

‘Proxy Parenting’ and Creating a ‘Golden Touch’: Practices and Discourses of Intensive Grandparenting

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Abstract

Grandparents' involvement in their adult children's families has increased in recent decades, especially in relation to care arrangements around grandchildren. This 'new army of proxy parents' calls for the need to critically analyse grandparental care. Drawing on a study on intergenerational care in Sweden, involving grandparents, adult children and grandchildren (63 interviewees including 28 grandparents), we suggest the concept of *intensive grandparenting* as an analytical lens for understanding contemporary grandparental involvement in care for grandchildren. Intensive grandparenting is done in a complex and ambivalent relation to parenting, making grandparents 'proxy parents' that help realise intensive parenting ideals, while also realising 'good grandparenting' ideals through adding a 'golden touch' to grandparent–grandchild relations. This growing involvement of grandparents, while highly appreciated, risks reproducing gendered and classed inequalities within and between families.

Keywords

ambivalence, care, class, gender, grandparents, intensive grandparenting

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Introduction

Grandparents' involvement in their adult children's everyday family life has increased in a wide variety of welfare state contexts, especially in relation to care arrangements for grandchildren (Arber and Timonen, 2012; Bordone et al., 2023; Cantillon et al., 2021; May et al., 2012; Timonen, 2020; Zanasi et al., 2023). This 'new army of proxy parents' (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018: 141) takes on new responsibilities, encompassing both practical help with daily chores such as picking up from daycare or school, and emotional investment in nurturing close relationships with grandchildren (Breheny et al., 2013; Harman et al., 2022). In a time when it is increasingly common for both mothers and fathers to participate in the labour market, while simultaneously the ideal of an intense and child-centred parenting culture is growing, achieving a good everyday family life is experienced as a challenge. Grandparents have come to play a significant role in meeting this challenge, speaking to the need to critically analyse grandparental care practices and ideals.

In this article, we take as our point of departure a study on intergenerational care in Sweden, where despite extensive public welfare provision of childcare we see increasing engagement of grandparents in grandchild care (Björnberg and Ekbrand, 2008; Hank and Buber, 2009; Zanasi et al., 2023). The study involves grandparents, adult children and grandchildren, and for this article we focus particularly on the narratives of the participating grandparents. We ask: what characterises grandparental care engagements in their adult children's family life today and how is this engagement experienced by the grandparents? To answer these questions, we propose the concept of *intensive grandparenting* as an analytical lens. While the term 'intensive' in some research literature refers primarily to 'time spent together' (see, for example, Bordone et al., 2023), we suggest a broader understanding, with practical, emotional and discursive elements. Like intensive parenting/mothering (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003), grandparenting today can be characterised as child-focused, emotionally demanding, financially expensive and labour-intensive (Hays, 1996: 8). In line with Harman et al. (2022) we argue that grandparents' engagements with grandchildren can be seen as *intensive* in a way that both relate to intensive parenting, but also adds other dimensions to care situations. We show in our analysis how intensive grandparenting consists of two elements: 'proxy parenting' and the creation of 'golden touch'. 'Proxy parenting' refers to activities with grandchildren focused on helping parents realise intensive parenting ideals. The creation of 'golden touch' is more focused on the grandparent–grandchild relation, formulating ideals of what 'good grandparenting' should entail to ensure a good situation for the grandchild. We further point towards differences in relation to *how* grandparents engage in intensive grandparenting, related to gender and class. We show how engaging in intensive grandparenting is experienced in fundamentally *ambivalent* ways by the grandparents (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998): on the one hand, they highly value their grandparenting activities and relations, on the other, they also express feelings of being overburdened with demands, and difficulties in saying no. In this sense, it can be argued that the ambivalence of intensive grandparenting obscures how gendered and classed care practices of grandparents increasingly 'rescue' families in welfare states by making possible the solving of work/family balance.

