

# Support from Grandparents to Families with Infants

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Parent-child interactions are influenced by factors outside the immediate family. A recent paper<sup>†</sup> based on data from the *Growing Up in Ireland* study (GUI) focuses in particular on the support provided by grandparents in caring for very young children. Such support can have important direct and indirect influences on child development. For example, a grandparent who babysits a young child while parents have a night out has a *direct* interaction with the child in the context of providing care. However, there is also an *indirect* influence in the context of supporting the mother-father relationship which, in turn, could be expected to affect (positively) parental interactions with the child.

The transition to parenthood and early infancy have been identified in the literature as the critical periods requiring most support. Infancy is a particularly intensive parenting period. Children at this stage remain highly dependent on caregivers for their basic needs but, by 9 months (the age of infants at the time of data collection in the GUI study), they are also starting to become more mobile and interaction-seeking. In the Irish context, 9 months may also be the stage when mothers may be contemplating a return to work or education following maternity leave (paid and unpaid) – and those who have been breastfeeding will likely have finished at least exclusive breastfeeding.

Here we report some key results from the paper; further detail, and a full set of references to the literature can be found in the paper itself.

## PERCEIVED AVAILABILITY OF SUPPORT

The effectiveness of the social support system available to the parent may be best assessed by a subjective measurement of the parent's satisfaction with the support they receive rather than through an objective assessment of the number or types of supports available. An important source of this support is from grandparents. Contact with grandparents seems to be relatively high in Ireland, perhaps because of the small size of the country and low levels of mobility, but perhaps also because of the value placed on the extended family. The role of

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grandparents in children's lives is an area which needs further research. They are likely to have an important role in the lives of infants, many of them providing informal childcare and babysitting while parents return to work.

***Growing Up in Ireland*** interviewed 11,100 primary caregivers (almost all of whom were biological mothers) when their infants were 9-months-old. In the context of the wider interview, mothers were asked a number of questions directly on the amount of support which they felt they were receiving and also on the level of contact they had with the infant's grandparents. A majority (72 per cent) felt that they *got enough help/support* from family and friends and 6 per cent said they *did not need any help*. However 10 per cent of mothers felt that they *did not get enough help* and 5 per cent said they *got no help at all*. An additional 8 per cent said that their family were not living in the country (and therefore were unavailable to provide support).

Mothers in larger families were less likely to report that they get enough support than those with only one child. This was the case for both lone parents and mothers in two-parent families. In families with one child (both lone-parent and two-parent families) 87 per cent reported that they *got enough* support. This figure dropped to about 80 per cent for mothers with two or more children, with similar figures for both lone parents and two-parent families.

### **TYPES OF SUPPORT PROVIDED BY GRANDPARENTS**

High levels of contact with grandparents were reported in the ***Growing Up in Ireland*** study, with almost 9 out of 10 of mothers reporting that they were in regular contact with the infant's grandparents. In most other cases the grandparents were abroad, or deceased. A wide range of important supports were provided by grandparents to the families of ***Growing Up in Ireland*** infants. (Table 1) For example, one in three families often benefited from grandparents providing babysitting, while direct financial support was much less common ("*never*" being the most frequent response).

**Table 1: Frequency and Types of Support Provided by Grandparents**

How often do infant's grandparents...	Never	Sometimes	Often
	%	%	%
Babysit	19	48	33
Have baby to stay over night	62	32	6
Take baby out	46	30	24
Buy toys or clothes for baby	4	81	15
Help you around the house	56	26	18
Help you out financially	71	26	3

## GRANDPARENT SUPPORT PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT FOR LONE PARENTS

Support from grandparents was particularly important for families comprising a lone parent with one child. They had the highest reported usage for each support type and differed significantly from every other family type in three of the five categories ( they did not differ significantly from other lone parents in terms of ‘help around the house’ and ‘financial help’). For example, almost 2 out of 3 lone parents with one child reported that the infant’s grandparents had the infant to stay overnight. This compares with 47 per cent among lone parents with two or more children, 45 per cent for two-parent families with one child and 31% for two-parent families with two or more children. The largest differential between lone-parent families and two-parent families was for ‘financial help’. This varied between 50-56 per cent for lone-parents to approximately 25 per cent for two-parent families.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The *Growing Up in Ireland* findings confirm that many families receive substantial amounts of support from grandparents, and this applies particularly to lone parents. While a majority of parents felt that were getting enough support from family and friends, there remains concerns for those who perceive they are receiving inadequate support – and for families who have a drop in support following the incapacity or death of a grandparent. Some of the supports provided by grandparents, such as babysitting or taking the infant out, are likely to be mutually enjoyable for the infant and grandparents. Direct financial support is less common for two-parent families, however it is also clear that many lone parents are receiving some financial support from their own parents.

† Williams, J., S. Greene, S. McNally, A. Murray and A. Quail (2010). *Growing Up in Ireland – The National Longitudinal Study of Children: The Infants and their Families*. Dublin: The Stationery Office. Available for download at <http://www.esri.ie/UserFiles/publications/BKMNEXT179.pdf>