

# When “Grandma” Is “Mom”

*What  
Today's  
Teachers  
Need To  
Know*

**I**ncreasingly, grandparents are being required to act as parents. Recent statistics indicate that well over 2 million children currently live with their grandparents in a home where no biological parent is present. The number of children living in grandparent-headed households has increased 66 percent since 1990 (Children's Defense Fund, 1997). While children living with grandparents is not a new occurrence, many features of this emergent family trend represent recent societal changes. Grandparent-headed households often result from what one writer terms the “Four Ds”: drugs, divorce, desertion, and death (Yorkey, 1993). High rates of adolescent pregnancies (Becklund, 1993), a prison population in which 80 percent of all inmates are parents of dependent children (Barry, Fortier, Smith, & Archibald, 1993), and the increased number of families affected by AIDS (Lee, 1994) also contribute to the sharp rise in grandparent-headed families. Irrespective of the diverse circumstances that may lead them to this new role, grandparents share the common goal of wanting to provide a stable, nurturing environment for their grandchildren (Strom & Strom, 1993).

Contrary to popular belief, grandparent-headed families are not exclusively a minority, urban problem (deToledo & Brown, 1995). The trend spans all ethnic groups and all social and economic levels; such family arrangements can be found in large cities, small towns, and rural areas. Minority families, however, are more likely to be affected. Approximately 12 percent of African American children (about 1.2 million children) are being raised by grandparents; the figures for Caucasian and Hispanic children are 4 percent (.5 million) and 6 percent (1.8 million), respectively (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

## The Grandparents' Perspective

While the home-school connection is critical for every young child, it is especially crucial in grandparent-headed households. Education professionals need unique insight and information about custodial grandparents' particular circumstances. Professionals must understand how these circumstances interact with the specific needs of the children if they are to work successfully with this emergent family type.

Many custodial grandparents do not fit the stereotypical notion of senior citizens actively enjoying retirement pursuits. Minkler and Roe (1993) found that the age of custodial grandparents ranged from 41-71, with a median age of 53. Another study found that over half of custodial grandmothers were caring for two or more young children, and approximately half were grandmothers without partners (Creighton, 1991). The parental responsibilities they carry often are accompanied by the need to provide care and/or support to their

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own aging parents. The constant challenges associated with this situation leaves many grandparents emotionally, physically, and financially drained.

Grandparents who are raising their grandchildren rarely seek out their new role; rather, it is thrust upon them. As a rule, their involvement begins after the grandchildren's basic needs have gone unmet for a significant period of time, or the children's living situation becomes unacceptable. Although a parent's substance abuse or mental illness are common reasons for grandparents to assume care (Jendrek, 1994), they may also elect to provide care when the child's parent is too young or too ill to act effectively as a parent. These circumstances often propel grandparents into action, with the immediate objective of providing their grandchildren with a secure and supportive home environment. Many grandparents, however, encounter deep feelings of failure, guilt, and embarrassment over their own adult child's inability to successfully assume the role of parent (Dannison, Smith, Dannison, & Nieuwenhuis, 1996). These emotions, coupled with the fact that they are assuming the care for children who are often physically and emotionally needy, add to the challenges of the custodial grandparent's role.

Other demands, albeit less dramatic ones, are a daily reality for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Assuming care for one or more young grandchildren requires extensive and long-term life changes and adjustments (Dannison & Nieuwenhuis, 1996; deToledo & Brown, 1995). Grandparents who had planned on retirement suddenly find themselves re-engaged in providing daily care for a young child. Routines for virtually every aspect of their lives, including those involving work, home, friends, and personal pursuits, must be evaluated and redefined. Often, grandparents find themselves struggling to negotiate unfamiliar and sometimes hostile territory involving the legal, education, and community support systems (Dannison et al., 1996). Financial worries are common (Dannison & Nieuwenhuis, 1996). Raising children is expensive for anyone, and most retirement incomes were not meant to cover the costs of raising one or more growing children on an extended basis. It is little wonder that custodial grandparents, while maintaining a strong commitment to providing a good home for their grandchildren, often express disappointment, worry, and frustration over their altered life circumstances (Burton, 1992; Creighton, 1991; Dannison et al., 1996; Jendrek, 1994).

