

Grandparents matter: Optimizing grandparents' involvement after child safety concerns

Susan Gair¹  | Ines Zuchowski¹ | Lyn Munns¹ | Ros Thorpe² | Debbie Henderson³

¹James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

²Family Inclusion Network, Townsville, Australia

³Debbie Henderson Family Inclusion Network, Western Australia

Correspondence

Susan Gair, James Cook University, Townsville, Australia.
Email: susan.gair@jcu.edu.au

Funding information

James Cook University, Australia

Abstract

Across Australia and internationally, growing numbers of grandparents are becoming primary carers for grandchildren, both within and outside of formal state care arrangements. Underlying factors include family breakdown, family circumstances where parents are unable to care for their children, or where there are child safety concerns. Some grandparents report a pattern of initially providing care for grandchildren but then experiencing reduced or lost contact that sometimes is not restored, in turn impacting ongoing relationships with grandchildren. A prevailing concern is the disproportional numbers of Aboriginal children in state care in all Australian states. Reported here are findings from a recent partnership research project focused on optimizing grandparent contact and ongoing relationships with grandchildren after child safety concerns. Qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with 77 participants. Findings revealed grandparents yearned to maintain a significant role in grandchildren's lives after child safety issues emerged, however, they often felt powerless, unsupported, and sidelined from decision-making in the best interests of their grandchildren. Participants made strong recommendations for more inclusive processes.

KEYWORDS

child safety, grandchildren, grandparents, kinship care, social work

1 | INTRODUCTION

[Some grandparents ... with genuine concerns and desires to be involved in, and support the lives of their grandchildren, are encountering problematic relationships with children's services (Tarrant, Featherstone, O'Dell, & Fraser, 2017, p. 362).

The number of children receiving formal child protection services continues to trend upwards although some variation exists across Australian states and territories¹ (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2017). Similarly, the number of children being cared for by grandparents is on the rise. Although grandparents involved in the care of grandchildren is nothing new, both in Australia and internationally, grandparent-headed families have become more common

(Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012). Relevant literature identifies the growing, critical role of grandparents as formal or informal kin carers for their grandchildren (Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Boetto, 2010; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012; Irizarry, Miller, & Bowden, 2016). This outcome often is due to family circumstances resulting from relationship breakdowns, substance abuse by adult children, poor parental mental health, poverty, housing instability, imprisonment of a parent, family violence, and/or where parents are unable or unwilling to care for children (Connor, 2006; Cox, 2014; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012).

It has been identified that grandparents' health can be impacted with the burden of parenting their grandchildren as they move towards retirement (Cox, 2014; Council on the Ageing, 2010; Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Tarrant et al., 2017). However, limited or lost contact with grandchildren also is said to impact grandparents' health and well-being (Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Gair, 2017). Extensive

literature identifies that family relationships are important for children and adults, that intergenerational relationships can be crucial in the transmission of family history and cultural knowledge, and that lost family ties can trigger lifelong trauma (Atkinson, 2002; Drew & Silverstein, 2007; Fisher & Hutton-Baas, 2017; Ryan, 2011). Yet some children who are removed from their parents' care continue to be at risk of losing ongoing connections with parents and extended family. Research exploring grandparents' experiences of disrupted or lost contact with grandchildren and grandparents' involvement in decision-making about their grandchildren's well-being after child safety concerns appears to be limited (Gair, 2017; Rigby, Gair, & Thorpe, 2016; Tarrant et al., 2017). As the opening quote and other literature suggests, grandparents can experience similar difficulties to parents in having a genuine voice in formal decision-making about the best interests of children (Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009; Ramsden, 2013; Tarrant et al., 2017).

Findings from an earlier small study identified that some grandparents experienced reduced or denied contact with their grandchildren after reporting their concerns for their grandchildren's safety to statutory child protection services. Other grandparents endured an unpredictable cycle of disrupted and regained contact with grandchildren, and many reported living with a fear that these important relationships would be lost (Gair, 2017; Rigby et al., 2016). The purpose of this article is to share findings from a recent, larger study focused on optimizing grandparents' ongoing relationships with grandchildren. In this article, reflecting diverse contexts, the phrase "after child safety concerns" encompasses situations where families have come to the attention of statutory child protection services and the children are in the formal care of grandparents, through to situations where grandparents are aware of child safety concerns and children are being informally cared for by grandparents or where grandparents are aware of previous or current concerns, they are disconnected from grandchildren who may be in the care of others and they are seeking to be more involved in safeguarding them.

