



the
Grandparents'
story

THE GRANDPARENTS' STORIES GROUP
a gathering of grandparents parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs



the Grandparents' story:

keeping the dignity of children alive

*we would like these
stories to be heard
by the powers
that be...*

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a gathering of grandparents parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs

The Grandparents' Stories Group started with the receipt of funding from the National Illicit Drug Strategy to raise the profile of grandparents parenting their grandchildren because of the effects of alcohol and other drugs on their adult children. Three projects were funded through brokerage funding—specifically to support grandparents in the parenting role. They were:

- to conduct a one day forum at the National Museum of Australia
- the Grand Jugglers circus program
- alcohol and drug education and support for grandparents.

Initially we wondered whether the grandparents would find a course that supports people who have a drug user in the family to build healthy relationships and identify appropriate boundaries around the impact on the family—the 'Stepping Stones' family drug course. This did not seem to be what the grandparents wanted. Instead ...

The grandparents expressed a desire for their stories to be heard. The program leaders thought that using storytelling structures using the ideas of narrative therapy would best facilitate the telling of the grandparents' stories. They organised for a listening team to join them in facilitating such a structure—a gathering process. A gathering process has been used in many communities to share and document stories of unique experiences; hopes and commitments, held by a community that otherwise would be silenced, invisible or not heard. It is a staged process that occurs over a period of time, and a listening team (a small group of narrative practitioners), facilitates the process:

Prior to the day(s) of the gathering, the community is consulted by the listening team about their particular concerns; themes are drawn from those consultations to form the framework for the telling of the stories at the gathering.

On the day(s) of the gathering the community stories are told and drawn out by the listening team, guided by the themes that emerged in the prior consultations—*the telling of the stories*.

After the community stories have been told, the listening team respond to the stories they have heard. They focus on the special knowledges and skills they have heard, and what has been evoked for them by listening to the stories of the participants—*a re-telling of the stories*.

The final stage on the day of the gathering is for the community participants to offer their reflections on what had resonated for them in the listening—*a re-telling of the re-telling*.

After the gathering the stories are documented and given back to the community. The community decides with whom they want to share the stories, and another gathering with other communities may be co-coordinated. So the process grows ...

In June 2005, a consultation was held with members of the Grandparents support group and a number of themes emerged:

- when it started—how it all began
- the importance of never giving up
- taking one step at a time ... ‘... just for today ... ’
- it's not about us...it's about the children'
- adjusting to having grandchildren thrust upon you
- where we get the most help and support—what's our rock
- how we've been treated by the system
- what we want workers to understand
- the importance of bucking the system
- frightening things—things we worry about
- need for our stories to be told and be heard

Each of these themes was an area that the grandparents knew a lot about, and felt passionately about. The gathering would provide a framework that allowed their special skills and knowledges to be articulated. The grandparents were very enthusiastic about the possibility that their stories could more easily and powerfully be heard if they spoke together.

Nine grandparents (including two great grandparents), two support group workers and four members of a listening team joined together on a Wednesday in October 2005, to share the stories that were important to the grandparents. We met in one of the meeting rooms at Canberra Mothercraft Society Inc. QEII Family Centre, a place where the grandparents felt acknowledged, valued and welcomed. Carolyn and Emma are the

practitioners who lead the project for grandparents parenting because of alcohol and other drugs.

The grandparents had come to the gathering with important points they wanted to make, and they were keen to have the stories documented. The listening team's job was to carefully draw out the stories, and document the unique skills and knowledges of the grandparents.

The day started with a playing of the CD that was played at the closing of the grandparents' parenting grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs forum in Canberra in October 2005—an event run by Canberra Mothercraft Society Inc. This CD has images of grandparents and grandchildren and the Grand Jugglers performing circus skills. The Grand Jugglers also arose out of brokerage funding from the NID strategy and was designed to increase resilience of the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren. The CD evoked powerful emotions around the images of grandparents and their grandchildren. It captured the essence of the richness of these relationships, the love, the giving, the way in which these grandparents keep these children safe and provide them with stable loving opportunities to grow up in what might otherwise be a chaotic context.

