

The Role of Grandparents in Divorced and Separated Families

Virpi Timonen,
Martha Doyle and
Ciara O'Dwyer

With Contributions from Elena Moore¹

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School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin

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The views expressed are the authors' and do not necessarily
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1 Chapter Three.

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Foreward



In the context of the changes in Irish family life over the last number of years, we are all acutely conscious of the devastating impact of relationship and marital breakdown. This phenomenon impacts not only on the individuals experiencing the breakdown but on their extended family. Where there are children involved, the network of relationships affected by the breakdown and subsequent separation extends to the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren.

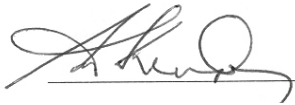
This study, which was funded under the Family Support Agency's annual Call for Research, provides unique and ground breaking insights into the diversity and complexity of the impact of breakdown and separation on grandparent/grandchild dynamics. The exploration of these dynamics as detailed in the report, reveals a rich tapestry of experiences.

We can take heart from some of the issues which the study highlights. In particular, the central role played by both paternal as well as maternal grandparents surveyed and the indications that a significant proportion of grandparents surveyed who provided extensive supports to their adult child, reported that this relationship had improved. This does not detract from the anguish which these grandparents obviously experienced when faced with the consequences of their adult child's relationship breakdown and the emotional and practical supports required to help their children and grandchildren. I would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to all of those who took part in this study and shared their experience with the researchers.

This report helps to articulate the importance of grandparents in supporting their families, particularly in times of crisis. This will

no doubt contribute to the thinking of policy makers and service providers involved in assisting couples separating, both in terms of potential supports available to separating couples with children, as well as implications for supporting the grandparents themselves.

Finally I would like to express my thanks, and that of the Family Support Agency, to Dr Timonen and her team for the significant effort and energy in undertaking this fascinating study. It represents a truly insightful exploration of a heretofore uncharted part of the landscape of divorced and separated families in Ireland.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Micheal O'Kennedy', written over a horizontal line.

Micheal O'Kennedy, S.C
Chairperson
Family Support Agency

Authors' Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Background

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

Aims and Objectives

The specific objectives of the study were as follows:

- To provide an overview of the Irish and international literature on grandparents of divorced families.
- To explore the experiences of grandparents following their children's divorce/separation, with a specific focus on how the relationship with their children and grandchildren has changed.
- To characterise the relationships of grandparents and their grandchildren following divorce/separation.
- To explore whether, in the Irish context, the relationships of paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents with their grandchildren differ following divorce/separation.
- To scope the range of inputs (social, personal, economic, practical and other) that grandparents make into the management of their children's and grandchildren's lives following relationship breakdown.
- To identify the challenges and rewards (and possible support needs) for grandparents who become more heavily involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following divorce/separation.
- To explore the sentiments of grandparents who have less contact with their grandchildren than they would like to following divorce/separation.

- To characterise policies that could assist both grandparents who are heavily involved in supporting post-divorce families and grandchildren in particular, and those who are seeking more extensive contact with their grandchildren.

Research Methods

Qualitative interviews were deemed the most suitable research method to gain an in-depth understanding of extended family relationships following divorce or separation. Table 1 describes the sample by lineage and gender.

Table 1: Sample characteristics: Gender and lineage

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

Key Findings

Centrality of grandparents' supportive roles

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

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

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

Increased closeness of relationships with adult children

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

Limits of the Mediating Influence of the Middle Generation

In line with the findings from previous international studies, our research also found that the 'middle' generation exercises an important (but not an all-important) 'mediating' influence on grandparent-grandchild relationships. Unfortunately, in some cases this influence was very detrimental to the maintenance of contact; in situations where acrimony between the (separated or divorced) parents continued, the impact on other relationships, including the grandparent-grandchild relationships, was negative and in extreme cases led to complete absence of contact.

However, our study also unearthed several cases where the grandparental generation had, successfully, made considerable efforts to maintain relationships across families in the face of ongoing conflict or complete breakdown in communication between the divorced or

separated parents. In these scenarios, grandparents (and grandmothers in particular) came to adopt a crucial ‘ex-kin-keeper’ role, acting as a conciliatory and stabilising force in their grandchildren’s lives. In some cases, grandparents had even managed to create an amicable ongoing relationship with the former partner of their son or daughter, following a fractious relationship breakdown in the middle generation; in this sense, grandparents could act as ‘peacemakers’ or ‘bridge-builders’, and usually the main motivation for such reconciliatory and fence-mending efforts was the wellbeing of and contact with their grandchildren.

Grandparents as a stabilising force in their grandchildren’s lives

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

The trauma of inadequate contact with grandchildren

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

While our study indicates that paternal grandparents experience greater difficulties in securing an adequate level of contact with their grandchildren, in many other respects and in several family contexts they were not significantly different from maternal grandparents. Indeed, our sample contained paternal grandparents who had become very closely involved in their children’s and grandchildren’s lives following the breakdown of the marital and (especially) non-marital

relationships of their sons. This finding goes against the supposed matrilineal advantage in grandparental involvement and furthermore constitutes evidence that paternal grandparents can also become heavily involved after the breakdown of *non-marital* relationships. None of this, of course, detracts from the suffering of grandparents who have experienced a drastic reduction in, or even loss of, their contact with grandchildren.

Adverse impacts of separation in the middle generation sustained by grandparents

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

Informal and formal supports used by grandparents

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

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

The impression that 'the interest of the grandchild(ren)' were often not best served by the legal processes associated with divorce and

separation, guardianship and access, was widely held among our sample, and understandably this impression was most common and strongest among grandparents who had had difficulties in securing (adequate) access to their grandchildren. At the opposite end of the involvement spectrum, the custodial grandparents interviewed were in some cases also in need of greater support and advice.

Recommendations

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

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

The study gives grounds for arguing that supporting grandparents is a highly effective means of supporting entire families undergoing divorce or separation. As our findings illustrate, the help, care

and support that grandparents provide to the younger generations, in some cases acting as bridges across the formally dissolved family lines, is frequently the lynchpin to successful transitions to life after divorce or separation both for their adult children and grandchildren. We therefore conclude that supporting grandparents is important because it translates into supporting all generations implicated in divorce and separation, and that the current paucity of formal supports for grandparents in Ireland must now be addressed.

1. Introduction and Background

1.1 Introduction

In comparison with most other Western countries, Ireland has low rates of divorce and separation. Nonetheless, patterns of partnership formation and dissolution in Ireland have changed significantly in the past two decades. The total number of people who have experienced marriage breakdown increased from 40,000 to just under 200,000² in the two decades between 1986 and 2006 (Fahey and Field, 2008). The context in which children are born and raised is also evolving. Cohabiting couples constituted 11.6 per cent of all couples in 2006 in contrast to 3.9 per cent in 1996. Almost a third (32.8 per cent or 40,000) of these couples had children aged 15 years or under in 2006. The percentage share of lone-parent families has risen from 7.2 per cent of all families in 1981 to 21.3 per cent in 2006 (Fahey and Field, 2008). In 2006, 183,744 children under 18 years of age lived with a lone parent or guardian (Census, 2006). This amounted to 17.8% of all children living in the country. Separated or divorced parents constitute approximately 30% of lone parent families. By applying the known percentage of lone parent families due to separation or divorce to the known number of children living in lone parent families, it can be estimated that approximately 55,000 children in Ireland are living with divorced or separated parents. These figures indicate that the number of 'non-traditional' family units in Ireland has increased, but tell us little about the social changes that have occurred within family networks as a result.

Despite the significant changes in family patterns there has been relatively little research on the effect of both divorce and separation on nuclear and extended families in Ireland. In particular, there is a dearth of knowledge on inter-generational relationships (the extent and type of contact between grandparents, grandchildren and the divorced or separated parents in the 'middle' generation) in the aftermath of relationship breakdown. We also have only very limited

2 18 per cent of these are non-Irish nationals.

understanding of how inter-generational relationships between the 'grandparental' and 'parental' generation are affected by divorce and separation. The impact of divorce or separation on the grandparent-grandchild relationship has also received little empirical attention in the Irish context. Many questions arise in relation (grand)parents' role in situations where relationship breakdown occurs. Do grandparents provide additional support to their offspring (adult children) following relationship breakdown and do they do so willingly? How do grandparents' relationships with their adult children mediate their relationship with grandchildren? Do grandparents find themselves taking on more responsibilities for their grandchildren post divorce/separation, or, conversely, experience a reduction in the amount of contact they have with their grandchildren? What role do policies and professionals play in supporting grandparents experiencing the reverberations of their adult children's divorce or separation? This report, which presents the findings of the first study examining the role of grandparents in divorced and separated families in Ireland, aims to go some way towards addressing these and other important, hitherto unanswered, questions.

1.2 Background to the Study

Unfortunately far too often the contributions of older people within wider society are overlooked due to a disproportionate emphasis on older people as recipients of help and support. Insufficient attention is given to the fact that care and support is often reciprocated between the generations, or indeed the fact that some forms of support (financial) tend to flow predominantly from older to younger generations (Hoff 2007). At different stages in the life course and at times of crisis in particular, the quantity and direction of transfers (time, money, care and other forms of support) can shift between generations. An exploration of the help provided by grandparents to their adult children and grandchildren in the wake of divorce or separation in the 'middle' generation provides an opportunity to unearth some of the often neglected contributions that the oldest generation makes to younger family members.

We can surmise from international research that the percentage of grandchildren who reach adulthood with several grandparents still alive has increased substantially in the last century (thanks to increased life expectancies). While decreases in family size may mean that grandparents have fewer grandchildren, increases in longevity mean that grandparenthood is likely to last for several decades for most grandparents. Membership of three (or even four) generational families is therefore likely to last longer now than has been previously the case. As Lowenstein (1999:398) suggests:

the shape of families is shifting from horizontal to vertical, where the size of generations is becoming smaller but the number of living generations is increasing.

Surprisingly little data is systematically collected about grandparents and the role they play in Irish families. The Central Statistics Office does not collect information on the number of grandparents, their age, gender or location, and for this reason it is not possible to calculate basic figures such as the average age of grandparents in Ireland, let alone more complex indicators such as the frequency of contact they have with their grandchildren. SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement) Ireland has started to collect some information on grandparenting within the 55+ population in Ireland, including the extent of childcare provided.³ However, the results of these questions have not yet been made publicly available. The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) will start collecting extensive data on inter-generational relationships and transfers in September 2009, thus providing, for the first time, a comprehensive, nationally representative picture of grandparents in Ireland.⁴

In the absence of nationally representative statistics on grandparents at present it is difficult to make any substantive claims about their role or prominence in Irish society. We can, however, look at previous research and attempt to create a picture of family structures

3 See http://www.share-project.org/t3/share/new_sites/Eragebogen/ma-Gener.pdf for an overview of the questions asked of grandparenting and <http://geary.ucd.ie/share/index.php> for more information on the study in Ireland.

4 For further information, see www.tilda.tcd.ie.

and household arrangements and conjecture on the proximity of older people to family members (albeit these older people may not necessarily be grandparents). In the Health and Social Services for older people (HeSSOP)⁵ survey completed by Garavan et al (2001) just under a third of respondents lived in a three-generation family household. Fahey and Murray's (1994) analysis of 909 people aged 65 years or more carried out in 1993 found that three-generation households accounted for seven per cent of their sample. The majority of participants in their survey had regular contact and lived within a very short distance of children or relatives. Eighty-two per cent lived within five miles of their nearest child or relative and 71 per cent had children living within a distance of five miles. Similarly, research conducted by Treacy et al. (2004)⁶ found that the majority (89 per cent) of participants had regular verbal interaction with relatives and at least weekly contact with their children. The skilled and semi-skilled/unskilled had significantly higher numbers of children living locally, and urban dwellers had more children living locally than rural dwellers. A little more than one-third of women and a little less than one-third of men had daily visits to or from relatives. Seventy-four per cent of men and 79 per cent of women had weekly face-face-contact with relatives. The majority of Lundström's (2001) sample of 58 grandparents lived within ten miles of their grandchildren and on average saw them at least once a week (although it is not possible to generalise from this small non-probability sample). This limited data illustrates the extensive gaps in the information on grandparents in Ireland.

It is likely that grandparents make an important contribution to childcare provision in Ireland. While not identifying the relationship of the caregiver to the care recipient, the Quarterly National House-

5 The sample was identified from the electoral register, 937 people completed the interview, with a response rate of 67 per cent. Nine percent of the sample acted as proxy interviewees – 57 per cent of whom were a son or daughter, 30 per cent spouses. The sample studied represented approximately 1.1 per cent of older people in the WHB and 0.32per cent of older people in the ERHA.

6 Six hundred and eighty three people aged 65 years and over participated in the survey achieving a response rate of 78per cent. The researchers claim that the sample was largely representative of the total population of older people. However, it contained smaller proportions of women in the 75-79 year group and the 85+ group than are found in the population; single men were also slightly under-represented.

hold Survey found that in 2005, unpaid relatives (9.7%) were the main form of non-parental informal childcare used by families with primary school-going children and also provided childcare to 11.5 % of families with pre-school children (CSO, 2005). Lundström (2001), who carried out a small-scale study with a purposive sample of 58 Irish grandparents found that many of her respondents cared for their grandchildren occasionally, for instance when parents went on holidays or during the grandchildren's school holidays.

The role that Irish grandparents play in a time of family crisis and relationship breakdown in the intermediary (or 'middle') generation has been uncharted territory in the Irish context until this study. The international research summarised in Chapter Two suggests that while some grandparents find themselves taking on more responsibility for their grandchildren, others experience a reduction in the amount of contact they have with their grandchildren. The literature suggests that in instances where relationships between the adult generations remain intact or at least functional, grandparents have the potential to act as an important resource within the post separation/divorce family. They can assist the parental generation by providing economic assistance or informal childcare and the youngest (grandchild) generation by acting as a buffer against the emotional distress which may accompany parental separation. The provision of this assistance comes with challenges; for instance, grandparents are often faced with the contradictory norms of 'non-interference' and 'obligation'. In addition, extensive caregiving can have negative consequences on the health and well-being of grandparents.

The existing literature examining other country contexts also indicates that for a small subset of grandparents, separation or divorce in the intermediary generation can result in a deterioration of relationships between the generations. In some cases contact with grandchildren can be completely terminated, usually due to unwillingness of the custodial parent to allow access. As outlined in Chapter Three, grandparents in Ireland have no automatic legal rights to see their grandchildren in the case of a parental divorce or family dispute.

While the Children Act (1997) gives relatives the right to apply for access to a child, this does not automatically give them the right of access. Due to this, it is likely that some Irish grandparents experience difficulties in seeing their grandchildren (and indeed subsequent chapters of this report describe such cases in detail). Lundström (2001) has pointed out that paternal grandparents can lose contact with their grandchildren by default if their son is not granted custody after a marriage breakdown, or if his visiting/access rights are very limited. Respondents in her study felt that the supports and policies available in Ireland were inadequate. Many wished to be able to avail of mediation and counselling, while others were unaware of their rights in relation to access, custody and social welfare entitlements. Lundström pointed out that while the State provides free mediation services to families experiencing divorce or separation, these services are primarily directed at the immediate nuclear family. Such findings suggest that Irish family policy pays insufficient attention to the impact of divorce/separation on the grandparent/grandchild relationship and fails to recognise the impact of divorce or separation in the intermediary generation on grandparents. In short, grandparents are a forgotten and hidden population in the Irish family law and policy system. From these gaps in our knowledge and apparent deficiencies in policy arises need for further exploration of the roles performed by grandparents in divorced and separated families and the challenges they experience when supporting their children and grandchildren.

1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The overall aim of the research was to add to the body of literature on an under-researched area, both in Ireland and internationally. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- To provide an overview of the Irish and international literature on grandparents of divorced families.
- To explore the experiences of grandparents following their children's divorce/separation, with a specific focus on how the relationship with their children and grandchildren has changed.

- To characterise the relationships of grandparents and their grandchildren following divorce/separation.
- To explore whether, in the Irish context, the relationships of paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents with their grandchildren differ following divorce/separation
- To scope the range of inputs (social, personal, economic, practical and other) that grandparents make into the management of their children's and grandchildren's lives following relationship breakdown.
- To identify the challenges and rewards (and possible support needs) for grandparents who become more heavily involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following divorce/separation.
- To explore the sentiments of grandparents who have less contact with their grandchildren than they would like to following divorce/separation.
- To characterise policies that could assist both grandparents who are heavily involved in supporting post-divorce families and grandchildren in particular, and those who are seeking more extensive contact with their grandchildren.

1.4 Outline of Report Structure

Chapter Two presents a review of international literature on the role of grandparents in general and their role in divorced and separated families. It outlines the different 'styles' ascribed to grandparents and factors found to influence the strength of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Exploring the literature on grandparents from the US and UK, it outlines the findings of various studies on the contributions of grandparents in divorced and separated family. Chapter Three traces the development of family legislation and legal provisions in Ireland. It outlines how much of the law concerning the formation and change of family relationships has been designed around the importance of the 'traditional nuclear family'. This chapter also examines what effect divorce law can have upon the breakdown of the relationships that exist outside of the nuclear family and the law as it relates to the involvement of grandparents in the post-divorce or

post-separation family. The methodology used to carry out the study is outlined in Chapter Four. The research findings are presented in Chapters 5-7. These three core chapters are ordered in accordance with the key relationships outlined by grandparents and the public-private sphere within which they experienced their son's or daughter's relationship breakdown so that there is a progression from examining the relationships between adults involved in the process, to analysis of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren, and finally the report zones in on the personal experiences of the grandparents and the impact of the process on them, contextualised within the Irish legal and policy system. Chapter Five therefore outlines the impact of relationship breakdown on the intergenerational relationships between adults i.e. primarily the grandparents we interviewed and their adult children (although other relationships with adults that our respondents deemed important are also discussed); Chapter Six discusses the impact of divorce and separation on the grandparent-grandchild relationship (from the perspective of the grandparents) i.e. examines the relationships between the youngest and oldest generations affected; and Chapter Seven focuses on how the respondents themselves were affected by the occurrence and reverberations of their adult child's divorce or separation, and presents the findings pertaining to grandparents' experiences of the legal and policy context in which these experiences took place. The conclusions and implications of the study are outlined in Chapter Eight.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical background to our study by reviewing the academic literature on the role of grandparents in divorced and separated families. The chapter begins with a brief discussion on the wider literature on the role of grandparents and significance of grandparenthood. Readers ought to bear in mind that much of the literature referred to in this chapter comes from the United States and the United Kingdom, contexts where population ageing is more advanced and divorce has been possible and prevalent for considerably longer than in Ireland.

2.2 Literature on Grandparenthood

1.1.1 Introduction

Before embarking on an in-depth discussion of the international literature on grandparents in divorced or separated families, it is useful to first consider aspects of the broader literature in the area of grandparenthood. This section outlines changes in the notion of grandparenthood over recent decades; the different grandparenting styles identified by researchers; the factors thought to influence grandparenting styles; and the supports that grandparents offer to their children and grandchildren.

2.2.2 Changing roles and portrayal of grandparents

Social and demographic changes over the past century have radically altered the significance of grandparenthood. According to Szinovacz (1998a), research on grandparents as a distinct theme emerged in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Social and demographic changes in the 1940s and 1950s altered the status of older people in society, and in several studies grandparents were portrayed as ‘rescuers’ to grandchildren and children in the aftermath of the crisis war years (Szinovacz, 1998). Despite this positive portrayal, however, some psychodynamically based case studies in the late 1930s, 1940s and 1950s argued that grandparents had a largely negative influence on their

grandchildren. For example, Smith (1991) cites numerous studies from the 1930s to the early 1960s which characterised as negative the influence of grandparents on grandchildren. The titles of these studies provide adequate illustration of the accusations levelled toward grandparents: '*The grandmother: a problem in child rearing*' (Vollmer, 1937), '*Grandma made Johnny delinquent*' (Strauss, 1943), '*The role of grandparents in children's behaviour problems*' (Borden, 1946) and '*The significance of grandmothers in the psychopathology of children*' (LaBarre *et al.*, 1960) (all cited in Smith, 1991). The influence of grandfathers was largely ignored within these writings, perhaps rather ironically because, Kornhaber (1996) observes, most of the academic writers at this time were men.

The portrayal of grandparents in scholarly literature somewhat later on in the 1950s and 1960s could be categorised as ambivalent (Szinovacz, 1998a). The primacy of the 'nuclear family' and related notion of 'generational independence' (Szinovacz, 1998a) cast grandparents into the role of unimportant family members at the periphery of the new family structure (Bernal and de la Fuente Anuncibay, 2008:68). Szinovacz (1998a) notes that researchers were interested in kinship but not the position of grandparents within these kin networks. Furthermore, the perception of older people as dependent and disengaged within the social gerontology literature is also likely to have contributed to a negative portrayal of ageing family members. Not all scholars in this era, however, ignored their positive contributions. For example, Townsend's (1957) seminal study of the community lives of older people in Bethnal Green in London titled '*The Family Lives of Older People*' indicated that grandparents played an important and largely positive role within the extended kin network. In particular, grandparents provided instrumental and social support to grandchildren and many were heavily involved in the rearing of grandchildren, with some providing continued care to successive cohorts of young children for four or five decades. Similarly, 'Family and Kinship in East London' by Young and Willmott, also published in 1957, highlighted the importance of kinship networks and the reciprocal nature of support provided by the different generations.

Szinovacz (1998a) notes that, from the mid-1960s, more emphasis was placed on the role of grandparents and the quality of the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. Neugarten and Weinstein's (1964) seminal study on grandparenting styles was an important landmark study completed at this time. Szinovacz (1998a) argues that the study of grandparents gained prominence in the 1980s and since then is no longer only 'an appendix to research on kin and family relations'. With societal changes in family patterns, teen and nonmarital births, divorce and an increase in parents with HIV or addiction problems, the functions and contributions of grandparents took on greater significance. Since this period there has been a proliferation of research on grandparents; areas that dominate the contemporary research agenda include the role of grandparents in skipped generation households, intergenerational transfers and the roles they can play in times of crisis. In short, to simplify somewhat, we can trace a trajectory in research approaches and key arguments in research on grandparents from a point where grandparents (and grandmothers in particular) were portrayed as detrimental to grandchildren's development and wellbeing, to a point where their contributions to child-rearing and intergenerational supports in general are argued to be highly valuable in a context of marriage breakdown and atypical family forms.

2.2.3 Significance and Meaning of Grandparenthood

Grandparenthood is a role that can be embraced to varying degrees or rejected. Indeed, the same arguably applies to all relationships, both within and outside families. As Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985:97) phrase it: '*it is up to individuals to cultivate and maintain [kinship] ties*'. Kornhaber, writing in the mid-1980s, spoke of the existence of 'new social contracts' between the generations, which had changed both the functions and meaning of grandparenthood (Kornhaber, 1985). He suggested that modernisation, urbanisation, the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s and increases in older women's participation in the labour force had diminished the importance of the role of grandparenthood for grandmothers. Grandmoth-

ers, he argued, had actively chosen to maintain and assert their own autonomy and rid themselves of grandparenting responsibilities. The fact that many of them were in paid employment made them less willing and able to provide extensive informal care. Szinovacz (1998a) points out that Kornhaber's findings were largely based on clinical studies and are confuted by other researchers.⁷ Over a decade later, Kornhaber (1996) himself acknowledged that these new social contracts may not be as prominent as he had previously argued.

Troll (1985) argues that the significance and meaning that grandparents attach to grandparenthood is contingent on the circumstances of the grandparent. Factors she forwards as influencing the significance of the role include grandparents' personality, health and employment status, the timing of entry into the grandparental role in the life of the grandparent and family characteristics. She argues that these variables interact to influence the importance of grandparenthood in the life of the grandparent. Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) qualitative study also concluded that the significance of grandparenthood differs among grandparents. Among their sample of 70 sets of middle-class American grandparents (46 maternal, 25 paternal), there were some who intimated that grandparenthood had had little effect on them and others who ascribed great importance to the role. Those in the latter group said it provided emotional self-fulfilment, a vindication of one's life history and represented biological renewal and family continuity. Some believed grandparenthood provided them with the opportunity to rectify mistakes made as a parent and to be a better grandparent than parent. Others hoped to accomplish life achievements vicariously through their grandchildren, to compensate for past lack of opportunities for themselves or their children. Peterson (1999), in an Australian study of 146 grandparents, cited biological renewal of the generations, sharing in the activities of grandchildren and watching their development as aspects of emotional fulfilment associated with grandparenthood.

7 Dr Kornhaber (a child psychiatrist) used a technique called 'emotional history' with over 1,000 grandparents over a period of ten years. He described this as a clinical method of interviewing in which participants '*had to summon forth the child within each of them*' (Kornhaber and Woodward 1997) and to discuss for a minimum of three hours their memories of their relationship with their own grandparents and current relationships with their grandchildren.

Research has indicated that the gender of the grandparent may influence the significance of the role. Somary and Stricker (1998) found that regardless of the frequency of interaction, grandmothers derived greater satisfaction from their role as a grandparent than did grandfathers. Grandmothers mentioned more frequently a desire to act as a source of wisdom and knowledge to the grandchildren while grandfathers believed they could be more useful in providing support to the middle generation.. With the exception of Kivett's (1985; 1991) research there are few studies which exclusively examine the role of grandfathers. Kivett's (1985) analysis of 99 qualitative interviews with American grandfathers found that other roles including those of a husband, father, worker and participant in church and leisure activities were more important than grandparenthood to most. She suggests that while grandfathers and grandchildren have affectionate relationships, they only provide low levels of mutual assistance; are involved in a narrow range of activities; and do not interact frequently. However, she argues that the older age of her sample (mean age of 75 years) may have impacted on the salience of grandparenthood for the men she researched. A subsequent study by Kivett (1991) found that normative or cultural values may influence grandfathers' perceptions of the importance of the role. In her quantitative study of 48 Black and 51 White rural American grandfathers, older Black men considered the role of grandfathers to be more central than older White men. Normative values, however, are likely to change over time and further research is required to ascertain the importance of the grandfather role in contemporary society (Mann, 2007). As Mann (2007) argues it is conceivable that further studies which specifically explore the role of grandfathers may reveal that the importance of the role is currently underestimated in the literature and that grandfathers play a complementary role to that of grandmothers. A more recent US study by Waldrop et al (1999) which adopted qualitative methods (51 questionnaires and 20 interviews) with a sample of Caucasian grandparents found that the grandfather role was important and that grandfathers hoped to act as mentors and educators to their grandchildren.

2.2.4 'Grandparenting Styles'

As no single 'grandparenting style' is likely to be applicable to the heterogeneous population of grandparents, researchers have attempted to classify grandparenting styles into distinct categories or typologies.

Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) described five styles of grandparenting as: 1) formal, 2) pleasure-seeking, 3) surrogate-exercising parental roles, 4) distant, and 5) holder of family wisdom. Based on their analysis of 510 interviews with grandparents of grandchildren aged 13 to 17 years Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) subsequently challenged this categorisation and argued that it was implausible that grandparenting styles could remain static from the birth of the grandchild into adolescence and then adulthood. For this reason, they suggested that grandparent styles should be examined within a life course perspective of grandparenting. Furthermore, they argued that grandparenting styles and relationships vary by grandchildren, and that grandparents invest 'selectively' in different grandchildren. They developed five categories or styles of grandparenting, namely the 1) detached (26 per cent of their sample), 2) passive (29 per cent) 3) supportive (17 per cent) 4) authoritative (9 per cent) and 5) influential grandparents (19 per cent). 'Detached' grandparents tended to be older and geographically distant from their grandchildren, while 'influential' grandparents had almost daily contact with their grandchildren. They did not find evidence to support the existence of a 'fun-seeking' category identified by Neugarten and Weinstein (1964), and suggested that this style may be only applicable to grandparents with young grandchildren.

More recently, Mueller et al. (2002) used data from the 1994 wave of the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) and the Iowa Single Parent Project (ISPP) to develop a typology of grandparenting styles applicable to grandparents with teenage grandchildren. The IYFP which gathered data on 451 two-parent households collected information on a target child, their mother, father, a near sibling and in 1994 each surviving grandparent. The ISPP also collected data for a focal child, their surviving grandparents, mother, and near sibling.

The analysis of this data yielded categories similar to those identified by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985). Assessing the relationship in the light of six variables, which included face-to-face contact, activities done together, intimacy, helping, instrumental assistance and authority/discipline they identified five styles of grandparenting; 1) the influential (17 per cent of their sample), 2) supportive (23 per cent) (3) passive (19 per cent) 4) authority-oriented (13 per cent) and 5) detached (28 per cent). Influential and supportive grandparents shared many attributes and were more likely to have few grandchildren, live in close proximity to the grandchild, be more highly educated and involved in farming. Mueller et al. (2002) contend that these findings suggest that influential and supportive grandparents are more common in close-knit family systems because the opportunity structures facilitate greater intergenerational involvement. Passive and detached grandparents were more likely to be on the paternal side, have weaker relations with the middle parent generation, have more grandchildren and have only infrequent face-to-face contact with their grandchildren. Authoritative grandparents on the other hand, were younger, tended to be on the maternal side, employed full-time and have a female grandchild. On the basis of their analysis, Muller et al. (2002) argue that grandparenting styles should not be treated exclusively as characteristics of the grandparents themselves, but instead should be seen to reflect broader family relations.

2.2.5 Determinants of the Grandparent/Grandchild Relationship

As explained above, grandparenting styles and the grandparent/grandchild relationship are contingent on several factors, such as the age and gender of the grandparents and grandchildren, geographical proximity and lineage (maternal vs. paternal). These key variables are thought to influence frequency of contact and quality of the relationship and are addressed in greater detail below.

Geographical Proximity

Face-to-face contact and geographical proximity have been identified as important influences on the closeness of the relationship between

grandparents and grandchildren. Geographical distance influences frequency of contact with grandparents and the ability of grandparents to be involved in the lives of their grandchildren (Bernal and Anuncibay, 2008; Kivett, 1985; Uhlenberg and Hammill, 1998). Research by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) on the grandparent-grandchild relationship found that geographical proximity accounts for as much as 62% of the variance in the frequency of visits between grandparents and grandchildren.

Time alone with grandparents has been construed as being important for the relationship and an indicator of the quality of the relationship (Sticker, 1991). Ross et al (2003) suggest that routine involvement in every day activities and networks helps to facilitate the development of strong bonds between grandparents and grandchildren. Geographical distance, however, does not inevitably compromise psychological closeness to grandchildren (Kivett, 1985; Kornhaber, 1985; Ross *et al.*, 2003). Holladay and Seipke's (2007) administered a questionnaire to a convenience sample of 81 grandparents aged between 53 and 89 years who lived in a large retirement community in Florida to explore communication between grandparents and grandchildren in geographically dispersed relationships. Their findings, which underscore the importance of telephone and email contact, suggest that grandparents can experience high levels of satisfaction with these relationships despite geographical distance. Reciprocity of contact was found to be important, with those who believed that contact was initiated equally by the grandparent and grandchild most satisfied with their levels of communication. The authors highlight that their findings which downplay the importance of face-to-face contact must be viewed cautiously, since their sample was somewhat biased towards more financially secure and independent older people who chose to distance themselves from family and live in a retirement village.

Age

The age of both the grandparent and grandchild can influence the salience and quality of the intergenerational relationship (Burton

and Bengtson, 1985; Hagestad, 1985). Findings are mixed as to whether contact with grandparents increases or decreases as the grandchild enters adolescence and adulthood. Silverstein and Long (1998) used the Longitudinal Study of Generations which consists of data on 300 three-generation Californian families since 1971 to examine the grandparent/grandchild relationship over a 23-year period. They found that emotional intimacy was not constant and that older grandparents were more likely to intimate higher levels of affection with their grandchildren than younger grandparents. They suggest that these findings are consistent with socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992) which argues that awareness of proximity to death can lead older people to place more emphasis on intimate kin relationships. Mueller et al. (2002:364) suggest that as a grandchild enters adolescence, the nature of the relationship becomes more elusive and voluntary and is 'characterized by deeper communication, mutual exchange, guidance and support'. Findings from quantitative study of 225 US adolescents carried out by Dellmann-Jenkins et al. (1987) suggest that, while the onset of adolescence may change grandparent/grandchild relationships, most changes were positive and that interaction and recreational activities with grandparents were still seen as important. Some researchers have suggested that grandmothers may remain more emotionally involved with adolescent granddaughters than grandsons, exerting more discipline and authority on the former (King and Elder, 1995; Mueller *et al.*, 2002). A Canadian qualitative study (n=37) which adopted a life-history approach with grandparent/adult grandchild dyads found that the bond can grow and become more meaningful with the passage of time, with both grandparents and grandchildren indicating satisfaction with their relationship and the importance of unconditional love, mutual support, obligation and respect (Kemp, 2005).

The middle generation

The central role of the middle or parental generation in mediating grandparent/grandchild relations is reiterated in the research literature (King and Elder, 1995). In particular, the parental (also called

the 'bridge' or 'intermediate') generation is thought to play a significant role in the maintenance and frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren (Uhlenberg and Hammill, 1998). Hagestad (1985:41) notes that mothers in the middle generation often act as the 'kin keepers' who play an important role in maintaining contact between grandparents and grandchildren. She notes that, within studies of grandparents, the persistence of a 'matrifocal tilt' is apparent and that maternal grandmothers and grandchildren have the closest relationships. She suggests that only in adulthood the grandchildren/grandparent relationship is not mediated through the middle generation. Commenting on the centrality of the middle generation in mediating the depth and quality of the relationship, Whitbeck et al. (1993:1026) argue that:

[p]arents set conditions and provide the emotional context for the grandparent-grandchild relationship. The power of the parent generation is so great in this regard that the relationship between younger children and their grandparents has been described as an indirect relationship that can only occur through the mediating influence of the children's parents.

