



# The impact of a residential camp on grandchildren raised by grandparents: Grandparents' perspectives



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## ABSTRACT

This research aimed to investigate grandparents' perspectives on the impact of *Leadership and Respite Camps*, designed for children being raised by their grandparents, on their grandchildren. In-depth interviews were conducted with 34 grandparents whose grandchildren had participated in 1 of 3 camps held between September 2018 and January 2019, in Perth and the south-west of Western Australia. Findings highlighted how grandcarers' perceived the camps created unique opportunities for grandchildren to share their experiences in a safe and supportive environment. Grandparents reported significant psychosocial benefits to their grandchild, including feeling they fitted in with their peers and were not alone in experiencing a difficult childhood and adolescence; gaining perspective on their situation and developing a new appreciation for their grandparents; being able to emotionally 'unblock' traumatic memories through the sharing of experiences in a safe and supportive camp environment; developing resilience, confidence and self-esteem through participation in challenging activities; and making new friendships. This research provides strong evidence that *Leadership and Respite Camps* designed for grandchildren being raised by their grandparents deliver significant psychosocial benefits to grandchildren, and offers a solid foundation to advocate for regular camps to address the needs of grandparent-led families.

## 1. Introduction

A growing number of children are living with grandparents, in situations where grandparents have assumed full-time responsibility for the care of their grandchildren. Grandparent care (grandcare) represents one of the fastest growing forms of out-of-home care for vulnerable Australian children (Horner, Downie, Hay, & Wichmann, 2007; McHugh & Valentine, 2011). The increase in grandcarer families is due to a range of social factors that have seen a rise in the number of children coming into care, including parental substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, child abuse and neglect (Backhouse & Graham, 2013; Baldock, 2007; Dunne & Kettler, 2007; Hay, Horner, Downie, & Wichman, 2007).

There are a number of benefits for children placed in kinship and grandparent care, including more stability and less disruption, less placement moves, ongoing connection between children and other family members, continuity of family identity and ties, more culturally appropriate placement experiences, and existing attachment relationships (Cuddeback, 2004). In the long-term, future costs are saved as children from functioning, supported families tend to function better as adults, and are more likely to participate in education and employment.

However, children who have been removed from their biological parents are also at risk of experiencing significant physical, psychosocial and developmental issues, especially if they have been exposed to adverse family arrangements (Merryman, Mezei, Bush, & Weinstein, 2012; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler, & Henderson, 2007).

With the numbers of grandparent carers (grandcarers) increasing, it is essential to ensure the ongoing support and service needs of this group are known and addressed in order to ensure the care and protection of grandcarers and the vulnerable children they care for. One initiative that may be relevant to support grandchildren, and by extension their grandcarers, is residential camps. This paper reports on research that investigated grandcarers' perspectives on the impact of *Leadership and Respite Camps*, designed for children being raised by their grandparents, on their grandchildren. These camps were held in urban and regional areas in the south-west of Western Australia (WA) in late 2018 and early 2019. The purpose of the camps was three-fold: (i) to provide grandcarers with respite; (ii) to promote inclusion and positive role models for grandchildren; and (iii) to build resilience and leadership skills amongst grandchildren.

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### 1.1. Challenges experienced by young people prior to placement in out-of-home care

Children and adolescents who are placed in out-of-home care, whether foster, kinship or grandparent care, are likely to have been exposed to adverse family situations prior to placement (Lin, 2018; Segal et al., 2019). This can include entrenched social and economic disadvantages, the death of one or both parents, parental substance use issues, parental separation, or parents' involvement in criminal activities and in some cases, incarceration (Gleeson et al., 2009; Leve et al., 2012; Segal et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that children who are exposed to these traumas are more prone to exhibit behavioral and personality disorders during adolescence and young adulthood (Björkenstam, Björkenstam, Jablonska, & Kosidou, 2018; Leve et al., 2012), and are more at risk of suffering psychosocial and health related issues in later life (Jääskeläinen, Holmila, Notkola, & Raitasalo, 2016; Raitasalo & Holmila, 2017). For example, children who have lived with a parent with substance use issues have an increased risk of experiencing sadness, worry, aggression, poor academic performance, low self-esteem, illness and injury (Schroeder, Kelley, & Fals-Stewart, 2006). Furthermore, parental substance use has also been associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), anxiety and depression (Osborne & Berger, 2009), as well as Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and learning disabilities. Regardless of causality, children and young people with a history of multiple childhood adversities should be regarded as a high-risk group for depression (Björkenstam, Vinnerljung, & Hjern, 2017).

### 1.2. Challenges experienced by grandcarer families

Given the circumstances that result in young people being placed in grandparent care, it is not surprising that grandchildren being raised by their grandparents are at increased risk of experiencing a range of issues that impact on their physical and psychosocial health and wellbeing (Brennan et al., 2013; Merryman et al., 2012; Thurber et al., 2007). This creates additional stress for grandcarers, many of whom are also struggling with their own health and emotional and financial challenges (Commonwealth of Australia, 2014). Grandcarer families are recognised as facing significant difficulties, including financial hardship, complex legal and financial issues, intra-familial dysfunction and conflict, and social isolation (Brennan et al., 2013; Commonwealth of Australia, 2014; Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997; Taylor, Coall, & Karthigesu, 2019). The role grandcarers undertake involves long-term and labour-intensive commitment, often exacerbated by age-related health issues, social isolation and economic hardship (Fuller-Thomson et al., 1997; Taylor, Marquis, Batten, & Coall, 2016; Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017). Limited access to respite services also heightens the risk of grandcarers neglecting their own health needs (Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017), and despite many grandcarers being embedded in social networks, few receive reliable support from family and friends (Gerard, Landry-Meyer, & Roe, 2006).

Despite these difficulties, there is evidence that grandcarers play a critical role in their grandchild's life (Coall, Hillbrand, Sear, & Hertwig, 2018). For example, Cox and Miner (2014) compared issues faced by grandchildren being raised by grandparents in two starkly different environments - New York and Tanzania - and found that regardless of geographical and cultural differences, grandchildren valued the love, support and attention they received from their grandparents. While some children struggled with poverty in their grandparents' households, they preferred living with their grandmothers than moving to another care facility (Cox & Miner, 2014). In addition, although grandcarers are presented with many challenges on a daily basis, emotional rewards such as having a sense of purpose, feeling needed, sharing activities and taking pride in grandchild(ren's) achievements have the capacity to balance the burden of care (Coall & Hertwig, 2010; Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2018).