### The Grandchildren's Perspective

Research focusing on children residing in grandparent-headed homes is virtually non-existent. Educators need information from studies about children's and grandparents' special needs and considerations. Through direct contact, leaders of community organizations, volunteer

groups, and public and private agencies have become acutely aware of the many needs of custodial grandparents. Educational and supportive intervention with this population can be effective, and also can provide a means for refining parenting skills. Grandparents in support groups, and professionals facilitating these groups, have described many of the unique demands faced by custodial grandparents (Dannison et al., 1996).

Whatever their backgrounds, children in grandparent-headed homes share certain feelings. They are often needy, due to a combination of congenital and environmental factors. These children may experience difficulty forming attachments (Dannison et al., 1996), due to inconsistencies and crises in their early home environments. Annually, an estimated 375,000 infants are exposed to drugs and/or alcohol in utero (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1990). Many "grandparented" children have experienced severe and prolonged abuse and neglect as a result of living with a drug-involved or otherwise ineffective parent (Churchville, 1984; Minkler and Roe, 1993). Fetal alcohol syndrome is common, leading to physical, cognitive, or emotional deficits. It may be difficult for grandparented children to communicate how they feel about the traumatic experiences that have changed their lives. While many act out inappropriately, others may cope by becoming either withdrawn, non-verbal, or "too good to be true."

Grandparented children must deal with many confusing, troubling emotions (see Table 1). Feelings common to grandparented children include:

- *Grief and Loss.* Grandchildren who have lost their parents, either to death or desertion, may be grieving intensely. Childhood professionals often overlook, however, the more subtle loss of the traditional grandparents. Custodial grandparents must drop their traditional roles as they pick up the responsibilities of parenthood, and children often are saddened when they are forced to relinquish their position as "grandchild." In their eyes, they have lost both a parent and a grandparent. One grandmother reports her grandchild as being especially upset over the confusion of what to call her. While "grandma" no longer seemed appropriate, neither did "mom," "aunt," or her first name.

Children may not demonstrate their feelings in ways that adults expect. It is common for young children to seemingly ignore their sadness, not speaking of their losses and going about their daily play in a routine manner (deToledo & Brown, 1995). Adults worry that children are not grieving "the way they should," particularly when they are intensely angry, when they do not wish to talk about their losses, or when they run about laughing with their friends. While children grieve in many different ways, all are experiencing intense loss.

Strategies for teachers include acknowledging these

## Strategies for Assisting Grandparented Children

FEELING	STRATEGIES WITH CHILD	CLASSROOM INTERVENTIONS
Grief and Loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- acknowledge child's losses</li> <li>- develop ways to express feelings</li> <li>- help child to accept grandparent's new role</li> <li>- discuss loss of parent and grandparent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- design classroom experiences (e.g., role plays, play experiences) to allow expression of feelings</li> <li>- provide child with consistent access to caring adults</li> <li>- team child with a "buddy"</li> </ul>
Guilt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide experiences to enhance self-esteem</li> <li>- assist child in releasing responsibility for parents' actions</li> <li>- provide abundant praise and reinforcement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- plan opportunities for child's success</li> <li>- offer options for child to help others</li> <li>- design lessons focusing on owning responsibility</li> </ul>
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide consistency in environment</li> <li>- maintain access to consistent caregivers</li> <li>- establish routines for separation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide engaging activities during times of separation</li> <li>- keep groups small</li> <li>- provide children with opportunities to become very familiar with school environment</li> </ul>
Embarrassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assist in developing answers to questions about home</li> <li>- assess child's "differentness" and communicate with custodial grandparent</li> <li>- provide access to other grandparent models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- teach lessons focusing on diversity</li> <li>- utilize other grandparents in classroom roles</li> <li>- constant sensitivity to differences (e.g., using the term "Caregivers Night" vs. "Parents' Night," displaying pictures of diverse family types, etc.)</li> </ul>
Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- model appropriate expression of anger</li> <li>- provide assurance that feeling angry is OK</li> <li>- teach self-recognition of triggering "cues"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- provide varied outlets for expression</li> <li>- design classroom experiences focusing on anger as a normal emotion</li> <li>- solicit professional referral, if necessary</li> </ul>

