



# Grandparents As Parents

An information resource for grandparent carers

**GENERAL INFORMATION**

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### DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this publication is for general information purposes only and is not to be relied upon as a substitute for specific, professional advice.

Community Solutions Inc. makes no representation or warranty that the information is accurate or complete or will remain accurate or complete after the date of publication.

The information about financial assistance is intended only as a guide to payments available. Individual circumstances vary and you should obtain your own advice about whether or not you qualify under the relevant laws and criteria.

Community Solutions Inc. has made reasonable efforts to ensure the information is accurate and current as at July 2006 but does not accept responsibility for any errors or omissions.

## Introduction

During recent years it has become apparent that there are many Australian families where the care of children is the responsibility of one or more grandparents.

Grandchildren come to live with their grandparents for a variety of reasons, including neglect, abuse, domestic violence, death, mental health, physical disability, and parental drug and alcohol abuse.

Grandparents that undertake the primary care responsibility for their grandchildren make a positive difference to the children's lives by providing a safe, stable and caring family environment. They are special people that face a range of issues associated with their decision to provide care for their grandchildren. These include social, emotional and health issues, many of which are increased by the age, health and financial circumstances of the grandparents, as well as the impact of the children's experiences prior to coming into the care of their grandparents.

Access to information and support assists grandparents to cope with their new family circumstances and meet the needs of the children in their care.

Community Solutions Inc. is a non profit organisation committed to the research, development and delivery of services for individuals and communities, particularly those who experience personal, social, economic and cultural disadvantage. In recognition of the importance of grandparent families, Community Solutions Inc. has developed this information kit with funding from the Australian Government and the Telstra Foundation. Australian Government funding was provided by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy.

The **Grandparents As Parents Information Kit** contains helpful information on a range of topics, as well as contact details for Government departments and organisations that can support grandparent carers, particularly those that care for their grandchildren on a full time basis.

The kit is most relevant to grandparents living in the Sunshine Coast and Wide Bay regions of Queensland and caring for grandchildren aged 0 – 12 years.

Community Solutions Inc. recognises the strength and commitment of grandparent carers, and hopes this resource will be helpful to grandparents and the children in their care.

## Department of Child Safety

*The Department of Child Safety is responsible for ensuring that all vulnerable children and young people in Queensland are safe and protected from harm.*

### GRANDPARENTING ARRANGEMENTS

#### **Under what circumstances do children come into the care of their grandparents?**

The first priority of the Department of Child Safety is to protect children who are suffering from, or are at risk of, abuse or neglect. An important part of the department's commitment to the safety and wellbeing of children and young people who need state protection and require an alternative place to live, is the maintenance of a close relationship between a child and their family and community.

Out-of-home care is used as part of the department's integrated child protection response and may be provided during the investigation and assessment or ongoing statutory intervention phases of child protection, to work towards either reunification of the family or the long-term stable care of the child. Under the *Child Protection Act 1999*, children and young people within the child protection system may be placed with grandparents through parental consent or under court-directed custody or guardianship orders.

#### **How do informal arrangements differ from formal arrangements?**

Informal care is defined as grandparents who care for their grandchildren outside of the child protection system. In these circumstances the Department of Child Safety has no involvement due to an absence of any ongoing statutory intervention or Child Protection Order.

#### **Formal care arrangements are entered into only if:**

- the Department of Child Safety is involved with the child or young person as a result of child abuse or neglect concerns
- a Child Protection Order is granted by the Childrens Court
- a formal assessment by the department concludes that the grandparents are suitable people to care for the child.

#### **What is a kinship carer?**

The *Child Protection Act 1999* has been amended to provide even greater levels of protection for vulnerable children. Further improvements to some of the laws concerning child protection came into effect on 31 May 2006. Among these improvements was a greater emphasis placed on kinship care.

The Act defines 'kin' as a relative of significance to the child or a person of significance to the child.

A kinship carer can be a relative, a neighbour or a family friend who is approved by the Department of Child Safety to care for the child.

## DEPARTMENT OF CHILD SAFETY

### What does the Department of Child Safety do?

The Department of Child Safety is responsible for ensuring that all vulnerable children and young people in Queensland are safe and protected from harm. The department administers the *Child Protection Act 1999* and the *Adoption of Children Act 1964*.

