

The role of the grandmother: child-rearing assistance from grandmothers supporting the process of becoming a mother

Sumi Misawa¹, Kazumi Nakayama¹, Michiko Machiura²

¹ Department of Nursing, Niigata University of Health and Welfare, Niigata, Japan

² School of Nursing, Osaka Prefecture University

Key words : grandmother's role, mother, child-rearing support

Abstract

Purpose: Despite the increasing nuclearization of the family in Japan, a great deal of support for child-rearing is provided by the mother's mother and mother-in-law. Therefore, the present study analyzed the current state of support for child-rearing by grandmothers in order to provide basic data for midwives to enable them to provide continuous family support from the perinatal period to child-rearing and from menopause through to old age. This study aimed to clarify the situation of mothers raising children with help from grandmothers as well as the support needs of mothers during child-rearing and those of grandmothers supporting mothers. **Methods:** Data were collected using semi-structured interviews conducted on 13 mothers raising children with support from a three-generation family or a grandmother living nearby and four grandmothers who were supporting mothers. **Results & Discussion:** Mothers raising children with support from grandmothers perceived a difference in child-rearing knowledge between themselves and the grandmothers and felt confusion and difficulty regarding coping with these differences. Mothers who were able to cope and overcame the confusion and difficulties tended to have a positive approach to child-rearing. Both mothers and grandmothers had needs regarding child-

rearing support. However, the resolution of differences between mother and grandmother regarding child-rearing requires the facilitation of child-rearing support by grandmothers and fulfillment of the support needs of both mothers and grandmothers. **Conclusions:** The present findings indicate the necessity of continuous involvement of midwives in child-rearing support for both mothers raising children and grandmothers supporting mothers.

Introduction

Despite the increasing nuclearization of the family in Japan, a great deal of support for child-rearing is still provided by the mother's mother and mother-in-law. Utilization of grandmothers' wealth of child-rearing experience is an important source of private child-rearing support, in particular during the breastfeeding and early infantile periods [1]. In many regions of Japan, it is common for primigravida to return to their family home before birth or for the early postpartum period. Furthermore, in the modern age, due to advancements in transportation services, it is also possible for the mother's mother and mother-in-law to stay at the new mother's home to help. Over 60% of mothers ask their own mother to provide personal care after the birth of their first child, and the mother's

Corresponding author: Sumi Misawa

Department of Nursing, Niigata University of Health and Welfare, 1398 Shimami-cho, Kita-ku, Niigata 950-3198, Japan

Telephone/Fax: +81-25-257-4562, E-mail: misawa@nuhw.ac.jp

mother plays a central role in providing support at the birth of their first grandchild. Thus, the traditional Japanese custom of returning to the family home for the birth continues today, despite the fact that is considered problematic medically and from the perspective of paternal role acquisition [2]. This confirms that the grandmother is an important presence during the initial period of motherhood. In other words, even in modern-day Japan, with the increase in family nuclearization, the grandmother is important for maternal child-rearing [3]. However, little research has investigated the situation regarding child-rearing and related support for mothers provided by grandmothers who raised children in a different era.

Child-rearing and related support can be perceived as life issues for women and the role of midwives is important in addressing such family-related issues. Therefore, in the present study, we analyzed the current state of child-rearing support provided by grandmothers in order to collect basic data for midwives to enable them to provide continuous family support from the perinatal period to child-rearing and from menopause through to old age.

Purpose

The aims of the present study were to clarify the situation of mothers raising children with help from grandmothers as well as the support needs of mothers during child-rearing and those of grandmothers who are supporting mothers.

Methods

1) Subjects

The subjects of this study were (i) child-rearing mothers living in three-generation households or receiving support from family members living nearby; and (ii) grandmothers providing child-rearing support to mothers.

2) Data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews using interview guidelines. Interview questions addressed the following issues: (i) parenting support needs of the mothers and details of actual child care support received; (ii) awareness of perception gaps regarding parenting issues between family members and the nature of these issues; and (iii) psychological struggles or problems associated with parenting.