*Table 1*

feelings of loss, even if children are demonstrating it in disruptive ways, and helping children to work through their sadness. Role plays, one-on-one discussions, and structured play experiences that focus on recognizing and expressing feelings of loss can be helpful. New losses (e.g., from sickness or death in the family, the disappearance of the biological parent, separation from siblings) may further compound grief. Professional intervention could be beneficial for many of these children.

- **Guilt.** Children residing in grandparent-headed homes often feel enormous guilt. They may view parental desertion as evidence that they "weren't good enough" or they had done something wrong. Children from abusive or neglectful backgrounds may feel they are betraying their parents when they find themselves feeling relieved and positive about their new living situations. Reassuring children that they had nothing to do with their parents' leaving sounds easy enough to do, but is, in reality, very difficult to carry out.

Education professionals may need to employ numerous strategies and interactions to boost children's levels

of self-esteem and self-confidence. Allow children to demonstrate their competence through a variety of experiences, such as doing special jobs for the teacher, or earning privileges by successfully completing tasks and classroom lessons. Older children also will benefit from being able to demonstrate success in their academic work, as well as in personal interactions with teachers. Grandparented children often have a special need for acceptance and praise from significant adults. Emphasize positive feedback and reinforcement. Similarly, grandparented children will need constant reassurance that they did not cause, in any way, their parents' absence, and that liking their new living arrangements is not akin to an emotional abandonment of their parents.

- **Fear.** Fear is common to many children parented by grandparents. Life for them has been full of huge, sweeping changes and many inconsistencies. Many of their basic needs have gone unmet, and so they are unable to form a trusting relationship with any adult caregiver. Others may become inappropriately attached to the grandparent or cling to another adult or older child.

Teachers need special sensitivity to this issue. Grandparented children need enormous amounts of reassurance and care; by consistently and quickly meeting their needs (as much as can be reasonably expected), educators can help them feel nurtured. Separation anxiety is often severe, necessitating that early childhood educators gently guide children when they must leave a secure grandparent figure. Some children are frightened to have the grandparent leave their sight, often crying and resisting when they sense a forthcoming separation. Other children may seem to be oblivious of the grandparents' comings and goings, but are distressed and act out later.

The professional's role may include assisting both grandchild and grandparent in understanding the reasons behind these fears, and providing strategies to make leave-taking less stressful. Older children may experience nightmares or enuresis, eating disorders, or immature or age inappropriate behaviors (deToledo & Brown, 1995; Smith, 1996a). Educating grandparents about the reasons underlying these behaviors, and providing strategies for dealing with them, is especially important. In addition, grandparented children of any age benefit from experiencing their home and school environments as places in which they can feel safe, cared for, and respected (as do all children). Opportunities to examine the classroom and social environments in great detail often are beneficial. One teacher engaged her 1st-grade class in a "treasure hunt" through the school building when a new grandparented student joined the class. The opportunity to explore the entire school and meet key personnel during a fun group experience helped her new student feel more secure.

Many grandparented children benefit from small-group settings and activities. The presence of too many people, either adults or children, can be overwhelming and frightening. Caregiver/teacher consistency is especially important to grandparented children, and teachers need to be continually observant for problem behaviors.