It is unsurprising therefore that conflictual family relationships between the first and second generation are thought to transmit onto the third generation and negatively affect the grandchild/grandparent relationship.

Lineage

There is some contention as to whether or not grandchildren have more intimate relationships with maternal as opposed to paternal grandparents. While there is some research which indicates no difference (Somary and Stricker, 1998), there seems to be a greater number of studies which suggest that relationships with maternal grandparents may be more significant (Brannen et al., 2000; Chan and Elder, 2000; Eisenberg, 1988; Ross et al., 2003; Somary and Stricker, 1998). Bernal and Anuncibay's (2008), quantitative analysis of 603 Spanish grandparents which sought to garner information on grandparents'

relationship with their favourite grandchild found that the favourite grandchild tended to be a male grandchild on the maternal side who lived in close proximity and, in the majority of instances, was first born. Eisenberg's (1988) survey of 120 young adult grandchildren (aged 18 to 23) in the US found that even when controlling for geographical distance, relationships with maternal grandmothers were still rated as the most important of all grandparental relationships by grandchildren. Chan and Elder (2000) used data gathered from 343 grandchildren in the Iowa Youth and Families Project to analyse the validity of the matrilineal advantage. They found that lineage was an important variable and attributed the matrilineal bias to the strength of relationships between mothers and daughters. While their research found that a father's closer ties with grandparents improved the strength of the paternal grandparent/grandchildren relationship, the overall matrilineal advantage remained.

Grandparent and grandchild gender

Uhlenberg and Hammill (1998) suggest that grandmothers have more contact with grandchildren than grandfathers. Other research, however, has suggested that male and female grandchildren tend to interact more with grandparents of the same sex during a crisis (Scherman *et al.*, 1988). As mentioned above there is a paucity of research on the importance of gender in the grandparent/grandchild relationship and more specifically, on grandfathers, the role they play and their relationship and level of contact with grandchildren. This gender bias can be attributed to an over emphasis of research on grandmothers as caregivers, the possible reluctance of males to take part in research and a failure by researchers to exclusively explore the impact and meaning of grandparenthood on male masculinity and identity (Mann, 2007). Despite this dearth of knowledge on the nature and role of grandfathers, there is evidence to suggest that where grandfathers are living alone, either as a result of being widowed, separated or divorced, their interaction with their grandchildren is lower than that of grandfathers living with their partners (Millward, 1998).

2.2.6 The role of grandparents

Some studies have examined experiences and importance of the grandparent/grandchild relationship from the perspective of adult grandchildren, typically taking a convenience (and arguably biased) sample of college students. Others have explored the relationship from the grandparents' perspectives by examining large national data sets and extracting information relating to those identifiable as grandparents or conducting either qualitative or quantitative research with grandparents. Much of this research is cross-sectional and has tended to focus exclusively on the grandparents' relationships with one grandchild with whom they live in close proximity or have a close relationship with (Szinovacz, 1998b). Furthermore, as Roberto et al (2001) point out most of this literature is gender-biased, focusing only on the experiences of grandmothers.

Kornhaber (1996) suggests that the roles of grandparents can be positioned on a continuum which ranges from the symbolic at one end to the instrumental and interactive at the other. Grandparents can have direct and indirect influences on their grandchildren (Tomlin, 1998). Direct influences refer to the influences that occur as a result of direct contact with grandchildren, while indirect influences, which are less transparent, relate to the support grandparents provide to the middle generation as important role-models and providers of advice and information.

Norm of non-interference

Researchers since the 1940s have been interested in gauging the appropriate levels of grandparental involvement or authority. Szinovacz (1998a) notes that the importance placed on the middle generation as mediating grandparent/grandchild relationships in the 1970s highlighted that authority and control resided in the intermediary generation. Troll and Benston (1979) spoke of the '*norm of non-interference*' which posited that grandparents consciously make efforts to respect the autonomy of their children and the rearing of their grandchildren. However, parallel to this norm is the contrary expectation that grandparents will provide additional assistance in a

time of crisis, the 'norm of obligation', and provide substantial help to the intermediary (or parent) generation if required (Mason *et al.*, 2007).

Grandparents as socialising agents

Some grandparents play important social roles and functions in their grandchildren's leisure and recreational activities (Dellmann-Jenkins *et al.*, 1987). Cherlin and Furstenberg (1985) stressed the importance of companionship between grandparents and grandchildren, with over half of their sample intimating that they had companionate relationships. Dench and Ogg's (2003) analysis of the 1998 British Social Attitudes survey suggests that grandchildren's attitudes towards grandparents and their involvement in family life are positive. Their survey of 941 children aged 10-12 years old in the UK found that when children were asked to visually represent the most important relationships in a diagram, the majority placed grandparents in the inner circle which represented their most intimate contacts (Brannen *et al.*, 2000). Sticker's (1991) qualitative study of 100 German grandparent-grandchildren dyads suggests that the grandparent role varied according to the age of the grandchild. She found that grandparents' function as a '*conversation partner*' was the most important role ascribed by older grandchildren, while younger grandchildren were more likely to mention the importance of cuddling and playing with their grandparents.

Numerous researchers have referred to the symbolic significance of grandparents in the lives of grandchildren and the important role they play in transmitting values and family history therein. They have been called 'oral historians' (Kornhaber, 1996), 'family archivists' (Kornhaber, 1996) the 'wardens of culture' (Gutman, 1985:181) and 'family watchdogs' (Troll, 1983). They are important providers of knowledge (Bernal and de la Fuente Anuncibay, 2008) and have been found to pass on family traditions and mores (Kornhaber, 1996). Kornhaber (1996) found grandchildren with positive relationships with their grandparents were less likely to form ageist attitudes towards older people. Other research that has found that some grandchildren view their grandparents as 'frail' and 'out-of touch' (Ross *et al.*, 2003).

Grandparents as ‘indulgers’

Research has indicated that some grandparents like to indulge their grandchildren. Grandparents interviewed by Townsend (1957) relayed how they had softened their opinions on the disciplining of children and tended to dote on or spoil grandchildren more than they had done with their own children. (Ross *et al.*, 2003) have argued that grandparents are seen as less strict and more lenient than parents by both grandparents and grandchildren. Grandparents are thought to frequently pamper grandchildren and provide unconditional love, advice and knowledge (Bernal and de la Fuente Anuncibay, 2008). Kornhaber (1996:97), referring to the relationship of grandchildren under six years of age with their grandparents, suggests that grandparents adopt the role of ‘wizards’ in the minds of young grandchildren and thereby provide ‘an imaginative and magical counterpoint to the ordinary day-to-day world [of grandchildren]’.

Grandparents as stabilisers

As shall be expanded upon in more detail in the following section, the role of grandparents in families undergoing stress or crisis is thought to be particularly important if they are highly involved in the lives of the grandchildren and can act as a stabilizing buffer against the negative family circumstances (Werner, 1991). In some instances, they are thought to play an important mediating role in disagreements between the middle generation and grandchildren (Ross *et al.*, 2003). Hagestad (1985:46) suggests that grandparents can act as a stabilising force for the parents and ‘*may also serve as a catalyst for wider family cohesion*’ by being the focus of family contact and getting the family to meet together. Ruiz and Silverstein’s (2007:801) analysis of the 1992-1994 wave of the US National Survey of Families and Households (n=925) emphasises the importance of grandparents for adolescent grandchildren, particularly in single-parent families or non-traditional family structures, where they found that the presence of a close grandparent relationship reduced depressive symptoms in grandchildren. They speculate that this occurs because grandparents act as ‘functional substitutes in reducing distress’.

Grandparents as providers of informal childcare

One of the most frequently mentioned grandparental roles is that of a 'carer'. Assistance provided by grandparents can range from the provision of full custodial care to occasional babysitting. Hirshorn (1998) categorises grandparents' caregiving activities into three types, namely *helping*, *co-parenting* and *surrogate parenting*. Each of these three types can be further divided into categories to indicate the frequency of caregiving as *occasional/emergency*, *short term* and *routin/long-term*. Goodfellow and Lavery (2003) found four styles of caregiving among grandparents assisting parents who are working or studying. These were

- **Avid** caregivers whose lives revolve around their grandchildren.
- **Flexible** caregivers who although they are very concerned with family also give some priority to their personal time.
- **Selective** caregivers who although grandchildren are an important part of their lives do not want to be defined simply as grandparents.
- **Hesitant** carers who did not anticipate caring for grandchildren and who recognise that they need to balance multiple roles in their lives.

It is conceivable that such styles may also have some relevance for grandparents assisting parents who have gone through a divorce or separation.

Research conducted by Wheelock and Jones (2002) in the UK indicates that informal childcare provided by grandparents is highly valued by parents who are in employment outside the home. Their study revealed that care provided by grandparents complemented and in some cases acted as a substitute for formal child care. Over half of the 425 research participants indicated that they availed of such 'complementary childcare' at least once a week, with the overall use of 'complementary childcare' being higher than the overall use of market-based childcare. They comment on the gendering of care and

the fact that in most instances maternal grandparents were the providers of childcare. While children sought out the care of grandparents for economic and practical reasons, it was also in some instances seen as the optimum type of care or 'best' or the 'next best thing' (to parent childcare), from the perspective of both parents and grandparents, with parents emphasising the trustworthiness of grandparents (Wheelock and Jones, 2002).

The importance of childcare provided by grandparents is also borne out by Clarke and Cairns' (2001) analysis of the 1995 Small Fortunes survey, a nationally representative survey of 1239 children in the UK. They found that the mother's employment status and family type were the two most significant influences on whether or not the grandparents looked after a grandchild during the day. In general, care by grandparents was more likely to be provided in families where both parents were in employment and the grandchild was under 11 years of age. Babysitting by grandparents was also found to be common, with one third of parents stating that a grandparent baby-sat when they went out socialising in the evening. Parents with a high socio-economic status and who were living in owner-occupied houses tended to rely on grandparents more frequently for babysitting compared with other groups.

Grandparents as custodial parents

In general, grandparents do not choose to become full-time caregivers. More often, this role is conferred upon them during or after negative life-events that befall the middle generation such as alcohol or drug addiction, mental illness or, as will be discussed in the following section and in our findings chapters, relationship breakdown in the middle generation. In such circumstances, it has been argued, 'the latent support of grandparents turns into active support', (Werner, 1991:73) In the United States, the vast majority of grandparents who provide extensive care are women, many of whom are more likely to be Hispanic or African American and economically disadvantaged (Minkler, 1999). Many of these women are 'dual' or 'triple' caregivers, providing support to grandchildren, children, ageing spouses

and at times their own parents (Minkler, 1999). Minkler (1999) attributes the increase in formal kinship care in the United States to reformulations of child welfare policies which have emphasised care within families. In addition, she argues that an increase in social problems such as drug addiction and AIDS, an increase in female incarceration, teenage pregnancies, increases in female labour market participation rates, increase in single-parent households and divorce have led to increased involvement of grandparents in the care of their grandchildren.

2.2.7 Summary

This assessment of the academic literature on grandparents has revealed how the roles and portrayal of grandparents have evolved as a result of changing social and family structures. The role of grandparents in 21st century families is arguably more multi-dimensional, complex and dynamic than it has been in earlier periods in history. In contrast with some earlier portrayals, grandparents more recent research has characterised grandparents as playing a central role in supporting their children and grandchildren in times of crisis. Conversely, grandparents are also acknowledged in the research literature to exercise choice in determining the extent to which they become involved in the lives of their grandchildren. Research has shown that grandparents can be faced with the paradoxical norms of ‘not interfering’ and ‘being obliged’ to help their children and grandchildren. Parents have been shown to act as an important bridge between grandparent/grandchild relationships, often serving as gatekeepers for the relationship. Lineage has also been argued to be important, with the ‘privileged’ role of maternal grandmothers as the closest grandparent to the grandchild borne out by the majority of studies.

The literature suggests that intimate ties develop between grandparents and grandchildren and are sustained over time. The role that grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren ranges from peripheral to very extensive. Typologies of grandparenting styles seeks to illustrate the different roles grandparents can adopt in their grandchildren’s lives. They suggest that grandparents can have differ-

ent levels of involvement or influence, being very involved and supportive or detached and passive. The relationship is thought to change over time and to vary between different grandchildren. Factors which are likely to have an impact on the quality of the grandparent/grandchild relationship include the age and gender of the grandparent and the grandchild, their distance from each other and the grandparent's health status, personality, ethnic background, employment status and their overall socio-economic status. Furthermore, the number of grandchild sets and lineage of the grandchild have been argued to influence the relationship.

2.3 Literature on the Role of Grandparents in Divorced and Separated Families

2.3.1 Introduction

Divorce and separation impact upon relationships within nuclear and extended families, but most centrally those between grandparents, the divorced/separated couple and grandchildren. This section examines the literature on the impact of parental divorce upon grandparents and their relationship with their own child, their child-in-law and their grandchildren. This more focused literature is naturally much less extensive than the broader field of research on grandparents discussed above.

2.3.2 Mediating factors in grandparent-grandchild relationships

There is a lack of clarity with regard to the factors that determine the level of contact and the quality of the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren after the parents have divorced/separated. Indeed, there is no consensus within the literature as to whether grandparents tend to gain or lose contact with their grandchildren after divorce. Our research was hence designed to contribute to this, at present very small, literature.

Douglas and Ferguson (2003) in a large, qualitative study carried out in South Wales and South West England, in which they conducted 115 interviews with members of 44 families where a divorce had

taken place, argue that the nature of the relationship grandparents have with their grandchildren after parental divorce or separation is largely determined by the relationships established pre-divorce/separation, both with their own children and their grandchildren. In other words, divorce *per se* does not fundamentally alter their approach to grandparenting, although it may serve to accentuate pre-existing features of the grandparent-grandchild relationship. This is largely as a result of the nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, namely the norm of non-interference and the norm of obligation. In their study many of the grandparents felt uncomfortable with criticising or offering assistance with the post-divorce/separation arrangements without being asked for their input, although many felt obliged to help their children where possible. As a result, grandparents who were closely involved in the family before the break-up were likely to become even more so afterwards, while those who were more distant often became more cut-off after the divorce.

Additional factors thought to explain the level and quality of contact between grandparents and grandchildren after parental divorce or separation include geographic proximity, the grandparent's age and gender, the gender of the grandchild and lineage, i.e. many of the factors that were highlighted above as variables that influence all grandparent-grandchild relationships.

Geographic Proximity

Schutter et al. (1997) found evidence from the literature that grandparents living in close proximity to their grandchildren are likely to have a higher level of contact with them following parental separation or divorce. However, research carried out in Australia by Weston (1992) indicated that, although frequency of contact was higher for parents of the custodial parent, the quality of the relationship between the child's parent and the non-custodial grandparents was more significant than proximity to the children, following a divorce/separation.

Similarly, a small-scale study carried out in Pittsburgh with 47 grandparents whose children had divorced (Jaskowski and Dellasega,

1993) found that the respondents perceived a significant decline in the *quality* of the relationship with their grandchildren. It appeared that the quality of the relationship was not influenced by geographic distance, but rather by custodial arrangements.

Grandparent age

Schutter et al (1997) suggest that grandparents tend to become less active in the lives of their grandchildren as they (grandparents) age. However, they suggest that the influence of age may be misleading as older grandparents are more likely to have older grandchildren, who are less likely to require significant amounts of care. Johnson (1988) found in a US-based 40-month longitudinal study following the role of grandmothers in 43 families during divorce that younger grandmothers tended to be more actively involved with their grandchildren during the divorce process, compared with older grandmothers. However, all of the respondents in Johnson's study tended to become more ambivalent and dissatisfied if they were unwillingly or reluctantly performing parenting functions over time, perhaps suggesting that grandparents are happy to carry out 'grandparenting' functions, particularly when they are younger, but are more reluctant to become tied down with the responsibilities of a 'second parenthood', a phenomenon which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

Paternal vs. maternal grandparents

Several studies have suggested that paternal grandparents have significantly less contact with grandchildren compared with maternal grandparents post divorce or separation. A longitudinal study of 173 grown children interviewed 20 years after their parents divorce found that the respondents' relationship with their paternal grandparents tended to be more distant, negative or even non-existent when children's relationships with their fathers deteriorated after divorce (Ahrns, 2007). Based on their findings of the first national survey of grandparents carried out in Britain, Dench and Ogg (2003) suggest that maternal grandmothers are the key people around whom most grandparenting activities revolve and that paternal grandparents have

relatively little influence on grandchildren in intact families and thus suffer a reduction in contact when the parents' marriage or relationship breaks down. They suggest that men tend to be less firmly linked into family networks than women, as they are broadly expected not to put as much effort into maintaining family links as women. However, Kemp (2007) points out that as it is usually the mother who takes custody of the children, the key factor may be custody, rather than the grandparents' lineage. Weston (1992) also reaches the same conclusion.

Relationships between grandparents and parents

As has been illustrated above, perhaps one of the most important factors that determines the quality and frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren following parental divorce/separation is the quality of the relationship between the grandparents and their child and their former child-in-law. Grandparents who successfully maintain or increase contact with their grandchildren are those who maintain friendly relations with the custodial parents (Schutter *et al.*, 1997). As noted earlier, the level of contact tends to remain the same or improve between grandparents of the custodial parent and grandchildren, and disimprove with grandparents whose children had lost custody of their children (Weston, 1992). However, it appears that instances where grandparents lose all contact with their grandchildren following parental divorce/separation are rare (Dench and Ogg, 2003; Ferguson *et al.*, 2004), while other research has indicated that the *quality* of the relationship can remain the same, even when contact has been significantly reduced (Bridges *et al.*, 2007).

2.3.3 Impact of grandparental support on grandchildren post divorce/separation

During divorce, some grandparents try to develop and deepen their bond with their grandchildren in order to help them maintain vestiges of a secure, intact family and to offset feelings of loss (Nichols, 2005, in Schutter *et al.*, 1997). Wood and Liossis (2007) found that many grandchildren who had been through a stressful life event, such as the divorce of their parents, had felt their grandparent to be

an important protective and stabilising influence thanks to the emotional and instrumental support they provided. However, Bridges, Roe and Dunn (2007) reported that while closeness to grandparents may be associated with fewer problems immediately following parental separation, this did not remain the case for their respondents five years later. The authors believed that this is related to the average age of their sample group (early teens) for whom other relationships, including those with peers, have become more important and influential. It should be noted that the authors did not consider whether the assistance from grandparents at the time of the divorce, regardless of the age of the grandchildren, was a key factor in helping them to adjust. Indeed, they suggested that it was possible that grandchildren may not need continued support from grandparents once they have learned to adjust to their life post-separation/divorce.

According to Douglas and Ferguson (2003), grandparents do not play as prominent a part as confidantes to children as much of the earlier literature suggests. The authors suggested that this may have been as a result of the dilemma faced by children in remaining loyal to both of their parents and sets of grandparents. Ferguson (2004) notes that children as young as eight maintained discretion when talking to their families, so that they could remain loyal to all parties. Lussier et al. (2002) also found that children's views about their closeness to grandparents differed from those held by their parents. However, they concluded that greater closeness to grandparents was associated with children experiencing fewer problems adjusting to life after their parents' divorce. Grandparents can become a negative force in the lives of their grandchildren if they criticise their former child-in-law in front of their grandchildren. Given the loyalties of young children towards their parents, as illustrated above, such outbursts can be damaging for young children trying to cope with changes in their lives (Douglas and Ferguson, 2003).

2.3.4 Grandparents' Experiences of Parental Divorce: Impact of Social Norms

As outlined in the previous section, the changing structures of families over the last 20-30 years, as well as changing social norms have

contributes towards changes in grandparents' involvement with their grandchildren. Douglas and Ferguson (2003) suggest that the norms of non-interference and obligation also play a role in the relationship that grandparents have with their children after the divorce/separation of the parents. The authors found that non-interference had some extreme implications, including almost half of the grandparents in their study not knowing about the divorce before the final decision had been made. Similar findings have also been reported elsewhere (Kornhaber, 1996). In addition, many grandparents in Douglas and Ferguson's (2003) study were reluctant to interfere in decisions about the divorce, including custody of the children and financial arrangements. In some cases, this meant that the grandparents had little power or control over their own role in the process and indeed in terms of the role they would play in their grandchildren's lives after the divorce/separation. However, the authors praised the non-interference of many grandparents, indicating that interference may have created additional unnecessary pressures on the couple going through the divorce/separation.

In spite of their reluctance to interfere, many grandparents interviewed by Douglas and Ferguson felt a sense of obligation towards their offspring and "wished to be there" for their children and grandchildren. As a result, many grandparents gave financial, emotional and practical support such as childcare and advice regarding the legal proceedings. Many of the parents interviewed for the study revealed a sense that their own parents did have an obligation towards them. However, changing social norms (such as higher labour market participation among women, older people having more interests and continuing to be active until a late age) have meant that grandparents may be reluctant to feel under obligation towards their children and grandchildren. Ferguson et al (2004) suggest that there are four 'types' of grandparents (which are not mutually exclusive) in contexts where divorce or separation have occurred:

- grandparents who had been very involved with their grandchildren before the separation and became surrogate parents thereafter;

- grandparents who prioritised their own adult child rather than the grandchildren;
- grandparents who had strong ongoing negative feelings about the former partner and who often had to be reminded not to express these opinions in front of the grandchildren. In contrast, non-partisan grandparents tried to continue their relationship with the former partner either because of a good relationship or in order to facilitate contact with their grandchildren; and
- reluctant grandparents, who minimised their grandparent role. Such avoidant behaviour usually pre-dated the separation and divorce of the parents.

2.3.5 Implications of the provision of additional support for grandparents

This section discusses the implications of grandparents experiencing either an increase or a reduction in contact with their grandchildren as a result of parental divorce or separation. When grandparents help out their children both as they are going through a relationship breakdown and afterwards, they may provide emotional, financial and practical support, such as childminding and even accommodation for their divorced or separated child(ren). In addition, some grandparents may also have to face a further change in their grandparenting role if one or both of the parents remarries or re-partners (Ochiltree, 2006b). Grandparents may become step-grandparents to children they have not known since birth and who may be accustomed to different family norms and rules and who may also have other grandparents. This section outlines research on the implications of the provision of such support on grandparents themselves.

Psychological effects of divorce on heavily involved grandparents

Childcare can become an important issue for divorced or separated individuals who become the main carers of their children following, especially where he or she is in (full-time) paid employment. Grandparents may be asked to step into the breach in order to avoid

or reduce the need to use of expensive childminding services. While most grandparents are likely to enjoy spending time with their grandchildren, some may find these unexpected additional responsibilities a burden. Kornhaber (1996) warns that when grandparents have too much responsibility for grandchildren, the role can lose some of its 'magical elements'. Douglas and Ferguson (2003) found that not all of the grandparents they interviewed were particularly enthusiastic about their role. The authors suggest that this may be a reflection on their earlier experiences of parenting, such as being unable to cope with the noise made by their children, and later, their grandchildren. Other respondents felt that they no longer had the same energy to care for grandchildren, compared with when they cared for their own children. Dolbin-MacNab (2006) reported that grandparents who had assumed full responsibility for caring for their grandchildren saw themselves as wiser and more relaxed "the second time around". However, similar to findings reported above, they also experienced difficulties as a result of a heavy demands on their time and energy and the need to negotiate changing family roles and parenting in a family environment that was in many cases negative.

Little attention has been given to the negative health impact of extensive caregiving by grandparents (Dolbin-MacNab, 2006). Research by Minkler, Fuller-Thomson et al. (1997) found that grandparents acting as full-time caregivers experienced higher levels of clinical depression. Gatz, Bengtson et al. (1990) propose a theoretical model which incorporates four primary aspects to explain how caregivers are affected by providing care which include, firstly the *stressor* or the event that led to the need for caregiving; secondly, the *perceptions* of the caregiving situation; thirdly, the financial, social and educational *resources* of the caregivers and fourthly, the *outcomes* and associated stress and burden which the role elicits. Implementing this theoretical model, Bowers and Myers (1999) found that grandparents providing full-time care reported both higher levels of stress and caregiver burden, with those providing less care reporting higher levels of grandparent satisfaction and life satisfaction in general. Notably, grandchildren's behaviour exerted the most important influence on

grandmothers' feelings of parenting stress, burden and grandparenting satisfaction, a particularly worrisome finding since the majority of full-time grandparents were found to have grandchildren with behavioural problems.

Grandparent-led families often face greater economic disadvantages than other families and consequently tend to be more reliant on government benefits and pensions (Ochiltree, 2006a). Grandparents who have taken on primary responsibility for caring for their grandchildren can be faced with difficulties in accessing state financial assistance and support (such as child benefit and school clothing and footwear allowances) despite the fact that in most social welfare systems they are entitled to claim such allowances, provided that the grandchild is living with them.

2.3.6 Reduced contact

Some grandparents, particularly those whose own child has lost custody of their child(ren), may experience a reduction in contact with their grandchild(ren) after the divorce or separation. It has been suggested that only a small proportion of grandparents lose all contact with their grandchildren (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004) although practical issues such as grandchildren moving house or new caring arrangements can limit the amount of time grandparents get to spend with their grandchildren. In a limited number of cases, grandparents can lose all contact with their grandchildren. Such circumstances are most likely to arise in cases where there has traditionally been a poor relationship between the relevant set of grandparents and the custodial parent, or when the custodial parent has concerns that granting access to grandparents can result in the non-custodial parent having access to their children and thus have the opportunity to inflict (further) harm on them (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004).

Psychological Effects of Reduced Contact

Drew and Silverstein (2007) conducted a study on the psychological effects of loss of contact with grandchildren on a sample of 442 Californian grandparents. They found that grandparents who had lost

contact with their grandchildren experienced a steeper increase in depressive symptoms as they aged compared with other grandparents. The findings indicated that the loss of contact with grandchildren after parental separation/divorce is an ambiguous loss (Boss, 2002, in Drew and Silverstein, 2007), the symptoms of which are similar to those experienced by a friend or relative of a missing person. Such individuals grieve with the continued hope of being reunited with their loved one and often find it difficult to achieve closure in the mourning process. Drew and Silverstein suggested that the ambiguous loss of a grandchild can be agonising and immobilising for the grandparent, with long-term effects of role confusion (e.g. 'am I still a grandparent?'), helplessness, depression and anxiety. In addition, support from others can diminish over time, despite the fact that negative emotions remain unresolved. They also suggested that mediation and/or counselling may help grandparents to overcome the trauma they had experienced.

In a discussion article, based on the findings of his earlier research (Douglas and Ferguson, 2003), Ferguson et al. (2004) outlined some of the emotional difficulties experienced by grandparents who no longer see their grandchildren. They cite one grandmother who states that "it just hurts when people say how many grandchildren have you got and I say I don't really see them and, you know, they just look" (p. 125). Many of their respondents spoke of the powerlessness they experienced as a result of not being able to access their grandchildren. As was noted earlier, grandparent-grandchild relationships are mediated by the parental generation, which can explain this sense of powerlessness, particularly as it is clear that grandparents are more likely to have access to their grandchildren when they maintain good relations with the custodial parent (Dench and Ogg, 2003).

Coping Strategies

While a number of studies have been carried out examining the psychological and practical effects of their children's divorce on grandparents, very little literature exists that provides advice and strategies to grandparents on how to cope when the situation arises. Carson

(1999) advised grandparents to deal with their own grief and come to terms with their child's divorce before trying to support their child and grandchildren. She argued that grandparents share a unique bond with their grandchildren and the sense of grief they share about the parent's divorce can help to strengthen this bond and can help them to support their grandchildren as they learn to cope with their parents' divorce. She also advises grandparents to protect their own rights and ensure that their rights and needs are not lost in the process of their child's divorce by maintaining a good relationship with their child-in-law and ensuring that they are communicating their needs to the couple going through the divorce/separation.

Barth (2004) provided tips to grandparents on how to cope with this problem, arguing that grandparents are often faced with two central dilemmas when their children divorce/separate; namely, how to provide support to their children and how to avoid losing contact with their grandchildren. She suggested that grandparents should:

- Deal with their grief and anger
- Talk about their involvement
- Maintain a neutral stance with grandchildren
- Maintain a flexible attitude
- Set new goals for their relationship with their grandchildren
- Maintain regular contact

Barth also suggested that grandparents may castigate themselves for not noticing that things were amiss in their child's relationship and that this may exacerbate their feelings of grief and anger and proposes that grandparents may benefit from undergoing counselling. She points out that it is important for grandparents to maintain a relationship with their former in-laws. Perrett (2005) suggests that grandparents can stay in touch with their grandchildren, even when face-to-face contact has been reduced, by using instant messaging, cameras, homemade videos, recording book chapters on a cassette to send to children and making scrapbooks together.

Grandparents' legal rights regarding caring and access of grandchildren

Ferguson et al. (2004) suggested that few grandparents may be willing to use the legal system in order to try to gain access to their grandchildren. Only two of the 36 sets of grandparents interviewed for their study had considered taking legal proceedings, although neither had ultimately done so, as they felt it may make matters worse and had concerns about the costs involved. They noted that in certain circumstances, grandparents who take legal action win their cases. However, often, parents of the grandchildren break the court order leaving grandparents with limited recourse for action, as judges are reluctant to send mothers of young children to jail for contempt of court.

Ferguson et al (2004) suggested that there are many diverse approaches to grandparenting and challenged the assertion that grandparents should be given automatic rights towards their grandchildren, arguing that such a right would not necessarily help to resolve family conflicts. Ferguson (2004) argued that contact arrangements may result in further conflict and place the grandchild in an awkward position if they are aware that one of their parents did not want them to see their grandparents.

In England and Wales, grandparents can acquire parental responsibility by obtaining a residence order (a court order that states where and with whom a child shall live), which gives the grandparents leave to make decisions about the grandchild's upbringing and care (Bouna and Smith, 2005). However, although grandparents are responsible for the day-to-day needs of the child, a residence order does not hand over responsibility from the parents to the grandparents. Rather, grandparents are expected to share responsibility with the parents, and so should consult them on major decisions about the needs of the grandchild.

Grandparents have few legal rights in England, Wales, the United States (Bouna and Smith, 2005; Henderson, 2005). At present in England and Wales, any person (not just a grandparent) who wishes

to maintain contact with the child can apply to the court to request a leave to seek an order to maintain such contact (Bouna and Smith, 2005). However, Bouna and Smith note that even when grandparents have obtained such an order, there is little to hold the parents to abide by the court ruling.

Many advocates for grandparents have campaigned for grandparents' role to be legally recognised. Henderson (2005) argues that the use of social science research to determine the best interests of the child or family remains limited, regardless of the research on the positive and negative influences of grandparents on family development. Henderson has also highlighted American judges' interpretation of the "best interest of the child" standard, which applies when grandparents apply for visitation rights with their grandchild. She noted that some judges have interpreted the standard to take into account the needs of parents, while others have concentrated solely on the wishes of the (grand)child. Henderson suggested that judges largely prioritise the rights of parents over the rights of the child without, perhaps, thinking about the impact on the development of the child.

Balzer (1994, in Henderson, 2005) argued that there are eight questions that judges should ask when determining the best interest of the child standard:

1. How much would grandparental visitation disrupt the parent-child relationship?
2. What is the nature of the grandparent-grandchild relationship in terms of healthy interaction and psychological attachment?
3. What is the quality of the parent-grandparent relationship (i.e., the ability to communicate, amount of animosity, and the willingness to compromise)?
4. What are the developmental and economic needs of the child?
5. Are the grandparents psychologically and physically capable of providing love, affection, and guidance to the child?
6. Are the grandparents physically, psychologically, and

economically able and willing to provide for the child's material needs?

7. What is the character of the grandparents including their moral fitness, physical health, and psychological well-being?
8. What social support resources are available to assist the involved families toward reconciliation and wellness?

2.3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a short review of some of the very extensive literature on grandparents' role in general and in the post-separation context. It has highlighted some of the gaps in the knowledge around the implications of divorce for grandparents personally and for their relationship with their grandchildren. The literature suggests that the grandparent-grandchild tie is not just a relationship between individuals that can be understood adequately as a dyad. It is part of a web of overlapping kin relationships which cut across many households to bind people into different combinations (Dench and Ogg, 2003). Divorce can have long-term effects on the extended family network. In most instances, the literature indicates, grandparent-grandchild relationships are constantly mediated by the middle generation, namely, the grandchildren's parents (Dench and Ogg, 2003). Many studies have looked at the health status of grandparent caregivers who were forced to assume greater levels of involvement following divorce or separation in the middle generation. Grandparents who are heavily involved in the rearing of their grandchildren in these situations are likely to report relatively low levels of role satisfaction.

There are gaps in our knowledge regarding the nature of the relationships that grandparents create or maintain with their grandchildren after parental divorce or separation; the factors that influence the level of contact between grandparents and their grandchildren, in particular how relationships with adult children and their former partners evolve and mediate the relationship with grandchildren; the impact of their adult children's divorce or separation on grandparents themselves; and the influence of the broader social, legal and policy context on grandparents' experiences. It is clear that there is

still a need for further research in order to characterise grandparents' experiences, spell out the diverse factors that influence these, and to explore the extent of change or continuity in the generational relationships during and after the divorce or separation process. The next chapter outlines the legal context within which our study, the first of its kind in Ireland, took place.

