

Grandparental Involvement in Early Child Development



KEY POINTS:

- **Significant role of grandparents:** Grandparents can play a vital role in the early years of a child's life. When grandparents provide supportive and consistent care in multigenerational households, their involvement has been associated with positive outcomes in children's health, cognitive development, and emotional well-being.
- **Grandparenting in disadvantaged families:** Research linking grandparenting with poorer child outcomes has highlighted that grandparents often step in to take on caregiving roles in response to family adversities, such as parental absence, illness, or economic hardship. In such cases, poorer child outcomes may reflect the broader challenges faced by these families rather than the effects of grandparental care.
- **Value of intergenerational co-caregiving:** Evidence consistently shows that when parents and grandparents work well together – clearly communicating and supporting each other's caregiving roles – they can improve family functioning and support better child outcomes.
- **Socio-cultural diversity and caregiving norms:** In multicultural contexts like Singapore, grandparenting practices are shaped by cultural, community, and family context. Because of this, programmes and policies should recognise and support the varied roles that grandparents play in children's lives.

Introduction

Population ageing and the rise of dual-earning households have led to increasingly strong multigenerational ties and extended periods of “shared lives” between grandparents and grandchildren¹. In many families, grandparents serve as trusted and dependable caregivers, providing essential childcare that enables maternal employment – an especially critical contribution in low-resource contexts². Their involvement often extends beyond routine care to fostering children’s emotional security, transmitting cultural values, and strengthening intergenerational connections within the family. Research highlights the role of grandparents in shaping children’s mental health, cognitive and educational outcomes, and physical health. Given these multifaceted contributions, it is necessary to deepen our understanding of grandparents’ roles in early childhood, and consider the need for context-specific, evidence-informed interventions and policies that acknowledge, support, and leverage their involvement.

Contextualising Grandparental Involvement in Singapore

Grandparental involvement refers to the roles that grandparents play in the lives of their grandchildren. This involvement can be viewed as a continuum – from having no contact at all to providing full-time custodial care³. Grandparental involvement is more prevalent in some non-Western cultures. Grandparents in Asia are significantly more likely than those in Western countries to co-reside with their adult children and provide daily care to the third generation⁴. In Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand, Viet Nam), over 50% of grandparents are estimated to co-reside with and care for at least one grandchild⁵, whereas in the United States, this ranges from 8% to 20%⁶. This prevalence is even higher in countries such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, where approximately 70% of grandparents live with grandchildren and provide childcare⁷.

Singapore, like many Asian societies, is characterised by an ageing population, long working hours, and a strong emphasis on intergenerational reciprocity and exchange – factors that collectively reinforce multigenerational family bonds, underpinned

by the Confucian ideal of filial piety⁸. Data from the Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthier Outcomes (GUSTO) study shows that 50% of children aged 4.5 years and 39% of children aged 6 years received childcare support from at least one grandparent⁹. More recently, the Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study (SG LEADS) reported that 25% of children in Singapore aged 0–6 years are living with at least one of their grandparents¹⁰.

The Singapore government has introduced several policies to support grandparental involvement in co-caregiving practices. A key initiative is the Grandparent Caregiver Relief (GCR) – a tax relief of up to S\$3,000 for working mothers who engage their parents or parents-in-law to care for their young children¹¹. This benefit, offered to mothers of Singaporean children under 12 years (or children with special needs of any age), recognises and supports grandparents’ contributions to childcare. A Proximity Housing Grant (PHG) also assists families who choose to live with or near their parents, thereby facilitating multigenerational living arrangements¹². Additional support includes priority schemes for multigenerational households – for example, HDB’s Three-Generation (3Gen) flats, introduced in 2013, are larger units designed for extended families, with priority given to married couples applying jointly with their parents¹³.



Grandparents’ Influences on Child Development

Antenatal and Postnatal Periods: Globally, research highlights the important role of grandparents – particularly maternal grandmothers – in supporting maternal well-being during the perinatal period. One review found that the presence and involvement of grandparents serves as a protective

factor against maternal postpartum mental health problems, offering emotional and practical support that can buffer stress and promote healthier parent-infant bonding¹⁴. Another review found that grandmothers can positively influence breastfeeding practices, particularly when they have personal breastfeeding experience or hold positive attitudes toward breastfeeding. In such cases, mothers were 1.6 to 12.4 times more likely to exclusively breastfeed or delay the introduction of solid foods¹⁵. However, when mothers experience conflict over childcare with grandparents, they are more likely to report higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms postpartum¹⁶. Therefore, fostering mutual understanding between parents and grandparents during early childcare is essential.



Throughout Early Childhood: As children grow, grandparents continue to exert an influence on their development. Their involvement has been associated with child mental well-being, cognitive and educational outcomes, and physical health outcomes. These influences vary depending on the caregiving arrangement, the quality of intergenerational relationships, and the broader sociocultural context in which grandparenting occurs.

