

# VU Research Portal

Grandparent–grandchild relationships

Geurts, T.; van Tilburg, T.G.

**published in**

International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences (2nd edition)  
2015

**DOI (link to publisher)**

[10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.23219-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.23219-4)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

**citation for published version (APA)**

Geurts, T., & van Tilburg, T. G. (2015). Grandparent–grandchild relationships. In J. D. Wright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences (2nd edition)* (pp. 336-340). Elsevier.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.23219-4>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## **Grandparent–grandchild relationships**

Teun Geurts, Ministry of Security and Justice, Research and Documentation Centre, The Hague,  
The Netherlands

Theo van Tilburg, VU University Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences

Keywords: aging; child care; grandparenthood; grandparenting; grandchildren; grandparents;  
intergenerational relationships; intergenerational solidarity; third age

### **Abstract**

A brief review of major conceptual notions and empirical findings within the literature on grandparent–grandchild relationships is presented. Four major topics for understanding the intergenerational relationship are addressed: the historical context, the importance of the relationship, changes over individual time, and culture and variation. The focus is on grandparents and grandchildren from Western societies and who are biologically connected.

## **Historical context**

In the popular and academic literature it is frequently presumed that grandparent–grandchild relationships have become more important in Western societies than ever before. This idea is often motivated by greater availability of grandparents due to increased length of life and decreased fertility (e.g., Bengtson, 2001). Due to these demographic changes, the lives of grandparents and grandchildren overlap for a longer period of time and there are fewer grandchildren per grandparent than in previous times (Uhlenberg, 2009). The demographic changes allow for a more intense relationship between grandparents and grandchildren for a longer period of time (Bengtson, 2001).

Greater freedom amongst contemporary grandparents strengthened the idea of gained importance. The period of time in which older adults are in good health and unfettered by child-care responsibilities and work obligations increased, due to better health care and the introduction of pensions funds in many countries during the 1970's and the 1980's (Laslett, 1991). Although current developments of pension reform aim to reduce opportunities for early retirement and to raise mandatory retirement age to deal with the economic pressures coming along with an aging population, the amount of free time for most people in old age in current Western societies is greater than ever before. New concepts were coined to capture and describe this distinct life phase for older adults, such as the “third age” (Laslett, 1991). Although increased free time may have induced involvement in social roles that compete with extended family relationships (Silverstein and Long, 1998), having free time is often mentioned as one of the reasons for greater involvement with grandchildren (Herlofson and Hagestad, 2012).

The idea of greater importance of grandparent–grandchild bond is reinforced by several other economic and family transformations in the past decades (Herlofson and Hagestad, 2012). The

most important economic transformation is increased employment amongst women. In earlier cohorts, mothers typically stayed at home to take care of children and household. Contemporary mothers of young children often continue to work at least part-time or return to the labor market after short breaks (Vlasblom and Schippers, 2006). Due to emancipation and a shift in gender roles, female labor participation is greater than before and, alongside with it, the need for child care from beyond the nuclear family increased. As grandparents can be called upon for assistance more than ever before, it is often assumed that their availability in combination with the parent's need for child care increased grandparents' involvement with grandchildren (e.g., Fergusson et al., 2008).

As to family transformations, the increase in divorce among parents is often referred to as the most important transformation affecting the importance of grandparent–grandchild relationships, predominantly because divorce increases the need for child care (Bengtson, 2001). In families of divorce, childcare is not easily shared with the former partner, and for that reason, grandparents are more often needed as childminders, in particular when the mother is employed. Hank and Buber (2009) observed across ten European countries that grandparents are more likely to provide childcare when the parent is single than when the parent has a partner. Other family transformations that led to greater need for grandparental involvement is an increase in the number of poor functioning parents, in particular in the United States (Uhlenberg and Cheuk, 2010). In such families, grandparents may take over the parental responsibilities and act as surrogate parents due to drug-abuse, illness, incarceration or poverty within the middle generation. These grandparent-headed households - sometimes referred to as 'skipped-generation' households - modestly increased in the second half of the twentieth century (Uhlenberg and Cheuk, 2010). The restructuring of gender roles and increase in poor functioning

parents created the need and opportunity for grandparents to become more involved in one of the most prominent functions of the family as an institute: socialization and nurturance of a child.

