

Study examines the phenomenon of 'surrogate granddads'

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The number of families in which both parents work is increasing. But who looks after the children when the nursery school is closed? Female child minders and surrogate grandmas are very popular, but is childcare an appealing activity for men too? A pre-study at the Department of Sociology is examining the phenomenon of "surrogate granddads".

A man pushing a pram through the park: Forty years ago, this sight would still have turned heads in Germany. This has fundamentally changed, thanks to new gender roles. Today, many men not only play a different part as fathers, but also in their role as grandfathers. But what happens when an older man doesn't have grandchildren? For some men, the desire to raise, play with and spend time with a child might be a reason to act as "surrogate granddad" in another family. But there could also be other reasons.

A research project, led by Birgit Blättel-Mink, Professor of Sociology at Goethe University Frankfurt, and Alexandra Rau, Professor of Social Work at Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, aims to shed light on this largely unexplored topic. Sociologist Luigi Wenzl is in charge of the project's implementation. His theory: The "surrogate granddad phenomenon" may become more widespread in future.

But on what scale does this social phenomenon already occur? Is it above all men who feel that they did not contribute sufficiently to raising their own children? Or do surrogate granddads see it as an opportunity to supplement their pension with a little side job? The topic could thus be

relevant for three major sociological debates of the present day: For the debate on the compatibility of family and career and childcare shortfalls in families, for the debate on (re-)activating "younger seniors" for services to society and finally for the debate on precarious employment relationships that do not allow sufficient provision for old age.

Luigi Wenzl has investigated 28 projects that paired "honorary" surrogate or voluntary grandparents with families. In the next step, detailed interviews are being held with the surrogate granddads identified and – for the purpose of comparison – with a few surrogate grandmas. "According to our initial assessment, enabling factors are the lack of own grandchildren, an interest in bonding emotionally with a child, the wish to stay young by being in touch with children and at the same time to allow children the experience of being in contact with 'older' people," says Wenzl regarding the first interviews. "But some older people also have the feeling they need to do something to counter 'modern' upbringing", adds Birgit Blättel-Mink, suggesting the "surrogate granddads" interviewed wanted to be seen solely as organizers of recreational activities and not as child rearers.

Deviating views on the tasks of a surrogate granddad can, however, lead to difficulties and tension. The study also aims to illuminate how parents and surrogate granddads negotiate their different requirements and opinions. It already became clear to Wenzl from his first interviews that it is often only through their partners that men are introduced to caring for other people's children. And some do, indeed, shy away from it: In public perception, there is still something rather suspicious about older men looking after children.

Provided by Goethe University Frankfurt am Main

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