more she did that the more she worried it would happen.

I said, 'I don't even care. I can dry the mattress and put it back on to a clean bed.'

She never wet the bed again, not even once.

Time and time again we had to encourage the children and reassure them that everything was OK.

Tracey would be sitting at the end of the table and I'd say, 'Come on darling, you have to build your strength up.' The girls were very thin, but when she'd

eaten what I'd put there, she would make herself vomit and spray out as far as she could around the room to punish me. I found out why later. She also used to hide toast in her pyjamas, in her dressing gown, under the chair pad and in her drawers. Food was an awful thing for the children.

If I had a small break when I didn't have to think whether it was someone's bath time, or if I had no one I had to do something for, I'd just sit and stare at the wall. Thinking for everybody, especially when there were six of us, was such a strain and was so exhausting.

I must have thought I was superhuman to start with. I really thought naively that love would fix the children. I thought, give them cuddles and love and warm food and make sure they are well dressed and someone cares for them, and they will be all right.

The fact was they were very mixed up. I didn't know the full extent of their problems, they wouldn't talk about them. I'd sit and talk to them and I'd get a bean bag and say, 'If you punch it, you will get this anger out,' and they'd feel better and more relaxed. I'd get them to write down all their terrible thoughts and fears and anger and we'd light the paper and watch it burn. Sometimes after doing something like that Tracey would say 'I feel like a knot's undone in my tummy.'

But, however much I was doing, it wasn't working. All the children needed counselling for their emotional problems and loss. I found myself taking them to psychologists, psychiatrists and to speech therapy. In the meantime Paul was working ten hour shifts. When the children started playing sport and going to training, we had to juggle taking them to different venues. Paul ended up giving up work before his retirement age to help me.

The children, including the older ones, were very frightened of anybody in authority, like parents or schoolteachers, because they'd lived with Damian too long. Their teacher down at the school said they never asked for anything because they thought they'd be rejected because of the harsh things that had happened.

When the girls went to counselling they still wouldn't open up and say how they felt. One counsellor said they might not face what had happened until they were in their thirties. They'd learnt to 'survival lie'. I'd never heard that term before. Being so young, they thought if they lied the problem would just go away. They'd seen their mother get bashed, sometimes more than once a day, and they'd seen the cruelty of this man. If they lied that would fix it.

Jane had taught them to lie. If she had to get some food, she'd say, 'We'll go to McDonald's and I'll give you a little treat but don't tell Damian because I'll get a hiding.'

So they tried to lie, but Jane told me herself, they weren't convincing at their ages and he knew. So she had to stay home all the time. He thought she had another boyfriend and was suspicious of everything she did.

For five years someone was smashing my possessions but I didn't know which child it was. I knew it was one of the older girls because it hadn't been happening before they came. They each said it wasn't them. Whatever was broken was always a precious possession of mine or something a friend had given me. It might have been worth two dollars or it might have been an expensive thing. If the child knew it was precious or special to me, she'd smash it and put it back where I'd find it, or if I had moisturiser or special gifts of girly stuff, she'd use it, or tip it out so I couldn't have it. I got some new chairs and they were scraped with something sharp. We didn't know how to discipline them about this.

Eventually I found out who was doing it and why. After yet another thing was smashed, I said, 'Come and we'll have a chat.' I was asking Kellie something and Tracey gave her the filthiest look, like, 'Don't you say anything.' They were very close. I realised Kellie was covering for Tracey.

I said, 'Tracey you've been doing this for a long time.'

Kellie screamed at me, 'How can you blame her for that?'

I said, 'It wasn't happening before.'

Tracey hit me and punched me and scratched me and then it came out. I wasn't the mother that she wanted. All those years and she hadn't said that. It explained so many things.

I said, 'I just want to be your friend. I just want to help you.'

The worst part was that Paul didn't think the girls would do these things, he didn't understand, but it was his own family and he would sometimes take their side. That was dreadful, that was really really awful.

It was extremely traumatic for me, your home's supposed to be your safe place. I know that whatever the problem was the girls didn't understand it either. Tracey used to fantasise, she used to pretend that Mummy was still here and they had a nice Dad and they lived in the one house. I counted one time, they had lived in fifteen or sixteen houses.

Tracey said that at school she was kept occupied with the task in hand but at home 'the thoughts' would come. 'What if Mummy was still here?' She idolised her Mum. Then I might call, 'Tea's ready!'

'Oh, she's here, Mum's not.' This would bring her back to reality.

All I wanted was for us to get on. It was like they had this hate for me, yet I only wanted what was best for them. They had deliberately tried to antagonise their Aunty Marjorie and Robyn, the two people who cared for them before they came to me, they told us later. Neither of them were the Mum they wanted.

