



# 'In the Firing Line': Grandparent Carers at Risk of Family Violence

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## Abstract

Increasingly, children deemed to be at risk of harm are being placed in kin care, most often with grandparents. Factors triggering the removal of children from their parents can include family breakdown, child neglect, substance misuse, poverty and family violence. Equally, these factors can result in children becoming disconnected from extended family. A prevailing concern in Australia is the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection services, and disrupted connections to their family and culture. The primary aim of a recent qualitative study was to optimise grandparent-grandchild connectedness after child safety concerns. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with a total of 77 participants. Grandparents were the primary sample recruited, however smaller numbers of workers, parents and foster carers contributed to the study. Discussed here are themes emerging from the qualitative data that pointed to grandparents being at greater risk of intrafamilial violence than previously may have been recognised after they step in to care for grandchildren. Recommendations from this study include a call for increased culturally and historically-informed practice approaches that take account of the interconnected nature of violence in families.

**Keywords** Grandparents · Grandchildren · Family violence · Child protection · Culturally- informed practice

## Introduction

*Many kinship families are dealing with complex, troubled intrafamilial relationships including intense conflict with children's mothers and fathers (Kiraly and Humphreys 2017, p. 231).*

The total number of children receiving formal child protection services in Australia continues to trend upwards, although some variation exists across Australian States and Territories (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2017, 2018a). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2018a), during 2016–17, 168,352 children had an investigation, care and protection order and/or were placed in out-of-home care, an increase on previous years (AIHW 2017). Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander children currently are up to 10 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to receive child protection services, with the legacies of historical child removals considered to be a significant contextual factor (AIHW 2017; SNAICC 2017, 2018).

The critical role of grandparents taking on a custodial role for grandchildren after child protection concerns increasingly is being documented in the literature (Backhouse and Graham 2012; Boetto 2010; Herlofson and Hagestad 2012; Irizarry et al. 2016; AIHW 2018b). For Aboriginal grandparents the grandparent carer role fits well with their cultural commitments and responsibilities (Dennis and Brewer 2017; SNAICC 2018; Thomson et al. 2013). Grandparents often become carers for grandchildren due to factors such as child neglect or abuse, parental substance misuse, poverty, housing instability, imprisonment of a parent, poor parental mental health, and family violence (Connor 2006; Herlofson and Hagestad 2012; Qu et al. 2018). Most grandparents are motivated to take on a primary carer role in order to safeguard and protect their grandchildren, and to prevent children going into non-relative, out-of-home care where extended family relationships may be disrupted or lost (Gair 2017; Backhouse and Graham 2012; Sandberg 2016a).

Key literature identifies that the past forced removal of children from First Nations families severely damaged

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intergenerational relationships, and increased the vulnerability of families to ongoing disadvantage and poverty, intergenerational parenting difficulties, and intergenerational child protection intervention. For these families, past child removals provides additional motivation for extended families to step in to care for children and break the cycle of family trauma (Atkinson 2002; Herring et al. 2013; HREOC 1997; SNAICC, 2010; Thomson et al. 2013).

A recent collaborative research study across three Australian states focused on optimising grandparent-grandchild connections after child safety issues. Some findings are published elsewhere (Zuchowski et al. 2018; Gair et al. 2018). The purpose of this article is to share grandparents' candid revelations regarding their experiences of feeling vulnerable, threatened, at risk of family violence, and of being assaulted by parents and family members of the grandchildren in their care.

## Background Context

### The Formal and Informal Grandparent Carer Role

Grandparents increasingly are becoming formal and informal carers for their grandchildren, particularly after child safety concerns. The burden of care for grandparents has been reported, including the impacts on their health, threats to financial stability and timely retirement, and impacts on broader family relationships (see for example Council on the Ageing (COTA) 2010; Drew and Silverstein 2007; Minkler et al. 1997). Elsewhere positive, rewarding and reciprocal benefits have been reported when grandparents take on the primary care of grandchildren, including mutual health and wellbeing benefits, family stability and maintained cultural connections (Drew and Silverstein 2007; Di Gessa et al. 2016; Fisher and Hutton-Baas 2017; SNAICC 2017). While kinship care is promoted as a desirable out-of-home care option for children who come to the attention of child protection services, many grandparent carers have reported receiving inadequate financial support to care for grandchildren and insufficient professional help to manage children's troubled behaviours (Boetto 2010; Fernandez 2014; Irizarry et al. 2016; Kiraly 2015).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that, for jurisdictions with available data in 2016–17, 52% of kinship carers were grandparents, an increase from 2015 to 2016, while 20% were aunts/uncles (AIHW 2018b, p. 46). However, the true extent of grandparent carers may be harder to ascertain, particularly for Aboriginal families (SNAICC 2010). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the roles of grandparents, aunties (culturally similar role to parents/grandparents) and elders carry caring responsibilities that provide children with strong cross-generational relationships, identities and care networks (SNAICC 2010). The past forced removal of children from First Nations