1.1 | Grandparents ongoing involvement in the lives of grandchildren

Extensive literature identifies that maintaining ongoing family relationships is important and that severed relationships can lead to lifelong experiences of grief and loss (Atkinson, 2002; Ehrenberg & Smith, 2003; Kruk, 1995). As noted, mounting literature identifies the role of grandparents as primary carers of their grandchildren often due to difficult family circumstances and living conditions (Backhouse & Graham, 2012; Connor, 2006; Council on the Ageing, 2010; Cox, 2014; Herlofson & Hagestad, 2012; Lonne, Harries, Featherstone, & Gray, 2016). In a study by Backhouse and Graham (2012, p. 309), grandparents described complex, interconnected reasons for their grandchildren being placed in their care ... "with the most frequently cited being their adult child's addiction to drugs and alcohol."

Kinship care is a growing, unique but under-resourced out-of-home care option where children are placed, formally or informally within family networks (Irizarry et al., 2016). A recent child protection report identified that 40% of Australian children in formal relative/kinship placements were placed with grandparents during 2015–2016 (AIHW,

2017). It has been noted that grandparents want to safeguard their grandchildren and they value the carer role, "but this should not obscure their support needs in what usually are very complex family situations" (Tarrant et al., 2017, p. 360). Elsewhere, it has been reported that although the grandparent role may be officially acknowledged, in many countries, a legal standing for grandparents to ensure their continued presence in a grandchild's life is not apparent (Fisher & Hutton-Baas, 2017).

Grandparents' experiences after child safety concerns, or their involvement in decision-making about the best interests of grandchildren, in turn impacting outcomes for children when they exit state care has received limited attention (Tarrant et al., 2017). Research documenting children's perspectives and experiences of maintaining family relationships while in state care is evident (see, e.g., McDowall, 2016), although in-depth exploration regarding children's perspectives on ongoing relationships with grandparents seems less evident.

1.2 | Child protection

In Australia, individual State and Territory Governments are responsible for the statutory protection of vulnerable children. According to the AIHW (2017), during 2015–2016, 162,175 Australian children (30.2 per 1,000) received child protection services that included investigations, care and protection orders, and/or placements in out-of-home care. Reunification is the policy priority for children in out-of-home care, however, for some children, this may not be achieved and permanent care policy options, including adoption, have been considered in several countries including Australia (AIHW, 2017; Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Tarrant et al., 2017).

1.2.1 | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are currently almost 10 times more likely than non-Indigenous children to receive child protection services, and these numbers have continued to increase (AIHW, 2017; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), 2017). Children from geographically remote areas are more likely to be the subject of a substantiation or be in out-of-home care than those from urban centres (AIHW, 2017). It is argued in the recent Family Matters Report that "if we continue to do what we are currently doing in child protection, the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in out-of-home care (OOHC) will at least treble in the next 20 years" (SNAICC, 2017, p. 3). That report called for new national standards to arrest alarming future projections of Indigenous children in care.

Key contributing factors to disproportional numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in care include the legacy of past forced removals of Aboriginal children, known as the Stolen Generation, and intergenerational trauma triggered by severed relationships from family, place, and culture. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families have a higher likelihood of living in the lowest socio-economic areas, they have lower health, well-being, educational and employment outcomes, and their culturally specific child rearing practices may be less understood. Drug and alcohol misuse and family violence

also have been identified as factors in the over-representation of Aboriginal children in child protection services (AIHW, 2017; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997; Ivec, Braithwaite, & Harris, 2012).

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Placement Principle (Child Placement Principle) outlines a preference for Indigenous children to be placed within family, culture, and community in order to support their rights to a strong cultural identity, a sense of belonging, and ongoing access to parents and extended family (Fernandez, 2014; SNAICC, 2017). However, AIHW (2017, p. 53) reports that nationally in 2015–2016, only 66% of Indigenous children were placed with relatives/kin, other Indigenous caregivers, or in Indigenous residential care; whereas others suggest much lower adherence with the Child Placement Principle (McDowall, 2016; SNAICC, 2017).

Kickett-Tucker and Hansen (2017), drawing on the work of Sherwood (1999), acknowledged that damage lingers for Aboriginal families because of past forced separations. However, they argue that Aboriginal families remain influenced by traditional family structures. They emphasize that most Aboriginal people are intimately connected to their family networks, they hold strong values of connection to country and kin, and helping rear the next generation is “everyone’s business” (Kickett-Tucker & Hansen, 2017, p. 208). They identify that kin possess knowledge of family issues, they are experts in local community politics, and they know what is needed to bring about change.

