

Grandparents First

The newsletter for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

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Tell us what you think ...

To coincide with the campaigning work we are planning we need to find out what you think about Grandparents Plus and the Network, to reinforce the messages of *This is my family* and secure future funding. Oonagh, one of our volunteers, will be contacting a selection of Network members soon for a short phone interview, so please spare a few minutes to help with our research if you receive a call. Thanks!

..and let your MP know too!

As part of the campaign we are organising a lobbying day at parliament for Network members to meet their MP and help put the issue in the media spotlight. The event will take place in the autumn and we will be working closely with partner groups across the country to plan the day. More details will follow in our next newsletter, or call us on 020 8981 8001.

“This is my family”

Grandparents Plus is launching an exciting new campaign this summer to celebrate the many faces of ‘family’ in the UK today.

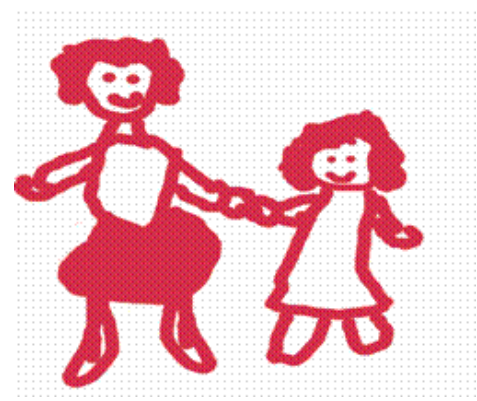
This is my family will give children and young people the chance to show who matters most to them and who they think of as their family – whether it be mum or dad, nan or granddad, aunt or uncle, brothers, sisters or cousins.

To start the campaign off in style we need your help. Please ask the children and young people you care for to get involved during their summer holidays by taking a photo of their family group. Just send it to us, with details of who everybody is and the child's first name and age, plus your contact details. A selection of photos will be used on our website to illustrate the campaign, and all entries will be put into a prize draw with three lucky winners receiving £25 worth of Argos vouchers.

Younger children need not miss out either – we'd love to see their drawings and paintings of their family, and again we will use a selection on our website and in future publications. There will be three prizes of £25 Disney Store vouchers for children aged under-5, 5 to 8 and 8 to 11, so remember to include age and contact details. Finally, if you'd like to share your family's story with us to go with the photos and drawings we'd love to hear that too.

“We are constantly trying to raise awareness of the extended family and how the vital role you play is undervalued,” said Grandparents Plus Chief Executive Sam Smethers. “This campaign aims to celebrate the diversity of families through the eyes of children and young people. Once we have launched the photos and drawings on our website we plan to use them to show visually why MPs need to recognise, respond and reward you.”

The closing date for photos and drawings will be on **Monday 31 August** and the winners will be announced in our November/December newsletter.



How you can get involved

Send your photos and drawings by post to:

This is my family
Grandparents Plus
18 Victoria Park Square
London E2 9PF

Or email to info@grandparentsplus.org.uk

News and resources

Strengthening Families

Grandparents from Tower Hamlets joined us at the Brady Centre in Whitechapel in May to find out more about local services.

Helen Jenner, Service Head for Early Years, Children and Learning heard from families struggling to raise their grandchildren and spoke about the successful *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* courses run by Tower Hamlets which welcome grandparents. There was also the opportunity to get advice on welfare benefits from the Grandparents Association and legal advice from leading solicitors Ridley & Hall. Finally, grandparents had the chance to unwind as they enjoyed a relaxing hand massage or Indian head massage – both of which were extremely popular.

“The day went well and I think it was really useful,” said co-ordinator Alison Blaxland. “It was a little disappointing that we were joined by fewer grandparents than we had hoped for, but it was good to meet some new faces who had not received any support before.”

Stars of the small screen

Calling all Supernans! Television’s Jo Frost is working on a new series for Channel 4, and is looking for any stressed grandparents or parents to contact her. Whatever the problem Jo and her team of experts want to help. Call 0207 424 7606 or email jofrost@outlineproductions.co.uk for more information.



* Sky Televison is planning a documentary looking at grandparenting in the UK today, showing and discussing a range of topics and situations including grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

The documentary aims to highlight the work, love, and support shown by grandparents in an ever changing world. If you would like to take part contact Lily Brazier at Epiphany Productions on 020 7631 0161 for details.

Filling the GAP

Grandparents as Parents (GAP) is a support group set up by Linda McEvilly when her daughter died in a car crash, leaving her to raise her young grandson. Eleven years later he is at university and Linda is campaigning to raise awareness for grandparent and kinship carers.

Although based in Blackpool, GAP supports grandparents from other areas through their discussion forum. For more information go to www.grandparentsasparents.org.uk or call 01253 691600 from 9.30 – 12.30 Tuesday, Wednesday or Friday.

The poor relation?

A new invisible generation of ‘gran-carers’ is facing financial hardship and deprivation says a new report from Grandparents Plus.

The Poor Relation? Grandparental care: where older people’s poverty and child poverty meet identifies the pressure many grandparents face as they juggle work and care. Funded by the Equality and Human Rights Commission, the report reveals that one in three (33%) grandparents aged under 55 are finding it hard to cope financially, while the number of single grandparents has doubled in the last decade, rising from 8% to 15%.

“The report challenges the cosy image we have of the retired grandparent with time to spare,” said Chief Executive Sam Smethers. “For many, particularly ‘gran-carers’ who are of working age, on low incomes and who provide most of the childcare, it’s a real struggle.”