Grandparenting in the Welfare State

The increasing involvement of grandparents in the lives of their grandchildren has been explained in different ways. It has been attributed to changes in women's labour market participation (Bordone et al., 2023) as well as in retirement policies, and a demographic shift towards 'beanpole families' (Bengtson, 2001: 5) with decreasing numbers of children per generation coupled with increasing lifespans of older generations. This means that more grandparents are available today to take an active part in their grandchildren's lives (Bengtson, 2001; Bordone et al., 2023: 983). This trend is further related to access to different care solutions provided by the state or the market. Studies have shown that in countries with well-developed public care solutions, and high percentages of women participating in the labour market, parents are less likely to count on grandparents to be the main providers of childcare (Jappens and Van Bavel, 2012). However, there is disagreement in the literature on how affordable and available public childcare solutions affect intergenerational care. As Bordone et al. (2023) show, some researchers have concluded that family solidarity and grandparental care are provided if care needs are not met by formal and affordable services, leading to the conclusion that a strong welfare state replaces family arrangements and *crowds out* intergenerational engagements. Conversely, others have argued that, as family ties are also driven by reciprocity and not only functional needs, the expansion of welfare state services can also stimulate and lead to a *crowding in* – increase – of intergenerational engagements. Others suggest mixed responsibilities, according to which family and state provisions interact (Bordone et al., 2023: 981; Daatland and Lowenstein, 2005).

Owing to its long history of extensive welfare state care solutions, Sweden is an interesting case. In the public debate, the crowding-out argument has gained attention, pointing towards increased independence between generations in family networks (Berggren and Trägårdh, 2022). With the aim of creating a society marked by social and gender equality, publicly funded social security provisions have been introduced, such as paid parental leave, public childcare and childcare allowances (Lundqvist, 2011). This has meant that individuals have been relieved of the need to rely upon their parents, children or relatives for practical or financial support. However, recent studies show that the engagement of grandparents in their adult children's family life has increased in Sweden (Zanasi et al., 2023). Over 60% of Swedish grandmothers and 45% of grandfathers report that they provide care to grandchildren (Hank and Buber, 2009: 61; see also Björnberg and Ekbrand, 2008; Halleröd, 2008). Herlofson and Hagestad (2012: 36) find similarly high involvement of grandparents in the lives of grandchildren in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, as in other parts of Europe. They also find as strong, or even stronger, agreement among Nordic grandparents that it is one's 'duty to be there for grandchildren in cases of difficulty', and to provide encouragement to adult children in their role as parents (Herlofson and Hagestad, 2012: 34). Thus, recent empirical data in the Swedish case seem to support the crowding-in argument.

However, the degree of engagement is not necessarily the same across the population. Studies indicate that there are structural differences between grandparents, with more highly educated grandparents more likely to provide childcare (Zanasi et al., 2023); this is attributed to their better health and economic resources (Halleröd, 2008). A Finnish

study shows that grandparents are especially inclined to help adult children who live in middle-class dual-earner households, where the pressure of paid work is experienced as high (Ojala and Pietilä, 2020: 178–179). The same study finds differences in relation to gender: grandmothers come out as the ‘coordinators of care’, that is, planning time together, keeping track of birthdays and so on. Grandmothers are also seen as primary carers of younger grandchildren, while grandfathers’ involvement increases with their grandchildren’s age (see also Danielsbacka and Tanskanen, 2018; Kerrane et al., 2024).

The characteristics of grandparental involvement in the family life of adult children have been described as a tension between ‘being there yet not interfering’ (May et al., 2012). On the one hand, there are expectations of grandparents being able, and wanting, to step in and help out whenever needed; on the other, there is a strong norm against meddling in the parents’ business (Maijala et al., 2013). In their interview study with grandparents, Breheny et al. (2013) have identified discursive conflicts in how grandparents talk about their involvement in the everyday lives of grandchildren. ‘Being there’ entails a desire to engage in daily experiences, intimacy and enjoyment, related to physical proximity (and measures are often taken to accomplish this, e.g. by moving closer), but also a more general wish to be important to a grandchild, and to have ‘a place in their grandchildren’s affections as the grandchildren age’ (Breheny et al., 2013: 177). However, being available to provide care in everyday life is experienced with great ambivalence: on the one hand, grandparents express understanding of the societal pressures on their adult children to work, requiring them to step in and do care; on the other, several express feelings of being overburdened with care responsibilities: extensive care needs complicate the norm of not interfering (Breheny et al., 2013: 180). Our analysis adds to these research findings by showing how ambivalence is related to practices and discourses of intensive grandparenting. This concept puts focus on the ways in which grandparenting relates to parenting practices and ideals today (Harman et al., 2022), and highlights inequalities in grandparent care practices, related to gender and class.