To meet the needs of individual children, the department offers a range of services. These include special support for families in crisis and different types of alternative care services that offer a safe environment for children who cannot live at home. The department also offers sexual abuse counselling and helps reunite families when it is safe to do so.

The department gives special attention to the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and is committed to ensuring that Indigenous children are cared for in a way that respects their culture. Wherever possible, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are placed with extended family, community or Indigenous carers.

The Department of Child Safety is the lead agency facilitating the whole-of-government response to child protection issues. A diverse range of government and non-government agencies contribute both individually and collectively to the child protection system.

## EFFECTS OF TRAUMA, ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### My grandchild has experienced trauma, abuse and neglect. How do I minimise the long-term effects of this?

Child abuse and neglect can result in varying levels of physiological or psychological impact for children and their families. Out-of-home placements with kinship carers and maintaining ongoing relationships with family and community are important for providing reassurance and familiarity for children and young people during this difficult time.

During intervention and out-of-home care placement, the child or young person's support needs and any responses to these needs are recorded in their case plan. Case plans are reviewed at least every six months. Options for addressing any identified support needs for children and young people include advice and support from trained departmental staff, for example Child Safety Officers and Child Safety Support Officers.



*As grandparents raising our grandchildren, we can intervene to protect them from abuse and violence. In this way, we can 'break the cycle', to make sure it won't happen to their kids.*

*Grandparent carer*

For children in out-of-home care where the case plan does not stipulate reunification, the department must visit the child at least once a month. If the child is on a long-term Child Protection Order granting guardianship to the chief executive, the department must visit the child every two months. The frequency of visits can be increased depending on the support needs of the child or carers. This relationship between child safety staff and carers serves as an invaluable support for assisting with the day-to-day tasks of caring for children and in exploring any underlying concerns for the child.

If the identified needs of the child or young person are significant and require more specialist intervention, the department can make a referral to an appropriate service provider. It is important to note that the Department of Child Safety is committed to ensuring appropriate levels of support are made available to children and young people in care.

In addition to this support, all children and young people in out-of-home care receive regular visits from Community Visitors as part of the Commission for Children, Young People and Child Guardian's Community Visitor Program. This program serves to monitor services provided by the department and advocate on behalf of all children and young people.

### **PARENTAL IMPRISONMENT**

#### **How do I talk about parental imprisonment with my grandchild?**

Grandparent carers should adopt a consistent and sensitive approach when talking with their grandchildren about the imprisonment of a parent. Factors such as the child's age, their ongoing contact with their parents and the child's previous knowledge of their parents need to be considered.

The *When the children arrive* booklet by the Mirabel Foundation is a valuable resource for kinship carers. The booklet's primary focus is on issues of illicit drug abuse and has reference to supporting children with issues of parental imprisonment.

During formal care arrangements the department's case planning process serves to ensure that appropriate responses to the child or young person's needs are developed and assessed.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

#### **How do I contact the Department of Child Safety?**

Grandparent carers can contact their local Child Safety Service Centre, visit [www.childsafety.qld.gov.au](http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au) or contact 3224 8045 or toll free 1800 811810.

# Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian

The Commission promotes and protects the rights, interests and wellbeing of Queensland's children and young people. Our mission is to improve their safety and wellbeing - particularly those most vulnerable.

**The Commission is an independent statutory authority that oversees the child protection system in Queensland. We:**

- advocate for improved prevention and early intervention services to assist at-risk children in our community, and
- work with organisations providing child-related services to create child-safe environments.

**We are keen to work with key partners like grandparents in Queensland to achieve:**

- effective child safety and juvenile justice systems
- child-safe service environments which protect young people and promote their wellbeing, and
- well-targeted prevention and early intervention strategies for vulnerable children and young people.

## COMMUNITY VISITOR PROGRAM

Grandparents who care for their grandchildren may come into contact with the Commission through our Community Visitor Program. Community Visitors visit children and young people living in out-of-home care regularly, including those in kinship care.

## COMPLAINTS

Grandparents may also come into contact with the Commission if they have a complaint about a service provided through the child safety system which they can't resolve with the agency involved.

## BLUE CARDS

The Commission also administers the blue card system. Grandparents who work with children and young people on either a voluntary or paid basis, or who provide formal kinship care require a blue card. For more information on applying for a blue card, call the Department of Child Safety on **3239 3521**.