### 1.3. Residential camps for vulnerable youth

One intervention that has proven effective in addressing the psychosocial needs of vulnerable young people is residential camps. In contrast to day camps, where young people participate during the day in camp activities, but sleep overnight with their family or caregivers, residential camps require young people to sleep over for the duration of the camp. Social interaction and peer bonding through camping can be beneficial for improving skills such as relationship building, self-control, self-help, communication, and promoting positive attitudes (Flynn, Ricker, Dolezal, Kunin, & Mellins, 2019). Camps have been found to play a major developmental role for vulnerable youth, in terms of forming caring connections through increasing awareness of commonalities and reducing social isolation; fostering feelings of reprieve and recreation through fun activities and a sense of freedom; and by increasing knowledge, attitudes, and skills, including conflict management, and disclosure (Gillard, Witt, & Watts, 2011). Moreover, these improved skills have been reported to be sustainable over an extended period of time, particularly for those who attend residential camps over multiple years (Flynn et al., 2019). These findings provide positive evidence that youth camps focused on improving social skills can be effective service programs for vulnerable populations (Flynn et al., 2019), such as young people being cared for by grandcarers. Significantly, as an intervention that supports the need for grandcarer respite as well as peer bonding for the grandchild, residential camps offer the potential to benefit grandcarer families more broadly.

### 1.4. Current study: Grandcarers' perspectives on Leadership and Respite Camps

In order to explore the effectiveness of a camp intervention for grandcarers and grandchildren in WA, *Leadership and Respite Camps* were co-developed by the university research team, in collaboration with Wanslea Family Services (Wanslea). Wanslea is a WA-based not-for-profit organisation with extensive experience in delivering services to grandcarer families in WA. The *Leadership and Respite Camps* are part of a larger project examining the lives of grandcarer families in WA that also included a state-wide quantitative survey of grandcarers, the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Survey* (n = 584) conducted in late 2018 to early 2019 (paper forthcoming). This survey was based on the *Grandcarer Needs, Experiences and Wellbeing* survey (Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017, 2018), and subsequently modified after consultation between a reference group of grandcarers, Wanslea and other service providers, and university collaborators.

Eligible grandcarers for this survey were those who were currently, or had previously had full-time care of their grandchildren. The survey could be completed online or in hard copy, and in addition, a researcher visited regional and remote areas of Western Australia to recruit Aboriginal grandcarers.

The impetus for selecting a residential camp as an intervention strategy were recommendations from previous qualitative research investigating the needs of grandparents caring for grandchildren in WA (Marquis, Coall, Taylor, & Werner, 2016), and an informal pilot camp for grandchildren raised by grandcarers held in 2016 (paper forthcoming). This previous research raised awareness of the critical need for grandcarers to be able to access respite, and provided evidence that grandchildren gained significant positive peer experiences through their participation at the pilot camp. These understandings led to the design of *Leadership and Respite Camps*.

The purpose of this paper is to report on the outcomes of qualitative research that investigated the impact of these camps from the grandcarers' perspectives. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are grandcarers' perceptions of any benefits or concerns resulting from their grandchild's participation in a *Leadership and Respite Camp*; and

2. What do grandcarers report their grandchildren had to say about their camp experience?

The rationale and design for these camps are detailed in the next section, in order to provide context to the findings of this qualitative research.

1.4.1. Leadership and Respite Camps

The goals of the *Leadership and Respite Camps* were to (i) provide opportunities for the grandchildren participants to develop personal skills and leadership qualities through a range of engaging and challenging activities; and (ii) to address grandcarers' need for an extended respite from the emotional and practical demands of caring for their grandchildren, through the provision of a residential camp. Given that many grandcarers cared for more than one grandchild, there was an option for siblings or cousins to attend a camp together, thus allowing grandcarers to have a real break from their grandcarer responsibilities.

In total, three *Leadership and Respite Camps* were delivered by Wanslea, each running for 4 days, and timed to coincide with school holidays. Two camps involved 16 grandchildren, and one camp involved 17 grandchildren, with the grandchildren aged from 12 – 18 years. In recognition of the lack of respite opportunities available to grandcarers living outside the Perth metropolitan area, two camps were conducted at different locations in the south-west of WA during January 2019, following the initial camp in Perth in September 2018. Demographic information on the grandchildren who participated in the *Leadership and Respite Camps* is provided in [Table 1](#).

The design of the *Leadership and Respite Camps* was based on [Merryman et al. \(2012\)](#) research. In their study of young people aged between 14 and 22 years of age, they found that vulnerable young people who are disempowered by their social and environmental situation can benefit from residential programs that promote skill development and resiliency within a safe and supportive environment. In this current research, a critical factor contributing to a safe and supportive camp environment was an awareness that many of the grandchildren had a history of trauma. As such, the *Leadership and Respite Camps* were designed through a 'trauma informed lens' which incorporated a range of strategies. For example, in the lead up to the camps, Wanslea staff spoke to grandcarers about any particular issues relating to their grandchildren they needed to be aware of, and care was taken when assigning staff and grandchildren to dormitories, and to small group activities, to maximise the chance of a 'good fit' between grandchildren and staff. The Wanslea staff who attended the camps also had an in-depth understanding of the impact of trauma, and understood there were reasons for these grandchildren's challenging behaviours,

**Table 1**  
Grandchildren demographic information.

Camper characteristics		(n = 49)	
		%	n
Gender	Male	52.2	25
	Female	47.8	24
Age	m		sd
	Range 12.00–17.75	14.4	1.5
School year	%		n
	Year 8	33.3	17
	Year 9	29.2	14
	Year 10	25.0	12
	Year 11	4.2	2
	Year 12	8.3	4
Ethnicity	Australian	70.8	35
	Australian-Aboriginal	22.9	11
	European	2.1	1
	New Zealand	4.2	2

fears and anxieties. They also appreciated and could respond to each grandchild's unique needs. In addition, the facilitators engaged to manage some of the activities had previously worked with Wanslea, had an understanding of trauma, and were aware that the grandchildren had trauma histories and may therefore display challenging behaviours. These strategies were supported through a relatively high staff to child ratio that enabled staff to provide individual grandchildren with extra attention or some timeout with a staff member when necessary.

The 'trauma-informed lens' also influenced the selection of activities, with arts-based activities and a yarning circle that took place around the campfire on one evening at each camp, included to provide a 'safe' space for grandchildren to share experiences and emotions. Yarning circles ([Dunleavy, 2013](#)) are common within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and are used to facilitate the sharing of personal stories through respectful dialogue. Integrating yarning circles into the camp structure was particularly relevant to the *Leadership and Respite Camps*, given the history of trauma experienced by many of the grandchildren, and the relatively high number of grandchildren who identified as Aboriginal (see [Table 1](#)). As Dunleavy observed about yarning circles, "through sharing and interweaving our understandings we may see a way to grow healing spaces with individuals and find healing pathways for groups and communities" (2013, p. 2).