What follows is some of the detail of the grandparents stories. They are organised according to the messages that the grandparents wanted to convey about the importance of their stories. One of the grandparents was moved to write the following poem:

As I hold your baby in my arms
The memories wash over me—I remember your charms
Where did you go to my child?
What demons called you to the dark side?

My babies now, that shouldn't have been
Whatever happened to the dream?
Your children are with me now
A constant reminder of you.
'Come close now Gran, and hold me near
If Mummy loves me, why isn't she here?'

I gaze in wonder at my hands
Old now, and careworn, as they soothe your baby's head
And the memories come back with a rush,
I remember my hands when they held you -
Young, strong and smooth, and so sure.

Stop the clock! Turn back time,
This can't have happened, not to mine!
And the dingoes come prowling,
What do they want from me now?
Leave me alone to get on with the job
Or perhaps support and encourage me somehow.

I pray for help, where do I start?
Then I speak as it is, from my heart.
God chooses not to answer that prayer
He can't make it different, or take away my cares.
Instead He reminds me of the gift that is mine
And tells me how strong I have been all this time.

The bells of Christmas ring loud and clear
The house is decorated with Christmas cheer.
Your children are awake at the break of day
Opening their gifts, innocent in play
And confusion mingles in with their cheer
'If Mummy loves me, why isn't she here?'



When it started—how it all began

As must be the case whenever grandparents take on the full time care of grandchildren, it was a very traumatic time for both the children and us. The children were then eleven and nine years old and their mother, our youngest daughter, had been found by us, dead in her home. It quickly became apparent that she had been murdered and that her ex-partner, the children's father, was the prime suspect. Our daughter had been granted custody of the children a fortnight before she died and at the time of her death they were staying with their father for the first week of the school holidays. A week after the discovery of her body, the police took the children from their father by force, that is, they had to bash down the front door of his home and forcibly remove the children. We had been asked at short notice if we would be willing to take the children. We agreed, and around 10.30pm they were brought to us and we were all taken to a safe house with armed police guards for the next two days and nights and when we eventually returned to our home, police slept in a police car in our driveway for a further night. So it was an extremely traumatic time for all of us although there were occasional lighter moments such as when our guardian policeman tripped over his gun as he stood up one morning. We were then 67 and 70."

"I was 58 when they gave me my two and a half month old granddaughter. They had totally unrealistic expectations of my ability. She needed feeds at 10pm, 2am, and 6am and then be ready for a daily 8am contact visit with her mother. We already had one of her other children. My youngest was then 14 ... it affected the whole family."

"The flat they were living in was becoming the local 'drop down' centre for anyone from the club too inebriated from alcohol and drugs to go home. People of both sexes were sharing the little boy's room and eventually the child had to give up his bed for 'Mick', a new boarder, and he had to sleep on the floor sharing the room with Mick.

"Our daughter was put on an uncontrollable charge when she was 15. Some of the things that followed: she went missing for long periods of time, her friends died from heroin overdoses, shoplifting became an important part of her life to support her drug habit, seven welfare workers came in and out of her life, court appearances every three months, she spent time in half way houses and refuges, she was placed with foster families, spent

time in Quamby, we were called out to hospitals and to police stations, reports from psychologists, court counsellors, welfare workers. We made out a report for the judge and read it out in court desperate for help from the system she was locked in to.”

“My son got custody of his two-year-old son—it was a landslide win for him and I supported him. Over the next two years my son deteriorated—drinking and taking drugs. I went to see the Family Court counsellors who made mandatory reports to Family Services—nothing happened. After four more reports still nothing had been done. My son called the police and wanted me charged with kidnapping—they didn’t press charges—they had seen my son’s flat. Then it took four years through the Family Court to get custody of my grandson. My son was physically abusive to me—I called the police—My grandson witnessed it all.”