“Closing the gap” strategies that target poverty, early childhood health and education, rebuilding family connections, addressing racism, and reducing the gap in education and employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations are considered pivotal in reducing Indigenous children’s vulnerability to involvement in child protection processes (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017; Fernandez, 2014). It was reported that the latest 3-year action plan (2015–2018) of the National Framework for Protecting Australian Children 2009–2020 will further improve outcomes for children (Council of Australian Governments, 2014). However, rates of Indigenous children receiving child protection services continue to rise (Fernandez, 2014; SNAICC, 2017).

1.2.2 | Child protection practice

It is recognized that child protection work involves workers making stressful, difficult decisions that potentially can have profound outcomes for families (Lonne et al., 2016). A strong underpinning discourse “at the heart of” child protection work is said to be decision-making in the best interests of children, although a consensus on what constitutes the best interests of children seems less apparent (Keddell, 2017; Lonne et al., 2016; Ramsden, 2013, p. 19).

The negative impact on families of being investigated has been identified over time, with researchers documenting feelings of dissatisfaction, anger, fear, shame, devastation, and powerlessness as families become stigmatized, “entrapped,” and vulnerable in investigation cycles and impoverished circumstances (Buckley, 2017, pp. 80–81; Lonne et al., 2016; Thoburn, Lewis, & Shemmings, 1995). Backhouse and Graham (2012, p. 313) revealed that grandparents in their study perceived there was also a “stigma” attached to the grandparent-as-

carer role and that they were viewed as “somehow responsible for what’s gone wrong” within the family.

Laird, Morris, Archard, and Clawson (2017) found that heavy case-loads required social workers to ration their time by engaging family members who were most accessible, when what was required was allocated time to interact with families. After examining case files from a UK local authority for children deemed “at risk,” Laird et al. (2017) observed that although policies supporting extended family involvement had been implemented in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, workers’ interactions with family members often were not aligned with family structures and kin relationships.

As might be expected, risk has emerged as a dominant, defining dimension in decision-making in child protection. However, growing literature identifies the increased assessing of “risk” of harm (Parton, 2017, p. 6), and even the identification of “dangerous” care givers to prevent worst case scenarios for workers, organizations, and children, as problematic (Roets, Roose, de Wilde, & Vanobbergen, 2017, p. 455). Parton reports that a simplistic “logic of precaution” and “pre-empting harm” can potentially lead to increased numbers of children being taken into state care (Parton, 2017, p. 6). Risk averse organizational environments have been identified as negatively influencing case-related decision-making (Lonne et al., 2016). Further, according to some, reliance on detailed risk assessment tools may be “incompatible” with an inclusive family approach (Buckley, 2017, p. 85). Optimizing grandparents’ involvement may be overlooked in such contexts, when in many cases, it might be in the best interests of many children that they were involved.

2 | METHOD

2.1 | Research aims and questions

The research question posed was as follows: What are the ways that the inclusion of grandparents can be optimized in relation to child safety concerns and intervention, out-of-home care, and related services? The study aims were to explore and identify ways to optimize the inclusion of grandparents where there are child safety concerns or children are in out-of-home care/kinship care; to document participants’ narratives, perceptions, and recommendations; and to contribute to current knowledge and practice in partner organizations, social work education, and professional social work. The study received University Human Ethics Committee approval. Given the over-representation of Indigenous children in child protection interventions, and the need to successfully gain Indigenous perspectives in this study, an Aboriginal elder was recruited to advise researchers from the planning and recruitment stages of the study and throughout the project. An Indigenous research assistant was involved in planning, data collection, analysis, and dissemination of the findings.

2.2 | Partners

This project was conceptualized and proceeded as a research partnership. The project grew out of a previous small partnership project with one of the current partners. The three community partners involved in this study were Family Inclusion Network Queensland (Townsville),

Family Inclusion Network Western Australia, and Act for Kids Queensland. These partners all are involved in various ways in supporting families and children "at risk" of child protection intervention. Partners embraced the topic of the research, provided input and guidance on the research question and research processes, and they promoted the research within their organizations, networks, and client groups through flyers and other communications. Individual partner organizations also provided venues, food and refreshments for focus groups, transport to some venues, and they facilitated staff and service users to attend focus groups and interviews, on several occasions supported by students on field placement.

Members of partner organizations contributed to theme conceptualization, consolidation of the findings, and dissemination of results. Partners in this project agreed that the collective voices brought together by this study would inform and improve the work of their organizations for the benefit of families and that findings can inform social work education and future child protection practice. Partners also wanted the project findings to influence legislation and policy across Australian states and territories so that organizational practices would become more receptive to, and inclusive of, the important role that grandparents play in a child/young person's life, and their critical link to family, identity, culture, and belonging.