After Jane died, people from palliative care wanted to come to the home and counsel the girls but unfortunately their aunty had said they didn't need it.

Gradually Tracey started communicating better. She carried a lot of anger and resentment towards Damian for abusing her mother. She actually blamed herself for not protecting her mother, yet she was four and five years old at the time.

When Laura was little I'd visit and pick the poor little thing up and put her on my lap. She wouldn't speak and all the time she'd have this frown. I really connected when I saw the sadness on Laura's face. Even though Jane was still there I could tell that Laura wasn't getting any love. When I'd go to leave I'd think, 'I don't want to leave this child here. Gee, I don't want to leave this child here.' She'd hang on to me and I'd have to put her back on the floor and she'd look terribly sad again. I used to take the kids out, sometimes separately, and take them to the park in the holidays. When Laura came to live at our place she did a lot better than the others because she and I had a bit of a bond between us.

When Gary and Laura came to live with us I was 'Granny' and Paul was 'Pop', but when they started going to pre-school two afternoons a week, they were the only ones without a Mum. Laura came home one day and said she didn't have a Mum and from now on she was going to call me 'Mum' so she could be like the other kids. It was so heart-warming and it humbled me. But then the court wanted to know why! Gary was still calling us 'Grandma' and 'Pop'. I said, 'You can call me anything you want to, call me 'Jean' if you like.' We were 'Mum' and 'Pop' with Laura for a long time and then she called Paul 'Dad' too. After a while Gary decided to call us 'Mum' and 'Dad' too.

Some time after Tracey and Kellie had been living with us it was 'Mum' and 'Dad' too, I think mainly to fit in so when we went somewhere we were all the same.

Tracey said, 'I don't know how to treat a Mum.'

And Kellie said, 'I don't know how to be around a Mum.'

I'd say, 'Come on Tracey let's just have a talk.'

'I just feel different to everybody else.'

Gary kept to himself for a long while. He started to go the same way as Tracey, he would damage things.

'Why are you doing this?'

'Because you don't like me.'

‘But I do love you. I’ve never had a boy of my own. You’re the first boy I’ve ever had and I love you dearly. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.’

But he had it in his mind that he was different, that he wasn't good enough. He couldn't spell, he couldn't remember things, he wasn't keeping up at school. He saw himself as a failure. Now he has been diagnosed with ADD, and he's relieved that it's not his fault. The doctor said that sometimes if children start in primary school and they can't keep up, they just give up.

I said to Gary, ‘Do you think that might have happened?’

He said, ‘I think so. I thought it was too hard, I wouldn't even try.’

He was starting to get very sad and he wouldn't communicate. Having a lot of pimples wasn't good for his confidence either.

He's right up there now and we're encouraging him. He has a beautiful nature . If I'm doing anything he'll race in and help me. He's a lovely boy. They are both wonderful kids. Laura's doing extremely well at school, and Gary, he'll get there.

When Gary was in first class he came home from school with three-cornered cuts in his jumper. After the second or third time I asked his teacher to keep an eye on him when there were scissors around. When I asked him why he was cutting his clothes he said , ‘I don't want to go to Daddy Damian's.’ It made him feel angry and powerless. I explained to him that if he kept cutting his jumpers we would have to keep buying more.

The four children have suffered in silence not understanding there is someone there or that they can spill it out, get rid of it and someone will care for them. They probably won't realise until they're older how severe the trauma has been for them.

Laura's a lot better and she will ask for things where she wouldn't before. That's a delight for me. Now we enjoy going shopping together. She has a lot of friends, but with Gary's problem thinking he was unworthy and not good enough, he was being bullied, poor thing. Until recently at school he was going to the library every recess and lunch to avoid the bullying and kids saying he was different. He hasn't had good speech but it is even harder since he has been wearing a plate in his mouth before he gets braces.

He's getting extra help at school now and he's better since he started medication for ADD. The first day he had his medication he came home and said he could stay focussed on his science He was really excited about that, his face had lit up. I think he's excited because he's found out that he can be like other people and he has started playing with the other kids. He has been playing football and he found out that he can use fitness and boxing equipment in the school hall at

lunch time. We've encouraged him to participate. Now that he likes himself he's starting to have good friendships.

There was still not much time for just Paul and me. It was hard for the two of us to go out together because we didn't like to ask people to babysit. So we had days out while they were at school. Some girls at age fifteen are sensible and responsible enough to mind young children but we couldn't ask Tracey and Kellie to do that. They weren't mature enough in the right ways.

When Gary was about nine he fell off the monkey bars at school and hurt his arm. He thought he'd be in trouble so he went to Tracey and she got him to put cold water on his arm. One of the teachers had him sit down for a while. He stayed out of my attention when he came home from school until I noticed at tea time that he was only eating with one hand.