“The stories my daughter told me made me go for custody. Drugs don’t go with being a parent; the baby was going to the group house with drugs and needles there ... I decided to make a choice. I knew we were right, the judge knew we were right, and each time he would say ‘good luck’.”

“We rescued our grandchildren from a men’s refuge—it’s not a place for small children—and we decided to go for custody—they were three, four, and five-and-a-half years old. Our daughter tried to get them back through DOCS and then the Family Court. Eventually she took up with a chap from Bateman’s Bay and they bought a hit from Cabramatta for \$25 each and our daughter died as a result of this in November 2000. We received a call at about 1.30 in the morning from a male using her mobile, asking ‘is your daughter ...? Well she’s dead’. We brought her back to Canberra and buried her at Woden cemetery.”

“Our granddaughter was dropped with another family where there were drug addicts. It was freezing and they took her outside at 2am, told her she was a child of the moon and chopped off her hair so that her scalp was bleeding. My husband started to cry, he picked her up and she asked him ‘Am I pretty Poppy?’ That’s when we decided to go for custody.

“My daughter has schizophrenia, she was hearing voices—we thought it was the drugs. We did not know until she had William (now 15). After that she had Amy—now seven—and they would not let her take Amy home. It was either we take her or she would go into a foster home. When I saw the baby, I knew she could not take her home. Night feeds were so hard—I was 59. Eventually, I split with my husband—he couldn’t cope with our daughter’s illness, and he would never help with the parenting.”

We rescued our grandchildren from a men’s refuge—it’s not a place for small children

How we've been treated by the system

Through all the vicissitudes of the police investigation the police were a tower of strength and remained so until the conclusion of the trial and sentencing and to this day they keep in touch. They displayed simple kindness ... and were always available for help or advice."

“The police have been wonderful, caring and compassionate people who seem to understand more than anyone what is really going on—they have been very supportive to us through the whole process.”

“We received priceless help and support from the Victims of Crime Coordinator attached to the courts. Our particular contact was always available to accompany us to court hearings and kept us up-to-date on what was happening and she worked together with the various bodies involved with the case and court proceedings. She became a friend we could rely on. We also joined VOCAL (Victims of Crime Assistance League) they too were always available to keep us company and help in any way at all and are also able to provide a variety of services not available elsewhere.”

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What we want workers to understand

“Family Services reluctantly became involved on the night the children were brought to us and have been involved ever since, that is, for the past three years. It has not always been an easy relationship, but without them to act as a buffer between the children’s father and us our lives would have been much more difficult. He is now in prison, but the result of his appeal is not yet known. Initially Family Services were concerned solely with the rights of the father. The rights of the children came second to this and we came last. We were told this in no uncertain terms by the regional manager. She made no effort to understand in any way that we were in shock and grieving for our daughter. She told us we had no rights at all, we were simply foster parents, no more, and all rights resided with the father, and that the sole justification for our existence was to look after the children. We definitely had no right to any life of our own. Family Services were the rulers of our universe from the time the children came to us. Both our Family Court lawyer and the police warned us not to get off side with Family Services or things would get much worse. Fortunately for us, our various caseworkers were all pleasant and helpful within the constraints placed on them by the system and by management.”

“Each day has to be taken as it comes and there are many difficulties to be overcome. Family Services has sometimes been a problem in the past and will no doubt be so again before the situation is finalised one way or the other. We lodged a formal complaint with them, and that was dealt with, and we have ‘moved on’. And while we have had our differences with them, life would have been almost impossible without them—our lives would have been as difficult as our dead daughters life was while she lived.”

“We were told the court would get to the truth, but you don’t get to the truth in the court system. The Family Court did get to the truth of the matter—but not the Children’s Court or Family Services.”

“Rules are there as guidelines ... I’m hoping that maybe they can bend the rules a little and look at how our lives are affected by their decisions. I’m hoping someone will sit down with enough compassion and ask how we can make things better.”