families is said to have geographically, psychologically and culturally distanced grandmothers from their caring responsibilities and their grandchildren (Thomson et al. 2013).

### Child Protection Intervention in Australia

In Australia, individual State and Territory Governments are responsible for the statutory protection of children, and a range of similar legislation exists across all Australian States and Territories to protect vulnerable children. As noted, Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children currently are up to 10 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to be the recipient of child protection services (AIHW 2017; SNAICC 2017). Key identified contributing factors to disproportional numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children currently in State care include the ongoing legacies and mistrust resulting from the targeted past removals of Aboriginal children from their families, known as the Stolen Generation (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, (HREOC) 1997). While practice is said to be much different 20 years on, Funston et al. (2016, p. 51) argued that the rate of Aboriginal children being removed into care 'bears an uncomfortable resemblance' to the Stolen Generation.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle identifies the importance of children being placed within family, culture and community, rather than the past preference for non-relative placement or institutional care. Placement with kin helps maintain cultural identity, a sense of belonging, ongoing access to parents and extended family, and it contributes to breaking the cycle of intergenerational involvement in child protection processes (McDowall 2016; SNAICC 2017; Fernandez 2014), although ongoing access to family may bring different stresses and challenges. In 2016–2017 only 68% of Indigenous Australian children were placed in accordance with the Child Placement Principle (AIHW 2018b, p.48). However, of relevance, Funston et al. (2016, p. 51) recognised that due to historical events many Aboriginal families have a higher likelihood of living at the 'traumatic intersection' between poverty, oppression, violence and many other related consequences of colonisation, including systemic racism and damaging levels of substance misuse and family violence. Compounding the situation are the negative impacts on families of being investigated by child protection services including fear, shame, powerlessness and an ongoing mistrust of child protection services (Buckley 2017; Lonne et al. 2016).

### Family Violence

Domestic and family violence has attracted increased political attention in recent years, after decades where domestic violence was considered a private family matter (Sanders and Lehmann 2016; Douglas and Walsh 2010; Barth and Macy

2018). Victims of domestic and family violence primarily are women and perpetrators are primarily men. Increasingly, domestic and family violence is viewed as a factor in the removal of children from parental care (Barth and Macy 2018; Humphreys and Stanley 2017). ‘Family violence’ is the preferred term for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples because it can cover family relationships in which violence may occur, beyond intimate partners (AIHW 2017). It has been noted that Indigenous Australians may be less likely than non-Indigenous Australians to report family violence due to mistrust of authorities and because they would prefer restorative rather than criminal justice processes to help stop the violence (Herring et al. 2013; Kelly 2002). Yet because of historical trauma and resultant contemporary disadvantage, these families may be more vulnerable to family violence. Deficits in available research on Indigenous family violence include who is at greatest risk; what services victims and perpetrators of family violence most need; and distinguishing the age and gender of perpetrators and victims of family violence (AIHW 2018b). According to Keiski et al. (2016) a gendered analyses of domestic and family violence, while crucial for naming male violence, has resulted in female perpetrators being under researched.

Past research by Dunne and Kettler (2008) revealed that for some grandparents who were caring for grandchildren, conflict with the parents of the children in their care had escalated to the point where a restraining order was required for their ongoing safety. More recently Breman and MacRae (2017, p.7) revealed similar examples of violence against kinship carers, including physical violence, emotional abuse, and property damage. Other authors note that while family violence is a factor in the removal of some children, few studies have explored intrafamilial violence directed against family members who step in to care for the children (Bent-Goodley and Brade 2007; Sandberg (2016a, b). As identified in the opening quote, and in the literature discussed above, grandparent carers may be dealing with complex, troubled family relationships (Kiraly and Humphreys 2017).