'Are you all right darling?'

Tracey said, 'Yes he's right.'

'Are you sure?'

I could see that his face was red but it was clear he didn't want to talk about it, so I thought, I've asked him, everyone seems to think he's fine, he must be all right.

The next morning I saw Tracey helping him getting his school clothes on. He couldn't dress himself.

'What's the matter?'

He showed me his arm, it was swollen and hot. The poor kid had had no sleep all night and nothing for the pain because no one knew about it. I was hurt and frustrated that no one had told me, the carer, that something was wrong. I took him to hospital where the doctor said his arm was broken. How do you think I felt? It had happened the day before!

I let the school know but I didn't blame any of the teachers. Even if it had happened at home the children wouldn't have told me, they were so fearful of being in trouble because of their past. I tried to impress on them how important it was for them to tell me about things that were happening. At least Gary was pleased to get the blue plaster and have everyone's name on it.

It took a number of years before our family was operating more like a normal family. There were noticeable improvements in all the children. Gary was speaking much better, he was showing his kind nature and was always ready to offer help. He loved to put puzzles together, played soccer and enjoyed riding his Pee Wee 50 motor bike.

Laura was very good at sport, she enjoyed netball and soccer and was a fast runner. She loved to play the piano. She was very loving and caring and delighted in giving me drawings and letters. She loves writing stories.

One day Laura heard someone say, 'So they're not your grandchildren, they're not your blood.' Laura probably didn't understand it but when she had to have minor anaesthetic she found out I had the same blood type.

'See I have got your blood!'

She really strived to belong.

Kellie and Tracey are intelligent girls and were doing well at school. Kellie was a sporty person and enjoyed netball and swimming. She started to communicate well, she'd sit at the table while I did the vegetables and tell me about her day. Tracey was less interested in sport though she did play netball. She preferred to paint, was interested in cooking and loved to read. The two girls still had a lot of problems but it was good to see their improvements.

The four all enjoyed it when we bought the caravan at the lake. It was good for them to run around there, they had their bikes and scooters, and they liked going prawning at night with a light on their head and scooping up the prawns. We also took the children to church, Sunday school and youth group. We took them many places, camping and travelling, trying to instil good basic family ethics and stability for them, and to have fun.

And then our family changed again. When Tracey and Kellie were fifteen they left. Their decision to go was a culmination of a lot of things.

Their aunty Robyn invited the children to have a week with her in the Christmas school holidays. Paul and I took the caravan up there, left the children at her place and drove on to have a week by ourselves. It was holiday time and Robyn took them to all the fun parks, the show and a circus. They spent a lot of time at a pool where there were big slides. The children didn't have to pick up after themselves or wipe up or anything. They were sad coming away back to reality where chores still had to be done.

Only a few weeks after that, Robyn told Tracey and Kellie that she would raise them again, she was in a more stable relationship, she was married and had a little boy. At this time the twins were going through a lot of anger, and everything I did was wrong, so they sent Robyn a message saying they thought they might go up and live with her.

When Paul found out their plan he talked to the girls. We tried to explain to them it wouldn't be like being on holidays and besides that Robyn and her husband both worked and their little fellow went to day care.

It really broke Paul's heart because his mother had rejected him when he was little, his wife had died, which was a form of rejection because she was not there any more, his daughter Jane had died and now the twins wanted to leave. He

threw his hands up and said, 'Just go! If you want to go, go!' Every good reason we thought of they rejected. So we did it as a trial.

This sounds awful but it is the truth. When the two girls were here it was as though they were predators. They'd gang up and whatever they could do to me they would because I wasn't the mother they wanted. So when they left it was a sort of relief for me. Paul had had to put locks on the door and he'd put a lock on the china cabinet because they were smashing things, and they were always maintaining they didn't do it.

It took me about twelve months after they left to settle down.

Kellie was only at Robyn's for a few short months, not even half a year, when Robyn put her into a place for troublesome children and Kellie had to go to school from there. Curfew was around six o'clock. When she came down here last Christmas she said the purpose of the place was to give her carer respite until their differences were worked out, then she could go back home, but Robyn never came, she just left her there.

When she first came to us here Kellie had had severe depression. I'd had her treated by a psychiatrist and she had to take medication. It was very hard for her to be in that place where girls were slitting their wrists and were much hardened. When she became depressed Kellie said she didn't know where there was a doctor or where to get help, so she had to get herself out of it. At fifteen she had to get herself out of being depressed!

A boy she sometimes went to the pictures with told her the two of them could live in a caravan in his backyard. At the same time Robyn said Kellie could come back and live with her if she gave up her boyfriend because she thought he was a bad influence on her. Kellie chose to live with the boy, she had craved love and affection and here was someone who doted on her.

