Beyond the Nuclear:
Including the Wider Family
Foreword

I am delighted to be writing the foreword to this significant report.

The importance of grandparents to children can never be underestimated and the unique contribution they play in the lives of children cannot be overlooked. Of equal importance is the joy and unprecedented love that grandchildren bring to the lives of their grandparents.

This report highlights the tragic reality of what happens when children lose out on a relationship with grandparents after the separation of their parents. This is not only heartbreakingly for the grandparents, but also for the children and such loss can have a harmful influence on their future.

This report shows the need for government to address the importance of grandparents in future policy and legislation. It also demonstrates the need to amend the Children Act 1989 to remove the obstacle that requires the biological family to ask permission prior to making an application to the court for contact. It is time for the Government to harness the love and attention that Grandparents yearn to give to their families.

Let’s hope this report is the beginning of the reform that is so desperately needed.

Gloria Hunniford
There are estimated to be 14 million grandparents in the United Kingdom and it is expected that one third of the UK adult population will be a grandparent by 2020.

Research consistently suggests that grandparents are uniquely important to children and play a vital role in today’s changing society. They often provide childcare (in 2004 Age Concern put a value of £3.9 billion on the childcare contribution of grandparents) and stand-in as a parent if needed. They provide love, support and advice to children throughout their lives. They can teach them about a range of things from healthy eating to homework and they can be someone to talk to in the event of bullying.

It is estimated that a quarter of the 12 million children in the UK will experience the separation of their mother and father. At this very distressing time children need their grandparents to provide important help. They can be a confidante, an ally and essential support at a very difficult time.

Tragically, when parents separate these relationships sometimes suffer as a result of parental hostility. The Cabinet Office and the DCSF published a joint evidence paper in 2008 which demonstrates a change in the relationship between the grandparent and the grandchild after parents separate. The evidence shows that 6 out of 10 paternal grandparents reported feeling close to their grandchildren prior to separation but afterwards this changes to 3 out of 10. However, the opposite is true for maternal grandparents, as they feel closer to their grandchild after separation.
Two hundred and eleven people replied to recent research conducted by Families Need Fathers and The Grandparents’ Association. The research found that prior to the parents separating 55% of grandparents were directly involved in their grandchildren’s care. Following parental separation, those grandparent carers and their grandchildren found that their relationship was radically changed:

- 80% of children experienced a change in those childcare arrangements.
- 67% of grandparents found themselves excluded from providing care.
- 42% lost all face-to-face contact with their grandchildren.

Following research in 2007, The Centre for Research into Parenting and Children, part of the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at Oxford University, found that there was a link between involved grandparents and adolescent well-being. Their findings showed that children grow up happier if their grandparents are involved in their upbringing.

From the research recently carried out by Families Need Fathers and the Grandparents’ Association, grandparents frequently described being separated from their grandchildren as the worst experience of their lives. Words that were common in the research were traumatic, heartbreaking, humiliating, expensive, clueless and powerless.

Each week, Families Need Fathers and The Grandparents’ Association are contacted by many grandparents caught up in family breakdown who are desperate for help. The heartbreaking reality is that they have no automatic right to be included in the lives of their grandsons and granddaughters.

For 19 years, the Children Act 1989 has led to a de facto presumption against grandparents’ access to their own grandchildren. Grandparents must ask the court’s permission prior to making an application for contact. This barrier is incredibly stressful, it can prevent grandparents from going to court and it costs an ever increasing amount of money. This is an expense that many grandparents just can’t afford.

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In 2006 there were a number of debates in Parliament about the difficulties faced by grandparents in maintaining contact with grandchildren. The Government has argued that granting grandparents an automatic right to apply for contact might in some way impact on a child’s rights being paramount. We would ask how the child’s welfare can be considered or their rights protected if an application is not heard.

The Children Act 1989 grants an automatic right to apply for contact to any adult who has lived as part of the family for three years, or a separated step-parent. Grandparents are simply asking for the same basic rights. Even in the cases where grandparents are awarded contact, this contact can be broken. New powers granted within the Children and Adoption Act 2006 can go someway to improve this situation, and it is crucial that the judiciary make use of these powers.

The Government has argued that 'the leave requirement is a mechanism to filter out frivolous or vexatious applications'. There is no evidence to support the unsubstantiated fear that the courts would become overwhelmed with frivolous applications from grandparents. They forget that court applications are extremely expensive and stressful. These two factors alone prohibit many people from approaching the courts who otherwise should.

On 18 January 2006, Maria Eagle, then-Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Children and Families, assured the House that the Children and Adoption Act 2006 would cover contact for grandparents. It did not, and two years on nothing has changed.
Frequently, institutions like Cafcass and the Judiciary ignore how important grandparents are to children and leave them out of mediation investigations and the reporting process in court. The important childcare role that they provide is overlooked and their relationship breaks down. Current legislation allows for this but it rarely happens.

We call upon the Government:

• To amend the Children Act 1989 to remove the obstacle that requires the biological family to ask permission prior to making an application for contact and their case being heard.

• To ensure that both Cafcass and the Judiciary consider the important relationship between children and grandparents in the court process and when determining the future arrangements for the child.

• To ensure that in any policy guidelines, grandparents and the wider family should be explicitly named.

Over the last 10 years there has been greatly increased attention on the importance of the family. The Government has asked us to ‘Think Family’ and ‘Think Fathers’ and now we need to ‘Think Wider Family’. It is important that we take the action which is urgently required now.
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“humiliating”
“expensive”
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The Team at Finerday.com is delighted to sponsor this Paper.

Finerday was originally developed two years ago, by a care home manager, as a safe and easy to use platform to allow older people to be in touch with the rest of their family on the internet.

Its clear design and icons provide a unique simple to use family friendly environment to connect, share photos and memories, enjoy live video and video messaging, play interactive games with grandchildren and access the web. Seamlessly linking all the family, whatever their age or ability, to communicate online safely without the exposure and “open” nature of broad networks such as Facebook and MySpace.

We quickly realised that providing an easy to use, safe family environment, helps the whole family to keep in touch. Finerday also lets you see your own unique view of the family. Early testing showed that this allowed families to keep connected following, what could sometimes be, difficult divorces. For example, a child can still see both parents, grandparents and extended families on their family screen, but the families do not see each other. This allows the child to feel “connected”, especially in situations where contact with one side of the family is limited. The secure nature of using a closed environment also means that younger children can use this family system in safety.

We continue to support the Wider Family in partnership with FNF and The GA – Allowing Grandchildren and Grandparents to simply keep in touch.

Finerday would like to thank HP for providing the technology for the events surrounding this Paper. HP’s broad portfolio of home computing products enable users to simply and easily use the internet and enjoy connecting with family and friends.