Despite the widespread believe of greater importance of the grandparent–grandchild relationship in family life, only few studies exist that examined trends over historical time. Data that allow for examining of changes over historical time, in particular grandparental involvement with grandchildren, are scarce. The few studies that do exist suggest both gained and reduced importance. On the one hand, a study from Finland suggests that older people from an earlier generation generally had more frequent contact with grandchildren than grandparents from more recent cohorts (Lyyra et al., 2010). Likewise, research from Silverstein and Long (1998) indicates that earlier cohorts of grandparents from the United States had more frequent contact with their adult grandchildren than later cohorts. On the other hand, an increase in grandparental childcare provision was observed in the Netherlands (Geurts et al., in press): Grandparental childcare substantially increased between 1992 and 2006 and this was linked to increased needs on the part of adult daughters due to by higher employment rates and a higher rate of single motherhood. The increase also appeared to reflect greater opportunities of grandparents to provide care as indicated by decreased travel time and less competition among grandchildren because recent grandparents have fewer of them. A similar trend of increased childcare provision by other family members - most likely grandparents - was observed in Great Britain (Gray, 2005).

Although empirical support for the assumption of greater importance of grandparent–grandchild relationships in family life is scarce and results are mixed, an abundance of scholarly research show that the sheer availability and freedom grandparents increased, the need for grandparental childcare increased, and that many of todays grandparents are involved with their

grandchildren in terms of childcare provision (Uhlenberg, 2009; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2001). These observations provide good reasons to believe that, in many families of Western societies, the grandparent–grandchild relationship is more important than ever before --- in particular during the grandchild's childhood.

### **Importance of the relationship**

The importance of the grandparent–grandchild relationship in contemporary Western societies is mainly given shape through the meaning grandparents attach to their role (Reitzes and Mutran, 2004). Depending on personal opportunities and preferences, grandparents give shape to their role which reflects their own interpretation of what it means to be a grandparent. Hayslip et al. (2003) argue that the meaning of this role includes a sense of continuity (carrying on the family line, or the sense of living on through the lives of grandchildren), extension of the self (by feeling valued as an elderly person or by vicarious accomplishments through the grandchildren), and satisfaction (by contributing to their grandchild's wellbeing through help, advice or indulgence). In addition, grandchildren can be a source of pride, and grandparents can derive enjoyment and companionship from the relationship with their grandchildren.

The grandparents' freedom in the interpretation of their role is often stressed in the academic literature by referring to what is called 'a role-less' role: a social status without clear cultural expectations and prescriptions. There is only one study that suggests that culture plays a significant role (Herlofson and Hagestad, 2012). Because of unclear cultural norms about how this role should be enacted, there is a great variety in how grandparents enact their role and therefore also in the importance of the relationship. Earlier research suggested that grandparents can enact their roles by being a 'family watchdog' (Troll, 1983), nurturer, mentor, family

historian and role model (Kornhaber & Woodward, 1981). More recent research examined the content of the relationships between grandparents and grandchildren (contact frequency, activities, intimacy, instrumental help, and authority/discipline) and developed a typology of five grandparenting styles: influential, supportive, passive, authority-oriented, and detached (Mueller and Elder, 2003).

The importance of the relationship is mainly manifested through its importance for the middle generation. That is, grandparents can play a significant role in child care provision and, in some cases, even the upbringing of their child. As time beyond working hours is often a luxury commodity, in particular for dual income parents, grandparental child-care provision is presumably of high value to parents. In particular because parents generally find child-care provision from their parents more convenient, more beneficial to their child, more trustworthy, and less expensive than care from other child minders (Fergusson et al., 2008). Furthermore, it enables women to be employed outside of the house because it eases reconciliation of child care with work. It is well documented that the intergenerational relationship is important during grandchild's childhood (e.g., Fergusson et al., 2008; Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2001; Hank and Buber, 2009). Through their child-care activities, grandparents contribute to their family, the society (by increasing employment opportunities for women), and the welfare state (by producing support functions that are absent or would otherwise be produced by the welfare state).

