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The ties that bind: Grandparents and their grandchildren

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Close your eyes for a moment, open your treasure trove of memories and take a step back in time to your childhood. Do you remember your grandfather gently scooping you up into his warm and comforting embrace? Or sitting by your grandmother's side as she lovingly baked pies chock full of delicious, juicy warm apples sprinkled with crumbly cinnamon bits?

The bond between grandparents and their grandchildren seems to be a magical one, and now, a new article published in the April issue of *Current Directions in* Psychological Science, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, sets out to discover why grandparents and their grandchildren share such strong connections across generations.

"Evolutionary perspectives on the post-reproductive years have highlighted grandparenthood as an unusual feature of the human lifespan that is only shared with one or two other species, such as some whale species," says David A. Coall of Edith Cowan University, who co wrote the article along with Ralph Hertwig of the University of Basel. According to the article, grandparents in industrialized societies invest a significant amount of time and money in their grandchildren. Taking care of the grandchildren when the parents are at work, providing financial resources and providing emotional support are just some of the many ways in which grandparents invest in their grandchildren.

Coall was interested in exploring the reason grandparents were motivated to invest in their grandchildren after examining a large body of evidence

from traditional human societies. The evidence suggested that the presence of some grandparents can substantially increase the chances of a child surviving during the high risk period of infancy and childhood. "We felt if such as association existed in Western societies, where the fertility and childhood mortality rates are much lower, grandparents could make a substantial public health contribution to our society," says Coall, who believes that an integration of evolutionary, sociological, and economic accounts will be necessary to fully explain the impact grandparents have in their grandchildren's development.

Coall and Hertwig conducted structured literature searches to see if the grandparental investment effect that influenced the human life history could still be detected in modern, Western society. Surprisingly Coall and Hertwig soon discovered that few articles actually dealt with the effect of grandparental investment in Western society.

"Although important effects have been found in traditional societies, there was a paucity of research in Western Nations", says Coall who also states that while researchers from the fields of evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, economics and sociology were all examining the influence of grandparents on their grandchildren, they were working in isolation – demonstrating an almost complete separation of evolutionary and sociological literature.

What does this suggest when it comes to the role of a grandparent in their grandchild's life in the future? Well, according to Coall, "Grandparents have helped and supported their families in the past, they do now and no doubt, they will in the future. Now we need disciplines to work together and establish what it is that grandparents do which benefits the development of their grandchildren. It could be as simple as knowing that there is always someone there if you need them."

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