The importance of bucking the system— the importance of never giving up

Because of the situation, it was imperative that contact between the children and their father be properly supervised. This was arranged by Family Services ... the woman chosen for this task was not supervising as she was supposed to. We raised this with Family Services many times but nothing was done until the results of police surveillance of contact was made by the police to Family Services and they were forced to arrange for more suitable supervision of contact. Family Services continued to give precedence to what they perceived to be the rights of the father. This did not change until after he had actually been charged with murder in July 2003. He was released on bail on his own recognisance of \$1000. Nobody seemed to take the murder at all seriously except the Police. Because their father had tried to contact the children, especially the boy, on a number of occasions without supervision it was necessary for us and the school they attended to supervise them very closely, their freedom to move around was very restricted and their visits to their friends had also to be closely vetted. We were constantly on guard and the house was kept locked at all times except when the children were actually outside playing. It was a great strain on all of us.”

*“They
called me the
Grandmother
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go away”*

“The caseworker decided the child should bond with the parents so they ordered supervised access when she was eight months. The child would become hysterical but DOCS refused to listen so I asked the caseworker to witness the access—they had to see what was happening.”

“I had been labeled a child abuser—now I have papers saying that I am a good parent! We don’t even meet them sometimes, yet they write reports about us—we don’t even know their names! I have been labeled ‘toxic’ by a psychologist who never even met me.”

“We’ve been battered around by agencies that don’t understand our situation. They forget that we are doing it out of love. They want to tell us how we are going to live our lives.”

“They called me the Grandmother from Hell—I wouldn’t go away, I knew if they sent her back she would die, I stood my ground, I became stronger with each little

victory, I knew it was wrong. When I stood up to them they threatened me, belittled me, made abusive phone calls, I thought I would fall in a heap but I became stronger.”

“We are dealing with a system that works with ticks in boxes—not caring about the children. They need to be aware of not subjecting these children to further abuse.”

“I was not eligible for Legal Aid—I was on a disability pension, had \$2000 in the bank, lived alone in a home I owned. I appealed their decision—and got it (Legal Aid)! Thus started my three year battle through the court—counselling sessions, conferences, adjournments, changes of solicitors, one or other of the parents not attending court, agreements made ... and then people changing their mind. Eventually, after 18 months, I was granted interim custody—Billy had been living with me for two years by then.”

“The assets we accrued over a lifetime of hard work disqualify us of such things as Legal Aid, Family Allowance, Carers Pension, and Health Care cards.”

“They treated us as criminals. I’ve almost had the sniffer dogs through the house and I’ve never had a parking fine.”

“Holidays were no longer possible and overseas travel became a thing of the past. Even a holiday with the children was not easy as the court order stipulated that we could only go away with them for a period of no more than ten days each year. However the court order did allow them to visit our son and his family on the south coast at weekends or school holidays, but this is always subject to Family Services approval. Family Services have also allowed and paid for the children to visit their fathers’ parents during school holidays so this effectively reduces any time available for other pursuits or holidays.”

“There are too many people not doing the job they are paid for ... we are just asking people to do their jobs. The counsellor made a decision in one hour of interviewing us—she was conned ... they should take longer—they have to be accountable—admit to being wrong ... there was no follow-up.”

“Being a grandparent you have to be careful because you get blamed for everything. You can’t smack or rouse on the children—it will go against you and it will end up in court. They told us to write everything down, if they hurt themselves we have to document



it, all the time you are having to be careful, you have to be careful and protect against the possible repercussions.”

“We knew we would have a huge fight on our hands—at the end of the court proceedings we were out of pocket \$40 000.”

“We have been told that we are not entitled to one cent from Centrelink or Child Support—her parents have to pay \$5 per week each to support her. They get Legal Aid, support with medical expenses, counselling and rental assistance. Surely a little support in the form of a health card or a little help with her needs would mean that we do not have to put in overtime (on top of full time hours) just to make ends meet and pay the solicitors bills. Retirement is out of the questions for a long, long time. I know we are doing the right thing. Why does it have to be so hard?”