3) Data analysis

Data were analyzed through qualitative inductive analysis. The results of the qualitative inductive analysis were categorized based on the content of the responses.

4) Ethical considerations

Potential participants were given a written document explaining the study, including the purpose and methods of the study, the dissemination of the study results and such ethical considerations as the protection of privacy. Consent to participate was confirmed with a signed written consent form. The protocol of the study was approved by the ethics committee of our affiliated university.

Results

1) Subjects

(1) Among the 13 mothers who participated in this study, 9 were full-time homemakers and 4 were working mothers. The mean age was 32.6 years. Ten child-rearing mothers were living in three-generation households and 5 mothers were receiving child-rearing support from grandparents living nearby (Table 1).

(2) Among the 3 grandmothers who participated in this study, 2 were living apart from their married daughters and were supporting them in child-rearing. One grandmother was living together with her son and wife and their

Table 1. Summary of characteristics of mothers

Mother	Age	Occupation	Family members	Primary childrearing supporter	Location of residence of childrearing supporter, etc.
A	Early 30s	Full-time clerical work	5 members [husband, self, child (2 yrs. & 2 mon.), mother- and father- in-law]	Mother-in-law	Parents living 30 minutes drive away
B	Late 20s	Full-time homemaker	3 members [husband, self, child (1 yr. & 5 mon.)]	Parents (mother and father)	In-laws and parents living nearby
C	Late 20s	Helping with parent's family business (ex-lawyer)	3 members [husband, self, child (3 yrs.)]	Parents (mother and father) and grandmother	
D	Late 40s	Full-time homemaker	4 members [husband, self, child (3 yrs.), mother]	Mother	Living with daughter
E	Late 30s	Full-time clerical work	5 members [husband, self, child (2 yrs.), mother- and father-in-law]	In-laws (mother- and father-in-law)	Parents living 60 minutes drive away
F	Late 20s	Full-time homemaker	4 members [husband, self, child (2 yrs. & 2 mon.), child (7 mon.)]	Grandmother	Parents and grandparents living in a separate annex building on the same property
G	Early 20s	Full-time homemaker	8 members [husband, self, child (4 yrs.), child (2 yrs.), mother- and father-in-law, brother-in-law, grandmother-in-law]	Grandmother-in-law	Parents and grandparents living 20 minutes drive away
H	Early 40s	Full-time homemaker	5 member [husband, self, child (2 yrs. & 7 mon.), mother- and father-in-law]	In-laws (mother- and father-in-law)	Parents living 30 minutes drive away

I	Late 30s	Full-time homemaker (was working 1 year ago)	4 members [husband, self, child (1 yr. 6 mon.), mother-in-law]	Mother-in-law and mother	Parents living 30 minutes drive away
J	Late 20s	Full-time homemaker (ex-part time worker)	7 members [husband, self, child (6 yrs.), child (4 yrs.), child (2 yrs.), mother- and father-in-law]	In-laws (mother- and father-in-law) and parents (mother and father)	Parents living within walking distance
K	Early 30s	Nurse	4 members [husband, self, child (6 yrs.), child (3 yrs.)]	In-laws (mother- and father-in-law) and parents (mother and father)	In-laws and parents living nearby. Until recently the family was living with the in-laws and sister-in-law.
L	Early 30s	Full-time homemaker	6 members [husband, self, child (2 yrs. & 7 mon.), child (6 mon.), mother- and father-in-law]	In-laws (mother- and father-in-law)	
M	Early 30s	Full-time homemaker	6 members [husband, self, child (2 yrs.), mother- and father-in-law, grandfather-in-law]	Mother-in-law	

grandchild and was participating in the grandchild’s child-rearing (Table 2).