The *Leadership and Respite Camps* were structured to include a range of activities that would appeal to a wide range of interests and be relevant to young people from early teens through to young adults. Specifically, activities were provided that enabled the grandchildren to explore new pursuits and work co-operatively to problem solve with peers and camp leaders, and demonstrate leadership skills. Activities were designed to be purposeful, such as improvisation sessions that fostered trust between participants, and activities including abseiling, surfing and kayaking that aimed to push the grandchildren outside their 'comfort zone', so they could experience a sense of mastery and achievement. The inclusion of Aboriginal Elders in several activities was also purposeful, and provided all grandchildren, regardless of their Indigenous identity, with a positive experience of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal leaders.

The grandchildren were strongly encouraged to participate in all activities, and this was supported by staff participating in activities as well. However, it was also anticipated that some grandchildren would not want to participate in particularly challenging activities such as abseiling or surfing. While the grandchildren were gently encouraged to 'give it a go', an alternative film-making workshop was provided for those who could not be persuaded. There were also several grandchildren who were reluctant to participate in a number of activities. This was managed by staff spending one-on-one time with the individual grandchild, and coming up with different personal goals that would allow them to experience a sense of achievement.

Importantly, all the activities provided grandchildren with opportunities to connect with other young people through sharing and listening to each other's stories, with the 'yarning circle' and art activities being key spaces that facilitated this sharing. Painting and craft were also used as calming activities that could be done individually or with others, and these proved important for setting the tone of the camps. Care was taken to balance structured activities with 'free' time, to enable a space for natural relationship building to occur among the grandchildren.

2. Method

The research described in this paper focused on grandcarers' perspectives of the camp, and adopted a qualitative exploratory approach within an interpretative framework ([Creswell, 2013](#)). This was considered the most appropriate approach to develop an understanding of grandcarers' perspectives on the impact of the camps on their

grandchildren as well as themselves. Qualitative methods are particularly valuable for giving a voice to marginalised groups such as grandcarer families, as they provide a platform for participants to explain how and why events are significant to them (Liamputtong, 2009).

### 2.1. Sample and recruitment

Eligible participants in this study were current grandcarers in WA with one or more grandchildren who attended 1 of 3 *Leadership and Respite Camps*. By way of brief background, as part of the recruitment process for the camps, grandcarers who had applied for a grandparent support scheme payment administered by Wanslea had been invited to participate in the camp project. The original intention was to recruit grandchildren aged 14–16 years to attend the camps. However, this criteria proved too narrow, and was subsequently broadened to include grandchildren aged 12 and 18 years, with no unmanaged health or medical conditions. The revised inclusion criteria also enabled more than one grandchild from the same grandcarer family to attend the camp. This was important, as many of the grandcarers were raising more than one grandchild, and may not get much respite if they were still caring for another grandchild or grandchildren, even if their other grandchild/ren were at camp. In addition, as many of the grandchildren had not been away from their grandparent since being placed in their care, and were emotionally vulnerable, a number would not attend camp without their sibling.

Study information packages were sent to the grandcarers who responded to the invitation to participate. Grandcarers were also recruited through the state-wide *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Survey* that was conducted as part of the larger research project (paper forthcoming). The information pack included an information letter, outlining the research process involved in evaluating the camps, and inviting grandcarers to participate in a focus group one week after their grandchild returned from camp. The pack also included consent forms for the grandchild to participate in a camp, and for the grandcarer to participate in a focus group. Grandcarers who agreed to participate in a focus group were required to return the signed consent form by post to the university research team. Thirty-five grandcarers consented to their grandchild/ren (n = 49) attending the camp, and to participating in a post-camp focus group.

### 2.2. Data collection

As noted above, the original plan had been to conduct several focus groups with grandcarers whose grandchildren attended one of the *Leadership and Respite Camps*. However, many of the grandcarers involved in this qualitative research came from vulnerable and hard to reach populations, and found it difficult to attend a focus group. In acknowledgement of issues such as lack of transport, limited child care and time constraints, it was subsequently decided that individual telephone interviews would be a less onerous process for the grandcarers. This decision was also influenced by the research team's desire not to place additional burdens on grandcarers.

With grandcarer consent, Wanslea provided grandcarers' names and telephone numbers to the first and second authors, along with information on appropriate times to telephone grandcarers. Individual semi-structured telephone interviews with grandcarers were conducted by the first and second authors between two to six weeks after each of the camps. The interviews aimed to understand grandcarers' perspectives about how the camps were experienced by their grandchildren, and how their grandchild's participation may in-turn have impacted on the grandcarers, both while their grandchild was on camp, and in the period following their return (see Appendix 1 for the interview guide). However, in line with qualitative methodology, the semi-structured interview design enabled grandcarers to focus on aspects of the camp they viewed as personally relevant and important (Bryman, 2012). With grandcarers' verbal consent, all interviews were audio recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim.

### 2.3. Data analysis

All transcripts were co-coded by the first and second authors. Working independently, the researchers conducted initial open coding of all transcripts. Constant comparative data analysis was used to identify "units of meaning" (Liamputtong, 2009) that were classified into 'open' codes, using either descriptive or *in vivo* terms. At this point, the first two authors discussed the open codes, comparing and contrasting them until agreement was reached on a coding framework. These open codes were then collated into tentative themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with consultation between the first and second authors to resolve inconsistencies and "eliminate errors and misinterpretations of the perspectives" (Markle, West, & Rich, 2011, Section 3.2, para. 1). Appendix 2 includes an example of the coding process, indicating how specific quotes were coded and then collated into themes.

### 2.4. Ethics

Ethics approval was gained from the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. Anonymity and confidentiality was ensured for all respondents, and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper. Participants are identified by the camp their grandchild/ren attended (e.g. C1, C2, C3), and the order in which they were interviewed (e.g. C1, 10).

## 3. Findings

In total, 34 grandcarers whose grandchildren (n = 46, aged 12–17 years) participated in 1 of the 3 camps run by Wanslea in September 2018 and January 2019, were involved in semi-structured interviews. One grandcarer could not be contacted, despite multiple attempts. Interviews ranged from 6 to 28 min (median = 14.5 min). Of the grandcarers interviewed, 11 had grandchildren who attended the Perth (WA) (metropolitan) camp, 10 had grandchildren who attended the first regional camp, and 13 had grandchildren who attended the second regional camp. All grandcarers interviewed were grandmothers, and many worked at least part-time. On average, they had primary caregiving responsibility for three grandchildren, although the number of grandchildren cared for ranged from 1 to 7. They lived in metropolitan and regional areas in the south-west of WA, and analysis of their postcode of residence indicated they lived in areas with a median SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Australia) ranking of 5 for relative socio-economic disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). This suggests that approximately half these grandcarer families experienced a moderate to high level of relative socio-economic disadvantage.