3. The Legal Context: Divorce and Family Law in Ireland

3.1 Introduction

Much of the law concerning the formation and change of family relationships in Ireland has been heavily influenced by the perceived importance and value of the traditional nuclear family. A married couple in Ireland can now separate or divorce and Irish family law plays an important role in regulating the breakdown of these relationships as well as the protection of relationships that exist within the extended family. Twelve years after the arrival of divorce, it is only now that research can examine how these changes in family law are affecting the diverse array of family relationships that exist in modern Ireland. This chapter considers the changing aspects of Irish family legislation and will have particular regard to the constitutional framework of family and divorce law in Ireland and the rules relating to the relationship between the adult members of a family and children including guardianship, custody and access. The chapter also examines the effect of family and divorce law on relationships that exist outside the nuclear family, with a focus on grandparents and their rights.

3.2 The History of Divorce in Ireland

Irish family law has been greatly influenced by the Constitution (Binchy, 1984). The constitutional bar on divorce was removed in November 1995 due to the shift in political, judicial and public attitudes towards marriage, parenting, children and family life (see Shannon 1999). However until November 1995, the State protected the institution of marriage and a stipulation of the Constitution was that “no law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage” (Constitution of Ireland, Article 41.3.2).

Despite the ban on divorce, there was a substantial increase in marital breakdown in the decades preceding the Family Law (Divorce) 1996

Act. Although the statistics on marital breakdown were not readily available, Duncan (1979) attempted to assess the level of marital breakdown by collating statistics on the various ways one could contract out of marriage, including desertion, annulment, and *divorce et mensa thoro* (separation by act of law rather than a dissolution of the marriage, granted in cases of extreme cruelty or desertion of the wife by the husband). The statistics obtained from the official Labour Force Survey in 1975 indicated that there were 8,000 separated wives in Ireland (Duncan, 1979). Based on these figures, it was clear that the number of couples separating were increasing. Many of these couples resolved their problems arising from the breakdown of their marriage privately and informally, without recourse to advice centres, social welfare officials or other sources of formal assistance. Due to the ban on divorce, there was minimal provision within family law to protect and regulate the rights and the responsibilities of the parties of the dissolved marriage and grandparents' rights in relation to custody and access to their grandchildren (Burley and Regan, 2002, Fitzpatrick, 1987, James, 1997, Duncan, 1986).

Duncan (1986) argued that the figures indicating the level of marital breakdown (approx 2,439 court applications and church annulments received in 1977 and 3110 Deserted Wife's Allowance recipients in 1976) indicated a serious and growing problem. The first figure is an estimate based on the figures for the number of maintenance applications, barring order applications, child related applications and *divorce e mensa et thoro* petitions received in 1977. The number of annulment applications received by the Roman Catholic Church in 1977 was also included (see also Duncan 1979).

In 1985, the government responded to this matter by establishing a Parliamentary Committee to examine the extent of marital breakdown in Ireland (Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown 1985). The findings from the report suggested the experience of separation was increasing and the Committee recommended that a referendum be held to remove the ban on divorce (Joint Committee On Marriage Breakdown, 1985).

The first campaign to amend the Constitution via a referendum on divorce took place in 1986 but was rejected by the electorate (see Dillon 1993). It has been argued that the defeat of the proposed divorce amendment in 1986 was due to the lack of essential provisions concerning financial arrangements post separation, i.e. pensions, benefit and inheritance rights (Mahon, 1987, James, 1997). Although the first referendum was rejected, it forced the legislature to develop alternative methods of addressing the inconsistencies and injustices that existed due to the ban on divorce. In doing so, the legislature enacted significant pieces of legislation intended to bridge this gap. For instance, the 1987 Status of Children Act, regulated the situation of children rendered illegitimate as the result of their parents being separated or unmarried.

Finally in 1992, the government compiled a White Paper addressing the possible problems to the divorce issue (Minister for Justice, 1992). This White Paper set out that the government envisaged another referendum on divorce and set out constitutional provisions which would allow for this (Ward, 1993). The White Paper specified the number of people who were separated in Ireland and stated that this figure had doubled since 1986. The White Paper proposed five options to amend Article 41.3.2 of the Constitution and also included a draft of the proposed Family Law Bill to be introduced if the ban on divorce was removed. A debate took place to examine whether the reforms should be placed in the legislation or Constitution. It was argued that in order to secure the backing of the opposition and public support, the government should place the reforms in the Constitution (Ward, 1995, Burley and Regan, 2002). The Government then announced that it would proceed to hold another referendum.

In 1995, anti-divorce lobbyists mounted again their highly organised campaigns. Their concerns related to the consequences of divorce for 'the family' and the Irish way of life. However, since the first referendum Ireland had undergone substantial social change and the main support to the anti-divorce campaign, the Roman Catholic Church,

had undergone a major shift in the public's eye (James, 1997). This weakened the position of the "No" campaign together with the rise in the number of separations, and increased government's confidence in the outcome of the referendum. The proposed amendment to the Constitution was this time secured. The results of the referendum were exceptionally close but the 'Yes' campaign won by a narrow 7,520 majority (a mere 0.6% difference).

In 1995 the government published the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution Bill which proposed the deletion of the prohibition on divorce from Article 41.3.2. (see also O'Higgins 1986, Mahon 1987, Darcy and Laver 1990). The Family Law (Divorce) Act 1996 (hereafter referred to the 1996 Act) came into operation on the 27th February 1997. The grounds for divorce under the 1996 Act are as follows:

- (i) at the date of the institution of the proceedings, the spouses have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the previous five years,
- (ii) there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation between the spouses ,
- (iii) such provision as the court considers proper having regard to the circumstances exists or will be made for the spouses, any children or either or both of them an any other person prescribed by law, and
- (iv) any further conditions prescribed by law are complied with.

The court will only grant the divorce if it is satisfied that the parties have fulfilled these requirements.

In order to gain an insight into grandparents' experiences of family break-up it is important to understand how the law regulates parental and grandparental rights and responsibilities upon divorce. The next section of this chapter will deal with section 5(2) of the 1996 Act

and explain how childcare arrangements are ordered upon divorce. This section will examine how the breakdown of relationships raises questions concerning the arrangements to be made for the children.

3.3 Guardianship, Custody, Access

Ryan argues that the constitutional focus on the nuclear family based on marriage ignores the relationship between the child and members of the extended family (Ryan, 2006). Until recently there was no protection or recognition in Ireland for the relationship between grandparents and their grandchildren. The Children's Act 1997 for the first time gives a person who has acted *in loco parentis*⁸ to the child 'the right to apply to the court for an order for access'. The person must first make an application to the court for leave to make the application and the court in deciding whether to grant such leave will have regard to all the circumstances including 1) the applicant's connection with the child 2) the risk if any of the application disrupting the child's life to the extent that the child would be harmed by it, and 3) the wishes of the child's guardian (see also Shannon and Power 1998). It is evident that the approach of the legislature has been that there is no automatic right of contact between grandparents and children but it recognises that contact with grandparents may be in the best interests of the child in particular circumstances. In such circumstances the grandparents are obliged to seek leave under the legislation as they do not have a statutory right to apply for an order.

In order to fully understand what the 'right to apply to the court for an order for access' actually means, it is important to explicate and understand the distinction between guardianship, custody and access. Such issues and matters dealing with the children, such as guardianship, custody and access orders are designated under the Guardianship of Infants Act (hereafter referred to as the 1964 Act). Guardianship relates to the duties of a person as to the welfare, care and upbringing of a child. Section 11 of the 1964 Act permits any

8 *Locus parentis* is defined as "in the position or place of the parent". It is a legal doctrine under which an individual assumes parental rights, duties, and obligations without going through the formalities of legal adoption.

person being a guardian of an infant to apply to the court for its direction on any question affecting the welfare of the infant (see also Shatter 1997). Guardianship is not dependent on custody. Custody relates to the day-to-day care and control of a child. A custody order does not have the effect of re-allocating guardianship between the parents. Upon divorce both parents retain guardianship which means that both parents retain the right to be involved in issues relating to the welfare of the child such as schooling, religious or medical issues. In many cases parents share the custody of the children. This may be arranged formally or informally and may operate on a 50/50, week-end and/or midweek overnight basis (see also Mahon and Moore, forthcoming). In situations where one parent is refused custody, he/she may apply for access to a child. Access permits a parent/ a person who has acted *in loco parentis* (for instance a grandparent) to meet and/or communicate with a child. It is important to note that access is a right of the child and that it should only be denied if it is not in the best interests of the child.

Applications relating to guardianship, custody and/or access will be assessed according to the welfare principle. The welfare of the child is paramount and will form the basis of all decisions relating to his or her upbringing. The 1964 Act is set firmly in the welfare mould. Section 3 of the 1964 Act states “Where in any proceedings before any court the custody, guardianship or upbringing of an infant, or the administration of any property belonging to or held on trust for an infant, or the application of the income thereof, is in question, the court, in deciding that question, shall regard the welfare of the infant as the first and paramount consideration.” This principle, referred to as the welfare principle, is defined in the legislation under section 2 of the 1964 Act and incorporates the religious, moral, intellectual, physical and social welfare of the child. While the principle is defined and provides the environment for private negotiations, there are difficulties in assessing how these factors should be viewed. The courts are obliged to carry out this balancing exercise and over the last 30 years have had to transform their views on how the best interests of the child are actually served.

In line with Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, where there is a conflict between the wishes of the child and another, the rights of the child take precedence in what is known as the ‘best interests of the child’ test. Although section 3 of the 1964 Act asserts that the welfare of the child is to be the paramount consideration in proceedings under the Act, it is not the only relevant consideration (Shannon, 2008:247). The Constitution plays a vital role in assessing the individual rights of the child vis-à-vis the family. This family, based on marriage, may supersede the rights (and consequently welfare) of the child. Family here refers to the immediate nuclear family and does not include extended kin such as grandparents.

Case law on family law cases involving grandparents is limited. However, Power outlined the significance of a High Court decision made in 2004 on the appointment of grandparents as guardians, which was against the child’s father’s wishes (Power, 2004). In *FN and EB v CO, HO and EK* (unreported, High Court, Finlay-Geoghegan J., March 26, 2004) the applicants, maternal grandparents, sought to be appointed guardians pursuant to section 8 of the 1964 Act and sole custodians of the two children who were aged 14 and 13⁹. The father claimed custody and so the judge ordered that a Section 47 report¹⁰ be undertaken. The judge also interviewed the girls in order to hear their wishes. The judge outlined that each of the girls was well settled in their schools and life in Ireland and had a loving relationship with their maternal grandparents. They considered their grandparents as their *de facto* parents. After hearing all the evidence, the judge found that it would be detrimental to the children’s welfare to require them to move to England against their wishes and that it was in their inter-

9 The children’s mother died in 1995 and the children had lived with the maternal grandparents since January 1996. The mother did not, prior to her death, appoint any person to be a guardian of the girls by deed or will. Whilst the mother was alive the children lived in Belgium with her and the father lived in England and the girls visited him there on occasions. The father and mother were separated before the death of the mother. The respondents were the father of the children, his new wife and the paternal grandfather.

10 The role of social reports in family law proceedings is dealt with in the 1995 Act, s47. The powers of the courts to procure such reports was first sought out in the 1989 Act and have since become widely used as tools in the solution of child-centred disputes. The parties may agree that a social report is necessary to aid in the resolution of a dispute or the court may, of its own motion, direct that such a report be furnished to it. The Courts are not bound by the recommendations contained in such reports but are strongly influenced by them. In this case the Section 47 report included interviews with the maternal grandparents, father and the girls.

est to have regular contact with their father. The father continued to be the joint guardian of the girl and has the right to be consulted on all matters affecting the welfare of the girls.

Such practices follow Article 8 of the European Court of Human Rights, which provides that “everyone has the right to respect for his private and family life, his home and his correspondence”. Under this provision mothers, fathers, children and other family members all have convention rights to respect for their private and family life. The position adopted by the Irish legislation in this instance follows the European Commission, by directing the focus on an assessment as to whether there are sufficient links between the grandparents and child to consider it as established “family life” (FN and EB v CO, HO and EK (unreported, High Court, Finlay-Geoghegan J., March 26, 2004, p.4). The nature and quality of the relationship between the child and grandparent and its contribution to the welfare of the child will be assessed.

Unfortunately there is no indication as to the frequency with which such applications are sought. The long-standing in camera rule prevented any research or reports being conducted on the types of cases that came to the Irish Family Law Courts. However, reform to Section 40(3) of the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 has improved access to the courts for researchers. Mahon and Moore’s (forthcoming) study of parent-child contact agreements and arrangements based on attending and observing family law circuit cases, supported by the Office of the Minister for Children, will provide insight into this area. Additionally the provision of reports from the quarterly family law report, *Family Law Matters*, has given us some insight to the reasoning behind such cases. In order to understand the experiences and role of grandparents whose children are divorced/separated, a sample of cases involving grandparents are described below.

A section 11B application was sought in a reported case in a District Court in the southern region (The Court Services, 2008). In this case, a couple applied for access to their granddaughter who was aged

eight. They had lived with the granddaughter and the father for the earlier part of the child's life. However the child was now living with the mother. The mother and father were no longer in contact and the mother had stopped all contact between the paternal grandparents and the child a year prior. During the case the paternal grandmother said "*the child was her first grandchild and had been part of the family for many years*" and the grandfather said she was "*special... we are very fond of her and she had lots of cousins who she should be allowed see*" (The Court Services, 2007b). While the judge in this case understood the mother's position he stated that "the child should see her grandparents and the grandparents should see her." The judge found it was in the "best interest of [the girl] to see her paternal grandparents with whom she shared a loving relationship in her early life". He commented that there was "much more to be gained than lost by making this order" (The Court Services, 2007b).

Another reported case in a northern District Court shed light on the reasons why grandparents coming to court require such legislative protection (The Court Services, 2007b). In this case, the father was seeking sole custody of his child, who had been living with his maternal grandparents. The mother of the child had re-partnered a man who was suspected as endangering the safety of the child. The judge took evidence from both parties and then interviewed the boy. From this conversation, he said the child had clearly indicated that he wanted to stay with the grandparents but would like to visit his father. In this case, the judge appointed the grandparents and father joint guardians and made a further order that interim joint custody be awarded to grandparents and father (The Court Services, 2008).

In a reported case in Dublin District Court (The Court Services, 2007a), the child's maternal grandmother facilitated supervised access to the father of the child. In her evidence the grandmother told the court that the father left early on seven of the nine visits and she believed that three hours was too long for the 4 year old girl. The father was seeking guardianship and unsupervised access. Judge Furlong ordered that access should "begin and end in the grandparents'

home but didn't have to be confined there. The judge did request one of the maternal grandparents to be present during those times.

These snapshot reports of the types of family law cases coming to the courts demonstrate that the role of the grandparents in cases of marital breakdown is not simply confined to guardianship and access for themselves but it may also include supporting access visits for their sons or daughters in law. Lundstrom (2005) argues that it is this broad recognition that grandparents provide extra care or surrogate parenting that requires greater legal protection. In her work on grandparenthood in modern Ireland, Lundstrom (2005) outlines how grandparents' rights and entitlements differ greatly across jurisdictions. While contrasting the rights of grandparents in the US, Scotland and Ireland, she concludes that there is greater legal protection for grandparents and children in other jurisdictions where divorce has been operating for a longer period.

This section has outlined the legislative framework for dealing with the involvement of grandparents with their grandchildren when family transitions occur. It is evident that the approach of the legislature has been that there is no automatic right of contact between grandparents and children but it recognises that contact with grandparents may be in the best interests of the child in particular circumstances. Lundstrom disputes whether such practices recognise the best interests of the child and argues that they seem to give precedence to the wishes of the child's guardian, rather than the child (Lundstrom, 2005). As demonstrated, the onus is on the grandparent to demonstrate that contact is in the best interests of the child.

3.4 Non- Marital Relationships

Shannon (2008:288) emphasises that the family which the State protects and which the Constitution sees as worthy of such protection is the family based on marriage alone (see for example *State (Nicolaou) v An Bord Uchtala* [1996] IR567). Parents who have not married do not benefit from the rights enunciated in Articles 41 and 42. Such

parents may be lone parents¹¹ or parents who are cohabiting. Given the lack of protection for unmarried fathers in their relationship with their children, grandparents of these unions may also be faced with increasingly complex access issues if the union dissolves.

Truly (as cited in Lundstrom, 2005) attributes the complexity of relationships between grandparents and grandchildren to the rise in divorce rates and single parenthood. The category as a whole, collectively referred to as lone parents (including divorced, separated, widowed or single parents) has increased from 7.2% (29,658) in 1981 to 21.3% (98,333) of all families in Ireland (Central Statistics Office, 2006). Single parents account for 36% (35,400) of all lone parent families (Central Statistics Office, 2006). Additionally the trend for couples to cohabit rather than marry is becoming increasingly prevalent in Ireland with the number of cohabiting couples increasing from 31,300 in 1996 to 121,800 in 2006, (Fahey and Field, 2008). Cohabiting couples make up 11.6% of all couples and of the 121,800 couples, 32.8% (40,000) have children under the age of 15. As we will discuss below, grandparents of single parents or grandparents, whose children's cohabiting relationship has dissolved, may face different challenges than grandparents who children have divorced.

The marital status of a couple in Irish Family Law determines the rights held by each party. As such, grandparents' relationships to their grandchildren may be affected by the marital status of the parties. There is, unfortunately, a dearth of research on cohabiting families and the relationships that exist within these extended kin groups. Consequently there is little information available in the Irish context on the difficulties that the grandparents of such unions may incur in maintaining relationships with their grandchildren, and the research at hand will attempt to provide some insight into this area.

11 Entry into lone parenthood can be through separation or divorce, being a single parent or through widowhood. For the purpose of this section, only the figures relating to single parents are relevant as widows, separated and divorced parents have and retain automatic guardianship.

Although parents who are not married do not benefit from the Constitutional protection for the family (*State (Nicolaou) v An Bord Uchtala* [1996] IR567), Shannon (2008:288) outlines that non-marital children have the same 'natural and imprescriptible' rights as marital children. The Status of Children Act of 1987 abolished all discrimination between marital and non-marital children. The equal treatment of non-marital children pertains mainly towards inheritance and all relationships, including those between aunts, uncles and grandparents, are construed without reference to the marital status of the parents. Additionally, with the enactment of The Children's Act 1997, people who have acted *in loco parentis* to the child have the right to apply to the court for an order for access. It is evident that the approach of the legislature has been that there is no automatic right of contact between grandparents and children within both married and unmarried unions but it recognises that contact with grandparents may be in the best interests of the child in particular circumstances.

3.5 Conclusion

As this chapter has highlighted, the law in Ireland is designed around the perceived importance and preservation of the 'traditional nuclear family'. While the ban on divorce ensured the preservation of the nuclear family, it did not prevent marriages from breaking down. The gradual increase in marital breakdown and the increasing number of unregulated familial arrangements led for calls for the constitutional ban on divorce to be removed. Despite failing at the first attempt, the changes in legislation introduced following the second divorce referendum in 1995 granted the dissolution of a marriage and set in motion the legislation needed to protect ongoing relationships between the parent and child.

This piece of legislation, the Family Law (Divorce) Act 1996, did not offer any protection or regulation for grandparents' relationships with their grandchildren. This chapter outlined how the protection of grandparents' rights to access their grandchildren came about later with the introduction of the Children's Act of 1997. For the first

time, this piece of legislation gives a person who has acted *in loco parentis* to the child ‘the right to apply to the court for an order for access’.

This chapter also outlined how arrangements for children are made upon divorce. It has been demonstrated that decisions regarding the child are made in accordance with the welfare principle. However, the strength and dominance of the welfare principle is weakened by the presence and superiority of the Irish Constitution. Providing for the best interests of the child while governed by the supremacy of the married family can create an ever-mounting tension between the rights of individual family members and the rights of the family.

There is a need to re-examine the role of the law in the creation, maintenance and termination of family relationships in the light of the considerable diversity in household structures and family formation in Ireland (Fahey and Field 2008). While the above description of the legal context of divorce in Ireland paints a picture of complex, shifting and sometimes restrictive processes, a major concern can be discerned. The current legal framework is built around the nuclear family and is potentially detrimental to the maintenance of significant relationships that exist outside of the nuclear family. The involvement of extended family, in particular grandparents, in supporting parents post-separation or divorce, is not new. However, access to and contact with grandchildren is not always simple when families become fragmented. There is a need for the law to recognise and protect these relationships where they serve the best interests of the child.

4. Research Methods

4.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to acquire a deeper understanding of how inter-generational relationships are affected by divorce or separation in the 'middle' generation, and, in particular, to explore the various roles played by grandparents in their children's and grandchildren's lives after the divorce or separation. After a reiteration of the key research questions, this chapter outlines and justifies the methods used to carry out the study, key characteristics of the sample, the approach taken to data analysis and the limitations of the research.

4.2 Research Questions

This study set out to address a significant gap in the literature on divorce and separation in Ireland. The main objective of the study was to explore the experiences and practical consequences of family break-up from the perspective of grandparents, a group rarely involved in research on divorce or separation. In other words, the study sought to place grandparents centre-stage in investigating a topic (breakdown of marital and non-marital couple relationships) where grandparents are rarely considered. Through this focus on grandparents, we intended to acquire an insight into intergenerational family dynamics in the post-separation context. We had a special interest in investigating the social, economic, emotional and practical assistance provided by grandparents of divorced families to their children and grandchildren. The research also sought to gain a deeper understanding of situations where the role of grandparents is transformed in a direction that the grandparent experiences as detrimental, in particular situations where contact with grandchildren diminishes or, in extreme cases, is denied. To the extent that is possible in a qualitative study with a small, non-representative sample, we also intended to develop recommendations for policies to support grandparents affected by their adult child's divorce or separation.

The specific aims of the study were stated in Chapter 1, but it is worth reiterating them here:

- Providing an overview of the Irish and international literature on grandparents of divorced families.
- Exploring the experiences of grandparents following their children's divorce or separation, with a specific focus on how the relationship with their children and grandchildren has changed.
- Characterising the relationships of grandparents and their grandchildren following divorce or separation.
- Exploring whether, in the Irish context, the relationships of paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents with their grandchildren differ following divorce or separation
- Scoping the range of inputs (social, personal, economic, practical and other) that grandparents make into their children's and grandchildren's lives following relationship breakdown.
- Identifying the challenges and rewards (and possible support needs) for grandparents who become more heavily involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following divorce or separation.
- Exploring the sentiments of grandparents who have less contact with their grandchildren than they would like to following divorce/separation.
- Characterising policies that could assist both grandparents who are heavily involved in supporting post-divorce families and grandchildren in particular, and those who are seeking more extensive contact with their grandchildren.

The first objective was met through an analysis of the relevant secondary literature, outlined in Chapter Two. Chapters Five to Seven endeavour to meet the remaining objectives.

4.3 Design and Methods

The central task in any research project is to 'match' the research questions with the appropriate research methods i.e. appropriate

ways of answering the questions. In choosing research methods, the degree to which different methods are realistic (usable, not excessively costly and so on) also has to be gauged. Given that the aims and objectives outlined above necessitate exploration of the interpretations and meanings that individuals (in our case, grandparents) attach to their experiences, a qualitative approach was used for the study. Qualitative research 'involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach', and qualitative researchers seek 'to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people attribute to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000: 3).

The adoption of a qualitative approach is also appropriate on the grounds that the topics outlined above are still poorly understood and under-theorised, certainly in the Irish context but also more generally. In Ireland, this study is the first of its kind and for this reason it involved extensive 'mapping out' the terrain of the topic. In other words, we needed to gain an understanding of the diversity and nature (quality) of phenomena related to grandparents in contexts of divorce and separation as the first logical step in the process of exploring and understanding the area. It is hoped that further qualitative and quantitative research will benefit from both the methodological lessons gained, and the substantive findings set out in the following chapters.

While it is possible, with the help of Census data, to build a profile of divorced and separated individuals in Ireland, it is not possible to build a profile of grandparents with a divorced or separated child as this information is currently not collected. The absence of a sampling frame appropriate for a quantitative study constituted an additional rationale for rejecting a quantitative approach. Given the lack of information about this group in Ireland and the absence of a realistic sampling frame, it was not possible to access a random, representative sample of respondents, thus further reducing the practicability and value of a quantitative approach.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews as opposed to structured or unstructured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate method of data collection for the study. Semi-structured interviews

both impose a measure of order on the interviews and at the same time allow a high degree of flexibility. They give respondents the opportunity to speak freely about their experiences and allow the researcher to modify the questions in the context of the particular interview. In contrast to completely unstructured interviews, the semi-structured approach gives greater scope for researchers to make comparisons between respondents' answers during the data analysis as all respondents have answered a similar set of questions. This approach has been used to good effect in a number of other studies (Dolbin-MacNab 2006; Williamson, et al. 2003).

We decided against a purely inductive, grounded theory approach, as there already is a sizeable body of research on the topic of grandparents' roles and a smaller, but still reasonably substantial literature on grandparents in divorced and separated families (as is evident from the literature review in Chapter Two). The interview guide was developed on the basis of findings from previous studies and was designed to allow respondents a certain amount of flexibility in sharing their views and experiences about their experiences of the divorce or separation process. The sequencing of the questions was designed to put respondents at ease (Darlington and Scott 2002). The interview guide addressed six key issues:

1. The respondent's views of the role of grandparents in general;
2. The respondent's relationships with his/her child, the child's partner and grandchild(ren) before and after the divorce or separation;
3. Support and care that the respondent had provided to their child and grandchildren during and after the divorce or separation;
4. The impact of the divorce/separation on the respondent;
5. Use of formal support and services, if any, and views on these;
6. The respondent's attitude towards divorce, and whether this had changed as a result of their child's divorce/separation.

The full interview guide can be found in Appendix Five.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin. All relevant ethical issues were taken into account when conducting the research. One of the most important ethical principles which all researchers should follow is to ensure that the well-being and interests of those participating in the research are safeguarded (British Sociological Association 2002). Every effort was made to ensure that all respondents gave 'informed consent' to take part in the research. Following the guidelines of Stringer and Dwyer (2005), all interviewees were:

- Informed of the nature and purpose of the study
- Asked whether they wanted to participate in the research
- Asked if they agreed to be recorded and granted permission to use verbatim quotes from the interview
- Assured of confidentiality
- Advised that they could withdraw at any stage of the interview without giving a reason and refrain from answering any questions
- Asked to sign a short consent form confirming their consent to the above

In addition to ensuring that all respondents were happy to take part in the research and understood the purpose and nature of the study, information on a support group for people experiencing marital, relationship and family problems was provided to all interviewees.

Full documentation of the ethics procedures including information sheets and consent forms can be found in Appendices Three and Four.

4.5 Access to Respondents and Conduct of Interviews

In order to ensure a high degree of heterogeneity in the sample and in order to sample for characteristics that previous research has shown to be particularly influential, the study team devised a stratified sampling framework to guide the accumulation of the study sample. This framework was designed to ensure that both maternal and paternal grandparents would be interviewed, each group incorporating individuals with varying levels of involvement following the relationship breakdown (increased, unchanged and reduced). Table 4.1 outlines these proposed characteristics of the sample.

Table 4.1: Proposed Sample Characteristics

Relationship to grandchildren	Grandparents' level of involvement following relationship breakdown			Total
	Increased	Unchanged	Reduced	
Maternal line	7	4	4	15
Paternal line	5	4	6	15
Total	12	8	10	30

In June and July 2008, we made preliminary contact with a number of state and non-profit organisations that were engaged in the provision of services to families and individuals undergoing divorce or separation, lone parents' organisations and also a small number of organisations representing older people. All of these organisations expressed their interest in the proposed study and their willingness to assist in the process of accumulating the study sample. This willingness stemmed from their unanimously stated belief that the issues we proposed to study were important and relevant on the basis of their experience of working with families and in particular with grandparents who had been affected by divorce and separation.

Recruitment for the study began in August 2008 and fieldwork was conducted between August and October. A variety of avenues were

used in order to gain access to respondents. Contact was made via email or telephone with over 30 organisations. Flyers and posters were produced and distributed to organisations that provide support to divorced or separated adults and to clubs and associations known to have a high proportion of older members (see a full list in Appendix 1). In addition, an advertisement was placed in a national newspaper (*The Irish Times*) inviting potential respondents to contact the research team. An article about the study (in which it was stated that the research team was looking for respondents) was published in an older person's association and a lone parent association newsletter.

Recruitment for the study proved more difficult than initially envisaged. While all of the gatekeepers approached were co-operative and interested in the research project, some of the various approaches utilised yielded no respondents for the study. Gatekeepers' lack of success in recruiting respondents related to a number of factors, including the time of the year (peak holiday season), a lack of time on respondents' part, or unwillingness of potential respondents to discuss issues relating to their child's divorce or separation. In addition, a number of gatekeepers thought it inappropriate to approach some individuals known to them due to the sensitive nature of the issue; this was a particularly acute consideration if the relationship breakdown had occurred in recent months. In spite of the difficulties encountered in recruiting respondents, desired sample size and composition were achieved.

The majority of the interviews took place in respondents' own homes; two took place in respondents' place of work; and three in cafes or coffee shops. These locations were chosen on the basis of the respondents' preferences and convenience and also reflect the predilection of qualitative researchers for conducting interviews in naturalistic surroundings whenever possible. Six couples were interviewed jointly and one couple separately, in each case in accordance with their wishes. The remaining 17 respondents were interviewed one-on-one. The interviews were audio-recorded subject to interviewees' consent, which was given in all instances without reservations. Duration of

interviews ranged from 30 to 120 minutes. All respondents received a €20 gift voucher as a token of appreciation for taking part in the study. During a small number of interviews, respondents became emotional or upset, whereupon the interviewers asked whether the individual wished to terminate the interview or to take a break. However, no respondents wished to do so and all appeared to see the interview as a cathartic exercise, or an opportunity to highlight the challenges involved as potential policy issues.

4.6 Key Sample Characteristics

In a qualitative study, it is not possible or desirable to determine the precise sample size *ex ante* as the final sample size reflects non-numerical considerations, first and foremost the stage at which the saturation point is reached. This refers to the point in the interviews at which no further significant insights or additional themes are arising, hence constituting a rationale for drawing the interview process to a close. However, it is possible to make an educated estimate of the number of respondents at which this point is reached, and in this case the estimate of 30 respondents was accurate (final number of respondents being 31).

Determining, before the interviews, whether the involvement of these respondents had decreased, increased or remained static was difficult. With hindsight, we realised that these three categories were somewhat crude and unhelpful since in all instances the relationship with the grandchild had undergone some element of change that could not always be captured by these three headings. It was virtually impossible to discreetly slot the interviewees into particular groups before the interviews were carried out. After the interviews had been carried out, we were able to categorise respondents by change in involvement as well as by lineage, yielding the sample breakdown contained in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2: Actual Sample Characteristics by Lineage of Grandparent and by Level of Contact with Grandchildren Following Divorce or Separation

Relationship to grandchildren	Grandparents' level of involvement following relationship breakdown			Total
	Reduced	Unchanged	Increased	
Maternal line	3	1	7	11
Paternal line	8	5	6	19
Both*	-	-	1	1
Total	11	6	14	31

*Respondent had a son and a daughter who had been divorced/separated.

Comparing the intended and the actual sample composition (Tables 4.1 and 4.2), it is evident that the actual sample reflects the intended sample to a very satisfactory degree. It is important to note that we did not set out to religiously follow the sampling framework; rather, it acted as a broad guide to achieving a heterogeneous sample that was not overly biased towards one 'type' of grandparent or another. The share of paternal grandparents in the final sample is higher than in the original framework. This is largely due to the fact that paternal grandparents approached the research team considerably more readily; this fact can in turn partly be related to the grievances that some of these respondents had about the process and outcome of divorce or separation for their children and themselves. However, this sample characteristic does not constitute a weakness in the context of a study like ours as the purpose of the study is to characterise issues and phenomena, and the issues that paternal grandparents face are highly complex, calling for elaboration in the light of a larger number of cases.

The numbers of respondents falling into the other primary categories of reduced, unchanged and increased contact are also broadly in line with the desired composition. Three were custodial parents to their grandchildren, whereas another three were denied access to their grandchild and as such had had no relationship with them for a

number of years. It is also of interest to note that sixteen respondents lived in close geographical proximity to their grandchildren. Nine lived at a distance of at least a two hour car journey; in one instance the grandchild resided outside Ireland.

At the outset of the study, the research team, aware of the preponderance of studies on grandmothers, expressed its commitment to achieving a gender balance of grandfathers and grandmothers. We did, however, anticipate that a greater number of grandmothers would come forward to take part in the research and decided that should this occur, we would deliberately boost the sample of grandfathers to ensure that we interview a minimum of eight grandfathers (see Table 4.3). We also ensured that respondents came from both affluent and deprived areas, assessed impressionistically through the general neighbourhood where respondents lived. However, we made the decision not to ask questions about income, education, occupation or other social class indicators as these would have increased respondent burden significantly and would have deterred some people from participating; for this reason we are not able to divide the sample into different socio-economic strata. These measures and steps ensured that we did not accumulate an excessively homogeneous sample but instead accumulated a diverse group of respondents who provided us with insights into the heterogeneity of experiences of grandparents in the post-relationship breakdown situation in Ireland.

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

Table 4.4 indicates that the relationship status of the respondents' children was almost evenly divided between those who had been married and divorced; those who had been married and separated; and those whose non-marital relationships had come to an end.