2) *The mothers’ perspective on parenting circumstances while receiving parenting support from grandmothers*

The mothers expressed both positive and negative feelings about the grandmother’s involvement in parenting. Furthermore, the mothers were taking measures to deal with their negative feelings. The following four categories were extracted regarding the mother’s thoughts on parenting in a three-generation household: (i) *benefits to the child*, (ii) *benefits to the mother*, (iii) *hesitation due to a generation gap in*

parenting styles, and (iv) *difficulties in establishing the mother’s own style of parenting due to relationship issues with the mother-in-law*.

The category ‘benefits to the child’ included such responses as “living in a three-generation household is beneficial when considering the child’s lifestyle and development.”

- *I always think that children being raised in three-generation households are very fortunate. (A)*
- *From the child’s perspective, this is a good situation. (C)*
- *Children who live with their grandparents have a place to escape to. (D)*
- *It helps children to become sociable and able*

Table 2. Summary of characteristics of grandmothers

Grandmother	Age	Occupation	Family members	Who receives childrearing support?	Others
a	Late 50s	Home helper	2 members (husband, self)	Eldest daughter, child (2 yrs.), child (3 mon.)	Living 10 minutes away from her eldest daughter
b	Unknown	Full-time homemaker	3 members (self, daughter, son-in- law, grandchild)	Daughter	
c	Early 50s	Full-time homemaker	3 members (husband, self, mother-in-law)	Second daughter, child (7 yrs), child (4 yrs), child (3 yrs)	

to talk to anyone. (H)

In the ‘benefits to the mother’ category, there were such positive feelings about parenting in a three-generation household as “helpful when both parents are working,” “financially advantageous,” and “valuable as there are multiple hands in parenting”.

- *It is good that I am able to raise a child while interacting with neighbors. (E)*
- *My mother and grandmother taught me everything about child-rearing. (F)*
- *Relying on in-laws whenever possible and accepting their assistance is a means of life, which I am not resistant to. In fact, they take good care of my child and I appreciate it. (G)*
- *I am raising my child on my own, but financially, I live comfortably thanks to them. (G)*
- *It is reassuring that my in-laws keep an eye on my child when I do housework. (H)*
- *Even at times when we do not need their help, my in-laws willingly help us by preparing meals and such. I feel very fortunate, as they don't seem reluctant to help out. (H)*

Negative feelings were centered around relationships with mother-in-laws and other

members of the family. In the category ‘hesitation due to a generation gap in parenting styles,’ mothers expressed that “today’s parenting is different from what it was in the old days.”

- *My grandmother thinks that the old ways are right although parenting today is different from what it was in the old days. (C)*
- *A gap exists between my mother and myself, as our parenting styles are different. (D)*
- *Parenting today is different from what it was in the past due to a different social environment. (I)*
- *Child-rearing today differs from what it was in the past, which results in a large generation gap. (J)*

The category ‘difficulties in establishing the mother’s own style of parenting due to relationship issues with the mother-in-law’ included the following responses: “I need to pay attention to my mother-in-law”; “My mother-in-law is not considerate of my needs”; “It is exhausting being around her”; “It appears that I have freedom, but actually I do not”; “I cannot voice my opinions”; “She won’t listen to my parenting opinions”; “She won’t do things the way I expect”; and “She takes the lead on issues that I am not familiar with and she ends up getting her way.” The mothers expressed difficulties in establishing their own style of

parenting, depending upon the relationship with their mother-in-law.

- *First-time parenting was stressful, as I did not know how to raise a child and I also had to be attentive towards the in-laws. (I)*
- *Despite living together with the in-laws, I feel overburdened. My mother-in-law does not do any housework so I have to do it after I come home from work. It is very tiring but my mother-in-law would not give me any kind words or support. My mother-in-law seems displeased to be tied down babysitting for the whole day. (K)*
- *When my mother-in-law and I have different opinions, I put up a fight but I feel frustrated because at the end my mother-in-law gets her way. (I)*
- *My mother-in-law wants me to do exactly as she did since she succeeded in raising her children. She wants to raise her grandchildren just the way she raised my husband and my sister-in-law. (L)*
- *I feel negatively about my mother-in-law as I feel compelled to follow her advice when I struggle with first-time parenting. (A)*

The following categories were extracted: ‘passively deal with it within one’s self,’ ‘take preventative measures,’ and ‘actively seek solutions within the relationship.’

