

## Sweep 1 – Topic Research Findings

### Sources of formal and informal support for parents of young children

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important new longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old, the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005. This document is one of a series that summarise key findings from the first sweep of the survey.

#### Methods

GUS is based on a cohort or longitudinal design involving the recruitment of a 'panel' of children (and their families) who will be revisited on a number of occasions over an extended period of time. Members of the panel were identified in the first instance from Child Benefit records. For the first year of the study, interviewers sought to contact the 'main carer' of the child named in the Child Benefit records. In virtually all cases (99%), this proved to be the child's natural mother. The interview covered a wide range of topics including pregnancy, birth and early parenting, formal and informal sources of support for parents, childcare, child health and development and parental health.

This report looks at the potential sources of support that parents of young children might draw on for help with parenting and childcare or for information and advice about child-related issues. Mapping parental perceptions of the range of sources of support available to them contributes to the knowledge base available to those developing and assessing policies and services designed to support parenting. Specific attention is paid to parents' informal sources of support including, in particular, the child's grandparents. Data detailing sources of advice on issues of child health and behaviour, and attendance at mother and toddler/baby groups and parenting classes are also presented.

### Main Findings

- Virtually all the children in the study had at least one living grandparent and over half in both cohorts had at least four - indeed, 4% had five or more grandparents, indicating the growing significance of 'blended families'. Around 1 in 20 (5%) had a grandparent actually resident in the household. This figure was much higher among lone parent households (18%) and households where the mother was aged under 20 at the time of the child's birth (26%).
- Most children had some contact with *all* of their grandparents and contact with grandparents was a generally frequent occurrence for the majority of children. Children in couple families, those with older mothers, those living in less deprived areas and those in remote rural areas were more likely to have some contact with *all* of their grandparents. However, children in lone parent families, those with younger mothers and those living in more deprived areas saw their grandparents more often.

- Grandparents helped out in a variety of ways. Providing daytime childcare and buying things for the child were the two most common forms of support provided. Respondents from lone parent families, first-time mothers and younger mothers reported higher levels of support from the child's grandparents.
- Arranging last minute childcare was easy for most parents. However, it was significantly easier for younger mothers, first-time mothers and those living in areas of higher deprivation to arrange last minute childcare suggesting that informal support is more important than household finances in relation to this issue. The child's grandparents were the most commonly reported source of this type of care.
- Most parents had sought some form of help or information on their child's health in the last year. GPs and health visitors were the most common sources used and were used universally. Lone parents and young mothers were less likely to have used other formal resources, such as books or telephone helplines and were more likely instead to seek advice from informal sources particularly their own parents
- Around two-fifths of respondents had attended a mother and child group in the last year. Young mothers and lone parents were less likely to have done so and cited feelings of awkwardness and shyness as key inhibitors.

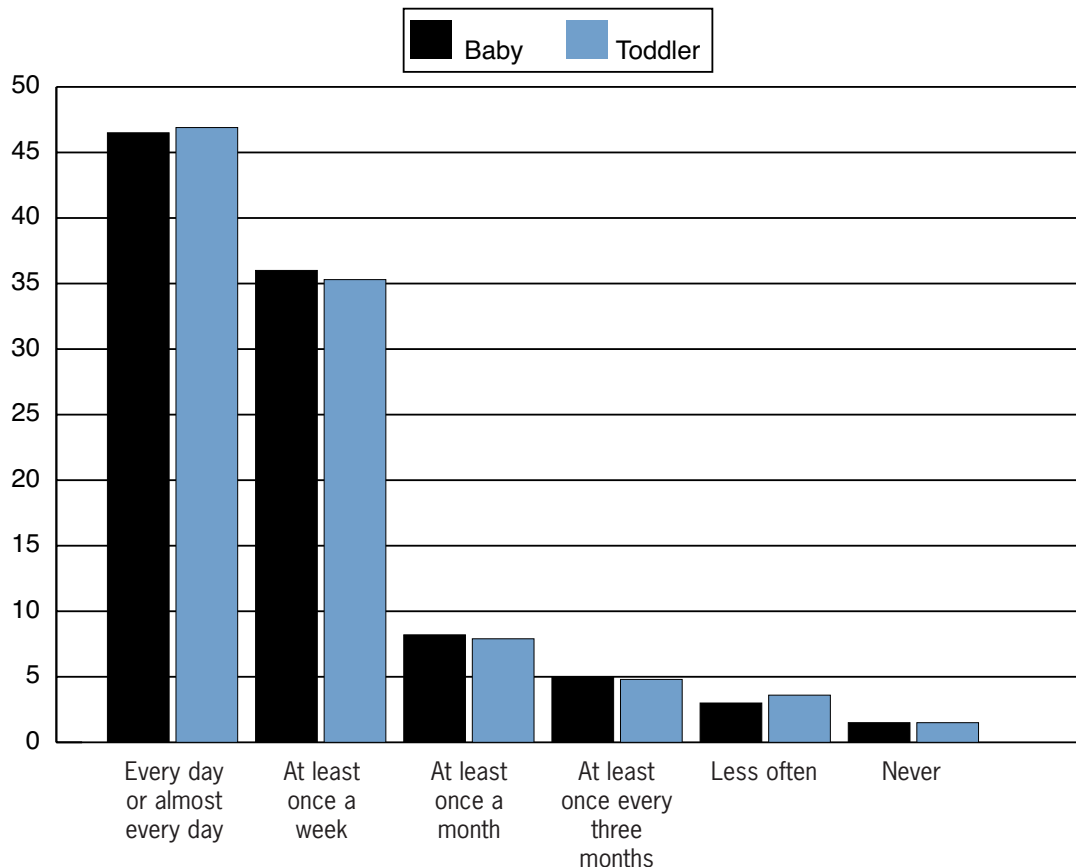
- Whilst only a small proportion (less than 5%) of respondents had attended a parenting class in the last year, virtually all of those who did so found it to be useful.