Theoretical Points of Departure

By putting a *reflexive social self* at the centre of analysis we can show how grandparenting is an embedded activity, affected by a multitude of relations, social conditions and discourses (Mason, 2004; Nilsen, 2021). Relations of particular interest here are those between grandparents on the one hand, and adult children and grandchildren on the other. The social conditions for doing grandparenting are the opportunity structure created by the surrounding society, for example, relating to being able to solve work/family balance through public daycare. Discourses refer to dominant ideals of what is considered to be ‘good for children’, ‘good parenting’ and ‘good grandparenting’. Here, the concept of *intensive parenting* is of particular interest as it captures norms, practices and the display of certain ideals in relation to child rearing, expressed in the need to make the right choices for one’s children and thus fulfil the parenting ideal of being ‘*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive*’ (Hays, 1996: 8, emphasis in original). The underlying notion is that the child is ‘innocent’ and ‘priceless’ (Hays, 1996: 128), in need of a carefully organised social environment to cultivate a ‘sound’ individual (Aarseth, 2015: 79; Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011), and a

‘good outcome’ in the future (Faircloth, 2014). To do intensive parenting requires resources in terms of money, time and knowledge about what is considered ‘best’ for children. As argued by Lareau (2003), parenting is a classed activity that relies on financial as well as cultural and social capital. Lind et al. (2016: 11) identify ‘good’ parenting in the Nordic countries as less characterised by an emphasis on spending the greatest possible number of hours with the child and more focused on being involved, providing regularity in the child’s life, spending quality time with the child and being prepared to sacrifice time on child-centred activities (Bach, 2014; Forsberg, 2009; Wissö, 2012).

Bringing these two insights together – that grandparents do more care for their grandchildren today, and that parenting is increasingly characterised by intensity – we suggest the concept of *intensive grandparenting* to capture the contours of contemporary grandparenting. Harman et al. (2022) have suggested a similar focus of intensive *grandmothering*, pointing particularly to the ways in which grandmothers today find themselves involved in fulfilling the ideals of intensive parenting by taking on different roles in relation to grandchildren. While the role of being a protector and educator gives rise to mixed feelings and sometimes even resistance in relation to parents, the roles of playmate and confidant are experienced as more free and less controlled by parents (see also Kerrane et al., 2024). Similar tensions of needing to relate and conform to intensive parenting ideals, but also the carving out of a particular grandparent–grandchild relationship, are visible in our analysis, captured in the dimensions of ‘proxy parent’ and the creation of ‘golden touch’.

To further understand the complex ways in which relations are made, understood and negotiated in and through the doing of parenting/grandparenting, the theoretical concept of *intergenerational ambivalence* is helpful, as developed by Luescher and Pillemer (1998). Contrary to other theorising, which has tended to either emphasise positive solidarity (Bengtson, 2001) or negative conflict (Marshall et al., 1993), it highlights how ‘[s]ocieties and the individuals within them are ambivalent about relationships between parents and children in adulthood’ (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998: 414), and puts the co-existence of incompatible expectations, beliefs and behaviours at the centre.

Methods and Data

The article draws on a qualitative study on intergenerational care, in which we have interviewed grandparents, adult children and grandchildren: altogether, 63 individuals. Here we focus specifically on grandparents’ narratives of care doings in their everyday lives. The grandparents interviewed were born between 1940 and 1955, and comprise 18 women and 10 men.¹ This group was recruited through pensioner organisations, online postings and snowballing. They have diverse class backgrounds: the majority were born in working-class or rural families and, due to the development of the welfare state and expansion of higher education in Sweden, many have experiences of social mobility through the life course. Based on previous (and some current) professions and educational backgrounds (Ahrne et al., 2018), 16 can be positioned as middle class and 12 as working class. Five of the grandparents were born outside Sweden, but their children spent all or most of their childhoods in Sweden. The participating grandparents have

between one and four (now adult) children, and between one and 13 grandchildren; most have four to six grandchildren.

The interviews with grandparents were semi-structured, with a biographical focus and lasted on average two hours. The participants were asked to talk about care and care relations during their lives, from being children themselves, to growing up and becoming parents, and eventually becoming grandparents. After the interview, all were offered the option of meeting for a second interview and 18 participants wished to do so. Out of these, 12 also agreed to keep a diary for about two weeks in which they wrote about daily care practices and interactions with grandchildren and adult children. The second interview focused specifically on their care practices today. All interviews were carried out by three of the authors between spring 2020 and autumn 2022. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all names in the article are pseudonymised.²

All interviews have been transcribed verbatim. In analysing the data, we have read and re-read fieldnotes and transcripts and thereafter coded the data thematically and, for this article, specifically focused on narratives of being a grandparent today. We have used NVivo 14 for detailed coding on grandparents' narratives on everyday caring practices; about helping out in different ways, on children's needs and on feelings in relation to doing grandparental care.

