



## A Study on the Optimization of Grand-Parenting Paths in Rural Areas

Nan He

Philippine Christian University Center for International Education, Manila, 1004, Philippines  
Email: 1062606492@qq.com

**Abstract:** In rural areas, young adults in the middle tier often face a difficult choice: seek job opportunities in economically developed areas, or stay behind due to the limited jobs available and the need to secure bilateral parental support and education costs for their children. Unfortunately, the dualistic urban-rural and inter-provincial household registration system restricts children's opportunities for further education, while the high threshold for public education forces them to complete their education in their hometowns, turning them into left-behind children. Furthermore, the family economy and workforce composition in rural areas often make grand-parenting the optimal choice and an unavoidable reality. However, while grand-parenting may make sense from an economic standpoint, it can have negative consequences on the development of children, including inadequate nutrition, unresponsive care, and a lack of early learning opportunities. To mitigate these negative effects, it is important to optimize the grand-parenting model. This can be achieved by adapting it to the child's needs, improving communication, developing activities, respecting rules, addressing conflicts, and optimizing the grand-parenting pathway. By taking into account both the internal strengths and weaknesses of grand-parenting, as well as external scientific knowledge, we can maximize the positive effects of this caregiving model on children's development.

**Keywords:** grand-parenting; left-behind children; optimal path

### Introduction

The emergence of grand-parenting is not accidental but rather an inevitable subsidiary phenomenon of the development of society and the era we live in. In China, the uneven distribution of employment resources has led to the widespread practice of grand-parenting, which refers to the process of grandparents assuming responsibility for the education and care of their grandchildren. Grand-parenting can be categorized into complete and incomplete grand-parenting<sup>[1]</sup>. Complete grand-parenting involves the child being separated from their parents for a prolonged period and being solely cared for by their grandparents, which is commonly found in western rural areas. In contrast, incomplete grand-parenting involves the grandparents and parents sharing responsibility for the upbringing and education of their grandchildren, with parents having limited time to spend with their children due to work commitments. While grand-parenting can have negative effects on children in the long run, it cannot be dismissed as an objective form of family parenting that is closely related to the physical and mental health of children. Optimizing the grand-parenting pathway is essential for maximizing the positive effects of intergenerational parenting. The society needs to draw on internal strengths and external scientific knowledge to achieve this. Thus, it is important to clearly understand the advantages and disadvantages of grand-parenting and to utilize its educational advantages while carefully mitigating any negative effects. This approach will optimize the existing family education situation of children and minimize any negative impact of grand-parenting, which will be of great importance exerting advantages of Grand-Parenting and promoting educational equity

### I. Social background and Causes of grand-parenting

#### 1.1. The Inheritance and Succession of Historical Traditions

From ancient times to the present, Confucian culture has emphasized the importance of filial piety, as reflected in the classics of Confucianism. Confucius himself taught that when serving one's parents, one should respectfully advise them on their shortcomings. If their advice is not taken, one should still treat them with respect and avoid disobedience. One should only grieve silently in one's heart, without complaining<sup>[2]</sup>. Influenced by the ethical and moral family culture of Confucianism, grandparents have had the right to speak in family education since ancient times. With the wave of reform and opening up, a large number of young adults have migrated to the southeast coast, leading to a direct change of the grandparents' discourse on family upbringing to a dominant one in less economically developed rural areas.

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## **1.2. Accelerated Population Aging and Increased Pressure on Families**

China's economy and society are undergoing a period of structural transition, characterized by a change in fertility attitudes, an increase in one-child families, and a 4-2-1 (four elderly, two parents, one child) family structure. With the adjustment of fertility policies, the economic pressure on parents in the middle tier of the 4-2-2 and 4-2-3 family structures has increased significantly. As parents in the middle tier, they need to take responsibility for the top and the bottom, resulting in a dramatic increase in pressure. To relieve the burden on the young, the elderly takes the initiative to assume the responsibility of raising their grandchildren.

## **1.3. The Impact of the Living Environment**

In rural areas, the elderly and children are the main groups left at home. The economic conditions in the western region are underdeveloped, and a large number of laborers have left their hometowns to work in the eastern coastal region, leaving their children behind. The urban-rural and inter-provincial binary household registration system restricts children's opportunities to attend school, and the high threshold for public education forces children to complete their education in their hometowns.

## **II. Characteristics of Rural Young Children's Grand-parenting**

### **2.1. Breadth and universality**

In the vast rural areas, especially the less economically developed regions in the west, grand-parenting is widespread, and the phenomenon of elderly people taking care of their grandchildren is common. In recent years, rural kindergartens have been closed, and children have to go to school in the nearest town. The elderly, as chaperones, either rent a room in town to live or pick up the children. Every day, grandparents pick up and drop off their children at the kindergarten gate on time, with mostly gray-haired elderly people.

