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The vital role of grandmothers in the perinatal period: A personal journey of connection and care

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A Grandmother's Embrace

In softest whispers, she awaits,

A tender heart that gently waits.

Through sleepless nights and joys unknown,

She guides the path, though not alone.

Her hands, with wisdom, cradle life,

A calming touch amidst the strife.

A grandmother's love, so deep, so pure,

A steady bond, forever sure.

In every breath, her hope is found,

A legacy of love unbound.

Through every change, she's by your side,

A constant in the shifting tide.

Introduction

My personal experience of pregnancy and motherhood during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of the grandmother for me, in profound ways. Faced with the isolation of lockdowns and the uncertainties of first-time motherhood, my mother became an anchor, offering unwavering support, guidance, and care. Her presence not only lightened the physical and emotional load of becoming a mother[1] but also demonstrated the timeless importance of intergenerational bonds in fostering resilience and wellbeing. This article reflects on the critical role grandmothers play during the perinatal period, drawing on both personal experiences and broader insights. It explores the practical, emotional, and cultural contributions of these significant others, emphasising how their involvement not only enriches the lives of parents and their grandchildren but also creates lasting connections that span generations.

The role of grandparents in family life

In modern societies, where life expectancy is rising alongside increases in single motherhood and female workforce participation, grandparents occupy a unique and cherished role within the family structure. Often serving as pillars of wisdom, stability, and support, their active involvement in caregiving enriches not only the lives of their grandchildren but also strengthens the overall family dynamic. Beyond their supportive role to parents, they are the 'significant others' in children's lives,[2] offering a special kind of unconditional love, mentorship, and connection that is distinct from parental relationships. This bond fosters emotional security, resilience, and a sense of belonging in grandchildren, leaving a lasting impact on their development.[3] In today's fast-paced world, where the challenges and demands of modern parenting can often feel overwhelming, the role of grandparents becomes even more vital.[4] As life expectancy increases, grandparents have the opportunity to be actively involved in their grandchildren's lives for longer periods, nurturing strong intergenerational bonds that support families in profound ways.

For single mothers, who may lack consistent partner support, grandparents often provide an essential safety net, offering practical caregiving, emotional stability, and mentorship that eases the pressures of parenting alone. Likewise, as more women re-enter the workforce or juggle demanding careers, grandparents frequently step in to fill childcare gaps, providing reliable, cost-effective, and trusted care

in an era when formal childcare can be both logistically and financially challenging. However, grandparents' involvement extends far beyond practical caregiving. With their wealth of experience gained through years of raising children, they are uniquely positioned to offer invaluable guidance and emotional reassurance during the transformative life stage of pregnancy and the postpartum period.[5]

Reflecting on personal lived experience

Isolation and connection during pregnancy.

When I became pregnant with my first child, the world was in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and social distancing kept families apart, while my mother, a vulnerable adult, had to shield herself for her safety. The separation during such a pivotal life event was deeply isolating, amplifying feelings of vulnerability and fear. However, technology bridged the physical distance, and through daily video calls, my mother became my virtual guide and confidante. During this time, my mother's wisdom became a compass for navigating pregnancy. When my appetite waned, and I struggled to eat, she offered practical, compassionate advice, encouraging small, nutrient-rich meals and consistent hydration. When I experienced swollen feet and fluctuating blood pressure, she provided simple yet effective solutions, such as elevating my legs and staying hydrated. These gestures, though seemingly minor, made me feel cared for and empowered, offering a sense of control during an otherwise unpredictable period. As my pregnancy progressed and physical tasks became more challenging, my mother encouraged my husband to step in as an active partner in caregiving. She provided him with practical advice, like assisting with foot care and learning how to help me relax after long days. This guidance strengthened our partnership and prepared us to share parenting responsibilities more equitably after our baby's arrival.

Postpartum recovery: a grandmother's wisdom.

After my daughter was born, restrictions eased, allowing me to stay with my mother for the first four weeks postpartum. Those weeks were a transformative experience, not only for me as a new mother but also for my family as a whole. My mother's support extended beyond caring for my baby; she cared for me in ways that I didn't even realise I needed. She prepared nourishing meals tailored to support my recovery and facilitated breastfeeding, ensuring I had the energy to meet the demands of early motherhood. Her expertise with breastfeeding was particularly invaluable. When I struggled with latching issues, she guided me with patience, taught me effective techniques, and massaged my breasts to stimulate milk flow. Her reassurance during moments of frustration eased my anxiety and bolstered my confidence. Her practical knowledge enriched my experience as a mother. I will always remember how she gave my daughter her first bath with calm assurance, turning an intimidating task into a moment of joy and connection. Her gentle hands trimmed my baby's tiny nails when I was too nervous to attempt it. These acts, small yet profoundly meaningful, underscored the unique value of experience and wisdom that grandmothers bring.