Analysis: To Do Grandparental Care

In narratives of being a grandparent, two main dimensions can be discerned. First, grandparents talk about being present in everyday family life of their adult children, particularly through everyday care activities for the grandchildren. This enables the solving of work/family dilemmas for adult children, as well as the fulfilment of intensive parenting ideals. In this sense, they can be seen to enter into a role of being a *proxy parent*. Second, grandparents talk about the specific character of the grandparent–grandchild relation and activities, which are formulated around the wish to provide 'something extra' that meets children's needs in a specific 'grandparent way', which we call '*golden touch*' activities. These two dimensions together form the contours of intensive grandparenting.

'Proxy Parenting': The Ambivalence of 'Being Needed'

Reflecting the tendencies discerned in the quantitative research discussed above, all grandparents in our study relate narratives of increasing engagement in everyday care practices to help out in their adult children's family life: practices primarily centred around grandchildren. This is often related to the work demands of parents: dual-earner couples, especially in a context like Sweden with its emphasis on gender equality, increasingly want extra help in the everyday, despite the availability of comprehensive public childcare (Eldén and Anving, 2019).

An important task that several grandparents take upon themselves is to pick up grandchildren from school and daycare so that parents can stay at work. This help is in many cases extensive and well integrated into the schedules of the adult children's everyday lives. David, a grandfather of five grandchildren, describes his own and his wife's engagements as comprehensive:

We each pick up the grandchildren at least two times a week, either we pick up [granddaughter] or we pick up [grandson]. [. . .] Maybe three times a week. But they also, their schedules change, when they can pick up, and like [adult son], he is studying at the moment so he sometimes gets home earlier in the day. But if [adult daughter-in-law] is working that day, she gets off at 6.30, and then that is how it is. So then, twice a week, each one of us, [wife] picks up [granddaughter] twice a week, and I pick up [grandson] twice a week.

David and his wife's interactions with their adult son's family are, for the most part, centred around the routine of picking up the grandchildren from daycare and school, and they adjust their involvement to the needs and schedules of the adults in the family. By doing this, they enable the parents to work and study full-time. As with several grandparents in our study, David and his wife have chosen to move closer to their adult child's family, with the explicit aim of helping out more in the everyday. At the point of retirement, they declared to them that, 'we want to move to [their town] and we want to live here, we like it here and we're around if you need us' (cf. Breheny et al., 2013). Other grandparents talk about adjustments that affect their own everyday arrangements, such as in the case of Tina, grandmother of five grandchildren. Like David, she has a regular schedule for picking up grandchildren from daycare, but she is also often called in at short notice, which in her case means having to leave work early, as she has not yet retired. A main purpose of her stepping in is to meet the parents' wish to reduce the time that their children spend in daycare:

I have often picked them up directly after work, and I have even taken like an hour off to be able to do that. It has been a lot like: 'Can you come?' 'Can you come and pick them up early at daycare so that they don't have to stay there for too long?', like half an hour. A lot like that, that they should not be in daycare for too many hours.

While daycare is highly valued, the emphasis on not having your children in daycare for 'too many hours' is a strong discourse among Swedish parents (Alsarve et al., 2017; Eldén and Anving, 2019; Lorentzi, 2011). The grandparents – like Tina in the quote – know of this discourse and seem to accept it, while acknowledging that it differs from when they had young children. However, they express reluctance in relation to their role in fulfilling the ideal. Tina is not saying *explicitly* that the adult children are treating her badly when calling for her help, but she still makes sure to convey to the interviewer that this means sacrifices on her part. Her work is seen as less important than the adult children's, and her willingness to help out with the grandchildren is assumed to trump any other need in her life, including her work.

Having a grandparent pick up children early in the afternoon makes two things possible: their engagement in extra-curricular activities, and the creation of a calm and quiet time at home in contrast to the presumed hectic schedule at school and daycare. Both dimensions are key to intensive parenting, as they strive to 'enrich' the child, creating a 'sound', socially equipped child who is not exposed to a stressful environment, who develops skills like music and sport, and engages in creative activities like crafting and baking (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011: 389; Aarseth, 2015: 79). For the grandmother Carolina, crafting is key to her engagement with her granddaughter: she picks her up

from school once a week to spend a quiet afternoon at home together. They do craft, and sometimes they also go to the local museum ‘because that is where she has the temple of arts and crafts’, Carolina explains. Engaging in these activities brings joy to them both, and Carolina also stresses that she is well aware that their crafting is much approved of by her adult daughter, as she considers it enriching for the child.

