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The role of grandparents in children's learning

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Charmian Kenner, Tahera Arju, Eve Gregory, John Jessel and Mahera Ruby report on a research project with children and grandparents in East London

Sumayah, her cousin and her grandmother are showing our research team how they work together in the small garden of their terraced house in Tower Hamlets, London's East End. First there are leaves to be swept up. Five-year-old Sumayah is determined to do the job and begins pushing the broom. After letting Sumayah sweep for a while, her grandmother takes over and demonstrates the firm strokes needed, then leaves Sumayah to finish the task. Next there are trees and plants to be watered. In this tiny space, Sumayah's family grows apples, pears, lemons, pumpkins, tomatoes and herbs, using the agricultural knowledge brought by the grandparents from Bangladesh. This knowledge is now being passed on to Sumayah and her cousin; it is they who are left in charge of the garden when their grandparents are away on visits to Bangladesh. On one such occasion, Sumayah arranged to send a small consignment of apples from the tree all the way to Bangladesh because they were 'grandfather's apples'.

What do the children learn from this experience? As they do the watering with three sets of hands grasping the watering-can handle – Sumayah's, her cousin's and her grandmother's – they find out how much water to give each tree or plant. They also know that not every plant is watered on every occasion; some need more water than others.



Photo 1: Three hands on the watering can

Sumayah points to the growing tip of a lemon tree seedling, commenting that the leaves are a different colour from the others because they are new. Her cousin shows three plants in a line of pots and explains that two of them are his uncle's and one is Sumayah's. Sumayah is responsible for her own particular plant and she will thus find out in detail how to nurture it. For example, she knows whereabouts in the garden the plant has to be placed to receive the right amount of light. Her knowledge goes beyond the classic primary school experiment of growing cress under different conditions in order to discover that plants need light and water to thrive. As well as being aware that these elements are essential, Sumayah also knows what quantities are necessary for each plant.

Our research project with grandparents and grandchildren in English-speaking and Bengali-speaking families in East London revealed a wealth of such learning events taking place between the older and younger generations. We had suspected that this little-investigated intergenerational relationship was of special importance to children’s learning, but we were surprised by the wide range of activities going on.

An initial questionnaire, answered by eleven Bangladeshi British families and three Anglo (English-speaking) families, offered a list of twenty activities and asked grandparents whether they engaged in any of these with their 3-6 year old grandchildren. The results showed the following spread of activities.