The profile of grandcarers interviewed in this qualitative research is consistent with the profile of respondents to the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Survey* of grandcarers in WA (n = 584) (paper forthcoming). The majority of survey respondents were female (86%) and married or with a partner (54%). Most were aged between 60 and 69 years (47.3%), 30% of the sample reported they left school by the age of 15 years, and 61% reported an annual income of less than \$49,999 – an income appreciably lower than the average yearly income in Australia of \$83,408 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). There was also some indication of the impact of this restricted income in the larger survey, with 43% of respondents stating they could not pay bills, vehicle registrations or insurances by the due date. The most commonly cited reasons survey respondents indicated for caring for their grandchildren were alcohol and other drug issues, mental illness or incarceration of parents, death of a parent, and issues of neglect, abandonment and abuse.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to offer grandcarers an opportunity to discuss positive and negative aspects of the camps, in terms of how the camp impacted both them and their grandchildren. However, while the interview guide included a number of questions

designed to understand the respite experience, the grandcarers were far more interested in talking about how their grandchild or grandchildren benefited from their camp participation. As such, the themes discussed in the following sections relate to their perceptions of how the camp impacted on their grandchildren.

Through analysis of the transcripts, a number of themes were identified relating to how grandchildren were perceived to have benefited from the camp experience: *fitting in*; *'not the only one'*; *gaining perspective*; *unblocking*; *making friends*; and *personal growth*. Several of these themes relate to the value of grandchildren identifying with each other through a recognition of shared experiences. However, these themes also suggest the grandchildren experienced different dimensions of emotional growth, and are therefore discussed individually in the following section.

### 3.1. Fitting in

A number of the grandcarers talked of their grandchildren feeling – often for the first time – that they ‘fitted in’ with their peers. As one grandcarer observed, before her granddaughter attended the camp, she didn’t think she would have “come across anybody else who was raised by their grandparents” (C1, 10):

*All the children that were there were being looked after by their grandparents. Maybe that's probably why (she enjoyed it) because she fitted in there. (C2, 6)*

Feeling like they ‘fitted in’ appeared to be experienced in a range of ways, from normalising references to ‘Nan’ or ‘Grandma’ (instead of Mum or Dad), identifying with other children through the sharing of personal and sometimes traumatic experiences, to simply feeling understood by their peers:

*They were very happy, relaxed and I think, for the first time, they felt like they fitted in somewhere....they said it was nice to hear other people say, yeah, Nan this and Grandma that because at school, they don't hear that....Well, definitely for them to feel normal. I think it was the first time they felt like they were amongst people that actually understood where they were coming from. They've had a lot of teasing over the years, 'where's your mum,' and they actually felt normal there. (C1, 10)*

Feeling like they were with their ‘tribe’ also appeared to minimise feelings of being judged as different to, and not standing out from their peers, as summed up in the following quotes:

*It was really good to sort of bunk in with other kids and, you know, stay up late at night and talk things over with other children without being judged and stuff like that. So, you know, from that point of view, I think it was good for her, because she knew that all the kids are in the same boat as her, and so, she knew she wasn't going to be judged or anything like that. (C3, 1)*

*He felt more comfortable, but everyone else gets it, you know, kind of feeling a little bit less conspicuous for his situation. (C3, 12)*

### 3.2. Not the only one

Through the process of identifying with other children’s experiences, many grandchildren came to understand they were not the only one who had experienced difficult and/or traumatic childhoods, resulting in them living with their grandparents. Indeed, during the interviews almost all the grandcarers described how their grandchild came home and explained – sometimes quite explicitly – how they had come to realise during the camp that they were ‘not the only one’ in this situation:

*Getting in with all the other kids and meeting new kids and finding that they're not the only ones with the same problem. So, I think that helps them a lot. (C1, 5)*

*I think finding out about other people's stories and knowing that they're not the only children that have been through trauma, that things have happened to them and that there's other kids that things also happened to was a bit of an eye opener for them. It also helped them, hearing other people's stories as well. (C2, 3)*

*It helped him because when he goes on the camps he can see that he's not the only one in the situation, that other kids are in the same, and I think it helps him to get out and be able to talk to kids in the same situation, whereas he can't do that at school. (C3, 10)*

As the following comment suggests, grandcarers viewed this realisation as a significant moment for their grandchild:

*[I asked her] "What made you feel good about it?" She goes, "Because I'm not the only one, Nanna." And I went, "Okay." I said, "So some other girls had the same experience?" and she goes, "Yeah, so I'm not the only one it happened to"....So when I sat back and thought about it, I thought maybe this was good for her, for her to realise that she's not the only one and there are children out there that are in the same position as her....That was massive for her, and for her to have that normality and being comfortable, I think that helped her tremendously. (C1, 6)*

Some grandchildren also appeared to gain an understanding that they were not the only one who, because of their grandparents’ difficult financial situation, were not able or could not afford to do or buy things that their school peers may have taken for granted:

*I think he kind of came out of himself a little bit, because he was exposed to another group of young people, potentially, probably also because they were being raised by grandparents, and I've always noticed that ... [grandcarer/grandchildren] camps that involve other children and families enable the kids to appreciate the fact that they were not the only ones being raised by grandparents, and that they were not the only ones who experienced the same sort of challenges of kids not being able to do things that other kids could, because their grandparents couldn't afford to, or they didn't have the physical ability to do it. (C3, 14)*

As well as gaining an appreciation that they were not the only one being raised by their grandparent, grandcarers reported their grandchildren had developed richer understandings about circumstances leading to children being placed with their grandparent:

*The fact that she found it good to know that she's not the only one being cared for by her grandparents, and the fact that there's lots of different reasons. Lots of the kids spoke about why they were being cared for, and she found that really good to know, that she's not just the only one. (C3, 13)*

### 3.3. Gaining perspective

Perhaps reflecting a natural progression for the grandchildren from feeling like they fitted in and were not alone in experiencing a difficult childhood and adolescence, many also appeared to gain a new perspective on their situation. Typically, this manifested in them observing that some of the other children they met at the camp ‘had it tougher’ than them. The catalyst for this was often the yarnning circle, through which the grandchildren were gently encouraged to share their experiences. These sessions took place on the second night of the 4-day camp around a campfire, and the supportive environment fostered throughout the camp appeared to culminate in a safe and comfortable space to disclose traumatic experiences and listen to others. As the following comments suggest, grandcarers felt this new perspective benefited their grandchildren, as it helped them to develop a sense of empathy for other children sharing similar and worse experiences than they had:

*And I think that was really powerful for them to hear that, to meet kids and talk to kids who'd had far worse happen to them. (C1, 9)*