2.3 | Participants

Participants in this study predominantly were grandparents, although smaller numbers of parents, aunties, foster carers, and workers participated in discussions about optimizing grandparent involvement after child safety concerns. Initially, grandparents were the sole target group, however, feedback from partners was that perspectives from other key stakeholder groups could help illuminate and inform the findings, given limited available research. An amendment to the ethics application was approved to extend the target group.

Participants were invited into the study through flyer distribution to non-government agencies, public flyers, media reporting of the proposed study, and use of network sampling (Creswell, 2014). The final sample ($n = 77$) included participants from Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria. In-depth interviews were undertaken in 2016 (Liamputtong, 2009). In total, 28 individual interviews, three couple interviews, and seven focus group interviews (43 attendees) were undertaken. The sample consisted of 51 grandparents (including four aunties, three of whom identified as Aboriginal and discussed undertaking a grandparent role), six foster carers (nonfamily), 12 parents, and eight workers. The grandparent sample consisted of 46 grandmothers (including four aunties) and five grandfathers. In total, 26 participants in the study identified as Aboriginal Australian and one participant identified as Torres Strait Islander.

2.4 | Data collection and analysis

The majority of 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 utilized the same interview guide. In line with an in-depth interviewing approach, emerging points of interest

expressed during interviews were followed up. Participants gave written consent to participation in interviews and the tape-recording of interviews. One grandmother preferred to document her own responses to the questions and forward them to the research team.

Interview transcripts were read multiple times and analysed using a qualitative thematic data analysis approach (Liamputtong, 2009). Researcher team members worked independently to read and reread interviews and identify common threads and themes. As a next step, university researchers worked together to jointly identify patterns and themes relevant to the overall research question and aims. Preliminary themes were discussed and refined with research partners across several meetings and presented to peers at a sector conference prior to the themes being consolidated.

3 | FINDINGS

Below, specific findings are presented under six related themes. These themes are grandparent relationships and involvement is vital; seeing the problem and taking action to fix it; grandparents felt unheard, sidelined, and powerless; grandparents in the firing line; workers: some good ones, some nasty ones; and feeling like hostages in the system.

3.1 | Grandparent relationships and involvement is vital

Grandparents in this study repeatedly spoke about connections between grandparents and grandchildren as vitally important for preserving intergenerational relationships, maintaining cultural continuity, and helping children stay connected, or reconnect if relationships were disrupted. Many participants spoke specifically about child protection workers not being sufficiently supportive of maintaining relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, whereas some inferred family politics was another factor for workers to be aware of in supporting ongoing relationships:

I think that that the grandparents should be able to have access as much as possible, there shouldn't be any barriers regardless which side of the family the children are being cared for in, ... the relationship ... is important to children. (Interview 1)

Below, one participant exemplified what many raised—the need to learn from past forced removals of Indigenous children:

[Contact] ... must happen, because inevitably, if it doesn't happen there will be terrible loss and bitterness later on and to me ... the classic example of that is the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal people. The pain and the hurt ... thousands of Aboriginal or part-Aboriginal kids felt since they have been grown up as the result of having been removed from parents and lost contact with them has been really, really horrible. (Interview 5)

Another participant identified how not involving grandparents can escalate problems and erode potential trust relationships with child protection services:

The current way that they are doing things is not working. It's let families down, it's let children down and in a lot of instances it's ... made the problem bigger by not involving grandparents, ... the elders and community ... [it's the] controlling perspective of the department that causes community to not have any trust or faith in them. (Interview 31)

Reflecting the points highlighted above, Laird et al. (2017) argued that excluding key family members from involvement in decision-making in child protection can be "profoundly problematic" (p. 1326).

3.2 | Seeing the problem and taking action to fix it

It seemed apparent that most grandparents were knowledgeable and informed about the family context and dynamics, and a number of them described how they would assess the situation and step in when needed. For example, the grandmother below pinpointed domestic violence as contributing to family breakdown and conveyed her opposition to child protection intervention at the time.

This is [about] domestic violence ... and my daughter can leave him or he can piss off. But you're not taking my grandchildren (Focus Group 4)

Another participant identified grandparents' crucial role in ensuring grandchildren's safety and helping find solutions, and importantly, that grandchildren knew it was their role:

The grandparents ... in the majority of cases are the safety net and the kids generally know that that's their safety net. So unless they [grandparents] are included in everything, you are eroding the child's sense of safety. ... grandma or grandpa come in and fix up the pieces. (Interview 18)

Forgiving adult children and helping them address their problems were seen as part of the solution:

She's still my daughter. While she was on drugs, and she wouldn't listen or think, I wiped my hands ... But when she went into rehab, I said I'm going to support her. (Focus Group 1)

Many grandparents identified family violence and parental drug and alcohol use as creating an unsafe environment for children. Although some grandparents were witness to and even subject to abuse from parents, they still sought to protect and "be there" for the grandchildren and offer support to adult children. Sandberg (2016) acknowledged that grandparents were a valuable source of support, especially in situations involving family violence.