### **2.2. Long-term and Stability**

Due to financial constraints, parents find it challenging to go home to take care of their children, and they can only send their living expenses to the family every month. To provide their children with a better living environment, parents often save on food and clothing and work outside all year round. Grandparents have to continue to take care of their grandchildren after they finish kindergarten and into elementary and junior high school, which spans a considerable period of time. Such a situation is unlikely to change for a long time and will continue to exist.

### **2.3. Inefficiency and Sentimentality**

Influenced by the value ideology, literacy level, and education style of grandparents, Grand-parenting education has significant differences in educational effects compared to parent-child education. Grandparents' low knowledge and culture may hinder children's study tutoring, and they may not guide children well in terms of developing reading interest and study habits. Grandparents tend to judge children's right and wrong based on their likes and dislikes, which is subjective and may be accompanied by strong personal feelings.

## **III. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Grand-Parenting**

### **3.1. Advantages of Grand-Parenting**

Rural grandparents possess valuable life experience and knowledge in child-rearing that enable them to have a significant say in the upbringing of young children. They typically have more free time and can dedicate themselves to the care of their grandchildren. Grandparents who have successfully raised their own children often possess a unique set of skills that have been developed through practical experience. Although grandparents may have a more old-fashioned view of parenting, their love for their grandchildren remains the same as that of their parents. Therefore, young parents should not dismiss the grand-parenting work of their elders, and should step back and consider the following three major advantages of grand-parenting when conflicts arise:

#### **3.1.1 Experience Advantage**

Grandparents have encountered many challenges in the process of raising their own children, and have witnessed and participated in their children's growth from infancy to adulthood. As a result, they have accumulated valuable experience in raising children, including both successful experiences and failures. Although some of these experiences may be outdated, the lessons learned from grandparents are still useful in terms of children's health and moral behavior.

#### **3.1.2 Patience Advantage**

Raising children requires significant patience, and young parents may be overwhelmed by the pressure of survival and anxiety surrounding child-rearing. Grandparents, on the other hand, typically possess more patience to reason with their grandchildren as they navigate the challenges of life and reach a more stable and peaceful time in their lives.

#### **3.1.3 Time Advantage**

Many young parents are workers who leave early and return late, or they are living far away from their families. In contrast, most grandparents are retired and have more time on their hands. Many grandparents regret not having had more time to educate their own children when they were younger and are eager to make up for lost time with their

grandchildren. In the process of educating their grandchildren, grandparents may also re-experience the joys of life and enrich their own lives.

The grandparent generation often has a more traditional view of child-rearing, while the parent generation may have a more modern perspective. These differences in child-rearing ideas and practices can cause disagreements and conflicts between the two generations.

## **3.2 Disadvantages of Grand-Parenting**

### **3.2.1. Negative impacts on character building**

Grandparents tend to be conservative in their thinking, always prioritizing safety and expressing worry about their children being knocked around. They are often in a state of fear and trepidation, reprimanding their children for playing and running around. At home, grandparents may not let their children do what they are capable of and instead follow their children's ideas, praising their every move, which can lead to the development of a selfish character and disregard for the feelings of others, hindering the formation of a sound personality<sup>[3]</sup>. Grandparents may also be too lenient with their children, lack daily work training for them, and view dismantling toys as naughty behavior, all of which may hinder their children's independence and innovative development. When grandparents scold children, they may become "obedient," lose their energy, and become introverted<sup>[4]</sup>. While grandparents have rich social and life experiences and have more time and patience to take care of their children's food, clothing, housing, and health, their values, lifestyle, knowledge structure, and education may differ from those of modern society. Additionally, grandparents are bound to have the physical and psychological characteristics of older people, which may have some negative effects on the personality development of young children<sup>[5]</sup>.

Excessive indulgence and accommodation tend to make children develop a sense of "self-centeredness" and form bad personalities such as selfishness and capriciousness. As people tend to love their children more in their old age, they may fall into unprincipled accommodation and indulgence. Facing the third generation of only children, grandparents may have psychological scruples, fearing that their children will blame them if they make mistakes. Thus, they may put their children at the core of everything, following them in everything and surrounding them everywhere. Even if the child makes a mistake, grandparents may not correct it in time, and the child's unreasonable desires are often met without principle. For example, in the area of food, grandparents may have more time to take care of the child's diet, resulting in one or two special dishes for the child on the table. Early childhood is a self-centered psychological stage, and indulgence by grandparents may lead to the illusion that everyone must listen to them, and that they will cry if they don't get what they want. Whenever this happens, the elderly may try to coax the child out of fear that they will cry. Over time, children may learn that capricious behavior such as spilling and throwing tantrums can help them achieve their goals. The overprotection of grandparents may stifle the development of children's independence and self-confidence, increase their dependence, and turn them into greenhouse flowers that cannot withstand the real world<sup>[6]</sup>.