Later Kellie and her boyfriend went to live upstairs in his father's home. She has been living with this boyfriend for two years. She only goes to school once or twice a month. She's in Year 12 but she seems to be still keeping up. I think she wants to be a hairdresser.

Tracey is still very thin and now she's a perfectionist. Her hair has to be perfect or she chucks a wobbly, she wears makeup every day and her clothes have to be 'labelled'. She has to be special. She's seventeen now. I think Tracey will make something of herself, she's been to school, she's been with Robyn, she's getting education and she's talking about going to college next year when she'll be eighteen.

I wish them both well. It's sad that they're not here. We miss them but we stay in contact.

I felt dreadful after they left but Paul said, 'Look you did a wonderful job. Who else could have done any better? You took them from a two out of ten to a nine and a half. Look how their lives improved in the seven years they were with us.' I tried to influence them positively in every way I could though it got a bit overwhelming at times. Looking back I wish I was just getting them now because I know more now.

I know more about a condition called Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) which is a mind-altering problem that can occur when children haven't bonded with their parents or carers in the first twelve months of their lives. These children don't know nurturing and trust and so they become isolated and angry and they can have behaviour and learning problems. I think all four children have varying degrees of this disorder. There were times when 'normal' parenting wasn't working.

I didn't realise that Gary and Laura were going through a dreadful grieving time after the girls left.

I had to bend over backwards, 'I'm here if you want to tell me anything, how you feel, if you want something.'

I found out in a roundabout way. Every Thursday Paul and I have a day out and Jenny, the carer, comes. This assistance was granted to us through the Mirabel Foundation which helps children who have been orphaned or abandoned due to parental illicit drug use. I noticed that Laura, who was about twelve by then, would be looking out as our car was coming across the paddock.

'Mum's home.'

I'd come in and say hullo to everyone and Laura would always be distant and Jenny would say, 'Laura's been a bit quiet.'

I realised it was happening every Thursday, so I asked, 'What is going on? I need you to tell me so we can work something out.'

'Well, I think you are not coming back. The girls left and they've never come back so I think you're not coming back.'

Laura thought, if she was horrible to Jenny I wouldn't be able to go away and Jenny would have to leave. If Jenny didn't come everything would be all right.

I said, 'If Jenny doesn't come, another carer will come. You have to talk to me about these things.'

I had to watch, everywhere I went, that I'd say, 'but I'll be coming back home.' I had to assure her that this was my home it would always be my home and she was my family.

Laura had really attached herself to me, she was always leaving me love letters, all that sort of thing. She really wanted to belong. She's a bit concerned, because

I'm old, I might die before she grows up, that sort of thing. I'm the person she depends on most.

It's hard for these children to shake off the effects of the past. They lost trust in DoCS from their earlier experience when DoCS had reported what they'd said to their father and that had made him very angry with them. I suppose because I was another adult, an authority figure, they felt they couldn't trust me.

When we first had to deal with DoCS I didn't even know what they were called, I'd never had to go to them. I don't know their side of the story. I can understand they would want to try to maintain parent/child relationships, especially if there is only one parent left, but it is another thing when the parent is a horrible, abusive person like Damian and the children are in danger.

They did interview Damian at times but nothing changed. Whenever we sought their help they seemed to be blocking our approaches. That was stressful. I felt I was let down and I was very disappointed in them. I think they should have taken Gary and Laura out of the dreadful situation they were in. I couldn't understand why I had such a heck of a job, and why I had to go through the court system for so long.

Like many other grandparents who are raising grandchildren I didn't know I was eligible for the Supported Care Allowance until I heard about it at one of our GAPS meetings. We should have received this allowance automatically but nobody told us it was available. The four children came to us with nothing and we needed the money, particularly after the expenses of the court case and house renovations. It seems as though DoCS don't tell people about it because they don't have enough funds and they're understaffed.

When the court case finished I was never going to darken their doorstep again, it made me feel sick because of my memories of their lack of support but when I heard about the Allowance I summoned up the courage to go in and ask for it. This time we got a lovely case worker who was very responsive, I have a great relationship with her these days. There's a better feeling now when I talk to DoCS. We had to wait a few months to get it but the money was a huge help. DoCS have also paid for braces on the twins' teeth.

We have had marvellous support from The Mirabel Foundation. The Organisation has paid for Gary's tutoring, both children's guitar lessons, as well as horse riding lessons which their carer Jenny takes them to. Jenny works for the Samaritans and because where we live is away from the city, grandparents raising grandchildren full time receive fifty hours a week free child care from the government. We can also leave the children for a couple of days with Jenny to go and enjoy some much-needed respite care ourselves.

Gary and Laura have been to a camp where they did all sorts of exciting and challenging activities like rock climbing and caving and white water rafting. They met other children whose parents have been on drugs, they made new friends and they will have more activities in the future.