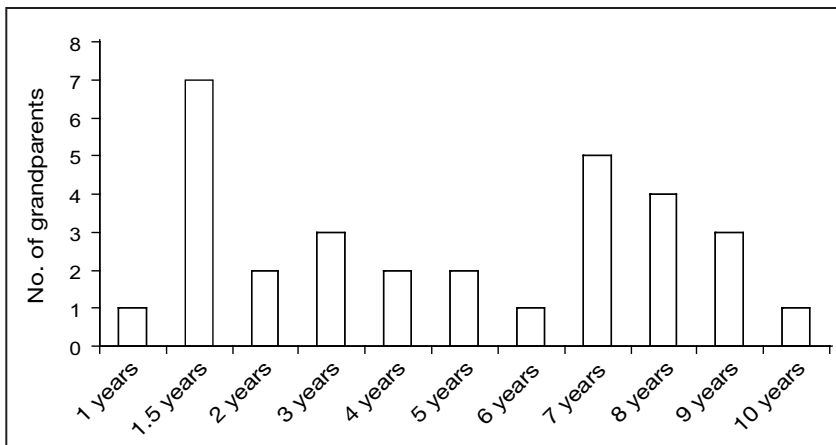
This distribution was advantageous because it facilitated analysis of experiences in the light of the adult child's relationship status, a characteristic that was important for instance for understanding the behaviours of some grandparents in relation to securing ongoing access to their grandchildren.

	Male	Female	Total
Divorced	6	4	10
Separated	4	5	9
Never married and separated	10	3	13
Total	20	12	32*

* One respondent had two children who had experienced relationship breakdown, hence figures relate to 32 children.

Nineteen respondents lived in rural, semi-rural or small town areas (population $\leq 5,000$) and twelve in urban areas. The respondents ranged in age from early 50s to early 80s. The length of time since the divorce or separation of their child (illustrated in Figure 4.1 below) ranged from a year to ten years, thus yielding a wide distribution of time since the occurrence of relationship breakdown.

Figure 4.1 Number of years since child's divorce/separation by number of grandparents



It is also of interest to note that, as Table 4.5 below illustrates, eleven of the respondents had themselves undergone separation or divorce. In this regard, our sample differs from the norm for their cohort where divorce and separation are relatively uncommon experiences. A possible reason for this sample characteristic is the greater willingness of individuals who have had personal experience of divorce or separation to share their thoughts on a topic that is, for many members of their cohort, still subject to social reservations and a sense of guardedness and privacy, in some cases even shame.

Married	Widowed	Divorced/ Separated	Divorced/ Separated and Re-part- nered	Total
16	4	6	5	31

4.7 Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and analysed by using the framework approach as advanced by Pope, Ziebland and Mays (2000:116). They have argued that this approach is particularly relevant for applied or social policy-related qualitative research in which the aims and objectives of the research have been identified *a priori*. The five stages of this approach include:

1. *Familiarisation* of the raw data to identify key ideas and recurrent themes.
2. *Identification of a thematic framework*. Based on *a priori* questions raised in the literature and the specific aims and objectives of the study in addition to key issues raised by participants in the interviews, the data is divided into 'manageable chunks for subsequent retrieval and exploration'.
3. *Indexing*. The thematic framework is applied to the entire data set by annotating the transcripts with codes.

4. *Charting*. The data is rearranged according to the thematic framework and summarised in charts.
5. *Mapping and interpretation*. Key concepts, typologies and associations between themes are outlined.

Each author undertook the first step of analysis (familiarisation with the raw data) independently. Step two involved, firstly, dividing the data into three main ‘chunks’ which came to constitute the three core chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven). This division was influenced and informed both by the structure of the interview guide (which had been in turn informed by the literature review) and by the interview data. Each of the three authors took main responsibility for conducting the analysis for one of the chapters. This was done both manually and using NVivo 8 (QSR International). Within these chapters, diversity of phenomena relating to the topic was charted; this was distilled into main themes, sub-themes, categories and (where relevant) typologies; and possible linkages between these and grandparent characteristics were scoped. Several meetings were held during which the chapter structure, key themes and the main thrust of argumentation were discussed and agreed upon by all research team members. Each author also read, revised and commented on at least two different drafts of each chapter, thereby facilitating the forging of consensus over the key findings.

In presenting our analysis we use a small number of tables and figures, but for the most part adhere to the conventional mode of data exposition in qualitative research, namely the extensive use of (anonymised, edited) verbatim quotes. This is done both in order to back up argumentation and in order to demonstrate respect for the ‘voice’ of the grandparents who participated in the study. The findings chapters do contain a small number of tables that specify the number of respondents falling into particular categories. While specifying numbers of respondents relating to particular categories, types and behaviours is a practice disapproved of by some qualitative researchers, we felt that this was helpful, if interpreted with caution. Readers should therefore bear in mind that the purpose of this study

was not to test hypotheses and hence the tables should not be read as seeking to demonstrate relationships between variables (for instance forms of support and ‘types’ of grandparents providing them).

4.8 Limitations of the Study

All research has limitations; no single study can answer all the relevant and interesting questions that occur in relation to a topic, especially if the topic is as complex as grandparents’ role in divorced and separated families. This last section of the chapter highlights the limitations of the study that should be borne in mind when interpreting the results.

As stated above, grandparents whose children have experienced a divorce or separation are a “hidden group”, and there was no existing sampling frame allowing for probability sampling methods to be used. As a result, a purposive non-probability sampling approach was used. Coupled with the small sample size, this means that it is not possible to generalise the results of the study to the broader population of grandparents whose children have divorced or separated. A related limitation pertains to the inability to draw causal inferences between dependent and independent variables, such as the degree of support provided by grandparent and his or her geographical distance from grandchildren; in order to yield firm conclusions about relationships between variables, a much larger, random sample would have been necessary. However, we were able to conjecture and hypothesise about possible relationships between variables; it is up to other, hypothesis-testing studies to test the validity of these conjectures.

The method of self-selection used for the study may mean that some of the individuals interviewed were “outlier cases” rather than “typical cases”. In other words, it is possible that individuals interviewed wished to talk about their experiences as they were experiencing a greater number of difficulties as a result of their child’s divorce or separation than may have been the case if a random sampling technique was used.

This study focused exclusively on grandparents' views and experiences of their child's divorce or separation process and their interpretations of its impacts. Some other studies exploring the role of grandparents in the divorce or separation process have also conducted interviews with other family members, including children and grandchildren (Ferguson, et al. 2004; Schutter, et al. 1997; Wood and Liossis 2007). However, our focus on grandparents alone is not a serious limitation because this study did not aim to ascertain the 'truth' about the generational dynamics by triangulating findings, but rather sought to understand the respondents' perceptions of their role within the process and the impact of the process on their well-being. In other words, it was not necessary to interview other family members in order to answer the research questions outlined above as they were firmly trained on gaining an understanding of grandparents' experiences and subjective perceptions.

Despite these limitations, the study makes valuable contributions towards research on the role of grandparents in divorced and separated families, both in the Irish context and as part of the international literature. As will be seen in the next chapters, this study provides novel insights into the implications of divorce or separation on the lives of grandparents who find themselves in a new and, for many, demanding and stressful situation.

5. Generational Family Dynamics in the Context of Divorce and Separation

5.1 Introduction

This chapter draws on grandparents' accounts of how their relationships with other adults were impacted by their son's or daughter's relationship breakdown and dissolution. The focus here lies on relationships that the respondents had *direct, first-hand*, experience of i.e. relationships that they personally had with their adult child; their child's former partner or spouse; their own spouse; and within the extended family network. This chapter alludes to the respondents' relationships with their former in-laws' families and new partners who may have entered the lives of their adult children and their children's former partners. The emphasis in all cases is on analysing the impact of divorce or separation on these relationships. The chapter also contains a short discussion of some other sets of relationships that the respondents had only *indirect* experience of, namely their perceptions of the impact of divorce and separation on the relationship between the divorced or separated child and his or her siblings. The respondents' relationship with their grandchildren is referred to only tangentially where it features as a prominent part of accounts of adult relationships; Chapter Six includes a detailed analysis of the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren.

As the earlier chapters of this book have made clear, all our data stems from a single group of respondents i.e. grandparents whose son or daughter had experienced divorce or separation. In other words, we rely on the grandparents' experiences and interpretations of their own relationships and relationships other than their own ones, such as the one between their child who has experienced relationship breakdown and his or her siblings. This, as was pointed out in Chapter Two, is a limitation of the study: we have not been able to 'validate' the respondents' interpretations through examining them in the light of other people's views. However, it is of intrinsic value and interest to

gain an understanding of grandparents' experiences and interpretations of these relationships and there is no reason to doubt the veracity of the accounts of their subjective experiences and emotions they felt during and after the breakdown of their child's relationship, and the reverberations of the breakdown into their relationships. The data outlined here gives us interesting and valuable insights into extended family and non-family relationships in contexts where divorce or separation have affected the 'middle' generation (and in some cases also the grandparental generation¹²).

5.2 Grandparental generation's relationships with their adult children

The most striking feature of the data pertaining to the relationships between the 'adult' generations, i.e. the grandparental and parental generations, is the extent and diversity of supports provided by the grandparents to their adult children. These supports are a striking feature of our data partly because the interview guide (informed by literature in the field) included questions and prompts relating to such supports. However, the quantity and detail of interview material relating to supports gives us grounds for arguing that this was a genuine and prominent feature of the lived experiences of our respondents and therefore would have emerged in the course of completely unstructured interviews also.

Data analysis revealed that the diverse supports given by the grandparental generation to their adult children during and after the relationship breakdown processes fall into five main categories i.e. qualitatively different types of help, care and support:

- financial
- practical: provision of housing (co-residence)
- practical: child care-related
- practical: legal and advisory
- emotional

12 Eleven of the respondents had been divorced or separated themselves.

Each type of support is analysed in detail below, and overlaps between different types of support are also discussed. Table 5.1 below summarises the number of respondents who had provided different types of support by lineage and their adult child's former marital status.

Table 5.1 Number of grandparents providing different types of support provided by grandparents to the middle generation by lineage and former married / non-married status of adult child

Type of Support	Maternal (N = 12)*		Paternal (N=20)*		Total
	Daughter formerly married (N=9)	Daughter formerly <i>not</i> married (N=3)	Son formerly married (N=10)	Son formerly <i>not</i> married (N=10)	
Financial	7		8	5	20
Co-residence	2		3	8	13
Child care	5	2		10	17
Legal and advisory	2		3	3	8
Emotional	6		7	7	20

* Total N=32 because one respondent had two separated adult children.

Caution should be exercised when interpreting the contents of Table 5.1 as a number of factors, in addition to lineage and former married/unmarried status of the adult child influenced the provision of supports. In particular, it should be noted that the custodial grandparents (of whom two were maternal) had very limited contact with their adult children due to the children's serious addiction problems; one maternal grandparent's daughter had passed away and another's had cut off all contact with her mother, hence making contributions to their adult children's lives impossible; one maternal grandmother's adult child was living abroad. In other words, the proportion of maternal grandparents who were in a position to offer help and support to

their children was smaller than the number of paternal grandparents. Nonetheless, it is of interest to note that financial, childcare-related and emotional support emerge as the most frequently provided types of support, with approximately two-thirds of grandparents having provided these. The most heavily supported group of adult children are separated sons who had not been married to their former partners; it is particularly striking that all grandparents who had sons in this category had provided them assistance with childcare at some point following their separation (although one grandparent in this category had subsequently been denied access to the grandchildren).

Each type of support is analysed in detail below, and overlaps between different types of support are also discussed.

5.2.1 Financial support

From Table 5.1 above, it appears that similar proportions of sons and daughters received financial support from their parents following relationship breakdown. However, there was a difference in the extent of and reasons for financial support provided to sons and daughters. The financial implications of the relationship breakdown for sons, particularly those had been married, were in many cases characterised as drastic:

‘He [son] just lost everything out of it. (...) He was left without a thing’

(Respondent 1, grandmother, married son¹³)

...I had to [give him] financial [support] as well, because he didn’t have anything the poor thing. He had literally nothing... Whatever he had he put an awful lot of money into the house with her and all that, I mean they started off as any married couple would... And he helped her with the house and all of that so... he had nothing. Eventually he had to... start from scratch again.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

13 ‘Married’ and ‘unmarried’ refer to the son’s or daughter’s marital status prior to their relationship breakdown i.e. the intention is to enable the reader to distinguish between quotes that refer to marital and non-marital relationships and contexts in the middle generation.

Legal costs associated with divorce proceedings and gaining access to or (joint) custody of children in some cases had necessitated direct and indirect, short-term and long-term financial assistance to sons. In many cases these transfers were, at least on the part of the grandparents, thought of as 'loans' that would be paid back at a later, unspecified time:

...I found that he was struggling with his solicitor's fees because he...went back to court twice to get [grandchild's name] and those bills I think were, the first one was 1,400 and the second one was 1,600 or something like because he had barristers... He needed to have that support, that legal support. So, around that time...we would have helped him out any way we can...he never took any financial support off us...if he owed you a few bob you'd say look hold onto it and pay your bills and sort us out later...

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

In the following case, the acceptance that the 'loan' may not be repaid by the son was combined with resentment that the son's former wife did not bear what the respondent thought would be her fair share of the legal costs. This also resonates with findings outlined in Chapter Seven on the perception of many paternal grandparents that the legal processes around divorce and separation are more favourable towards mothers:

R: [W]e paid his mortgage a few times for him...We lent him money a few times and he hadn't to pay it back to us... we must have lent him ten or twelve thousand... We told him if he ever comes good he can give it back to us and if he don't we'll do without it.

R2F: ...the courts really skinned him. She's getting free legal aid, and she's just getting everything...

(Respondents 10 and 11, grandfather and grandmother, married son)

Provision of extensive financial support by grandparents was not exclusively related to paternal lineage and the (former) marital status of the son: the employment status and general financial circumstances of the son played an important role, too. This respondent's son was relatively young and due to low-paid employment was struggling to meet financial obligations towards his child:

...they would have lived with me for a bit...maintenance money was...sometimes...in back arrears...I would have covered that stuff.

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

However, financial support was not limited to paternal grandparents or those whose child was experiencing financial hardship. Very extensive material support of varying kinds was given by several maternal and paternal grandparents who could be characterized as comfortable middle class. These gifts towards house purchase, holidays, cars and other goods and services such as education costs were made in order to help the adult child cope with the financial fallout from relationship breakdown but were primarily motivated by the desire to enable the child and grandchildren to maintain a lifestyle that he or she had become accustomed to, or was expected to adhere to, because of their background. In the following case, paternal grandparents had contributed towards the purchase of a house, school fees and holidays:

R: I helped him financially.

R2: Purchase of a house.

R: And I gave him something before that, I can't remember what.

R2: And I assisted him with the education of the children.

I: Okay. So if we think about the kind of...inputs that you have made they certainly include some financial...

R2: Oh very definitely, yeah.

R: Holiday, I mean holidays...Paid for them.

(Respondents 30 and 31, couple, married son)

A high proportion of daughters, too, were at least initially relying on monetary support from their parents. The need for this arose in most cases, not from legal costs, child maintenance and the expense of maintaining two households (as in the case of sons), but from the fact that the daughter was not in paid employment and had to wait until divorce settlement or maintenance agreement had been reached:

... there was initially financial support...until she got her allowance, her settlement... we helped her with the rent of a house, and then she got her settlement and she bought a house...

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

Even in situations where no direct monetary gifts were made (for instance due to the fact that the son or daughter had a sufficient degree of financial security thanks to a well-paid job), the expenditure by grandparents on items such as clothing, hobbies and toys for their grandchildren, and occasional large outlays such as holidays, was often considerable and would not have been captured through a straightforward question about monetary gifts as can be seen from the following exchange:

I: And financially did you have to help him in anyway?

R2F: Not really, not really, no.

R1M: No. Well, I mean they both [son and ex-partner] have fairly well-paid jobs.

R2F: Now...I would buy...an awful lot of toys.

R1M: Well then yes, we spent a lot of money on...toys and that kind of thing (...) we buy a lot of clothes.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, son not married)

...certainly financially we still help her out. As regards the children's clothing...even things like books, the [grand] daughter does ballet...we certainly would still financially help her out. Pay for holidays...

(Respondent 26, grandmother, daughter married)

5.2.2 Practical support: provision of housing (co-residence)

Financial obligations, the sale of the family home or relinquishing it to the former partner or spouse was the reason why several grandparents had accommodated their son or daughter for varying lengths of time following separation. As Table 5.1 indicated, co-residence was very common among paternal grandparents whose son had not been married, and was relatively less common among maternal grandparents and those paternal grandparents whose son had been married. This in turn is partly linked to a number of characteristics of the unmarried sons, such as their young age, low degree of economic independence, and, for some, the brevity and instability of the partnerships that had resulted in the birth of their children. Co-residence easily spilled over into extensive involvement of the grandparent(s) with the trauma and stress that accompanies separation and divorce, especially in cases where there was on-going conflict between the separating couple:

...I think he really leant on me a lot...I had three pretty awful years when he came back to live me. We never knew what brick that she [son's ex-wife] was going to throw at him...

(Respondent 14, grandmother, son married)

Co-residence with an adult child also placed several practical, often rather awkward, restrictions on the parent who had already become accustomed to living alone or with a partner only. The paternal grandmother quoted above and a maternal grandmother elaborated:

...he came back to live with me...he's a rotten communicator...I did my best to give him support but...every day I used to be tense...the phone calls would come from the children and he would be absolutely – it was very awkward for me, it was my phone and my friends would be ringing and...he would be there tensed up for these phone calls and if a friend of mine rang at that hour I'd go oooooohhhh...So that was a pretty tense period but I was there to try and support him as best I could.

(Respondent 14, grandmother, son married)

...she's not the easiest to live with either. I found that after [she came back to live] here for [several] years. It's very difficult to have two people in the one kitchen, and with the children...

(Respondent 26, grandmother, maternal, daughter married)

Most grandparents stated that co-residence with their adult child was far from an ideal option, and one that was imposed on both parties due to limited financial means, short-term lack of alternative housing, an increase in child care responsibilities, or all of these. For some paternal grandparents, there was the additional consideration of being in a position to offer a stable place where the son could bring his child(ren). While the grandmother quoted below had offered this arrangement initially as a short-term solution, it had become a long-term situation that caused considerable stress and tension for her. It is evident from the quote below that this grandmother was somewhat torn between the sense of duty towards her son and grandchild, and the deleterious consequences of the situation for her own well-being:

...he is living at home; he is [in his thirties]...I don't think he should be living at home with his parents, he doesn't think he should be living at home with his parents. He's not in a job where he'll be on a high salary so for as long as he needs it, the house is there...He's a hard one to live with because he's very quiet, very withdrawn...he tends to have mood swings...he drinks too much for my liking. But he is extremely attentive to [his daughter] and...spends good quality time with her...I would prefer if he was living [in] a home of his own that was suitable enough to bring [his daughter]...two friends of his had said he could have a bed in their home and I said look you have to think of [granddaughter], you have to have somewhere stable...if this ends up in a court situation, the court will want you to have a stable place to bring her. So I said... for her alone you should come back and it took coaxing and he said okay I'll come back for a couple of months and Jesus he's still there...

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

Further elaboration on the negative consequences of support provision for grandparents is contained in Chapter Seven.

5.2.3 Practical support: child care-related

Child care-related support took many different forms, ranging from extensive provision of childcare to young children to less intensive assistance with caring for children of different ages. Unsurprisingly, this form of support was most frequent for grandparents with young grandchildren, although not all of them were heavily involved in this form of support (some had no or only limited access to their young grandchildren and others had chosen to limit their involvement for other reasons such as personal problems or employment). Co-parenting by grandparents in most cases took place alongside strong parental involvement, although some grandparents (especially custodial ones) substituted for the parents.

The provision of childcare-related support by grandparents (predominantly but not exclusively grandmothers) was most frequent among those whose son had not been married; indeed, all respondents falling into this category had provided varying amount of childcare assistance at some point or on an ongoing basis (although one grandparent in this category had subsequently been denied all access to her grandchildren by the custodial parent). Crucially, in some cases, these grandparents had taught or were seeking to teach their adult children how to parent i.e. conveyed core parenting skills. Over time, the son or daughter was in many cases able to increase their role with the effect that the grandparents were conversely in a position to reduce their involvement somewhat. It could perhaps be said that the adult child had undertaken an ‘apprenticeship’ in parenting under the guidance of his parents:

R2F: [Son said] that he felt that we taught him how to parent, how to play with [his daughter]...

R1M: That’s right, yes.

R2F: ...I think he...used to nearly panic [when he had to look after his daughter]

R1M: What was he going to do with her?

(...)

R2F: [Granddaughter] loves being around him and I think that's really positive...did you notice that [son's name] loves taking [daughter] now?

R1M: Oh he does, yeah.

R2F: ...they have great fun together...So our role would be lessened...and the more it's lessened the better in the sense that the more he takes on.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

In this case, the decision to become very heavily involved in the care of a young child had also been motivated by the desire to 'free up' both parents to work without taking recourse to what was perceived as poor quality care in crèches. More importantly, however, these grandparents had concerns about the fact that the grandchild had not been born into a stable nuclear family context and felt that they had an important role to play in ensuring that the child was well looked after, educationally stimulated and emotionally secure, a theme that is also elaborated on in Chapter Six:

I think it's our style, it's in our value system...it takes a family to [raise a child] and this little one wasn't planned as such... the young couple were only together for about three months before [girlfriend became pregnant] and we felt [that it was] a little risky [for the grandchild]. So we wanted to give them [extra support].

(Respondent 3, grandmother, unmarried son)

However, the developmental trajectory of the adult child towards parenthood was not in all cases straightforward. Some of the respondents attributed to their adult children characteristics that were not in keeping with their status as parents. This grandmother portrayed her adult son as being like a brother to his own child, and herself as the mother to both of them:

[my son] still lives at home...I give [him] a lot of help with [grandson] because [my son]...is good with him, but... [grandchild] is like a brother to [my son] rather than a son... they're arguing over cartoons or a football match...I...would be like the mother to the two of them... and if they were... fighting over [something] I'd say – [son's name], for God's sake, you're the daddy. He has to be reminded...

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

In other cases, the respondents felt that the behaviour of their adult children, while in many ways corresponding to that of a responsible parent, still left a lot to be desired and had to be 'patched up' by them. However, despite these irritations the grandmother quoted below did not think that the quality of her relationship with her son had deteriorated as a result of co-residence and his failure in some respects to pull his weight as a parent:

...he tends not...to pick up after [grandchild]...her clothes... I don't regularly go into his room but when I do go in I say 'oh gees, there's clothes of [granddaughter's name] still sitting on the floor'...there's a frustration around it. But I also don't think my relationship with him has worsened [because of that].

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

Extensive involvement in childcare and in acting as the 'bridge' between the separated parents did in some cases spill over into excessive responsibility and reliance on the grandparents, especially paternal grandmothers. This respondent felt that her son's time with his children had come to revolve around her and to depend on her to an extent that was unwelcome and burdensome:

...I started taking responsibility for his relationship with his children...Because it was like "well ma, we'll be down on Sunday", and so I had to be there on Sunday no matter what happened...I was making the dinners and he wasn't doing

anything...he didn't go [out] with them...so the highlight of the [children's] visits [to their father] became that they came to see me...

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

This extensive involvement in childcare was not entirely voluntary and welcome for the grandmother, and in the long run the excessive reliance on her to facilitate contact between her sons and their children resulted in conflict and a vicious circle of accusations, guilt and deteriorating quality of relationships:

My relationship with [my sons] is quite fraught sometimes... I do try to nag them to do something different [and tell them that] you really need to have more...contact with your child and this is going to have an impact on them and I nag them quite a lot and that affects the relationship...then they make me feel guilty. I make them feel guilty then. You know what all those emotions [do] to relationships...It makes your relationship difficult...

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

Another grandmother had become aware of the negative consequences of excessive involvement in co-parenting and decided to take action to guard against the danger of such involvement:

...for a while I felt I was trying to compensate for their lack of parenting and now I'm not doing that any longer. I've withdrawn from that and I think the danger is that you would get hooked into that role and stay with it.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

However, resolutions against excessive involvement were not always a realistic option for grandparents who co-resided with their adult child or otherwise acted as the indispensable 'bridge' between their children and grandchildren.

5.2.4 Practical support: Legal and advisory

A small number of grandparents had become very closely involved in assisting their adult child with the legal proceedings associated with divorce or with gaining access to children. In the following case this involvement was motivated by the perception that the daughter lacked (some of) the skills and resources required to negotiate the legal process in an optimal way, and that the respondent was more competent in managing the process:

I saw my role as to...try and push the legal side so I actually got quite involved...my daughter...doesn't have a computer...I know a fair bit about how family law and the courts work...and I decided I would challenge the lawyers...I took up being correspondent between the lawyers and my daughter. She would give me the information...and I would type the letters, fax through the details and keep pressure on the lawyers and obviously attend any meetings with barristers, with solicitors, attending at the court.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

In our sample, there was a somewhat greater propensity among paternal grandparents to become involved in the provision of legal advice and assistance, possibly reflecting the greater likelihood of sons to feel aggrieved by some parts of the legal process and decisions. In the following case, provision of assistance with legal matters pertaining to her son's access to a child had led the respondent had to take time off work. The nature of the assistance in this case was not very technical, but rather related to the need to be present at meetings, and to the inability of the son, both practically and emotionally, to take time off work and to become embroiled in the process. This grandmother also felt that in providing assistance to her son, she was compensating for the absence of more formal sources of assistance, a finding that is also discussed in Chapter Seven:

R1F: There just literally is no help for the guy...at one stage I had to take...loads of hours off [work] while we were waiting to get the court case sorted.

I: Okay. Why did you have to take the time off?

R1F: Because I needed [son's name] to keep [his] job, to keep his head...he was going through a very bad time.

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

In a small number of cases grandparents also gave assistance with claims, administration and other paper work after the divorce or separation. The following respondent had invested considerable energies into 'campaigning' for council housing for her son, motivated by the desire to ensure that he had his own residence where the grandchildren can also spend time:

[W]hen the son was living with me for the 3 ½ years I kept going to the council and telling them that he needed his own place, that I had so many children coming into the house and he needed to have his own little space with his own children. So I fought very hard with the council to get him his house because I knew he wanted it. (...) So I got him, I kind of more or less [did] all the running for him to get in the house so he'd have his own little house, his council house with the children and he is very happy.

(Respondent 7, female, paternal, no marriage)

5.2.5 Emotional support

The provision of emotional support was widespread, and approximately two-thirds of grandparents belonging to the relevant categories (parents of previously married daughters, previously married sons and previously unmarried sons) engaged in this form of support (see Table 5.1). Many grandparents perceived the immediate emotional impact of relationship breakdown on their adult child as drastic. In the following case, the upset had been so extreme that it has led to the loss of employment:

R1F: ...two or three weeks after Christmas they just broke up and that was it. And I think he was shocked.

R2M: ...he fell to pieces.

R1F: He did, he fell to pieces for months after...he lost his job...

(Respondents 12 & 13, couple, unmarried son)

Many grandparents, both maternal and paternal, perceived the relationship breakdown, the manner in which it took place and its consequences as unfair towards their son or daughter but were also personally upset and distressed by it (for elaboration on this theme, see Chapter Seven):

[H]e didn't deserve it. (...) So hard when you are watching it, it is very, very tough.

(Respondent 1, grandmother, married son)

The negative impacts of relationship breakdown reverberated to close family members. The atmosphere in this family was imbued with nervousness and tension for a prolonged period as the parents were waiting for the co-resident son to recover emotionally from the break-up:

It was very, very hard...he started drinking, he stopped going to work, he didn't want this, he didn't want that...then he'd be kind of coming back to himself and you'd be kind of walking on egg shells thinking – this is it, he's on the way back – next minute it might be he'd meet [ex-girlfriend's] brother and her brother would beep at him or something stupid and back to square one again.

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

While the emotional impact of relationship breakdown was not equally drastic in contexts where the separation had been amicable, virtually all of the grandparents in our sample became involved in the provision of some type and varying quantities of emotional support to their adult child during and often for long periods after the relationship breakdown process. In many cases there was a high degree of continuity in the basic quality of the parent-adult child relationships

i.e. the relationship with the son or the daughter post-separation bore great resemblance to the relationship before the occurrence of separation:

‘[relationship with son] is the same, it never changed. (...) He has always been a super son.’

(Respondent 1, grandmother, married son)

I think [the divorce] hasn't really affected [my relationship with my daughter] in any way. It's always been a good relationship. We can talk and communicate very readily and we have just kind of shared this thing so I would think if anything, it has deepened it. It certainly hasn't dis-improved it.

(Respondent 18, female, daughter married)

Similarly to the quote above, many respondents reported, somewhat unexpectedly, positive change in the relationship with their adult child in the wake of the latter's relationship breakdown. A strongly positive ramification of most types of support (but perhaps especially emotional support) was an increased degree of closeness reported by the interviewees. In virtually all cases where extensive support had been provided, the respondents felt that this had brought them closer to their adult child. In the following case the fact that the mother was to some extent compensating for the absence of the partner in social situations was one of the factors that brought her closer to her daughter:

I used to go out with her if we were going for a night out, going for a drink or anything. I am more inclined to go with her and say ‘Come on it will be all right.’ I got closer that way.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter)

The presence of a child or children as an important factor that mediated and in many ways facilitated closer relationships was also acknowledged:

...we'd be closer [respondent and son] because there's a child involved between us all now...

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

In a less positive vein, closeness could also ensue from very frequent contact that was motivated by fear for the safety and mental wellbeing of the child. In the following case this fear also meant that the respondent felt that she had to 'stay strong' herself:

R1F: ...we [became] closer I think for it, to be honest. (...)

I: OK. And in terms of...support, for your son, did you give him much support or...

R1F: Oh God yes. I would call him every single solitary day when he went back to work...I had fear for him, that she [former partner] would do something silly. (...) And it was the fear for him kept me strong.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

A few respondents made references to their son's or daughter's (near) suicide attempts, or alluded to worry about the possibility of suicidal thoughts and rash self-destructive actions. It can be conjectured that the actions and support of parents played a role in dissuading the adult children from suicidal thoughts and behaviour:

I was awful worried for him for a while...he wouldn't talk to you...He nearly broke down...we never let him out, if he went out with the lads at night we always made sure one of the girls went as well...He was at an all time low.

(Respondent 11, grandfather, married son)

...my daughter was extremely depressed herself, and she confided in me one day that she went as far as the river in the car. Thank God she stopped and thought. But I can understand it.

(Respondent 9, grandmother, daughter married)

The perceived need to 'stay strong' for the sake of the separated or divorced adult child, flagged above, also featured in the following

interview with a paternal grandfather, where the respondent admitted that this role of a strong supporter was not always an easy or pleasant one to maintain:

We just had to be strong for him...And listen to him, listening is very important...I found it very strange because I think it was the first time, and I have three children, it was the first time that I actually had to be very strong and say – right, get up, get on with it – which is not nice.

(Respondent 13, grandfather, unmarried son)

Emotional support could also take the form of encouraging the son or daughter to ‘move on’ and to distract themselves from the low mood that usually accompanies separation and divorce. This respondent’s own experience of relationship breakdown (she was separated) had convinced her of the need to ‘stay strong’, to ‘move on’ and to engage in activity and form new relationships in order to get over the break-up:

...maybe if I hadn’t been separated myself I would have felt sorry and compassionate but...I was strong, I said ‘Well, you move on...It’s not the end of the world...Time now for you to get yourself another girlfriend...not to be living in limbo...you’re not a monk.’ (...) Going through an emotional time, they need somebody at the end of the line to say, to kind of chuck them out of it when they’re down...and say ‘Look, for God’s sake will you wake up and we’ll go somewhere. We’ll go on a holiday or we’ll go off for a weekend or something.’

(Respondent 7, grandmother, unmarried son and married daughter)

In some cases, the provision of emotional support had led the grandparental generation to change their role in relation to their adult child considerably, reverting to the earlier roles of a protector and a comforter. Some respondents explicitly referred to their son or daughter having become more dependent on them:

She would depend on me an awful lot more now. She would text me and ring me every minute...

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

However, some relationship also had strong undertones of *mutual* support and reciprocity:

She [daughter] is great support. She might lose the cool with me now an odd time...over some small thing...and you think well she doesn't appreciate it, but she does.

(Respondent 29, grandmother, married daughter)

It is interesting to note that in all of our data, this is one of the very few explicit references by respondents to the separated adult child as a source of support for themselves. References to expressions of gratitude on the part of the adult children for the different types of help and support they had received from respondents were also scarce. It could be argued that in this respect, too, the adult children had reverted to an earlier (childhood) role of an almost unquestioning, sometimes needy and unidirectional receipt of protection and care. However, another explanation for this is that we did not pose any direct questions about this aspect of parent-child relationships. Furthermore, inclusion of the adult children among interviewees may also have yielded a different picture.

5.2.6 Coalescence of Different Supports

In practice, the five types of support outlined above tended to coalesce so that two or more types of support were provided in tandem. Daughters, where not distanced from their parents by their own actions (drug-taking, or deliberate cessation of contact in three cases) or geographical distance (living abroad in one case) tended to draw on several of the supports, most commonly financial assistance, childcare and emotional support. However, overlapping and simultaneous provision of several different types of support was most common in contexts where the 'middle generation' is very young or has additional problems such as addiction issues, necessitating in the

following case support in the form of housing, financial assistance, emotional support and co-parenting. Such multiple challenges and needs were most frequent among separated sons who had not been married:

He had no parenting skills whatsoever. He actually was out drink and drugs at the time (...) But I had to give an input because my son was just out of it. Just couldn't cope with life, just hanging out with all the young fellas just had no skills as a parent...He himself was trying to cope with his own life. So then another baby came along...she [son's ex-partner] had no house, she was living with her parents. She was living at my house...So I had to financially give her support. I had to; I felt it was my duty. I had to give her every moral support. (...) I was trying to be mother and grandmother...