This possibility of having special, child-centred time with grandchildren is enjoyed by the grandparents, and they see and take pride in their important role as helping parents in contributing to the positive development of the child, in line with intensive parenting ideals (cf. Harman et al., 2022). But it also leads to ambivalence, often related to negative feelings of being reduced to a role of being ‘a service’. Tina, again, sees her sacrifice of her own time and energy as ‘self-evident’, but also expresses dissatisfaction when comparing her engagements in her two adult children’s families:

When I’m [with one son’s family], they want me to be a ‘play lady’, and, like, give the children gifts and look after them, and play with them [. . .] With the other family, it is a different tempo, I spend time with *all* of them. [. . .] I maybe do something with the children at my place [after daycare or school], and then they [her son and daughter-in-law] come home and suggest we all have dinner together.

Like several grandparents in our study, Tina is keen to stress that she enjoys helping out and spending time with her grandchildren, but admits that it can be rather demanding. ‘I can get really tired’, she says. The child-centredness of the activities she is expected to engage in is key here. Tina is dissatisfied with being a ‘play lady’. She does not want to be just a ‘babysitter’, but to feel acknowledged and seen as someone of interest in herself, including in the eyes of the adult children. The intensive parenting ideal of child-centredness is communicated through the parents’ way of organising the grandparents’ engagements, which is both appreciated by the latter, as it opens up the possibility of developing independent relations with the grandchildren (and creates a ‘golden touch’ as we will discuss in the next section), but also limits their role and identity.

The ambivalence of being a proxy parent is expressed particularly strongly by grandmothers. Ärna, grandmother of six grandchildren, articulates this ambiguity and points towards its gendered character:

It is a little tricky. A couple of friends that we see often, they have the same experience as us. On the one hand, they [grandchildren] are *livets efterrätt* [literally ‘life’s dessert’]. These children, it is hustle, bustle and a lot of fun. But on the other hand, it is damn hard. And I think that you should be able to say no. It is like you are supposed to have to be this retired grandmother and grandfather that let go of everything else for one’s grandchildren. There is this image of the good grandmother who is self-annihilating, who lives through her grandchildren.

Ärna identifies a particular grandparental ideal, which she finds constraining: grandchildren are supposed to be ‘life’s dessert’, a metaphor for that special sweet thing that comes towards the end of life that one should cherish by *always wanting* to spend time with them, and time together is supposed to be happy – all of which is assumed to make it unproblematic to set aside any other needs. This ideal seems to affect grandmothers in

particular. Quantitative studies show a gender gap in the engagement of grandparents in everyday care: grandmothers provide more care for adult children's families and for their grandchildren (Zanasi et al., 2023), including in Sweden, although men are more involved today than they used to be (Halleröd, 2008). Our study reflects this in two ways: first, it is visible through explicit references to particular *grandmotherly* ideals, which reflect stronger expectations on grandmothers to engage in children and care and, second, in how adult children and grandchildren talk about the different ways in which grandmothers and grandfathers provide care in their everyday lives. In these interviews, grandmothers are more often the main, taken-for-granted – and most reliable – providers of care, especially in making sure that everything *practical* is taken care of. Grandfathers are also pointed to as important, but more in relation to providing support to older grandchildren, or being a 'fun playmate' for the younger ones (Horsfall and Dempsey, 2010; Kerrane et al., 2024) – something that is often less controlled by the parents (Harman et al., 2022: 51). The different expectations on grandfathers and grandmothers are discussed by Gerd and Gunnar, grandparents of three grandchildren:

Gunnar: Since you, Gerd, are so busy during the days [referring to the different activities Gerd is involved in] that means that you cannot always pick up from daycare when they need us to, I could pick the grandchildren up too, but as a grandfather it just does not happen that I do that on my own. . .

Gerd: Strangely enough.

[. . .]

Gunnar: I don't think our son thinks that I would be able to do certain things in relation to the grandchildren.

Gerd: No, I don't think so either.

Gerd and Gunnar both conclude that they take different tasks upon themselves, but also that there are gendered expectations: the former, as grandmother, is expected to do more and to be more responsible. As Gerd concludes: 'Well, I just do more than Gunnar. That is another reason I think for me being the one picking up, like I pick up, and he, as a grandfather, comes along.'