3.3 | Grandparents felt unheard, sidelined, and powerless

Many grandparents talked about feeling disbelieved, powerless, and even irrelevant after taking steps to manage unsafe, difficult family

situations and alert child protection workers, as exemplified in these two quotes below:

The other nan rang me and the mum and the aunty, oh, [name] you need to do something because we think that baby ... is being sexually abused. Well, I lost the plot then and I said, "Get her, take her to the nearest hospital, even ring the police, do whatever you have to do, get her out of that house. She'll allow you to go but she won't allow me to," and when I rung DCP, they said you can't make allegations like that, you need evidence. (Focus Group 2)

I ended up in a meeting with the manager and the practice manager ... they said, because I was a grandparent they couldn't talk to me. (Interview 2)

Another grandparent felt that her rights to maintain a close relationship with her grandchildren, and the children's rights to maintain their connection with her, were not supported by workers. She feared retribution and exclusion by the children's mother after reunification was foreshadowed:

When they reunify, that will be it for me. She will not forgive me and it is not that I have done anything to her, ... I have taken them to her twice every week ... [but] you either have a valuable role or you don't exist ... Child Protection ... said if she decides to move and move with the children that's her right (Interview 3)

As illustrated above, some grandparents felt powerless and feared retribution from parents who could deny contact with grandchildren to punish them (Agllias, 2013).

3.4 | Grandparents in the firing line

In the themes above, grandparents identified parental drug use, family violence, perceived child safety concerns, and a desire to safeguard grandchildren's health and well-being as prompting their intervention. Here, those themes are extended as grandparents locate themselves as targets, some detailing their fears and experiences of family violence and others identifying anger directed at them for supporting grandchildren, with minimal worker support or recognition for their complex and precarious role:

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)

I have had serious death threats and I said [to workers], I have already been assaulted by the mother, ... for helping the kids be safe. (Interview 2)

In contrast to the above situations, this grandmother reported anger directed against her from Department workers because of her action to get medical attention for her grandchild:

It was actually me that took him to a doctor and had him diagnosed, the department was furious about it. They were so angry that I had taken this child up and had him seen by a professional. (Interview 9)

3.5 | Workers: some good ones, some nasty ones

Many participants were dissatisfied with their interactions with child protection workers. Although several participants had contact with workers whom they deemed satisfactory, others felt that grandparents (and parents) were disrespected, mistrusted, judged, and blamed rather than being viewed as legitimate stakeholders who wanted support, accurate information, and an ongoing connection with grandchildren:

Well, there has probably been a couple of, like the support workers that I have dealt with, haven't been too bad that have done access [visits], there has been a couple, but there has been really, really nasty ones. (Focus Group 7)

And how would I describe my relationship with Child Protection ... "fraught with stereotypes. Child protection by stereotype!" This is what we get. It frightens me ... (Interview 3)

And that was then a very long struggle for me to have any sort of contact with those [grand] children at all ... The treatment of me was really appalling, because they lie, they lie about how they do things, ... they wouldn't give me any information, they would only give information to my daughter about how the investigation ... was going, and ... they didn't tell me that I could appeal, that I had 14 days to appeal, they didn't tell me that (Focus Group 1)

Similarly, this grandparent identified feeling mistrusted and even judged regarding intergenerational parenting:

I don't consider myself a bad parent, neither do I consider myself to be a bad grandparent, ... I worked as a teacher for 40 odd years and have done lots of odds and ends with kids, so, I feel as though I am reasonably trustworthy, but they [workers] don't. (Interview 16)

The participant below pinpointed the need for increased worker reflection on their communication style with families:

The Department really needs to assess how they are [coming across] before they sit there and expect other people to be more accepting of them and being more open and honest with them. (Interview 4)

Backhouse and Graham (2012, p. 313) reported that some grandparents felt they were held responsible for what went wrong in their adult children's lives. Reflecting this sentiment, several participants, in various ways, identified feeling that workers stereotyped

grandparents and were quick to contemplate intergenerational parenting inadequacies or abuse without evidence.

3.6 | Feeling like hostages in the system

Extending several of the above themes, some grandparents identified feeling at the mercy of a powerful, controlling system, with minimal perceived accountability to families.