(Respondent 8, grandmother, unmarried son)

The above quote also highlights the blending of mothering and grandmothering that can ensue as a result of extensive provision of childcare and accommodation (see also Chapter Six). The strong sense of duty experienced by this grandmother, and its possible deleterious consequences for grandparents, are discussed at length in Chapter Seven.

Due to the small sample size and complex interaction effects, we are not in a position to specify the impact of gender on the extent and nature of supports given. However, from our sample it appears that mothers were more often and more deeply involved in the provision of emotional support, and that the support from some fathers was characterised by a well-intentioned but somewhat brusque approach:

...he [son] was devastated...I actually had to become, I mean she [mother] is a strong person in this house as in – ah yeah, grand it's lovely – but I actually had to say something – you've got to get up off your ass, kid.

(Respondent 13, male, paternal, no marriage)

These possible gender differences in the focus and mode of support are also in evidence in the following description of a division of labour between a grandmother who was engaged in emotionally supporting her daughter and a grandfather who entertained the grandchildren:

...[my daughter] would either come up for the weekend with the girls...and [my husband] would play with the girls... [he] is a brilliant grand-dad...[meanwhile] I would talk to [daughter's name]...She needed that time...(...) basically it split itself naturally. The girls played with grand-dad and [my daughter] was able to download information and trauma and stress to me...

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

It appears from our data that relationship breakdown in the middle generation only rarely leads to a significant deterioration in the quality of the relationship between the separating child and his or her parents; a complete breakdown in this relationship also seems very rare and is brought about by a confluence of factors, not only the divorce or separation. Our data contained examples of a complete severing of the relationship with an adult child only in one case where the grandmother had taken her former son-in-law's position in relation to disputed access to children, and in the following case where the respondent, the sole custodial grandparent of his grandson, found his son's drug addiction impossible to handle:

...I just hadn't got the energy to give my son anymore...I was in hospital and I had to get myself right because [of] stress, I've two sons at the moment on drugs ... I can't [handle it] ... so I washed my hands of my son...

(Respondent 20, grandfather, unmarried son)

Aside from these few exceptions, the grandparents were, or had been, involved in providing emotional support to their adult children during and after relationship breakdown. Indeed, when combined with the other, material, types of support, the role of parents in

seeing their adult children through the separation or divorce process was considerable, and arguably in many cases was the lynchpin to the son's or daughter's ability to negotiate the emotional and practical fallout from relationship breakdown.

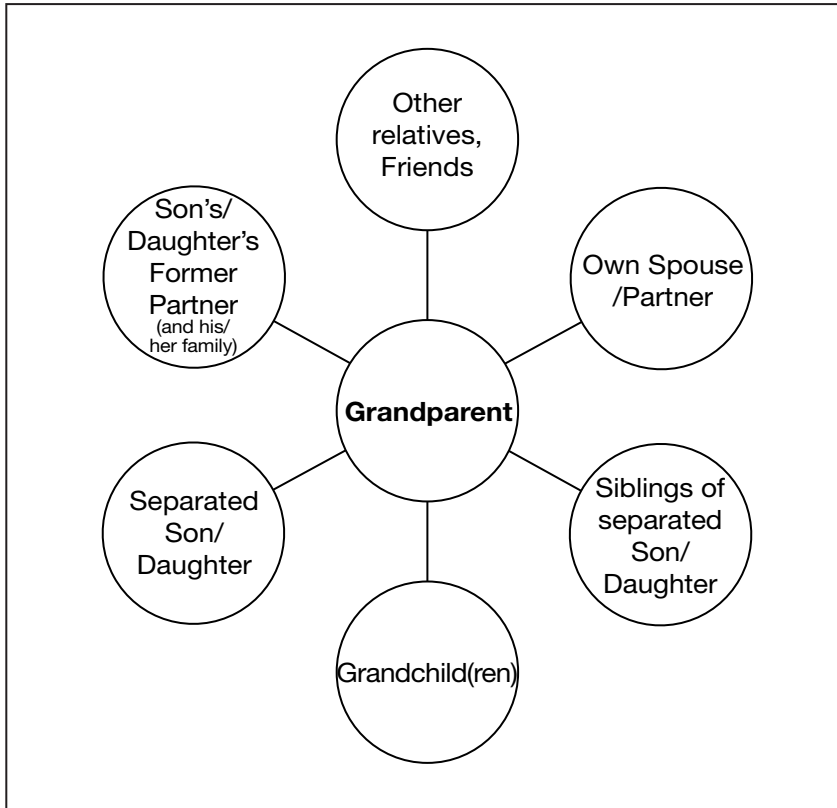
Figure 5.1. below illustrates that, in addition to the relationship with their separated son or daughter (discussed above) and with their grandchildren (the topic of Chapter Six), grandparents have a number of other relationships that can be important and influential in the post-separation context. The significance, and indeed the presence or absence, of these relationships varies considerably between grandparents. We will now turn to discussing four¹⁴ other sets of relationships that our interview data provides some preliminary insights into, namely the respondents' relationships with:

- their son's or daughter's former partner;
- the former partner's family (including, where relevant, reconstituted extended families);
- their own spouse or partner;
- the son's or daughter's siblings (i.e. respondent's other children).

All of these relationships are potentially influential in shaping the extent and nature of grandparents contact with their grandchildren, and also act as potential sources of help or, conversely, stress, for grandparents in situations where they are seeking to support their adult children going through the separation process.

14 Relationships with other relatives and friends is not discussed at length here as our dataset contained only very few references to these.

Figure 5.1 Grandparents' relationships in the context of their son's or daughter's divorce or separation



5.3 Grandparents' relationship with their son's or daughter's former partner

When expounding their views on their son's or daughter's former partner, many grandparents understandably gave highly emotional accounts and in some cases appeared to lack awareness that theirs and their adult child's was only one side of the story. However, in some cases respondents were strongly aware of their child's and by extension their own, lack of impartiality and objectivity:

I have to say...that when we talk to you about the situation we are always talking on the standpoint of discussing it with

our son [name]. We never ever talk to [former daughter-in-law]...So if you like we're getting one side and that is, we have to always bear that in mind.

(Respondent 30, grandmother, married son)

The following respondent felt that, despite the complexity of the situation, it had been necessary to take her own child's side, and with only a couple of exceptions the respondents had indeed done this:

Right through that process he [ex-son-in-law] became very antagonistic towards us, it was understandable I mean now sides were being taken. He wanted the marriage to continue, he couldn't see what was wrong. He got very annoyed with her [respondent's daughter], he got very annoyed with me...I had to explain, look whatever has gone wrong has gone wrong but I have to take my daughter's side...

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

Anger at the son's or daughter's former partner was a common response:

Well, it was she walked out – I was angry with her...That she did that to...Not so much [my son] because [he] is a strong fella but for the child at that time I felt hurt.

(Respondent 6, grandmother, married son)

However, some also felt anger towards their own son or daughter. In the following case, the anger was motivated both by concern for what the respondent had believed to be the best interests of the grandchildren, by feelings of sympathy for the former son-in-law and by the strongly held view that marriage should not be lightly broken:

...initially I suppose I was a little bit direct and cross with her, and I said...[your] children...haven't a choice...you've decided to go and leave them and you know the repercussions...

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

In many cases there was continuity in poor relationships i.e. the currently poor relationship with the son's or daughter's former partner had always been bad (or at least in retrospect was portrayed as always having been bad):

R1F: I couldn't get close to her...She was a very aggressive kind of a person, very stormy kind of a person. You couldn't sit down and have a chat with her, no way.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

In the case of good relationships, too, there was often continuity, and an effort to ensure that this was maintained both in for the sake of the relationship *per se* and because an amicable relationships among adults seen to be beneficial for the grandchildren:

We all liked [ex-son-in-law] and we are still on good terms with him. (...) He's got ... some terrific qualities... if we meet we are delighted to see each other or at least I'm very pleased to see him. I've worked very hard to remain on good terms with him for the boys...

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

Often contact with son's or daughter's former partner evolved in a direction that was neither fractious or particularly amicable, but very neutral, and was limited to meeting at ceremonies involving the grandchildren such as confirmations, where communication was polite but limited:

We get on fine now, we're polite, we're friendly. We've met for example [at the eldest granddaughter's] confirmation ceremony; we all end up in the church together.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

Maintaining an amicable relationship through the break-up process often took effort, even in cases where it had good 'foundations' in the form a friendly pre-separation relationship. In the case of this

successful ongoing relationship, the grandparents' own regard for the ex-partner as a person, not merely as the grandchild's mother, was also felt to be conducive towards a good relationship:

We always got on well with [son's ex-partner]...there were times when we had to bite our lip when things got very hot... But now it's kind of settled again...I always worked very hard at trying to say 'Look...I am interested in how you are. Not [just in] the mother of [name of granddaughter]' ...I always felt that was really important.

(Respondent 3, grandmother, unmarried son)

It is interesting to note that the amicable relationship between one set of grandparents and their son's ex-partner persisted despite the fact that their son was somewhat aggrieved about his lack of guardianship status. These grandparents felt that it was also in their self-interest to maintain civil relationships with their grandchild's mother due to possibility that she may move abroad with a new partner, hence potentially limiting their contact with the grandchild:

R1F: ...we don't confront her too much because it's a very kind of delicate situation.

R1M: It is very delicate.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

However, this kind of 'strategic' cultivation of positive relationships with the child's former partner was not practiced exclusively by the parents of non-custodial parents (who are predominantly paternal). In a similar manner, the maternal grandmother quoted below perceived a need to maintain 'civil' relationships with her former son-in-law in order to ensure that she and her husband would always, even in the unlikely event of her daughter's death, have access to their grandchildren:

...every time we go over to visit my daughter and the children, we make a point of calling into him in his office and saying 'Hello, how are you?'...it's very selfish, if anything happens

to our daughter, he's going to be the only means of seeing our grandchildren...if there were no children involved, we probably wouldn't ever see him again....(...) I think it's terribly important to stay friendly...if [daughter's name] is killed in a car crash today, how then are we going to see our granddaughters? He'll have full custody of them obviously as their father. So, any dealings we have with them would have to be through him.

(Respondent 27, grandmother, married daughter)

The couple quoted here was aware of the positive impact their ongoing, amicable relationship with the son's ex-partner was having on the relationship between the parents of their grandchild:

R1M: [Our son is] quite lucky because...access [to his daughter] isn't a problem.

R2F:...if [we] hadn't such close relationships with [name of son's ex-partner] that would have been more difficult...I think we had a kind of a mediation role...(...)

R1M:...she would feel that we see her side of the situation...

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

In fact, these grandparents were also enabling a 'normalisation' of a large number of relationships through their balanced and reconciliatory approach which was ultimately motivated by and aimed at ensuring the wellbeing of their grandchild:

...the more you can normalise things [the better]. [granddaughter's name] sees [her father] and [her mother] talking normally...that's really important isn't it...you have to have a vision of where you're going. You have to...know what's good...for the child...

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

However, this success at maintaining smooth relationships in a complex situation had not been easy to achieve as it had required consid-

erable maturity, self-control and settings aside of their own feelings, a finding that is analysed in greater depth in Chapter Seven:

...all the time we...had to put people out there first...and put how we were feeling secondary...And bite our tongues.
(Respondent 3, grandmother, unmarried son)

Severe conflict or a complete breakdown in the relationship with the adult child's former partner was a common occurrence in situations where access to child(ren) or custody of the child(ren) was disputed or where other types of serious friction occurred. In these cases, the dispute between the former partners in the 'middle' generation tended to extend itself and to mar the broader set of relationships with the ex-partner's family. Only in rare cases was there an attempt by a member of the grandparental generation to understand the now estranged partner and his or her position in the dispute. Some grandparents were living, or had lived, with ongoing volatility and unpredictability on the part of their son's or daughter's former partner, which affected them negatively and created ongoing stress and tension:

[Son's former partner] does these silly little things...I don't know why, like, because the relationship is over...she's gone her way and [son's name] has gone his way, thanks be to God and hopefully their lives will pan out and the two of them will be happy. But every now and again she kind of throws a spanner...Everything would be going great and then you think you're breathing easy but then you say – oh Jesus not this again...

(Respondents 12 and 13, couple, unmarried son)

Regarding access to grandchildren, several paternal grandparents felt that they were at the mercy of their son's former partner, experienced distressing helplessness, and at times even found it impossible to get even information about their grandchild's whereabouts:

...she'd say 'You're not having her this weekend' ...at the drop of a hat...she is the mother of your granddaughter, until the day you die you have to have a relationship with her whether you like it or not...she has control over us (...) the effects throughout the family were...dreadful because nobody knew how [grandchild] was, there was no contact. At one stage I actually texted [son's former partner]: 'Just wondering how [granddaughter's name] is doing.'...I got a very abusive text message back so I just left it at that.

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

The quality of the respondents' relationship with the son's or daughter's former spouse or partner was usually powerfully mediated by the former partners' relationship, both in the case of negative relationships (as demonstrated above) and positive ones such as the following:

...we decided we'd ...just say hello to [son's ex-wife] which we did. And I have met her a few times since because the relationship is quite good between herself and [name of son]. It is very good. It's even almost better than when they were married...

(Respondent 5, grandfather, married son)

A factor that contributed to a successful relationship of a grandmother with son's former partner was the willingness of the respondent to be available for childcare, albeit in the following case largely on the grandmother's own terms:

I: And you are saying your relationship with [son's ex-partner] is better now?

R: Yes, it is. I think she now appreciates what I do, and she is very generous about that.

I: In terms of minding the two boys?

R: Yes, she appreciates that I will take the boys, no matter what, I will take them overnight...if I can I will. And I have always said to both of them, if I can't, I am not going to feel

guilty about it and if you ring me say on Friday night, and it suits me, no problem, and if I have plans, my plans have been made and so that is it...

(Respondent 21, grandmother, unmarried son)

In the following case the respondent and her son's ex-partner had gone on to have a very successful relationship, despite the fact that the latter's relationship with the respondent's son had been rather tumultuous. In this case, too, it appears that the success of the relationship arises at least in part from a mutual concern and care for the (grand)children:

[son's ex-partner] and I have a great relationship...Any time I wanted the kids, I had the kids. (...) [she] and I go to Spain or go on holidays once a year. I have great input and I hope it's a very positive input.

(Respondent 8, grandmother, unmarried son)

This successful relationship was aided by the fact that the son's ex-partner had allowed as much access to the grandchildren as the respondent wished for, and was also seen to be a very competent and responsible mother by her: in other words, they reinforced positively each others' roles as a mother and a grandmother. However, even in this case contact with grandchildren was periodically diminished when the respondent's son and the ex-partner were engaged in a dispute. Despite their negative impact on her contact with the grandchildren, the grandmother had made a conscious decision not to get involved in the former couple's disputes:

...[son] hasn't much of an input on them because they're always fighting and arguing...sometimes she won't be talking to him so I won't see the kids either...I try not to get involved in any of their issues.

(Respondent 8, grandmother, unmarried son)

Although the son and the ex-partner had long ended their romantic relationship, their ongoing contact was so riddled with conflict that

it had marred the son's relationship with his sons completely to the point where 'he forgets about the two lads'. As a result, the grandmother was the only link to the grandchildren from her family and in the light of this fact her resolve to remain detached from the former couple's issues is understandable and rational. It is therefore possible for grandparents to maintain contact with their grandchildren even where the grandchildren are not living with their own child and where extreme conflict between the parents persists. In other words, the importance of the parents' relationship in influencing the grandparent-grandchild relationship is great, but it can be overridden in circumstances where the grandparent is able to forge and maintain a positive relationship with the custodial parent.

Despite traumatic break-ups and ongoing problems that had affected their contact with grandchildren negatively, the grandparents quoted below had a striking degree of empathy towards their son's or daughter's former partner or spouse and in some cases went as far as trying to understand and explain their violent or destructive behaviour, and in the second case acting against a court order in order to facilitate former daughter-in-law's access to her child:

...the poor man he really has a very difficult personality...
(...) I know he's terribly hurt his wife walked out... (...) obviously he was feeling...angry, terrible, horrible...but maybe something...could have helped him...to address why he had to be as angry as he was and lash out (...)I actually feel quite sorry for him in some ways...his life could be a lot easier.

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

...[son's ex-wife] had a powerful bond with me (...) she used to always tell me I was the father she never had... when the child was taken off her that time and [respondent's son] got full access, temporary full access that time - there was no one in the family supposed to contact her. And I contacted her... asking did she want me to help her...I couldn't see it right for any mother, the child to be taken away and for her not to see

him...I wanted her to see him for let it be an hour, five hours, whatever...

(Respondent 11, grandfather, married son)

...a lot of the hassle that came from the young lady was immaturity. (...)...she was firing things out there because she was lost...

(Respondent 13, grandfather, unmarried son)

...when I went to court in the initial stages I went over and spoke to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Just told her I hoped that everything would work out for both of them.

(Respondent 31, grandfather, married son)

Some continued to appreciate aspects of their son's or daughter's former partner, in this case the ex-son-in-law's qualities as a parent:

[husband's name] and I go out of our way to be friendly to [former son-in-law], we still respect him as the children's father. He is actually a very good Dad, he may be boring, he may not be what my daughter wants...but he is a good Dad, he is caring and he very much wants to participate.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

Grandparents sometimes went into great lengths to 'bridge' and to try to 'mend' their grandchildren's worlds which had become divided as a result of their parents' relationship breakdown. While this grandmother was happy about her relatively good relationship with her son's former partner and appreciated contact with her grandchildren, she was somewhat aggrieved that she was pressurised by her sons into maintaining these relationships while he put no effort into them:

...then my son eventually fecked off [abroad]...for a year... [so] I made my arrangements with [son's ex-partner]...I asked her if I could see the children...she allowed me to see the children every weekend.(...) I've developed a very good

relationship with [her] and I see [grandson] once a month and if there's special family occasions...she'll drop him up for me...we have a very good relationship and arrangements, which exclude my son though...which is daft...[but despite this] ...there's a lot of pressure on me from my son as well... that I *have* to do this. (...) I don't think that [her sons] would have had any relationship with their children at all [if it wasn't for respondent's own efforts]...I don't think they'd even know anything about their children.

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

This case also illustrates how even relationships characterised by a great deal of animosity can turn amicable over time, and how 'closure' in court can help to pave way for more 'civilised' communication:

I: And was there animosity as a result of the court case between the two of you?

R: No it actually helped the relationship...We nearly became friends after it...[following] the break up, she wouldn't even speak to me...she used to walk by me in the street...she was very aggressive with me...But the court case kind of sorted all that out and she became fairly civilised...

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

Some grandparents were determined to act as 'peacemakers' within their own family context and to work towards convincing other family members that there was no point in letting relationships get fractious:

...members of my family were more angry than what I was. (...) So, you have to kind of cover the family as well and say 'don't be so stupid, all right sure they're separated. Not the first couple to separate but they're grand. He'll be grand and she'll be grand.' I found myself being a peacemaker in the middle of it.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

5.4 Relationship with Son's or Daughter's Former Partner's Family

The nature of the respondent's relationship with their son's or daughter's former partner's family ranged from non-existent or antagonistic to cordial. In a few cases there was extensive contact with the son's or daughter's ex-partner's family, in this case going as far as sharing childminding, which for this couple had amounted to two full days per week, from 7 am until 7 pm:

R2F: We [all] hated the idea of the little one being put into a crèche so between the two sets of grandparents we worked around that.

(Respondent 2, grandmother, unmarried son)

Social engagement with the other set of grandparents was also maintained:

R2F: [son's ex-partner] was a fairly decent and her parents are decent...we would still meet at parties...and they never...

R1M: We get on okay.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

Importance of humour and frankness was emphasised by this couple, although sometimes maintaining relationships was still hard work and was to a large extent premised on mutual commitment by both sets of grandparents to put grudges to side:

R1M: We get on very well with the other grandparents and they have always said that they wanted that to continue.

R2F: But we're able to verbalise it with them...I remember our Christmas party last year I said to [son's ex-partner's mother] do you find it very stressful being around us...here we play happy families...She said 'Not at all...I don't blame you at all' and I said 'Well that's great,'...because our son had more or less said he wouldn't marry their daughter.

R1M: So you might understand if they were hostile but they weren't.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

Even in cases where interaction with 'the other family' was limited, there could be a determination not to speak ill of them:

... I've absolutely nothing against anybody, I've nothing against his mother and I wouldn't, under no circumstances would I ever say anything bad about his mother or her partner or anyone belonging to the child on the other side.

(Respondent 13, grandfather, unmarried son)

The loss of contact with the former in-laws was a source of regret for some:

...your whole emotional investment in the other family is just gone and I liked [ex-son-in-law's] family, some of them very much and [daughter] liked them, they were very good to her and he has four or five siblings and she got on really well with them, that's all gone. That's very hard.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

An unsuccessful attempt to gain access to her grandchild through the other set of grandparents was made by a grandmother whose relationship with the son's ex-partner, the custodial parent, had broken down:

[son's ex-partner] just didn't want anything to do with us... So I rang her parents who I would be on friendly terms with... they wanted to leave it up to her, what she wanted... I said... look, they're only young... we'll support them all we can - and [son's ex-partner's mother] was in agreement with all that and I said - can we just get the four of us [grandparents] to sit down and we'll talk about [name of grandson], don't mind them? And her attitude was - I'll talk to [my daughter] and

get back to you - and then she got back and she said – no, she doesn't want to do that.

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

5.5 Reconstituted extended families

There were some cases in our sample where the respondent's son or daughter had gone on to form another relationship and had children from the new relationship. Only very few accounts of the relationships within 'reconstituted extended families' were relayed during the interviews, but these gave interesting insights into some of the issues and dynamics involved:

...all that stress is going on in my head when it comes up to the time for [grandson's] visit and then if my son is ringing... asking me "is [grandson's name] coming up this weekend?", and I'd say "I don't know" and he'd say "well do you think you could find out because like I really need to know ..." and of course he has to know, he has two small kids now [from a new relationship], and he has to drag them up with him. And there's all that stuff going on in my home...you have his another family now and you have this family.

I: And...does [respondent's grandson] get on with...his half-sister and half-brother?

R: No because there's a big gap in the age. And my son is trying to blend the two of them together and they are totally incompatible...so it's all stress, stress, stress (laughs). ..It's terrible you know.

(Respondent 16, grandmother, unmarried son)

Even in the context of more relaxed social interactions the complexity of relationships between the attendees at 'family' gatherings could be bewildering, but also a source of some hilarity, to the grandparents and their adult children:

...there was a confirmation last April and my son has a new girlfriend, who is a very nice girl who I really like...his [ex]

partner also has somebody, but this confirmation was on and it was a barbecue...[my son] said, my mother was there, her ex-husband was there, her ex-mother-in-law was there, I was there with my ex-partner and my new partner, and my ex-partner had her partner...

(Respondent 21, grandmother, unmarried son)

...when my granddaughter and grandson made their communion we had a little meal back here afterwards, and their father came and his mother and brother came as well. And my ex-husband, so all the out-laws or in-laws or whatever you call them, they all came. So I would just see that, a continuation of family occasions and that.

(Respondent 27, grandmother, married daughter)

These grandparents planned for and fitted into a reconstituted family's activities, albeit somewhat wearily at times:

...[our daughter] has the children every second weekend and on that second weekend [her new partner] also has his children...one weekend they have five children and the next weekend they have no children...obviously when we go to visit, we plan it that it's a weekend when she's got them. But it means she's got five...there's always [the] step-grandchildren...we rarely get the [biological grandchildren] to ourselves...because we have to...[going] out for an ice-cream.. [w]e have to take [all] of them...

(Respondent 27, grandmother, married daughter)

Acceptance of the fact that the son's or daughter's ex-partner was still an inextricable part of their lives, or even 'part of the family', meant that new partners also had to be welcomed and accepted:

R2F: This Christmas now I was just thinking we'll invite [son's ex-partner] and [name of] her new boyfriend if he's here...I think it's so important and she has something in her

apartment and we go to that and her parents are there...

I: Okay so you still keep it within the family as much as you kind of...

R2F: Oh yeah. She is family, she is family. She has to be family.

R1M: She's the child's mother.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

This grandmother was helping her grandchild to generate a picture, in this case quite literally, of his evolving family:

...if we're drawing pictures or anything here we always put in mammy and lately we put in [name], who would be the new partner...

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

5.6 Grandparental generation's couple relationship

Personal impact on the grandparent was highly dependent on the degree of acrimoniousness in the relationship breakdown (see also Chapter 7 for more detail on personal impact). The impact, regardless of its nature or magnitude, was often 'shared' to some extent by the grandparents who were married or partnered. Emotional stress and concern for the wellbeing of adult child and grandchildren were the main reasons for the shared negative impact on both grandparents:

R2F: I think that would be the single most stressful thing about the break-up, handling everybody. In fact I think [husband's name] and myself thought we were going mad at one stage.

R1M: Oh yeah, it was very stressful.

R2F: Very stressful because we were handling everybody's stress, you know.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

However, this couple also felt that they had helped each other through the experience, and that their relationship had become stronger as a result despite the fact that they had had to adjust their expectations regarding travelling and other more relaxed ways spending time:

R1M: ...I would think it has...helped to foster our relationship working on this together...Any impact on our relationship as husband and wife has been positive. (...)

R2F: That's right, so we got through it together...If he was going mad I listened to him or vice versa...but it certainly would have lowered our quality of life which we were...really looking forward to...travelling and doing a lot of things. (...)
We would have felt this huge sense of sadness and bereavement last year.

R1M: ...when you retire you expect to have time for each other and that kind of thing...to do things like travelling and...it would have interfered with that to some extent.

R2F: We would have been exhausted and tired but...

R1M: But I sort of, I don't think either of us regret anything we did.

(Respondents 2 and 3, couple, unmarried son)

In stark contrast to the above case, the marriage of another respondent, although already plagued by various problems, was adversely affected by her son's relationship break-up which had resulted in him and, for a time, his soon-to-be estranged girlfriend moving into the respondent's family home:

My husband didn't want to know [about son's relationship and substance abuse problems]...so it was me, me, me, me all the time. (...) And myself I was going through a hard time...my husband said it broke up our marriage because of the kids - because of this family...But...our marriage was bad anyway.

(Respondent 8, grandmother, unmarried son)

Milder conflict arose in another couple relationship, caused by son's former partner's difficult behaviour:

...that was very...upsetting...for both myself and [my husband] because we would have been airing our frustrations

and we would have ended up arguing...

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

Feelings of resentment could also arise at the apparent lack of reaction or response from a spouse:

...this was the first real crisis...we had... I've been very angry [with him]...very angry...let down. Here we are in a crisis and [he'll just go and immerse himself in a hobby].

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

For some, friends were an important source of support because the spouse was not in a position to provide the perspective that a friend could:

It's dreadful...I can laugh about it now but I'm telling you I wasn't laughing then but when I went over to [friend's place] with the little pink pills in my bag I stayed with this friend who [was herself divorced] and she was absolutely wonderful...It's your friends who see you through. I mean your husband is very supportive but I couldn't talk to him too much because he was worried enough and all I could do was just talk about how worried I was.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

5.7 Divorced or separated son's or daughter's relationship with siblings

The grandparents we interviewed naturally did not have first-hand experience of their son's or daughter's relationship with their siblings. However, they had been in a position to observe these relationships and gave some interesting accounts of them. Siblings had in many cases offered support through their friendship and companionship:

[my two daughters]...have been super support. [first-mentioned daughter] used to come down here for the first six months for [son's name], bring him for walks.

(Respondent 1, grandmother, married son)

In a few cases, siblings had also become involved in provision of childcare:

I don't think [myself and husband would] be able to [provide all the childcare]...we had both just retired and I think that was great [that] my son helped out as well. The little one's uncle...it took the three of us...because...there were huge dilemmas at times...

(Respondent 3, grandmother, unmarried son)

Other types of support were also derived from siblings. Assistance with legal matters was in this case provided by a sister:

...especially my oldest daughter. She was very, very involved. She took it all very serious. She went to all the court cases with her and to meet her solicitors and...she helped her through it.

(Respondent 29, grandmother, married daughter)

Concern and care were expressed by siblings, even from a distance:

...I've a son living in England and he'd be on the phone every week saying – how's things? You know – what happened? What's happening now?

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

'A big family' i.e. a large number of siblings was seen to offer great support to the divorced sibling(s):

We are such a big family, we support each other. I suppose there would be other people...maybe only one or two in the family...they'd feel that they're in limbo. And maybe some people that have no one at all belonging to them and have a break-up and have to...sit in silence and bear it. We're lucky that we have such a big family...if something happens one, the whole lot rallies around. We're very close.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

In thinking of the relatives who were participating in her grandchild's care and upbringing, this grandmother came to draw the conclusion that his son and granddaughter had received considerable support and had been embraced by the kinship network and one of the separated son's siblings in particular:

... I must include...[daughter's name]...she's living at home as well. She's [granddaughter's] godparent, godmother... [they] might have an early night with [a] DVD...*Home Alone* or something like that so she has, she has a good relationship with [daughter's name] as well...getting dressed for the 21st [birthday] now the other night...[daughter's name] was doing her hair with curls and [granddaughter's name] wanted hers the very same way so...she's very, very much a part and... knows that she has a place there. [Also] my extended family, I have a sister who lives nearby and I have another sister who's got four kids, they all know [granddaughter]...I think [son's name] has a lot of supports.

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

Some siblings were very concerned and upset, but could not translate this concern into concrete acts of help and support, which some of the respondents believed had been resented by their divorced or separated child:

[my son] was devastated by [my daughter's] break up. He couldn't bear the thought of the boys not being alright. He's a very tender hearted fellow. (...) [my son] liked [my daughter's ex-husband] very much. They had that relationship and he couldn't cope with the whole thing and he coped by distancing himself...[my daughter] feels he didn't support her. In fact she is quite right he really didn't give any... and I think it was because he just couldn't handle it...he didn't take [her] out, he didn't take the boys off her for the afternoon. All these things he could have done...I think still it niggles at her at bit.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

In many cases the sibling(s) had indeed become extremely upset on hearing the news of separation, partly because the sister's or brother's relationship breakdown shattered the images of a successful partnership and a happy family that they had held dear:

...my son who's my daughter's older brother and they're very close, they always have been, he was completely devastated... because to him she had everything that he didn't have and would have liked. At the time he didn't...have a close relationship and he didn't have children...she had all the things that he wanted...he was completely destroyed by the fact that this was happening to her and it took him along time to cope with this fact and he was just really, really upset.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

In the following case the respondent believed that the disillusionment arising from their brother's marriage breakdown had a decisive long-term impact on his siblings' relationship-related behaviour, deterring them from getting married for fear of a similar failure:

...my two younger children are not married and I always felt that [son's name] marriage and break-up, because they thought he was so lucky, he'd a nice house, the children, everything was going well and then bang all this nastiness and I really feel it ...influenced them in a huge way.

(Respondent 14, grandmother, married son)

Shock and surprise were the reactions of some siblings, and these were in the following case compounded by the fact that the sister's divorce impacted on the brothers' friendship with the ex-husband:

...the boys [brothers] were all very shocked...because they liked the ex-husband very much. They had sport and all of that sort of thing in common...they were shocked but they have still been very supportive. Shocked in the sense of... not disapproving shocked, but just couldn't believe what they were hearing.

(Respondent 27, grandmother, married daughter)

For some siblings, there was relief that the abusive or otherwise dysfunctional relationship of their brother or sister was over:

...he [interviewee's son] witnessed a lot of the abuse of our daughter because he stayed with them...as a child... when it all broke loose, he said Mum, I saw him beat my sister so badly...he is thrilled that she is [out of the relationship]

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

Feelings of resentment towards the separated sibling could arise in situations where a brother or a sister felt that excessive attention and undeserved liberties were given by a parent in the interest of allowing time and space to recover from the relationship breakdown:

When [my separated son] came back [home] that caused a huge problem for [name of other son] because [my separated son] was at break point and could not cope and I was working full time and [other son] was working full time and when I would come in in the evening and the place would be an absolute shambles and I would cook a dinner for everybody and [separated son] would not do things, and [other son] used to say Mum you are not to be doing that...(...) What he could not understand was...how delicate [separated son] was and he needed me just to unquestionably do things...(...) Mother him...

(Respondent 21, grandmother, unmarried son)

Conflict sometimes flared up among the siblings in this family over the former partner of their son / brother:

I would have had many an argument with my own lads and [daughter]...they'd be talking about her and they wouldn't be very respectful and saying bad things towards her and I would be saying 'Look, don't be talking about her like that.' If they were texting back if she texted and I'd say 'Just ignore the text' and they'd say '...mum, why are you like this?' and then

we'd argue over that. ...[husband's name] just said 'Listen, you deal with things your way, they're adults, leave them. Let them deal with it any way they like'...So I just had to say to them 'Look, unless she actually makes a threat on you I don't want to know of anything that's going on between you.' It was very short lived, it was only when there was major conflict between herself and [son's name] that the rest of us would be dragged into it...

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

5.8 Conclusions

This chapter has shown that the nature of the relationship between the grandparental and parental generations is strongly defined by supports and care channelled by the older to the younger generation. Considerable direct and indirect financial and material support, including housing (both costs of housing elsewhere and co-residence) was given by the respondents to their adult children during and sometimes for long periods after the latter's separation or divorce. Co-residence easily spilled over into extensive involvement in child-related care and support (most frequently received by sons who had not been married), although non-co-resident grandparents, especially maternal ones, also frequently became involved in different types of childcare and provision of emotional support.