## Involvement of and support from the child's grandparents

Almost all of the children in both samples had at least one grandparent who was still alive and over half of children in both cohorts had four or more grandparents alive. The fact that 4% of children had five or more grandparents alive at the time of interview gives some indication of the complexity of family structures in Scotland today and the increase in 'blended families'. Around 5% of children had a grandparent living in the household. This was more common for young and/or single parents.

Most respondents in both cohorts (72% of babies' parents, 69% of toddlers' parents) said they were in contact with *all* of the child's grandparents with the majority of the remainder in regular contact with at least some of them. Less than 2% of parents did not have regular contact with any of the child's grandparents. The majority of children in both cohorts (85%) also had a grandparent living locally, that is within 20-30 minutes drive of the child's home.

**Figure 1 Reported frequency that children saw their grandparents by sample type**



Contact with grandparents was a relatively frequent occurrence for most of the children in the sample. A large proportion of children saw their grandparents on a daily or almost daily basis with around four out of five seeing them at least once a week or more often.

Lone parents, younger mothers and families living in more deprived areas were less likely to have regular contact with *all* of the child's grandparents than were parents in couple families, but tended to have more frequent contact with those grandparents they were in touch with. For example, just under half of lone parents (49%) said they were in regular contact with all of the child's grandparents compared with a little over three-quarters (77%) of parents in couple families.

To gauge the extent and type of support offered to parents by the child's grandparents, respondents were asked how often the child's grandparents babysat, had the child to stay overnight, took the child out, bought toys or clothes for the child, helped out around the house and helped out financially. Providing childcare during the day and buying toys, clothes or equipment for the child were the two most common activities reported by respondents. In all, around 90% of babies' parents and 87% of toddlers' parents said that the child's grandparents bought things for the child at all with around one quarter, for babies, and one fifth, for toddlers, doing so on at least a weekly basis. Around four out of five (80%) parents in both cohorts said that the child's grandparents looked after the child for an hour or more during the day at least occasionally, including one-fifth where this was a daily or almost daily occurrence.

To allow a broader examination of how the level of support from grandparents varied across the sample, each item was converted into a scale<sup>1</sup> and all items added together to give an overall index of 'grandparental support'. A higher score on the index indicated a higher level of support from grandparents. Overall, the analysis indicates that grandparents were involved more in the lives of children from lone parent families, children with younger mothers and those who were first born. Lone parents scored an average of 16 on the grandparental support scale compared with an average score of 12 for couple families; mothers who were aged under 20 years scored an average of 19.1 compared with 11.2 for mothers in their thirties; and first-time mothers scored an average of 14.5 compared with a mean score of 11.2 for mothers who already had children.

<sup>1</sup> Every day or almost every day = 5, At least once a week = 4, At least once a month = 3, At least once every three months = 2, Less often than once every three months = 1, Never = 0. Scores on the scale ranged from a potential minimum of zero to a potential maximum of 35.

## Wider sources of informal support

To further explore the extent and nature of sources of informal support available to parents, respondents were asked a range of questions about the ease with which they could arrange for someone to look after the sample child at short notice.

