



📷 Grandparents are often called in to help raise their grandchildren.

■ Opinion ■

Opinion: Grandparents left holding the baby

James Farrell, The Courier-Mail

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MANY of us work hard throughout our lives and expect that our later years will be spent reaping the rewards of this hard work — perhaps travelling, mastering a new skill and spending time with our loved ones, particularly our grandchildren.

But this idyllic dream isn't realised for many older Queenslanders, as an increasing number of grandparents are denied contact with their grandchildren due to family breakdown, parental drug use and domestic violence.

Grandparents may also be forced to take on a larger role in their grandchildren's lives due to working parents and increasing costs of childcare.

Part of the problem is the growing issue of drug use in regional Queensland, in particular ice, which can cause parents to completely disengage. Their drug use can mean they are not a fit and proper parent to their children.

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Ice Nation — "I was forever chasing that first high"

Sometimes parents are in prison or "disappear" due to drug-taking binges.

Grandparents are being relied upon by the governments as alternatives to parents who had substance abuse issues, were in prison or who were experiencing domestic violence.

In some instances, parents turn up to their grandparents' home, leave the children and often don't return for several months.

When they do, they demand their children be returned to them.

Parents often become violent when under the influence of drugs and alcohol and grandparents are exposed to violence when they try to step in and protect their grandchildren from their own parents.

It is not uncommon for community lawyers to see grandparents applying for domestic violence protection orders against their own children when grandchildren are involved.



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Domestic violence hotline reforms 'fantastic'

Without a formal parenting order in place grandparents may be unable to obtain financial family assistance, access Medicare, open a school banking account, obtain a passport or even apply for a birth certificate.

When they are affected by drugs or subjected to violence, parents can choose not to participate in mediation or consent to formal parenting orders.

The grandparents are left with no option other than filing a contested application in the Federal Circuit Court for parenting orders. This is complex and can take up to 18 months to finalise. Given their chaotic lives, these parents can dip in and out of the court process, which causes significant delays.

Too many of these grandparents are unable to afford legal help to navigate these legal processes, so many turn to community legal centres for free help.

Unfortunately only half of the people who contact one of Queensland's community legal centres are able to get the help they need. The rest are turned away because community legal centres just don't have the resources to help everyone who qualifies.

In July this year, the Federal Government will cut almost 30 per cent of funding to community legal centres across Australia.

Malcolm Turnbull must reverse these funding cuts to community legal centres to ensure grandparents get the legal help they need and the protection they deserve.

James Farrell is Community Legal Centres Queensland director