This grandfather had the care of his granddaughters when they were suddenly removed:

It is the worst organisation I have ever come across ... and I worked with [community-based organisation] ... you know ... but DCP or what they call themselves ... they are the worst organisation, and they just ... get away with it. (Interview 16)

This grandmother reported feeling the controlling influence of workers regarding precious contact with grandchildren:

I had unsupervised visits, and then the next week before I saw my grandchildren they sent out this paper for me to sign it, and if I didn't sign it, that I would not see my grandchildren on that afternoon. And I said no, I'm not going to sign it. And then I thought no, I will sign it, because I have to see my grandchildren. I'm not allowed to have a phone, I'm not allowed to have an iPad tablet, I'm not allowed to have a camera. The only time I'm allowed to take a photo is when the kids are getting in the car. (Focus Group 1)

Taking a broader perspective, this grandparent suggested that determining contact between grandparents and grandchildren went beyond individual workers—to the system and the prevailing discourse regarding grandparent involvement:

[It] is not the worker's fault. It's the system—Grandparents don't matter. (Interview 23)

In line with sentiments evident above, findings from Tarrant et al. (2017, p. 359) identify grandparents felt “steamrollered along” in their dealings with child protection.

4 | DISCUSSION

Grandparents are increasingly taking on the primary care role for grandchildren. Although reunification remains central in child protection policy and practice, the reality is that some children will remain in long-term care. It is acknowledged that extended periods of time in care can lead to loss of ongoing family connections, loss of a sense of identity and culture, and difficulties in transitioning out of care back into family networks (Fernandez & Lee, 2013; McDowall, 2016).

What seems important to reiterate from these findings is that most grandparents yearned to “be there” for grandchildren, to safeguard them, and act as an enduring conduit between the grandchildren and the family network. Most grandparents had existing relationships with their grandchildren and wanted to be considered for kinship care

placements, or they currently or previously had grandchildren in their care. At the very least, they wanted some involvement in decision-making in the best interests of their grandchildren. They reported having valuable knowledge about family history and contextual vulnerabilities. However, many perceived they were not viewed as a valuable resource and that in child protection processes, grandparent–grandchild relationships did not really matter. Implications of excluding grandparents include the strong possibility that decisions made about the best interests of children may be ill-informed, and some important relationships between children and their extended family may become tenuous or lost, in turn impacting outcomes for children, including when they exit care.

Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, and McNamara (2013, p. 109) identified that “the inescapable dilemma for those who experience abuse in their communities, is whether the safety offered by the intervention of mainstream services outweighs the refuge from racism afforded by remaining silent.” A similar reticence appeared evident in interviews with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participants in this study, regarding grandparents approaching child protection services for early intervention to safeguard grandchildren. Factors inhibiting disclosures about family problems appeared to include mistrust, avoidance of shame, and a sense of fear and powerlessness surrounding anticipated outcomes of any formal intervention (Herring et al., 2013).

The issue of trust was raised by many grandparents in different ways. Aboriginal grandmothers inferred that because of historical legacies, contacting “the Department” was seen as a last resort. Increased recognition may be needed that many Aboriginal grandparents may have been removed as children or may have witnessed other family members' removals, and contact with the Department had the potential to retraumatize them. As such, family circumstances may be significantly unsafe before some Aboriginal children come to the attention of child protection services. In turn, risks may seem too high to leave children in the presenting circumstances while consulting with extended family members. As a result, “fast-tracking” children into care may be deemed appropriate but in reality may be ill-advised (Tarrant et al., 2017, p. 362).

Featherstone, Morris, and White (2014, p. 1739) noted a “perfect storm” in the UK of political conservatism, early intervention and a risk averse environment that lead to increased interventions. Additional factors, including family violence, poverty, and deep mistrust, particularly for Aboriginal families and communities, may point to a similar perfect storm facilitating unabated child removals in Australia. Although a 2014 report of the National Framework for Protecting Australian Children 2009–2020 (Council of Australian Governments, 2014) identified strategies that would result in better outcomes for children, “the trajectory for Aboriginal children is clear” (SNAICC, 2017, p. 12).

Laird et al. (2017) and others identify that very busy social workers appear to ration their time by focusing on family members who are most accessible, when what is required is time allocated to build relationships, so extended families might be willing to trust workers enough to reveal family circumstances earlier and then work collaboratively with workers to safeguard children (Lonne et al., 2016; Lonne, Harries, & Lantz, 2013). Although it has been identified that grandparents, particularly in countries with minority Indigenous

populations, are increasingly being included in child protection matters (Lonne et al., 2016), narratives from almost all participants in this study do not reflect experiences of meaningful inclusion in child protection processes.