*One thing that she did say was they had ... I don't know if it was a camp*

fire, but they all sat around and they talked about their situation, the other kids. She said. "Oh Nanna, I thought I had a bad story but those kids out there ... far worse things have happened to them. (C3, 8)

Interestingly, the camps not only raised grandchildren's awareness that other young people also experience difficult family situations, but some grandcarers reported that this new perspective led to their grandchildren becoming more reflective on their own situation, and also more appreciative of the sacrifices their grandparents were making:

*I just think it's a bit of a breather where she can think of somebody rather than herself, because she came home very humble ... so I said it really did her good and did us good, my husband and I, just to get a break from her....Just hearing other children's stories and her thinking her life wasn't as bad as she thinks it is, you know? Yeah. So that's what I got out of it. (C1, 2)*

*He told a few stories about children who had gone to their grandparents for worse situations than his, so he's grateful that his situation was not as bad as some of the children he met....Just interacting with children in a similar situation, I think, was really positive for him. You know, he's grateful that his separation from his mother wasn't as traumatic as some other children's. It's made him a little bit, I guess, more thoughtful about who he is and what he does....His comment was, "Well, they had it tougher than me. (C1, 11)*

### 3.4. Unblocking

Several of the grandcarers reported a significant 'shift' in their grandchildren's ability to disclose deeply traumatic experiences. As with the process of gaining perspective on their situation, the catalyst for this 'unblocking' of traumatic memories and emotions was the yarning circle. By this stage, the children had come to learn a little about their peers, and could identify with their similar experiences and situation. Through this bonding experience, they appeared to have developed empathy and perhaps more importantly trust with their peers and the counsellors. For some, this paved the way to open up for the first time about deeply traumatic experiences:

*He actually mentioned, and he's never spoken to me about it, and I didn't ask him to elaborate about a situation where one of his mother's partners tried to molest him, and he talked about that at camp, and yet, he's never talked to me about that before. (C1, 11)*

For several of the grandcarers, what made this 'unblocking' process more remarkable was that it happened with grandchildren who had been receiving professional psychological counselling for a number of years. As the following quote indicates, the yarning circle appeared to have facilitated a 'breakthrough' that had only been marginally achieved through professional counselling:

*[grandchild]: "They asked why we were living, if anybody wanted to talk about why they were living with their grandparents." And it sort of threw me back because I thought, "should that question have been approached to the kids?" And I said, "Okay, did anybody talk about it?" And she goes, "A couple did, Nanna, and I did," which really shook me because she's [granddaughter] been under a psychologist for four years and she's only just starting to talk a bit about her trauma. So I said to her, "Oh, what did you talk about?" And she said, "What Dad did to me." And I'm going, "oh my God, this shouldn't have been happening." So I got quite ... not angry but quite ... this is going to harm what we've been trying to do....But then I said to [granddaughter], "How did that make you feel, sweetheart?" And she said, "Good, Nanna"....A huge hurdle had come out of the camp for [granddaughter] because she's never disclosed it, and we'd only just started tipping the iceberg with her psychologist. So that was massive. (C1, 6)*

Another grandcarer emphasised the dynamics between the children

and counsellors, as well as the the camp environment, as being instrumental in enabling her grandson to disclose a traumatic incident that had occurred several years earlier. For this grandcarer, her grandson's ability to open up was critical to the process of healing:

*The communication and interaction was great because of something that happened to him. My grandson was a victim of a heinous incident and it was just the worst time ever and so we both withdrew from everything quite a lot. So getting him out and learning to socialise more ... and it helps that what he's experienced, other children have experienced. That's a huge thing....That's one thing he did mention, of course (campfire session). He told me when I was driving home. I was in a bit of a shock, but at the same time pleased, because he said that he had spoken about his physical assault at the hands of someone else. He hasn't really gone into great detail about that because he blocked it out, and we'd been in Australia for three years before he even felt the slightest bit comfortable (talking to grandparents). So that was a huge thing on his part, really....It was a huge thing on his part being able to discuss that incident with complete strangers....For him to feel comfortable within himself to talk about it with other children and a mentor, that is amazing. And that's what society need for the young children. For them to get together, to be able to get together in a comfortable neutral environment, like the camp, and to be able to open up. That's huge part of healing and I think that's marvellous. That's wonderful and I'm grateful. (C2, 2)*

### 3.5. Making friends

The grandcarers also valued the camp for the opportunity it gave their grandchild to make new friends. This appeared to be important from the grandcarers' perspective, regardless of how many of their grandchildren attended a camp. For example, the following quote is from the grandcarer of six grandchildren, three of whom attended a camp, while the second is from the grandcarer of a grandchild who attended a camp by herself. Interestingly, even the three grandchildren who attended the camp together were reported to be apprehensive about not knowing anyone else on the camp:

*When they [three grandchildren] first started they didn't know anybody and then by the time they left the camp, it was like they said that people were crying, and like it was real "Oh wow", they'd really formed a lot of good bonding friendships. (C2, 3)*

*She made friends with two or three other girls. She talks about these girls quite a lot and she liked them. (C2, 1)*

*She said "Nanna, I've made friends with all these kids," and she was telling me what they did and all that. (C3, 4)*

For many of the grandcarers, a particularly pleasing aspect of the friendships the grandchildren made was that they extended beyond the camp. For some, this seemed limited to social media, but a number of other grandcarers talked of their grandchild meeting up with 'camp' friends offline as well:

*For [grandson], I think he seems to have made some friends. They're all linked up, I think, on the internet or whatever, and he's been showing me photos and stuff he's got, so he seems to have another friendship group that he seems to like....And he really likes that he's kept in contact with them after, so whoever set that up did a good thing as well, because he really likes that. (C1, 1)*

*He keeps up with a number of them, you know, via social media as they do. (C3, 12)*

*He got to meet new people who he's still friends with. He's since been to the movies with a couple of them, and he's staying in touch. Not just social media, yeah, they've actually caught up. (C1, 11)*

### 3.6. Personal growth

A number of grandcarers described situations where their

grandchild experienced personal growth. For some, this seemed to be related to developing resilience as a result of having to make new friends, and not being able to rely on their grandparent:

*We threw her in at the deep end. She's not used to going anywhere where she doesn't know anyone, and she didn't know anyone at the camp, so that was quite confronting for her, but good for her to know that she can stand on her own two feet. (C3, 13)*

*It stretched her horizons a bit, because she went further, and I guess [there were] probably new dynamics there that she felt her way around, but she didn't feel uncomfortable at any point, you know? It wasn't like, "Oh, I wish I had more friends here," it was like, "Oh, I'll make new friends here," you know? (C3, 3)*

*Being able to go and have his time without me makes a huge difference. If I'm there all the time, or any other grandparent, if they're there all the time, they rely on their Nanna, they don't develop or interact with other people as easily. They behave for other people or do things for other people but they might not do them at home. (C2, 2)*