*Community Visitors regularly visit children and young people living in out-of-home care, including those in kinship care.*

## HOW DOES THE COMMISSION HELP CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

**The Commission helps children and young people by:**

- advocating for their interests individually or systemically
- reporting regularly to the community and government on their status and wellbeing
- consulting them about decisions which affect them
- listening to and considering their concerns, views and wishes, and
- making sure staff are sensitive to young people's cultures and values, especially young Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people.

## IS THE COMMISSION THERE FOR EVERYONE UNDER 18?

**Yes, the Commission helps and supports all Queensland children and young people, but gives priority to those:**

- who can't protect themselves
- who have no-one to act for them
- who live in out-of-home care (including kinship care) or detention centres, or
- who are disadvantaged by disability, living in an isolated area, homelessness, or poverty.

## WHAT DOES THE CHILD GUARDIAN DO?

**The Child Guardian oversees services for, and decisions about, children in the child safety system. This is done by:**

- visiting all children in care and detention to ensure their safety and wellbeing needs are met
- investigating concerns about services
- negotiating to address any issues impacting on young people, and
- collecting information from various sources to report on the effectiveness of the child safety system in providing for children and young people's needs.

## WHAT IS THE WORKING WITH CHILDREN CHECK, OR BLUE CARD?

The *Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian Act 2000* requires organisations who provide certain essential or developmentally-focused services to children – such as child care, sporting and recreational associations and counselling and coaching agencies – to provide these in a way that protects children and promotes their wellbeing.



These organisations are required to implement annual risk management strategies to achieve this, which include appropriate criminal history screening of employees or volunteers through the Working with Children Check, or blue card system.

Therefore, people who work with children under 18 in certain categories of child-related employment must apply for the check if they regularly work with children and young people. The areas screened are listed on the Commission's website [www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au](http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au).

From 31 May 2006, foster carers, kinship carers and adult members of a foster or kinship carer's household have been required to hold a blue card.

People in these categories have until 30 November 2006 to apply for a blue card.

This process is managed by the Department of Child Safety. Questions can be directed to the Department on 3239 3521.

## HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE COMMISSION?

Phone: (07) 3247 5525

or freecall: 1800 688 275

Web: [www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au](http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au)

*The information above was provided by the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian.*

## Grief and Loss

Children and adolescents may feel vulnerable and insecure when families experience a loss. They may believe that they are responsible for what has happened. It is possible for them to misunderstand what is happening unless parents or other caring adults discuss the situation and any proposed changes with them.

Not all children and adolescents have two parents to give them love and security, and this can occur for a number of reasons. An increasing number of families are experiencing the trauma and disruption of separation and divorce. Families may also experience loss through the illness or death of a family member. Even the death of a loved pet or a close friend moving away may cause significant distress to children and adolescents.

Moving house can also be disturbing for children and adolescents. They may find losing contact with familiar places and people, changing schools, and having to make new friends very stressful.



### When there is a death in the family

Children may feel vulnerable and insecure when there is a death in the family, or a death of someone close to them. Pre-school children see death as temporary and reversible, like the cartoon characters on their television. Between the ages of 5 and 9, children start to think more like adults but still can't believe it could happen to them or anyone they know.

Funerals provide a means of saying goodbye to a loved one. It is helpful to include children. However, if children are frightened of attending a funeral, they should not be forced. Instead, help them have their own farewell such as lighting a candle or saying a prayer.

Spend as much time as possible with the child and let them know they can show their feelings. They may display their feelings of sadness on and off for a long period of time. Anger is a natural reaction to the loss of someone special. This may be shown by aggressive play, nightmares or irritability. Children may express anger towards the surviving members of the family or may become fearful about their safety.

Young children may persist in the belief that the family member is still alive. This should pass after a few weeks. If not, seek professional assistance.

As well as the shock and confusion a child feels at the death of a family member, adults' own feelings may make it difficult for them to cope with the emotional and physical needs of their children. Professional counselling may help guide families through this difficult time.

### WARNING SIGNS IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Children and adolescents usually don't show their pain and suffering all at once. They may seem to be over it and then their distress may suddenly reappear.