Safety planning is a recommended strategy in everyday practice with victims of domestic violence although the evidence base appears limited regarding best practice in extended family contexts. Safety planning most often involves multi-layered strategies including restraining orders and/or civil or criminal proceedings (Jenney et al. 2014; Logan and Walker 2018). However, culturally-appropriate safety planning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families may be complicated by the impact of colonisation, intergenerational trauma, and an ongoing mistrust of authorities (Long and Sephton 2011). As such, extended family networks may be reticent to admit to authorities they are experiencing family violence for fear it would provoke criminal proceedings and the removal of children (Funston et al. 2016; HREOC 1997; SNAICC 2017; Thomson et al. 2013).

While some authors debate whether violence against grandparents is a form of elder abuse, the framing of elder abuse as the exploitation, abuse and neglect of persons because of their status as an older person, points to family violence as the more contextually accurate term for the discussion of violence directed against grandparent carers in this article (Bows and Penhale 2018; Cripps 2000).

## **An Informed, Integrated Response to Child Abuse and Family Violence**

It is evident that responses to child abuse and domestic and family violence have developed in siloed ways based on different priorities and legislative mandates (O’Leary et al. 2018; Wilkins et al. 2018). More recently, there has been greater recognition of the inter-relatedness of child abuse and family violence, and practitioners and researchers have been encouraged ‘to connect the dots’ (Barth and Macy 2018, p. 60; Humphreys and Stanley 2017; Jenney et al. 2014; Lonne et al. 2016; Wilkins et al. 2018). Some literature has implicated grandparents and adult parents in the violent behaviours of their children (Lonne et al. 2016; Gilbert et al. 2009). Elsewhere, it has been reported that the family dynamics of domestic violence are often ‘misunderstood and inappropriately responded to by child protection workers’ (Douglas and Walsh (2010, p.489) p.492). Aboriginal families recognise the significant impact of trauma passed down through their families. Equally, it is understood that the best protective factor for children is ensuring connection with family, extended family, culture and community (Bamblett 2006; Dennis and Brewer 2017; Lohoar et al. 2014).

The focus of this article is on family violence directed against grandparents who step in to care for grandchildren as revealed during a recent qualitative study focused on optimising grandparent-grandchild connections after child protection concerns. It was expected that a context of family violence might be raised by participants as a factor in children being removed from their parents. What was unexpected was the extent of the emerging discussions of fears, threats and physical violence directed towards grandparent carers.

## **The Study**

### **Partners**

The three community partners involved in this study, alongside university researchers, were Family Inclusion Network Queensland (Townsville), Family Inclusion Network, Western Australia, and Act for Kids Queensland. These partners are all involved in supporting families and children at risk of child protection intervention. Partners provided guidance

on the focus of the research and the aims and evolving research processes, and they promoted the research within their organisations and networks. Individual partner organisations provided venues, food and refreshments for focus groups, transport to venues, and they facilitated their staff and service users to attend focus groups and interviews, on several occasions supported by students on field placement. Members of partner organisations also contributed critical input into theme conceptualisation, consolidation of the findings, and dissemination of results.

## Research Aims and Questions

The research question posed in this qualitative study was: What are the ways that the inclusion of grandparents can be optimised after child safety concerns? The primary Aim was to explore and identify ways to optimise grandparent-grandchild relationships, and optimise the inclusion of grandparents in decision-making when there are child safety concerns. University Human Ethics Committee approval was received for the study. Given the importance of recruiting Indigenous participants to the study, respected Bindal elder Auntie Dorothy Savage agreed to act as advisor to the project. An Indigenous research assistant was involved in project planning, data collection, analysis and dissemination of the findings.

## Participants

Participants in this study predominantly were grandparents. Initially grandparents were the sole participant group. However one partner argued that perspectives from other key stakeholder groups could help inform the findings. Participants were invited into the study through public flyers, media reports, and use of network sampling (Creswell 2014). The final sample ( $n = 77$ ) included participants from Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria. Interviews and focus groups were undertaken in 2016. In total, 28 individual interviews, 3 couple interviews and 7 focus group interviews (43 attendees) were conducted. The sample consisted of 51 grandparents (including 4 aunts, 3 of whom identified as Aboriginal aunts undertaking a grandparent role), 6 foster carers (non-relative), 12 parents, and 8 workers in child protection and support roles. The grandparent sample consisted of 46 grandmothers (including 4 aunts), and five grandfathers ( $n = 51$ ) aged from 36 years to older than 66 years. In total, twenty-six participants in the study identified as Aboriginal Australian and one participant identified as a Torres Strait Islander ( $n = 27$ ), constituting 53% of the grandparent sample. Data reported here is drawn from Grandparent/auntie participant interviews and focus groups.