Gendered expectations are also sometimes expressed in terms of personal characteristics and competencies. David, for example, describes his wife as 'more skilful', and as having 'different antennae' for seeing care needs, which points towards care being much more than practical activities: it includes being attentive and attuned to different needs (Mason, 1996). Although grandfathers are involved in doing care, and often talk warmly about caring for grandchildren, it is still grandmothers who have overall caring responsibility. It is they who are most often in charge of recurring and comprehensive caring activities, such as cooking, tidying up and changing diapers, but also organising when to care for the children, what time to pick them up, staying in contact with adult children and so on – activities that are, as DeVault (1991: 228) points out, sometimes clearly visible, and at other times not seen until they are missing.

The ‘proxy parent’ part of grandparenting enables two things. First, grandparents are becoming a significant factor in providing everyday care, stepping in to help realise work/family balance for adult children. Second, grandparents enable the fulfilment of intensive parenting ideals, uniting with adult children in the endeavour of creating the best conditions possible to ensure good future outcomes in their children. While acknowledging differences with previous times and their own parenting ideals, the grandparents seldom oppose the adult children’s parenting ideals. Still, they express ambivalence towards their part in fulfilling these as they, and especially the grandmothers, feel that plenty is expected of them, that the child-centredness of the activities is dissatisfying and that they are often taken for granted. There are several balancing acts going on here: between ‘being there yet not interfering’ (May et al., 2012), offering care and support while limiting parents’ expectations of them (Harman et al., 2022: 52) and also, as our study has shown, between adhering to adult children’s needs while still being able to say no.

The ‘Golden Touch’ of Intensive Grandparenting: Carving Out the Specific Grandparent–Grandchild Relationship

While the ‘proxy parenting’ part of the grandparental role centres on the parents’ wishes and wants, our interviews with grandparents and grandchildren also attest to specificities to this relationship beyond parents’ needs. These are formulated around a wish to provide ‘something extra’ that meets children’s needs in a specific ‘grandparent way’: to provide what, in Swedish, is termed *guldkant* – a ‘golden touch’, which elevates the everyday. The assumption is that grandparents play a particular and important role in grandchildren’s lives, and that they are key to what constitutes a ‘good childhood’. Similarly to proxy-parent activities these activities are child-focused and guided towards providing ‘the best outcome’ for the child, and can as such be seen as contributing to intensive parenting. But ‘golden touch’ activities are also experienced as reciprocal relationship-building engagements between grandparent and grandchild, with the parents less taken into account, and sometimes even explicitly disregarded.

These golden touch activities are varied as to their character: they can, for example, involve serving the grandchildren their favourite foods, or going shopping together. They can consist of arrangements around overnight stays at the grandparent’s place, or even grandparent–grandchild vacations. The important thing is that it deviates from the daily routine: grandparents want to offer something different from what children experience with their parents, and grandchildren acknowledge this as a key aspect of their engagements with grandparents (Eldén et al., 2024).

Grandparents find great pleasure in being able to provide these special treats and activities. Food frequently has a significant place in these activities and often involves indulging in something sweet and creating memorable moments, as when Olof talks about how his three grandchildren fight over who gets to have the most sleepovers, and how he and his wife try to make them special:

They long for it so much, we take them to our house and let them stay overnight. We spoil them a little, they help me make orange juice for breakfast. Grandma makes smoothies [laughs] and

sometimes we bake something. So, we have a good relationship. They enjoy being here. It is fun to do these kinds of things for them, because it makes them so happy.

The grandparents in our study acknowledge that the activities they do with the grandchildren are, at times, in opposition to the parents' wishes, for example, when they serve food that they know the parents would not approve of; this is also mentioned as grounds for disagreement in our interviews with adult children. Sometimes, this is concealed from the parents, reflecting the norm of 'not interfering' (May et al., 2012), but on other occasions, grandparents openly challenge the parents. Vanja for example, a grandmother of five, tells about buying a sequined jacket that the granddaughter wanted but the parents – 'who are such Green Party people' – denied her:

[According to the parents], one should not have any special clothes either. . . So, I went with my granddaughter to buy something flamboyant. We bought one of those jackets, they look like a whole disco, with sequins. So that she would have a couple of those, what should I say, useless pair of clothes. Because I do not care at all if her mother thinks she shouldn't have clothes like that, because then I, as her grandmother, I can give it to her. Because it is my daughter, so I do not care at all what she says about that.