Adjusting to having grandchildren thrust upon you: *taking one step at a time*

Adjusting to life with young children again was not easy, although the need to simply get through each day meant that we did not have a great deal of time to dwell on the problems. Many things about our way of life had to change overnight. The type of food we ate had to change for a start. We had become accustomed to eating simple Asian-type stir fry's with no red meat and although we still have such meals, we have found that old fashioned foods such as toad-in-the-hole, shepherd's pie, rissoles, bread-and-butter pudding are more popular. One child in particular is a very fussy eater and it is a nightmare trying to find something that she will eat without complaint or a pile of rejects on the side of her plate. Pizza is always popular with them, even home made, but not with us. Our grandson likes red meat so we have that sometimes to be fair to him.”

*“Why
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“Modern schooling was another shock. It was no longer a place where children learned the three R’s. In addition there were all sorts of extra activities like drama, singing with other theatrical activities, which in fact seemed to impinge on time which could have been spent learning more ‘useful’ things. These less basic things were, from our experience with our own children, things that parents arranged out of school hours. Now many hours of school time were spent practicing for either assembly performances or public performance. Parents, or as in our case, grandparents were still expected to arrange for other additional activities such as martial arts and guitar lessons. One time I was driving our granddaughter home from martial arts, I took a wrong turn which meant that it would take us longer to get home, and she said ‘that’s good, now we can talk more.’”

“It is also difficult to accept that teachers use sweets as rewards. Class parties and the availability of junk food at the schools were also difficult to accept. It is difficult to find anything that we can do or give them that will be a treat because these things are available all the time. Or so it seems for much of the time.”

“Clothing worn by this generation of children is another revelation. At primary school uniforms are de rigueur and the children all look neat and tidy. But high school is a very different matter—there is a ‘color code’ only and within this code anything goes ... The clothing worn generally by the girls in particular is sometimes not at all elegant or smart or even in many cases, decent. Even quite young girls are dressed in outfits more suitable for streetwalkers than little girls. So far we have been lucky in that our granddaughter is quite conservative in her tastes, but as she enters the teenage years we anticipate that life will not be quite so easy.”

“It is difficult to reconcile to the idea of discos and, for Year 6 students, the end-of-year formal. It seems to us that children are being made to grow up far too early and are missing out on so much of their own childhood. There seems precious little for them to look forward to as they grow older.”

“Another difficulty for us grandparents is to have to refer to the children’s father as if he were an ‘ordinary’ person for whom we have no negative feelings ... not the man who murdered our daughter. We do this for the sake of the children who see their father

as being like any other father and they still love him. With time they have come to trust us enough to refer to him quite naturally in the course of normal conversation, especially when they have had contact with him in gaol. Over time they have also come to trust us enough to refer to their mother in the course of normal conversation, something it took them quite a long time to do.”

“One difficulty which is always with us is the fact that we are neither parents nor grandparents to the two in our care. We cannot indulge them in the way that grandparents should be able to. It’s difficult to reconcile the easygoing discipline of ‘grandparents’ with the day-to-day discipline and routine which we must impose as foster parents. And following on from that is the difficulty of trying to give our other four grandchildren the attention they deserve as grandchildren. We make special efforts to do this but it is exhausting, especially as they are all six of them either teenagers or almost so. We have been very fortunate so far in that our two surviving children have been very supportive and the attention we perform have to give to two of our grandchildren is understood and forgiven.”

“My life for the past three years revolved around him. I heard the reading at school, went to tuck-shops, cooked for Joey’s camp, sold chocolate frogs, football practice, football on Saturday morning, Church on Sunday, made sure he saw his mother, father and siblings—birthdays, holidays ... ”

“I had to learn who I was (before I could take this on), I had to overcome problems, I didn’t know how to treat another human being.”

