

Sort out affordable childcare and we won't need 'granny leave' ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

I can only imagine what my grandma would have made of government plans to introduce paid leave for grandparents. The idea that she might receive money from the state in return for looking after me or my sister, allowing my mother to return to work and pursue her career, would have made her hoot with laughter. It's just something that grandma did, in return for nothing more than endless games of snap, the occasional rubbish felt-tip portrait and cuddles. If someone had given her £140, she would have tried to sneak it into my mother's handbag when she wasn't looking.

Now there is to be a scheme which will reward grandparents who take time off to look after grandchildren. Parental leave will be widened to cover working grandparents as well as a child's mother and father, setting families free to divide up the 52 weeks of leave between them and to split the statutory shared parental pay of £139.58 a week. It is good news for lots of people, not least older workers and single parents who previously had no one to share parental leave with.

Harriet Harman had the idea of "granny leave" back in April as part of her manifesto for women but everyone was so furious about the Big Pink Labour Bus for Girls from which she launched it, the concept didn't get much traction. It should, because it says a lot about the way we live now. And more than most politicians' empty waffle on the topic, it actually means something to those familiar hard-working families.

Gran and grandad hours are the secret silver engine of the UK economy powering the country with unpaid childcare, unplanned babysitting, summer-holiday sleepovers and a bottomless pocket supply of toffees. There are benefits to all concerned that can't be measured in money, of course – the educational, formative, rewarding moments that come from real relationships that span the generations – but the economic benefits cannot be taken for granted.

According to Grandparents Plus, almost one in five working parents in the UK said that they would give up work if they were not able to rely on grandparent childcare. One in six said they would have to cut their hours if they could not turn to the nanny that comes free, as opposed to the one you advertise for on a message board. It is estimated that grandparents save families £11bn each year in childcare costs, simply by being around. I may be one of the "have-it-all" generation, but having it all means someone else – a parent, usually – having slightly less of something: freedom, spare time, or peace and quiet in their own home.

A further poll by the same charity in July found that almost two million grandparents in the UK had given up a job, reduced their hours or taken holiday or sick leave in order to babysit their grandchildren. These older workers will benefit, no longer torn between earning a living and helping their grown-up children avoid ruinous childcare costs.

Yet people are working longer and retiring later. When they finally retire, having spent most of their lives bringing up children, juggling work and home, should parents be expected to start it all over again? Helping out is something grandparents do; perhaps taking the parents' place is not.

Recognising the contribution grandparents make to society is a good first step; the next is providing affordable housing, properly subsidised childcare and better-paid part-time work for parents. Then, perhaps, grandma and grandpa will finally be able to put their feet up.

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Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: accessibility ^[4]

grandparents ^[5]

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/15/10/sort-out-affordable-childcare-and-we-won%E2%80%99t-need-%E2%80%98granny-leave%E2%80%99> [2] <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/sort-out-affordable-childcare-and-we-won-t-need-granny-leave-a6683521.html> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/accessibility> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/grandparents>