I have gained tremendous support from GAPS. I went along to see what was involved and I became a regular attender. The other members and I have been through difficult situations, some similar and some very different, but we are all, in fact, victims. These experiences give us a common understanding that other people do not have so I can talk to them a lot more easily than with some friends or family. We have a bond.

We offer each other ideas to help overcome some of our problems. We discuss many things related to bringing up another family at our age, health problems, legal issues, financial issues, our grandchildren's problems and progress. We get elated hearing success stories. I greatly value my time at these meetings as it is a comfort to know I am not alone and that someone cares. We support each other. One of the things I appreciate is the confidentiality and respect which is present in the group. I benefit from every meeting. Speakers, including DoCS, Centrelink, psychologists and legal advisors have provided us with a wide range of valuable information.

Our Support Group has a highly committed co-ordinator who organises speakers and events for our benefit. We have picnics together and Christmas parties. The children get a lot out of these times as they have in common the fact that they all have old 'parents'.

Our co-ordinator talks to us individually when needed, and as well as managing the official side of things, she is a great friend to us all. We share a light luncheon together. One member prepares a newsletter for our enjoyment including amusing anecdotes, news, dates for future events, helpful information, stories, poems and other fun things which we look forward to reading.

Just recently I have started to feel like my old self again. As grandparents raising grandchildren, we put our lives on hold for the sake of our little ones. Now that my grandchildren are coping better, it is not so stressful. Now that they are developing more confidence, are healthy and feel safe, it is easier to teach them right from wrong. They grasp the everyday parent-child teachings better.

I enjoy the things we do together. I couldn't let the children go swimming without me, so I got in with them where I would not have bothered before. I have been for rides on a merry-go-round, hanging on to a little person.

Sometimes during school hours Paul and I enjoy a lunch or fishing trip, or we go for a drive. It's a chance to do things together without the children. I have also

lost some weight, which makes me feel better, as I comfort ate for a time during all the stress. I think it takes a while for both the children and grandparents to adjust to the new life.

Many things have helped me along the way. Great counselling for the children, my wonderful family, especially my adult daughters who never resented my new family, caring school staff, our Support Group, our family doctor, and last but not least, my Lord Jesus without whom I know I could never have managed it all. He has been my strength, comforter and encourager to go forth. It has all been a great reward for our perseverance.

I am enjoying where I am at, but I am looking forward to when the children are old enough for us to leave for short times, say in their late teens, early twenties. Maybe we can do some travelling after all, health permitting.

I believe that it is of great importance for our government to meet the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren. We have done our bit, worked and supported our own families, raised them and looked forward to retiring to have a rest and enjoy our senior years. More and more grandparents are raising their grandchildren due to illness, death, bad choices by the children's parents. We are striving to cope under all sorts of difficulties. We need assistance in our struggles. It is not our fault that we are in our present predicament. Much help, including financial help, is poured into foster care each year by our government. While foster care is a worthwhile thing to do, foster carers choose to care for children, they seek it out, and it may be only short term. Most grandparents have no choice. They feel they should take on the responsibility because it is the right thing to do for the children.

The drug scene is only one reason that grandparents are taking on the role of parents. Illegal drug use can cause mental disorders, mood swings, violence, even suicide, robbing innocent children of their parents. This situation is definitely not going away. These children are hurting and angry and suffering fear of more rejection. We do not want these children to grow up and create more dysfunctional families. They need stability, love and genuine guidance.

All children deserve a safe, loving family to feel worthwhile and to contribute positively to society in adulthood. In the case of the grandparents providing this upbringing, we desperately need government assistance through all the necessary avenues like counselling, transport, respite, free legal advice, financial assistance in some cases for housing, and free medical treatment. Some grandparents are striving to cope in small apartments with more than one child, with only their pension to survive on because the children's parents keep the Centrelink payment for their own drug use. Each case is different and needs individual care and provision.

I have gained such a lot from watching these young people in my care settle into their new lives, and from helping them cope with changes so that eventually they will trust us and return the love that has been given to them. The best thing is that the children are out of the danger they were in prior to coming to us, and hopefully they can enjoy a good life with great values. I hope they will become self sufficient and make good choices. I want them to have the best life that I can give them, the best education, learn about life. I can only do my best. The rest is up to them. They already give me so much love. I do think of Gary and Laura as my own, they have become part of me after all that time.

People think everything's all right when the kids have their grandparents to live with. Just being with grandparents doesn't make it better, they need their parents if that is possible.

To think that my husband's daughter had such a terrible life and died. It affected so many people. Her four children were grieving, her sister was grieving, her father Paul was grieving, and then we had to go through that horrific court ordeal where we didn't know what to expect, and we had to deal with this abusive man in a sane way when he wasn't.

