

Grandma and Grandpa Taking Care of the Kids: Patterns of Involvement

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July 2004

Overview Over the last decade, considerable media attention and public discussion have focused on the varied roles that grandparents play in family life. Much of this public attention has centered on grandparents who assume parental responsibilities for their grandchildren.¹ Similarly, grandparents are recognized for the active but temporary roles they assume during times of crisis or special need, such as in cases of a parental divorce or military deployment.² Yet child care provided in such contexts constitutes only a small proportion of all child care assistance provided by grandparents. The more typical pattern is for grandparents to baby-sit over the weekend or during the evening, look after grandchildren when parents are at work, or take care of grandkids under other, more routine, circumstances.

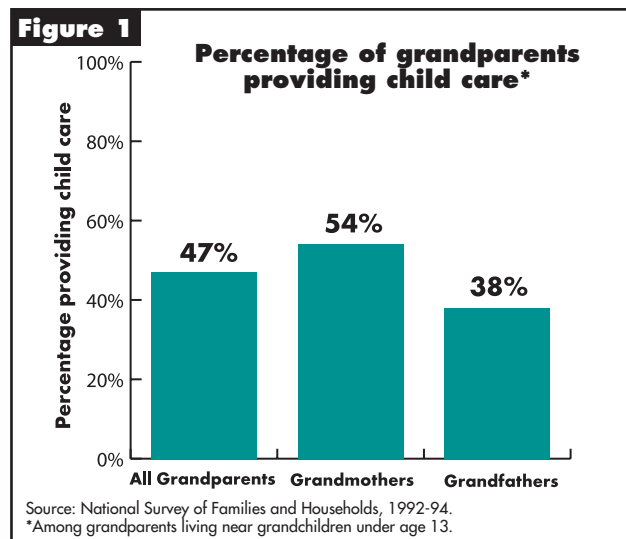
Using data from two large national surveys, this Research Brief presents a statistical snapshot of grandparental child care in American families. The brief sheds light on who provides this care, what type and how much is provided, and considers some of the financial benefits of this care for the families involved. While most research on grandparents has focused almost exclusively on grandmothers,³ this brief considers child care provided by both grandmothers and grandfathers.⁴

Analyses reveal that many grandparents provide some type of child care to their grandchildren, an important type of ongoing assistance to their adult children that reflects the lifelong patterns of support between parents, children, and grandchildren.⁵ Although grandmothers are more likely to provide child care, many grandfathers do so as well. The data also suggest that, while some grandparents provide child care for only a few hours a week, many are providing substantial amounts of this assistance, and, in fact, may be juggling child care responsibilities with their own work schedules.⁶ Another, perhaps surprising finding, was that although most grandparental child care is unpaid, a small but significant percentage of families with young children report paying grandparents for the child care they provide.

WHO PROVIDES GRANDPARENTAL CHILD CARE?

In this section, data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH, see Box, page 2) are used to explore the prevalence of grandparental child care and characteristics of grandparents who provide some type of child care.

Close to one-half of all grandparents provide child care assistance. Forty-seven percent of grandparents with young grandchildren living nearby reported providing some type of child care assistance to their adult children (see Figure 1).



About the Research Sources for this Brief

The National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) is a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults that follows its participants over time. The NSFH was first conducted in 1987-88 with 13,017 adults.⁷ Respondents were re-interviewed in 1992-1994, and, most recently, in 2002-03. Data from the NSFH can be used to learn about aid, such as child care, that grandparents provide, as well as the characteristics of family members receiving and providing support. The author analyzed data from the 1992-94 wave of the NSFH for a sample of 1,406 grandparents whose oldest grandchild was under the age of 13. The sample of grandparents was further restricted to those who lived within 50 miles of a grandchild (i.e., those living close enough to be able to provide routine day-to-day child care).⁸

To examine the number of hours that families receive child care from grandparents and the extent to which families pay for grandparental child care, the author used data from the *2001 National Household Education Survey (NHES), Early Childhood Program Participation* component. The NHES is sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics to describe Americans' educational experiences, including child care and pre-kindergarten. The analyses reported in this brief using NHES data are based on a sample of 6,749 children age six and younger.⁹

It is important to note that while both data sets provide information about grandparental child care, they do so from different perspectives. The NSFH provides data on grandparental child care from the perspective of grandparents, while the NHES tells us about the experiences of young children and their families with grandparental child care, as reported by parents. Moreover, while analyses based on the NSFH sample are limited to grandparents living near grandchildren under the age of 13, the NHES sample includes only grandchildren age six and younger and is not limited by geographic proximity to grandparents.