The majority of respondents had become deeply emotionally involved, usually in the short but sometimes also in the long term, in their son's or daughter's experience of divorce or separation. Increased closeness was often the result of such emotional involvement. It could also be argued that coping with divorce and separation together caused many adult children to become reliant on their parents again to a greater degree than they would otherwise have been; many of the grandparents we interviewed had reverted to their earlier roles of providers and protectors, and from their accounts of their adult children's behaviour we can conjecture that the latter reverted to the earlier childhood role of a recipient of care and concern.

While relationships with the son's or daughter's former partner tended to be more complex and more frequently characterised by animosity and the need to re-negotiate roles carefully, many of these relationships also took on a broadly positive character, sometimes after a period of conflict that came to be resolved, in many cases thanks to the determined efforts of the grandparents. However, there were many instances of ongoing conflict and even complete breakdown in relationships. On other hand, the data also brought to light some very successful 'reconstituted' extended family relationships where communication was possibly infrequent, but nonetheless amicable.

Within their own nuclear family, support from their spouse or partner played a central role for many grandparents who were seeking for support for themselves. However, where spousal relationship was already under stress, divorce or separation of adult children constituted an additional factor that undermined the already troubled partnership. Many grandparents felt that their other children had acted as important sources of support for the divorced or separated child, although here, too, close familial relationships were easily fractured if the sibling was not perceived to be sufficiently helpful or tolerant towards the child undergoing relationship breakdown. The centrality of informal supports in the lives of grandparents (a theme also explored in Chapter Seven) is further underscored by the importance of the help received from friends.

One of the key insights that can be drawn from our data relates to the powerful impact of relationships between the separated or divorced couple on the relationships between grandparents and their grandchildren. Indeed, this powerful impact, where negative, was a source of great distress to the grandparents and in the worst cases had led to enforced lack of contact with their grandchildren for lengthy periods of time. In some cases, there was no expectation that contact with grandchildren would ever be resumed. Chapter Six will now examine these and other aspects of grandparent-grandchild relationships in greater depth.

6. The Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the impact of divorce or separation on the relationship between the 31 grandparents interviewed for this study and their grandchildren. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 1 examines how the divorce or separation affected grandparents' contact and involvement with their grandchildren. Section 2 outlines the impact of parental divorce or separation on the grandchildren as seen and understood by the grandparents. Section 3 discusses the manner in which grandparents responded to their grandchildren's needs following divorce or separation.

6.2 Impact of divorce/separation on grandparent/grandchild contact

In the eyes of the grandparents, parental separation and divorce divided the grandchild's life into two separate spheres: one revolved around the mother and her extended family circle, the other around the father and his extended family. In only two cases (one maternal grandmother and a paternal couple), the adult child's divorce or separation had not impacted on frequency of contact with grandchildren. In the two cases where frequency of contact remained the same, the grandparents were geographically distant from their grandchild. Both pre- and post-divorce, the contact they had with their grandchildren was infrequent. In all other cases, the grandchild's 'division of time' between the separated parents resulted in either a reduction or an increase (of varying magnitudes) in the frequency of grandparents' contact with the grandchildren. In virtually all instances the new family arrangements required that grandparents apply greater organisation and planning in order to maintain contact. Hence parental separation introduced a degree of complication into the grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Several variables impacted upon grandparents' contact with grandchildren following parental separation. Table 1 summarises some of these variables under five headings: 1) geographical distance; characteristics of 2) the adult child, 3) the grandchild, 4) the grandparent and 5) the relationship between the custodial parent and grandparent. It is important to highlight that in reality these variables are not mutually exclusive and do not exert influence in isolation from each other. A larger study with a randomly selected sample of grandparents would be necessary to establish the relative influence and interaction of these variables.

Variables	Positioning along variable	Direction of influence
Geographical Distance	Close proximity	↑ contact
Characteristics of adult child	Child has custodial rights	↑ contact
	Child co-resident with grandparent post divorce/separation	↑ contact
	Reduced economic security post divorce/separation	↑ contact
	Child young in (teens or twenties) at time of separation	↑ contact
Characteristics of grandparent	Personal difficulties (e.g. marital difficulties, substance abuse problems)	↓ contact
	Ill-health	↓ contact
Characteristics of grandchild	Age of child – infant to early/middle childhood	↑ contact
	Negative perceptions of non-custodial parent and extended family	↓ contact
Characteristics of relationship with ex-partner when they are main custodial parent	Confrontational and embittered	↓ contact

Note: ↑ indicates increased contact ↓ indicates decreased contact

6.2.1 Geographical Proximity

As outlined in Chapter 2, there is evidence in the existing literature that the geographical distance between grandparents and grandchildren exerts an important influence on their level of contact. In our sample, grandparents whose grandchildren lived nearby were more likely to have increased contact with grandchildren following parental separation than grandparents who lived at a distance, suggesting that geographic proximity may influence or mediate the degree of involvement. All of those who had grandchildren living at a distance and had reduced contact were grandparents whose children were not the main custodial caregiver (five paternal and three maternal). In all but three instances the grandchildren had lived near the grandparents before their parents' separation and the grandparents had felt a sense of loss when their grandchildren had relocated with their main custodial parent to a new location. As mentioned above, degree of contact with grandchildren was not drastically changed for those grandparents whose grandchildren already lived at a distance from them before the parental separation; contact had been infrequent with these grandchildren in the first instance.

6.2.2 Characteristics of the adult child

Grandparents whose children were the main custodial carers were likely to have more contact with grandchildren than those who were not. In the current study mothers tended to be the main custodial carer although in three cases the father had been granted main custody. This is an important finding and suggests that in situations of divorce or separation the traditional 'matrilineal advantage' cannot be assumed to always persist and instead a 'custodial advantage' may play a greater role and influence frequency of grandparent/grandchild contact. The issue of reduced contact-time tended to be raised more by grandparents whose adult child who was not the main custodial parent and therefore had a limited number of hours to spend with their child¹⁵. During the time allotted the parent frequently wanted to pursue a leisure activity with their child or allow them to catch up

15 The amount of time awarded to fathers differed substantially. Typically they were awarded one evening during the week and an overnight stay on the weekends although in some cases contact was less frequent and did not include a mid-week meeting.

with old friends, leaving less time than previously to spend with their grandparents. As two grandparents discussed:

F: Sure we don't see him now....Mostly he's with his Dad - he spends his whole time with him, and he does have to bring him to his little friends from here and there to places he wants to go.

M: Down to hours now really

F: It's not the same now

(Respondents 10 & 11, couple, married son)

Notwithstanding this, paternal grandparents whose children returned to live with them following divorce or separation had increased contact with grandchildren. This is also an important finding which highlights how the involvement of paternal grandparents may take on greater significance in divorced and separated families, again diluting the importance of the matrilineal advantage in divorced and separated families. A subset of these grandparents mentioned that the relationship with their grandchildren improved post-separation. This was especially the case for those grandparents whose adult children's relationship with the ex-partner had involved a high degree of conflict. In these instances, the dissolution of the parental relationship permitted the development of a closer relationship between grandparent and grandchild. This was due to the fact that strained relationships pre-separation had resulted in infrequent contact with grandchildren. Post-separation, however, contact increased, in no small part due to the adult child's co-resident status. Hence these grandparents were able to enjoy a closer relationship with their grandchildren than previously possible. A paternal grandmother speaking on this issue stated:

I would say, unless things go really badly wrong, that has been one of the luckiest things to happen to me with [son's name] coming home, unlucky for them, but the outcome of that for me was I think I would have a bond with them that I would never have had without that happening and that is a high price for them to pay

(Respondent 21, grandmother, unmarried son)

The age of the adult child at the time of the relationship breakdown also had an important impact on grandparents' level of involvement with grandchildren following parental separation. With one exception, contact with grandchildren increased in instances where the separated couple were in their teens or early twenties. The need to provide greater care was necessitated by the perceived lack of maturity or parenting skills of the child, factors that in some cases were combined with the adult child's limited financial resources (for further discussion on this, see Chapter 4).

6.2.3 Characteristics of grandparent

Frequency of contact has been argued to be contingent on the circumstances of the grandparent (see, for instance, Troll, 1985). The grandparents interviewed for this study considered the role of grandparents to be important and indeed, for some, grandparenthood was a central aspect of their life. A number of interviewees outlined how the stereotypical image of a grandparent and the role they play in the extended family has changed. Participants in our study believed that grandparents in the past had a more distant relationship with their grandchildren than most contemporary grandparents. In the past, contact was thought to be infrequent and centred on social activities, while at present, contact was considered to be more frequent and encompassed not only social interaction but also the intellectual and emotional development of the grandchild. However, the nature of the grandparent role differed substantially among the 31 interviewees; some played a central role in their grandchildren's life and had contact at least two to three times weekly, while others had infrequent contact centred on family social occasions. The eight grandparents who were in full-time employment outside the home had less time available to spend with their grandchildren, but some tailored their weekdays to accommodate the needs of these grandchildren. In two cases interviewees were unable to direct significant attention towards their grandchild post-separation because of their own marital breakdown. One of these interviewees, whose marital breakdown coincided with the birth of her grandchild recounted:

And so, he [grandchild] was born and I had no bond with him whatsoever. My first grandchild, I could not handle the situation, I could not handle any part of it, when I look back now I have no idea of why – probably my own trauma was too great.

(Respondent 21, grandmother, unmarried son)

Another grandmother with marital problems which included both physical and substance abuse was unable to channel extra attention to her grandchildren at the time of their parents' separation despite the fact that her son was unable to care for his children and was undergoing treatment for substance abuse problems.

6.2.4 Characteristics of the grandchild

Contact with grandchildren tended to be greater when the grandchild was a baby, toddler or of preschool age - presumably reflecting the need for greater hands-on practical care at that age. Even when the grandparents lived at a distance from the grandchildren, substantial care was often provided at weekends and during holiday periods to young grandchildren. As outlined below, grandparents seemed to play a protective role in the life of adolescent grandchildren in the early stages of the parental breakdown, acting as reassuring role models and nurturers. However, the amount of contact grandparents had with grandchildren tended to decrease with age and hence post-separation contact with teenage grandchildren was usually more limited than with younger grandchildren. This is of course not unexpected: once grandchildren become old enough to look after-themselves (for example after school), the amount of time they typically spend with their grandparents is reduced irrespective of parental breakdown. Grandparents with teenage grandchildren indicated that a readjustment of the relationship had occurred when the grandchild had entered adolescence.

For a small number of grandparents of non-custodial children, the amount of contact they had with grandchildren within the family affected by divorce or separation was not equal. In these instances

the reduced contact with a particular grandchild was ascribed to the grandchild's loyalty to the custodial parent which resulted in aloof and withdrawn behaviour and decreased contact with the non-custodial family (this issue is expanded upon below in section 5.3).

6.2.5 Characteristics of the relationship between custodial parent and grandparent

As outlined in Chapter 4, characteristics of the relationship between the custodial parent and grandparent had a significant impact on grandparent-grandchild contact. In some cases contact with grandchildren was reduced significantly immediately following separation but increased once disputes between the parents had been resolved. In a few cases, however, contact decreased over time. Where contact was reduced one of the key factors was the acrimonious relationships between the separated couple. Disagreements between the separated couple could result in refusal of access to the grandchild imposed by the custodial parent. Many did not comply with the visitation rights even when formalised through the courts and violated access rights, making it virtually impossible for grandparents to meet grandchildren:

But when they separated then there was an arrangement made that he [son] could see him [grandson] on Sundays, that was a hit and miss situation from the start. The mood that she may be in may be OK; she would let him come, if she wasn't in a fair mood she wouldn't let him come..... The courts didn't matter to her, her own law was her own law and that was it. Her mood was the dictation of what would happen.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, married son)

While some grandparents were temporarily denied access to their grandchildren as a consequence of acrimony between the separated parents, in most situations contact resumed or increased once relationship grievances subsided. However, three interviewees (two paternal and one maternal) did not regain contact with grandchildren following the separation or divorce. The length of time which

had expired since last contact at the time of these interviews was 15 years, four years and three years. These interviewees experienced profound sorrow and grief at the loss of what had been an affectionate and loving relationship. They felt that there was a void in their lives and that the emotions of sadness and loss were indescribable. The quotation below by one grandmother, estranged from her grandchild for three years, gives an indication of the sense of loss and yearning experienced:

I find myself looking at boys and those, one day somebody is going to give me a clout for that 'What are you looking at my child for!' You know, you do do it! What is he like yeah, and then you are kind of, in no man's land - because he is not missing, not dead. He is out there somewhere and you are looking for him in the crowd all the time, all the time. Everywhere you go you kind of, where there are kids in particular, you always look and see would there be anybody there that.. And would you recognise him if you saw him! That is the hardest part. Really hard. Would you know him if you saw him.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, married son)

Despite the lack of contact with their grandchildren, all three forcibly estranged grandparents made efforts to maintain communication. This was achieved by the posting of letters, Christmas and birthday cards and birthday requests on the local radio. One grandmother was compelled to go incognito and observe her grandchildren from a distance. After travelling a journey of over three hours, she watched her grandchild outside the church on his confirmation day and again watched her grandchildren go to school:

...and to try and resolve the problem for me emotionally, I have watched my grandchildren very, very closely from a distance. I watch them go into school some days, and out of school. And I am not ashamed to say I was in disguise. I have travelled the country to see some of my grandchildren.

And again I have done it in disguise. The need I have to just look at them from a distance to see them grow up...I have absolutely no communication with them whatsoever. But I have gone to those lengths to watch them shall we say grow up from a distance. They are not aware of that, but it sort of; it has appeased my emotional need.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

Another grandmother, unwillingly estranged from her six grandchildren for fifteen years, attempted to keep updated about their lives through personal contacts in universities and schools. However, as the years went by, these sources yielded less and less information. While the adage 'time heals all wounds' may not be borne out in the lives of the three grandparents denied contact with their grandchildren, there was, however, a feeling that the urgency to see the grandchildren had subsided with time. Nonetheless, all three hoped to be reunited with their grandchildren in the future. They anticipated that in adolescence or young adulthood their grandchildren might become curious about their estranged grandparents, questioning the reason for the termination of the relationship and attempt to make contact. Despite holding such a hope, however, there was a realisation that the relationship could never be restored to that of the pre-separation era. The passage of time was such that they believed they would no longer know the grandchild; as one grandparent who had had no communication with her grandchild in 4 years relayed:

I know that their last memories of me were being looked after and loved and I am hoping that some day those memories will come to the forefront...Some day I hope that the grandchildren may remember the good times and they may come to the door, but they will come to me as strangers. Too much time will have elapsed...though...I will endeavour obviously to build bridges and to close up voids.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

6.3 Perceived Impact of the Divorce or Separation on the Grandchild

6.3.1 Introduction

All of the grandparents were concerned about the repercussions of parental separation on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the grandchild. While grandchildren were thought to have adjusted to their parents' separation, the degree to which the event was thought to have negatively impacted on them differed substantially. Effects of divorce were viewed to be less severe if minimal disruption had occurred in the grandchild's life. For example, those who remained in the same school, family home or geographical location were thought to have experienced less distress. Disruption was also minimised for those whose parents had had an amicable separation and for those who were babies or toddlers during their parents' separation and hence had few recollections of a different living arrangement before the parental break-up. In some instances different grandchildren were thought to have reacted differently to their parents' separation, and the reason for this tended to be ascribed to personality characteristics of the grandchild or their closeness to one of the parents which resulted in them having strained relationship with the other parent and their extended family.

6.3.2 Navigating through a period of change

All interviewees believed that their grandchildren had had to negotiate a period of change in their lives following parental separation. Anxiety for the well-being of the grandchildren was greatest during the tumultuous early stages of the separation - a period aptly labelled by one interviewee as the 'demolition phase'. During this transition phase, many grandchildren displayed both confusion and vulnerability. With only two exceptions, the grandparents had channelled extra attention to the grandchild at this point.¹⁶

A number of grandchildren grappled to adapt to the reconfiguration of their lives following parental separation. The uncertainty and personal anguish that they experienced as a result of their changed

¹⁶ Due to their own personal difficulties, two grandparents were unable to attend to the needs of their grandchildren in the immediate aftermath of their parents' separation.

circumstances was thought to manifest itself in challenging behaviours that were seen by the grandparents to be 'out of character' for the grandchild. The grandchildren appeared to be torn between conflicting emotions, their confusion apparent from both verbal questions and nonverbal actions. Unusual or atypical behaviour included frustration, irritability and confusion. Anger was an emotion also experienced, with one grandchild venting his frustration over his parents break-up in public fora where he frequently announced that 'my parents have ruined my life'. Another example of a grandchild's mal-adaptation to the break-up was temper tantrums as recounted by this grandmother:

It was quite a regular kind of thing, on and off, when he threw the tantrum. I suppose he was torn between the two parents and he would probably be trying to size one up, against the other, I often wonder was he told to throw a tantrum to get his own way.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

Grandchildren's behaviour after parental separation was frequently erratic and in many instances reflected the instability of the separated parents' relationship. Disagreements or tensions between the separated couple could manifest themselves through the behaviour of the grandchild. For example, a small number of interviewees outlined how their grandchild displayed increased nervousness about returning home on time, having sensed tensions between their parents. One grandparent who was subsequently denied access to her grandchild recounted:

He would be outside of the door and going home in the evening, he would be very nervous in case he would be late home. He would be very frightened to be late home. He had to be home at six and he would be saying 'Will we be in time, will we be in time?'

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

Another grandmother who observed her granddaughter's changing moods, which she ascribed to her parents' poor relationship, stated:

Sometimes she clams up...and there have been times when [she]...wouldn't want to communicate with me and I'd say to [son] 'Are you and [former partner] fighting by any chance?' and he'd say 'Ah a bit of a tiff going on,' and I would say 'Well, it's coming out in her.' ...she may not actually be hearing them arguing but she is aware of it.

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

While most grandchildren adjusted to the two-household system which required that they transit between homes at regular intervals, there were occasions when it gave rise to frustration. The distress was thought to result from the disruption in the child's routine which had an unsettling effect. Grandparents with grandchildren in their preschool years thought it was more difficult for young children to comprehend their changed family circumstances. Statements made by the grandchild suggested they had difficulty understanding the consequences of the divorce or separation for the grandparent-grandchild relationship. While the grandchild usually became accustomed to the situation with time, the confusion that some experienced was captured by the quotation below from an interview with a grandmother whose granddaughter was age four:

[W]hen you'd be least expecting it she'd say 'Are you my family?' and I'd say 'Of course I am your family, I am your grandmother' and she'd say 'How?' And I think she knew the answers but she needed confirmation. And I'd say 'Well I'm your daddy's mummy and that means I am your granny'... and she'd say '...I want you to be my granny but my mummy keeps saying you're not'.

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

6.3.3 Neglected: Perceived negligence of the parents

Virtually all the grandparents attempted to be attentive to the needs of their grandchildren, particularly in instances where the paren-

tal relationship breakdown had been acrimonious. In situations of extreme hostility, tension between the separating couple was thought to have absorbed the parents' energies to such a degree that they were temporarily unable to attend to the needs of their children or recognise the distress they might be experiencing. Grandchildren who witnessed their parents' disagreements and arguments were thought to be particularly vulnerable to emotional distress. In some cases it was thought that they had been used by the sparring couple as a bargaining tool or for the purposes of emotional blackmail. For example, to intensify ill-emotions, parental access to the grandchild could be threatened by the custodial parent. Seemingly with no regard for their well-being, the fighting couple positioned their child(ren) at the centre of the row. As one interviewee phrased it:

The [grand] children didn't matter anymore. It became just a power battle between the two of them

(Respondent 16, grandmother, married son)

6.3.4 Detached and aloof: Deterioration of grandparent-grandchild relationship

Deterioration in their relationship with grandchildren following parental separation was mentioned only by grandparents whose children were not the main custodial parent and had had high-conflict relationships with their ex-partner following the separation. In such instances, the grandchild was viewed to have become detached and aloof, portraying a lack of affection towards the grandparent since their parents' separation. Grandchildren embroiled in such belligerent relationships tended to be less communicative. As the comment below indicated, the grandchild conceived of the non-custodial family as the 'enemy':

[She was] cold towards [me], not the hug and everything and I bought her a present. And I said come on now and there's a little gift granny got you, but...yeah we are the enemy, definitely with the second [grandchild].

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

The grandchild's changed behaviour resulted in strained relationships devoid of spontaneity and enjoyment. Questions relating to the grandchild's new home aroused suspicion or anger, emotions previously not displayed. For example, one five year old granddaughter's retort to her grandmother's question as to whether she attended dance lessons in the town to which she relocated, was 'that's not really any of your business'. Responses such as this forced grandparents to temper with greater effort their conversations with their grandchildren:

It is very strained because I can't, I feel I can't talk to them about their whole life, I can't say to them what's your house like down there or what did you do, I feel I can't say that. ... Because I feel that if I do they go back and they say granny was asking questions.

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

In these cases, the changed behaviour of the grandchild was attributed to the embittered relationship between the separated couple. The fault for the erosion of the relationship was ascribed to the custodial parent who was thought to openly criticise members of the non-custodial family. This castigating was believed to stem from resentment towards the ex-partner and their extended family. The following statements illustrate these sentiments:

She tries to turn him against the grandparents.

(Respondent 10, grandfather, married son)

She has driven a wedge totally between her and us.

(Respondent 31, grandfather, married son)

He has fed them all sorts of things about us.

(Respondent 9, grandmother, married daughter)

While relationships tended to improve over time and trust between the grandparent and grandchild often returned to pre-separation level, in a small number of cases acrimony persisted and the relationship with grandchildren was not restored.

6.3.5 Long-term effects of divorce/separation on grandchildren

Even where the grandchild had (seemingly) not been negatively affected by the separation, interviewees voiced concern about the long-term repercussions of parental divorce or separation on the grandchild. The most recurrent worry was that problems relating to the separation might arise during the grandchild's adolescence. Some worried that the lone-parent status of their grandchild's household deprived them of economic security. Particularly in the case of lone-mother households there was a concern that the grandchild might not enjoy the opportunities available to children in two-parent households where financial security was likely to be greater. A small number were worried about the long-term effects of their grandchildren being raised in a household without a father. Some grandparents mentioned that their grandchildren had recently begun to display more disruptive behaviour and to challenge their parent's authority. One grandmother who viewed the defiant behaviour as a portent for future discipline problems relayed:

And maybe because they felt like I have only one boss now so we can be a bit more free...They started doing things... they seem to be getting more independent...like they have no restrictions, well they said 'Well it's only mammy, it will be all right'...You notice little things when people break up. You notice a little difference in children.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

Another grandmother, estranged from her grandchildren for four years, wondered about the psychological effects of denied contact on the grandchildren. She worried that they may have difficulty forming relationships of attachment in their adulthood and believed that ultimately the denial of contact would be to the detriment of the custodial parent-child relationship:

It backfires. You see they don't develop emotionally right. Because...hatred is put into them, and by the time they come

to an age where they want to enter into relationships with friends...relationships in general, they haven't got the tools to do it with. They are lost. And they start to question what's happened, why. And all this that's been put into them over the years comes to the forefront. They then meet up with their father when they are allowed to do so and they realise this isn't such a bad guy and you know, they start to hate then, the person that has indoctrinated them.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

6.4 Perceived Role of Grandparents

6.4.1 Introduction

The interviewees' perceptions of grandparents' role in the lives of their grandchildren finds resonance in the existing literature on grandparents outlined in Chapter Two. The roles attributed to grandparents in the post-separation family included those of a nurturer, a socialiser, an entertainer (or distracter), a confidant, a role model and a car-giver. The specific roles that the grandparents played varied mainly according to the age of the grandchild. Table 6.2 below summarizes the main roles adopted by grandparents in post-separation situation and their variance according to the age of the grandchild.

	Infancy	Toddler-hood	Early/ Middle Childhood	Adolescence
Care-giver	X	X	X	
Entertainer	X	X	X	X
Nurturer	X	X	X	X
Confidant		X	X	X
Role Model			X	X
Companion				X

6.4.2 Nurturer and Socialiser

Virtually all the interviewees believed that grandparents were nurturing and protective and constituted a dependable and positive support to grandchildren. They thought that grandparents provided reassurance to grandchildren by conveying unconditional love, affection and affirmation to them. Grandparents were considered to play a role separate but complementary to that of parents, which included providing guidance and supervision to the third generation. While all interviewees maintained that grandparents had a responsibility and duty towards the welfare of their grandchildren, virtually all believed that the desirable degree of involvement was less than that expected from a parent.

Grandparents who had frequent contact with their grandchildren believed that grandparents were important agents in the socialising of the grandchild. As indicated in previous studies, the role of a storyteller or grandparents as the conduits of family traditions and knowledge was also mentioned. Many emphasised the importance of passing on their accumulated knowledge and wisdom to their grandchildren. Providing grandchildren with an opportunity to communicate was seen to be particularly important in contemporary society, where both parents were typically employed outside the home. In such instances, some grandparents believed parents had insufficient time to communicate and listen to their children:

I think grandparents are there to... the same as a parent, to listen to the children. That's the most important thing because sometimes children are looking for someone to tell something to. And I think the important thing is to be there for them. Give them a hug and a cuddle because maybe sometimes mum and dad might not be the best to tell and they sort of say well who is the next best bet for me to go [to]. So they go to the nanny and you give them a hug and a kiss and reassure them that everything is going to be alright.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter
and unmarried son)

A number of interviewees mentioned that grandparents could provide perspectives and stimuli different from those offered by parents, peers or formal educators in schools:

...I do the things that their parents wouldn't, I say things that their parents wouldn't say...and I do listen to them. I ask the questions about school, whereas with my own children I would have said 'you do the homework' and that's it whereas with the grandchildren, I listen to what's going on...

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

...parents have one role, grandparents have a different role. Sometimes it's parallel, but in a way you can open windows of opinion and view different contexts of things. To expand if you like on the view of the world from school or from parents, the grandparents can just open different windows and different experiences.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

6.4.3 Foster a sense of identity

Grandparents whose children were not the main custodial care-givers were more likely to talk about the role they played in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness in their grandchildren's lives after the parental separation. This emphasis on developing a sense of family identity was due to the fact that contact with the extended family had been disrupted or reduced. These grandparents believed that they should reassure grandchildren of their role and importance in the extended family unit in the hope that this would instil a sense of continuity in the grandchild's life. This continuity was thought to be particularly important for grandchildren who, prior to their parents' separation, had had regular contact with their grandparents. As one grandmother indicated, she wanted to ensure that her grandchildren did not feel 'rejected' by the extended non-custodial family:

When he's going out the door...after being here, once or twice...I'd say to him 'don't forget now...you're our eldest

grandchild and nobody can ever take that away from us or you'..

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

Some grandparents believed that family gatherings and celebrations, such as communions, confirmations, weddings and birthdays provided an opportunity to elicit a sense of belonging in the grandchildren:

If we have a family wedding, all them children are meeting at the one wedding. Even though the partners wouldn't be there...Son's girlfriend wouldn't be there and the daughter's husband wouldn't be there but the children would be included. I would always say whichever of our family is having a wedding...'Make sure you don't forget A, B and...' 'Oh no they'll be all there' So there's still a big family circle for the children's sake.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

Involving grandchildren in family events, however, was not always straightforward. Cognisant of the possibility of the custodial parent denying access at short notice, some grandparents and non-custodial parents were not able to make long-term arrangements with their grandchildren. They limited conversation on forthcoming family celebrations or holidays, in the fear that the grandchild might be denied access to the event at short notice, causing disappointment to everyone.

6.4.4 Confidant: Providing affirmation and support

Grandparents who had at least monthly contact with their grandchildren emphasised the importance of providing affirmation and support to their grandchildren following parental separation. Playing the role of 'family watchdogs' (Troll, 1983), they strove to alleviate grandchildren's distress and to be sensitive to their emotional needs. They endeavoured to reassure grandchildren and normalise the separation of their parents and wanted to act as a confidant to their grand-

children if they so desired. The following quotation illustrates how grandparents strove to be compassionate and understanding:

I think I have always been there and been involved with them. I've been there for them and really tried to communicate that we're here and that we love them. Just really creating a space of security and fun and things to let them know we're interested in what they do and how they're getting on and trying to encourage them to talk about their feelings as well, but because of this huge change in their lives I try and acknowledge that I understand the complexity of it.....and I say okay that's fine but if you're not happy you have to say that you're not happy. Don't just put up with it. You are entitled to express your feelings as well and letting them know that they have the permission to do that...

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

The manner in which support and affirmation was provided depended on the age of the grandchild. Those with young grandchildren (between three and six years of age) tended to make a deliberate effort to talk to them about the separation. However, a number of these grandparents conveyed uncertainty over how to best broach the issue of parental separation with their young grandchildren who they believed had difficulty understanding the reasons for their changed living arrangements. These grandparents felt ill-equipped to adequately explain the reasons for the separation. Those who referred to this issue thought it was important to be honest while simultaneously shielding and protecting the grandchild from any animosity that had arisen between their parents. The difficulties that grandparents contend with are captured in the quotation below:

And a thing I would love to know is - are we dealing with it right, the way we're dealing with it? My attitude is - his mother wouldn't be my number one but his mammy is his mammy and that's it and if we're drawing pictures or anything here we always put in mammy and lately we put in [name], who

would be the new partner, because he is living with him, you know. We have to but I don't know is that right? Or I'd just love to know who would tell you are you right or wrong. And then there's the part of leaving him back when he doesn't want to go back, how do you deal with that?

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

The role of confidant was thought to be particularly important to teenage grandchildren in the post-divorce family. The maturity of the adolescent grandchild allowed grandparents in many cases to talk candidly with the grandchild about their parents' separation/divorce. Furthermore, the fact that the teenage grandchild-grandparent relationship was no longer brokered by the parents enabled the development of a relationship which was more open and honest than hitherto possible. As one interviewee, the grandmother of a 15-year-old grandson, stated:

...I feel that with [grandson] he's a bit older and I have that relationship with him now that I can actually say to him...if you have a problem with your dad... if you're...fighting ... or whatever you come down and tell me and I'll see to it you know.

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

In many cases the grandchild had approached the grandparent(s) directly for advice. Reflecting on her relationship with teenager grandchildren, one interviewee stated:

...teenagers...might be more inclined to open up to [grandparents] where they wouldn't open up to their mother and father. I think teenagers are the most difficult because they're at a time in their life when they're changing from a child into a teenager and they'd be looking for guidance maybe. And even if they can't talk to the parents, I am always there, you know.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

However, in a small number of instances grandparents took a more reticent approach with their young adolescent grandchildren, not actively addressing the issue of the parents' separation, but cultivating an environment of security, which would allow the grandchild to introduce the topic if they so desired:

Well, I never discuss their emotional lives with them. They are both quite articulate so I leave that to their parents. They don't confide in me in that way and I would like to feel that I was there if they wanted to. They're very loyal and the older one would never admit to me or to anybody that either of his parents was in anyway not coming up to scratch... I feel he's got enough to talk to and the [younger grandchild], again I wouldn't probe...He is quite ready to tell you when things aren't going well so I really let them take the initiative.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

6.4.5 Entertainer: A diversion/distraction

In an effort to distract grandchildren from the negative aspects of the family situation, grandparents may be somewhat more indulgent to grandchildren who have undergone a divorce or separation. Not having ultimate parental responsibility for the grandchild meant that the relationship revolved less around rules and discipline and more around enjoyment and communication. Having to incur less of the practical stress of parenthood, grandparents were thought to be able to indulge and spoil grandchildren and have greater latitude to engage in social, recreational and educational activities with them:

Because with your own children you have responsibilities big time, financial, education, health, you name it. With your grandchildren it's a different ball game. You hand them back. When you have them you can love them to bits, spoil them to bits, and educate them to bits.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

The ability to offset any distress that may be experienced by the grandchild as a result of the parental divorce or separation was mentioned by many grandparents, both maternal and paternal, and both by those who lived near and by those who lived at a distance from their grandchildren. Aware of the unhappiness and upset which can at times accompany parental breakdown, they made deliberate efforts to entertain their grandchildren and to deflect any distress they were experiencing. This was achieved by taking them on outings, sporting events or holidays, by purchasing gifts, by engaging in jovial banter with the grandchild, or simply by doing slightly unusual things, as one grandmother commented:

So I would try and do mad things you know really fun things, like skipping down the street in the city centre, you know just to mortify them, things like that just to say really life goes on, it can be fun, everything isn't serious all the time, we can do some fun things.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, married daughter)

Others attempted to create a supportive and welcoming environment in their home which was thought would provide a counterbalance to the insecurity of the grandchildren's new living arrangements. Grandparents also strove to create an atmosphere in their households which was welcoming and redolent of emotional safety. They believed that their house could act as sanctuary or haven of security. As this grandmother of a teenager grandson recounted:

He finds our house quite relaxing, it's big. There is a lot of space and nobody is on top of anybody else and he likes to go off on his own so he would go into the garden and brandish bamboo canes and act the Lord of the Rings and things like that. I think it's good, it gives him space.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

6.4.6 Positive Role Model

Grandparents with adolescent grandchildren were more likely to mention that grandparents can act as a positive role model to their

grandchildren. This function was thought to be particularly important if the grandchild was growing up in a one-parent household, or in instances where grandparents were concerned about their adult child's parenting skills. One grandfather who was concerned about the absence of a positive male role model in his granddaughters' lives explained how he hoped he could instil in them a love of learning and the importance of the value of education:

I think I've been useful intellectually to them. I think I've been good for them in challenging them and saying things and getting them to decide whether I'm being real or not and so on. I think that's been useful and I think [granddaughter's] interest in science and mathematics has certainly been influenced by me.

