

'Hidden army' of grandparents save working families billions in childcare costs, study ^[1]

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Source: iNews

Format: Article

Publication Date: 21 Feb 2017

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

Millions of working parents are only able to hold down their jobs thanks to a “hidden army” of grandparents who provide childcare worth more than £16bn a year and in many cases also subsidise the needs of their grandchildren, a study has found.

The report estimates that some nine million grandparents – representing 65 per cent of the total – provide care for their grandchildren, clocking up an average of 11.3 hours of unpaid supervision per week.

Safety net

The International Longevity Centre (ILC-UK), a think-tank, said grandparents are increasingly looked to by parents to provide the safety net that allows them to work long hours without having to bear the extra expense of formal childcare such as a nursery or childminder.

A 20 per cent rise in the cost formal childcare has seen the number of grandparent carers increase by nearly half from 6.1m in 2009 and the average number of hours of care provided increase by three hours over the same period.

But the study warned that policymakers need to do more to take into account the needs of grandparent carers, pointing out that in many cases they also remain in employment as more and more people work past retirement age. Some 39 per cent of grandparents who provide care for their grandchildren have jobs themselves.

“Unpaid army”

Baroness Sally Greengross, chief executive of ILC-UK, said: “It is clear that grandparents have become the biggest sources of childcare after parents themselves, allowing more parents to work and thereby reducing the costs of childcare.

“Nevertheless, how we support and reward this growing unpaid army and how we reconcile an increasing need to work longer for the over 50s, 60s and 70s and shape and expand family friendly policies for all, remains subject to debate.”

The research, carried out on behalf of insurance company Ageas, found that grandparents provide childcare worth £1,786 for their loved ones per annum, equating to £16.1bn across the United Kingdom.

In many cases, the support also takes monetary form, with nearly 40 per cent of parents say they also receive financial help from their own parents to help pay for the cost of hobbies, toys, leisure activities and pocket money.

‘Thank you’ is enough

The report found that grandparents receive little or nothing in return, with only one in ten being reimbursed for expenses such as travel or the cost of activities. It is equally clear, however, that grandparents expect no remuneration for their time, with 52 per cent say they simply enjoy spending time with their grandchildren and a quarter saying a thank you sufficed.

The ILC-UK said the Government needs to give urgent consideration to further legal safeguards for grandparents and other working carers such as the introduction of up to ten days statutory leave a year to provide emergency care for a grandchild. It criticised the failure of ministers to begin a consultation promised 12 months ago into shared parental leave for grandparents.

There is also extremely low awareness of a scheme which allows grandparents to claim National Insurance credits for looking after a grandchild in the place of a parent. A separate study found that on average just two grandparents per parliamentary constituency were taking part in the scheme.

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