Little attention however has been given to the importance of the intergenerational relationship when grandchildren are adults. It is known that the frequency of contact between grandparents and grandchildren declines when grandchildren grow older (Silverstein and Long, 1998). Other studies examining the significance of the intergenerational relationship concluded that the

relationship continues to be highly valued, personally meaningful, and potentially important (Kemp, 2005). Adult grandchildren may even contribute to their grandparents' well-being by providing emotional and practical support (Fruhauf et al., 2006). For example, adult grandchildren may introduce new technologies and instruct their grandparents in how to operate them. In this way, grandparents can learn about societal developments through contact with their adult grandchildren. Although such support can also be provided by other young people, for instance in the context of intergenerational programs, adult grandchildren are more easily approached because many older people maintain contact with younger generations only within the family context. Furthermore, grandchildren, and in particular adult grandchildren, may assist a grandparent in need of care (e.g., Fruhauf et al., 2006), even though they are generally not the first in order of preferred care providers.

To understand the importance of the relationship across generations in Western societies, researchers commonly draw on the intergenerational solidarity framework developed by Bengtson and Roberts (1991). This model distinguishes between structural, consensual, functional, associational, affectual, and normative solidarity. Structural solidarity refers to factors that facilitate or hinder the opportunity for contact between generations. Consensual solidarity indicates the amount of agreement in beliefs and values. Functional solidarity refers to the amount of help and assistance within the intergenerational relationship. Associational solidarity concerns the frequency of contact and shared activities between the generations. Affectual solidarity involves the amount of emotional closeness as perceived by both generations. Normative solidarity refers to obligations felt regarding the other party in the relationship and expectations regarding the content of the relationship.

Although the intergenerational solidarity model was originally developed to understand parent–adult child relationships (Bengtson and Roberts, 1991), it is applied to grandparent–grandchild relationships as well (e.g., Bengtson, 2001; Silverstein and Marenco, 2001). In particular research focusing on grandparent–adult grandchild relationships uses the model to understand the intergenerational relationship (e.g., Mills, 1999). The model is however less suited to understand connectedness during the grandchild’s childhood. Because the focus is on dyadic relationships, it is unclear how intergenerational relationships should be understood when it is mediated by a third party. For instance, when grandparents provide child care, should this be understood in terms of solidarity between grandparent–adult child relationships, grandparent–grandchild relationships, or both?

The concern of applying the intergenerational solidarity model to grandparent–grandchild relationships underscores the importance of keeping in mind that the generation in between plays a key role in connecting grandparents and grandchildren. That is, they often serve as a lineage bridge between grandparents and grandchildren by either facilitating or hindering the contact. Likewise, parents shape the opportunity structure for intergenerational contact for instance through their choices regarding residential location, parental divorce and the quality of the parent–grandparent relationship (Uhlenberg and Hammill, 1998). Over individual time, however, the role of the middle generation as mediators between grandparents and grandchildren presumably declines in its importance. Adult grandchildren can maintain contact with their grandparents independently from their parents and may re-establish the relationship on the basis of their own and their grandparents’ terms (Kemp, 2005).

### **Changes over individual time**

The grandparent–grandchild relationship is considered to be most intense before the grandchildren have reached adolescence (Cherlin and Furstenberg, 1986). Although the relationship may continue to be personally meaningful and significant for grandchildren and grandparents in and after adolescence (Kemp, 2005), the relationship presumably becomes less intense when grandchildren grow older for two reasons. First, the initiative for maintaining contact is likely to shift from parents and grandparents to grandchildren. During childhood and early adolescence, parents are most important, as they initiate and facilitate contact with grandparents (Brown, 2003). When grandchildren enter adulthood, the parental influence on the grandparent–grandchild relationship is assumed to become less important and grandchildren may re-establish the relationship on their own terms. Although the grandparents' need for family contact may increase, as these contacts are considered to be more emotionally rewarding at an older age (Carstensen, 1992), grandparents also believe they should not interfere in the lives of younger generations and may be reluctant to contact their grandchildren (Kemp, 2005).