Grandparents in this study repeatedly argued that maintaining relationships between grandparents and grandchildren was vital for grandchildren's well-being. They believed that their knowledge of the children, the cultural context, and the family circumstances was essential to decision-making in the best interests of children. Although a range of initiatives are emerging nationally and internationally to engage families in decision-making, including grandparents, specific legal standing around grandchildren's rights to have an ongoing relationship with grandparents may be a required next step (Fisher & Hutton-Baas, 2017). As set out in the Child Placement Principle, children have rights to maintain connections to family and culture, and families need to be involved in decision-making. Partners in this study were united in recommending changed practice across Australian states and territories so organizational processes are more receptive to, and inclusive of, grandparents.

The importance of ongoing emotional, financial, and practical support for grandparents was another key point raised by participants in this study, inferring that Child Protection Departments have not finished their job once they had placed children with grandparents. Rather, there were many complex issues to be addressed including family violence, parental addictions, children's behaviour, and financial and health challenges for ageing grandparents. Further, participants in this study reported unprofessional, inappropriate, and unsupportive worker behaviour and it would seem evident and necessary that workers who are contributing to, or overseeing controlling and dismissive organizational practices, need to be held to account.

Participants in this study urged child protection workers to work genuinely, respectfully, and collaboratively with families and to include grandparents for better outcomes for children. As succinctly put by this participant:

[w]ork with the family not against them, ... it is a battle between the family and the child protection authorities, and it shouldn't be. (Interview 1)

The limitations of this study include that, given the focus was on optimizing an ongoing connection with grandchildren after child safety concerns, participants who were satisfied with their level of involvement may not have come forward to participate in the study.

5 | CONCLUSION

The primary aim of the study reported here was to explore and identify ways to optimize the inclusion of grandparents after child safety concerns including when children are in out-of-home and kinship care. What seems evident is that grandparents in this study wanted to be valued by practitioners as informed, rightful experts in the lives of their grandchildren, yet they often felt undervalued and overlooked. Recommended here is increased facilitation of grandparent involvement, for more inclusive decision-making in child protection practice in the best interests of children. Future research capturing children's

views about maintaining relationships with grandparents may be useful, whereas research further exploring workers' perceptions regarding inclusive decision-making in the best interests of children seems warranted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the time, genuineness, interest, and involvement of all participants and partner organizations and thank Bindal elder Mrs. Dorothy Savage for her guidance. This study was funded by James Cook University, Australia.

ENDNOTES

¹ Statutory child protection services across Australian states and territories operate under different names. Commonly, participants referred to these services as "the Department."