Emotional and physical support for new mothers.

One of the most profound aspects of my mother's involvement during the perinatal period was her

unwavering focus on my physical and emotional wellbeing as a new mother. Her attentiveness went beyond simple acts of kindness; it was a comprehensive form of care that allowed me to prioritise recovery and bond with my baby. Recognising the toll that childbirth had taken on my body, she regularly massaged my back and abdomen to alleviate postpartum aches, improve circulation, and promote healing. These gestures, infused with love and care, provided both physical relief and emotional comfort, reminding me that I was not alone in navigating the challenges of recovery. Equally important was her constant encouragement for me to rest. Like many new mothers, I felt a sense of responsibility to juggle everything—feeding, nappy changes, and adjusting to sleepless nights—often at the expense of my own rest. My mother gently reminded me of the importance of prioritising my health, reassuring me that taking time to recharge would make me a better, more present mother. Her insistence that I pause and care for myself alleviated the pressure I felt and gave me permission to lean on others for support. Emotionally, her presence was invaluable. She listened without judgment as I shared my fears, insecurities, and moments of doubt, creating a safe space where I felt heard and validated. Postpartum emotions can be overwhelming, ranging from sheer joy to exhaustion and, at times, self-doubt.[6] My mother's calm demeanour and open heart helped me process these feelings without shame or guilt. She offered reassurance drawn from her own experiences, which helped me feel understood and empowered to embrace my new role as a mother.

Empowering partners and building a team to strengthen family bonds.

Beyond her care for me, my mother played a pivotal role in nurturing my husband's confidence as a father. Recognising that fatherhood was as new to him as motherhood was to me, she actively involved him in caregiving tasks, guiding us both through practical skills such as bathing, dressing, and soothing our baby. Under her gentle guidance, we learned to bathe our child together—a task that initially seemed daunting but quickly became a cherished ritual of teamwork and connection. Her mentorship fostered a deeper sense of partnership between my husband and me, reinforcing that parenting is a shared journey. These shared experiences not only strengthened our bond as a couple but also equipped us with the confidence and skills to tackle challenges as a team. By creating an environment of support and collaboration, my mother ensured that we both felt capable and empowered in our respective roles as new parents. Ultimately, her holistic approach to care—attending to my physical recovery, nurturing my emotional resilience, and fostering my husband's involvement—transformed what could have been an overwhelming time into a period of growth, connection, and shared joy. It underscored the vital role she played in easing the transition into parenthood, offering a sense of stability and strength during one of our lives most significant changes.

Lessons learned: fostering intergenerational bonds

My experience has highlighted the importance of fostering intergenerational bonds, not just for my child but for my entire family. The wisdom and care of a grandmother enriches lives and my own experience brings forth important lessons learned.

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The value of patience and perspective. One of the most profound lessons I learned from my mother during this period was the importance of patience. Her calm demeanour and measured approach to caregiving taught me that not every challenge requires an immediate solution. Babies, much like new parents, thrive when their environment is calm and supportive. This perspective has helped me navigate parenting with greater confidence and less stress.

- *Collaboration builds confidence.* My mother's ability to involve my husband in caregiving not only strengthened their bond but also made our family unit more cohesive. Her guidance in simple tasks, such as bathing and feeding, showed me that parenting is a team effort. Watching my husband grow into his role as a father under her mentorship reminded me that support doesn't just benefit the mother—it empowers the entire family.

- *Cultural heritage as a source of strength.* During my postpartum period, my mother shared family traditions and cultural practices that added richness to my experience of motherhood. From preparing traditional meals for my recovery to singing lullabies that had been passed down for generations, these moments deepened my connection to my roots and gave me a sense of belonging that I now hope to pass on to my child.

- *The importance of vulnerability.* My experience also taught me that leaning on others is not a sign of weakness but of strength. Allowing my mother to care for me and share her wisdom created a deeper bond between us. It also showed me the value of opening up to those who care for you, fostering a sense of mutual trust and support.

- *Empowering future generations.* Observing my mother's nurturing influence on my child inspired me to think about how I can support my child when they become a parent someday. Grandparents not only provide care in the moment but also model behaviors and values that shape future generations. Their legacy is a gift that continues to give long after the perinatal period has passed.

- *Resilience through community.* My mother's support reminded me that parenting is not meant to be done in isolation. The involvement of grandparents and extended family creates a supportive network that strengthens resilience in times of stress or difficulty. This lesson has inspired me to nurture connections with other family members and friends, ensuring that my child grows up surrounded by a community of love and care.