Challenging camp activities such as abseiling enabled the grandchildren to take risks and extend themselves within a safe and supportive environment, and this seemed pivotal to enhancing their confidence and self-esteem. The significance of this should be seen in the context that many of these children lived with mental health conditions related to trauma they had experienced – as such, even small changes in their social and emotional wellbeing are important to grandcarers:

*And they were doing things, abseiling or whatever. She said that was amazing. And they were taking risks and seeing, "how did you feel about that?" It was great. I think that was good. They had this little room, a little shack that they stayed in....And she said even though they felt a bit scared at times, they just talked to each other and made the most of it. That was a good experiment for them to being out in – knowing people were close but not actually in the same room. (C1, 7)*

*They were so, so happy. They both [grandson and granddaughter] achieved things, very confident. [Grandson] seemed to have moved mountains. He has post-traumatic stress and he's generally very ... holds himself back and doesn't join in and apparently, he was very involved in everything. But, I mean, yeah, they loved the activity, they loved being challenged in a supportive environment....[grandson] was really proud of himself because he seemed to do really well at everything he did. He came home with a much greater self-esteem, much more confidence. (C1, 9)*

*She was just full of so much confidence. Really a completely different child. A child that at school is having lots of problems and we had lots of problems getting her to school. She doesn't really relate to people and things like that, and has trouble talking to people. Well, she got on with so many people, got so many phone numbers and kept in contact with everybody. (C2, 7)*

Several grandcarers also reported that the camp enabled their grandchild to develop and demonstrate leadership behaviors:

*He was pumped up. He was happy. One of the (camp leaders) said to me that he'd make a very good leader, so that was really good. He came home really happy' (C3, 9)*

Having their grandchild's leadership qualities publicly recognised was also validating for grandcarers, given the challenges many grandchildren experienced. For example, one grandcarer was particularly happy that her granddaughter, who had suffered a traumatic brain injury some years ago that made it difficult for her to develop friendships, was recognised as a future leader:

*And [granddaughter], well, [camp counsellor] has offered for [granddaughter] to go to another camp as a camp counsellor, which is huge. (C1, 9)*

#### 4. Discussion

With increasing numbers of children being cared for by their grandparents on a full-time basis, there is an urgent need to understand and respond to grandcarer families' needs. An emerging evidence base has documented the significant challenges experienced by grandcarers and grandchildren (Brennan et al., 2013; Taylor, 2011; Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017; Wanslea Family Services, 2019), such as economic constraints, mental health issues, legal difficulties, family conflict and social isolation. Independently and combined, these issues have the potential to impact grandcarers' and grandchildren's health and wellbeing. However, while grandcarers acknowledge their own need for respite, they find it difficult to access respite services, and have reservations about using what services are available (Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017). For example, formative quantitative research with grandcarers indicated a reluctance to use respite services due to concerns this will be interpreted as an admission they cannot cope, and concerns about their grandchildren's safety and wellbeing while in respite, particularly since many grandchildren experience trauma relating to earlier abandonment (Taylor, Marquis, Coall, & Werner, 2017). Given that grandcarers are essentially 'gatekeepers' for their grandchild being able to participate in camps such as the *Leadership and Respite Camps* described in this research, it is critical that their concerns are adequately addressed if the benefits of such camps can be fully realised.

The findings from this research provide important insights into grandcarers' perspectives on the impact of three *Leadership and Respite Camps* for grandchildren cared for by their grandparents. Six major themes were identified that serve to highlight the degree to which these camps created unique opportunities for grandchildren to share their experiences in a nurturing environment. As noted previously, a number of these themes are closely interrelated, and may be viewed as representing a continuum of personal growth for grandchildren. In this sense, these respite camps appeared to have a similar effect as the summer camps for youth with HIV/AIDS reported by Gillard et al. (2011). They described their themes as "nested within each other in a temporal order" (p. 1514), and explained that as a result of the relationships that camp participants developed, they gained a temporary reprieve from emotional difficulties. This reprieve enabled them to engage in recreational opportunities available at the camp, and in turn, these opportunities led to personal growth through skill development and enhanced knowledge (2011). A similar dynamic was evident among grandchildren at the *Leadership and Respite Camps*.

A significant finding in our research was the perspective amongst many grandcarers that participating in the camp gave their grandchild a chance to feel like they 'fitted in'. Indeed, many grandcarers suggested this was the first time their grandchild felt they fitted in with their peers, often through simple things such as feeling comfortable when referring to their 'Nana'. Gillard and colleagues' research raised similar issues amongst young people living with HIV/AIDS, as expressed through the sub-theme of commonalities (2011). As Gillard et al. explained, the camp provided an opportunity for young people to spend time with peers who shared the same stigmatising and isolating experiences, and thus could truly empathise with each other. Participants also shared common experiences around arduous medication routines, and the reality of grieving for friends and relatives who had died from AIDS. Other research disease-specific camps with young people living with HIV/AIDS in the United Kingdom (Lut, Evangeli, & Ely, 2017), and young people living in families with Huntington's Disease (HD) in North America (Kavanaugh, Cho, Maedab, & Swopec, 2017), revealed similar feelings of 'fitting in' with camp peers in a way that was not possible with other peers. As one participant in Lut and colleagues' study noted, "as much as I love my best friends, they can never relate to me. They can say they understand but deep down they truly don't and like, knowing someone that does have HIV can like, complete everything" (Lut et al., 2017, p. 428). Although the young people in our research were not coping with life-threatening diseases, as were

participants in Lut et al. and Kavanaugh et al., all three research samples shared common experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination. Together, these studies provide evidence that a camp dedicated to young people's specific situation provides a much-needed space for them to connect with others who understand and accept them.

In our research, many of the grandchildren's parents had substance use issues, or were in rehabilitation or incarcerated, and around half the grandcarer families experienced social and economic disadvantage. Thus feelings of 'fitting in' also encompassed the perspective that grandchildren felt they were not being judged because of something they might say about their family situation, or because they did not live in a traditional 'family', or because they lacked the opportunities and resources available to children living with their parents in more financially sound situations. Sharing the camp with other young people who shared very similar life experiences and challenges provided an opportunity for the grandchildren to express themselves without fear of being judged. Similar sentiments were expressed by the participants in Gillard and colleagues' research (2011). As one of their participants explained:

*We all have that thing [HIV/AIDS] in common. It makes us all more at ease because we don't have to, we're not judging each other. Even though that everybody always judges outside of us [the campers]. Everybody judges. But [there], it's like, we're all the same. (Gillard et al., 2011, p. 1514)*

Closely related to grandchildren feeling like they fitted in, was the growing realisation they were not the only ones who were living with their grandparents because their parents were unable to care for them. The camp structure appeared to be a critical factor contributing to this, with many grandcarers highlighting the importance of activities such as the yarning circle to their grandchild's developing awareness. As the grandchildren developed feelings of fitting in with their camp peers, they became exposed to other grandchildren's stories, and through that, developed empathy. From the grandcarers' perspective, integral to this was the yarning circle, where participants were gently encouraged and supported in sharing personal stories. Through this, camp participants learnt about peers' experiences that often closely mirrored theirs. This sense of having their life reflected back at them in a way that is not possible in their everyday lives, appears for some at least to have been cathartic.