In the ‘passively deal with it within one’s self’ category, responses included such measures as “exercising patience”; “not voicing opinions to avoid trouble”; “processing the issue within one’s self by organizing one’s thoughts”; “visiting one’s parent’s home”; “going shopping”; “changing subjects”; and “doing things as one pleases when the mother-in-law is not around.” These responses indicate that some of the measures taken were unrelated to the problem.

- *Since I am the one asking for help, I do not interfere and try to avoid troubles. There is a part of me that internally tries to fine-tune my feelings. (A)*

- *I do not assert my views in front of my grandmother and I do as I please when she is not around. (C)*
- *My parenting philosophy differs from that of my grandmother-in-law. However, I have given up on insisting mine, as she just does not accept it. (G)*
- *I try to endure the stress to a certain extent. However, when it becomes intolerable, I try to distance myself from my in-laws. I also visit my parents, vent my frustrations, and return home refreshed. I try to release the stress little by little so that I won’t explode. (H)*
- *When I cannot process my feelings, I go shopping. (I)*
- *I try not to stay home on holidays. (K)*

The ‘take preventative measures’ category included a response of “not having idealistic expectations for the mother-in-law.”

- *My mother-in-law and I think differently. If I go about my daily life without expecting her to do anything, it is gratifying when she does something for me. It is therefore better not to have unrealistic ideals. Since my marriage, my mother-in-law and I have discussed and divided up the housework. It is desirable to state your parenting ideals early on. I try to voice my opinion whenever I feel the need rather than putting it off. (G)*
- *Using materials I collect at medical checkup, I update my mother-in-law on the current parenting norms and practices about various such issues as breast and formula milk, weaning food preparation, diaper choices, and babies that are not happy unless held.*
- *I convinced myself that I could not make it without help from my mother-in-law. (J)*

In contrast, the ‘actively seek a resolution within the relationship’ category included responses that actively engage the mother-in-law in finding solutions by such measures as

“proactively asking the grandmother’s opinion”; “exchanging opinions”; “making decisions together through discussions”; “communicating one’s wishes beforehand”; and “agreeing upon the division of roles at the beginning.” Furthermore, mothers who tended to ‘*proactively deal with issues within the relationship*’ had the tendency to positively view parenting and accept child-rearing support.

- *We express opinions face-to-face to pursue mutual understanding. When there is a health-related issue regarding my child, the two of us discuss it and come up with a solution. (E)*
- *I try to tolerate what I can and clearly express my opinion when I need to. Both sides should not get bogged down. (H)*
- *When we voice our opinion to each other, we should not say it all to prevent ruining the relationship. When I voice my opinion, I try to think of my mother-in-law’s feelings and choose my words carefully. When I make requests, I try to be attentive towards my in-laws’ health condition and feelings. (H)*

(3) *Parenting support needs of child-rearing mothers who are receiving support from grandmothers*

In order to meet their parenting needs, what the mothers hoped for from grandmothers was ‘*an improvement in the grandmother’s attitude regarding parenting support.*’ In other words, the mothers wanted the grandmothers to do the following: “give only advice and not be too involved in child-rearing”; “enroll in parenting classes for grandmothers and learn about current parenting skills and knowledge”; “accept differences in parenting styles”; “understand them (the mothers)”; “exchange information with other grandmothers”; and “develop interests in things other than the grandchild.”

