

ACA News

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Little support for Hong Kong's elderly carers who are being 'taken for granted'

The alleged murder of a six-year-old boy has raised concerns about the adequacy of support services in the city

The grandmother of an autistic boy is brutally honest about her frustrations at being his carer in her twilight years.

"There were times when I wanted to choke him and commit suicide afterwards ... he could make me so annoyed that I wanted to chop him into pieces," the grandmother of nine-year-old Tsz-yan said.

The 69-year-old has been the main carer of the boy since he was diagnosed with autism at the age of two. The boy's parents are divorced, with his mother leaving soon after learning of her son's disorder.

"One day feels like 26 hours to me. I have no personal space, no time for a break and no one to complain to," said the grandmother, who asked not to be named.

As Hong Kong's population rapidly ages the plight of senior citizens who act as parents to their grandchildren cannot be ignored, experts said.



This comes as a 52-year-old woman was charged with the [murder of her six-year-old grandson](#) this month. The child was believed to have had special educational needs, raising concerns about the adequacy of support services in Hong Kong.

"My grandson's welfare depends on the length of my life, but at this age, I am a person with no tomorrow. So I want to speak up for all parenting grandparents," Tsz-yan's grandmother said.

All her life, she said, she had acted as a carer, bringing up six children.

Heidi Pang Wei-sum has supervised a support centre for families with grandparents acting as parents since the Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service rolled out the four-year Project Legacy in 2016.

Pang's project served 80 clients last year, among whom 11 were taking care of grandchildren from broken marriages and 21 got no help from families, friends or communities.

"Grandparenting [in Hong Kong] has been taken for granted," Pang said.

"People seem to have forgotten the importance of supporting them."

Tsz-yan's grandmother still remembered the family's despair when they learned the boy had autism.

"No one could tell us – not even the staff at the assessment service centre – what to do next," she said.

She decided she had to get a proper education for the boy, herself, and his father and stepmother.

"I took Tsz-yan to three training sessions every week when he was in kindergarten, which cost us HK\$3,600 per month. I went to all kinds of workshops for parents like us. I brought my son and daughter-in-law along so they now have learned to accept and help Tsz-yan," the grandmother said.

"But taking the first step [to get resources and training] would have been so difficult were it not for the help of my friends and then the social workers."

The boy is "now doing fine at school", she added.

Pang said it was very difficult for service providers like her centre to identify the areas most in need of help because of a lack of relevant data.

The Social Welfare Department did not have statistics on grandparenting, a spokesman said.

In 2004, a Department of Health community survey on parenting found that 33.4 per cent of the 942 parents polled used grandparents as carers. Another study jointly conducted by Baptist University and the Boys' and Girls' Clubs Association in 2010 estimated 40,000 families relied on grandparenting.

Pang identified four major challenges in grandparenting.

"First, shortage of physical strength. Second, anything related to school work can be a headache, especially when the grandchildren have special education needs. Third, management of a child's emotions is not easy. Fourth, grandparents themselves may suffer from emotional [problems], especially for those divorced, or whose children have divorced," Pang said.

Some of the participants in Pang's project often blamed themselves for their children's marriage problems, and considered taking care of the third generation an act of "redemption".

Such mental burdens could be passed to the children, Pang said.

The identification of a child's special needs and search for rehabilitation services are more likely to be neglected and delayed in single parent families, according to Lee Yu-po, supervisor of the Single Young Mothers project operated by Against Child Abuse.

"Age zero to five is the golden period for rehabilitation but single mothers, and parenting grandparents, might be more likely to miss the chance due to lack of support," Lee said.

In March 2016, the Social Welfare Department rolled out a pilot project on childcare training for grandparents which conducted 27 courses provided by nine appointed NGOs to 589 participants.

The scheme ends on Saturday. The department's spokesman said it would "map out the way forward" after reviewing the project's effectiveness.



Pang said the project should be continued, normalised and expanded to serve grandparents looking after children aged above six. She also called on the government to provide more respite services and community childcare services for parenting grandparents. "For many, time to rest is more needed than training because they are old and physically weak."

Lee suggested voluntary visiting services be further improved as the city does not have enough social workers. "With a bigger and more systematic volunteer network, we may be able to identify families at risk earlier, instead of rushing to help only after a meltdown."

Reference:

<http://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/community/article/2138844/little-support-hong-kongs-elderly-carers-being-taken>