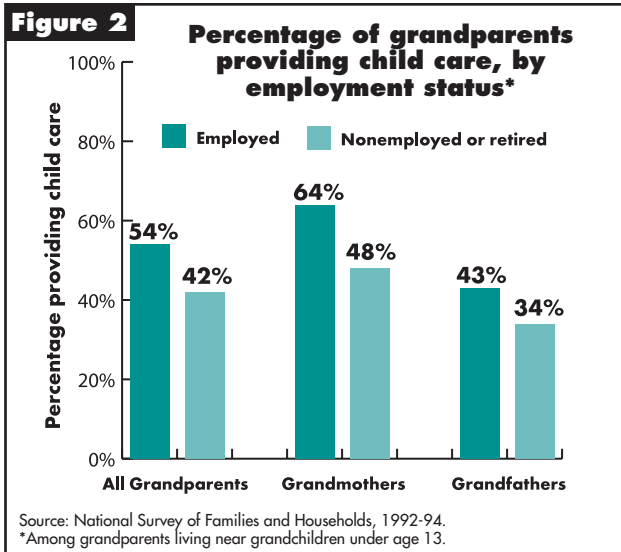
In addition, variation in question wording across the two surveys may result in differences in the types of grandparental child care captured by the two data sets. Specifically, while the NSFH asks grandparents to report child care assistance they provided to their adult children in the last month, the NHES asks parents whether their child is receiving care from a grandparent on a *regular* basis. Consequently, parents in the NHES may be more likely to report grandparental child care that is part of a regular or routine arrangement, and underreport occasional or nonwork-related grandparental child care.¹⁰ Nevertheless, although specific estimates differ, general patterns and findings are comparable across the two data bases and to prior research.¹¹

The relatively high prevalence of grandparental child care likely reflects both a desire among grandparents to participate in their grandchildren's lives and a preference among some parents for this type of care.¹² Parents who prefer grandparental child care may do so because they perceive it as providing a trustworthy, safe, and emotionally nurturing environment.¹³ For others, however, grandparental child care may represent the only affordable or available child care option. For example, single-parents, low-income families, and those working nights, weekends, or other nontraditional hours are more likely to use grandparental child care.¹⁴

Although grandmothers are more likely to provide child care than grandfathers,

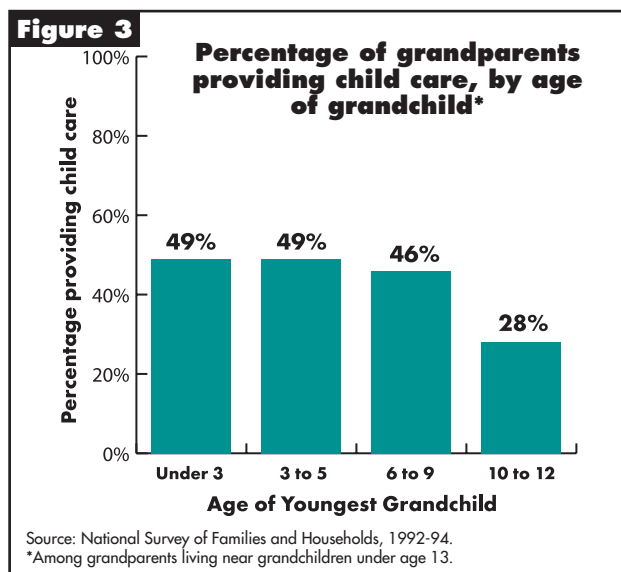
a considerable percentage of grandfathers do so as well.¹⁵ More than one-half of grandmothers (54 percent) and more than one-third (38 percent) of grandfathers with young grandchildren living nearby reported they provide child care (see Figure 1). These findings echo those of prior research that finds that care given by grandfathers constitutes a small but significant amount of all grandparental child care.¹⁶