(Respondent 25, grandfather, married daughter)

Another interviewee who had returned to adult education in her 60s, explained that she hoped her actions would imbue her adolescent grandchildren with an appreciation of the importance of third-level education:

I think they're very proud of me. Because, especially the ones that are going to college they're saying, 'Now nanny, you put the foundation stone in for us and we're going to make you proud nanny, we're going to keep there and do this and do that and the other.' You know, and they look at my photo with the gown and the cap and they say 'Now nanny, next year I am getting to do that.'

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

6.4.7 Grandparents as care-givers

Involvement in the care of grandchildren was greatest for grandparents whose adult children returned to live with their parents following the separation. In all cases, unsurprisingly, co-residency led to an increase in contact with the grandchildren. This included eleven

paternal grandparents and two maternal grandparents. Naturally co-resident grandparents were forced to re-organise their lives to cater for the needs of their child and grandchild(ren). They engaged in many of the activities that might normally be categorised as being in the domain of parental responsibility, such as meal preparation, feeding, bathing and collecting grandchildren from crèche or school. However, the narratives of the interviewees confirmed the validity of the norm of non-interference discussed in Chapter Two. The majority of interviewees did not wish to assume parenting duties. In particular, they did not want to interfere in core decisions regarding the upbringing of their grandchild:

I don't want to be their mother...I've been there done that....
They have two perfectly good parents so I'm going to let them
parent...I'm not going to parent her [daughter] or the kids,
I'm just going to be there for them.

(Respondent 24, grandmother, unmarried daughter)

Notwithstanding the desire to maintain a relationship of 'non-interference', a small number of interviewees were forced, or felt obliged, to adopt a co-parenting role (Hirshorn 1998) during or immediately after the chaotic period of separation. This was the case for one grandmother whose son's reaction to the divorce resulted in a deterioration in his parenting skills to such an extent that, according to his mother, he acted more like an older brother than a father in relation to his infant son. The grandmother in this situation felt compelled to adopt the dual role of a mother to her son and her infant grandchild:

[son] still lives at home...I give [him] a lot of help with
[grandchild] because [son] was great with him when they were
in the relationship, and is good with him, but as far as, we'll
say, making him brush his teeth and just stuff like that, he's
like a brother to [grandson]...I mean the sitting there and
they're arguing over cartoons or a football match...So I'm the
mother...in the background of it.

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

Another grandmother with children of a preschool age at the time of her teenage child's relationship break-down felt obliged to combine the rearing of her infant grandchild with that of her own young children:

I was almost a sort of parent in a way... we shared parenting... I would have treated them the same as I was treating my own children... I was at home with my own child, I had a big gap between the first lot and then... I had another two but I was at home, and to me it was just another child. Just blended in there, you know?

(Respondent 16, grandmother, married son)

In cases such as these, the relationship that evolved between the grandmother and the grandchild at times had a close semblance to that of a mother-child relationship. The following quotation by a maternal grandmother who was co-resident with her grandchild for four years gives an indication of how the boundaries of relationships in these situations can become blurred:

When his mummy won't do what he wants her to do he phones me up. I don't interfere though I always try and get him to see his mammy's side, you know. Try and talk to him. But that's his first thing; he goes for the phone and rings me. He calls me mamma. Because he was here when he started talking, his mother called me mummy. His mother is mummy and I am mamma.

(Respondent 29, grandmother, married daughter)

The extensive provision of care was deemed acceptable and almost obligatory in the early stages of the separation, when the adult child was experiencing distress, anxiety, or depression as a consequence of the relationship breakdown. However, the sense of obligation to provide extensive care subsided with time. In particular, a reduction in the amount of care delivered was viewed as reasonable once relationship disputes had been resolved and the family had adjusted to their new post-separation living arrangement. One interviewee who had provided extensive care and support stated:

...at the very beginning we [respondent and spouse] did plan our lives around it...If we were going out for dinner we'd say, 'no we won't, we'll leave it to the weekend, [grandchild] is not here.' But you can only do that for so long...now we don't plan our lives around it [any more]...we...just book a holiday...

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

Similar attitudes were expressed by another grandparent who was reluctant to become extensively involved in the upbringing of her grandchildren and therefore took active steps to distance herself from the parenting role, reassuring herself that the parents were making efforts to perform their role:

For a while I felt I was trying to compensate for their lack of parenting and now I'm not doing that any longer. I've withdrawn from that and I think the danger is that you would get hooked into that role and stay with it... so I concentrated on really trying to be a grandparent rather than trying to worry about whether they were eating the right things and getting enough sleep. But the thing always that saved the situation was that both parents were so devoted to the boys and in the long run what they wanted was what was best for them, even though they weren't going about it in the best way.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

6.4.8 Custodial grandparents

Three interviewees were parents of children with substance abuse problems. Due to their child's inability to provide adequate parental care they sought custodial rights for their grandchildren. The decision to acquire custodial rights largely stemmed from a sense of duty and obligation towards their grandchildren. The three interviewees found full-time child rearing very labour-intensive. For one grandfather, the untimely death of his wife required that he become the sole guardian of his grandchild – a role which obviously involved great responsibility and sacrifice. Becoming a custodial grandparent required that each of the interviewees readjust their lives and in the following case take early retirement:

I do not know about retiring, when I did, because I could retire at 60 and I did retire exactly when I was 60.... but I enjoyed everyday of my work and you know I would happily I think have gone on, but certainly looking at my intention ten years ago would have been to be involved politically or to be involved in some voluntary capacity, but it certainly would not have been here looking after children, I think it would be true that in these circumstances, and in [my wife's] circumstances I think it is true to say that [she] retired early..

(Respondent 22, grandfather, unmarried daughter)

Taking on the role of a parent consumed much of the three grandparents' time and energy. In addition to the rearing of their grandchildren, each of them endeavoured to assist their drug-dependent children. Trying to cater for the needs of their child and grandchildren, however, proved too demanding for one interviewee. Health deterioration forced him to sever relations with his son. Although this was a difficult decision, he felt compelled to take such action to ensure that his grandchild received the optimum level of love and attention:

...I gave up on his dad because... I couldn't even go through the stories...I just hadn't got the energy to give my son anymore I had to concentrate on [grandson] because I was in hospital and I had to get myself right because stress...now as I got older I shed a lot of stress and devoted most of my time to [grandson] and said to myself I have to give him everything ... I can't ... so I washed my hands of my son...

(Respondent 20, grandfather, unmarried son)

The three custodial grandparents were concerned about the psychological and emotional well-being of their grandchildren. The untimely death of one grandchild's custodial grandmother was thought to have negatively impacted on the grandchild and contributed to a decline in his educational performance:

He's had problems, he's having problems at school at the moment because of his irritation and unfortunately the head

teacher doesn't understand his grandparents reared him and when my wife died, with [grandson] calling her ma, when she died...it left such a vacuum...

(Respondent 20, grandfather, unmarried son)

The custodial grandparents were particularly concerned that problems might occur in their grandchildren's adolescent years. They explained that even at a young age their grandchildren were demarcated by their peers as different. Two of the custodial grandparents emphasised the importance of empowering their grandchildren to help them to better understand and accept the absence of their parents in their daily life. They believed it was necessary to be honest to their grandchildren but also to explain their situation in uncomplicated language. Mindful of the complexity of their parent's situation they strove to shield the grandchildren from any confusion and insecurity which could result. The anecdote below provides some indication of the heart-rending problems the grandchildren may encounter which needed to be addressed by the custodial parents:

I think that is the huge difference between rearing your own children and rearing somebody else's, because you have issues that would keep coming up all the time and you've got to answer questions all the time for the children... [grandchild]...went to a birthday party a few weeks ago...she came back...quite upset because this...boy said to her, 'why don't you live with your mummy and daddy?', and her response was 'because they took drugs'. And she came back and told me what happened and I said to her 'why did you feel the need to tell them that they took drugs? Because you said that they took drugs, they wanted to ask you what are drugs, did they?' 'Yes, they did ask me'. 'What did you say?' 'I said I did not know'. And I said 'we need to think of an easier answer for it. Would it not be better for you to say that because my mummy and daddy were too young'.

(Respondent 23, grandmother, unmarried daughter)

The three custodial grandparents, having experienced the pain, disappointment and suffering of being the parent of a drug-dependent child, articulated how they would endeavour to exert more parental guidance and supervision than was exercised with their own children:

I think I would be a bit more guarded in terms of freedom and things like that – probably the danger for me would be [being] over-cautious because I think was I too liberal with the others, it makes you just raise questions within yourself and there are no answers to that.

(Respondent 23, grandmother, unmarried daughter)

All believed it was important to minimise the grandchild's exposure to anti-social behaviour and the life style of their parents. For this reason, one couple relocated to an area with better educational and social facilities. The widowed grandfather lamented the fact that he had not done so. Nonetheless, in an effort to minimise the influence of local troublesome youth on his grandson, they moved each summer to a seaside town outside Dublin where it he believed the child's social contacts to be more positive.

6.4.9 Negative implications of extensive involvement

Satisfaction with the grandparent role was linked to the extensiveness of care responsibility. In general, caring was not seen as a burdensome task but instead as something that the interviewees willingly incorporated into their weekly or monthly routine. However, for a small number, the degree to which they were involved was excessive. Investing heavily in the care of one's grandchildren required numerous sacrifices. As the quotation below from one grandmother suggests, years of intensive involvement deprived her of time to engage in personally fulfilling social activities:

I once asked the doctor this question... 'Doctor, everybody retires at a certain age, shop keepers, doctors, nurses. When do you retire from the family?' He said 'I haven't an answer'. You never do.... now I don't regret what I have done because I

am very proud of all my children and all that. But at the same time I'm sympathetic to myself...I wasted a womanhood...I didn't look that much ahead for myself...I put myself away to one side...locked myself away and forgot about myself.

(Respondent 7, grandmother, married daughter and unmarried son)

These grandparents who experienced their involvement with grandchildren as excessive emphasised their desire for independence and pursuit of other activities not related to the grandparent role. The provision of on-going assistance had proved exhausting. They wanted to reduce their involvement to what they believed were more normal levels. One maternal grandmother of two granddaughters outlined her reflections on the appropriate limits to grandparenting and the difficulty of gauging the level of involvement at times:

I have pulled back a little in the last year...last year my husband had a very serious heart operation...this year I was going to try and do more for myself...if you do get involved, before you know where you are you're very involved...the children when they're older...will be off doing their own thing and you've missed out on your own life and your own friends.

(Respondent 26, grandmother, married daughter)

In a similar vein, a paternal grandmother who had provided extensive care to her grandchildren for nearly a decade expressed a wish to decrease her involvement. This desire stemmed both from a concern for her own health and a wish to have more personal time to pursue social and leisure activities. Struggling with the duties she held as a grandmother she felt that the extensive caregiving had compromised the quality of her relationship with her grandchildren. The unintended consequence of continuous extensive involvement was that their relationship had become devoid of fun and spontaneity. In short, duty had replaced enjoyment, also leading to what this grandmother believed to be confusion, or confluence, of the roles of a mother and a grandmother:

... I would like to have more quality time...with my grandkids...I don't have it. I don't seem to be able to develop it... [one of the grandchildren] has a totally different relationship with her other nanny than she does with me. Great relationship. Real nice relationship with her nanny whereby it's all, no expectations. Of the nanny...But with me...she can be cheeky, and she'd slag me...There's no niceness about it...I'm almost like her mammy, that's what it is...that was ok, a long time ago, because my own children were quite young and we were a young family, but now I don't seem to be able to get the place where I can be just a nanny.

(Respondent 16, grandmother, married son)

Another grandmother, heavily involved with the care of her grandchild, relayed similar emotions of frustration and recounted how extensive care-giving had deprived her relationship with her grandchildren of spontaneity and enjoyment:

I used to feel...almost resentful with the boys, that these should have been years of enjoyment but they weren't, they were just years of anguish and every time I saw them I was kind of reading the body language, are they okay?...I remember once they were in our back garden...and things were going well and they were relaxed and they were playing and it was sunny and [my daughter] was reading a book or having a cup of coffee or something and I thought 'Gosh this is what it could be like, this is what other people have...who are grandparents, who keep going on about how wonderful it is...I've never forgotten that moment.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

6.5 Conclusion

It is conceivable that the grandparent-grandchild relationship takes on greater significance for both parties after parental separation. Particularly in the early stages of the separation, grandparents who have had close relationships with their grandchildren prior to the separation

have the opportunity to play a pivotal role in minimizing disruption in the grandchild's life. They help to mitigate some of the distress that a grandchild may experience and ameliorate feelings of insecurity that are often experienced by grandchildren. Our interview data suggests that grandparents are an important resource to grandchildren in the context of parental separation and divorce. Cognisant of the unsettling life event which the grandchild(ren) had to negotiate, the grandparents we interviewed strove to provide continuity and reassurance to them. Sensitive to the needs of their grandchildren, they treated them as a central concern and made themselves available as counsellors and confidants. They strove to normalise the situation for their grandchild and to distract and reassure them when necessary. In such instances, they could be regarded as anchors of stability at a time of uncertainty.

While the grandparents interviewed for this study were situated in very different circumstances, common issues relating to the grandparent-grandchild relationship emerged. Among these was the joy derived from the relationship (although for some, this was marred by what they perceived to be excessive involvement), the anxiety they had for the well-being of their grandchild, the concern for their grandchild's long-term well-being and their desired ability to act as a stabiliser or source of support to their grandchild. Grandchildren were thought to transit through different phases of adjustment when negotiating their new family arrangements. The interviews indicated that, in the eyes of their grandparents', the majority of grandchildren were highly resilient and presented few adjustment problems. Despite the complexities and insecurities confronted because of the parental separation, most grandparent-grandchild relationships remained intact and well-functioning. In some instances the bond became closer due to co-residence or reduced contact with the non-custodial parent whose involvement had previously to varying extents marred the grandparent-grandchild relationship. However, in a small number of cases where the relationship breakdown was acrimonious, deterioration in the grandparent-grandchild relationship occurred. In such instances, contact with the grandchild, which was frequently at the behest of the custodial parent, was sporadic and constrained.

Our interview data suggest that many grandparents go to considerable lengths to reorganize their lives to accommodate the needs of their grandchildren following parental separation or divorce. Some, particularly those who became full-time custodial caregivers, made great sacrifices. The majority (excluding those denied access to their grandchildren) were satisfied with the degree of involvement in their grandchildren's lives and enjoyed the role played therein. A small number had been forced to temporarily assume the role of a parent in relation to their grandchildren. In addition to providing practical hands on care, grandparents provided intellectual stimulation, emotional support, guidance and supervision. However, as time passed and the emotional turmoil that surrounded the relationship breakdown subsided, grandparents were able to reduce the intensity of their involvement. For those who were unable to decrease their level of involvement, satisfaction with the grandparenting role was compromised.

The grandparents interviewed for this study underscored the importance of maintaining relationships with both maternal and paternal grandparents if at all possible. While the literature on grandparents suggests that maternal grandmothers play a more extensive role in the upbringing of grandchildren, our data do not unequivocally bear out such conclusions. Despite the fact that fraught relationships with the custodial parent resulted in decreased contact for some paternal grandparents, the amount of care provided to grandchildren increased for most due to the fact that the separated son required additional support following divorce or separation. This finding is important since it underscores the central role played by many paternal grandparents. It suggests that a 'matrilineal advantage' cannot be assumed in all instances, and that the separation or divorce can lead to the development of a closer relationship between paternal grandparents and their grandchildren.

7. Personal Pathways: Impact of the Divorce or Separation Process on Grandparents

7.1 Introduction

Chapters Five and Six have outlined grandparents' roles in supporting their children and grandchildren during and after the breakdown of marital or non-marital relationships in the middle generation. The focus in the literature to date has been on the impact of divorce and separation on the couple undergoing relationship breakdown and their children. However, as this chapter shows, the parents of the divorcing or separating couple are also affected by their adult child's separation or divorce. This chapter outlines the findings from the interviews relating to grandparents' personal experiences of their son's or daughter's separation process. The chapter starts with an overview of the emotional and physical impact of the process on the grandparents. The next section argues that grandparents follow unique 'emotional journeys' as they seek to come to terms with their child's separation. These emotional journeys differ according to a variety of factors which are separated into those that grandparents have some control over and others that they are not in a position to control. In addition to this focus on the personal experiences of the grandparents, the chapter also outlines their interactions, where relevant, with formal support services and with the legal system in Ireland. The chapter therefore endeavours to place the grandparents' personal experiences in the legal and policy context within which they lived, and to gain some insights into the impact of that context on their experiences.

7.2 Impact of the Divorce/Separation Process on Grandparents

7.2.1 Introduction

An analysis of the interview data indicated that the separation of their child had a significant emotional and physical impact on each respondent, from when they first heard of the impending separation,

until, in some cases, the time of interview. This section outlines the impact of the divorce/separation process on the respondents.

7.2.2 Initial Reaction

Only a few of the grandparents were surprised to hear about their child's relationship breaking down. The news came as a shock to just one respondent, who had not anticipated the break-up at all. All other respondents had seen problems developing in their child's relationship before the split occurred, and most reacted to the news with a degree of relief that the fighting and tension might now cease. In some cases it even appeared that grandparents anticipated the relationship breakdown before their own child became fully aware of the possibility:

You know he [son] seemed to be not seeing or not wanting to see what was going on...she [ex-wife] asked him to leave for three weeks so she could make up her mind...But he didn't know it was about the marriage...He still hadn't copped on that his marriage was falling apart.

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

Although the majority of respondents were not surprised to learn of the breakdown, hearing the news was nonetheless something of a shock for a small number. For one grandmother, this shock was compounded by the fact that her son communicated the news about his separation via text message:

I was in my office [when I received the text message]...and I had to just go into the meeting. I thought they'd never shut up until I came back out and I rang and I said 'Don't you ever give me news like that by text message,' I said 'I deserve a bit better than that, you're after shocking me.' But there was a part of relief in it as well.

(Respondent 15, grandmother, unmarried son)

7.2.3 Confusion and Apprehension

Throughout their child's separation process, many grandparents experienced feelings of confusion and apprehension, largely as a result of fears and uncertainty over the outcome and impacts of the process. Many suggested that they worried about the impact of the process on their grandchildren, while others indicated that they had worried that they may lose contact with their grandchildren, if disagreements over children between the separating couple were not resolved in a satisfactory way (see also Chapter 6). While almost all of those interviewed endeavoured to provide as much emotional and practical support to their child and grandchildren as possible, most recognised that the separating couple should be given the opportunity to make their own arrangements with regards to custody. As a result, many grandparents felt helpless as they waited to find out how their relationship with their grandchildren would be affected.

7.2.4 Grief and Loss

Grandparents who lose contact with their grandchildren can suffer from many negative long-term effects, as a result of the difficulty of finding closure in the grieving process (Drew and Silverstein, 2007). This was the case for a small number of the respondents interviewed for this study. Those who had lost contact with their grandchildren experienced extreme feelings of grief and loss. Many struggled to cope with the loss, and appeared unable to think of little else and remarked that it had impinged upon their ability to love and trust others. One grandmother stated that she was reluctant to develop a close relationship with her second grandchild, following the loss of contact with her first:

I love the wee child, don't get me wrong, but I wouldn't go out of my way to go over to see her. I would buy her plenty of stuff and I'll be good to her and I'll love her when she's there, but I just look at her and say, how long am I going to have you?

(Respondent 19, grandmother, unmarried daughter)

The loss of contact with grandchildren was acutely felt and resulted in anxiety and restlessness and appeared to be coupled with feelings of guilt, as well as concern over the well-being of their grandchildren:

[I]t's really hard...not to see him. I find myself looking at boys and wondering what is he like... You are in a kind of no man's land - because he is not missing, not dead. He is out there somewhere and you are looking for him in the crowd all the time, all the time.

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

A number of grandparents also grieved for the positive relationship they had had with their child's former partner, which had soured as a result of the breakdown. One grandfather, who had previously had a good relationship with his son's former partner, remarked:

She hurt me more than any woman ever hurt me.

(Respondent 11, grandfather, married son)

The grief experienced by some respondents appeared to be linked to disappointment that the hopes they had once had for their child and grandchildren's futures had diminished, and had been replaced with a sense of fear about what the future may hold, including concerns about whether their grandchildren would cope with their parents' separation and divorce.

7.2.5 Anger

Some respondents experienced a great deal of anger during the process. As will be discussed in greater detail below, some grandparents were angry at the lack of support available to help them cope and provide support to others. Such anger was most often expressed by grandparents in situations where divorce or custody proceedings were still underway, and the final potential impact on all individuals was still unknown. However, the grandparents' anger, where expressed, was most often targeted at their child's former partner whom they held responsible for the relationship breakdown and the hurt caused

to their child and grandchildren. One grandmother suggested that her anger towards her former daughter-in-law may have dissipated if she had heard both sides of the story:

At this stage it's still too raw... I would have liked for her to have come along and said to me "this is what the problem is and I can't do this any longer".

(Respondent 17, grandmother, married son)

This anger may have been related to respondents' changed expectations about their child's and grandchildren's future and may have been simply a way of expressing emotion over their personal disappointment and concerns over the well-being of their family.

7.2.6 Emotional Delay as Personal Sacrifice

The emotional turmoil experienced by respondents was often compounded by the efforts made by each individual to act as a source of strength and support for their own child and grandchildren, as outlined in Chapters Five and Six. Despite this, with the exception of one respondent, none expressed any resentment, bitterness or anger over the sacrifices they had made for their children and grandchildren. All appeared to see it as part of their role as parents and grandparents and, for the most part, were willing to give all the support they could. For some grandparents, this often delayed the processing of their emotions until after the initial crisis had passed, thus postponing their ability to come to terms with the outcomes of the process. Many felt that it was better to provide support first, and only think about themselves after the needs of others had been met:

Ah no [I didn't use any support services]. I suppose I was so involved in my daughter's part of it, I only wanted things to go right for her. If you're that type of person, if you have that nature in you, you do without and look after your child.

(Respondent 29, grandmother, married daughter)

The only respondent who expressed resentment towards her daughter had made a decision to side with her son-in-law. Thus, while she saw

her own daughter as being at fault for the break-up of the relationship, she appeared to have given unlimited support to her son-in-law, motivated by the desire to enable him to maintain a positive relationship with his children.

7.2.7 Physical and Practical Impacts

The separation also took a physical toll on respondents, with five grandparents noting that the stress and tension they experienced on a continual basis had impacted on their health:

I don't think it has been very good for me. I found it very stressful, I found it very hard to think of anything else and it seemed to go on for ever and there seemed to be nothing I could do about it. That's the really stressful thing...You have to cope with the situation but there is nothing you can do.

(Respondent 18, grandmother, married daughter)

The stress had made many respondents more susceptible to illnesses; one had developed pneumonia, while others developed stomach problems, which they believed had resulted from the stress of supporting their children and grandchildren.

The toll of the divorce or separation process on the emotional and physical health of grandparents was greatest for those who had lost and were hoping to regain contact with their grandchildren:

As you get older it gets more difficult emotionally. I took a stroke last year and I have the lupus to contend with now, and I just feel I have paid a colossal price. And there is no way I am going to overcome this obstacle. I just have to condition myself now that they are gone, they have gone.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

The separation process also impacted on grandparents in a number of practical ways. As noted in Chapter Five, eight respondents lives' had changed significantly as their child (and in some cases their grand-

children) had moved in with them on a temporary (or in some cases long-term) basis, following their separation. Twenty-five respondents also noted that they had given or were giving financial support to their children. Other contributions and sacrifices that grandparents had made in the interest of ensuring the well-being of their children and grandchildren included care of grandchildren, and postponement of personal plans regarding, for instance, holidays (for more detail on different types of support and care provided see Chapter 5).

The lives of three respondents had been completely changed when they agreed to take on full custody of their grandchildren, following the breakdown of their children's relationships (coupled with parental drug abuse). These grandparents made considerable sacrifices, including giving up work, to care for their grandchildren. These custodial grandparents experienced a high level of stress, coupled with a factor which did not appear to affect any other grandparents interviewed to a great extent, a questioning of their own parenting skills, a finding noted in an earlier research study (Bowers and Myers, 1999):

...I would be a bit more guarded in terms of freedom...probably the danger for me would be to be over-cautious because I think was I too liberal with the others [own children]...

(Respondent 23, grandmother, unmarried daughter)

7.2.8 Overview

Much of the literature on the impact of separation and divorce has focused on the couple and their children. The findings from this study suggest that grandparents provide a great deal of emotional and practical support to their children and grandchildren and, as a consequence, the divorce or separation process has a significant impact on grandparents. Grandparents can suffer from a great deal of emotional trauma in trying to set aside their own feelings in the interest of being able to support others. While it has been argued that grandparents may best serve others by trying to come to terms with their own grief and anger before supporting others (Barth, 2004), the findings from this study suggest that many grandparents may not be able, or may not wish, to prioritise themselves during the separation

process. Due to this strong inclination to parent, grandparent and support others, grandparents may continue to put others first in spite of evidence suggesting that this is not the best approach.

7.3 Grandparents' Personal Journeys through the Separation /Divorce Process

7.3.1 Introduction

It has been suggested that individuals move through a process with five phases in order to cope with a tragedy or bereavement: denial ("this cannot be happening"); anger ("why me?"); bargaining ("I'll do anything as long as..."); depression ("what's the point?"); and acceptance ("it's going to be okay") (Kubler-Ross, 1970). This section argues that grandparents move through a 'grieving' process after their child's separation, and that these pathways vary greatly as personal circumstances and inter-personal relationships impact upon the emotional response.

7.3.2 The Process as a Unique 'Emotional Journey'

Many of those interviewed used terms which suggested that they viewed the period following their child's separation/divorce as a process, or as an emotional journey that involved different phases, in most cases progressing from a very difficult early stage to more settled later stages:

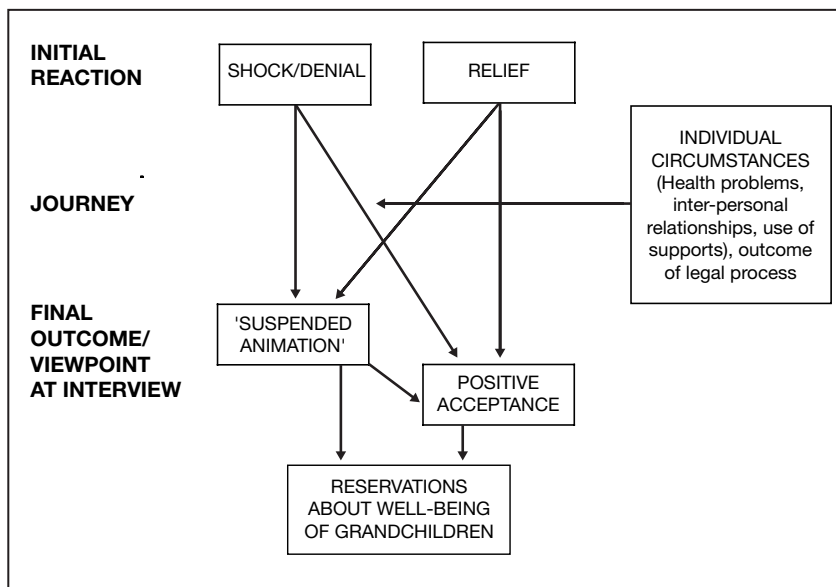
They had a horrific six months where everywhere they turned, everything was wrong... And to get on to the better side of story is that the bond I had with them is a new, it's unreal, and it's amazing, and it has eased up now because their dad has a house now and so they live between the two houses and they are coming to me tomorrow night, they still come and down and stay... We have all moved on.

(Respondent 21, grandmother, married son)

In contrast to the argument of Kubler-Ross (1970), while many grandparents interviewed for this study experienced similar emotions after their child had separated, the 'emotional journey' followed by

each individual in attempting to come to terms with their child's separation and the subsequent outcomes differed according to their specific circumstances. Figure 7.1 outlines the commonalities in the 'emotional journeys' of the respondents. Grandparents are likely to experience grief, fear and anger, as well as a range of other emotions throughout the process. Following the breakdown of their child's relationship, many grandparents felt that they were living in a state of 'suspended animation', with some waiting for normality to return to their lives and others waiting in vain for contact to be restored with their grandchildren. Some respondents had passed through this phase and had found a 'positive acceptance' of the outcome, namely, a realisation that their child is happier as a result of their split with their former partner, and/or that their grandchildren are coping well post-separation. For such grandparents, the process, or journey, was described as an event which had taken place in the past and no longer had a great deal of impact on their lives. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, all grandparents are likely to have worries and concerns over the well-being of their grandchildren, regardless of how this relationship has been affected by the separation.

Figure 7.1: The Separation/Divorce Process as an Emotional Journey for Grandparents



In spite of this broad similarity, the actual emotional pathway experienced by each grandparent varied widely. Figure 7.2 outlines the actual and emotional journeys experiences by four respondents in order to highlight how different personal circumstances resulted in a different process for each individual. As can be seen below, the process was relatively straightforward for some individuals and more complex for others. The final outcome depended on a variety of factors, including *inter alia* whether the breakup was amicable or not, the support available to respondents, respondents’ own views of the process and the outcomes of court proceedings.

Figure 7.2: Emotional Journeys, Selected Respondents			
Paternal grandmother, lost contact with grandchildren		Paternal grandfather, level of contact unchanged	
Actual process	Emotional journey	Actual Process	Emotional Response
Tense relationship between respondent and son’s partner prior to relationship break-up	Worries over potential outcome	Son marries abroad; contact with grandchildren limited	
Break-up of son’s relationship with former partner	Sense of relief	Son and wife return home; but relationship breaks down	Shock
Support provided to son	Fear and worry for son and grandchildren; “fear kept me strong”	Effort to maintain positive relations with son’s former wife	Sense of fear and dread about the future
Court ruling to allow respondent’s son access to his children		Court case to determine custody arrangements	Stress, tension, feelings of “coping”
Contact between respondent and grandchildren increased	Sense of happiness	Financial and emotional support given to son	

Disregard for court ruling by son's former partner	Disappointment	Loss of contact with son's former partner	Sense of betrayal
Relations between respondent and son's former partner break down	Tension, dread	Respondent talks to wife and friends to cope with process	
Son's former partner moves farther away		Disputes over custody arrangements	Fears that grandchildren's mother trying to "drive a wedge" between them and respondent
Son decides to cut off contact with his children	Shock, sense of loss	Informal arrangements worked out between son and former partner	Sense that tension easing
Respondent loses contact with grandchildren	Sense of guilt, grief and worry over well-being of grandson; "suspended animation"	Grandchildren receive counselling	Start of positive acceptance of process; everyone better off
		Contact with grandchildren maintained	Fears about grandchildren's future well-being

Maternal grandmother, contact with grandchildren increased		Maternal grandfather, custodial grandparent	
Actual Process	Emotional response	Actual process	Emotional journey
Relationship between respondent's daughter and former son-in-law breaks down	Sense of relief due to tempestuous nature of relationship	Daughter and former partner's relationship breaks down	
Daughter and former partner strive to maintain positive relations	Hopes that situation will work out ok	Daughter unable to care for her children due to drug use	
Daughter's former partner moves away but maintains access to his children	Concerns for daughter and grandchildren	Respondent agrees to take custody of his grandchildren	Fears over well-being of grandchildren and concerns about 're-parenting'
Respondent provides financial, emotional and practical support for child and grandchildren	Stress and desire to do the right thing	Grandchildren thriving and coping well with changed circumstances	Respondent satisfied with outcome, but concerns over grandchildren's future
Respondent talks to friends and husband to cope with the process; feels that formal support services are limited	Gains a greater sense of control and ability to cope		
Shared custody between daughter and former son-in-law	Sense of relief everything has worked out and everyone better off; though concerns over well-being of grandchildren		

NOTE: Small details have been changed in order to protect the anonymity of respondents.

7.3.3 Overview

For the majority of grandparents, the process of coping with the aftermath of their child's relationship breakdown and providing support to their separated child and his or her grandchildren constituted a challenging 'emotional journey'. Each respondent's journey took a different path, influenced by personal circumstances and other factors discussed in Section 7.4 below. Although 11 respondents had personal experience of divorce or separation through dissolution of their own relationships, most were experiencing the breakdown of their child's marriage or long-term relationship for the first time and therefore had to shape and understand their role within the process in the absence of any previous experience.

7.4 Coping with the Divorce/Separation Process

7.4.1 Introduction

Section 7.3 argued that while a small number of respondents had reached a level of 'acceptance' following their child's separation or divorce, others remained aggrieved, angry and confused to varying degrees. An analysis of the data indicated that there were a number of factors, listed in Table 7.1 below, which appeared to influence grandparents' ability to cope with the separation process.

Factors outside of grandparents' control	Maintaining access to grandchildren
	Perception that own child and grandchildren are coping with the separation/divorce process
	Time
Factors within grandparents' control	Ability to understand and contextualise legal decisions
	Use of appropriate supports (formal/informal)

Many of these factors are outside of the control of grandparents, including the passage of time (to the extent that for instance acri-

mony between the separating couple lessened over time), the extent to which they could maintain access to their grandchildren, and whether or not their own child (and grandchildren) were coping with the process. However, respondents had some scope for enhance their ability to cope with the process. An ability to understand and contextualise legal decisions appeared to help many grandparents to cope, as well as using appropriate support services. These factors within grandparents' control are discussed below.

7.4.2 Grandparents' Ability to Understand and Contextualise Legal Decisions

An analysis of the interview data suggested that respondents' emotional journeys were greatly affected by the outcome of legal proceedings. Those who perceived the process as biased and unfair had, unsurprisingly, greater difficulties in coming to terms with the outcome of their child's separation. Many paternal grandparents were aggrieved at a perceived imbalance in the system toward more favourable treatment of mothers. One respondent suggested that women were more likely to "win" in the court, regardless of the circumstances:

I told the solicitor... my son wouldn't [win custody]. And he said to me 'How do I know?' I asked him could he name one man he knew that got custody of the children? And he wasn't able to name one.

