

Grandparent carers let down by social services

February 9 2016, by Fiona Tyrrell

Poor collaboration between child protection and adult addiction services is resulting in the children of drug-using parents and their grandparent carers missing out on supports and services, according to new research conducted at the School of Social Work and Social Policy in Trinity College Dublin.

Grandparents who have assumed full-time care of children of drug-using parents feel they are being taken for granted by social services, according to the research conducted in conjunction with the National Family Support Network. The study also identified particular difficulties and dilemmas faced by grandparent carers including financial difficulties, marital and other relationship issues and mental health problems.

The study recommends the drafting of formal guidelines governing collaboration between the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) in relation to the needs of the children of drug-dependent parents and grandparent carers to help address this problem and reduce the risk of these children falling between two bureaucratic stools.

The small qualitative study, published in the *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, looked at the experiences of 11 [grandparents](#) who had assumed full-time child care responsibilities as a result of parental substance misuse.

Key findings:

- Grandparents expressed considerable dissatisfaction with the level of support they received from both the [child protection](#) system and the adult addiction treatment system. Grandparents also expressed the feeling that they were being taken for granted by social services.
- Grandparents were generally of the view that there was poor integration between the addiction treatment and child protection arms of the HSE; specifically, grandparents claimed that social workers lacked expertise in relation to drug problems, and tended to separate the addiction issues from the child care issues rather than seeing things holistically.
- Grandparents described a range of adverse physical and mental health consequences as a result of their caring role, including sleep deprivation, constant exhaustion and feelings of depression, anger and guilt.
- In many instances grandparents experienced financial difficulties as a result of their caring role and had difficulty navigating the bureaucratic maze of state services when trying to seek financial help from support services.
- Grandparents reported that their work and social lives were radically disrupted and all participants reported that the caring role had damaged other relationships. Relationships between grandparent carers and birth parents tend to be conflictual.
- Some children of drug-using parents have significant delays in achieving age-appropriate skills, which entails grandparents devoting large amounts of time to attending medical, psychological and educational services with their charges.
- Grandparents also reported emotional and behavioural problems presented by their grandchildren, including aggression, nightmares and low moods.
- While grandparents reported that they neither wanted to nor

expected to become primary carers for their grandchildren, they described the experience of being able to provide a safe and loving family environment as one of the most enjoyable aspects of their role.

Shane Butler, Associate Professor in Social Work, Trinity, co-author of the study said: "While there are obvious advantages for the children being cared for by family members as opposed to stranger foster parents, the grandparent carers reported some specific stresses. This distress is exacerbated by poor collaboration between child protection and adult addiction services. This study points to the need for the drafting of a formal protocol governing collaborative work between Tusla and the HSE in relation to the needs of the children of drug-dependent parents and grandparent carers. Such a protocol, which could be drawn up with the assistance of the National Family Support Network, would reduce the risk of these children falling between these two bureaucratic stools."

Megan O'Leary, Community Development Worker, National Family Support Network, co-author of the report added: "Grandparent carers are fulfilling a vital role for their grandchildren under extremely difficult circumstances. The stresses associated with this caring role are further compounded by support services that are often ambiguous, unclear and inconsistent in their approach to this group. As a result of these factors the [mental health](#) of grandparent carers is frequently compromised."

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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