#### Some of the ways children cope with loss and grief are:

- Acting younger than their age. This may tell you that it is all too much and they need to be less grown up and less independent while they gather strength.
- Trying to over-achieve at school or at home so that it is not obvious that they really are suffering.
- Having difficulty concentrating at school and being preoccupied with their feelings.
- Trying to defend their parent, brother or sister. They may try to look after someone who seems weaker.
- Some may show anger or hostility in play, towards their toys, brothers and sisters or parents.



## WHAT CAN GRANDPARENTS DO TO HELP

There are a number of ways grandparents can help their children cope with loss.

- Let them know they are loved and that you are there for them.
- Let them know that it is not their fault.
- Answer their questions simply and honestly and where possible include them when making decisions that will affect them.
- Be tolerant of their behaviour as it may be their only way of expressing their feelings.
- Try to find out how they are feeling. Let them cry, talk, or express their anger in a safe way.
- If they can't talk to you, encourage them to talk to others whom they trust.
- Keep things as familiar as you can (school, friends, pets, precious possessions).
- It is okay to show your feelings. Showing your children how to cope will help them.
- Let their school or teacher know what is happening.

Find support for yourself, as this is the key to surviving difficult times.

Everyone needs time to adjust to changes and deal with feelings of grief and loss. Children and young people may not want to tell you what they are feeling, for fear they will upset you or make you angry. Your own feelings may be so strong that you may not notice or feel able to cope with what your children need.

### How to get help for children and young people experiencing grief and loss

- Your child's general practitioner, teacher, guidance officer, or school counsellor.
- If more specialised assessment or intervention is required, general practitioners, schools or other health professionals can make a referral to a Child and Youth Mental Health Service (CYMHS) – for local clinics, look under Health in the White Pages telephone directory.
- Your general practitioner may refer you to other specialists who work with children and adolescents such as a private psychiatrist or psychologist.

## TELEPHONE SERVICES

Service	Phone
<b>13HEALTH</b> Preventative health information and advice about referrals to local health care services.	<b>13HEALTH</b> <b>(13 43 25 84)</b>
<b>Parent Line</b> 8am – 10pm, seven days a week.	<b>1300 30 1300</b>
<b>Lifeline</b> 24 hours, every day of the year.	<b>13 11 14</b>
<b>Kids Help Line</b> 24 hours, every day of the year.	<b>1800 551 800</b>

The information above was provided by Queensland Health.

*Everyone needs time to adjust to changes and deal with feelings of grief and loss.*

## Relationships And Communication

*Many relationship difficulties can be resolved with the right kind of help.*

### **I have a difficult relationship with my grandchild's parents – how can I work things out?**

It can be difficult but it is important to try to establish some sort of relationship for the sake of the children. Be realistic in what you can expect and don't try for too much too soon. If you are finding you are not making much progress, you may need to ask advice from a counsellor or mediator on strategies that may assist you and the grandchild's parents. It is important to always keep uppermost in mind the needs of the children as these are the biological parents of the children and will always have an important place in their lives.

### **What should I do to manage contact between my grandchild/ren and their parents?**

You should plan contact visits with the parents of the grandchild/ren where possible and stick to that plan. However this is not always the case. If the child/ren may be at harm or in an unsafe environment during contact visits, you may need to investigate the options available to you such as a Children's Contact Service or perhaps through a neutral third party who can provide adequate supervision while allowing parental contact with the grandchild/ren.

But contact does not necessarily mean physical contact. In some circumstances it may be that the parents are not physically able to see their children (eg, parents are in jail, working in another State, ill in hospital, or being treated in rehab). In these situations, communication is essential and you should try to encourage contact via email, SMS, telephone calls, letters, videos, digital photos – anything that allows for the channels of communication to be open and flowing.

You may encourage the parents to write notes of support and love to their children which you can place in their lunch boxes, sock drawer or under their pillow on their behalf. It is important that the child/ren are aware that their parents love them but at the moment can not be with them under the same roof due to circumstances which prevent this.

### **How do I maintain my relationships with friends and family, now that I am caring for my grandchild/ren?**

It is important to continue your relationships with friends and family as you will need their support and assistance as you parent your grandchild/ren. You may need to ask for help, child-minding assistance and advice from them so keep those relationships going. If you ask for help, it is often surprising but you will receive it. Don't be afraid to ask for help from friends and especially from family

as it is important that you get a break from parenting every now and then, and it is important for the child/ren to have positive role models around them of all ages and genders. Your friends and family can help to build a supportive environment for your grandchild/ren to grow up in and perhaps heal the hurt of not being with their parents.