## Data Collection

The majority of the interviews were undertaken face to face, although a smaller number of telephone interviews were conducted. The interview team consisted of one Indigenous and two non-Indigenous interviewers, who all utilised the same interview guide (Creswell 2014). In line with an in-depth interview approach, emerging points of interest expressed by participants during interviews were followed up. One grandmother preferred to document her responses to the questions herself and forward them to the research team. No question on the interview guide asked grandparents about their experiences of family violence after taking on an increased carer role for grandchildren, nevertheless this was a strong emerging theme.

## Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were read multiple times and analysed using a qualitative thematic data analysis approach influenced by the work of Liamputtong (2009). Researchers worked independently and collectively to identify common threads and themes. Preliminary themes were discussed and refined with partners across several meetings. During the analysis process, family violence and threats to grandparents' safety was identified as a unique and unexpected theme. While broad findings have been reported elsewhere (Zuchowski et al. 2018; Gair et al. 2018), the focus of this article is on family violence. According to Liamputtong (2009), ethical rigor, credibility and trustworthiness are enacted when transparent information about the research processes is made available and multiple examples of themes are presented to provoke attention and enhance insight.

## Results

In this study grandparents identified many factors impacting their families that, in turn, prompted them to become more involved in the care of their grandchildren. These factors included parental drug and alcohol misuse, child abuse and neglect, and family violence. Somewhat surprisingly, in sharing these stories of struggling families, some grandparents located *themselves* as targets of ongoing anger, threats and violence. Four linked themes are discussed here: An existing context of domestic and family violence; Threats, abuse and damage; Acts of physical assault; and Lack of appropriate, targeted support and intervention.

### An Existing Context of Domestic and Family Violence

Domestic and family violence and substance misuse were identified by many participants as the known and even the sole circumstance leading to grandchildren being cared for



by grandparents. Some participants shared their fear of repercussions if they reported or intervened in family violence, while others shared memories of growing up with violence and alcohol abuse during the time of the Stolen Generation.

For example this grandmother identified parental intimate partner violence, but not child abuse as implicated in the removal of the children:

*They took the kids off her because she was a drunk and her and her partner at the time... there was a lot of domestic violence... they weren't hitting the kids they were hitting each other (focus group 2)*

This grandmother identified it was her daughter's fear of retaliation against family members that stopped her daughter reporting her partner's violence:

*We try to encourage her to go and get a restraining order and then charge him with assault... and she says he always threatens her with harming her father and brothers... so she will not say anything (focus group 4).*

The grandmother below shared memories triggered by the focus group discussions, of growing up with alcohol abuse and family violence. As she points out, many survivors of the Stolen Generation, including herself, were now grandparents:

*[W]ell the majority of us would have come up in that kind of stuff, you know there was the Stolen Generation.... and then... a lot of family members would have been subjected to domestic violence or the substance abuse and all that. So... the grandparents would have been growing up with that as a kid (focus group 4).*

Drawing on another example, the grandmother below explains how she knew the danger had increased for her grandchildren and she could not ignore it, but she also knew that stepping in would increase the family conflict:

*[W]hat do you do, do you shut up and don't help these kids when you know damn well nothing has changed and it is getting worse and you are suspecting more and more types of abuse, what are you going to do? You are going to shut up and say nothing? ... it's like- 'No way', I am going to put my head on the chopping board here and I don't care ... (interview 2)*

### Threats, Abuse and Damage

Moving from discussing the context of family violence, a number of grandparents reported threats and intimidation against them from the adult parents of the grandchildren in

their care. For example, this grandmother spoke of repeated threats and damage to her property at a time of the mother's heavy drug use:

*Because at this point she was heavily into drugs... she wasn't allowed to come to my house and she would come a number of times and with other people and made threats and broke in and did things like that, yeah. (interview 14)*

Equally, these grandparents spoke of bearing the brunt of verbal abuse from their daughter-in-law when they picked up and dropped off their grandchildren for parental visits:

*Everything was about we had to fit in with her. She didn't drive, we had to do all the drop off and the pick-up. Well, why couldn't she catch public transport to my house? And then you would cop all the abuse under the sun (interview 20)*