A higher percentage of employed grandparents provide child care than those who are not employed or are retired. Fifty-four percent of employed grandparents with young grandchildren living nearby reported providing child care, compared with 42 percent of those



who are not employed or who are retired (see Figure 2). While this finding may reflect age or health differences between employed and nonemployed grandparents and retirees, it suggests willingness on the part of grandparents, in particular grandmothers, to combine both work and child care.¹⁷ Sixty-four percent of employed grandmothers and 43 percent of employed grandfathers reported providing some type of child care assistance to their adult children.

Grandparents of preschool-aged grandchildren are especially likely to provide child care.¹⁸ Roughly one-half (49 percent) of grandparents with grandchildren under the age of three, as well as grandparents with grandchildren between the ages of three and five, reported that they provide child care, compared with 28 percent of grandparents with



grandchildren aged 10 to 12 (see Figure 3). It is worth noting that although grandparental child care is most prevalent in the preschool years, a significant percentage of grandparents are providing child care as their grandchildren approach and enter adolescence – a period during which research suggests that having an adult mentor (other than a parent) is beneficial to child well-being.¹⁹

Not surprisingly, grandparents who live nearby are more likely to provide child care than those who live farther away.²⁰

An important consideration in all child care decisions is convenience. All else being equal, the greater the travel time between the homes of parents and grandparents, the less likely grandparents will be called upon to provide child care. And, the data bear this out. The majority (64 percent) of grandparents who live within five miles of their adult children and grandchildren reported providing child care; this percentage decreased to 40 percent among grandparents who live between 16 and 50 miles of their adult children. While large distances clearly preclude the provision of *routine day-to-day child care*, even among grandparents who lived 300 or more miles from their adult children, 20 percent reported providing some type of child care assistance. This care likely takes place during family or holiday visits and children’s summer vacations.

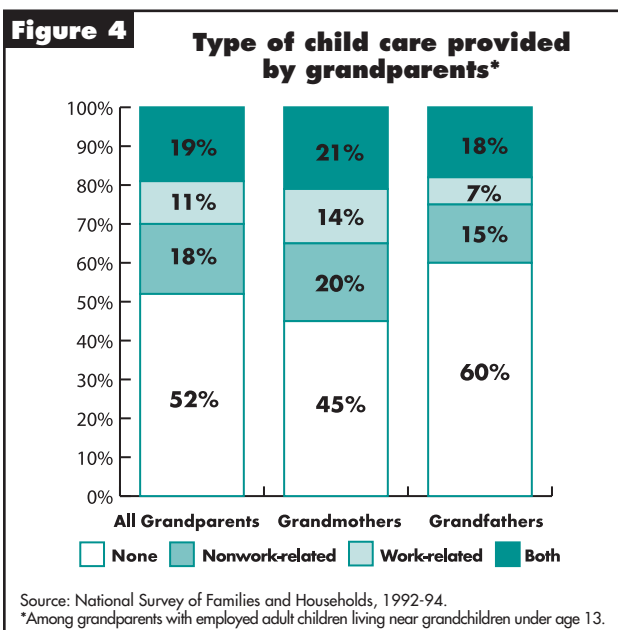
WHAT TYPE OF CHILD CARE DO GRANDPARENTS PROVIDE?