- *Mental wellbeing:* Evidence on the influence of grandparental involvement on children's mental well-being is mixed. A recent meta-analysis found that grandparental care was associated with increased internalising (e.g., depression) and externalising behaviours (e.g., aggression) in children, more overall mental health challenges, and lower

socioemotional well-being¹⁷. However, these negative associations were partially due to the fact that many of the studies included grandparents who were raising their grandchildren in difficult situations (e.g., parental absence or financial hardship), which are already linked to poor child mental health¹⁷. Other studies have reported more positive associations. For example, research from China found that joint caregiving arrangements – where grandparents provide co-caregiving alongside parents – were associated with better early child mental health outcomes compared to skipped-generation or parent-only care^{18,19}.

In Singapore, the SG LEADS study found that co-residence with grandparents was associated with increased internalising problems among children during the COVID-19 pandemic²⁰. However, the GUSTO study, conducted before this period, found that maternal grandparental childcare was associated with greater parental warmth and reduced harsh parenting among mothers of 6-year-old children. Notably, grandparental involvement did not show a significant association with children's depressive symptoms at age 10⁹. These findings highlight that the relationship between grandparental involvement and child mental health may vary depending on the caregiving context, relationship quality, and the specific outcomes examined.

- *Cognitive and educational outcomes:* Grandparents can positively influence children's early cognitive and educational development through the transfer of knowledge, experience, and practical skills. Through activities such as reading, storytelling, and play, grandparents can foster early language development, numeracy skills, and curiosity about the world. They may also contribute directly to early academic attainment by supporting and nurturing practical skills that support school readiness²¹. Research suggests that supportive and well-educated grandparents can be particularly effective in enhancing early learning outcomes^{22,23}. However, the impact of grandparental involvement on

academic achievement is context dependent. In some cases – especially in disadvantaged households or when there are conflicting parenting styles between generations – excessive reliance on grandparents may hinder children's cognitive or academic progress²⁴.

In multilingual Singapore, many grandparents serve as custodians of linguistic and cultural heritage. Studies have highlighted Singaporean grandparents' important role in maintaining children's home languages, offering linguistic input that may not be consistently available from parents²⁵. While direct evidence of the impact of grandparental involvement on children's cognitive and educational outcomes in Singapore remains limited, studies in the region suggest that children cared for by grandparents demonstrated stronger second-language (English) vocabulary skills in elementary school²⁶. These findings underscore the unique contribution of grandparents to bilingual development and language-rich home environments in culturally diverse settings like Singapore.



- *Physical health:* There is mixed evidence about the influence of grandparents in shaping maternal and child health behaviours. A review of non-Western societies found that grandmothers often guide young mothers on child feeding and health practices, influencing intergenerational caregiving norms²⁷. Grandparental involvement has been linked to children's physical health outcomes, especially diet and weight. While some studies highlight potentially adverse effects – such as indulgent feeding practices²⁸ – others point to the

nurturing, home-based care that grandparents provide as beneficial to children's general health outcomes²⁹. These inconsistencies may be partly attributed to variations in study design, as well as differences in caregiving intensity, cultural expectations, and household socioeconomic status and arrangements³⁰. There is a need for more nuanced, context-specific research to better understand how grandparents shape physical health outcomes in early childhood.



A study from Singapore revealed that while the vast majority of grandparents (91.3%) were aware that childhood overweight could lead to future health problems, many continued to adhere to traditional beliefs that may inadvertently promote overfeeding³¹. For example, nearly half (47%) of the grandparents surveyed reported that they rarely or never imposed limits on junk food or high-calorie snacks³¹. These findings point to a gap between nutritional awareness and actual practices, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive health education tailored to grandparent caregivers.

Early Childhood Interventions Involving Grandparents

There are still few interventions globally involving grandparents to support early childhood development (both those aimed at changing grandparents' behaviours and practices, and interventions delivered with grandparents aimed at improving child behaviours and outcomes). A meta-analysis found that such interventions have small to moderate positive effects on

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various well-being outcomes, including increased social support and parenting skills among grandparents, as well as reductions in children's behavioural problems. The inclusion of supportive and educational components was found to be particularly promising³². A review of eight grandparent-targeted programmes – most of which were adaptations of existing parenting programmes – revealed that the majority of studies originated from the United States and primarily focused on outcomes for grandparents – such as psychological distress of grandparents – with limited attention to the implications for children or parents³³.

Interventions involving grandparents of young children have been implemented across diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. These interventions range from home-based programmes aimed at enhancing caregiving practices³⁴ to group-based sessions promoting intergenerational communication and early learning support³⁵. While some interventions were designed specifically for grandparents, others integrated them into broader family- or community-centred approaches³⁶. Preliminary evidence suggests that grandparent-inclusive interventions can enhance child developmental outcomes, improve grandparenting practices, and strengthen intergenerational relationships, though variations in programme fidelity and evaluation methods remain³⁷.

