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The Role of Grandparents in Divorced and Separated Families

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Background

Despite the rapid and extensive changes in patterns of partnership formation and dissolution, there has been a dearth of information on the effect of divorce and separation on nuclear and extended families in Ireland. The study at hand is the first study conducted in Ireland with a view to understanding inter-generational relationships – the nature of contact and support between grandparents, grandchildren and the divorced or separated parents – in the aftermath of relationship breakdown in the 'middle' generation.

Aims and Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- To provide an overview of the Irish and international literature on grandparents of divorced families.
- To explore the experiences of grandparents following their children's divorce/separation, with a specific focus on how the relationship with their children and grandchildren has changed.
- To characterise the relationships of grandparents and their grandchildren following divorce/separation.
- To explore whether, in the Irish context, the relationships of paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents with their grandchildren differ following divorce/separation.
- To scope the range of inputs (social, personal, economic, practical and other) that grandparents make into the management of their children's and grandchildren's lives following relationship breakdown.

- To identify the challenges and rewards (and possible support needs) for grandparents who become more heavily involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following divorce/separation.
- To explore the sentiments of grandparents who have less contact with their grandchildren than they would like to following divorce/separation.
- To characterise policies that could assist both grandparents who are heavily involved in supporting post-divorce families and grandchildren in particular, and those who are seeking more extensive contact with their grandchildren.

Research Methods

Qualitative interviews were deemed the most suitable research method to gain an in-depth understanding of extended family relationships following divorce or separation. The table below describes the sample by lineage and gender.

Sample characteristics: Gender and Lineage

	Maternal	Paternal	Both	Total
Male Respondent	2	6	0	8
Female Respondent	9	13	1	23
Total	11	19	1	31

The views expressed are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Family Support Agency.

Copies of the book are available free of charge from the Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin.

Key Findings

Centrality of grandparents' supportive roles

The findings suggest that the role of grandparents in divorced and separated families in Ireland is very significant. Grandparents interacted extensively with their adult children, and where possible, with their grandchildren, during and after the divorce and separation process. The role of grandparents in seeing their adult children and grandchildren through the separation or divorce process was considerable, and in many cases was arguably the lynchpin to the younger generations' ability to negotiate the emotional and practical fallout from relationship breakdown.

Five main types of support and care were channelled by the older to the younger generations, namely (1) financial; (2) housing (coresidence); (3) child care; (4) legal and other advice; and (5) emotional support.

Extensive involvement in one type of support, especially co-residence, easily spilled over into other types of support, and several of our respondents were engaged in the provision of four or even five types of support. Support and care were typically most intensive in the early stages following the adult child's relationship breakdown, but in some cases extended to several years and could involve very substantial sacrifices of their own time, opportunities, leisure and even employment by the grandparents. A very high proportion of sons who had not been married to their former partners were in receipt of multiple supports, especially child care-related assistance and housing (co-residence).

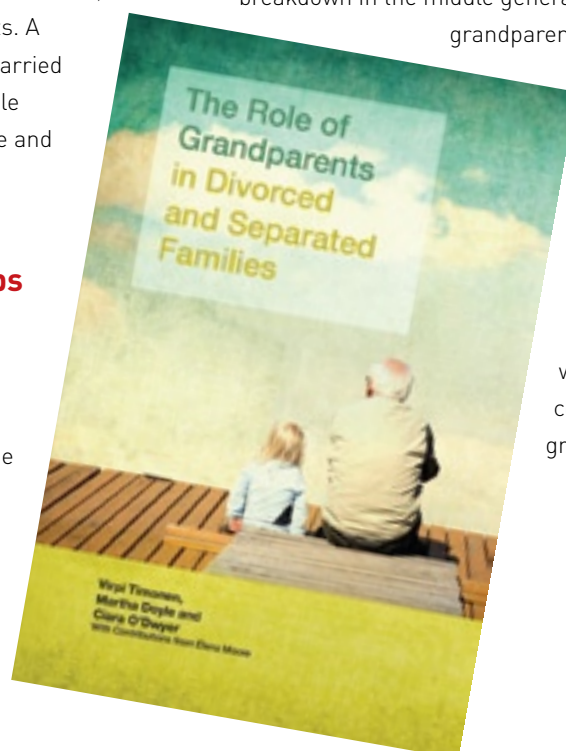
Increased closeness of relationships with adult children

A striking proportion of the respondents who had provided extensive supports to their adult children stated that their relationship had become closer as a result. Following their generous and unconditional, seemingly instinctive, response to the initial 'crisis' period in their adult children's lives, grandparents usually adjusted their involvement to a level that they deemed more manageable and suitable, although extensive involvement did sometimes continue.