While past studies have focused typically on child care that grandparents provide during parents’ work hours, this type of child care represents only one facet of grandparental care. Many grandparents help out by taking care of children on the weekends and evenings or other times when a parent is not working. Data from the NSFH are used to examine how much of grandparental child care centers around parents’ work hours and how much of it takes place during parents’ nonwork hours.²¹

Grandparental child care serves varied purposes. Relatively few grandparents (11 percent) provide child care solely during parents’ work hours (see Figure 4). Approximately, one in five (19 percent) grandparents reported that they provide child care during parents’ work and nonwork hours; a similar percentage (18 percent) reported they provide child care

strictly during nonwork hours. These patterns suggest that in addition to meeting the child care needs of working parents, grandparental child serves a variety of other purposes as well. For example, grandparental child care gives parents time in which to pursue leisure and social activities, run errands, keep doctors' appointments, or simply relax. In addition, grandparental child care can provide a unique opportunity for grandparents and grandchildren to share time together and engage in mutually satisfying activities that are largely outside the sphere of influence and authority of the middle generation (i.e., the adult child). This kind of grandparent-grandchild time may, in fact, be the primary motivation for many grandparents to provide child care. Past research indicates that much of the influence that grandparents have on grandchildren is dependent on the grandparent-parent relationship.²² The amount of time that grandchildren spend with grandparents, for example, is related to the quality of the grandparent-parent relationship.²³

The type of child care that grandmothers provide differs in some key respects from that provided by grandfathers. Among grandmothers, 20 percent reported that they provide child care only during parents' nonwork hours, compared with 15 percent of grandfathers; similar proportions reported they provide *both* work- and nonwork-related child care – 21 percent of grandmothers versus 18 percent of grandfathers (see Figure 4).



However, close to 14 percent of grandmothers – double the percentage of grandfathers (7 percent) – reported that they provide child care solely during the hours when parents are working. The extent to which grandparental child care differs by gender is explored further in the section below.

HOW MUCH CHILD CARE DO GRANDPARENTS PROVIDE?

While the *type* of child care informs us about the function or functions that grandparental child care may serve, it sheds little light on the *amount* of aid grandparents provide.

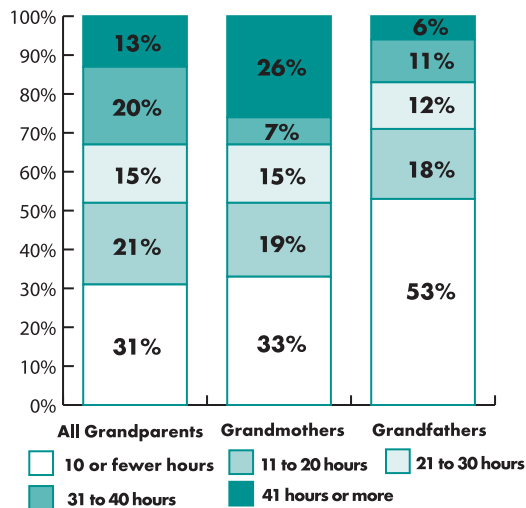
In this section, data from the NHES are used to gain a better understanding of the amount of child care that grandparents provide. Note, again, that the NHES provides data on the child care arrangements of children age six and younger; thus, in contrast to the data presented thus far, the estimates below are derived from the perspective of children, *not* from the perspective of grandparents (see Box, page 2).

Grandparents provide considerable child care.²⁴ According to the NHES, among those receiving grandparental child care on a regular basis, children age six and younger received an average of 23 hours of care a week from grandparents.²⁵

To provide a fuller picture of the amount of grandparental child care children receive, the distribution of the number of hours in grandparental care is presented. Just under one-third (31 percent) of grandchildren age six and younger received 10 or fewer hours of care from grandparents a week; 21 percent received 11 to 20 hours of care; 15 percent received 21 to 30 hours of care; 20 percent received between 31 and 40 hours of care; and 13 percent received 41 hours or more of care a week (see Figure 5).

The results presented thus far suggest that many grandparents are taking on large amounts of child care responsibility, and that some may be combining child care with paid employment. For some, this added responsibility may have unintended consequences.²⁶ A recent study, for example, found that grandmothers who provide child care for nine or more hours a week had higher rates of heart disease than those who provided no care, net of the other factors.²⁷

Figure 5 Number of hours children spend in grandparental child care*



Source: National Household Education Survey, 2001.
*Among children age six and under who receive grandparental child care on a regular basis.

Grandmothers provide more hours of child care than grandfathers do. Parents reported that young children who were cared for by grandparents received an average of 23 hours of care a week from grandmothers,²⁸ compared with 16 hours from grandfathers.²⁹

These data, along with the analyses presented above on type of child care, suggest that while grandfathers are indeed providing child care, the child care role that they play likely differs from that provided by grandmothers.

