



1986

# Grandparents & Family Crisis

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## Recommended Citation

Cherlin, Andrew, and Frank Furstenberg. 1986. "Grandparents & Family Crisis." *Generations* 10 (4): 26-28.

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# Grandparents & Family Crisis

## **Abstract**

When family crisis occurs, are grandparents part of the solution or part of the problem? Both possibilities have been advanced in a spate of recent books and articles about intergenerational relations. Some authors have urged grandparents to take a more active role in helping to solve the family's problems, while others have called for legislation to help ease the effects on grandparents of crises such as divorce. However, a national study of grandparents that we recently completed, to be published by Basic Books this September (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986), suggests that most grandparents are unlikely to become either the saviors of the family or the helpless victims of family disruption. Our study consisted of interviews conducted in 1983 with the grandparents of a nationally representative sample of children who had been interviewed previously in 1976 and 1981, yielding a unique, three-generational national survey. The study indicated that grandparents play a limited but important role in family dynamics. This role prevents them from becoming major forces in their grandchildren's lives, but it also provides them with ways of avoiding some of the severe shocks of family crisis.

## **Disciplines**

Family, Life Course, and Society | Gerontology | Sociology

# Grandparents & Family Crisis

*Have grandparents abdicated their responsibility to help their grandchildren?*

by ANDREW CHERLIN &  
FRANK F. FURSTENBERG, JR.

When family crisis occurs, are grandparents part of the solution or part of the problem? Both possibilities have been advanced in a spate of recent books and articles about intergenerational relations. Some authors have urged grandparents to take a more active role in helping to solve the family's problems, while others have called for legislation to help ease the effects on grandparents of crises such as divorce. However, a national study of grandparents that we recently completed, to be published by Basic Books this September (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986), suggests that most grandparents are unlikely to become either the saviors of the family or the helpless victims of family disruption. Our study consisted of interviews conducted in 1983 with the grandparents of a nationally representative sample of children who had been interviewed previously in 1976 and 1981. The children's mothers had also been interviewed in 1976 and 1981, yielding a unique, three-generational national survey. The study indicated that grandparents play a limited but important role in family dynamics. This role usually prevents them from becoming major forces in their grandchildren's lives, but it also provides them with ways of avoiding some of the severe shocks of family crisis.

The idea that grandparents can and should take a far greater role in curing the ills of the contemporary family has been argued most forcefully by Kornhaber (1985; Kornhaber and Woodward, 1981). He has charged, in fact, that grandparents have abdicated their responsibility to help their grandchildren:

*"A great many grandparents have given up emotional attachments to*

*their grandchildren. They have ceded the power to determine their grandparenting relationship to the grandchildren's parents and, in effect, have turned their backs on an entire generation."* (1985: 159).

Kornhaber and Woodward (1981) call for a return to "an ethos which values emotions and emotional attachments," particularly between grandparents and grandchildren.

Kornhaber's critique, though well-intentioned, is strong on rhetoric and weak on the facts. For example, his charge that grandparents have given up emotional attachments to their grandchildren is false, as the evidence from our national study demonstrates. Again and again, our interviews showed that grandparents have strong attachments to their grandchildren. In a majority of cases, this bond takes the form of a companionate relationship based on regular contact and an informal style of interaction. Most grandparents interviewed insisted that they felt emotionally close to their grandchildren and professed love and affection for them.

To supplement the formal interviews, we also conducted a series of group discussions and about 40 case studies. These less-structured interviews also persuaded us that grandparents take their relationships with their grandchildren quite seriously. Pictures of the progeny were prominently displayed in the grandparents' homes, and the grandparents generally described their feelings for their grandchildren with passion and conviction.

Our survey showed that when grandchildren live nearby, grandparents see them often, even if the grandparents don't get along with the children's parents. The effect of proximity was quite powerful:

geographical distance alone accounted for 62 percent of the variance in the number of visits per year between grandparents and grandchildren. On the one hand, this statistic means that grandparents who live far away have a difficult time overcoming the barriers of distance. But the finding also signals the strength of the grandparent-grandchild relationship: parents and children, with few exceptions, make sure that they visit nearby grandparents regularly. This strong sense of obligation to keep in touch usually is overlaid with love, concern, and assistance; but even when the sense of obligation is unsupported by these props, it is often still honored. The uniformly high frequency of visiting among nearby kin suggests that the bond among grandparents, their adult children, and their grandchildren is still strong. And with longer life-expectancies today, more grandchildren than in past times have living grandparents to visit.