In Singapore, a small range of programmes and initiatives aim to equip grandparents with knowledge and skills to effectively support their grandchildren. For example, the Triple P for Grandparents programme³⁸ is designed to help grandparents learn about positive childcare practices and communication strategies, enabling them to better connect with younger generations. Health promotion campaigns have also enlisted grandparents as active partners in cultivating healthy habits among children³⁹. For example,

videos have been posted on HealthHub's website to foster evidence-based grandparenting practices⁴⁰. Despite growing recognition of grandparents' caregiving roles, there remains a limited availability of targeted programmes in Singapore that are contextualised to equip grandparent co-caregivers with the skills needed to support caregiving.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Given that many grandparents serve as primary or consistent secondary caregivers, it is essential to formally recognise and include them within early childhood and early intervention eligibility frameworks. Early intervention services should routinely invite grandparents to participate in intake sessions, caregiver coaching, and home-based services if they play a substantial caregiving role. Quality grandparent-grandchild interaction should be considered a core component of early intervention programmes involving extended family members.

To support and scale grandparent engagement, successful grandparenting interventions should be developed into sustainable programmes and publicly accessible resources. Educational workshops and toolkits tailored to grandparents could cover topics such as early childhood development, responsive caregiving, and strategies for reinforcing intervention goals at home with other co-caregivers. Such efforts should recognise and build on grandparents' existing strengths – including their role in promoting family traditions, cultural values, and heritage languages. Family-centred intervention models offered in Singapore could be inclusive of other caregivers, such as grandparents. Strengthening communication and alignment between all caregivers and intervention service providers (e.g., early childhood educators) would lead to better support for children and potentially improve child outcomes. Given Singapore's cultural diversity, the design and delivery of grandparenting

interventions must also incorporate multilingual, culturally inclusive resources and services to ensure accessibility across all communities.

National government policy should acknowledge the growing number of grandparents who remain in the workforce past traditional retirement age⁴¹. This group of older adults would benefit from targeted respite care options and flexible work arrangements to help them balance employment with caregiving responsibilities and opportunities. Financial incentives such as GCR could also be enhanced by linking eligibility to participation in early childhood development programmes, workshops, or health screenings, thereby encouraging lifelong learning and reinforcing evidence-based caregiving practices.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Early childhood practitioners should recognise and engage grandparents as integral members of the caregiving network, particularly in households where they serve as primary or regular caregivers or co-caregivers. Targeted outreach during health visits and developmental screenings can equip grandparents with up-to-date knowledge on infant care, nutrition, and early stimulation, while addressing common misconceptions (e.g., overfeeding).
- Grandparents should be considered and integrated to the design of early childhood interventions, acknowledging their influence on childrearing practices in multigenerational households. Educational workshops and home-visitation programmes can support intergenerational alignment in caregiving approaches, promote consistent messaging between parents and grandparents, and encourage collaboration in supporting early child development.
- Culturally sensitive and multi-language resources should be developed to support grandparent caregivers. Such resources can provide credible and accessible information on child development, caregiving techniques, and health promotion, tailored to the needs, digital literacy, and caregiving styles of grandparents. In particular, grandparent-led families may require more comprehensive support as they often face heightened caregiving burdens and family stressors. Tailored interventions should consider these additional needs to ensure equitable and sustained support for this vulnerable group.
- Further research is needed to examine the health, caregiving stress, and educational needs of grandparent caregivers – particularly grandfathers and those caring for children with special needs or in skip-generation households. This evidence can inform the development of inclusive, intergenerational policies and targeted support systems that enhance family resilience and child well-being.
- Policymaking should adopt a family-centred model of early childhood care that moves beyond a parent-centric or nuclear family lens. Public health and social development initiatives can leverage this shift to spotlight the pivotal role of grandparents, particularly in multigenerational households, and to emphasise caregiving as a shared intergenerational responsibility. This approach aligns with Singapore's cultural norms of familial reciprocity and can promote more inclusive, sustainable support systems for young children and their caregivers.

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Abbreviations:

GUSTO – Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthier Outcomes

SG LEADS – Singapore Longitudinal EARly Development Study

GCR – Grandparent Caregiver Relief (tax relief scheme in Singapore)

PHG – Proximity Housing Grant

HDB – Housing & Development Board (Singapore's public housing authority)

3Gen – Three-Generation (flats designed for extended families)

Triple P – Positive Parenting Programme

Contributors:

Nazihah Binte Mohamed Pauzi, Natalie Koh, Keri McCrickerd, Jamie Ng, Gayatri Kembhavi-Tam, Yihang Wang (writing lead)

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