

NATIONAL PARENTING

## Grandma forgoes retirement to care for four grandchildren

By Kimberley Le Lievre

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### Talking points

- Some grandparents are forgoing retirement to care for grandkids.
- An ANU project is helping strengthen carer's relationships with their charges.
- Kinship care is on the rise in Australia.

It's been 10 years since Mila Angcon refused to let her four grandchildren enter foster care, instead taking them into her own home.

The children were then aged between two and five years old.

"It was a shock to my system, to get four kids," she said.

Ms Angcon thought it would be for just a short time, but a decade later, she said the placement is permanent.

Ms Angcon is glad she made the decision, despite having to give up things including full time work and a peaceful retirement to look after the children.



Mila Angcon with two of her grandchildren Rebecca, 12, and Riley, 15, and their dog Malakai. JAMILA TODERAS

Ms Angcon is a kinship carer, similar to a foster carer except the children are relatives. Kinship carers can be grandparents, aunts or uncles, or family friends.

According to ANU Research School of Psychology lecturer and clinical psychologist Dave Pasalich, kinship care is on the rise in Australia.

He said placing a child with a carer from within their family or existing network can help maintain family ties and cultural connections.

But there is a gap in evidence-based support services for this community of carers. Dr Pasalich is implementing a research-based project tailored to kinship carers to help improve the way the carer relates to the child, to strengthen their relationship. The project aims to shed new, evidence-based light on an underserved area.

Partly funded by the Australian Research Council, the Connecting Kin research project is a modified version of a program that originated in Canada more than a decade ago. This is the first trial of the program in Australia.

Over nine weeks, carers learn to respond with a set of principles that can be flexibly applied to different children in many situations. The program has been modified specifically for children who have experienced trauma in the past, like being exposed to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse or maltreatment.

"This is important because every child in care has a unique story and pattern of relating to others," Dr Pasalich said.

"It's an attachment and trauma informed program. The overall aim is to strengthen the relationship between kinship carers and kids to promote resilience and wellbeing."

"Often when they come into this care they come from a background of trauma and they can present with confusing and challenging behaviour. The program is really to help carers understand that behaviour and the underlying attachment and emotional needs."

He said the idea was to benefit children who have had a difficult upbringing but who have a lot of potential.

Dr Pasalich said 15 families have participated in the program to date. The hope is to reach 60. The program will expand to foster parents in 2019.

Ms Angcon took part in the program in the first round. She said it was tremendously helpful.

"It's really helped me a lot. It helped me to understand and to be mindful of myself as well, about how I react around them," she said.

"I've learnt a lot about how to communicate with the children, and how to respect their personal space."

Ms Angcon said she's proud of the teenagers her grandchildren have grown into.

"They really are warm and very loving. They love me so much."

"Only this morning one said, 'I love you so much Grandma'."

Dr Pasalich is seeking participants to the study, formal and informal kinship carers. Kinship carers with children aged 8 to 16 years are invited to learn more by contacting 6125 2067 or emailing [dave.pasalich@anu.edu.au](mailto:dave.pasalich@anu.edu.au)



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