

WHO'S BRINGING UP BABY?

Childcare costs in Britain are some of the highest in the world. So when your daughter has kids, will you be expected to be the unpaid childminder? And if so, how would you feel about it? Penny Rich investigates a new trend

The change came slowly, so subtly that nobody has quite noticed it happening, or the impact it has had on our families... I'm talking about the millions of women across the country who rely on their parents to look after their children while they're out at work - and the grandparents who are bringing up baby on a daily basis.

Most of us know at least one mother who drops her child off at grandma's before she heads for work, or one grandparent who doubles up as a childminder. On the surface, the solution makes perfect sense - why not leave your child in the hands of someone who truly loves them, especially since grandparents now are generally fitter and younger (the average age to become one is 49). As a result of falling birth rates and increased longevity, they're also more abundant than ever before, and experts are predicting a 25% increase in the number of grandparents in the UK over the next eight years.

There's no doubt that the country needs grandparents to help make ends meet. UK childcare costs are the highest in Europe, single-parent homes are on the increase and - according to one study - two-thirds of grandparents are stepping in to fill the breach. Some seven million people care for

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their grandchildren for more than 13 hours a week, saving UK families more than £33 billion a year in childcare costs. And this trend isn't unique to Britain – the Spanish call them *superabuelas* (or supergrans) and acknowledge that they hold the country's struggling economy together. While across the Atlantic, the US Census Bureau recently announced that 76% of American grandparents care for their grandchildren on a regular basis.

It looks as if we over-45s are the unsung heroes of the 21st century, and there are huge benefits: spending time with grandchildren keeps us young, strengthens family ties and creates a very special lifelong bond. Parenting second time around has bonuses, since we've learned that many of the things that kept us awake at night with our own children aren't that important. But this new role comes with a sting in the tail: doses of guilt ('we want to help, but we want a life'), possible discord ('our child-rearing experiences versus what our grown-up children want') and facing up to the fact that no matter how young we look, feel and act, there are limitations ('toddlers are exhausting when you're 25; try them at 50!').

This newly evolving, intergenerational relationship can be a minefield too. For the past four years, 63-year-old Lorna Edwards has left her husband in Suffolk at 9am every Monday morning and driven to London to look after her eldest daughter's six- and three-year-old. The next day she takes care of her youngest daughter's five- and three-year-old, then drives all the way home.

'When I retired, I didn't want a stranger caring for my grandchildren,' Lorna explains, 'but the thing that's hard is the balance. I want to be "Grandma", I want to be a mother, but I also want to be "me" with my husband. At first, both daughters thought I was at their beck and call, but eventually I learned to say no.

That is extraordinarily hard, because you want to show your daughters that you can still do this. But you do get tired, and that's something you have to admit and accept, which is a horrible thing to do. I used to feel taken for granted when they ran late at work, and I would be there waiting, absolutely at the end of my energy. Eventually I had to say: "You have to let me know if you're going to be late – as you would with a paid childminder". To make it work, you have to step back from being family.'

And for Lorna, there were a few new parenting experiences to learn. 'I didn't know how annoying boys can be when they are overtired – I'd only had girls! They bounce, they fiddle and they take risks. They have so much physical energy. But

when you get that love, you get that grin when something special happens which you share with a grandchild. That, to me, makes it all worthwhile'.

So much has changed in childcare that, even if you were a great mother yourself 20 years ago, you can be totally at a loss. I realised this while babysitting locally for a new generation of young mums: one insisted her baby's bottom was only cleaned with Evian water and cotton-wool balls (a real challenge when faced

with a filthy nappy). Another let her baby feed himself from five months, under the baby-led weaning guidelines of expert Gill Rapley (cue, toothlessly gummed food covering the entire room). I had to wake one toddler after exactly 15 minutes' nap, and swaddle a 12-monther like an Egyptian mummy (both mums follow the precise routines of author Gina Ford). And I can't tell you how many 'tasty and nutritious' Annabel Karmel children's meals I've cooked – including a recipe for Maple Glazed Chicken that required 3tbsp maple syrup and 5tbsp sweet tomato ketchup (sugar was banned in my day).

With endless information available from books and websites such as Mumsnet, it's no wonder mums have very fixed ideas about childcare. So much has changed in childcare that a 'good telling off' now means you lower your voice and bend down to the child's level to 'explain' – shouting is strictly forbidden. But when family looks after offspring,



7 million grandparents babysit for more than 13 hours each week

rather than a paid employee, these fixed regimes blur the boundaries of who knows best.