ORCID

Susan Gair  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2139-0269>

REFERENCES

- Agllias, K. (2013). The gendered experience of family estrangement in later life. *Affilia*, 28(3), 309–321.
- Atkinson, J. (2002). *Trauma trails*. Recreating song lines. The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia: Spinifex Press, Melbourne.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2017). *Child Protection Australia 2015–2016* (Child Welfare Series no. 66. Author. Canberra: AIHW.
- Backhouse, J., & Graham, A. (2012). Grandparents raising grandchildren: Negotiating the complexities of role-identity conflict. *Child and Family Social Work*, 17, 306–315.
- Boetto, H. (2010). Kinship care: A review of issues. *Family Matters*, 85, 59–67.
- Buckley, H. (2017). Service users as receivers of risk-dominated practice. In M. Connolly (Ed.), *Beyond the risk paradigm in Child Protection* (pp. 77–90). London, United Kingdom: Palgrave.
- Connor, S. (2006). Grandparents raising grandchildren: Formation, disruption and intergenerational transmission of attachment. *Australian Social Work*, 59, 172–184.
- Council of Australian Governments (2014). Protecting children is everyone's business: National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020. Annual Report 2012–2013. Author, Canberra.
- Council on the Ageing (2010). Listening to grandparents. Report of the NSW Grandparenting Forum. NSW Ministerial Advisory Committee on Ageing, August.
- Cox, C. (2014). Personal and community empowerment for grandparent caregivers. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 17, 162–174.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods*. California: Sage.
- Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (2017). Closing the gap Prime Minister's report 2017. Author, Canberra.
- Drew, L., & Silverstein, M. (2007). Grandparents' psychological wellbeing after loss of contact with their grandchildren. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 21, 372–379.
- Ehrenberg, M., & Smith, T. (2003). Grandmother-grandchild contacts before and after adult daughter's divorce. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 39, 27–43.
- Featherstone, B., Morris, K., & White, S. (2014). A marriage made in hell: Early intervention meets child protection. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44, 1735–1749.
- Fernandez, E. (2014). Child protection and vulnerable families. Trends and issues in the Australian context. *Social Sciences*, 3, 785–808.
- Fernandez, E., & Lee, J.-S. (2013). Accomplishing family reunification for children in care: An Australian study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 35, 1374–1384.
- Fisher, R., & Hutton-Baas, T. (2017). Supporting grandparent/grandchild contact under the Care of Children Act 2004: Assessment and a call for change. *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work*, 29(3), 30–41.
- Gair, S. (2017). Missing grandchildren: Grandparents' lost contact and implications for social work. *Australian Social Work*, 70, 263–275.
- Herlofson, K., & Hagestad, G. (2012). Transformations in the role of grandparents across welfare states. In S. Arber, & V. Timonen (Eds.), *Contemporary grandparenting* (pp. 27–49). Great Britain: Policy Press.
- Herring, S., Spangaro, J., Lauw, M., & McNamara, L. (2013). The intersection of trauma, racism, and cultural competence in effective work with Aboriginal people: Waiting for trust. *Australian Social Work*, 66, 104–117.
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997). *Bringing them home. Report of the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families*. Sydney: HREOC.
- Irizarry, C., Miller, K., & Bowden, M. (2016). Kinship care: Child safety or easy option? Staff and carers' perspectives. *Journal of Family Social Work*, 19, 199–219.
- Ivec, M., Braithwaite, V., & Harris, N. (2012). 'Resetting the relationship' in Indigenous child protection: Public hope and private reality. *Law & Policy*, 34, 80–103.
- Keddell, E. (2017). Interpreting children's best interests: Needs, attachment and decision-making. *Journal of Social Work*, 17, 324–342.
- Kemp, S., Marcenko, M., Hoagwood, K., & Vesneski, W. (2009). Engaging parents in child welfare services: Bridging family needs and child welfare mandates. *Child Welfare*, 88, 101–126.
- Kickett-Tucker, C., & Hansen, J. (2017). Ngalang Moort: Family as the building block of community development. In C. Kickett-Tucker, D. Bessarab, J. Coffin, & M. Wright (Eds.), *Mia Mia Aboriginal community development* (pp. 199–216). United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Kruk, E. (1995). Grandparent-grandchild contact loss: Findings from a study of 'grandparents' rights' members. *Canadian Journal of Ageing*, 14, 737–754.
- Laird, S., Morris, K., Archard, P., & Clawson, R. (2017). Working with the whole family: What case files tell us about social work practices. *Child and Family Social Work*, 22, 1322–1329.
- Liamputtong, P. (2009). *Qualitative research methods* (3rd ed.). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Lonne, B., Harries, M., Featherstone, B., & Gray, M. (2016). *Working ethically in child protection*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Lonne, B., Harries, M., & Lantz, S. (2013). Workforce development: A pathway to reforming child protection systems in Australia. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43, 1630–1648.
- McDowall, J. (2016). Connection to culture by Indigenous children and young people in out-of-home care in Australia. *Communities, Children and Families Australia*, 10, 5–26.
- Parton, N. (2017). Concerns about risk as a major driver of professional practice. In M. Connolly (Ed.), *Beyond the risk paradigm in Child Protection* (pp. 3–14). London, United Kingdom: Palgrave.
- Ramsden, K. (2013). Children's perspectives on their own wellbeing: 'I don't think they can hear us'. *Developing Practice*, 36, (Spring), 18–30.
- Rigby, E., Gair, S., & Thorpe, R. (2016). Surviving intervention: Grandparents' struggle to maintain contact with grandchildren. *Children Australia*, 41(2), 98–105.
- Roets, G., Roose, R., de Wilde, L., & Vanobbergen, B. (2017). Framing the 'child at risk' in social work reports: truth-telling or storytelling. *Journal of Social Work*, 17, 453–469.
- Ryan, F. (2011). Kanyininpa (Holding): A way of nurturing children in Aboriginal Australia. *Australian Social Work*, 64, 183–197.

- Sandberg, L. (2016). Being there for my grandchild—Grandparents' responses to their grandchildren's exposure to domestic violence. *Child and Family Social Work, 21*, 136–145.
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (2017). The family matters report. Melbourne: Author.
- Sherwood, J. (1999). What is community development? *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal, 23*, 7–8.
- Tarrant, A., Featherstone, B., O'Dell, L., & Fraser, C. (2017). 'You try to keep a brave face but inside you are in bits': Grandparent experiences of engaging with professionals in children's services. *Qualitative Social Work, 16*, 351–366.

- Thoburn, J., Lewis, A., & Shemmings, D. (1995). *Paternalism or partnership? Family involvement in the child protection process*. London: HMSO.

How to cite this article: Gair S, Zuchowski I, Munns L, Thorpe R, Henderson D. Grandparents matter: Optimizing grandparents' involvement after child safety concerns. *Child & Family Social Work*. 2018;1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12464>