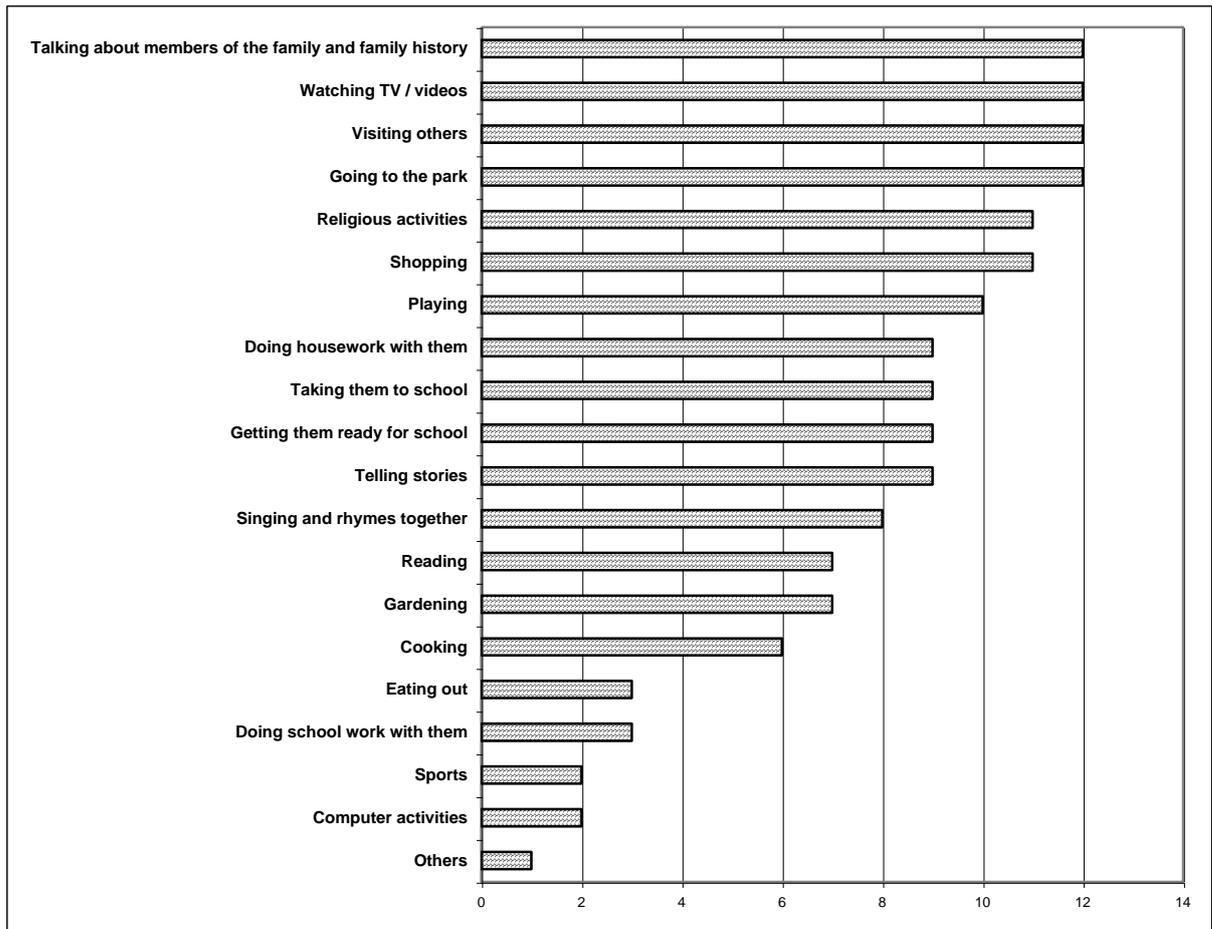


Figure 1: Activities carried out jointly by children and their grandparents, showing the number of grandparents reporting each activity.

Firstly, the questionnaire demonstrated that Bangladeshi British as well as Anglo families took children on outings to the park, played and read with them, involved them in cooking and gardening, told them stories and recited rhymes together. This finding challenges the assumption often made that ethnic minority families do not offer their children these kinds of learning experiences.

Secondly, the Bangladeshi British families placed a high priority on ‘visiting others’ and ‘talking about members of the family and family history’. These were categories

which the Anglo members of our research team had not originally thought of including, until two of the researchers – themselves from Bangladeshi backgrounds – made the suggestion. They explained that family visits are of considerable importance in Bangladeshi culture. When children go to see relatives, often accompanying their grandparents, they learn how to greet each person appropriately and how to behave within the social group. They gain knowledge of each relative's place in the complex kinship network and where they themselves fit in, giving them a sense of their own identity. Conversations with grandparents enhance their understanding of family history. These are important types of learning experience often overlooked by mainstream educators, and largely absent from the National Curriculum. We need a wider definition of the term 'learning', to encompass the rich variety of knowledge children gain from spending time in family settings.

The study

Having gained an initial idea of the kinds of learning experiences happening between grandparents and grandchildren, we approached twelve families who agreed to participate further in the project. Six were Sylheti/Bengali-speaking of Bangladeshi origin and six were monolingual English-speaking. Four families had children in the nursery class, four in Reception and four in Year 1. In interviews with grandparents and videorecordings of learning events at home such as cooking, gardening, storytelling and computer activities, we examined the following questions:

- In what ways do grandparents and grandchildren take the lead in the learning interactions?
- In what ways are the learning interactions co-constructed by the participants?
- What kinds of knowledge are exchanged between the younger and older learners?
- What is the role of the computer in the cultural, linguistic and technical aspects of learning?