Over three-quarters of parents in both cohorts said they would find it very or fairly easy to find someone to look after their child for a few hours during the day. Slightly less (60% in both cohorts) said it would be fairly or very easy to arrange for someone to look after their child for a whole day, with similar proportions (58% in both cohorts) finding it easy to leave the child with someone overnight. Making these arrangements was, on the whole, less problematic for first-time mothers, younger mothers, white mothers and those living in more deprived areas.

Grandparents, and in particular the maternal grandparents, were by far the main source of informal support in terms of looking after the sample child. Around 70% of respondents in both cohorts said that the child's grandparents would most likely be their first port of call when they needed help looking after the sample child. Friends or neighbours of the respondent, and parents' siblings were the next most common sources of informal support in this context.

## Knowledge of key government supported initiatives aimed at parents and families

Knowledge and awareness amongst parents of key blanket schemes for children and families such as Child Trust Funds, NHS24 and Working Families' Tax Credit was particularly high as may be expected. However, the awareness of other nationally accessible but more focused schemes such as Childcare Link and Parentline Scotland was extremely low.

## Sources of help, information and advice on child's health and behaviour

All parents were asked about the sources of help, information and advice they had used in the last year when they had concerns over the sample child's health. Parents of children in the toddler sample were also asked about any sources of information and advice in relation to their child's behaviour which they had used.

Almost all parents in both samples (89% overall) said they had consulted at least one person or service for information or advice about the cohort child's health. Parents living in less deprived areas were more likely to have sought information and to have sought it from a greater number of sources than respondents who lived in more deprived areas.

Local doctors were by far the most popular source of information and advice about the sample child's health. Health visitors were also popular sources of advice particularly, as might be expected, for parents in the baby cohort. The respondent's own parents (the child's grandparents) and other family or friends with children were the two most common informal sources of advice on child health. Key differences existed in the range of sources used by different sets of parents. For example, lone parents and younger mothers were less likely than parents in couple families and older mothers to have used books or leaflets, the internet, health visitors (particularly in the baby cohort) and telephone helplines. Instead, lone parents and younger mothers were more likely to draw on their own parents for advice.

Toddlers' parents were much less likely to have had a concern about their child's behaviour than about their child's health. Half of parents in the toddler sample reported that they had had no concerns over their child's behaviour in the last year. Most of those who did have a concern used only one or two sources of information or advice. Informal sources of support featured more prominently in this instance. The respondent's own parents were the most commonly cited source of help for this matter, used by around one-quarter of parents in the toddler cohort. Other friends or family with children were also a popular source of information.

## Attendance at groups and classes for parents and children

Around 40% of parents in both samples said they had attended a parent and baby or parent and toddler group in the last year. In both cohorts, mothers from couple families and older mothers were more likely than lone and younger mothers to say they had attended a group in the last year. Parents living in areas classed as small, remote towns or remote rural were almost twice as likely as those living in urban areas to say they had attended a group in the last year.

The dominant reason for not attending given by parents in both cohorts was a lack of time. However, the pattern of reasons varied by respondent, family and household characteristics. Feeling awkward and shy about attending such a group, along with a general dislike of groups were key reasons given for non-attendance amongst lone parents, younger and first-time mothers. In addition, mothers in the two youngest age groups were significantly more likely to say that nobody had told them or they had no information about any such groups.

Only a very small proportion of parents in each cohort said they had attended a parenting class or group in the last year – 4% of babies' parents and 3% of toddlers parents. But almost all those who had attended reported that they found it to be very (52%) or fairly useful (41%).

## Conclusion

These data demonstrate the importance of grandparents in most children's lives and confirms that the majority of parents receive some support for their parenting from their own parent or parents. The construction of an index of grandparental support shows that young lone mothers receive the highest levels of support, suggesting that children in families with young lone mothers where there is no involved grandparent experience a particularly serious deficit.

As research on service use has demonstrated, knowledge of services, often a prerequisite to accessing their support,

varies with socio-economic status. As well as typically lacking the advantages of high levels of education and income, lone parents, by definition, are without a co-resident partner to act as another pair of ears which may in part explain why they are less likely to have information about services and to know about and attend mother and baby or mother and toddler groups. The finding that lone parents, younger and first-time mothers often felt awkward or shy about attending antenatal classes is also significant, as it suggests that a one-size fits all approach to such support may disadvantage particular key groups.

If you have any queries about the GUS project, please contact:

Analytical Services Unit – Children, Young People and Social Care Branch  
Area 1-B (South)  
Scottish Executive  
Victoria Quay  
Edinburgh EH6 6QQ

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