

Divorced grannies provide more childcare, researchers report

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University of Canterbury social work Associate Professor Gretchen Perry.
Credit: University of Canterbury

Grandparents often play an important role in childcare, but some are more involved than others, University of Canterbury Social Work

Associate Professor Gretchen Perry has found.

In her free public talk on 27 April, Associate Professor Perry will discuss her finding that divorced grandmothers—particularly single, maternal nanas—are exceptional providers, despite being the least resourced. She will explain why this matters when working with vulnerable families and children in Aotearoa New Zealand.

"My research focuses on non-parental caregiving, who provides support to children beyond their parents, and what the associated outcomes are," she says.

With over 25 years of social service and social work experience, Associate Professor Perry returned to academia after realizing that the assessment tools she had been trained to use did not adequately address the complexity and nuance of extended family caregiving.

She completed a Ph.D. in [cultural anthropology](#) in 2016, and joined the Social Work department at UC, researching non-parental caregiving from a cross-cultural perspective, with attention to both the theoretical and practical aspects of grandparental caregiving.

"My interest in non-parental caregiving was born out of my experience as a child protection worker in Canada, where I worked with many families who, for various reasons, were struggling to provide for the needs of their children.

"To have a non-parental caregiver provide childcare support was essential to those children's wellbeing, and could be the difference between a child needing to be removed from their parents' care or not."

Wanting to more deeply understand the effect of different caregivers on child wellbeing, Associate Professor Perry worked with Professor

Martin Daly at McMaster University in Canada to look into the role of grandparents in Europe.

"There's a general claim in family studies literature and textbooks that when grandparents get divorced, they become less involved with their grandchildren, at least in economically developed countries like New Zealand. But it never sat well with me. Divorced grandfathers, maybe so, but not grandmothers.

"I was a child protection worker in Canada for many years, and in my experience grandmothers who don't have a partner play a huge role in looking after the most vulnerable children."

Using the Survey of Health Aging and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) dataset, Associate Professor Perry and Professor Daly found patterns of caregiving by grandparents, based on their relationship to the grandchild or their own marital status.

"Knowing which types of grandparents are most willing to help—and in what circumstances they provide the most effective help—is important for supporting children when their parents are struggling to meet their needs."

Associate Professor Perry and Professor Daly have published two papers this year looking into the impact of grandparent care. In January they released research on A Cinderella effect in the childcare assistance provided by European grandparents, furthering these ideas in their March publication of Grandparent partnership status and its effects on caring for grandchildren in Europe.

"Our findings show that there is more nuance in grandparental caregiving than has been clearly understood before. Historically, a lot of research hasn't distinguished between grandmothers and

grandfathers—they've just been lumped together in the analyses—and it's no great surprise that their behavior after divorce is very different."

Across 20 European countries, there was a significant difference between how a child's maternal grandparents and paternal [grandparents](#) provided care, which Perry describes as the 'matrilateral bias.'" There was also a key divide between how grandmothers and grandfathers provided care, with grandfathers largely following their wife's care patterns.

This was highlighted in the finding that divorced grandmothers continued to provide care to their own children's children, whereas grandfathers tended to provide care to their new wife's grandchildren.

"What we've shown is that the claim divorced women drop out of their grandchildren's lives is not true! While this study used European data, I'm confident that similar results would be obtained in other countries, including New Zealand."

Another interesting result Associate Professor Perry found was that when financial status was taken into account, divorced grandmothers provided more care (on average) than married grandmothers.

"Single divorced grandmothers are providing care to their grandchildren, despite being in the least supported circumstances. This is not something that had been found before, and I think it's important to understanding the nuance of grandparental care."

"Knowing the importance of these intergenerational relationships can help us develop more effective assessment tools for non-parental [caregiving](#), as well as how best to support parents with the care available to them."

More information: Martin Daly et al. A Cinderella effect in the childcare assistance provided by European grandparents, *Evolution and Human Behavior* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2021.01.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2021.01.001)

Gretchen Perry et al. Grandparental partnership status and its effects on caring for grandchildren in Europe, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0248915](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0248915)

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