- *Grandmothers should not be too involved in child-rearing and mere advice is sufficient. I would like her to attend ‘Parenting Classes for*

Grandmothers’ to learn how parenting environment today differs from that of the old days and acquire new sets of required skills. (D)

- *Interaction among grandmothers could help them understand today’s parenting styles. It would also help them find interests other than the grandchildren in the outside world and gather information about parenting grandchildren from the outside. (D)*
- *I would like meal times to be adjusted flexibly according to my children’s lifestyle pattern and their body growth and development. (I)*
- *I would like my mother-in-law to understand the difference in parenting styles. I would like her to understand what I am doing. (J)*
- *I wish to be acknowledged and appreciated for the work I do. (K)*

In terms of public support needs, the category ‘*need for instrumental support that meets the mother’s individual situation*’ was created. Responses included the following: “want better infrastructure and systems for parenting support service centers and childcare, respectively”; “need facilities that can look after children for short periods of time”; and “want opportunities to exchange information with people with different backgrounds.”

- *I encourage the use of public parenting support service centers. (I)*
- *As our parent’s generation is getting younger, even in three-generation households, there are times I wish my mother and mother-in-law would be more practical and take advantage of public parenting support services. (A)*
- *It would be helpful to have a person or a system to meet short-term needs that do not require putting the child into childcare. If parenting support centers could dispatch child minders for short periods of time, it would be beneficial. Support from female senior citizens in the neighborhood or employee-supervised playgrounds for children in supermarkets while*

mothers shop would also be helpful. (C)

In terms of the needs for professional service providers, the following categories were created: ‘need for specialists to educate grandmothers directly’ and ‘need for direct professional guidance to support the mother’s decision-making process.’ In the ‘need for specialists to educate grandmothers directly’ category, responses included wishes for “child-rearing classes for grandmothers” and “information brochures designed specifically for grandmothers.” The ‘need for direct professional guidance to support the mother’s decision-making process’ category included such wishes as “mothers want to talk to others, especially specialists” in the process of making their own decisions.

- *An information brochure on parenting grandchildren for grandmothers would be helpful. (D)*
- *Knowledge can be acquired through the Internet but I feel asking the opinion of a third person when making various parenting decisions is beneficial. I think we need to be able to ask a third person’s opinion, preferably a specialist in the field. (A)*

(4) The needs of grandmothers who support child-rearing

In terms of public support needs, the following categories were extracted: ‘need for instrumental support that meets each mother’s unique situations’ and ‘support need for grandmothers.’ In the ‘need for instrumental support that meets each mother’s unique situations’ category, responses included a request “for a childcare system that is flexible enough to provide long-hour child care to meet the needs of working mothers.”

- *A 24-hour child minding facility would be beneficial. (My daughter is a caregiver) (a)*
- *My daughter and my son-in-law are both working so they cannot raise the children*

without support. To respect my daughter’s wishes for family or relatives to help raise the children while they are young, I have taken leave from my job and I am fully supporting them. (a)

- *I watch the children as my daughter and son-in-law both work. (b)*
- *When my grandchild was born, we decided on each other’s role in parenting and I try to help to the best of my abilities. (b)*
- *It is not easy for my daughter to raise a small child while working. (c)*
- *I take care of my grandchildren when they are ill. I help by taking them to the doctor. I help with housework except cooking. (c)*

The ‘support need for grandmothers’ category included such needs as “opportunities for grandmothers to meet and exchange information” and “stress relieving opportunities.”