ARE THERE FINANCIAL BENEFITS TO GRANDPARENTAL CHILD CARE?

Grandparental child care may have important economic value for both parents and grandparents.³⁰ From the perspective of parents, money not spent on child care can be redistributed to meet other family needs; this may be particularly important for low-income families who spend a greater portion of family income on child care. For example, in 1999, employed mothers of children under the age of 14 living below the poverty line spent one-third of family income on child care, compared with 6 percent among those living above the poverty line.³¹ Recent research also suggests that grandparents, particularly low-income grandmothers, may use child care as a means to supplement their incomes.³² Data from the NHES are used to investigate the degree to which grandparents receive monetary compensation for the child care they provide.

Nineteen percent of families with children age six and younger who receive grandparental child care pay grandparents for this care. Though estimates of the amount families pay for grandparental care are beyond the scope of the present study, prior research indicates that families pay less for grandparental child care than for other forms of child care.³³ Thus, even among those families who pay for it, grandparental child care may offer an inexpensive alternative to formal market care.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite concerns about the decline and alienation of the American family, grandparents continue to provide assistance to their adult children, even after they have left the “nest,” and many of these grandparents play active roles in the lives of their grandchildren. The analyses presented here indicate that grandparental child care is quite prevalent in American families, with close to one-half of grandparents who live within 50 miles of a grandchild providing some type of child care assistance.

That much of grandparental child care takes place outside of parents’ work hours indicates that this care is more than just an inexpensive and trustworthy child care option for working parents. Indeed, grandparental child care may provide a vehicle through which grandparents and grandchildren can develop and foster relationships and an opportunity for traditions, family history, skills, and values to be exchanged across three generations of family members. Some research suggests that early involvement with grandparents helps to foster enduring family bonds and may provide a model of intergenerational relations that grandchildren can later emulate.³⁴

The findings reported in this brief also speak to the importance of bringing men into the equation when studying family behaviors. Though grandmothers are more likely to provide grandparental child care, one-third of grandfathers do so as well. Nevertheless, the data presented here suggest that grandfathers provide fewer hours of child care than grandmothers, and grandfather care is less likely to be centered around parents’ work hours. Related research from the NSFH (not presented in this brief) also suggests that grandfathers are most likely to provide child care when their wives are also

providing it.³⁵ Further research is needed to explore differences in the type, meaning, and motivation between grandmother and grandfather child care.

In addition, the results reported in this brief indicate that grandparental child care may represent an important economic transfer for parents and grandparents. Analyses showing that almost one in five families provide monetary compensation for the care grandparents provide is consistent with a growing body of research that suggests that child care functions as a family currency, especially among low-income families.³⁶ One such study, for example, found that providing child care to relatives allowed older and less skilled women an opportunity to earn money, while avoiding physically menial and demanding labor.³⁷

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY

While the use of grandparental child care may reflect parental preferences toward relative care,³⁸ it may also reflect the mismatch between what the child care industry offers parents and the needs of working parents.³⁹ Although many parents are now employed in jobs that require them to work hours and days outside of the standard 9-to-5, Monday-to-Friday workweek,⁴⁰ many child care facilities and providers continue to offer services only during standard work hours.⁴¹ Consequently, many parents are faced with fewer child care options or a gap in their child care schedules. To close this gap, working parents may need to turn increasingly to relatives, in particular, grandparents.⁴²

Even though grandparental child care may offer a convenient and trustworthy child care option, the provision of this care may be taxing for grandparents who provide child care on a full-time basis or who combine child care with work. But assuming this responsibility, while tiring at times, can also mean delight for grandparents and grandchildren alike.

This *Research Brief* draws heavily from the author's Ph.D. dissertation "Love and Investment. The Continual Bond: Grandparents' Care for Children." The author is indebted to her dissertation advisor, Elizabeth Thomson, for her

insightful comments and advice, and expresses appreciation to Larry Bumpass, Gary Sandefur, Lynet Uttal, and Karen Swallen for their careful review of and helpful suggestions on that work. The author also thanks her Child Trends colleagues Akemi Kinukawa and Greg Matthews for their assistance in finalizing this brief and Kristin Anderson Moore and Laura Lippman for their valuable review.