Some people say, 'I don't know how you are doing it.'
I can't stop. I have to keep going. It has made me stronger though I still have days when I can't talk about things without getting emotional. I know that if anything else like that happens I can do it. I know if someone's doing something dreadful that I can stand up for the good of little people.

Their father will never know the damage he's done.

Two years later

Gary started showing passive aggression. He was damaging things, he'd spoil a program on the computer, and he would completely deny that he did it. I had to watch out all the time. It was a dreadful feeling having someone in the household doing this. He wouldn't do any jobs either. I was feeling cranky when Gary was being so anti everything. I'd put so much effort into trying to establish better relationships and he was not responding.

I made a few inquiries and found out he hadn't been taking his tablets for ADD. There was a three-week supply of them at his high school.

Laura was grieving over her brother's change in behaviour. He was mucking up her games. She alerted me to have a look in Gary's bedroom. He had a top bunk and I used to pass his sheets up to him because it was too high for me to reach, and he used to make his bed. Gary had a cake tin with a whole frozen cake up there. Further investigation brought to light empty coke cans, poppas, biscuits

and old food. It was smelly too. He'd been sneaking into the kitchen after bedtime and stealing food.

I had a talk with him. 'It's not your fault that your Mum died. It's not your fault that your Dad was violent. Dad and I bond with you more, how about you take the risk and try to bond with us?' as he now knows more about attachment disorders himself.

When he realised it was not his fault he started trying to be good again. When he's doing all these things you've got to forgive and keep going. It's all coming out now because of his earlier life.

It came out that he, too, was grieving over Tracey and Kellie leaving home. That's when his behaviour started changing. He said he thought Paul and I had got over their leaving, and Laura had got over their leaving but he hadn't. In the past whenever he'd been upset, Tracey used to cuddle him. Now his sister wasn't there any more.

Gary's negative behaviour began when he started high school and that is when his sisters left as well. His transformation to his new bigger school wasn't easy for him with bullying and his low self esteem. He told me he wanted to feel power like his peers so he stole food and wrecked things in the home. He felt power at the time of these offences but he said he didn't feel like that when he was found out.

I had thought Gary and Laura were coping with the loss of the girls.

'Why didn't you say?'

'If I'd told you the real reason you'd say that the Tracey and Kellie were very settled in their lives up north with school, their friends, jobs. You'd say their futures are there so they most likely won't be coming back here to live anytime soon.'

He was fantasising, hoping they'd walk through the door. He wouldn't face reality, it was too painful. Poor kid. His acne had been getting worse, and in hindsight, I think it was due to the stress of the twins leaving. And Laura, I know she got cold sores when they left.

I can't do much for Kellie and Tracey, they live too far away from us. Kellie has moved back in with Robyn since she broke up with her boyfriend, so that is a comfort to us.

I don't know what the future holds for Laura and Gary. Laura's doing well. Presently both sometimes play guitar in our church band which gives them confidence and a sense of pride in themselves. It's very exciting for them.

I'm encouraged to read that in time and with patience, even severe attachment disorders can be repaired. So now we recognise Gary's problem I am hopeful we can help him lead a happier future.

At least we'll try.

Postscript

All four grandchildren have transformed into confident young people with heartwarming family values.

Kellie is very outgoing and loves organisation. She is practical and loves to have lists and goals. She is a great planner. She is affectionate and a great deal of our family ways have stayed with her. She has tried to cook a Christmas pudding like she used to enjoy when with us, and remembers my potato salad that she calls, her 'favourite'. She is studying at college, and has a steady boyfriend who has a good job.

Tracey has a hairdressing apprenticeship. This is something that she has wanted to do for a long time. So she really enjoys her work. She is very beautiful, has many friends and likes socialising on weekends. She has a drivers licence and her own car. She and Kellie are extremely close.

When we are all together both girls like to remember things that we used to do when they lived with us. Both are thinking about coming to live closer to where we live when Kellie finishes her course and Tracey her apprenticeship.

Gary has a wonderful loving way about him. He is very caring and loves to help people. He has a dry wit and has the ability to read a job really well. If he sees Michael working on the tractor, say putting a new part in the motor, he looks around to see what needs to be done next in getting it back together. If we are going somewhere for a picnic, he knows to go and get the cold storage box for me without being asked. He likes to help people and thinks, "How can I be of help?"

I was telling this to our neighbour at the caravan park, a man who has his own carpentry business, and he said it's so hard to get young people like that who just get in and do what needs to be done instead of waiting to be told every single job all the time. Gary is clever with his hands and likes to build things.

Gary and Laura are close as well. He looks up to Laura and is protective of her and she of him when the occasion arises. Both still enjoy playing guitars in our church band, and love to go to Army Cadets.