“I’m still emotional about that little boy taking his Dad’s side. I’m not the ‘giving in’ type, but he was fighting so hard to be with his father. I worry about him ... ”

Frightening things—things we worry about ... and our hopes and dreams

“We are not young and must face the fact that something may happen that will prevent us from caring for the children into the future. And while we know that our son and his wife would take the children, it would mean much more trauma all round. In summary, none of us knows when we might find ourselves in the position of bringing up yet another generation of young Australians. All we can do is take it day-by-day and do the best we can in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.”

“I have fights with my daughter—she says ‘you stole my child’—abusive fights, but we have still maintained a connection. You still love them (your own children).”

“We support her—she is our only daughter, our flesh and blood.”

“We lose the specialness of being a grandparent—the parenting needs take over.”

“She calls me names but I stay in touch with her ... I tell them that their Mummy loves them.”

“I set limits for my survival—I don’t love my daughter, I remain disconnected.”

“I would like to see Family Services made more accountable for their action as is stated in the reporting guidelines—each case must be thoroughly investigated and this certainly was not done—it cost us a lot of money and court subpoenas to learn what the children had been through before they came to us. I can stand before God and say the things we were accused of were a complete fabrication. I would like our integrity back as they stole that and assassinated our characters.”

A lot of forgiveness is involved—her head is not in the space of parenting—I only ask that she stay in touch with us.”

“She (the mother, my son’s partner) died in a car accident. She realised that I was the closest thing to a mother that she had ever had and she wanted my grandson to have an experience of stability and security. I’m proud that I made the child safe, but I should have ploughed on ... and not given in and let him live with his father. She thanked me for standing up to my son—I really miss that girl.”

“A lot of forgiveness is involved—her head is not in the space of parenting—I only ask that she stay in touch with us.”

“It was bad enough to lose my daughter to heroin—having her daughter makes it a little bit easier.”

“We hope that the children will take their rightful place in society—they should not be penalised just because this happened to them. The alcohol, drugs, mental health issues are like the lenses that taint how people see our families. A negative lens is used because of the drugs and alcohol ... instead of the positive lens that we are lovingly taking on the care of children.”

“We want to keep the dignity of children alive. When children come into the system they are treated differently—they are treated as second class citizens—they are expected to cop it sweet because they are in this awful situation. You (the system) have to act as if you love and care about them. Just because their parents for whatever reason have lost them does not mean the children should be treated any differently than how we would treat our own children.”

“There are several worries for the future. Whatever the outcome of the appeal against the conviction, there will be further dealings with the courts which will have to decide who is to be the custodian of the children and when this will take effect and under what conditions, if any. Until all this is decided it is not possible for us to make any plans beyond the next school holidays either for ourselves or for the children.”

It's not about us, it's about the children ...

“There is a tendency to blame the parents for the children's problems—they say it must be our fault that our kids went off the rails. Our children blame us as well for taking their children.”

“Comparing bringing up our children with bringing up our Grandchildren—we were not able to give our children what we can give our Grandchildren—it is sad ... and it is not fair ... ”

“It's what's in your heart that is important—if you are wrong—apologise—being honest is very important. We are giving them love, affection and guidance—they are the fabric of our society.”

“Children need to be responded to—but I've been told I was overprotective. When they are in my care I do everything I can to protect them. They are our life. We are as protective as we can be for the children's welfare. I look at the consequences—what will happen if they do this or that ... I know we can't be there 24 hours. I just give everything to my children to ensure that they are safe.”

“She (our daughter and the children's grandmother) is a strong character—like her mother. Caring for children is looking after them properly—do all the right things—what you want others to do to you.”

“It's about building a good character. Through AA—that's when I started rebuilding my character—I learned to say sorry and had to be honest. When I was drinking, I knew in my heart it was wrong.”

“We had no choice—I had to make the children safe. It's the children they're hurting. We took the step to give the children stability.”