Moreover, the grandparents in the study reported overwhelmingly that their relationships with their grandchildren were "closer" and "more friendly" than their relationships with their own grandparents had been. To be sure, there are limits beyond which today's relationships rarely pass. Most grandparents (and most parents) subscribe to a "norm of noninterference" which states that, under normal circumstances, grandparents should not interfere

with the way that the parents are bringing up the grandchildren. Kornhaber takes this limit as evidence that today's companionate relationships do not qualify as "real" relationships — thus his charge that grandparents have abandoned family commitments. But these relationships certainly seemed real to the grandparents we interviewed. And these grandparents made it clear that the greater independence of the generations is experienced by them and most of their children as a positive change. What appears to Kornhaber as detachment is perceived by most grandparents as self-reliance, a quality much valued in American culture. Just a generation or two ago, far fewer grandparents had the economic resources and the good health necessary to live long, independent lives. Now that more grandparents do; it may not be fair to criticize them for enjoying the same autonomy and material comforts — and the same emphasis on feelings, affection, and companionship in interpersonal relations — that their adult children prize so highly.

Thus, in the absence of a family crisis, grandparents play a role that emphasizes emotional gratification from their grandchildren. (Black grandparents are a major exception; even when class and family-structure differences are accounted for, black grandparents are much more likely than white grandparents to take on a

parent-like role.) But when a crisis such as a divorce in the parent generation occurs, the norm of noninterference no longer applies. Grandparents, especially those on the side of the custodial parent (usually the maternal grandparents), provide substantial assistance to their children and grandchildren. Six out of ten grandparents on the custodial side reported that they provided some financial assistance to the grandchild in the study or to his parents. And three out of ten said the grandchild came to live with them (usually accompanied by the custodial parent) about the time of the break-up. Among grandparents on the noncustodial side, the reported levels of assistance at the time of the break-up were lower but still substantial. Grandparents were much more likely to help if they lived close by, a fact consistent with the general finding about the importance of proximity. The large amounts of assistance provided during a crisis such as divorce have led observers such as Troll (1983) to refer to grandparents as "the family watchdogs" who are in the background during tranquil times but are ready to step in when an emergency arises.

Indeed, years after a break-up had occurred, we found that grandparents on the maternal, custodial side had maintained or even enhanced their relationships with their grandchildren compared to maternal grandparents in families where no break-up had occurred. The maternal grandparents in families with a break-up remained more likely to be living with the grandchildren or to be seeing them almost every day, were more likely to be exchanging services, were more likely to be providing financial support to the parents, and were much more likely to be engaging in behavior usually reserved for the parents. Thus, rather than simply disrupting intergenerational ties, divorce may actually strengthen the ties between grandparents and grandchildren along the maternal line. (Should joint custody become more common, the imbalance between the maternal and paternal lines probably would decrease.)

