



Navigating Support Systems: A Map for Custodial Grandparents



Key Words

grandparents raising grandchildren, custodial grandparents, social services (grandparents navigating)

The knock on the door came early one Sunday morning. Marla, a 52-year-old divorced grandmother, answered the door to find one of her adult daughters, Shawna, and her three young children. Marla wasn't totally surprised to hear that Shawna's stormy relationship with her boyfriend had ended, leaving her temporarily homeless. Shawna's oldest daughter, Brittany, had lived with Marla off and on for the first four years of her life, while her mother was incarcerated for issues related to her drug abuse. Marla was less well-acquainted with the younger two children, who had different fathers and had spent their early years with their mother. Things became more complicated the next day when Shawna returned to her boyfriend's apartment to gather up her belongings. She and her boyfriend began arguing and Shawna physically assaulted him, landing in jail. Suddenly, Marla found herself responsible for three young children. Initially concerned with finding food, clothing, sleeping space and daily care, Marla soon found herself overwhelmed as she struggled to negotiate interactions with legal, educational, health and social service agencies. Like most grandparents, she was caught unaware and unprepared for a second parenthood experience.

The challenges experienced by Marla reflect issues that millions of families face today. The need to interact effectively with various social systems to obtain necessary services proves difficult and time-consuming for many grandparents. A myriad of choices for services exist and grandparents may find themselves confused and uncertain about entry points for obtaining services. Prioritization of systems into those providing what one needs to have (*i.e., food, shelter and clothing*) versus what can be delayed (*long-term mental health counseling, personal respite*) is an essential first step. Assistance to meet immediate needs is most often obtained

through interactions with four systems: Legal, Educational, Health Care and Social Services. The legal system may already be in action before the child arrives.

Typically, the legal system is the gateway to accessing other services, even for very simple decisions. Grandparents must obtain some legally recognized authority for their grandchildren's care. This may take the form of a *power of attorney*, a *limited or temporary guardianship order*, *designation as a foster care provider*, or eventually *adoption*. (Crumbley and Little, 1997) Legal authority will enable grandparents to seek out assistance from other agencies, will provide access to essential services, and can buffer potentially difficult relationships with the child's parent or parents.

Grandparents can find assistance with *basic needs* through various social service agencies. Requirements vary from state to state, but many caregiving grandparents will qualify for *food stamps, housing assistance, or cash allowances and vouchers*. Social service agencies can also assist grandparents with *transportation issues, access to emergency food banks, and essential clothing, furniture and household and personal care supplies*. Grandparents often experience feelings of failure, guilt and embarrassment over their adult child's inability to parent and may be hesitant to initiate contact with local social service offices. They must overcome this resistance. Grandparents need to know that they are applying for the grandchild(ren); they may not qualify for benefits but the grandchild will. Encouraging grandparents to apply can help them to benefit from a variety of services offered in most communities, from federal, state, county and local resource programs.

(deToledo & Brown, 1996; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998)

Health care is often an immediate concern for many grandparent-headed families. Children in the care of grandparents are often needy, due to a combination of congenital and environmental factors. They are more likely to have been exposed prenatally to drugs

and/or alcohol (Minkler & Roe, 1995; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998) and may be impeded in terms of physical, cognitive or emotional deficits which can impede development. (Smith & Dannison, 2002) Grandchildren may have received little or no *medical or dental care* and medical records are often difficult or impossible to locate. Grandchildren may be taking prescribed medications that need to be carefully monitored and continued. Allergies to foods, medications and environmental substances may be problematic. A *simple physical examination or check-up, to include dental care, is an essential first step.* Additionally, many grandparents caring for children may experience health concerns and needs unique to their stage in the life cycle. Custodial grandparents should be encouraged to carefully select a health care provider who is sensitive to the needs and health issues of both grandchildren and grandparents. (Grinwys, Smith & Dannison, in press)

While all children need educating, many grandchildren come with *special learning concerns.* Studies focusing on educational needs of custodial grandchildren, particularly those who have been drug-exposed, have found they are more likely to have *learning disabilities and/or mental impairments,* will be enrolled in *special education services,* and are more likely to repeat at least one grade in school. (Brooks & Barth, 1998; Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994) Keeping children in the same school or day care program is beneficial and desirable but may not always be possible. Grandchildren may have moved from school to school and attendance may have been inconsistent. *Obtaining school records and special education plans* can be a frustrating but a necessary struggle. It may include some legal impediments. Grandparents need to communicate about their grandchild's living situation and unique needs to teachers and work to actively promote partnerships between themselves and the educational community. (Dannison & Smith 2003; Smith & Dannison, 2002) Important roles for grandparent caregivers are to communicate the importance of education to their grandchild, develop a home environment that supports learning, and supervise and monitor grandchildren's school progress. Continuing the child's learning opportunities while juggling relationships with other systems is essential.

A fifth system, applicable in some situations, which may be beneficial in meeting immediate needs is the *extended family.* Members of the extended kinship relationship can provide necessary information, support and assistance to fill in gaps not covered by more formal organizations. A crucial first step is for

family members to put grandchildren's needs ahead of their own emotional issues and to reach an effective consensus. Families can then dialogue about what needs to be done and who will do it. *Recordkeeping* takes on added importance as custodial grandparent families navigate these systems. A good resource related to these issues is the *Second Time Around: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren* curriculum. (Dannison & Nieuwenhuis, 1996) Grandparents' continued abilities to self-identify and communicate needs is essential to securing support from the extended family system.

Resources

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