At a more basic level, an awareness that they 'weren't the only one' seemed to reduce feelings of isolation and 'being different' amongst the grandchildren. The importance to young people of being with peers in an environment in which their family situation is the norm, and where they can gain comfort and reassurance that others are going through and surviving the same traumatic experiences, has been highlighted in previous research on camps developed for vulnerable adolescents and young adults (Gillard et al., 2011; Howse, Diehl, & Trivette, 2010; Kavanaugh et al., 2017). Moreover, a recognition that they are not the only ones to experience a particular adversity, and hearing how others deal with challenges, can help to develop resilience amongst young people (Gillard et al., 2011; Kavanaugh et al., 2017).

Sentiments around not being the only one to experience childhood trauma and dysfunctional families also relates to feelings of being alone and not belonging. Although not raised specifically in our research, previous research with vulnerable young people has provided evidence that camps providing an opportunity for young people who share a particular experience of disadvantage or illness to come together, can help to ameliorate a sense of aloneness, and foster feelings of belongingness amongst participants. For example, one of Kavanaugh et al. participants at a camp for young people living in families with a terminal illness explained: "I don't feel so alone anymore. I feel like I can actually talk to people my own age about [illness]. I gained not only a support group, but a huge family" (2017, p. 329). Similarly, Gillard and colleagues found that facilitated educational talks at a camp for young people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS led to participants feeling

"they were not alone and that there were others like them" (2011, p. 1515), while seeing other participants taking their medication also reinforced that they were not alone. Likewise, a participant in a camp for young people in foster care explained that one of the most helpful outcomes of the camp was "just knowing he was not alone in his struggles" (Howse et al., 2010, p. 111).

The trauma-informed lens that guided the design of the *Leadership and Respite Camps* appeared to facilitate new perspectives among some grandchildren, with grandcarers describing how they had come home from the camp with a different and more grateful perspective on their situation. As the grandcarers explained, their grandchildren had developed an awareness that other young people also experienced difficult and in some cases worse family trauma, by listening to their peers recount their experiences through camp activities such as art sessions and the yarning circle. Grandcarers appreciated these new perspectives, viewing it as a positive way for their grandchild to cope with their challenging lives, as well as making for a more pleasant home environment.

A similar dynamic has been observed in other studies investigating outcomes of camps for young people. For example, a report by the *American Camp Association* (2005, p. 13) noted that campers developed empathy and "became less self-centred". This dynamic can be interpreted with reference to social comparison theory. This theory proposes that human beings have an intrinsic desire to compare themselves to others who are similar (Dawson, Knapp, & Farmer, 2012). Comparisons to someone who is similar in particular ways (e.g. living with a life-threatening illness, or living in a grandcarer family) but who is faring better (upward comparison), can foster hope, inspire an individual to improve their situation (Dawson et al., 2012), and provide guidance on problem-solving (Gillard et al., 2011). Likewise, comparisons to someone in a similar situation, but who is worse off (downward comparison) can lead an individual to feel better about their own circumstances. According to Meltzer and Rourke, the process of downward comparison represents a "cognitive coping mechanism" (2005, p. 306), as an individual reassures themselves that at least their situation is better than someone else's. The process of downward comparison was evident in our research, with some grandcarers reporting that their grandchild had explained how other young people at the camp 'had it worse' than they did. Research suggests that social comparisons to people who are similar can promote positive mental health (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). This is particularly important for young people experiencing multiple disadvantages, such as is often the case for grandchildren being cared for by their grandparents. In this context, social comparisons facilitated through activities in the *Leadership and Respite Camps*, such as the yarning circle, can promote enhanced self-esteem and a greater level of peer acceptance, and reduce social isolation (Dawson et al., 2012; Meltzer & Rourke, 2005). In contrast, social comparisons with people who are dissimilar in terms of challenges they experience – such as their school peers – can result in negative feelings (Meltzer & Rourke, 2005).

For several grandcarers, the most profound outcome of the camp was their grandchild's emotional development in being able to 'unblock' painful memories. As the grandcarers explained, participation in the camp enabled their grandchild to reach a point where they felt safe and comfortable enough to disclose personal trauma to their peers, in a way they had been unable to before. The catalyst for this 'unlocking' seems to have resulted from a combination of factors at the camp, including an awareness among many of the grandchildren that their camp peers had also been through difficult times, and the fostering of a safe, trusting and empathetic environment, facilitated through the camp structure and knowledgeable camp counsellors, and culminating in the yarning circle. Although one grandcarer was initially alarmed that her grandchild opened up during the fireside talk might cause emotional damage, she came to view this experience as enabling her grandchild to overcome a 'huge hurdle'. Similarly, other grandcarers described the emotional breakthrough their grandchild made while on camp as



'massive' and 'a huge thing'. For these grandcarers, the emotional breakthrough their grandchild had achieved while on camp had paved the way for their family to move ahead.

The mechanisms through which camps designed for vulnerable young people aim to facilitate emotional development, by fostering opportunities for participants to 'open up', has been documented in previous research (Gillard et al., 2011; Howse et al., 2010). In Gillard and colleagues' research, camp participants were much younger (7–16 years) than the youth who participated in the grandchildren camps (12–18 years) described in this paper, rendering it difficult to make direct comparisons. However, both studies demonstrated the benefit in providing quiet, safe and intimate spaces in camps for vulnerable young people. In the grandcarer camps, this took the form of the yarning circle, while in the camps for young people with HIV/AIDS (Gillard et al., 2011), educational workshops ('Teen Talk') held at night time for a sub-group of campers between 12 and 16 years of age provided this opportunity. These 'Teen Talk' sessions were explicitly designed to promote a calm, intimate environment, with subtle lighting and floor pillows to encourage participants to 'settle in', and a safe atmosphere fostered by enabling individuals to "hang back and observe" (p. 1515). As a Teen Talk facilitator explained, "it was important for campers to be able to hide their emotions within the larger group if they needed to, because [i]t be real deep at Teen Talk" (p. 1515). The value in providing a safe space, such as Teen Talk sessions or the yarning circle in the grandcarer camps, is further highlighted by the fact that whereas the camps described by Gillard et al. had participants aged 7–16 years, only older campers (aged 12–16 years) participated in Teen Talk. As Gillard and colleagues' research found, older campers who had participated in the Teen Talk sessions appeared to be more willing to disclose than younger campers, who did not take part in the Teen Talk sessions.