Laura is super confident in lots of ways and there is absolutely no trace of the eating problem that used to torment her. She has filled out nicely now. She is doing well at school and is involved with the school representative council and helps tutor Year 7 students with their reading. She enjoys writing stories and

would like to be a journalist. She is very affectionate and leaves me little love notes to find. She commented lately that to look at herself and Gary now, that you wouldn't know what sort of life they had come from.

LAURA'S STORY (granddaughter of Jean in the previous story)

“My grandma is the best person in my life and my Pop is also.”

Hi, my name is Laura and I am being raised by my grandparents. I would like to tell you about my life and the ups and downs I've had. The laughter and grief.

When my Mum Jane died I was just two years old. My earliest memory was when I had to visit my Dad. I didn't like going to my Dad's because he was violent towards my twin brother, Gary and me. I was scared to go to that place. I dreaded it.

I also remember the good side of him. Sometimes he was happy and took us to the local park and other times he wasn't and Gary and I would be sad. I remember the first time I learned to ride my bike without training wheels I used to practise riding up and down the back lane. Then one day I got the courage to ride my bike without training wheels I was in the backyard and Dad was at the window in the kitchen. I asked him to watch me and he said he would. I rode down the backyard and halfway I looked back and he wasn't there he didn't watch and I felt so disappointed, so angry and so sad.

There was a milestone in my life that was washed down the drain.....

Always on a Friday when my Dad's Mum who I called Nanna S went to pick us up from McDonalds she drove us back to the house that my Dad was renting. Nanna always bought us an ice-cream from the corner shop and Gary and I always got a Bubblegum Bill.

My Dad burned Gary and me with cigarettes when he was angry and we would come home with burns. My Grandparents who I lived with I called them Grandma and Pop had gone to DoCS about Gary and me. But DoCS didn't do anything about it. I was upset that I got hurt and nothing was done. But when they did do something and talked to Dad, Dad just got really angry at us when we came the next weekend and told us not to tell my Grandparents, he didn't say Grandparents, he used awful names for them. This made me feel like he was trying to make us sound like we didn't like them. I hated to say the names.

One weekend when we were at my Dad's after Nanna had dropped us off. Dad, Gary and I were inside when a screeching car came to a halt outside the house and we all went outside to see what was happening. A man got out of the car with a long gun. I was terrified. I was frightened. He and Dad had a little argument then Dad, Gary and I went inside.

Most nights Gary and I went to bed dirty and hungry because Dad fell asleep. One night we were going to have a bath. Dad turned the taps on and told us to

shout out when we wanted them turned off. We yelled out to him but he didn't hear us and so the water ran over the sides and we eventually figured out how to turn the taps off. Also once I thought I might be able to cook dinner for me and Gary because Dad had fallen asleep. I cut up some carrots and potatoes raw and some bread and well it wasn't the best meal I've had but it was still something.

Grandma and Pop had this special medication because we were sick that Gary and I had to have. It was strawberry and it tasted good, really good but Dad just tipped it into the sink.

When I was little I had a problem when I ate at the dinner table. When I started to eat some food I had flashbacks of Dad being abusive towards my Mum at the dinner table. It was like having nightmares. I felt different because Gary didn't get them It was just me and no-one knew I had a problem. When they did find out, my family I mean, my grandma took me to a psychologist. He told me to imagine a TV screen and on one side I would block out the bad stuff and on the other side I would look at all the things I like!!! To surprise you it worked.

Also in the night I had horrifying nightmares and we didn't know how to stop it. I shut my door one night and I didn't have a nightmare so I did that every night and I didn't have any more. My nightmares were mostly about my Dad killing me, Grandma, Pop and Gary. One night before we were to leave for our holiday to Barrington Tops for the holidays I had a nightmare, this was when I still had my nightmares, I dreamt that our family was at Barrington Tops where we usually camped and it was a dark night and Dad and his mates had come to kill us and they did. I was then scared to go.

I started school when I was five and ended when I was eleven years old. I missed out on Captain or Prefect but I got school councillor. Just as I had a buddy in Kindy I now was a buddy. My first buddy in year five was a shy little girl named Georgia but we soon became best friends. She never stopped talking and telling me how her mum and dad were going to call her Olivia but they didn't they called her Georgia. She was so cute and yet I knew she thought I was the best thing since sliced bread. My friends at school like my bestie Ally had a buddy and so did all my other friends and we, my friends and our buddies, used to sit together at recess and lunch. It was great for me I loved it.

In high school seeing all my friends in town with their mums who were much younger than my grandma made me see that I hadn't got over my mum's death after ten years.

Living with my Grandma and Pop made me think how much my mum must have cared about me. She could have done nothing and I might have gone into Foster Care or something like that. She thought to ask my grandma to look after her babies (Gary and me) and my grandma is the best person in my life and my

Pop is also the best person in my life. I often think about my Mum and Dad and how my Mum is!