Another grandmother revealed how she reported intimidation from the child's father but was not taken seriously:

*[H]e follows me around, he hasn't hurt me, but he follows me around, kind of scares me. .... Why don't any of the authorities step in and do something? (interview 19)*

Similarly, this grandmother was scared of her son's behaviour. She applied for a domestic violence protection order to protect herself and the grandchildren, but it did not stop her son entering her property and making frightening threats:

*You worry about not being there, being protective of the kids, then you get hurt or ... something happened to you... I put a restraining order on my son. Because he kept ringing up and abusing the shit out of me. And you know, he terrified me that much. ... I woke up and I could hear the fence rattling and the dog going berserk. When I looked through the window, ... it was him jumping over the fence. ... 'If you're in there, you're fuckin dead'. (focus group 4)*

### Acts of Physical Assault

For some grandparents the threats and abuse escalated into physical violence against them from daughters, daughters in law and sons, and even another grandmother. For the grandmother below, previous death threats were followed by

physical assault by her daughter in law, prompting her to take increased safety measures:

*[K]inship, ... [care] was discussed by the manager and the practice manager and at that point I couldn't put my hand up, because I got assaulted ... by the mother ... I had death threats and ... ongoing phone rubbish from associates of theirs ... I have got punched in the head ... the night we got the oldest one to safety, but I am a smart old woman, I knew not stay home on my own, because I live alone (Interview 2)*

Similarly, this grandmother and her home were under attack by female in-laws who wanted to take the child home:

*And her and her mother came, and I only had one[grandchild] here..., and ... her mother attacked me and everything in the house to try and get the children back, um, ... I said they could come in and spend as much time as they wanted and she said, 'No', 'I want to take her with me' and I said, 'you can't ... because ... she was left in my care' and then the mother ended up attacking me and, anyway she went outside and I locked her out, and I said ... 'I am going to ring the police' (Interview 13)*

The grandmother below barely avoided being assaulted by her son, but the children were severely beaten before she could protect them and phone the police:

*When he got them and he flogged the fuck out of them. I said, "Leave them alone, you [expletive]." ...and so I rang the Police and ... He [son] came right in my face..., and I started thinking "Oh, [expletive], I'm going to get it." (Focus group 4)*

### **Lack of Appropriate, Targeted Support and Intervention**

This theme moves beyond the violence revealed above, to identify how grandparents felt unsupported when trying to manage the conflict and violence. Below, grandparents identify that after reluctantly going to child protection services for support, workers often did not accept grandparents' assertions about the danger, and they misunderstood or inappropriately responded to their concerns:

This grandmother felt unsafe, vulnerable and dismissed by busy Department workers:

*I was providing the safe house, which meant, I was putting myself in the firing line for what they knew was a very dangerous man, but they[workers] couldn't even talk to me, let alone give me any emotional support (interview 18)*

Similarly, this grandmother did not receive the help she was looking for when she took the step to report her son's behaviour to child protection services:

*Well these children were in a violent situation so I have reported my own son ... and how he was behaving... and basically the response to me was 'you are overreacting' or 'you are being very judgemental'... which doesn't help (interview 3)*

Finally, this grandparent identified how workers did not address the violence with the male perpetrator. Instead, they appeared to collude with him, and he was being considered eligible to become primary carer for the children going forward:

*Or they don't deal with the domestic violence, which [he] started ... in the first place. In our case the father had started all the domestic violence, and still not having domestic violence counselling because 'he's working'. And 'he's a wonderful bloke' as far as they're concerned. And he's in the running to take the children. He's done nothing but cause trouble and misery to the family (Focus group 1)*

## **Discussion**

The findings reported above affirm the importance of grandparents staying connected to and stepping in to safeguard grandchildren after child safety concerns. Yet greater attention seems needed on the risk factors leading to grandparents becoming involved in the primary care of grandchildren- parental substance misuse, poor parental mental health, child abuse and neglect, family breakdown, and family violence. The unravelling family circumstances prompting the removal of children from parental care was of deep concern to grandparents in this study, as was their adult children's behaviors and life struggles, and these factors are unlikely to disappear without committed, targeted intervention. For many Aboriginal families additional contextual factors include intergenerational child protection intervention that began with the Stolen Generation. These survivors are now grandparents.