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation provided funding for the writing, editing, production, and dissemination of this brief and for ongoing support of Child Trends' communications efforts. Other support for these efforts has been provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

Endnotes

¹ Fuller-Thomson, E., Minkler, M., & Driver, D. (1997). A profile of grandparents raising grandchildren in the United States. *The Gerontologist*, 37(3), 406-411; Bryson, K., & Casper, L.M. (1999). Coresident grandparents and grandchildren. *Current Population Reports*, P23-198. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

² Johnson, C.L. (1988). Active and latent functions of grandparenting during the divorce process. *The Gerontologist*, 28(2), 185-191.

³ Szinovacz, M.E. (1998). Grandparent Research: Past, Present and Future. In Szinovacz, M.E. (Ed.), *Handbook on grandparenthood*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; Spitze, G. & Ward, R. (1998). Gender variations. In Szinovacz, M.E. (Ed.), *Handbook on grandparenthood*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

⁴ For exceptions, see Szinovacz, M.E. (1997). Grandparenthood: Profiles, support, and transitions. Final report submitted to the AARP-Andrus Foundation. Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University; Fuller-Thomson, E. & Minkler, M. (2001). American grandparents providing extensive child care to their grandchildren: Prevalence and profile. *The Gerontologist*, 41, 201-209.

⁵ Rossi, A.S., & Rossi, P.H. (1990). *Of human bonding: Parent-child relations across the life course*. New York: Aldine DeGruyter; Eggebeen, D.J., & Hogan, D.P. (1990). Giving between the generations in American families. *Population Issues Research Center Working Paper Series*, No. 1990-21.

⁶ See, also, Presser, H.B. (1989). Some economic complexities of child care provided by grandmothers. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51, 581-591.

⁷ Sweet, J., Bumpass, L., & Call, V.A. (1988). The design and content of the National Study of Families and Households. *Working Paper NSFH 1*, Madison, WI: Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin.

⁸ In addition, because the analyses based on NSFH data presented in this brief are part of a larger project that examines the provision and receipt of grandparental child care among specific pairs of parents and adult children, one adult child was randomly selected to be the focus of the study for each parent in the sample. A more detailed description of the sample is available upon request.