“You can never give in. It feels like being battered by a system that doesn’t look after children—the system is not flexible enough, all they’re concerned about is numbers. Each case is different—they should be looking to what each whole story is about, including evidence given in the Family Court and the Children’s Court. Unless the caseworkers understand the complete story they cannot possibly understand the needs of children and the concerns of the grandparents.”

“It should be harder to be parents—people who keep having problems should not be allowed to keep having babies.

“The children know they have parents other than us. What goes on in their minds? I tell them that their mother was so clever, she had so much personality. But she was too street wise, and got into chasing the dragon (drugs). You can’t run down their parents. I say Mummy is sick. We work hard to keep the positive images alive. Because they still love their parents. He still loves his Dad.

“Grandparents raising grandchildren face a very difficult task. We are older, we do have savings and or superannuation, we own our own car and home, maybe a holiday home ... but all of these assets go against us, as we take on raising our grandchildren who come to us mostly in emergency situations. We may not be in good health, we get tired, we can’t play ball, or run fast, but on every application form we fill in, age and ability does not rate a mention.

“Unless the caseworkers understand the complete story, they cannot possibly understand the needs of children and the concerns of the grandparents.”

Where we get the most help and support—*what is our rock*

- “It’s good to know you are not alone, although I can get upset listening to everyone’s stories.”
- “It’s a family—we love it here.”
- “We get nothing—except this support group, and this is about knowing that someone understands and cares.”
- “The group is run by caring people who are trying to improve things and give us a chance to tell out stories, they know when to listen.”
- “I want to shake the hand of every one of you before you leave today. What you are doing is unique—caring for children as a community.”
- “I was so alone until I found this group. There is a kinship between us that gives us hope. We can help each other.”
- “We get handy hints from each other—about allowances, mobiles. We are pretty much in the same boat. We can be open and honest—say what we feel.”
- “I have discovered I might be a latent militant—with numbers there is strength. I want these issues tabled in Parliament.”
- “I feel like I am contributing to a change in the system.”





Reflections from the listening team

As a mother of young adults (one who is involved with drugs) I tried to imagine what it would be like to suddenly start over with young children—my grandchildren! And having to perhaps stand against my own children in court ... it all seemed an enormous daunting challenge ... one I could only begin to try and understand and have enormous respect for ... the love and the courage and the strength that would have to be found—not to mention the physical energy! and the sleepless nights! only someone with the greatest love and strength could meet these challenges ... so it stands to reason that the people capable of drawing on and developing these kinds of love and courage and strength should be among the most respected and valued in our community ... their voices should be listened to and acted upon ... it made me think too of the grandparents in Africa caring for their grandchildren orphaned by HIV AIDS ... like there is a growing role for grandparents in the world, it would be amazing to me to listen to a conversation between grandparents across the world ... it made me think of what one grandparent said about ‘I would do this for any child, not just my grandchildren.’ This is inspiring to me as it speaks to a deeply held value of mine—from feminism—that what effects one of us affects us all and while one child suffers we all suffer or are diminished in our humanity. I do know that whenever I see or hear the word ‘grandparent’ in the news or elsewhere I will take note in a new way.”

“The idea of perseverance was a strong one for me. Despite the systems and authorities against them, they keep fighting. They are doing such a hard thing—as families we would all like to be able to let go (of plans and hopes for future, as well as resentments for past), but they are doing that 100 per cent ... they are focusing on the children—their safety and security. There are so many obstacles there to block them, but they overcome them. What are they drawing on to do that?”

“The word integrity was in my head all the time that I was listening—they expressed strong beliefs about what is the right thing to do, the integrity of being true to who you are.”

“There were lots of expressions of determination and for me, they were linked to a strong theme of accountability—they have taken up their responsibility and they just

“I had this sense of the gift they were giving to their grandchildren”

want other people to do the same. They have a strong appreciation of the complexities of the system—the struggles the workers are up against. But they have a real experience of becoming invisible—they just become cases—the family becomes invisible. As a worker it is very sobering to hear these stories and I will take them back to my work and pay attention.”