Verity Gill is co-founder with her mother of Grannynet*, a website which supports grandparents looking after grandchildren and offers some ground rules. She says these are vital to make things run smoothly, and to this end, they have created the

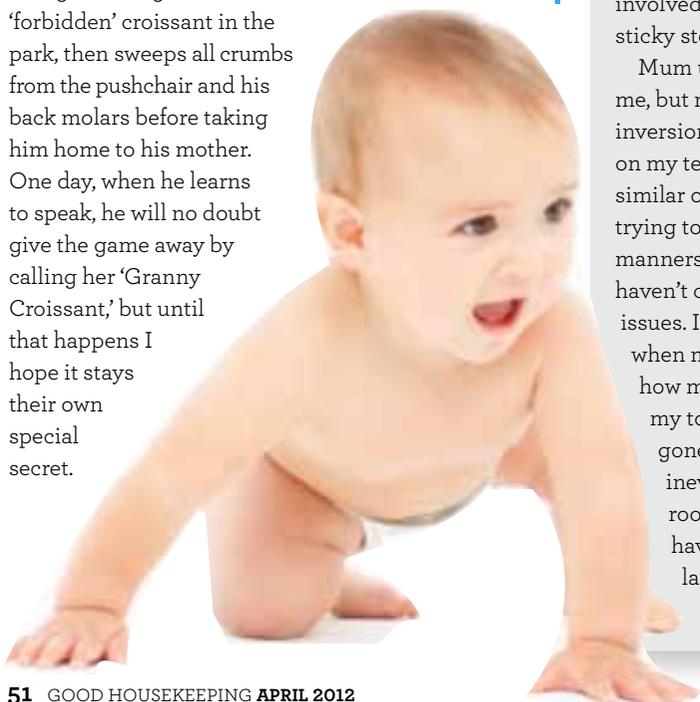
Grannynet Ground Rules, a fantastic, informal document to download from their website.

'With family, it's much more personal than with a nanny or other childcare options,' she says. 'When it is your mother or mother-in-law suggesting things, you feel more sensitive. The Ground Rules just opens up discussions, like a very informal

agreement, and it stops potential problems occurring.'

She has also recently launched a series of courses to help grandmothers brush up their skills. 'It is important for grandparents to keep up to date with significant changes in childcare,' Verity says. 'Cot death guidelines mean putting a baby to sleep is completely different now, and there are so many new ideas on feeding, first aid and discipline. Also, health and safety laws have made huge changes to baby equipment. Although we certainly don't tell them what they should do, or that anything they do is wrong.'

Amid all the rights and wrongs though, never lose sight of the grandparent's special relationship, one of fun, indulgence and treats. I know a grandmother who gives her grandson a 'forbidden' croissant in the park, then sweeps all crumbs from the pushchair and his back molars before taking him home to his mother. One day, when he learns to speak, he will no doubt give the game away by calling her 'Granny Croissant,' but until that happens I hope it stays their own special secret.



'Mum's in charge but on my terms'

One working mum who relies on grandparent-power is Good Housekeeping's Celebrity Editor, Becky Howard. She tells us how it works for them

Early each Thursday morning, my mum lets herself into my house, and we all sit down to breakfast together - she and myself, my husband and our two children, a son aged four and a daughter aged one. While my son makes daft jokes trying to impress his 'Gaga', and my toddler attempts to throw her porridge on the floor, I put my shoes and coat on, tell mum what's for lunch and tea, and leave to catch the Tube into the GH offices. Because, for that day each week, my Mum is in sole charge of my kids.

My childcare arrangements have always involved my mum. I have a nanny who looks after them two days a week, but Mum's help is something I couldn't have done without. And the new dynamic that it's brought to our relationship has involved negotiating some pretty sticky steps for us both.

Mum used to be in charge of me, but now we're in an unusual inversion where she's in charge but on my terms. Luckily, we share a similar outlook in raising kids, trying to balance discipline, manners and silly fun, so we haven't clashed over the serious issues. It's more those occasions when my son gleefully tells me how many 'treats' he's eaten, that my toddler's nap times have gone out the window, and the inevitable bombsite living room that I return to, when I have to take a deep breath, laugh, and remember what a huge favour my mum is

doing for me. Because my mum's help is financially essential.

Living in London, childcare costs are exorbitant. If I had to pay for the three full days I work, it would almost wipe out my earnings. Of the many working mums I know, all have help from a grandparent, whether for a full day, school pickup or even weekly overnight stays. This isn't because we're selfish, farming out our kids to susceptible baby-boomers. We all need (and want) to work, and trying to stay afloat financially with pre-school age children means we look to our family, who can offer

'Mum and I both try to balance discipline, manners and silly fun'

wonderful love and care for our kids - and yes, for free.

I do feel guilt about my mum getting up so early, and when she's exhausted. But she is firm about her boundaries, and I know she'd never do it if she felt she wasn't up to it. And overall, it's been a huge boon. My mum gets to see her grandchildren regularly, and has an incredible bond with them both. And I've learned that many of those parenting niggles we fret about aren't important. What is important, is they have a loving grandma taking care of them, and will have irreplaceable memories for the future. □