- ⁹ The sample excludes children aged four to six who have entered kindergarten.
- ¹⁰ Because grandfathers appear to be less likely than grandmothers to provide regular or work-related child care, the NHES may underestimate grandfather child care to a greater extent. The response categories used in the NHES may further contribute to the underreporting of grandfather child care. While grandfathers appear to provide child care together with grandmothers, the NHES asks parents to report about care that grandmothers or grandfathers provide. Surveys that allow parents to report about child care they receive from both grandparents yield higher estimates of grandfather care.
- ¹¹ See, Smith, K. (2002). Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: Spring 1997. *Current Population Reports, P70-86*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau; Szinovacz. (1997).
- ¹² Hofferth, S.L., Brayfield, A., Deich, S., & Holcomb, P. (1991). National Child Care Survey. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press; Kulthau, K., & Mason, K.O. (1996). Market child care versus care by relatives: Choices made by employed and nonemployed mothers. *Journal of Family Issues, 17*, 561-578; (1997). National Institute of Child and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network. Familial factors associated with the characteristics or nonmaternal care for infants. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59*, 389-408.
- ¹³ Though the results of studies using large representative samples are consistent with this hypothesis, data to address this question directly are not available. See, Presser, H. (2003). *Working in a 24/7 economy: Challenges for American families*. New York: Sage; Hofferth et al. (1991)).
- ¹⁴ See, Smith. (2002); Vandell, D.L., McCartney, K., Owen, M.T., Booth, C., & Clarke-Stewart, A. (2003). Variations in child care by grandparents during the first three years. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 65*, 375-381; Presser (2003).
- ¹⁵ All comparisons noted in the text are significant at the .05 level or below.
- ¹⁶ Fuller-Thomson & Minkler. (2001).
- ¹⁷ Presser. (1989).
- ¹⁸ Age of youngest grandchild was used in this analysis.
- ¹⁹ Tomlin, A.M. (1998). Grandparents' influences on grandchildren. In Szinovacz, M.E. (Ed.), *Handbook on grandparenthood*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; Hair, E.C., Jager, J., & Garrett, S.B. (2002). *Background for the Community-Level Work on Social Competency in Adolescence: Reviewing the Literature on Contributing Factors*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.
- ²⁰ Analysis of patterns of grandparental child care by geographic proximity includes all grandparents with grandchildren under the age of 13 and is not limited to those living within 50 miles of a grandchild.
- ²¹ To examine type of grandparental child care, the sample of grandparents from the NSFH was further restricted to those with employed adult children.
- ²² Mueller, M.M., & Elder, G.H. (2003). Family contingencies across the generations: Grandparent-grandchild relationships in holistic perspective. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 65*(2), 404-417; Uhlenberg, P., & Hammill, B.G. (1998). Frequency of grandparent contact with grandchild sets: Six factors that make a difference. *The Gerontologist, 38*(3), 276-285; Cherlin, A., & Furstenberg, F. (1986). *The new American grandparent: A place in the family, a life apart*. New York: Basic Books.
- ²³ Uhlenberg & Hammill. (1998); Cherlin & Furstenberg. (1986); Whitbeck, L.B., Hoyt, D.R., & Huck, S.M. (1993). Family relationship history, contemporary parent-grandparent relationship quality, and the grandparent-grandchild relationship. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 55*, 1025-1035.
- ²⁴ See, also, Fuller-Thomson & Minkler. (2001).
- ²⁵ These findings are consistent with estimates recently released by the Census Bureau, (Smith 2002).
- ²⁶ See, Presser. (2003).
- ²⁷ Lee, S., Coldiz, G., Berkman, L., & Kawachi, I. (2003). Caregiving to children and grandchildren and risk of coronary heart disease in women. *American Journal of Public Health, 93*(11), 1939-1944.
- ²⁸ Please note that in the NHES children receiving child care from grandmothers outnumber those receiving care from grandfathers on a ratio of roughly 13 to 1. In other words, for every child cared for by grandfathers, there are 13 cared for by grandmothers. As a result, the average number of hours children are in grandparental child care is driven by care provided by grandmothers.
- ²⁹ Moreover, while close to one-half (48 percent) of children being cared for by their grandmothers received more than 20 hours of care a week, only about one-quarter (29 percent) of children being cared for by their grandfathers received care for that many hours (see Figure 5).
- ³⁰ Presser. (1989); Bass, S.A., & Caro, F.G. (1996). The economic value of grandparent assistance. *Generations, 20*, 29-33.
- ³¹ U.S. Bureau of Census. (2003). Retrieved June 28, 2004, from <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/child/ppl-168/tab06.pdf>
- ³² See, Presser. (1989); Uttal, L. (1999). Using kin for child care: Embedment in the socioeconomic networks of extended families. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61*(4), 845-857.
- ³³ Smith. (2002).
- ³⁴ King, V. & Elder, G.H. (1997). The legacy of grandparenting: Childhood experiences with grandparents and current involvement with grandchildren. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59*, 849-859; Mueller & Elder. (2003).
- ³⁵ Guzman, L. (2003). *Love and investment: The continual bond grandparents care for grandchildren*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- ³⁶ Uttal. (1999); Presser. (1989).
- ³⁷ Uttal. (1999).
- ³⁸ NICHD. (1997); Kulthau & Mason. (1996).
- ³⁹ Collins, A.M., Kreader, J.L., & Layzer, J.I. (2004). National Study of child care for low-income families: The supply of regulated child care in 25 study communities: Executive Summary. Prepared for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Bethesda, MD: Abt Associates, Inc.
- ⁴⁰ Presser. (2003).
- ⁴¹ Collins et al. (2004).
- ⁴² Vandell et al. (2003); Presser (2003).

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