



Back on the (grand)mommy track

UVic social workers study the surge in “Grannycare”

By **Patty Pitts**

For years, the relieved cry of loving but exhausted grandmothers after a day or afternoon spent with grandchildren has been, “I love them, but it’s great to be able to give them back.” But what about those grandmothers who don’t hand their grandchildren over to their parents at the end of the day — those who, instead, take their grandchildren home as they unexpectedly find themselves on the “mommy track” again later in life?

A group of UVic social work researchers wants to know about the phenomenon they call “intergenerational child rearing” and what care agencies refer to as “custodial grandparenting.” Whatever you call it, it’s an increasing trend among a group of women that is all-but-invisible to census takers, policy analysts and child welfare agencies.

“We used to ask parents how many kids they have. Now we’re asking kids how many parents they have,” says Pat MacKenzie, principal investigator for the three-year project, which is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

Like many of her colleagues, MacKenzie became aware of the phenomenon of grandmothers raising grandchildren first-hand when members of her own extended family became involved in helping to raise their grandchildren.

“It’s one of those things that when you start studying it you notice it’s everywhere,” says fellow researcher Barb Whittington. “Watching my friends become grandparents twigged my interest. Then I started having students say they couldn’t continue classes because they had to help care for their grandchildren, after they’d saved up the money to come back to university in their fifties. Their whole lives shifted.”

Team member and school of social work director Leslie Brown found grandparents were always among the caregivers in the Aboriginal communities she worked with, “but they weren’t always officially recognized as such by the government. Curiosity brought me to this project.” She also has a personal interest. At one point, one of her own grandchildren was removed from her daughter’s custody. Brown and the child’s two other



Left to right, standing: Ployer, Whittington, MacKenzie, Brown; seated: Callahan and her grand-daughter.

grandmothers intervened, with one grandmother gaining custody while the others provided support and acted as a liaison with provincial child care authorities. “We became a grandmother ‘system,’” she recalls.

Marilyn Callahan discovered that the teen moms that she studied relied on the children’s grandmothers for care. “Obviously, they were forming a child welfare system that no one noticed. It seemed like a rigorous kind of life they were leading.”

Gayle Ployer, the project’s research co-

ordinator, was attracted by the fact that the intergenerational care giving was provided primarily by women. Like the other researchers, she also has a personal interest in the study.

“I saw my brother gain joint custody of his children and the only way he could fulfill his duties was because of the help of my mother and grandmother in caring for his kids.”

The researchers will start collecting data this fall and are in the midst of identifying potential study participants and project advisory group members.

facts from the **EDGE**

- If you are a grandmother caring for your grandchild and are interested in participating in this research project — or simply sharing your story — contact project research manager Gayle Ployer at (250) 472-4129, or gployer@uvic.ca

- The UVic Family Centre provides health and social support to families living on or off campus. It provides practicum placements to students from the schools of social work, child and youth care, and nursing. Practicum students are central to the Centre — they engage in community development activities, promoting a sense of place for families.

- The Family Centre serves a very diverse group of people. “It’s the most dynamic place I’ve ever worked,” says Whittington. “There are families from more than 20 countries, whose members are studying and contributing to the campus community. Volunteers are crucial to the heartbeat of the Centre. We really need people who are fluent in languages of the Pacific Rim to help make the connections with international student families far from home and far from family.”

sharpen your knowLEDGE

- For more information about the Grandmothers Caring for Grandchildren research project, visit its Web site:

web.uvic.ca/socw/grandmoms/

- The UVic Family Centre Web site contains a wealth of information useful to all families, including a page of information about a wide variety of community resources for families.

web.uvic.ca/family-centre/

- Web sites with information resources for grandparents raising grandchildren:

www.grandsplace.com/

[www.aarp.org/confacts/programs/](http://www.aarp.org/confacts/programs/grandraising.html)

[grandraising.html](http://www.grandraising.html)

www.grandparentagain.com/

Three-generation child care at UVic

“People who are bravely juggling their education with the job of parent and sometimes additional employment have taken on a lot,” says Prof. Barb Whittington, faculty coordinator with the UVic Family Centre. The Centre, located in the David and Dorothy Lam Family Student Housing Complex, provides health and social support to UVic families living on or off campus.

“There are a number of families at the Family Centre that have three-generation

families caring for kids, either part time or full time,” says Whittington. “And there are many more that miss that opportunity and support big time. I can think of a single-parent mom whose mom lives with them whenever she can to help, because her daughter is both working and studying full time.”

“We also have a resident grandma at the Family Centre on a volunteer basis and she is a real favourite with everyone.”