Mr. Chen Hechen's quote, "Let your child do whatever he can do by himself", is a recommended approach to cultivate children's independence, self-care ability, and sense of responsibility. In practice, many grandparents tend to take charge of their children's lives. They sort out toys when their children scatter them, carry their children up and down the stairs when they move around, and feed them when they eat. These actions may result in slow motor development, poor independent living skills, and increased dependence on parents. Moreover, children may lack the confidence to solve problems when faced with difficulties or unmet requests and may experience negative emotions such as anger and dissatisfaction.

Traditionally bound, grandparents tend to prioritize food, clothing, housing, and transportation and may disregard children's inquisitive nature by not answering their numerous questions. Furthermore, their thinking patterns and lifestyles may be fixed, making it challenging to keep up with social development and conceptual renewal. Consequently, they may not be effective in guiding children creatively and scientifically, and may suppress children's risky and innovative exploratory behaviors, such as destructive and experimental behaviors. Yet, these are manifestations of children's creative behavior in exploring the characteristics of things. Lack of awareness and inappropriate educational methods could hinder children's development of positive qualities such as love of work and humility. While grandparents value education, they tend to emphasize reading and counting and may overlook the scientific key learning periods. When children express the desire to work, grandparents may prevent them from doing so because they think the children are in the way or fear that the children may get tired<sup>[7]</sup>. This hinders children's enthusiasm for work and stifles their sense of work, causing them to become reluctant to engage in tasks. Moreover, when children have disputes with peers, grandparents may favor their children without offering scientific guidance on right and wrong. In summary, grandparents' traditional mindset and fixed ways of thinking and living can impede children's development of essential skills and positive qualities. They need to be aware of the scientific approaches to guiding children and adapt to changing social and conceptual trends to ensure optimal child development.

### **3.2.2. Negative impacts on psychology**

Young children stay with older people for a long time and are susceptible to the influence of older minds. Grandparents have limited energy due to their age and prefer to be quiet and do not like to go out and walk around. Young children and grandparents together also tend to become like solitary, interpersonal relationship is more difficult

to deal with, as if a "small adult" look, lose the children should be curious and active<sup>[8]</sup>. Young children are separated from their parents for a long time, and it is easy for them to kiss their grandparents and be alienated from their parents, even some children don't call their parents, the lack of father and mother's love causes children's childhood to be gray, which is not conducive to a harmonious family atmosphere. Some parents believe in feudal superstition and unconsciously instill bad superstitious ideas in their children. By the time they go to kindergarten, they put their children's development on kindergarten teachers and elders, thinking that as long as this is the case, the children will get good development, which makes grand-parenting has become a more common strange phenomenon in family education<sup>[9]</sup>.

However, the task of grand-parenting is not as simple as parents who have no time for their children think. From the reality around us, we often see scenes of incongruent age and behavior, lagging in social development, often self-centered, hogging and scrambling completely, often quarreling with peers, throwing tantrums to vent their discontent at the slightest dissatisfaction; or often screaming, rolling on the ground, dropping things to get adults' attention, etc. These are all related to the way children are raised in families. These are all closely related to the way children are raised at home.

Compared with parenting, intergenerational education has revealed some drawbacks that cannot be ignored and should be highly valued and discussed. Grandparents mostly show love for children, unconditionally meet the needs of children, can tolerate the child's nature, the child's mental environment is greatly relaxed, no pressure, extreme freedom, providing them with the opportunity to imitate, explore. However, in terms of psychological development the child's psychological needs cannot replace the child's parents, and the child's emotional attachment to the parents cannot be met, making intergenerational education unsatisfactory for the child's psychological health development. When the child has some bad behavior habits, such as hitting, randomly turning things over, losing temper, being rude, dropping things, being rude to others, grandparents are often not too concerned about these behaviors, whether the child listens or not, whether there is improvement is not concerned, can put forward rules but do not put them into practice. Some elderly people even think that children are small nothing, quite interesting, the tree nature is straight, the child where all good, do not recognize the child's psychological problems, not the correct guidance to the child's problems.