Second, grandchildren's priorities and opportunities for maintaining contact with grandparents decrease. Grandchildren in early adulthood are likely to prefer peer relationships over intergenerational relationships because they place more emphasis on the potential for information gain and future contact (Carstensen, 1992). Moreover, grandchildren face more time restrictions as they take up adult roles such as starting their own families or pursuing careers (Mills, 1999). Kemp (2005) observed that adult grandchildren frequently use their busy lives as a legitimate excuse for not contacting their grandparents, supporting the assumption that limited time restricts grandchildren to contact their grandparents. The reduced importance of parents and grandparents, combined with grandchildren's weaker preferences and fewer opportunities for intergenerational contact, are assumed to weaken the grandparent–grandchild relationship when

grandchildren enter adulthood. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) even go so far as to say that it evolves into a relationship with limited meaning and little content. Most studies have focused on young grandchildren and showed a decline in contact frequency during adolescence (e.g., Silverstein and Marenco, 2001). The few studies that track grandchildren beyond adolescence also suggest a decline (e.g., Geurts et al., 2009; Mills, 1999; Silverstein and Long, 1998).

The development of the relationship into one of low intensity may at least partly be counteracted by an intense relationship during childhood. The relationship in childhood is of importance because discrepancies in developmental stages are likely to hinder continuation of the relationship when both parties age. Older generations strive to maintain continuity in the intergenerational relationship while younger generations tend to exaggerate differences to facilitate separation from the family of origin (Harwood, 2001). A strong bond between the parties at an early stage of the relationship may hold back a decline in relationship intensity even though discrepancies in the developmental stages become increasingly pronounced. Results from three studies support the idea that a strong bond established during childhood positively affects the bond in adulthood. Taylor et al. (2005) observed more positive perceptions and greater satisfaction in the intergenerational relationship if adult grandchildren had co-resided with their grandparents during childhood. Brown's (2003) study observed that the quality of adult grandchild-grandparent relationships was higher when a grandparent had intensively cared for their grandchild during childhood. The presumed link between childhood intensity on later relationship outcomes was also supported by a study of Geurts et al. (2012), who observed that more overnight visits, contacts, and childcare increased the likelihood that grandparents identify adult grandchildren as a personal and important contact.

### **Variation between countries**

Grandparent–grandchild relationships take shape within a social-cultural context. Economical and political regimes shape the social conditions that are assumed to play a major role in variation in intergenerational relationships; it influences the allocation of care responsibilities among state, market, and family (Igel & Szydlik, 2011). Although non-parental childcare is often dictated by the reconciliation of mothers' care responsibility with paid employment, families with children at risk can mobilize non-parental support as well. In such families, grandparents may take over some or even all of the parental responsibilities. In the following, we briefly describe variation in grandparental childcare provision by looking at Europa, China, South Korea, Russia, and the United States.

Across European countries, 58% of grandmothers and 49% of grandfathers took care of a grandchild aged 15 years or younger in 2004 (Hank and Buber, 2009). In European countries with extensive public childcare arrangements, grandparental childcare is often complementary to these public services. That is, grandparents are occasionally called upon for child-care assistance but are generally not needed for daily child-care. In European countries with limited public childcare arrangements, however, grandparental childcare provision is predominantly a substitute for absent services. In particular for full-time employed mothers, grandparents generally provide daily rather than occasionally childcare (Hank and Buber, 2009).