Limits of the Mediating Influence of the Middle Generation

In line with the findings from previous international studies, our research also found that the 'middle' generation exercises an important (but not an all-important) 'mediating' influence on grandparent-grandchild relationships. Unfortunately, in some cases this influence was very detrimental to the maintenance of contact; in situations where acrimony between the (separated or divorced) parents continued, the impact on other relationships, including the grandparent-grandchild relationships, was negative and in extreme cases led to a complete loss of contact. However, our study also unearthed several cases where the grandparental generation had, successfully, made considerable efforts to maintain relationships across families in the face of ongoing conflict or complete breakdown in communication between the divorced or separated parents. In these scenarios, grandparents (and grandmothers in particular) came to adopt a crucial 'ex-kin-keeper' role, acting as a conciliatory and stabilising force in their grandchildren's lives. In some cases, grandparents had even managed to create an amicable ongoing relationship with the former partner of their son or daughter, following a fractious relationship breakdown in the middle generation; in this sense, grandparents could act as

'peacemakers' or 'bridge-builders', and usually the main motivation for such reconciliatory and fence-mending efforts was the wellbeing of and contact with their grandchildren.



Grandparents as a stabilising force in their grandchildren's lives

Grandparents strove to normalise the situation for their grandchild and to distract and reassure them; they could be regarded as anchors of stability at a time of uncertainty. The frequently intense desire to shelter grandchildren against what most grandparents believed to be the negative consequences of the separation in the intermediary generation was a powerful motivation for many to increase or enhance their involvement in grandchildren's lives. For this reasons, the grandparent-grandchild relationship arguably takes on greater significance for both parties after parental separation.

The trauma of inadequate contact with grandchildren

Some grandparents experienced the degree of involvement with their grandchildren as inadequate. Usually these situations of insufficient contact arose in the lives of paternal grandparents whose son's former wife or partner had primary or exclusive custody of the grandchildren.

While our study indicates that paternal grandparents experience greater difficulties in securing an adequate level of contact with their grandchildren, in many other respects and in several family contexts, they were not significantly different from maternal grandparents. Indeed, our sample contained paternal grandparents who had become very closely involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following the breakdown of the marital and (especially) non-marital relationships of their sons. This finding goes against the supposed matrilineal advantage in grandparental involvement and furthermore constitutes evidence that paternal grandparents can also become heavily involved after the breakdown of non-marital relationships. None of this, of course, detracts from the suffering of grandparents who have experienced a drastic reduction in, or even loss of, their contact with grandchildren.

Adverse impacts of separation in the middle generation sustained by grandparents

Being such important supports for their children and grandchildren, often making very considerable personal sacrifices in order to help them, grandparents themselves suffered many adverse, primarily stress-related, impacts. Many were too caught up in responding to the needs of others, particularly their own children and grandchildren, to be able to focus on their own needs.

Informal and formal supports used by grandparents

Despite the fact that many grandparents were (fortunately) able to draw on informal supports, the wish that more information and support were available to them was frequently expressed. Very few respondents had accessed any formal services such as counselling, information services, or legal and mediation services. The fact that support was primarily obtained from within informal networks is partly due to the absence or sporadic availability of formal supports in Ireland.

Many grandparents felt that they could benefit from a greater understanding of and even involvement in the legal processes and principles underlying rulings in their children's divorce or separation and their own access to their grandchildren. The desire for more information and guidance on how best to go about explaining and helping the grandchildren to cope with their parents' separation or divorce was also expressed.

The impression that 'the interest of the grandchild(ren)' were often not best served by the legal processes associated with divorce and separation, guardianship and access, was widely held among our sample, and understandably this impression was most common and strongest among grandparents who had had difficulties in securing (adequate) access to their grandchildren. At the opposite end of the involvement spectrum, the custodial grandparents interviewed were in some cases also in need of greater support and advice.

Recommendations

Having undertaken the first study of its kind in Ireland, we now call for further investigations to both deepen and refine the analysis provided here and to test the hypotheses generated, and for the collection of more information on grandparents in the population census and through other surveys that can enable researchers to establish the prevalence of the patterns of contact, support and involvement that we have identified and expounded in this report. The fact that TILDA, the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing, is now collecting detailed baseline information on grandparents will provide representative information and facilitate additional research on this population.

Our findings give grounds for arguing that many grandparents would use and benefit from formal support services were they more widely available and responsive to the needs of grandparents. Information and counselling, the latter possibly in the form of peer-support groups, appear to be particularly urgently needed. Transfer payments are also highly important, especially to custodial grandparents and grandparents who have made considerable financial sacrifices (including, in some cases, giving up employment) in order to support their children and grandchildren. Benefits available to these groups should be protected and enhanced for low-income groups. Further research is warranted to explore the different supports that are most accessible and acceptable to grandparents.

The study gives grounds for arguing that supporting grandparents is a highly effective means of supporting entire families undergoing divorce or separation. Our findings illustrate that, the help, care and support that grandparents provide to the younger generations, in some cases acting as bridges across the formally dissolved family lines, is frequently the lynchpin to successful transitions to life after divorce or separation both for their adult children and grandchildren. We therefore conclude that supporting grandparents is important because it translates into supporting all generations implicated in divorce and separation, and that the current paucity of formal supports for grandparents in Ireland must now be addressed.

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If you wish to give us any feedback or advice regarding this and proposed future work, please contact us at:

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