Many Aboriginal grandmothers in this study identified that because of historical legacies, families were fearful, mistrusting and reluctant to contact 'the Department', although a reluctance to report family violence was not limited to Aboriginal participants. As noted in the literature, and evidenced in these findings, the impact of colonisation and the Stolen Generation has had ongoing consequences for many families (Funston et al. 2016; HREOC 1997; SNAICC 2017;

Thomson et al. 2013). Increased recognition may be needed that many Aboriginal grandparents carry the memories and the impact of growing up with trauma and family violence. They may be living in disadvantaged circumstances with limited resources but still they step in when needed to help raise children. Many might be very reluctant to report family violence directed against them by adult children for fear that the grandchildren would be removed from their care. Meanwhile, grandparents remain in the firing line. While no questions were asked about participants experiences of family violence, many Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in this study revealed threats, abuse, damage to property and physical assault. Many identified a lack of appropriate, professional support and intervention.

As evident in the findings reported above, grandparents identified that some mothers of children in their care (daughters and daughters in law) behaved in threatening and violent ways towards them, as did some adult sons. While interventions against male violence predominate, Keiski et al. (2016) noted that past policies and research had not adequately explored women as both victims and perpetrators of family violence. In particular, Keiski et al. (2016) identified that, unlike power relations underpinning men's violence, reasons for women's violence may include a threatened sense of self in conflictual and confronting circumstances related to their female identity and gender role. Failure to comprehend the very complex nature of violence in families may result in all family members, including children and grandmothers, being left vulnerable to further violence.

As noted, there may be minimal if any safety planning for grandparent victims of family violence, not the least because it is likely to be under-reported, particularly by Aboriginal families fearful of the ramifications. Further these findings reflect perceptions reported by Douglas and Walsh (2010) and others, that child protection workers may not respond appropriately to domestic and family violence situations and they may not engage well with perpetrators of family violence, consequently leaving children and families inadequately supported (Humphreys et al. 2018).

Available literature identifies the many challenges of intergenerational violence and trauma but also highlights the importance of restorative justice and culturally-informed practice for recovery and healing (Fisher and Hutton-Baas 2017; Kelly 2002). Equally, while intergenerational poverty, historical trauma, child removals and violence may be evident, workers need to be mindful that a key protective factor for children is being placed within family, culture and community (Funston et al. 2016; Jenney et al. 2014). As noted by Kickett-Tucker and Hansen (2017), damage may linger for Aboriginal families because of past forced separations, yet workers may overlook that Aboriginal families possess many strengths and remain influenced by cultural family values, responsibilities and structures (Herring et al. 2013; Nancarrow 2006).

Overall, the findings reported here suggest that the ability of grandparent carers to protect children may rely on child protection workers implementing historically and culturally-informed, integrated practice with families and communities (Dennis and Brewer 2017). According to Wilkins et al. (2018) and others, implemented approaches need to take more account of interconnected forms of abuse and violence and overlapping risk factors in families. Further recommended is the promotion of protective factors that increase the resilience of individuals and communities, and help safeguard families, including grandparents (Barth and Macy 2018; Humphreys and Stanley 2017; Jenney et al. 2014; O'Leary et al. 2018; Kelly 2002; Thomson et al. 2013; Wilkins et al. (2018).

## Limitations

The limitations of this study include that, given the focus was on optimising grandparents' ongoing connections with grandchildren after child safety concerns, grandparents who were satisfied with the level of ongoing connections would not have come forward to participate in the study. It is acknowledged that no question in this study asked grandparents about their experiences of family violence and findings reported here emerged through the qualitative interviews and analysis processes. The authors cannot speculate on the broader prevalence of family violence against grandparent carers within the community from these findings. It is further acknowledged that the findings presented here cannot be interpreted as reflecting the extent of everyday family conflict faced by grandparents within or beyond the sample. Nevertheless, these findings were concerning, and were substantial enough in the context of the broader data set to present them. A follow-up study focusing on preventing family violence as a strategy to protect children and extended families seems warranted.

## Conclusion

Findings reported here identify that grandparents are regularly stepping in to safeguard grandchildren, and keep them within their family, community and culture. However, the unravelling family context that prompted children's placement with grandparents, may in turn be placing grandparents and more specifically grandmothers, in the firing line. What seems evident is that grandparents in this study wanted to protect their grandchildren, and support their adult children, yet they often felt unsupported and unsafe themselves. Future research could focus on identifying what specific, integrated violence interventions might help protect children and extended families, and help restore family relationships.

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