In China, 56% of grandparents provide childcare (Ko & Hank, 2013). Labor migration plays a significant role: about 20% of Chinese elders in rural areas with high migration rates provide full care of their grandchildren (Silverstein, Cong, & Li, 2006). In South Korea, grandparental childcare is less common (6% of grandparents; Ko & Hank, 2013). Because childcare is widely considered as a primary task for the family, Korean mothers prefer to rely on relatives rather than

on public or privately paid services (Ko and Hank, 2013). Russian grandparents - in particular grandmothers - play a significant role in the upbringing of children: One third of the young adults born in the 1990s grew up with a grandparent in the household (Semenova and Thompson, 2004). Grandparents' significance increased due to increased numbers of full-time employed single mothers, increased poverty, and decreased state provision of childcare (Lokshin, Harris, and Popkin, 2000).

In the United States, 24% of grandparents engage in caregiving activities between 10 and 29 hours per week (Fuller-Thomson and Minkler, 2001). About half of children from employed mothers who received grandparental childcare, received this childcare combined with another arrangement (Ulhenberg and Cheuk, 2010). Because public financed child care is limited, grandparental child care is presumably complementary to private services. Next to grandparental childcare services in relation to mothers' employment, a substantial number of grandparents also provide non-work related care. See Hayslip and Kaminski (2005) for an overview on custodial grandparenting in the United States.

## Reference List

- Bengtson, V.L., 2001. Beyond the nuclear family: The increasing importance of multigenerational bonds. *J. Marriage Fam.* 63,1-16.
- Bengtson, V.L., Roberts, R.E.L., 1991. Intergenerational solidarity in aging families: An example of formal theory construction. *J. Marriage Fam.* 53,856-870.
- Brown, L.H., 2003. Research and evaluation intergenerational influences on perceptions of current relationships with grandparents. *J. Intergenerational Relat.* 1,95-112.
- Carstensen, L.L., 1992. Social and emotional patterns in adulthood: Support for socioemotional selectivity theory. *Psychol. Aging* 7,331-338.
- Cherlin, A.J., Furstenberg, F.F., 1986. *The New American Grandparent: A Place in the Family, a Life Apart*. New York: Basic Books.
- Fergusson, E., Maughan, B., Golding, J., 2008. Which children receive grandparental care and what effect does it have? *J. Child Psychol. Psyc.* 49,161-169.
- Fruhauf, C.A., Jarrott, S.E., Allen, K.R., 2006. Grandchildren's perceptions of caring for grandparents. *J. Fam. Issues* 27,887-911.
- Fuller-Thomson, E., Minkler, M., 2001. American grandparents providing extensive child care to their grandchildren. *Gerontologist* 41,201- 209.
- Geurts, T., Poortman, A., Van Tilburg, T.G., Dykstra, P.A., 2009. Contact between grandchildren and their grandparents in early adulthood. *J. Fam. Issues* 30,1698-1713.
- Geurts, T., Van Tilburg, T.G., Poortman, A., 2012. The grandparent-grandchild relationship in childhood and adulthood: A matter of continuation? *Pers. Relationships* 19,267-278.
- Geurts, T., Van Tilburg, T.G., Poortman, A., Dykstra, P.A., in press. Childcare by grandparents: Changes between 1992 and 2006. *Ageing & Society*.