Vanja expresses frustration with her daughter, finding her overly practical, and goes against her wishes by buying the granddaughter the 'useless' jacket. However, navigating between adhering to and, occasionally, opposing the wishes of adult children is a delicate matter, which grandparents describe as challenging. Open conflict may potentially affect their availability to the grandchild. Simultaneously, in daring to go against parents' wishes the grandparent–grandchild relationship can manifest as 'special', highlighting the unique bond that is created through these interactions.

To be able to offer 'something extra' requires knowledge of what the grandchildren like, but also, time, energy and money. As we saw in the previous section, grandparents' (and especially grandmothers') ambivalence about taking on care responsibilities for their grandchildren is related both to frustration at the parents' orchestration of their time together, but also to the fact that caring is itself a demanding activity. As studies have shown, middle-class grandparents are able to participate more in their adult children's and grandchildren's everyday lives due both to their greater financial resources and to their better health (Bordone et al., 2023; Halleröd, 2008; Ojala and Pietilä, 2020). Still, grandparenting ideals affect all. Carolina, who described engaging in crafting activities with her grandchild above, talks about how the ideal of 'good grandparenting' sometimes feels impossible to live up to. There is a 'norm' among her peers around how you should be as a grandparent, she says, and this is expressed also in relation to what you should be able to afford and pay for. Her single status – previously as a single mother, now a single grandmother – makes her struggle to make ends meet. During the interview, she describes how her daughter's family went on holiday to the Canary Islands with her son-in-law's parents, a trip that the paternal grandparents paid for. This, she says, would have been impossible for her:

The norm is that you should be in a good financial situation, you should be able to pay for a trip. Pay everything, pay for all the food when you go out for dinner, that is the norm. That is hard for me, it happens every once in a while that I do it, but after that I am broke.

Previous research has shown that consumption practices, like travel, can be used to strengthen relationships with grandchildren, and are activities that parents encourage (Godefroit-Winkel et al., 2019; Gram et al., 2019). Many of the participants in our study are unable to afford such activities, yet being able to do so remains a sought-after ideal. Not being able to provide ‘golden touch’ activities becomes equivalent with not being capable of nurturing the ‘good’ grandparent–grandchild relation, which, in turn, is seen as important to achieve a ‘good childhood’. While expressing ambivalence – and even critique – in relation to current ideals, grandparents like Carolina are still left with a feeling of inadequacy.

However, providing a golden touch as a grandparent is not only narrated by the grandparents in terms of joyful and/or expensive activities. It can also be related to providing space and time away from ordinary life, especially so when times are tough – not least when there are conflicts between grandchildren and their parents, or between parents (Gottzén and Sandberg, 2019). In this case, the ‘extra’ is more focused on the capability of grandparents to offer a calm refuge for grandchildren, of ‘just being there’ to ‘see’ the grandchildren’s needs. Several grandparents in our study talk about how they have provided a ‘safe haven’ to grandchildren through offering a temporary place to stay when things are tough. Hanne and Hans, grandparents of five, have a teenage grandson who is depressed, and his symptoms get worse with his sleeping problems, so Hanne and Hans have him stay at their place during the weekdays: ‘Then he sleeps better and better for each day he is here, but then, he’s back home and meets everyone, the whole family, over Saturday and Sunday, then on Monday he’s in a really bad state again.’ The capability of grandparents to offer a ‘safe haven’ is also emphasised – and highly appreciated – by grandchildren in their interviews.

The ‘golden touch’ thus entails activities, consumption and the possibility of providing space and time for the specific grandparent–grandchild relationship to be reproduced. Like ‘proxy parenting’, it is child-centred and directed towards fulfilling norms of a ‘good childhood’, and also sometimes requires substantial emotional and financial investments by grandparents (Hays, 1996). ‘Golden touch’ activities bear the potential of reproducing inequalities between grandparents and creates feelings of ambivalence in relation to not being able to provide ‘good grandparenting’. However, by diverging in focus *away* from parents’ needs, it also points towards the possibility of a separate and potentially more independent, and less ‘future-oriented’ (Faircloth, 2014; Harman et al., 2022), role of grandparents in today’s everyday life of grandchildren.

Conclusion

As has previously been argued (Bordone et al., 2023), grandparents’ engagement in their adult children’s family life cannot easily be equated with access or non-access to public childcare. On the contrary, even in the Swedish welfare state, with its extensive public provision of childcare, we can see a ‘crowding in’ of grandparental engagement. Responsibilities between the state and family are mixed: basic care needs are met by public childcare, which means that grandparents can take part in grandchildren’s everyday lives without bearing full responsibility, and provide regular, although not as

encompassing, care. This arguably makes it more possible and attractive for grandparents to be involved in the lives of their adult children and grandchildren, as their engagement is not expected to be the only solution for the work–family dilemma.