(Respondent 11, grandfather, married son)

A number of paternal grandparents also suggested that women themselves were aware of this, and could therefore use the court as a tool to gain control over their former partner/spouse, including threatening to deny the latter access to their child(ren). For some grandparents, this threat was more covert, but was always present, and meant that they were always aware they could be cut off from their grandchildren with little warning (for further elaboration on how these fears reverberated in relationships with sons' former partners can be found in Chapter 5). Understandably, respondents tended to judge the legal system and professionals on the basis their own child's case,

a tendency which is related to the the *in camera* rule in family law courts in Ireland. This means that it is not possible for grandparents to determine whether their own child's case was an aberration or was typical of such rulings. Grandparents' absence from the court, and their consequent inability to contextualise a particular decision made by a judge in relation to custody or maintenance payments may have impacted on their ability to come to terms with the outcome of the process. It is possible that, by being present in court and having the opportunity to read court decisions, grandparents could gain a better understanding of why a particular decision made in respect of their own child (and grandchildren) was made.

Comments made by both paternal and maternal grandparents were indicative of perceived lack of child-centredness within the system. Many felt that children were the ultimate losers in family law cases:

Some people...try to hurt each other through the children. It's the children that count, and having watched what we watched I feel very passionately about that. I can see what it can do to them...how parents can score off each other...and the children suffer.

(Respondent 30, grandmother, married son)

Their experiences led a number of grandparents, particularly paternal grandparents, to view the legal system as disconnected from the reality of divorce, with many expressing dissatisfaction with the outcomes of legal proceedings, arguing that the court did not always take contextual factors into account, nor recognise any gender imbalance in how mothers and fathers were treated within the courts. Many felt that court proceedings lacked a 'human element', failing to take into account the needs and emotions of all of those affected by judgements handed down. As a result, a number of respondents were critical of judges, remarking that at times they did not appear to understand the reality of divorce:

My son was after being let go from his job so he wanted his maintenance payments brought down. So, the cranky judge

just said 'have you a car?' And my son said 'I have'. And the judge said... 'ah if you can afford that you can afford ...' ... just so cold. And the solicitor said 'maybe the next time that we're applying we'll apply for a Tuesday because another judge is there who's more for the men'. If there's anything that can improve the family courts, bring a mediator and let him remind the judge that there's human beings involved and that we're all not just numbers...

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

Some grandparents who were pre-occupied with such judgements and felt that they were unfair may have been able to come to terms with the decisions taken had they received an explanation of the judges' reasoning behind them.

In contrast to frequent references to the legal system in interviews with paternal grandparents, such references occurred less frequently in interviews with maternal grandparents. Many maternal grandparents viewed divorce or custody proceedings as something of a formality, particularly when their own daughter had been awarded full custody of the children. Few made any reference to the impact this had had on their grandchildren's father. However, the perceived unfairness and complications of the legal system were raised as a topic in the small number of interviews with maternal grandparents whose daughter's former husband had been awarded (joint) custody.

The significant costs involved in bringing a custody case to court also appeared to deter both parents (and grandparents) from trying to gain access to (grand)children. Often, those who had spent a significant amount of money on legal bills had a cynical view of the legal system, with many claiming that the legal profession was the ultimate winner of separation and divorce in Ireland:

My son-in-law's bill, he wasn't eligible for legal aid by a few pound...he had to fight this case, and he and I fought tooth and nail for two years, and when the hammer went down his

bill was huge. The winners here are the legal profession, there is not a doubt.

(Respondent 28, grandmother, married daughter)

Very few respondents had direct experience of family law courts as grandparents (although 11 respondents had divorced or separated themselves). Just one grandmother reported having gone to court in order to regain access to her grandchild and thus continue to play a role in his life, and two more indicated that they would consider going to court for the same reason if necessary. All three worked in the area of health and social services and had a basic understanding of family law. This may indicate that grandparents who are aware of their rights may have fewer reservations about using the court system. Grandparents therefore require access to information in order to facilitate their use of the court system to fight for their legal rights.

A total of three grandparents (maternal grandparent couple and a paternal grandfather) had gained full custody of their grandchildren due to drug use by the children's parents in both cases. While neither had experienced difficulties in negotiating the legal process of gaining custody of their grandchildren, both expressed disappointment about the lack of legal recognition for grandparents as carers, reflected particularly in the low levels of financial support available:

The guardian's allowance is [extremely small]... and the state, its attitude is 'we've a moral obligation to look after our own' [laughs].

(Respondent 20, grandfather, unmarried son)

This low level of financial support was understandably exasperating for custodial grandparents who had made considerable sacrifices, including reducing contact with their own children in order to protect their grandchildren from the influence of drugs, giving up work and in one case, moving house.

At the other extreme, many grandparents had lost contact with their grandchildren, causing them extreme grief and anxiety, as outlined above and in Chapter Six.. Grandparents thus affected varied in their knowledge of their rights and their level of motivation to try to access their grandchildren. Knowledge of the court system was a significant factor in giving grandparents the confidence and motivation to challenge their child's former partner and apply for access, a factor commented on by one set of grandparents who felt that their middle class background and education gave them an ability to fight for their rights, an advantage not available to those without such characteristics:

I could see it ... all the time how they [social services] abused ... people's lack of knowledge. They would abuse that considerably...

(Respondent 22, grandfather, unmarried daughter)

Two other grandparents who had considered going to court to fight for their rights as grandparents appeared to have ruled out the legal system as an option for them due to the expense involved, suggesting that both financial resources and information exert an influence on the decision to pursue these rights.

Many paternal grandparents felt that the court system failed to take the context of each family into account when making judgements. Many went so far as to argue that the legal system should be changed, in order to take the needs of the wider family into account:

...there should be more of a family [focus]...there should be something where the children, the whole family could meet and talk things over. Make arrangements...And I mean all the family – ... aunts and uncles of the child, parents...I think they should be there...they should be all included in this circle...and say look, ok we have our differences, but we love our children, we will do whatever we can for the children...

(Respondent 4, grandmother, unmarried son)

7.4.3 Grandparents' use of Support Services

When asked if they had used any formal support services to help them get through the process of their child's separation or divorce, 16 of the 31 respondents replied that they had not used any formal supports, as there was nothing available for them. However, in the course of the interview, all but two respondents revealed that they had turned to some form of support. *Informal* support from family and friends was of greatest significance. Many noted how beneficial this informal support had been, as it had provided them with an opportunity to work through grief and anger, and also in some cases had enabled them to see the point of view of their child's former spouse or partner, which in turn had allowed them to provide their own child and other family members with support. However, for others informal support was inadequate, and failed to ensure that respondents and their families coped as well as they could with the process. For example, resonating with the findings of a UK study (Douglas and Ferguson, 2003), many grandparents were uncertain about the extent to which they should provide advice to their child or grandchildren. One grandmother questioned whether her actions throughout the process had helped her grandson to come to terms with his changed environment:

...when it happened first as grandparents you say – what do we do? Or are we doing things right?...I don't know are we doing right or are we doing wrong in what we're doing with him and there's no place you can go...

(Respondent 12, grandmother, unmarried son)

The very low use formal support services was partly due to the lack of available, accessible and approachable services. Many remarked that there were few existing support services, but had they been available, they may have used them. Indeed, as can be seen in Table 7.2, although few respondents had used formal support services, approximately one-third recommended the use of information and counselling services to grandparents in their situation, or saw them as in principle helpful.¹⁷

¹⁷ Respondents were asked explicitly about their use of formal support services, and interviews probed into informal supports in a less direct manner.

	Used	Recommended
Counsellor	2	10
Legal Advice	4	2
Information	4	12
Social Services	2	0
Ombudsman	0	1
GP	1	0
Voluntary Organisations	5	2
Mediation	0	3

NOTE: Table represents the 29 respondents who indicated that they had used at least one form of support. Some respondents appear in the table more than once, due to use of more than one service.

This discrepancy between service use and recommendations may have been related to respondents' views on the appropriateness, for themselves, of the formal support services available. Respondents who had used formal support services (counselling services, legal advice and mediation services, a family doctor, and voluntary organisations supporting single parents or grandparents) believed that these worked well when the service provider was already familiar to the respondent. One respondent had used her own family doctor as a support, as she already felt comfortable talking problems through with him. In contrast, one of the two respondents who had used the services of a previously unknown counsellor was unsatisfied with the comments made by the counsellor and thus discontinued counselling:

I went for counselling once or twice but the lady said "the more you keep involved in your daughter, the more you'll be down in yourself". But I kept involved anyway...

(Respondent 29, grandmother, married daughter)

The counsellor of the other respondent who used formal counselling services was a friend in whom the respondent had also confided about other issues.

Respondents may have recommended formal support services because they recognised, with the benefit of hindsight, the importance of appropriate formal support services. Overall, those who had used formal support services suggested that it had helped to make the process easier, had helped them to recognise the importance of maintaining good personal relations with all involved and, in some circumstances, had helped them to come to terms with reduced access to their grandchild(ren). Indeed, one grandparent who had used formal support (a support group) advised all grandparents to look for support early on in the process:

How the separation is handled in the beginning is absolutely critical you know... because if things build up, it's very hard to go back.

(Respondent 3, grandmother, unmarried son)

7.4.4 Overview

Contextualising legal decisions and using appropriate supports (both formal and informal) are important factors in helping grandparents to come to terms with the outcome of their child's separation or divorce. Many of the grandparents, especially paternal ones, indicated that their experience of the legal system was negative, and viewed the system as biased and costly. However, it is important to note that, as family law operates *in camera* in Ireland, family members, including grandparents, are not always fully aware of the reasons why judges reach particular decisions about access, custody, the splitting of assets and maintenance payments. This lack of understanding may in turn impact negatively on grandparents' ability to accept the decisions reached. A number of respondents suggested that they lacked information about navigating their way through the legal system, highlighting the importance of information provision in this regard.

There had been very little formal support available to guide the majority of respondents throughout the process of their child's separation or divorce. For the small number of respondents who had used formal supports, the experience had not in all cases been positive. However, it appeared that few had had the time, resources or indeed the inclination to source the various services available. Many indicated that the formal support services were not appropriate to their needs, namely, finding ways of supporting others (particularly grandchildren) through a difficult process. Many appeared more comfortable using supports they were already familiar with, for instance talking to family members and friends. While it cannot be discounted that an apparent reluctance to use formal support services may have been due to a sense of 'stigma' associated with the 'need' to turn to formal supports as opposed to relying solely on informal networks, it was clear from a number of interviews that grandparents would have used formal support services had they been available and responsive to individual needs. These findings indicate that support services for family members of those who have gone through a separation or divorce should be easily accessible and approachable. Further research is necessary to determine which types of supports and service delivery mechanisms are viewed as approachable and have a positive impact on users.

7.5 Summary

This chapter has shown that divorce or separation in the 'middle' generation has a direct and often substantial impact on grandparents. Many grandparents experienced considerable stress and emotional and physical difficulties as a result of emotional involvement in the separation process, and as a result of providing support to family members. In spite of this, a significant number did not use supports in order to help them to cope. Many were too caught up trying to respond to the needs of others, particularly their own children and grandchildren, to be able to focus on their own needs. Respondents who did use supports appeared to prefer informal support rather than formal, although some found the informal support provided by family to be inadequate. In addition, formal support was not always available, and indeed, not always sought. A large number of respondents were unaware of the various support services available or had found the available supports to be unsuited to their needs.

Many respondents were critical of the legal system, viewing it as unequal, unfairly favouring mothers over fathers. Many respondents also saw the courts and the legal process as disengaged from reality and the needs of young children. Respondents, particularly paternal grandparents, often felt excluded from the legal system and expressed a desire for the courts to be accessible to other family members also affected by court decisions, particularly in relation to access and custody arrangements.

Overall, this chapter has shown that grandparents themselves face a number of difficulties following their child's relationship breakdown. In striving to support others, they can ignore their own needs and suffer a significant amount of stress in the process. While a small number indicated at the time of interview that they were unlikely to regain contact with their grandchildren in the short- to medium-term, and thus were suffering from a tremendous sense of loss, for most respondents, their child's break-up was an event that had happened in the past and most had found ways to come to terms with it. However, many suggested that appropriate formal support services would have helped them to come to terms with the process and also to provide more appropriate support to others.

8. Grandparents' Role in Divorced and Separated Families in Ireland: Conclusions, Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

8.1 Novelty and Originality of the Study in the Irish Context

Both 'intact' and 'dissolved' extended families are highly complex networks of relationships; the 'content' of these networks consists of the communication that takes place between family members and the supports ('transfers') that are sometimes unidirectional, at other times bi-directional (reciprocal). Grandparents' role within these intergenerational family networks has given rise to an extensive international literature. This literature has sought to identify the contributions that grandparents make to families, and to tease out the characteristics and contexts of grandparenthood that influence the extent and nature of these contributions. The literature is less extensive in the more specific field of grandparents' roles within divorced or separated families, but has nonetheless brought to light interesting information and led to the development of theories on the role of grandparents within this context that is often characterised by stress, loss, communication problems, and frequently also material and financial difficulties. It is to this literature and the national policy debates concerning grandparents in divorced and separated families that our study sought to contribute.

As a qualitative study conducted with a relatively small number of respondents, our study has both strengths and limitations. Its primary strength pertains to the ability to provide an in-depth characterisation of a very novel phenomenon in Irish society and to further the development of conceptualising and theorising grandparenthood in the context of divorce and separation. While marriage breakdown has always occurred in Ireland, the dissolution of marriage in law (divorce) has only become possible very recently, and the incidence

of marriage breakdown in Ireland, although increased, remains relatively low in the context of Western countries. The number of children born to parents who are not married to each other has increased, too, and a proportion of these relationships also end in separation. The phenomenon of grandparenting within the context of divorce or separation is therefore increasingly widespread but still very novel in the Irish context, and until this study has remained very poorly understood. Ours is the first study that sheds light on this topic in the Irish context, and as such it can be characterised as exploratory and path-breaking. We have charted here some of this hitherto unknown territory of family relationships during and following relationship breakdown in the 'middle' generation; and qualitative methods were chosen as they best yield themselves to such exploratory, theory-building research.

An obvious limitation of this kind of research involving collection of in-depth data with a small, non-random sample is that the findings generated cannot be generalised to the entire population of grandparents in Ireland (or any other context). The research we have conducted has enabled us to characterise the diversity of experiences that grandparents have and the types of inputs they make into their children's and grandchildren's lives; the *prevalence* of these experiences and inputs, however, would have to be established with the help of further (quantitative) studies. For the same reasons, our study cannot yield firm conclusions about relationships between dependent and independent variables, such as the amount of child care provided by grandparents and their various characteristics, for instance age: the number of cases in the sample is quite simply too small to do this, let alone to draw inferences while controlling for all other possible confounding influences on the dependent variable.

8.2 Key Findings

This chapter does not contain a detailed summary of all findings: these can be found in the core chapters (Chapters Five, Six and Seven). Rather, it briefly summarises the key findings and recommendations arising from the study under the following headings: Centrality of

grandparents' supportive roles in the post-separation context; Types of support channelled to the parental ('middle') generation; Increased closeness of relationships with adult children in post-separation contexts; Limits of the mediating influence of the middle generation; Control and agency exercised by grandparents; Grandparents as a stabilising force in their grandchildren's lives; The trauma of inadequate contact with grandchildren; Additional Factors shaping extent of contact with grandchildren; Adverse impacts of separation in the middle generation sustained by grandparents; Informal and formal supports used by grandparents; Need for improved and more accessible formal support services; Recommendations for further research and data collection; and the leverage that supporting grandparents provides. These headings also serve as the shortest possible summary of the central themes that emerged from the data.

8.3 Centrality of grandparents' supportive roles in the post-separation context

Our findings give grounds for arguing that **the role of grandparents in divorced and separated families in Ireland is very significant**. Grandparents in our study interacted extensively with their adult children, and where possible, with their grandchildren, during and after the divorce and separation process, increasing their involvement in virtually all cases where this was required and possible. The role of grandparents in seeing their adult children and grandchildren through the separation or divorce process was considerable, and in many cases was arguably **the lynchpin to the younger generations' ability to negotiate the emotional and practical fallout from relationship breakdown**. This theme of **the centrality of informal supports** is also reflected in the supports that the grandparents themselves drew on (see below).

8.3.1 Types of support channelled to the parental ('middle') generation

Five main types of support and care were channelled by the older to the younger generations and strongly characterised the relationship between the grandparental and parental generations. These support

categories, the subject of extensive exposition in Chapter Five, were (1) **financial**; (2) **housing** (co-residence); (3) **child care**; (4) **legal and other advice**; and (5) **emotional** support.

Extensive involvement in one type of support, especially co-residence, easily spilled over into other types of support, and several of our respondents were engaged in the provision of four or even five types of support. **Support and care were typically most intensive in the early stages** following the adult child's relationship breakdown, but in some cases extended to several years and could involve **very substantial sacrifices of their own time, opportunities, leisure and even employment** by the grandparents. A notable finding relates to the fact that, in our sample, **a very high proportion of sons who had not been married to their former partners were in receipt of multiple supports**, especially child care-related assistance and housing (co-residence). Proportionate to their incomes, grandparents from relatively deprived backgrounds appeared to provide at least as much material and financial support (direct and indirect) as grandparents from better-off backgrounds; for the latter group, material and financial support to children and grandchildren was not always motivated by 'need' *per se* but rather by the desire to preserve the pre-separation living standards of the (grand)children, behaviour that was also motivated by a **desire to compensate for various perceived deficits in their grandchildren's lives** that had arisen as a result of the parental separation (see below).

8.3.2 Increased closeness of relationships with adult children in post-separation contexts

The unstinting 'parenting' of their adult children practiced by many grandparents in the post-separation scenario had led in some cases to the **adult children adopting or reverting to earlier 'childhood' roles of (uni-directionally) receiving care, support and nurturing**. Despite this somewhat regressive behavioural pattern that was evident in some cases, a striking proportion of the respondents who had provided extensive supports to their adult children stated that their **relationship had become closer** as a result. Following their

generous and unconditional, seemingly instinctive, response to the initial 'crisis' period in their adult children's lives, grandparents usually **adjusted their involvement to a level that they deemed more manageable and suitable**, although extensive involvement did sometimes continue, giving rise to varying degrees of exasperation and even resentment which in turn could lead to the grandparent seeking to regain control by, for instance, cutting back on their involvement in childcare.

8.3.3 Limits of the Mediating Influence of the Middle Generation

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

Continuity in the relationships between adults (grandparents, their adult children and the latter's former partners) was often evi-

dent, but these relationships could also take new directions following separation or divorce, both in negative and positive directions. Many respondents reported **positive change in the relationship with their adult child** in the wake of the latter's relationship breakdown. A strongly positive ramification of most types of support (but perhaps especially emotional support) was an increased degree of closeness reported by the interviewees. The data also brought to light some very successful 'reconstituted' extended family relationships where communication was possibly infrequent, but nonetheless amicable. To simplify somewhat, **divorce or separation, usually seen as unequivocally negative life events, can also bring about positive changes in relationships** and yield new, stable and satisfying relationships within and between families.

8.3.4 Control and agency exercised by grandparents

In contrast to some of the international literature outlined in Chapter Two, our analysis attributes considerable **control and agency** to grandparents in the formation and maintenance of relationships with the younger generations in their families. It certainly cannot be concluded from our study that the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren are largely 'indirect' i.e. in all cases decisively influenced by the parental generation alone. The grandparents in our study had in many cases reflected extensively on their role within the family, and had sought, often successfully, to **set their involvement at a level that they found to be desirable and appropriate**. However, in other cases grandparents had been called upon to respond to the distress and needs (for money, housing, emotional support, childcare, advice) generated by their adult children's relationship breakdown, and had **responded largely on the terms of their children and grandchildren**. Reverting to co-residence with their adult children was a common pattern, at least in the short term, and both money and time were in many cases given unstintingly to the sons and daughters who were undergoing, or had experienced, relationship breakdown.

8.4 Grandparents as a stabilising force in their grandchildren's lives

The frequently intense desire to **shelter grandchildren against what most grandparents believed to be negative consequences of their parents' separation** was a powerful motivation for many to increase or enhance their involvement in grandchildren's lives. The determination to ensure the best possible life chances for grandchildren, shared by many grandparents in general, therefore appears to be exacerbated and strengthened in the post-separation context. For this reasons, **the grandparent-grandchild relationship arguably takes on greater significance for both parties after parental separation**. Grandparents strove to normalise the situation for their grandchild and to distract and reassure them; they could be regarded as anchors of stability at a time of uncertainty.

8.4.1 The trauma of inadequate contact with grandchildren

In contrast to situations, alluded to above, where grandparents sought to pull back from excessive involvement, some grandparents **experienced the degree of involvement with their grandchildren as inadequate**. Usually these situations of insufficient contact arose in the lives of paternal grandparents whose son's former wife or partner had primary or exclusive custody of the grandchildren. However, in all situations the nature of the break-up was highly influential: **amicable or 'civil' relations between the separated couple being conducive to on-going contact with both sets of grandparents**. Furthermore, some grandparents who found themselves in this situation had, thanks to their determined efforts, managed to build a friendly relationship with their grandchildren's mother, independently of their son, with the intended result that contact with grandchildren continued. However, a small number of respondents had had no choice in this regard: their **lack of contact or limited involvement was imposed upon them** as a result of the deep rift between the parents and the lack of scope for forging a new, amicable relationship with the custodial parent.

A central finding from our study relates to the striking **diversity that we found among grandparents**. Far from being a homogeneous group, the grandparents we interviewed differed along a number of dimensions. However, not all of these dimensions emerged as particularly strong or decisive in terms of involvement in families post-divorce or separation. Much of the international literature has highlighted the primacy of maternal grandparents. While our study indicates that **paternal grandparents experience greater difficulties in securing an adequate level of contact** with their grandchildren, in many other respects and in several family contexts they were not significantly different from maternal grandparents. Indeed, our sample contained paternal grandparents who had become very closely involved in their children's and grandchildren's lives following the breakdown of the marital and (especially) non-marital relationships of their sons. This finding goes against the supposed matrilineal advantage in grandparental involvement and furthermore constitutes evidence that **paternal grandparents can also become heavily involved after the breakdown of non-marital relationships**. None of this, of course, detracts from **the suffering of grandparents who have experienced a drastic reduction in, or even loss of, their contact with grandchildren**.

8.4.2 Additional factors shaping extent of contact with grandchildren

In addition to lineage and the former marital status of the adult child, our data suggest that the other factors that are influential in shaping grandparents' involvement in post-separation situations are:

1. **age**: in the light of the findings from our sample, older grandparents appear to be less extensively involved (a factor which in most cases is inter-linked with their grandchildren's ages, with older grandchildren requiring less care); grandparents whose adult children are young at the point of becoming parents tend to become more heavily involved due to their adult child's low level of financial resources, lack of housing which necessitates co-residence, and, in some cases, under-developed parenting skills;

2. **geographical distance:** in our sample, the grandparents living within a close proximity to their grandchildren had increased their involvement considerably more often than grandparents living at a distance of two hours or longer travel;
3. **addiction issues and other serious personal problems:** where these affected the grandparent, the level of involvement with grandchildren did not increase as a result of relationship breakdown in the parental generation. Where addiction issues affected the parents, grandparents became more closely involved, in some cases seeking and gaining primary custody of the grandchildren.

Other factors that are likely to influence the extent and nature of grandparents' involvement in the lives of the younger generations in post-separation contexts include health status, employment status, socio-economic status and gender. Further research should explore the relative importance of these characteristics in influencing grandparents' involvement.

8.5 Adverse impacts of separation in the middle generation sustained by grandparents

The centrality of informal supports provided *by and for* the grandparental generation emerged as the strongest over-arching theme in our research, and is interesting both from the policy point of view and in the context of the international literature on the topic. As has been explained above, virtually in all cases where the adult children and grandchildren had required support and care following the relationship breakdown, grandparents had provided this wherever possible. Being such important supports for their children and grandchildren, often making very considerable personal sacrifices in order to help them, **grandparents themselves suffered many adverse, primarily stress-related, impacts.** Many were too caught up in responding to the needs of others, particularly their own children and grandchildren, to be able to focus on their own needs.

8.5.1 Informal and formal supports used by grandparents

Many grandparents, playing such important and demanding supportive roles, were therefore, unsurprisingly, **in need of support** themselves. While adult children were not singled out by many as providers of support - the bulk of supports was clearly unidirectional, from the grandparental to the parental generation - the respondents had been able to draw support from other informal networks such as spouses, friends, their own siblings, other children, colleagues and extended family members. The fact that **support was for primarily obtained from within informal networks** is partly due to the absence or sporadic availability of formal supports in Ireland. **Very few respondents had accessed any formal services** such as counselling, information services, or legal and mediation services. Despite the fact that many grandparents were (fortunately) able to draw on informal supports, **the wish that more information and support were available to them was frequently expressed**. It is interesting, and indicative of the paucity of formal services (or difficulty of accessing them) in Ireland that even where formal services were used, they were often provided by professionals who were already familiar to the grandparent. In other words, somewhat ironically, even formal services were often *de facto* informal, for instance counselling received from a General Practitioner known to the grandparent.

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

8.5.2 Need for improved and more accessible formal support services

This study has shown that **grandparents play a significant role in the adjustment process that their children and grandchildren frequently have to undergo** following relationship breakdown in the middle generation. Many grandparents felt that they **could benefit from a greater understanding of and even involvement in the legal processes and principles** underlying rulings in their children's divorce or separation and their own access to their grandchildren. The desire for **more information and guidance on how best to go about explaining and helping the grandchildren** to cope with their parents' separation or divorce was also expressed by many grandparents. The impression that **'the interest of the grandchild(ren)' were often not best served** by the legal processes associated with divorce and separation, guardianship and access, was also widely held among our sample, and understandably this impression was most common and strongest among grandparents who had had difficulties in securing (adequate) access to their grandchildren. At the opposite end of the involvement spectrum, the **custodial grandparents whom we interviewed were in some cases also in need of greater support and advice.**

8.6 Recommendations for further research and data collection

Having undertaken the first study of its kind in Ireland, we now call for **further investigations to both deepen and refine the analysis provided here** and to test the hypotheses generated, and for the **collection of more information on grandparents in the population census and through other surveys** that can enable researchers to establish the prevalence of the patterns of contact, support and involvement that we have identified and expounded in this report. As was highlighted in Chapter Two, further research faces some challenges due to lack of a sampling frame for the population of grandparents in Ireland. The fact that new longitudinal studies (SHARE-Ireland and TILDA, the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing) are now collecting baseline information on grandparents will provide

some representative information and facilitate additional research on this population.

8.7 The Leverage that Supporting Grandparents Provides

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

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Appendix 1: List of Organisations Approached for Support

Organisations Supporting Older People

Age Action Ireland

Grandparents Association, UK

Organisations Supporting People experiencing Marital, Relationship and Family Problems

Aim Family Services

Focus on the Family

MRCS Counselling Service

Rainbows Ireland

Treoir

Family Resource Centres

Aonad Resource Centre, Galway

Artane Family Resource Centre, Dublin

Ballyogan Family Resource Centre, Dublin

Cherry Orchard Family Resource Centre, Dublin

Claddagh Family Resource Centre, Crumlin, Dublin

Clann Resource Centre, Galway

Doras Bui, Coolock, Dublin

Drop in Well Family Resource Centre, Dublin

Farranree Family Resource Centre, Cork

Hill Street Family Centre, Dublin

Hillview Community Resource Centre, Dublin

Killinarden Family Resource Centre, Dublin

Mountview Family Resource Centre, Dublin

St Andrew's Resource Centre, Dublin

Saint Kevin's Family Resource Centre, Dublin

St Munchin's Family Resource Centre, Limerick

Lone Parents Organisations

Forever Fathers, Donegal

Gingerbread.ie

OPEN

Parental Equality

Parents Alone Support Services

solo.ie

Additional Organisations

Children's Rights Alliance

Women's Action Group Crumlin, Dublin

Appendix 2: Poster/Flyer distributed to access respondents



Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre



Grandparents' role in divorced and separated families in Ireland

Are you a grandparent whose child has gone through a divorce or separation in the last 5 years?

If so, Trinity College researchers would like to talk to you about your relationship with your son/daughter and your grandchildren following on from the divorce/separation.

Interviews will last approximately one hour and can take place at a time and location of your choice. A €20 gift voucher will be given to each participant.

Interviews will be taking place between August and October 2008. If you are interested in taking part in the study, please contact

Ciara O'Dwyer: Phone: 01 896 3363

Appendix 3: Information Form Provided to Respondents



Information Sheet

**Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin**

Grandparents' role in divorced and separated families in Ireland

The Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre, in the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin is conducting research on Grandparents' role in divorced and separated families in Ireland. Researchers in the Centre are hoping to speak with 30 grandparents whose:

- 1) involvement in the care and support of their grandchildren has *increased* following relationship breakdown,
- 2) involvement in the care and support of their grandchildren has *remained largely unchanged* despite relationship breakdown, and
- 3) involvement in the care and support of their grandchildren has *declined* following relationship breakdown

The interviews will last approximately one hour and will seek to explore the experiences of grandparents following their children's divorce/separation, with a specific focus on how the relationship with their children and grandchildren has changed. The interview will explore whether the relationships of paternal grandparents and maternal grandparents with their grandchildren differ following divorce/separation and the social, personal, economic and practical support that grandparents provide to their children and grandchildren following relationship breakdown.

It is hoped that results of the research will help to identify policies that could assist both grandparents who are heavily involved in supporting post-divorce families and grandchildren in particular, and those who are seeking more extensive contact with their grandchildren.

Participation in the research is completely voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw from the interview, you may do so at any time without giving a reasons or explanation for doing so. The interviews will be transcribed and the information you give us will be kept strictly confidential. All references to names and personal details will be removed and details concerning specific locations or events can be changed. Anonymous portions of the interview may be used in any resulting publications, lectures, education, or broadcasts.

Should you have any further questions regarding the research please contact **Martha Doyle or Ciara O' Dwyer** who can be contacted at **01- 896 2911 or 01- 896 3363** in the Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre.

Appendix 4: Consent Form for Respondents



Social
Policy and
Ageing
Research
Centre



Consent Document for participation in research

**Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre
School of Social Work and Social Policy
Trinity College Dublin**

- I agree to be interviewed and tape recorded by the researcher.
- I understand that the information that I have given will be treated with complete confidentiality and anonymity
- I understand that the information I provide will be incorporated into the final report provided to the Family Support Agency and other publications emanating from the research.
- I have been given a copy of the information sheet and any queries I have had have been satisfactorily answered.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the interview at any time, without giving a reason.

I understand that any details recorded will be treated in complete confidence and stored in a secure place.

Name of Participant Date Signature

Name of Researcher Date Signature

If you need any further information, please contact: **Martha Doyle or Ciara O' Dwyer** at Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin, College Green, Dublin (**Tel: 01 896 2911 or 01 896 3363**)

Appendix 5: Interview Guide

Introduction

My name is (Ciara/Martha/Virpi) from the Social Policy and Ageing Research Centre in Trinity College. As you know, I am here to talk to you about your relationship with your son/daughter and grandchildren following on from the divorce/separation of your son/daughter.

We are conducting the interview as part of a wider study aiming to find out more about the role of grandparents in families that have experienced a divorce/separation, as well as the implications of the divorce/separation on grandparents themselves. The study is funded by the Family Support Agency.

The interview should last about an hour. All the information that you give me will remain confidential. Extracts from the interview may appear in the final report, but under no circumstances will your name or any identifying characteristics be included. Your participation is entirely voluntary, you are free to end the interview at any time and you can refuse to answer any question.

Background

1. How many grandchildren do you have in total?
2. From your own experience as a grandparent, what role do you think grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren?
3. As you know, we are here to talk specifically about your relationship with your son/daughter and his/her child(ren) as a result of your son/daughter's divorce. So, can you tell me first of all, when did your son/daughter divorce?

Relationships with Son/Daughter and Grandchildren

4. Can you tell me about your relationship with your son/daughter and their ex-(husband/wife/partner) before they separated/divorced?

5. Can you tell me about your relationship with your son/daughter and their ex-(husband/wife/partner) after they separated/divorced?
6. How do you think your relationship with both your son/daughter and their ex-(husband/wife/partner) has changed as a result of the divorce?
7. Can you tell me about your relationship with your grandchildren before your son/daughter separated/divorced?
8. Can you tell me about your relationship with your grandchildren after your son/daughter separated/divorced?
9. How do you think your relationship with your grandchildren has changed as a result of the divorce?

Support for Grandchildren

[ONLY ASK IF APPROPRIATE]

10. Can you have a look at the following table and tell me since the divorce/separation where you would put yourself in terms of the type and amount of care you provide to your grandchildren?
11. Tell me more about the help or care that you provide to your grandchildren?
12. Are you satisfied with this level of involvement?

Support for Own Son/Daughter

13. Since the divorce/ separation, what kind of support do you provide to your son/daughter?
[PROMPT: emotional, practical, financial]

Impact on Respondent and Wider Family

14. What was your initial reaction to the divorce?
15. What impact has the change in your son's/daughter's family situation had on you personally?
16. Has it impacted on the wider family? And if so, how?
[PROMPT: own spouse, other grandchildren etc]
17. Did you use any support service during or after the divorce/separation process? [What kind of support?]

18. Is there any kind of assistance that you felt may have benefited you during the divorce or separation or in the period that followed?
19. What is your overall opinion on divorce? Have you always felt this way?
20. What are your hopes for the future in terms of your relationship with your grandchildren?

