

Call of (grandparent) duty

It takes a village to raise a child, as the proverb goes, and increasingly grandparents are answering the call. If you are embarking on a second caring act, here's how to navigate the challenges – and rewards.

Words **RACHEL SMITH** Photography **NICK CUBBIN**

SHARING CUDDLES, STORIES, naptime and other aspects of your grandchild's daily life can be a truly rewarding part of being a grandparent. It's a co-caring role you may have greatly looked forward to, if work's not a big priority and you have more time on your hands.

And we know from the Australian Seniors Grandparents report that around 71% of grandparents actively support their families in this way – be it through care for the grandkids, finances, or both. It's a caring role that's on the rise in Australia, but with it may come differing expectations, boundaries and worries for your own retirement, experts say.

"There's a lot more financial pressure on young families," says psychotherapist Cherie Marriott from The Good Relationship Practice. "Parents are scrambling, looking around for who can look after the children and there are a lot more grandparents being called on."

On the plus side, taking on such a role can give you a front-row seat into your grandchildren's lives, building deep attachment and providing them with a sense of

security and belonging, says Rachel Tomlinson, registered psychologist and founder of Toward Wellbeing. "Plus, you can feel useful, needed and connected – a protective mechanism as we get older. The challenge many grandparents face is how consuming the role can become."

EMOTIONAL BURDEN

According to the Grandparents report, 52% of over 50s provide hands-on care for their grandchildren. And as an ongoing arrangement, that can be emotionally tough, says Cherie.

"A lot of grandparents might still be working part-time themselves, and adding in extra days of caring for grandkids can feel like a big load, even though they're aware that if they say no, it can have big implications for the family. Feelings can be mixed and resentment often builds if you feel like your help is expected or not fully appreciated."

Rachel agrees that expectations need to be clearly set by both parties, or it can potentially strain relationships. "If you frame these conversations as being on the same page or team, it helps keep the discussion respectful and meaningful," she adds.



Susanne Gervay
shares her home
with granddaughter
Violet Rose.
Read their story
from page 50.



These scripts can be a good start:

- “I want to be involved, I just want to make sure what I offer is sustainable long-term.”
- “I’m happy to help, I just want to make sure before I commit that we’re both really clear on what’s expected.”
- “I’d like us to have a check in and make sure everything is working, rather than assuming everything is ok.”

MONEY TALKS

If you’re struggling to pay the bills or worried about your retirement savings and how caring for grandkids could impact that, you’re not alone. The survey shows one in two grandparents who provide financial support admit to dipping into their own savings or super to do so, and just over one in three say they felt torn between supporting their adult kids financially, and protecting their own retirement savings.

“You’re in a different life stage to your adult child. You’re in a stage of conservation and holding onto your finances, while younger generations are in an accumulation stage, and may find it hard to understand why you worry about money so much,” explains Cherie.

If it would help you to get paid as a co-carer, raise it gently with your adult child, adds Rachel. “You could say something like, ‘I learnt that there are some supports available for grandparents that help with regular care for their grandkids. That might ease pressure for all of us and could help to make this something more long-term or sustainable. Would you be open to looking into this together?’ That frames the conversation as problem-solving rather than being focused on the actual money.”

SETTING BOUNDARIES

Taking on a co-caring role for grandkids can raise different issues – even before the baby’s born! Here’s how to deal with some common scenarios.

- **Have conversations early (before babies arrive):** “Be realistic about what

you can do that’s sustainable,” says Cherie. “Lots of issues in families happen because grandparents get excited about the new arrival, overpromise and give the impression they’ll be on tap in terms of care. Instead, you need to be really upfront about what you can do – like one day a week.”

- **Don’t clash over parenting styles:** “Respecting your adult child’s parenting style doesn’t have to mean you agree with everything but you should follow their lead while the child or children are in your care,” says Rachel. “A good rule of thumb is to pre-negotiate things like discipline, sleep approaches, screen time, food rules and how to manage safety or risks.”

- **Care for grandchildren at their own home:** “If you set the expectation that you’ll come to your adult child’s home, it can make it easier on you as the children can be more settled and have their toys around,” says Cherie. “It also ‘brackets’ that time for you – it’s your caring time with the grandkids, and after that you step out of that and back into your own life.”

- **Avoid comparisons with other grandparents:** “Creating as much consistency across households only creates a sense of safety and security for your grandchild,” says Rachel. “If tensions do arise, it can help to shift the focus from comparison to what your grandchild needs, rather than who does it better.”

Caring for small children is a lot harder when you’re older, but a lot of grandparents may come from a generation that just ‘got on with it’, says Rachel. “It’s worth getting help if the load feels too heavy. Do it early, as it stops things from reaching breaking point.”

Cherie agrees. “Watch your feelings, and if you’re finding you’re sad or frustrated or a bit less optimistic, and those feelings are hanging around, that can be a sign of burnout or that you’re doing too much and it’s worth renegotiating.” ●



I went on the difficult journey with my daughter to have her baby – she has kidney disease and IVF and using a surrogate in America were her only choices, but she wanted a baby so much, and couldn’t do it alone. Seeing my daughter so happy with her baby, and being there for



CASE STUDY

"It's a full and ultimately beautiful life"

Author Susanne Gervay, 70, shares her Sydney home with her daughter Tory and granddaughter Violet Rose, four, who was born via a surrogate.

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my beautiful granddaughter has been sheer joy for me.

I'm a children's author and work from home, and Tory works part-time from home too. There's not a lot of conflict. We split up the work pretty well. I'm the one who cooks, Tory buys the groceries. Violet Rose wants

me to put her into the bath, but then it's her mother's turn. I take her to preschool in the morning and Tory does pick-up. I'm involved in playdates or occasions when Tory might need an extra hand. It's all about accommodating each other.

I do think if you find

yourself in a caring role, it's good to keep walking, keep fit. I'm not as young as I used to be and I have to go to the gym, otherwise I'm not fit enough to do it. I also think, take care of your mental health; have time out, meet your friends. That's important.

We all live together now in my terrace, which isn't a huge house, but it has enough space for three generations of women! It's been a mix-master of emotions, energy and lack of energy, but it works and it's a full and ultimately beautiful life."