While perhaps not as profound as unblocking, but arguably no less important for young people's health and wellbeing, were the friendships that grandcarers reported their grandchildren had made while on camp. These friendships developed through the grandchildren's participation in a range of purposeful activities, such as those that required cooperative problem solving, tasks that fostered trust such as improvisation sessions, and the sharing of personal stories through the yarning circle and art-based activities. The value of friendships formed at residential camps has been previously highlighted by the American Camp Association, which observed that "young people's friendships may have a remarkably enduring influence on their functioning as adults" (2005, p. 9). It is perhaps not surprising then, that a key focus of many youth camps is the development of social skills that enable participants to make friends amongst their camp peers (Flynn et al., 2019). A number of studies have highlighted the importance of helping young people develop friendships (see for example American Camp Association, 2005; Flynn et al., 2019; Henderson, Whitaker, Bialeschki, Scanlin, & Thurber, 2007), and the role that camps can play in helping young people get along with their peers (Howse et al., 2010). Indeed, providing opportunities for participants to develop friendships appears to be fundamental to creating a positive, safe and supportive camp culture (Schelbe, Deichen Hansen, France, Rony, & Twichell, 2018). Moreover, evidence suggests that 'successful' camps are those that "create a culture where making friends blossoms in the absence of cliques, bullies and materialism" (American Camp Association, 2005, p. 9).

According to many of the grandcarers we interviewed in our research, a particularly pleasing aspect of the friendships the grandchildren made was that they extended beyond the camp. Grandcarers viewed these friendships as a welcome new source of support for their grandchildren, especially amongst those grandchildren who found it difficult to connect with their school peers. Previous research suggests that social skills developed on camps with vulnerable young people may translate to an improved ability to make friends beyond the camp. For example, Howse et al. (2010) investigated camp outcomes for older

youth in foster care, in which participants emphasised the camp provided an opportunity for them to meet people and make friends. Importantly, these young people reported that their ability to get along with peers and adults had improved after the camp experience (Howse et al., 2010).

Finally, a number of grandcarers in our research drew attention to the personal growth they believed their grandchild had achieved while on camp. Grandcarers talked of their grandchildren being 'thrown in the deep end', being 'out of their comfort zone', and taking risks – whether that was in relation to challenging activities such as abseiling and public speaking, or not knowing anyone at the beginning of the camp. Grandcarers also described their grandchildren as returning from camp as more independent and resilient, and with improved self-esteem and confidence. Integral to this personal growth were activities that enabled the grandchildren to develop and demonstrate leadership qualities. Similar experiences of positive youth development have been observed in other research evaluating camps for young people (see for example American Camp Association, 2005; Flynn et al., 2019; Gillard et al., 2011; Schelbe et al., 2018). Gillard and colleagues, for example, noted that through the development of life skills and exposure to positive role models at youth camps, young people who have experienced trauma are supported to develop anger management and conflict resolution skills (2011).

## 5. Limitations and future directions

A limitation of this research was the delay in interviewing grandcarers after their grandchild returned from camp. The initial goal had been to conduct focus groups with grandcarers one week after the respective camp. However, difficulties in bringing grandcarers together for focus groups, along with a concern not to create additional burdens for people already experienced major challenges, resulted in a shift in methodology to individual interviews. The use of individual interviews was also driven by an understanding they are likely to be more appropriate than focus groups for potentially sensitive, private topics such as those discussed by many of the grandcarers in this qualitative research (Green, 1999). As Green observed, "where 'the private' is an important component of the research question, 'the group' is unlikely to deliver the desired data" (1999, p. 42).

In addition, grandcarers' busy schedules meant that some interviews took place up to six weeks after the camp, and this delay may have potentially impacted on grandcarers' recall. However, the delay also suggests that positive outcomes such as more positive attitudes amongst grandchildren were sustained beyond the camp, at least in the short term. The interviews were also relatively short, due in part to grandcarers' often hectic lives and related time constraints. However, this limitation is mediated by the fact that 34 of the 35 grandcarers whose grandchildren participated in the *Leadership and Respite Camps* were interviewed. This facilitated very comprehensive insights into grandcarer perspectives. Moreover, data saturation (Liamputtong, 2009), meaning that no new themes emerged during the individual interviews, was reached midway through the interviewing process. Therefore the last few interviews were used to triangulate and substantiate already identified themes.

The high response rate also reflects the enthusiasm with which grandcarers embraced and endorsed the *Leadership and Respite Camp* model. This was further reinforced in the interviews, with grandcarers overwhelmingly highlighting the positive benefits of the camp for themselves and their grandchildren. Therefore, an important recommendation from this research is that these residential camps should be delivered on a regular basis to provide support for both grandcarers and grandchildren. Based on our findings, there should be a particular focus on developing peer relationships, and strengthening resilience amongst young people to help them manage unhealthy family and community influences. In addition, given the high levels of social media use among teenagers (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Australian

Communications and Media Authority, 2016) and the observations by grandcarers in this research that their grandchildren were maintaining contact with their new 'camp friends' via social media sites such as Facebook, it is recommended that a social media site be established to provide a platform for grandchildren to connect with peers and counsellors skilled in responding to grandcarer family issues. Moreover, as increasing numbers of older Australians (65+ years) are also using social media (Australian Communications and Media Authority, 2016), the development of a site specific to the needs of grandcarer families could also provide a valuable support to grandcarers, enabling them to connect with other grandcarers and access professional support and advice on managing their grandchildren.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides evidence of the value in delivering a camp intervention tailored to grandcarer families. Overwhelmingly, grandcarers endorsed the *Leadership and Respite Camps* as beneficial to themselves and their grandchild. Specifically, interviews with grandcarers provided strong evidence that the camp intervention led to positive psychosocial and developmental outcomes for their grandchildren, in terms of greater confidence, improved self-esteem and a stronger sense of belonging and 'fitting in' with their peers. Several grandcarers emphasised the emotional 'unblocking' their grandchild had experienced while on camp, while almost all grandcarers reported how their grandchild had come home with a sense of relief at learning that other young people were experiencing – and surviving – similar difficulties. Positive psychosocial outcomes amongst the grandchildren appeared to lead to improved grandcarer-grandchild relationships, with many grandchildren returning from camp with a new found awareness and appreciation of their grandparent, and the personal sacrifices they had made in providing care. Evidence from this research provides a strong foundation to advocate for regular camps to address the needs of grandcarers and grandchildren.

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## Declaration of Interests

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix A. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2019.104535>.

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