The Poor Relation? is an interim report, with a final report due out in September which will focus on groups particularly at risk of poverty, including families where a grandparent or other family member cares for children when their parents are unable to, single parent families and families with disabled children and/or disabled parents.

For a copy of the report go to www.grandparentsplus.org.uk or call 020 9891 8001.



Useful helplines

The Grandparents’ Association 0845 434 9585
www.grandparents-association.org.uk

Family Rights Group 0808 801 1366 (10am–3.30pm)
www.frg.org.uk

A family's story

Anita and Mick were a young couple just starting out in life when they took on the care of Mick's young brother.

At the age of 24, life for Anita and Mick was typical of many young couples; they had just bought their first home together, Anita had a demanding career in advertising and Mick was building up his own business. But suddenly Mick's mum, Dot, was diagnosed with cancer, which meant that someone needed to care for her young son, Shaun, who was aged just 3½.

"In December 1996 Dot went into hospital, and asked if we would care for Shaun," remembers Anita. "Naturally we said yes – he was in nursery so we carried on working, caring for him and visiting Dot daily. I was literally getting him to bed, reading him his *Thomas the Tank Engine* story then doing all the other stuff, like clearing up. We just muddled through – it was like long-term babysitting."



In January 1997 Dot's illness was classed as terminal, and Mick met with the hospital social workers and confirmed he and Anita would care for Shaun. Dot came home, and social services sent a carer to look after her while Anita and Mick were at work. "As we were paying for a nursery place we asked if she was there to look after Shaun as well," says Anita. "She just said 'I'm not here for Shaun', so we paid for the nursery – we were both working, so couldn't get help with the fees, although social services told Mick he would be better off on the dole – that way they could assist more financially."

In May 1997 Dot died. Although the bereavement counselling team was involved it was hard for Anita and Mick to cope with their own grief. "Dot died in the night and I was heartbroken," says Anita. "Then we just had to get on with things. We had to tell Shaun his mum had died – he knew mummy wasn't well and was in bed all the time – so he kissed her and said goodbye."

Anita took 10 days compassionate leave from work and asked to cut back on hours, or work from home. "My employers weren't very sympathetic, so I had to leave. I had been earning more than Mick, but I gave up my career to be a proper mum while Mick concentrated on building up his business."

In the summer of 1997 social services contacted the family to see if everything was ok, and said they'd be in touch again soon. That was the last the family heard from them. It wasn't until 2004 that Anita found out by accident that she was a 'kinship carer', and should have been getting support.

"I wrote to Margaret Hodge MP, the Children's Minister at the time, and got advice from the Family Rights Group," she says. "Eventually we were means tested, and in 2006 were awarded £2,000 a year until Shaun is 16." But as Shaun's 16th birthday approaches he hopes to do his A Levels, so the family will need to be means tested again to see if the payments can continue.

Shaun has also needed support with health problems. Born at 26 weeks when Dot was 43, his knees were back to front and had to be manipulated into place, and he had other joint problems. As he grew older both knees needed to be reconstructed as they dislocated on a daily basis. "The hospitals always assume I'm his mum, which is frustrating," says Anita. "They ask me what happened at his birth – Shaun just laughs about it now, and says 'haven't you read the notes?'."

Anita and Mick have two daughters of their own, 10-year-old Eleanor and Grace, now three, who think of Shaun as their big brother. "Eleanor knows he's really her uncle now she's older and thinks it's quite cool," says Anita. But life is difficult bringing up three children – the family moved into Dot's house to keep Shaun in his familiar environment, taking on a large mortgage to rebuild and renovate it which they wouldn't have had otherwise.

"When Shaun was little, as a family we were fine," says Anita. "But it gets harder now he's a teenager. Mick does lots of things with him, but really he just wants to be his big brother, not his dad. It's hard being a parent at the same time."

Keeping it in the family

Building on the success of camps for siblings overseas, an exciting scheme is bringing the idea of holidays for siblings separated by care to the UK.

For many people, the relationship with their siblings is both the longest and most rewarding of their lives. Siblings Together, a not-for-profit organisation, promotes positive contact between siblings separated by care through holiday camps, building foundations for



continued contact and educating a generation of social workers about the importance of sibling family contact.

“Siblings Together is an exciting and innovative programme, created specifically for young people in care, kinship and adoption,” says manager Delma Hughes. “We provide a holiday camp experience, organised and facilitated by trained staff and volunteers, where young people can begin to build upon, value and maintain essential lifelong relationships with their brothers and sisters.

“When children are unable to live together it's vital they have the opportunity to strengthen essential bonds with one another,” says Delma. “We offer an opportunity for siblings to share positive experiences together, to nurture and re-build important relationships after sometimes having grown apart for various reasons, sometimes beyond their control.”

A trained art and photo therapist who grew up in care herself, Delma helps the children make albums and scrapbooks to take away, to keep and share forever.

Offering activities such as archery and swimming as well as art and crafts, the emphasis of the camp is on having fun together. The cost of the camp is £300 per week, with Siblings Together funding the other half of the costs. Aware that this cost would put the camps out of reach for many, Delma is working hard to find funding and is looking at plans to develop weekend camps.

Research for the camp draws on the experience of older care leavers and social workers, plus camps overseas including those run by Unicef for siblings in the Ukraine. “Early educational camps held in Aberdeen in the 1940s gave children in homes the only chance to meet their siblings, and it was noted that the children were more settled when they knew how their siblings were,” says Delma. “We do all we can to keep it small and manageable, but most of all fun!”

The next camp will take place in Devon from 26 August to 1 September, with plans for more to be held in October and March depending on funding. For more information visit the website at www.siblingsitogether.co.uk or call 020 7231 6925.

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