

The grandparents who help keep mothers at work, but at a cost^[1]

Author: Hare, Julie

Source: Financial Review

Format: Article

Publication Date: 10 Jun 2022

AVAILABILITY

Access online^[2]

EXCERPT

Grandparents are often the glue that holds the social fabric of working families together, but sometimes the competing demands of paid employment and intergenerational care can be a difficult balancing act that undermines their economic security.

Researchers from the University of Sydney point to an irony that, in their efforts to help their daughters and daughters-in-law return to the workforce, grandparents – particularly grandmothers – curtail their own work hours and earnings potential.

Myra Hamilton, an expert in population ageing at Sydney University, says evidence from overseas suggests the Albanese government's proposed move to full universal childcare would free up significant numbers of grandparents back into the workforce by reducing the costs for working families and making them less reliant on informal care.

"When people talk about making Australia's early childhood education and care system more affordable, they are referring to boosting the economic potential of mothers with young children. But if we think about it more broadly, there is a huge role grandparents play in the care of young children, and they tend to get overlooked," Dr Hamilton said.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that about one in five children under the age of 12 receive informal care, including grandparents, in a typical week.

That care not only includes regular shifts to allow a parent – almost always the mother – to engage in paid work, but also includes weekends, evenings and ad hoc instances such as illness and taking children to appointments.

Grandparents who provide regular care for their grandchildren report an impact on their labour market participation as a result. "They report reducing their working hours, or changing work arrangements or even changing jobs," said Dr Hamilton,

"The greatest impact is when grandparents provide more than 13 hours of care a week. That is where we see a tipping point, and it really starts to impact on their capacity to work more hours."

Overseas research

Overseas research shows that in countries with highly subsidised and well-structured childcare systems, grandparents are still actively involved in their grandchildren's upbringing, but on a more impromptu basis.

One study found that childcare by grandparents was more common in countries such as Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and France, which have highly subsidised and accessible childcare systems. But the intensity and regularity of childcare was higher in countries such as Italy and Greece.

"This has an impact on labour supply, particularly among the younger cohort of grandparents aged between 55-64," Dr Hamilton said.

"And that's the group that governments are trying to encourage to participate in the labour market more."

Libby McLeod left her role in school administration "prematurely" a decade ago when her eldest daughter had her first child. Since then, the number of grandchildren has blown out to nine, aged from eight months to 12 years.

"I gave up work about 10 years ago, probably prematurely because I wanted to be a grandmother, but to do other things with my life as well," Mrs McLeod said.

"Partly it is to help out with the expense of childcare, but it's also maintaining a relationship with the grandchildren as much as anything."

Over the years there have been "various permutations and combinations" of care that she and husband Rob, who retired a couple of years ago, provide to their grandchildren.

The current arrangement involves getting up at 6.30 on Monday mornings to be at their eldest daughter's home by 7am to get their four girls – Lucy, Charlotte, Amelia and Isobel – ready for school. Then three-year-old Joey, who is the older of two children to their son Ben and daughter-in-law Mary-Helen, comes to their house at 8am where he stays all day. When Rob takes Joey home, Libby does the school pick-

up for the older girls and takes them to swimming lessons.

Their day ends when one or both parents, who are both anaesthetists and have unpredictable hours, finally get home.

They also care for grandkids William, Alice and Tom on Thursday afternoons, including taking them to swimming lessons. They homeschooled during COVID-19, have anywhere between four and seven children to stay on weekends, do the occasional evening and take the kids to appointments and the like.

Twin demands

While the McLeods work in tandem now Rob has retired, Dr Hamilton's research shows that grandfathers do almost all of their childcare with their partner present, whereas grandmothers provide care alone about 40 per cent of the time.

And while the McLeods relish the time they get to spend with their grandchildren, Dr Hamilton has found many grandparents can struggle with the twin demands of worker and carer.

While almost all grandparents strongly emphasised that they enjoyed providing care and derived great pleasure from it, some participants in Dr Hamilton's study felt overwhelmed by their responsibilities at times.

"Some found it exhausting, others described it as challenging when they felt they couldn't be either the worker or the carer that they wished they could be," Dr Hamilton said.

Region: [Australia and New Zealand](#) [3]

Tags: [child care](#) [4]

[family](#) [5]

[labour market](#) [6]

Source URL (modified on 14 Jun 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/06/grandparents-who-help-keep-mothers-work-cost>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/22/06/grandparents-who-help-keep-mothers-work-cost> [2] <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/the-grandparents-who-help-keep-mothers-at-work-but-at-a-cost-20220609-p5asn> [3]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/australia-and-new-zealand> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/child-care> [5]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/family> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/labour-market>