The lesson to be drawn for family counselors and service providers is

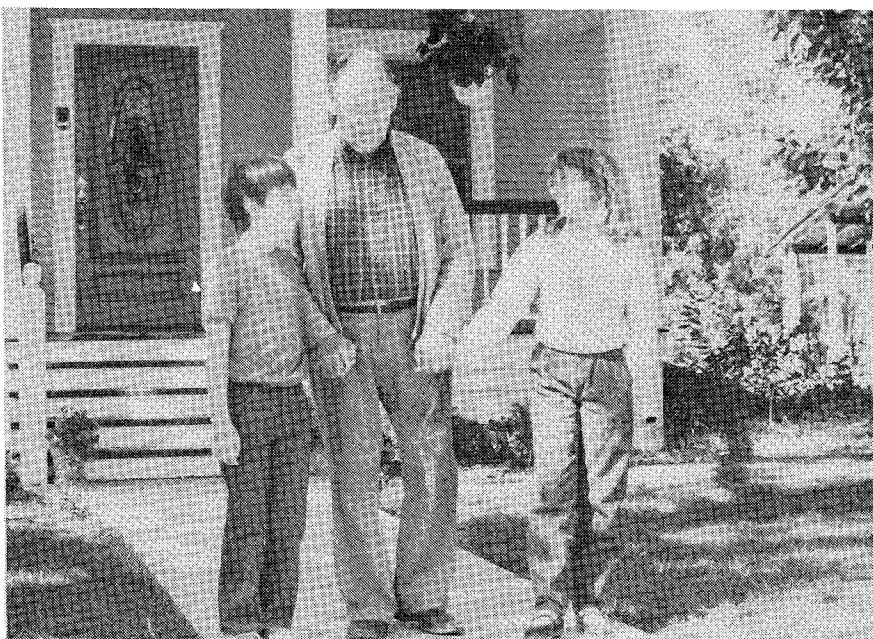


Photo by Rod Schmall

*Divorce may actually strengthen the ties between  
grandparents and grandchildren along the maternal lines.*

that in the absence of a crisis such as divorce, serious illness, or prolonged unemployment, it is unlikely that most grandparents can, would want to, or would be allowed to play a strong functional role in rearing the grandchildren. The constraints of distance, the powerful norm of noninterference, and the strong preference on all sides for autonomy and independence make a larger role unlikely, for better or worse. Still, grandparents play an important emotional and symbolic role, providing (and seeking) valued, affectionate, informal relationships and serving as symbols of family continuity. And when a crisis strikes, the rules change. Grandparents who live nearby and who have continuing access to their grandchildren can and do play an enlarged, lasting role in their grandchildren's lives.

What of the grandparents who don't have access to their grandchildren after a divorce in the middle generation? There has been much public discussion of the plight of these grandparents, who are usually on the paternal (noncustodial) side. Most attention has been focused on the "right" to visitation by grandparents whose ex-daughters-in-law won't allow them to see the grandchildren (Wilson and DeShane, 1982). Our study did turn up some grandparents in this unenviable situation. But much more often, paternal grandparents didn't see their grandchildren regularly after a divorce for other reasons. Once again, distance was important: paternal grandparents often find that their ex-daughters-in-law move away, making it difficult for them to retain the same level of contact. In addition, paternal grandparents some-

times find that their sons — the noncustodial parents — have dropped out of their grandchildren's lives, making continued regular visitation difficult. Nevertheless, there was substantial variability in the situation of grandparents on the paternal, noncustodial side; a minority managed to maintain or increase their contact with their grandchildren by assisting their ex-daughters-in-law.

The lessons for service professionals from the responses of noncustodial grandparents would seem to be as follows. First, their relationships with their grandchildren, though often diminished, aren't necessarily so. They sometimes can construct an important, continuing role for themselves — at least when the grandchildren remain nearby. Second, the problems noncustodial grandparents encounter are not usually amenable to legal remedies. Legislation to provide grandparents with the legal standing to ask the court for visitation privileges may have symbolic value, but such legislation won't help most grandparents to actually see more of their grandchildren after a divorce. And to the extent that such legislation raises expectations too high, it could lead to greater disappointment. Relatively few ex-daughters-in-law, the study results suggest, bar the door to their former husbands' parents; more frequently they simply have moved away or have little to do with their former husbands. Paternal grandparents who wish to retain contact with their grandchildren after a divorce need to actively construct a post-divorce role for themselves; and indeed a number of grandparents in our study had successfully done so. Amicable ties be-

tween former in-laws certainly improve the prospects of continuity between the generations.

In sum, we must reject the notion that grandparenthood has become a meaningless, unimportant role. On the contrary, being a grandparent is still deeply meaningful. But grandparents, like most other Americans, increasingly find meaning in their lives through personal fulfillment. Except in times of family crisis, therefore, relationships between grandparents and grandchildren take on an informal, pleasurable, companionate style. In this regard, grandparent-grandchild relations are becoming increasingly similar to husband-wife and parent-child relationships. Contemporary family ties rely more on the flow of sentiment than the bond of obligation. □

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