- *As a grandmother, I can comfortably and safely watch over the grandchildren. I like being able to bond with the children. (a)*
- *I acquire new knowledge and make discoveries in various ways: by taking my grandchild to day care prior to admission to compare my grandchild with others and to have the grandchild interact with others and observe how he would react; and by interacting with other grandmothers. (a)*
- *Looking after my grandchildren has brought many positive experiences, such as opportunities to communicate with my neighbors and harbor friendships. (c)*
- *It makes me very happy when my grandchildren tell me they love me very much. When my grandchildren rely on me, it makes me want to try hard. (c)*
- *When I am with my grandchildren, it makes me feel young and people praise me by saying that I look young. (c)*
- *It is stressful for grandmothers as well but a grandmother’s stress reliever is communicating and interacting with the neighbors. (a)*

- *Whenever we start getting irritated due to fatigue, we try to improve the atmosphere in the family through such measures as speaking to one another. (b)*
- *My daughter appreciates me. I have a positive and candid relationship with my daughter. (c)*

As for the needs for professional nursing services, a category termed ‘*need for specialists to educate grandmothers directly*’ was extracted. In this category, responses indicating a desire “for informational brochures designed specifically for grandmothers” and “to attend parenting workshops for grandmothers” were included.

- *My daughter has the responsibility as a parent so I take a third person’s perspective. Thus, I must adapt if there are disagreements over parenting. I discuss with my daughter issues on discipline and type of play and follow the way she likes. (a)*
- *Types of play, diet and weaning foods are different from the past. However, I simply try to accept and practice modern day parenting and make use of modern equipment and retort packed food. (a)*

Discussion

Mothers raising children with support from grandmothers perceived a difference in child-rearing knowledge between themselves and the grandmothers and felt confusion and difficulty regarding coping with these differences. Some mothers had methods for resolving the confusion and difficulty. Mothers who were able to cope tended to have a positive approach to child-rearing. This suggests that the ability to cope with confusion and difficulties is linked to positive maternal feelings about child-rearing. Both mothers and grandmothers had specific needs regarding child-rearing support. The resolution of differences between mother and grandmother regarding child-rearing requires the facilitation of child-rearing support by grandmothers and

fulfillment of the support needs of both mothers and grandmothers. Accommodation of these requirements allows the differences in perception between mother and grandmother to be overcome, achievement of a greater sense of satisfaction with child-rearing by mothers, and increased acceptance of the respective roles of mother and grandmother.

The mean lifespan of a woman in Japan is 86.05 years [4]. Furthermore, in Japan, the mean number of births for a woman who is expected to assume the role of a grandmother in the future is about 2. The birth rates for women giving birth to their first child at age 25 and the third child at around age 30 are high [5]. These figures reveal that a Japanese woman’s life after childbearing is more than 50 years. Furthermore, after a woman’s third child reaches adulthood, she is expected to live another 35 years. In other words, her life after child-rearing is almost as long as the number of years before she gives birth. This means that we can expect women in the early stages of their post-birth-and-child-rearing years to assume the role of grandmother and support the next generation of young mothers [6]. At the same time, midwife care and support to help maintain and promote the health of grandmothers are essential for assisting the mothers in the process of becoming mothers and supporting the subsequent child-rearing.

Conclusion

The present findings indicate the necessity of the continuous involvement of midwives in child-rearing support for both mothers raising children and grandmothers supporting mothers.

References

1. Miyanaka F. Midwifery care for childbirth and child-rearing: Human and environmental perspectives. *J Jpn Acad Midwif*. 2005; 19(1): 71-75.
2. Kobayashi Y. Assistance received from

- parturient' own mothers during 'Satogaeri' (their perinatal visit and stay with their parents) and development of the mother-infant relationship and maternal identity. *J Jpn Acad Midwif.* 2010; 24(1): 28-39.
3. Sakae R. One-month-old babies' mothers' maternal consciousness and attachment to their babies versus their child-care supporters. *Japanese Journal of Maternal Health.* 2006; 47(1): 81-88.
 4. Ministry of health, labour and welfare; 2008. Available from: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/life/life08/index.html> (in Japanese)
 5. Ministry of health, labour and welfare; 2010. Available from <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/toukei/saikin/hw/jinkou/suii10/dl/s02.pdf> (in Japanese)
 6. Miyanaka F. Relationship between mental health of aged women and their involvement in child-rearing: effectiveness on grandmothers. *J JSPOG.* 2001; 6(2):173-180.