- Gray, A., 2005. The changing availability of grandparents as carers and its implications for childcare policy in the UK. *J. Soc. Policy* 34,557-577.
- Hank, K., Buber, I., 2009. Grandparents caring for their grandchildren: Findings from the 2004 survey of health, ageing, and retirement in Europe. *J. Fam. Issues* 30,53-73.
- Harwood, J., 2001. Comparing grandchildren's and grandparents' stake in their relationship. *Int. J. Aging Hum. Dev.* 53,195-210.
- Hayslip, B., Kaminski, P.L., 2005. Grandparents raising their grandchildren: A review of the literature and suggestions for practice. *Gerontologist* 45,262-269.
- Hayslip, B., Henderson, C.E., Shore, R.J., 2003. The structure of grandparental role meaning. *J. Adult Dev.* 10,1-11.
- Herlofson, K., Hagestad, G.O., 2012. Transformations in the role of grandparents across welfare states, in: Arber, S., Timonen V. (Eds.), *Contemporary Grandparenting: Changing Family Relationships in Global Contexts*. The Policy Press, Bristol, pp. 25-51.
- Igel, C., Szydlik, M., 2011. Grandchild care and welfare state arrangements in Europe. *J Eur Soc Policy*, 21, 210-224.
- Kemp, C.L., 2005. Dimensions of grandparent-adult grandchild relationships: From family ties to intergenerational friendships. *Can. J. Aging* 24,161-177.
- Ko, P.C., Hank, K., 2013. Grandparents caring for grandchildren in China and Korea: Findings from CHARLS and KLoSA. *J. Gerontol. B-Psych*, gbt129.
- Kornhaber, A., Woodward, K.L., 1981. *Grandparents, Grandchildren: The Vital Connection*. Anchor, New York.
- Laslett, P., 1991. *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

- Lokshin, M., Harris, K.M., Popkin, B.M., 2000. Single mothers in Russia: Household strategies for coping with poverty. *World Development*, 28, 2183-2198.
- Lyyra, T.M., Lyyra, A.L., Lumme-Sandt, K., Tiikkainen, P., Heikkinen, R.L., 2010. Social relations in older adults: Secular trends and longitudinal changes over a 16-year follow-up. *Arch. Gerontol. Geriatr.* 51,e133-e138.
- Mills, T.L., 1999. When grandchildren grow up: Role transition and family solidarity among baby boomer grandchildren and their grandparents. *J. Aging Stud.* 13,219-239.
- Mueller, M.M., Elder, G.H., 2003. Family contingencies across the generations: Grandparent–grandchild relationships in holistic perspective. *J. Marriage Fam.* 65,404-417.
- Reitzes, D.C., Mutran, E.J., 2004. Grandparent identity, intergenerational family identity, and well-being. *J. Gerontol. B-Psych.* 59B,S213-S219.
- Semenova, V., Thompson, P., 2004. Family models and transgenerational influences: Grandparents, parents and children in Moscow and Leningrad from the Soviet to the market era, in: Bertaux, D., Rotkirch, A., Thompson, P. (Eds), *On Living Through Soviet Russia*. Taylor & Francis, New York, pp.120-145.
- Silverstein, M., Cong, Z., Li, S., 2006. Intergenerational transfers and living arrangements of older people in rural China: Consequences for psychological well-being. *J. Gerontol. B-Psych.* 61, S256-S266.
- Silverstein, M., Long, J.D., 1998. Trajectories of grandparents' perceived solidarity with adult grandchildren: A growth curve analysis over 23 years. *J. Marriage Fam.* 60,912-923.
- Silverstein, M., Marenco, A., 2001. How Americans enact the grandparent role across the family life course. *J. Fam. Issues* 22,493-522.

- Taylor, A.C., Robila, M., Lee, H.S., 2005. Distance, contact, and intergenerational relationships: Grandparents and adult grandchildren from an international perspective. *J. Adult Dev.* 12,33-41.
- Troll, L.E., 1983. Grandparents: The family watchdogs, in: Brubaker T.H. (Ed.), *Family Relationships in Later Life*. Sage, Beverly Hills, pp. 63-74.
- Uhlenberg, P., 2009. Children in an aging society. *J. Gerontol. B-Psych.* 64B,489-496.
- Uhlenberg, P., Cheuk, M., 2010. The significance of grandparents to grandchildren: An international perspective, in: Dannefer, D., Phillipson, C. (Eds.), *Sage Handbook of Social Gerontology*. Sage, London, pp. 447-458.
- Uhlenberg, P. Hammill, B.G., 1998. Frequency of grandparent contact with grandchild sets: Six factors that make a difference. *Gerontologist* 38,276-285.
- Vlasblom, J.D., Schippers, J., 2006. Changing dynamics in female employment around childbirth: Evidence from Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. *Work Employ.Soc.* 20,329-347.