A special relationship

Children's relationship with their grandparents involved a sense of mutual vulnerability. Grandparents were recognised as needing care due to age and a certain amount of frailty. Sitting at the computer with his grandmother Hazel and observing her hand as she held the mouse in front of him, three-year-old Sam suddenly raised his own hands and declared 'I'm not getting old...I've not got old skin'. Hazel agreed with amusement, noting that she indeed had wrinkles whilst Sam did not.

Gloria related a story showing how her grandson Stephen came to understand her physical limits. Wanting to engage her as a playmate in the park, he at first insisted that she joined him on the slide in the playground. However, when she came off the slide awkwardly and bumped her head, he was mortified, crying and saying he would never make her do it again because 'Granny was getting too old for these things'.

Meanwhile, the grandparents in the project were keen to take care of their young grandchildren, and expressed this through a supportive use of touch. The close physical relationship between the generations was noticeable in the events we videorecorded: Sahil's grandmother Razia linking her arm through her grandson's as they talked about the books they read together, Hazel patting Sam's tummy whilst talking about the computer game they were playing. The children's response showed

a reciprocal use of touch: Sahil's younger siblings climbed on their grandmother's lap as she and Sahil read a poetry book, while Sam rested his head against his grandmother's shoulder as he listened to her comments on the computer game.

Touch was an important means of communication between young children and grandparents. As well as building children's sense of security and self-confidence, it was used by grandparents to guide kinaesthetic learning. The example was given above of Sumayah's grandmother helping her grandchildren to water plants in the garden. Through her touch, she indicated at what angle to hold the watering-can and how much water to give. We also observed Sahil's grandmother guiding his hand as he wrote in Bengali, enabling him to experience the flow of the pen on the page to inscribe the pattern of each letter. Once again, guidance through touch could be reciprocal. Moments later, Sahil placed his hand over his grandmother's to show her how to operate the mouse on the computer.

Learning exchanges around language

Grandparents often considered themselves responsible for particular areas of their grandchildren's learning. In the case of the Bengali-speaking families, one of these areas was language. For example, Sahil's grandmother Razia was seen by the family as responsible for maintaining the children's knowledge of Bengali. Sahil's mother, having grown up in Britain, tended to speak English as well as Bengali to her children, but wanted them to develop their family language in order to retain a link with their heritage and culture. Razia entered into her task with considerable energy. She used books brought by the children's mother from Bangladesh, including stories such as 'Snow White' in Bengali which she knew the children would enjoy.

Sahil was able to identify different categories of Bengali book - alphabet primers, 'chora' (poetry) books, and the 'Snow White' storybook – realising that each had a different purpose. When reading the 'chora' book with his grandmother, he closely followed her lead. The oral recitation of poetry was enjoyed by Sahil and also by his younger sisters, who ran into the room to join in when they heard the rhythm of their grandmother's voice. As well as developing their vocabulary and expression in Bengali, the children were receiving an introduction to rhyme – a skill considered very important by early years educators.



Photo 2: Reading a Bengali poetry book together

Meanwhile, Razia was learning English from her grandchildren, in an intergenerational language exchange. Along with other grandparents in the study, Razia mentioned that contact with her grandson added to her knowledge of English. When Sahil was asked by the researchers whether his grandmother knew English, Razia (understanding the question perfectly) told her grandson in Bengali 'say Granny doesn't speak English'. She was maintaining her role as the resource person for Bengali within the family, but throughout the videorecorded event her knowledge of English was evident. When Sahil was asked what he most enjoyed doing with his grandmother, he thought for a few moments and then replied in English 'I enjoy she telling me what the word means in Bangla' ('Bangla' is the term often used for Bengali). Contented, Razia smiled and kissed him, once again showing her understanding.

Several of the Bengali-speaking grandparents were also introducing their grandchildren to Arabic for the purposes of reading the Qur'an. Sumayah and her grandmother spread out a prayer mat on the carpet and sat together on the mat, with Sumayah reciting verses of the Qur'an after her grandmother. This early introduction to the sounds and intonation of classical Arabic was a prelude to a gradual understanding of the content of the verses, just as children participating in hymn-singing or prayers in an Anglican church would be inducted into the richness of language which they would later comprehend more fully.