When my sisters left home when they were fifteen they went to live with my Aunt in Tamworth. I was so angry and sad I felt like I was broken inside. Everyone in my life was leaving me, first my mum and now my sisters. Besides Gary my twin, my sisters were the closest people. When Grandma and Pop went away by themselves I was scared that they weren't coming home. I was sort of scared in case someone else left me. We are better off where we live full time with our grandparents.

I think that I want Mum back and that we can live like a family without Dad. But I've talked to my Grandma and she says that if Mum was still alive that Mum and Dad would still be together and that she would still be getting abused and nothing would be different. I thought about this and I thought she was right. In the future I will never forget my Grandma and Pop in the Laughter and Grief in the Thick and thin. I love them like I would love my real parents they are my lifesavers and I love living with them. I know other people who are worse off than me! My grandparents keep me alive. They are my Rock as I said my LIFESAVERS! Now in 2009 I am thirteen and I'm in year eight and I wrote this for kids like me to know that they're not the only ones out there!

APPENDIX 1

GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND SERVICES

- **Centrelink** Federal - Social security payments and services
- **Children's Court** (Federal) - Includes matters relating to the protection and care of children and youth at risk and applications for intervention orders
- **Community Legal Centres** NSW provide equitable and accessible legal services particularly for disadvantaged and marginalised people
- **Community Services FACS** Family and Community Services NSW - (formerly DoCS, then CS) - care and protection of children and young families in most need and most vulnerable
- **The Community Services Helpline 132 111**
- **Department of Education and Training (DET)** NSW
- **Family Court of Australia**
- **Legal Aid** - legal services for disadvantaged people
- **Medicare**
- **Technical and Further Education_TAFE** NSW - vocational educational and training provider
- **Disability Services DAHDC** Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care (Department of Human Services NSW) - support and services to older people and people with disabilities and their carers

APPENDIX 2

SUPPORT AGENCIES AND GROUPS

- **Alcoholics Anonymous AA** and **Al-Anon**
- **Association for the Relatives and Friends of the Mentally Ill - ARAFMI** (Non Government organisation)
- **Benevolent Society** help people overcome barriers preventing them participating fully in society. Advocates for change
- **Brighter Futures** for families encountering problems that impact on their ability to care for their children (NSW)
- **Carer Assist** - provides individual support services and education and training for carers and families of someone with a mental illness
- **Connecting Carers** funded by Community Services - for foster, kinship and relative carers - training, education and peer support
- **Council of the Ageing COTA** (an independent consumer organisation in every State)) protects and promotes the well being of all seniors.
- **Family Referral Service** assists vulnerable children and families to access support services with the intent of preventing difficult situation from escalating to a crisis
- **Family Relationships Counselling Services** for people with personal or interpersonal issues to do with children and family during marriage, separation and divorce
- **GAPS: Grandparents as Parents** (See COTA for list)

- **Headspace** National Youth Mental Health Foundation (Australian Government of Health and Ageing)
- **Interrelate** Family counselling, dispute resolution and relationship support programs
- **Kaleidoscope - Newcastle/New England Children's Health Network**
- **Karitane** Child and family health nurses to assist with issues relating to pregnancy and parenting children up to 5 years. **Careline: 1300 227 464**
- **Lifeline** - Crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support
- **Mirabel Foundation** assists children orphaned or abandoned due to parental illicit drug use, providing advocacy, referral and emotional and practical support for children and carers
- **OOHC:** Out of Home Care
- **Samaritans Kinship Care Support Service** for grandparents and kinship carers raising grandchildren
- **VOCAL:** Victims of Crime Assistance League

APPENDIX 3

ABBREVIATIONS:

ADD: Attention Deficit Disorder

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder

ODD: Oppositional Defiance Disorder

RAD: Reactive Attachment Disorder

APPENDIX 4:

Other assistance:

DVD: Raising Others Children (View ROCS website)

APPENDIX 5:

Suggested Reading:

Possum Magic, by Mem Fox - a story for young children about a grandmother (possum) and her grandchild

Fed Up, understanding how food affects your child and what you can do about it, by Sue Dengate (View Food Intolerance Network website) DVD also available

Love Aubrey by Suzanne LaFleur - Puffin Books - a touching story told by an eleven year old granddaughter living with her grandmother. Very appealing read for young teens.

Once on a Road, by Mary-Ellen Mullane - Vintage Books - a sensitive story of a grandmother raising two grandsons. Examines many real-life issues and their effects on relationships

Dear
Nan I love
you heaps and
don't think I
don't cause I do
Sophie
X X O O X O
X ♥ ♥ ♥