### **3.2.3 Lack of responding care**

The early childhood stage is a critical period for children's development and enlightenment, encompassing key elements such as language, movement, direction, color, and personality development. This stage is crucial for future growth and success<sup>[10]</sup>. However, rural grandparents, who generally have a low level of education, are unable to provide after-school tutorials for their families, leaving children in a free-range situation in terms of learning and education. As a result, children rely solely on their self-awareness and ability to comprehend and understand. Unfortunately, grand-parenting lacks an understanding of the laws of early childhood development, failing to follow the nature and developmental characteristics of young children. Intergenerational parents also tend to neglect taking advantage of young children's active, playful nature to guide their early development. Early reading is guided by children's playful nature<sup>[11]</sup>. Although children's intelligence is inseparable from their genetic inheritance, the training and guidance they receive later in life is crucial to their intellectual development. Children possess an innate curiosity about things and always like to ask "why." In parent-child education, parents can explain well and provide their children with interest and inspiration during parent-child interaction. This is conducive to the child's intellectual development. However, grandparents, in general, pay less attention to their children when they are within sight, engage in more "parallel" activities, communicate less verbally, play less with their children, attend to their children's needs only when they ask for it, and pay less attention to their children's psychological development. They do not understand what their children think, nor do they pay much attention to their children's emotional changes. Furthermore, they believe that if the child does not cry or get sick, the child is fine, failing to recognize the importance of psychological development in early childhood.

### **3.2.4 Unbalanced Diet Habits**

In the eyes of grandparents, a meal is considered well-cooked, clean, and rich, and children can eat whatever they like. Such a perspective is problematic as young children are in the stage of development and growth, with high demands for nutrition. The digestive and absorption ability of young children is weak, and their dietary needs differ from those of adults. Unbalanced nutrition in their diet, due to absorption problems, can lead to malnutrition and excess uncontrolled intake of fat and sugar, leading to obesity and poor physical fitness<sup>[12]</sup>. Rural grandparents are often not systematically trained and may not know how to match a diet rationally. Due to their poor learning ability, they may not understand the nutrients contained in vegetables, eggs, and meat, including the lack of vitamins, calcium, iron, zinc, and other essential elements required for human body performance. This lack of knowledge may lead to difficulty in preparing nutritionally balanced meals, affecting the absorption of nutrients and hindering the physical development of young children.

## **IV. Paths to the Optimization of Grand-Parenting**

### **4.1 Teaching According to the Material and Paying Attention to the Individual**

Teaching according to students' ability means that teachers should tailor the depth, breadth, and pace of instruction to suit students' knowledge level and ability to learn, while considering their individual characteristics and personal differences, so that each person's talents and character can be developed optimally. Implementing teaching according to students' abilities in effective teaching is of great practical importance for cultivating innovative talents who can adapt to the needs of the times. Teaching according to ability is not only for teachers, but also for guiding rural grandparents on how to raise their children based on what they have learned, bringing education into the family, and providing different methods of education for different students.

According to Montessori, "the most important stage of life is not in college, but from 0 to 6 years old because it is during this stage that human intelligence is formed. Not only intelligence, but also psychological stereotypes are completed at this stage"<sup>[13]</sup>. Each child has a different family environment and different learning and cognitive abilities. Kindergarten teachers should assess the situation of children raised by intergenerational payments, understand their interests and strengths, and provide targeted daily instruction and management.

The concept of effective teaching originated from the Western scientific movement of teaching in the first half of the 20th century, which emphasized that teaching is an individualized behavior of teachers and advocated that the factors affecting the teaching process are complex and the teaching results are rich. It provides the theoretical support and practical guarantee for the transformation from a "teaching classroom" to a "learning classroom," where teachers understand the specific situation of children's families and provide positive guidance according to their actual situation.