“ There was a lot of pain expressed about the difficulty of going against your own children, for the sake of caring for children who can’t care for themselves. I would like to know more about how they hold a sense of ‘things not going so well’ with their own children in one hand, while in the other hand, at the same time, they stay strong for their grandchildren.”

“ I was drawn to a sense of letting go of the struggle with the system, and instead being more hopeful about what they have built and what they have learned together—a sense that they can make a difference to their own situation. Maybe these relationships with their grandchildren have increased their hope that they have got something to offer to others that come behind them. How has that happened? Maybe it is to do with courage—what shone through to me was their love and willingness and commitment.”

“ I was struck by how closely they listen to each other—they have been talking about their own experiences of not being listened to or believed—they are very careful to listen to each other and to give each person the space to tell their stories.”

“ I had this sense of the gift they were giving to their grandchildren—how committed they are to their grandchildren, how they have chosen to offer their children their love and their wisdom. They are gifting the system too—they are laying the foundations for the next generation.”

“ I have a picture of the smiles on children’s faces on the CD—the people they are caring for. I was wondering what it will mean to them as they grow older that they had people who stood up for them, cared for them and loved them so fiercely.”

“ It has been such a privilege to see their journey in terms of sharing ... prior to this in the group they had been quite protective of their stories. There is a sense for me that there has been a shift—they seem to be in a rich place where there are different

possibilities (than two years ago). I thought they were turning outwards to support other people, they are very generous in the help they give to new people in the system.”

“ You could really see the links they have made with each other—the support they get now is from each other, not the system. I like to hope that this has been enriching, and I wonder if it has given them more energy, this support has fueled their spirits, fired them up to be heard and to be visible.”

“ It seems to me that these folks here are experts in what sort of listening is helpful and how to find good listeners. It reminds me of the times in my life when I have trusted wrongly and learned from this. And it reminds me of the joy that comes from good listening, the feeling of being with a kindred spirit, when someone is listening in ways that are significant to you.”

“ I am a parent of young adults—not yet a grandparent. Reading your words brought heaviness to my heart as I imagined how I would respond at this time of my life (late 50s) if I were needed to care for grandchildren. As my children became increasingly independent I felt a sense of being able to return to a world where my desires/needs could take centre stage. I had a vague memory of having felt similarly in my teens and early 20s. I can imagine that I would have to fight with an enormous sense of resentment if my children failed to care for their children and I was required to step in.”

“ Knowing what an emotional battle it would be for me to take on the task of rearing grandchildren fuels my admiration for those of you who spoke of putting your focus on loving and caring for your grandchildren and still having a loving place in your heart for your children. You know what it means to turn ‘love’ into action rather than just seeing it as a thing.”

“ The failure of the government system to adequately support you is immensely unjust. Resources should not just be seen in terms of money. You’ve opened my eyes to an area that is not visible to many people.”

“ I hope I could live up to the title of your group if it was required of me.



Feedback from the grandparents after the reflections

- We need to have more time to be understood—we are often not listened to.
- It was nice to hear about how we listen to each other.
- I appreciate so much that this group is very supportive.
- I remembered that a problem shared is a problem halved.
- I would do it for any child, not just my grandchildren.
- We need to make this job easier, not harder.
- Grandparents can never give in—they're always there.
- It is such unfairness that we don't get the same allowances as other carers.
- After the hurt, never lose your anger towards the system.
- It was good to be reminded of all the adjustments we make for the sake of the children
- Thank you for caring
- Please keep your focus on the child's safety and care. Children are being affected so much.

the end

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The research contained in this publication was commissioned by ACT Health Alcohol and Drug Policy Unit.

Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Strengthening Families National Illicit Drug Strategy funded the project.

ISBN 0 9595 4003 2

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