Learning exchanges around computers

It can be seen from the questionnaire results that few grandparents engaged in computer activities with their grandchildren. For the Bangladeshi grandparents particularly, computers were unfamiliar and there were language constraints – computers operate in English script unless special software is obtained.

The potential for learning from computer activities was emphasised by our video observation of Hazel with her grand-daughter Lizzie. Hazel and Lizzie frequently used the internet at Hazel's house to search for information to enhance the other learning activities they did together. For example, they often looked at wildlife in the garden and once discovered an unusual moth which they could not then find in Hazel's reference book. Via the internet, they identified its picture, with the name 'Quercus' and information about the male and female moths and egg-laying habits. They then printed out this page and glued it into Lizzie's scrapbook.

Lizzie and Hazel repeated this activity on the computer at Lizzie's house, with Hazel guiding Lizzie through the steps of obtaining the internet connection, spelling the word 'moths' for the search, choosing a site which dealt with English as well as North American moths and navigating through the 'Moth Index' on the site.

Hazel's support for Lizzie's learning was sensitively given, allowing Lizzie to take the lead when doing the typing or clicking the mouse on the appropriate spots. At some moments, Lizzie's responses preceded those of her grandmother. Whilst Hazel was working out what step to take next on the search engine 'Google', Lizzie had already pulled out the keyboard ready to type the search word. Lizzie was familiar with the sequence of commands for 'Print', quickly remembering them when her grandmother pointed out 'You know, it's *your* machine'. Hazel stated that she was less

confident about word processing than her grandchildren, ‘but now that Lizzie is learning at school, hopefully she’ll teach me’.

In this exchange of competencies, Hazel helped to structure the stages of the learning event for Lizzie and supplied alphabet letters to complete the word ‘moths’ when Lizzie was unsure. Lizzie’s eager confidence in using the word processing commands suggested that she would indeed soon be instructing her grandmother in this area. Her desire to go beyond the limits of this particular investigation by printing out information about another moth on the same website (despite her grandmother’s attempts to keep to the original task) would exploit the possibilities of hypertext and introduce new areas of learning for them both.

In comparison, the activities conducted by Bangladeshi grandparents (when the research team supplied a laptop computer for them to use with their grandchildren) at first seemed more basic. The children were unfamiliar with a laptop although they had used other types of computer at school, and for most of the grandparents it was their first chance to use the technology. The children mostly typed their names, working out how to use the different form of mouse incorporated in the laptop keyboard.

However, a closer examination of these events reveals that the grandparents, sitting quietly beside their grandchildren, were playing an important role similar to that of Lizzie’s grandmother. Through their presence they helped to structure the event, for example by ensuring that the child was the main actor and an older cousin did not take over, or by suggesting the activity of typing the child’s name and supporting the child’s efforts through their own knowledge of English letters. By giving their attention through gaze or pointing, even though they did not touch the computer, they helped the child maintain concentration and accomplish the task.



Photo 3: Working together on the computer

Furthermore, the grandparents showed a growing interest in what was happening on the screen. Their curiosity indicated a potential to develop knowledge and expertise if they were to have access to software or websites which operated in their own language, as Lizzie’s grandmother did. One aim of the research project is to increase family involvement with computers at our partner school in the study, Hermitage

Primary School in Tower Hamlets. If Bangladeshi grandparents can attend family workshops with tutoring and resources in Bengali, this could lead to positive outcomes for their own learning and that of their grandchildren.

Grandparents may need special encouragement to come into school and share their wisdom and experience. When invitations were issued to a 'Grandparents' Coffee Morning' at Hermitage School, a number of grandparents attended, some having dressed in their best clothes for the occasion. The grandparents were proud that the school had acknowledged their importance in their grandchildren's education – and the children were delighted to bring to school these key figures in their learning lives. We hope that our project marks just the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between the school and its body of grandparents from different cultural backgrounds.

This research project has begun to open up a fascinating world of learning between grandchildren and grandparents, hitherto little-known to schools particularly with regard to ethnic minority families. Our findings suggest the potential benefits if teachers widen their links with 'parents and carers' to ensure that the significant role of grandparents is recognised and built upon in home-school interactions.

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