

The following media release announced the publication of the Research Report 2005 commissioned by the GRG Trust on 3 May 2005.

Media Release

Grandparents fulfilling the role as parents to their grandchildren are doing their bit under the Children Young Persons and Their Families Act to keep children together with their siblings and families, but they are getting a raw deal from the Government, Child Youth and Family, Work and Income New Zealand staff and the justice system,” says Jill Worrall. Jill Worrall spoke to an audience of judges and lawyers at the 4th Annual Child Law 2005 Conference in Auckland today. (11th March 2005)

A trustee of the Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Charitable Trust and Honorary Research Associate at the School of Social and Cultural Studies at Massey University in Auckland, Jill Worrall today released a Research Report, commissioned by the Trust following a survey of 324 grandparents and other kin caregivers across New Zealand.

The research represents the largest quantitative and qualitative analysis undertaken in New Zealand or Australasia covering the issues grandparents, in particular, and other family members such as aunts, uncles and even great grandparents are experiencing as they struggle to cope with raising children placed in their care when the parents, for various reasons, are unfit or unable to care for them.

Among the key concerns outlined by Ms Worrall at the conference was the incidence of grandparents paying considerable legal fees (either paying privately or through Statutory Legal Aid Charges) to obtain custody and guardianship of their grandchildren – often at the behest of Child Youth and Family where the child/ren are considered at risk and in need of care and protection.

The report also illustrates that while fulfilling the same role as foster caregivers, providing stability, security and safety for the children, the grandparents are typically left to cope on their own with the legal costs, counselling, medical, clothing, schooling, and accommodation costs at a time when many of them have retired, down-sized their homes or have health concerns of their own.

Often the only financial support available for the children is the Unsupported Child Allowance which is considerably less than what is available for foster care parents and nearly half of the respondents in this survey reported that they were not receiving it at all. One grandmother in the survey on superannuation cared for five grandchildren over a period of 12 years after her two daughters died and has only received the UCB since 2003 because no one previously told her she was eligible for any sort of financial assistance. The children were aged 18 months, 3, 4, 5 and 17 years respectively when they came into her care.

On top of all the day to day pressures of raising these children, the report further illustrates that many of the grandparents are also having to go to Court to defend ongoing applications from parents, who are challenging their custodial status as primary caregivers in circumstances where there is little realistic prospect of the parents being in a position to adequately provide and care for their children. Many of the grandparents also live in fear of attacks of physical violence or psychological abuse from these parents.

This research confirms what the Trust has known anecdotally for the past several years,” says Diane Vivian, National Convenor of the Trust. “There is a real crisis in the care of children by extended family or grandparents in New Zealand and we have been telling the Government for a

long time that it is simply unjust for children at risk to be so disadvantaged simply because they are now being cared for by extended family instead of by strangers. There must be equity in the system and we must make sure that these children and their caregivers get the financial and social support they need.”

Mrs Vivian also points out that: “In many cases these grandparents will be dead in the next 10-20 years and these children are the next generation of adults in our society. They need proper support now if they have any chance of being productive members of society rather than following the example of their parents into a life of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, violence and ultimately abuse of their own children in future.”

The report’s findings show that most of the grandparents providing the primary day to day care are doing so under considerable stress financially, emotionally and socially. The research shows that:

- 82.69% of caregivers are over 50 years of age with a significant proportion (43%) of them aged over 60
- 58.9% of the caregivers had a deterioration in their health since assuming the primary care of the children
- 37.4% of caregivers are caring for the grandchildren on their own
- 37% of the caregivers were caring for their grandchildren on an income of less than \$20,000 per annum, with a further 29.2% on an income of \$20,000-\$40,000 per annum. Less than one quarter have an income over \$40,000
- Parental relationship breakdown is a common feature for the children being cared for by their grandparents
- The major cause of placement with grandparents is drug (40.255%) and alcohol (29.10%) abuse and neglect (as a co-existing state).
- The age of the parents at the time grandparents assumed primary care of their children was also analysed. The largest cohort for both genders was in the 20-30 year age group. The figures tend to debunk any theory grandparents are for the most part assuming the care of children of teenage parents
- Nearly 25% of the caregivers have been caring for their grandchildren since birth, with drug/alcohol abuse, mental illness, abandonment, parental incapacity or incapability being cited as the principal reason for the placements.
- Nearly 85% of the respondents in the survey reported that the children in their care suffered from physical illness or disability with Asthma being the most prevalent condition (30%)
- Behavioural and psychological problems of various types were reported with 22.91% reporting severe aggressive behaviour, 18% reporting destructive behaviour (to property and persons), 17.34% reporting conduct disorder and 21.67% with ADD or ADHD, with 18.58% citing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.
- 77% reported that they had not received any financial assistance to pay for the specialist fees and medical costs associated with their grandchildren’s physical and/or psychological problems.

Among the key recommendations in the Ms Worrall’s report to the Government, its agencies and the courts are that:

- Kin/whanau caregivers must receive adequate income support commensurate with Foster Care Board Payments and financial support that is reflective of the particular needs of children placed with kin/whanau.
- WINZ workers should be better educated with respect to the income support entitlements of grandparent and kin caregivers, particularly in relation to the UCB and other benefits they are entitled to in addition to the UCB
- Judges need to focus more on the need of children to have placement stability and they should be more proactive in the prevention of on-going custody challenges by

disingenuous parties who place their own needs above that of their children and put their children's stability and security in jeopardy.

- Respite care, day care, after school care, free medical care and free counselling should be provided as a matter of course for kin/whanau caregivers, particularly grandparents.
- Where a child has been under the care of Child Youth and Family, all legal expenses incurred to achieve kin/whanau custody and/or guardianship should be paid for by the State. Similarly Grandparents gaining permanent custody/guardianship of their grandchildren should not be liable to repay legal aid payments. [ENDS]