- *Adaptability in modern parenting.* While my mother's advice often stemmed from her own experiences, she was also open to adapting to the unique challenges of modern parenting. For instance, she embraced the use of technology to stay connected during pregnancy and learned about current guidelines on safe sleep and breastfeeding. Her willingness to learn and adapt

reinforced the idea that parenting is a continuous journey of growth and evolution.

- *A shared sense of purpose.* Finally, I learned that the role of grandparents is not limited to helping during the perinatal period; it extends to creating a shared sense of purpose within the family. Watching my mother form a bond with my child was one of the most fulfilling aspects of my postpartum experience. It reinforced the idea that families are strongest when their members support and uplift one another.

Why grandmothers are vital in the perinatal period

Although both grandparents contribute to their grandchildren's lives, grandmothers have a unique role and provide crucial contributions to the well-being of their daughters and grandchildren[7] and are more likely to provide care due to their reproductive experience and expertise.[8] Support provided during pregnancy is invaluable and studies have suggested that this not only supports the mother but may beneficially impact foetal development.[5] A grandmother's presence can also help ease the steep learning curve that many new mothers face. From soothing a colicky baby to navigating the complexities of feeding and sleep schedules, grandmothers often have a wealth of knowledge earned through lived experience.[9] These funds of knowledge not only reduce the trial-and-error burden for mothers but also provide reassurance during moments of self-doubt or insecurity. Grandmothers often embody a sense of calm and patience that can balance anxieties of parenthood. For mothers, this steady presence can be grounding, offering reassurance that challenges, no matter how daunting, are surmountable.

Further, grandmothers often serve as cultural custodians, passing down traditions, rituals, and family values that enrich the baby's sense of identity. Whether it's preparing family recipes, teaching lullabies from their childhood, or sharing stories about the baby's heritage, they create a sense of continuity that connects past, present, and future generations.[10] Their presence also supports the baby's emotional development where studies have shown that babies thrive in environments where they receive love and attention from multiple caregivers.[11] This provides an additional layer of security and attachment, fostering emotional resilience and a sense of belonging in the child. For new mothers, especially those recovering from childbirth, the physical and emotional toll of postpartum recovery can be overwhelming. Grandmothers provide essential relief by taking on caregiving tasks, allowing mothers to focus on healing and bonding with their babies. Moreover, grandmothers often serve as emotional anchors during challenging moments, such as postpartum depression[12] or breastfeeding struggles.[13] They go on to create a safe space for mothers to express their fears and frustrations without judgment. However, despite the critical and multifaceted role grandmothers often play in supporting mothers, perinatal health research has largely neglected the influence of them on maternal mental health. This oversight fails to account for the ways in which their emotional, practical, and cultural support can alleviate stress, foster resilience, and improve maternal wellbeing during one of the most vulnerable periods in a woman's life.

Acknowledging the absence of grandparent support

I know that not everyone has access to the kind of support that I was fortunate to receive during the perinatal period. Whether due to physical distance, family dynamics, health challenges, or other circumstances, many new parents navigate pregnancy and early parenthood without this unique form of care. The absence of a grandparent's guidance and nurturing presence can be especially challenging during moments of exhaustion, self-doubt, or overwhelming uncertainty. While this kind of support is irreplaceable in many ways, the core elements that grandparents provide—wisdom, emotional reassurance, and practical care—can sometimes be cultivated through other means. Community networks, close friends, colleagues or peers with children, and even virtual resources, can offer valuable support, helping to bridge the gap for families without access to grandparent involvement. For example, parent support groups, lactation consultants, or trusted friends with parenting experience can provide guidance and empathy when it's needed most. This is a 'more-than-parental' intergenerational approach that recognises the roles and influence of all members of a child's close family, friends, and networks.[14, 15] This awareness has deepened my appreciation for the importance of building inclusive communities that ensure no parent feels isolated or unsupported. Whether through fostering stronger social connections or advocating for accessible resources for new parents, we can work toward creating a culture that embraces the principles of care, wisdom, and resilience that grandparents so often bring to families. No one should feel they must face the perinatal journey alone, and finding ways to fill these gaps can make all the difference.

Final thoughts: a timeless role reimagined

Grandparents occupy a timeless and essential role in the family structure but the demands and opportunities of modern parenting have reimagined their contributions. Today, grandparents serve as bridges between tradition and innovation, offering wisdom from their own experiences while adapting to the changing needs of their children and grandchildren. As I reflect on my journey, I am profoundly grateful for my mother's presence. Her care, wisdom, and unconditional love not only shaped my experience of early motherhood but also enriched the bond between our generations. Grandparents are not merely caregivers; they are nurturers of connection, continuity, and resilience—a role that remains as vital as ever in today's fast-paced, often isolating world.



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