However, the grandparents in our study identify a shift towards more engagement in the everyday lives of their adult children and grandchildren, compared with when they themselves had young children. Being a grandparent today requires more on their part, both in relation to stepping in and doing practical chores, and also in relation to being able to – and expected to – provide a ‘golden touch’ when caring for grandchildren. It requires an ability to care for children in a way that is in line with the parents’ ideals while, at the same time, developing their own relationships with the grandchildren, and living up to emerging discourses of what good grandparenting entails.

We have shown how grandparents take on a role as ‘proxy parents’ where they clearly contribute to fulfilling the parental ideal of intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2014; Hays, 1996). This engagement of grandparents is orchestrated by parents. It is labour-intensive and child-centred and can reduce the grandparents to a limited role of being babysitters. As ‘proxy parents’ grandparents make possible the realisation of both the gender equality ideal – with double-income parents in full-time work – and the intensive parenting ideal. They thus become important actors in everyday family life, but are often taken for granted, as they are expected to be willing to step in *due* to their role as grandparents. Our mixed gender sample (as compared with previous studies elaborating on the concept of ‘intensive’; Harman et al., 2022; Kerrane et al., 2024) testifies to both men and women being involved in ‘proxy parenting’, however, their ways of engaging differ: grandmothers do, and are expected to do, more care. The ideal of the self-sacrificing grandmother is strong, and they, especially, express ambivalence about caring for grandchildren (Luescher and Pillemer, 1998); it can be experienced as joyful and rewarding, but also as tiresome. While intensive grandparenting/grandmothering contributes to realising the work–family balance for adult children, it also obscures an ongoing dependence on women’s caregiving labour.

We have also shown that the increased engagement of grandparents in the lives of grandchildren enables the carving out of their own specific relationships. This is particularly visible in ‘golden touch’ activities, fulfilling emerging ideals on what constitutes ‘good grandparenting’, and occasionally done in opposition to what parents consider appropriate. These activities are sometimes in line with intensive parenting ideals: they can be enriching and educational, and directed towards providing a ‘safe haven’ for the child, building on the idea of children as ‘sacred’ and ‘priceless’ (Hays, 1996: 128). However, and compared with proxy parenting, golden touch activities can also diverge in focus away from parents’ needs and the future-oriented project of creating the ‘sound child’ (Aarseth 2015: 79), giving space instead to the qualities of the grandparent–grandchild relationship as such. It is more positively experienced by grandparents as they see their important role in being able to provide something *different* to their grandchildren. But these activities, too, are sometimes experienced as demanding, particularly the need to have energy and finances that enable one to live up to the norms around good grandparenting. It is a sought-after ideal and recognised as such by all grandparents in our study, but it is also marked by ambivalence and worry of not being able to realise the ideal.

Harman et al. (2022: 52) sees the potential in the concept of intensive grandparenting for capturing how today's grandparent involvement in adult children families facilitates intensive care of children, while also opening up for 'enjoyment of the moment', the possibilities of cultivating 'a protective space of time together', and, as expressed by Breheny et al. (2013), grandparents' wish to be important in grandchildren's everyday lives. This tension is clearly visible in our study: grandparents' increased engagements cannot be reduced to being 'proxy parents' only, but entail the potential of profound and important relationship building, of value in and of itself. As such, intensive grandparenting points towards the importance of the grandparent–grandchild relationship – a relationship that, arguably, has been wrongfully neglected in family studies and politics until recently (Cantillon et al., 2021) – not least from the perspective of grandchildren (Eldén et al., 2024). At the same time, it has the potential of highlighting new (or persisting) gender and class inequalities in everyday care practices. When grandparental care is increasingly sought to realise work–family balance and intensive parenting, faced by adult children, care practices risk being obscured under the veil of the self-sacrificing grandmother or being best suited to well-off middle-class grandparents, with better health, time and money.

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Ethics statement

The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (2019-03890).

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Notes

1. We also interviewed 15 adult children (10 women and five men) born in 1966–1985, and 20 grandchildren (12 girls and eight boys) born in 2001–2015. The cohort of grandparents was selected for being born during the aspiring years of the Swedish welfare state and living through its expansion and recent challenges.
2. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority (2019-03890).

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