### **4.2 Strengthen Communication and Unify Ideas**

Home and school cooperation is the only way to optimize the efficiency of education. Kindergartens need to keep in touch with parents to provide feedback on their child's attendance in school and inquire about the child's situation at home. Children often spend extended periods with their grandparents, which may lead to a strained relationship between the child and their parents. Therefore, parents should visit or call their children regularly to demonstrate their love and care, while grandparents should educate children about their parents' hard work and emphasize the importance of respecting and honouring them. In the education of young children, grandparents and fathers should leverage the traditional advantages of grandparents and incorporate new ideas from fathers to improve the education process continually. They should also cultivate children scientifically and pay attention to their moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and social development. As parents, they should create a healthy and relaxed family environment, which will foster psychological development and a happy learning environment for children<sup>[14]</sup>. A relaxed environment will enable children to relax both physically and mentally, provide ample space for physical and mental activities, promote integrated relationships among children, and reduce tension. A relaxed environment includes sufficient activity materials, a bright and spacious activity space, less restrictive requirements, and more encouraging words. Research indicates that families' contributions to children's development in the preschool stage exceed that of early childhood education institutions. Therefore, leveraging the educational role of families, improving parents' educational abilities, establishing a harmonious, consistent, and complementary relationship among the general environment of kindergarten, family, and community co-education, playing a synchronous and co-educational role in young children's growth and education, and realizing co-education between families are critical tasks in building high-quality rural early childhood education. First, publicity and study should be leveraged to improve teachers' intergenerational family education guidance levels so that all teachers recognize that studying intergenerational education can enhance the quality of education and teaching in their school. Second, grandparents should be guided to frequently communicate with their children to promote the healthy growth of their minds, which is vital for their overall well-being. Grandparents should listen carefully to their children and avoid imposing their ideas on them. Finally, grandchildren should be guided to enhance their studies and improve their cultural literacy and educational ability. The importance of grand-parenting is increasingly being recognized, and intergenerational education guidance should capitalize on its strengths and avoid its weaknesses to empower every intergenerational parent with the knowledge to help their later generations grow up healthily. This will ensure that all our children can be happy and healthy. It is most important for grandparents and fathers to collaborate in educating young children to foster their healthy development.

### **4.3 Activities to Enhance Quality**

Kindergartens can carry out teaching and observation activities to involve parents, using modern education models to inculcate and persuade parents to change their backward ideology. This approach can help parents appreciate the superiority of modern early childhood education models and agree with and approve of teachers' education. Such efforts can build a trusting relationship between intergenerational parents and kindergarten teachers. Intergenerational education parent schools should be established, and excellent teachers and experts selected to teach. This approach can help intergenerational parents learn how to use small things in life for education and counseling. Parents can learn to treat their children with a rational attitude, distinguish the boundary between spoiling and loving, let go of their children to do something, and cultivate their children's sense of independence fully.

#### 4.4 Respect the Law and Build a Home Together

Rules govern the education of young children, and only through effective interface and cooperation between kindergartens and parents can the best environment for the healthy growth of children be provided. Kindergartens need to put more effort into children to compensate for the lack of education and counseling functions of intergenerational parents. Parents of the children should regain the responsibility of supervising the education of their children, so as to build a closed-loop structure of two-way parent-kindergarten communication and help children become better adults. Early childhood children have a strong ability and desire to imitate, and the role model role of parents can provide good guidance, which is far-reaching in terms of children's value orientation and character formation. Early childhood teachers can incorporate character education in games and stories to teach children about traditional culture and Chinese manners in a light-hearted and humorous way.

#### 4.5 Facing Conflicts and Resolving Them

In the process of socialization of young children, as their circle of interaction gradually expands, the focus of their external relationships shifts from parent-child relationships to peer relationships. They often experience conflicts of various kinds in their interactions and activities with peers. In conflicts between children and peers, many parents worry that their children are at a disadvantage and do not feel comfortable letting their toddlers solve problems independently. In kindergartens, the development of young children may suffer when they face common conflicts. However, excessive conflicts among young children can lead to various psychological disorders, which requires seeking appropriate ways to channel them.

Early childhood teachers' educational targets are young children. Because young children, especially small children, cannot distinguish right from wrong and often have trouble distinguishing between falsehood and reality, teachers must pay attention to observing the performance of young children and understanding the real situation in a timely manner to carry out targeted education. Young children's minds are still fragile and inexperienced, and their dependence on adults is particularly strong. Therefore, when they encounter problems they cannot solve on their own, they often rely on teachers for help. However, teachers can guide them to solve problems by themselves as much as possible, so that they can exercise their problem-solving skills and reduce the workload of teachers.

Conflicts arising between young children in kindergartens can be dealt with internally, while conflicts arising from schooling and family education require cooperation and coordination among multiple parties to resolve. The negative effects of grand-parenting can be minimized by facing up to the problem of rural grand-parenting, strengthening the ties between schools and grandparents, and guiding grandparents to sort out the scientific concept of parenting.

#### Conclusion

Early childhood is a critical period for rapid development across various domains, including language, cognition, emotion, motor, and social skills. Providing high-quality early care and education can enhance children's future human capital and promote social equity. To optimize grand-parenting, the society should adopt the "government guidance, family focus, and multi-participation" approach, creating a societal atmosphere and environment that values scientific family parenting and interrupts intergenerational transmission of poverty. This can enhance people's well-being and access, and improve grand-parenting services. Improving parenting service capacity and providing high-quality scientific parenting and intellectual stimulation for infants and toddlers is strategically important for China to enhance the quality of its population, transform from a large population country into a strong human resource country, and increase national competitiveness.

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