NEWS LESSON

What Are You Buying When You Hire a Grandmother?



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What practical skill would you like an older person to teach you?
2. Can someone feel like family without being related?
3. Would you ask for advice from someone with a very different life?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**shorthand**	☐	A	in a clear and direct way, with nothing hidden
2	**overlapping**	☐	B	criticism, or a negative opinion of someone
3	**explicitly**	☐	C	removes a duty or a worry from someone
4	**judgement**	☐	D	a short, quick way of describing something
5	**inequality**	☐	E	a statement that something bad is true
6	**mentors**	☐	F	experienced people who give advice to others
7	**admission**	☐	G	an unfair difference in wealth or opportunity
8	**relieves**	☐	H	partly the same, sharing some parts

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Customers of OK! Obaachan, set up in 2011, book older women for practical help and company. The service is openly commercial, and it asks why contact between the generations now has to be arranged.

1 In Japan, a service called OK! Obaachan lets customers hire older women for practical help and company. The attention-grabbing shorthand is "rent a grandma". What people actually book is more ordinary: time with someone whose experience may be useful, whether for a household task or a patient conversation.

2 Set up by Client Partners in 2011, the service matches customers with women who can provide practical assistance, companionship and accumulated life experience. Their work might involve preparing food, helping with household tasks or accompanying a client on an outing. The relationship is explicitly professional, even when the experience feels warm and informal, and neither side pretends otherwise. What the customer is buying, in effect, is competence and patience, two qualities that are difficult to advertise and impossible to hurry.

3 Its appeal reflects several overlapping social changes. Japan has a large older population, while smaller households, demanding work schedules and geographical separation can make routine contact between the generations far less common than it once was. Some customers want help with a specific task. Others may value the reassuring presence of somebody older who is willing to listen without judgement, and who has probably encountered the same difficulty several times before. The two motives can overlap, but neither makes the visitor a relative.

4 The arrangement can be beneficial to the women providing the service as well. In an Australian interview published in 2025, worker Taeko Kaji spoke positively about the activities and variety the role brought into her life. That is worth dwelling on, because it challenges a persistent assumption that older people should be regarded primarily as recipients of care rather than as skilled and independent contributors with something to offer. Framed that way, the business looks less like an admission of social failure than a modest correction to the way older workers are valued.

5 Nevertheless, paid companionship raises uncomfortable questions about authenticity and inequality. If emotional reassurance becomes another service to be bought, those of limited means may find themselves priced out of something that ought to be freely available. A professional visit cannot replicate the history, the mutual obligations and the sheer unpredictability that characterise an enduring family relationship, however skilled the visitor. There is a further risk that a commercial solution quietly relieves families, employers and public services of obligations they might otherwise be expected to meet.

6 But writing the business off as evidence of social decline would be too easy. People have always sought wisdom and support beyond their immediate families, falling back on neighbours, mentors and local institutions when relatives were unavailable or unsuitable. Perhaps what is genuinely new here is not the arrangement itself but the honesty of its financial terms. Japan's rentable grandmothers point to both the value of experience and the difficulty, in a busy and dispersed society, of creating ordinary places where the generations can meet without anybody having to make an appointment.

Sources: ABC Australia. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer implies that customers should not expect a hired visitor to become a relative. T F NG
2. The writer argues that the service will push families to take on more responsibility for older relatives. T F NG
3. Most of the women who work for the service used to have jobs in caring. T F NG
4. Taeko Kaji's experience supports the view that older people can be skilled contributors. T F NG
5. The writer regards paying for support outside the family as a modern invention. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

competence	dispersed	elusive	modest	persistent	recipients	replicate	temporary

1. No amount of training can fully _____ the warmth of a relationship built over decades.
2. Despite repeated evidence to the contrary, the _____ belief that older workers are slow has survived.
3. What distinguishes a good surgeon is not charm but _____, the reliable skill to do the job properly.
4. The profits were _____, enough to pay the rent and little more.
5. With the family now _____ across three countries, they see one another once a year.
6. Charities often treat the elderly as passive _____ of help rather than as contributors.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. Paid companionship raises uncomfortable questions about _____ and inequality. (AUTHENTIC)
2. Part of a family's charm is its sheer _____, since nobody knows what the next visit will bring. (PREDICT)
3. Customers appreciate _____ about what they are paying for. (TRANSPARENT)
4. The _____ view that old age means dependence is increasingly challenged. (CONVENTION)
5. Poorer households may find the fees _____, however valuable the visits. (AFFORD)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. At this level many phrasal verbs are idiomatic, so the literal meaning of the parts will not help. Learn each one with the particle it needs.

brush	fall	gloss	play	stand	tide	wear

1. Governments that _____ aside the loneliness problem risk finding that it grows.
2. When the family cannot help, older people often _____ back on savings or friends.
3. Critics _____ down the benefits by calling the visits a gimmick.
4. Rather than _____ over the awkward questions, a good report confronts them.
5. A paid visitor can _____ in for an absent relative, but cannot replace the family.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What could make paid help feel warm without pretending it was family?
2. Which kinds of experience become more valuable with age?
3. What could different generations enjoy doing together?

9 Role-play: should we hire a grandmother?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the daughter

Your father lives alone and you live far away. You want to book a paid visitor from a service like OK! Obaachan for two hours a week. Explain why it could help, listen to his worries and try to agree a plan.

Student B · the father

You're proud and independent. You think paid company is strange, and you'd rather see your family. Say what worries you. You can say no, or agree to try it if the conditions are right.

Useful phrases

I'm worried you're on your own too much.

It's only a trial, so we could try it once.

I don't want a stranger in my house.

She'd help with the cooking, and she'd be good company.

I'd rather see you than pay someone.

Let's try it for a month and see how it goes.

Afterwards, tell the class: did the father agree, and what changed his mind?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 H · 3 A · 4 B · 5 G · 6 F · 7 E · 8 C

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 replicate · 2 persistent · 3 competence · 4 modest · 5 dispersed · 6 recipients

6 Word forms

1 authenticity · 2 unpredictability · 3 transparency · 4 conventional · 5 unaffordable

7 Language focus

1 brush · 2 fall · 3 play · 4 gloss · 5 stand

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