

ABC NEWS

Queensland grandparents group together to ease the pain of family separation

ABC Wide Bay By Nicole Hegarty

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PHOTO: A group of grandparents is banding together to reconnect with their grandchildren. (ABC Wide Bay: Nicole Hegarty)

A group of Queensland grandparents with limited or no access to their grandchildren have formed a support group to help members reconnect with their beloved family members.

Lori (last name withheld) has not seen her two grandsons in almost two years.

She said she established the group, which meets once a month on the Fraser Coast, north of Brisbane, after the mother of her grandchildren cut her access off.

"The main aim of it is to be able to have contact with our grandchildren to share our stories, to share the stories of their parents that you've brought up and to share your love, your support, just to be there for your grandchildren," Lori said.

"I have two grandsons and for some reason I'm not permitted to see them, so that is why I started up the group — not only to support myself, but to give support to other people and to hopefully take it further.

"It takes a bit of you to actually come and say 'this is my circumstance' and to share.

"The more we do share hopefully the better we'll feel to know that we're not alone."

Lori said she hoped to spread her idea around the country.

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Key points:

- Grandparents unable to see their grandchildren have formed a support group in Qld
- An expert says grandparents a 'hidden resource' whose role in families can be 'extremely important'
- A lawyer says many are suffering in silence because they are unaware of their legal options

Should you stay for the kids?

"With a bit of luck I am hoping that it will go Australia-wide, because I think the need is out there for this sort of support group," she said.



It may seem obvious to call a relationship quits if you've fallen out of love, but for couples with children it's not always black and white.



PHOTO: The Family Law Act says children have a right to a relationship with their grandparents. (ABC News: Gregory Nelson)

A 'hidden resource' — but many estranged

Australian Institute of Family Studies director and psychologist, Anne Hollonds, said while there had not been much investigation into the estrangement of grandparents, many were in a similar situation to Lori because of family breakdowns or geographical distance.

"There can be grief and sorrow associated with the loss of those relationships, so to the degree that the group can provide each other with support it sounds like a positive move," Ms Hollonds said.

"Grandparents these days are a hidden resource — they are extremely important to the lives of families and are very much part of the support team.

"It does take work, and there's a lot of mutual benefit that can be gained from that sort of intergenerational family approach.

"If they don't take sides and fuel arguments than a grandparent can be a more neutral figure who is really just there focused on the needs of the grandchild.

"Sometimes grandchildren need that attention and focus when everyone else is struggling to deal with a major disruption in family life."

'Disheartening and very painful'

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PHOTO: Anne Hollonds, the director of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Queensland grandfather Steve and his wife have not seen their grandchildren for more than two years following the separation of their son and daughter-in-law.

Steve said he joined Lori's group to work towards making it easier for grandparents like him to visit their grandchildren.

"At the moment we're just in limbo because arbitrarily the mother of the children says 'no you can't see them,'" he said.

"We love our grandchildren, we're big on family and ... we have so much history that we want to share with them, and we feel as if our ex-daughter-in-law is turning us into nothing.

"Sometimes, apart from feeling like you're banging your head against a brick wall to try and see them, I do get a bit angry, I do get a bit frustrated with the whole situation because you just don't which way to turn.

"Being here in the group and talking and helping other people helps."

Steve said he feared that the memories of him and his wife would fade in the minds of their grandchildren.

"We don't get to see them so they're going to forget us," he said.

"They have so much on our side of the family — they have aunts, uncles ... [it's] just like wiping the writing off a chalkboard ... because over time they're just going to forget or it will be a vague memory and it's not fair.

"I'm a child from a divorced family and my mother helped us to see our father.

"They had their problems and issues but we still got to see our family and I just can't understand — you feel the pain through your whole life".

Limited knowledge of legal pathways a broader issue

Caxton Legal Centre's Family, Domestic Violence and Elder Law Practice senior lawyer Colette Bots said many grandparents were suffering in silence because they do not know what assistance is available.

"Grandparents have the option — in the event that they're unable to afford legal advice from a private solicitor — [to] get free advice from community legal centres and from Legal Aid Queensland," she said.

"Grandparents have the right to make that application for a mediation and in the event that a mediation fails, they then will have the right to make an application to the Federal Circuit Court of Australia to get parenting orders.

"There are certainly some issues around awareness and barriers, and difficulties with the emotion of it all.

"The purpose of mediation is to reach a parenting agreement in which it can be detailed what time children can spend with their grandparents on a regular basis."

She said it was not uncommon for the parent who opposed contact to be the former son-in-law or daughter-in-law.

"Often those grandparents have tried everything they can before seeking legal advice, but they've simply been ignored," Ms Bots said.

Decision-making in the family

Who usually decides on child-related matters	per cent (n = 61)
Mother decides	18
Father decides	3.3
Parents decide together	16.4
Parents discuss with child	55.7
Child decides	8.2
Something else	16.4

Notes: Percentages may exceed 100 as respondents could select more than one option.

Source: Children and young people in separated families: Family law system experiences and needs Final Report 2018

Long-term cost of divorce



RN's The Money explores a new national study examining the long-term financial consequences of divorce.

What to know about the Family Law Act

- It focuses on the rights of children to know and be cared for by both parents and other people significant to their care, welfare and development, such as grandparents and other relatives
- It applies across Australia
- It acknowledges the importance of children having a relationship with their grandparents
- However it is important to be aware that this does not mean that grandparents (or indeed parents) have an automatic right to have contact with the children
- The Family Law Act makes it clear that the 'best interests of the child' are

"There's not [a legal] 'as of right' for the grandparents to have the grandchildren live with them, but the law clearly recognises that the children do have a right to have a relationship with them, which would include visiting the on a regular basis."

the main considerations when it comes to decisions about parenting

Source: Legal Aid NSW