### **How do I develop good communication with my grandchild?**

Talk to your grandchild/ren and listen to them. Realise that this is not only a difficult situation for you but also for them – they would love to be with their parents and you would love to be enjoying the golden years doing things you enjoy. Teach your grandchild/ren and let them teach you.

As long as you provide a stable, supportive and loving environment to the best of your ability, that will help the flow of communication. Be honest with yourself and with them and work as a team to make the best of the situation you find yourselves in.

### **How can Relationships Australia help me?**

Relationships Australia can help grandparents with relationship difficulties whether as individuals, in couples or as a family.

Relationships are important as they impact on our well-being and happiness. When our personal relationships are not working well, our ability to cope with other areas of our life is often affected. Many relationship difficulties can be resolved with the right kind of help.

There is something exceptionally healing about being in a safe environment where you feel respected, understood and supported, and where you and your family members can 'say what you feel'. No issue is too large or too small to bring to counselling.

Counselling sessions are usually one hour in length and all of our counsellors are qualified and experienced.

Relationships Australia (QLD) has over 50 years of experience with its humble beginnings as the Marriage Guidance Council of Queensland established in 1949. With the change of name in 1994 came an expansion of services and this continues today with RAQ at the forefront of providing services to the changing needs of the community and society. Our reputation has been built on experience over the past 50 years and we will endeavour to continue that into the future.

### **Relationships Australia (QLD) offers a comprehensive range of services and skills including:**

- Individual, couple and family counselling and relationships education
- Pre-marriage guidance and education



*All counselling sessions are private and confidential.*

- Marriage guidance and education
- Mediation and Separation services
- Parenting skills and family counselling
- Domestic and family violence prevention counselling services
- Anger management courses
- Gambling Help Service
- Victims Counselling and Support Services
- After-care Resource Centre (for past residents of state-run institutions)
- Children's Contact Service (Cairns, Townsville and Brisbane only)
- Parenting Orders Program (South-East Queensland and Townsville only).

All of our professional staff are qualified with tertiary qualifications and trained to meet the high standards of Relationships Australia. Our staff receive regular training and skilling sessions and we have an established procedure of monitoring skill levels in our staff. They are regularly kept up-to-date with information on current best practice standards and new research on emerging areas of counselling. In addition, Relationships Australia often commissions and engages in research to further our knowledge and skills.

All of our staff have sworn an Oath of Confidentiality under the Family Law Act and all counselling sessions are private and confidential. The only exception is where a child or individual may be at harm.

### **How can I contact Relationships Australia?**

Relationships Australia has branches and outreach services throughout Queensland and can be contacted on **1300 364 277**. More information is also available at [www.relationships.com.au](http://www.relationships.com.au).

*The information above was provided by Relationships Australia (Qld).*

### **FAMILY RELATIONSHIP SERVICES PROGRAM**

The Australian Government provides funding for family relationship services under the Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP). Although services are not specifically targeted to grandparents, prevention, early intervention and family breakdown support are available to all family members, including grandparents. Some of these services include relationship and parenting skills training and education, counselling, mediation, and supervised contact for children with non-resident parents.

The Government has recently announced major changes to family law incorporating new and additional services through the FRSP. The centrepiece of

the changes is a network of 65 Family Relationship Centres. They will be a source of information for families at all stages, including people starting relationships, those wanting to make their relationships stronger, those having relationship difficulties and those affected when families separate. Centres will also offer individual, group and joint sessions to help separating families make workable arrangements for their children without having to go to court.

These changes also include a significant expansion of services which help keep families intact and assist families experiencing conflict or separation.

The Government is also funding legal aid commissions to provide additional dispute resolution services in family law cases involving grandparents.

More information about the FRSP, including a directory of services is available at: [www.facsia.gov.au/frsp](http://www.facsia.gov.au/frsp).

*The information above was provided by the Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.*

*When the children first arrive, make them feel very loved and very welcomed. Caring for them certainly isn't a chore – it is done with great love.*

*Grandparent carer*





This booklet, **Grandparents As Parents: General Information**, was developed by Community Solutions Inc. with funding provided by the Australian Government and the Telstra Foundation. Australian Government funding was provided through the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, under the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*.