

Grandparents' Caring for Grandchildren in Contemporary Korean Society

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Being a grandparent is a new experience that brings great changes to family relationships and daily life. It is natural for new grandparents to feel complicated feelings such as joy, excitement, and burden simultaneously. According to recent statistics reported by various institutions, the proportion of grandparents who care for their grandchildren while their adult children work seems to account for 20–40% of households with infants and preschool children within the Korean social context (Lee, Kwon, & Kim, 2015; Shin, Yoo, Kim, & Yoon, 2013; Yoo, Lee, & Hong, 2015). However, little research has been conducted on this topic.

To fully understand the lives and the experiences of grandparents as substitute caregivers in our society, I think that it might be necessary to consider at least three aspects: grandparents' developmental characteristics, family relationships such as parent–child relationships, and social and economic environments.

First, most people become grandparents in their middle-to-old-age years. In general, the parents of adult children might become grandparents in their 40s and 50s if they or their children married early, or in their 60s and 70s if they or their children married later. People in their 40s and 50s are more likely to nurture their children who are not yet self-reliant while adapting themselves to physical and

social changes by age (Lemme, 2002). Middle age can be the golden age of life, but concepts of 'midlife crisis' and the 'sandwich generation' (frequently used in the media) refer to the midlife stress caused by physical, financial, and social problems and personal maladjustment in a rapidly changing environment (Conway, 1994; Kruger, 1994). In addition, many grandparents in their 60s and 70s worry about whether they will be able to spend the rest of their lives without physical illness and economic difficulties because the decline of body strength and cognitive ability accelerates during this time (Lemme, 2002). Therefore, the quality and the motivation of grandparents' caring for grandchildren could vary by their developmental tasks and characteristics.

Second, the relationship between grandparents and their adult children can affect the development of grandchildren directly and indirectly. Grandparents who have established positive relationships with their adult children are more likely to have stable and positive interactions with their grandchildren (Mueller & Elder, 2003); further, adult children who are securely attached with their parents are more likely to establish positive and stable interactions with their children (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004; Bretherton, 1990). Grandparents' parenting behaviors appear to play a critical role in

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developing parenting attitudes and value in their adult children.

Finally, it is important to understand the social systems and cultural characteristics of Korean society. Despite contemporary Korean culture being influenced by characteristics of individualist cultures, the high proportion of grandparents' caring for their grandchildren seems to indicate that Korea is still a collectivist culture. In addition, under the circumstances in which reliable childcare systems for dual-income couples are not yet fully established, adult children might choose to utilize their parents or close family members as substitute caregivers (Yoo et al., 2015). Even though raising a grandchild is quite stressful, many grandparents are willing to give up comfortable aging and to assume responsibility of their grandchildren for their adult children.

In conclusion, grandparents' caring for grandchildren might result from the dynamic interactions of various developmental, interpersonal, and socioeconomic factors. You might feel more engaged and interested if you read the research on grandparents published in this issue of the Korean Journal of Child Studies with this perspective.

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Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this editorial was reported.

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