- **Embarrassment.** Children in grandparent-headed homes may feel sensitive about their different living situations. Questions from other children, even those innocent in intent, may embarrass these children. Even harder to handle are the insensitive comments and teasing that inevitably arise when other children sense that a child is different in some way. Even subtle differences, such as clothing that does not quite fit in with the current styles, or not being able to participate in peer-related social activities, can intensify children's embarrassment. Grandparents, often overwhelmed with their caregiving challenges, may not

understand the importance of peer acceptance, or may not have the information and skills to prevent children from feeling singled out and different (Dannison et al., 1996). These types of situations may perpetuate the child's hope that someday, somehow, his "real" mother or father will return (deToledo & Brown, 1995; Smith, 1996).

Grandparented children may need assistance in recognizing and accepting ways in which their lives are unique and special. Educators can focus on building classroom communities that accept and respect diversity. Teachers also may wish to consider using other grandparents in the classroom setting as volunteers, activity leaders, or reading buddies. Providing grandparented children with opportunities to interact with other grandparents may be a unique way of diminishing their sensitivity, and could increase their acceptance among the other children. In addition, educating custodial grandparents about current social trends may be useful. One grandfather expressed great surprise when his 8-year-old grandson kept talking about wanting to play soccer. The grandmother of one kindergartner sent a note to the teacher asking for help understanding what young children did in "computer lab." These examples only begin to illustrate what changes, both subtle and more visible, have occurred since grandparents were last active in raising children. Meetings with grandparents could address such issues as where to locate affordable, fashionable clothing, how to help children make friends, and how to get a child involved in extracurricular activities (Smith, 1996b). Grandparents also may benefit from one-on-one conversations with professionals that focus on children's need to belong, and from joining support and informational groups for custodial grandparents.

- **Anger.** Grandparented children are often angry, and they may display this anger inappropriately. Anger may be directed at many targets: parents, grandpar-

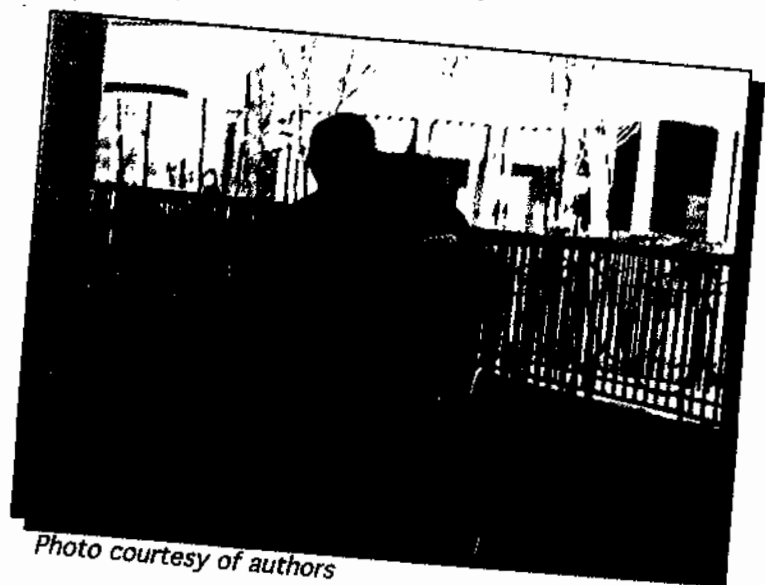


Photo courtesy of authors

ents, siblings, teachers, peers, and, often, themselves. A sense that they have no control over their lives often intensifies their fury. Children may threaten violence, act out inappropriately, be destructive, or physically harm something or someone. Often, these episodes of anger are unpredictable and seem unprovoked.

Professionals need to model appropriate ways of expressing anger, and they may need to provide acceptable outlets for such expressions. Running, kicking a ball, painting a picture, pounding on clay, or writing a story are just some of the possible options. Furthermore, children need to be reassured that anger, while acceptable, needs to be expressed appropriately. Recognizing "cues" that threaten an upcoming angry outburst, and helping the child to gain control before these feelings intensify, is often helpful. Frequent, uncontrolled outbursts, or threatened or actual harm to others or self, may indicate an impending crisis. Teachers may need to use additional resources or refer families for counseling and therapy.

### Importance of the Professional Educator's Role

Professionals working with grandparented children need to reach out to both grandparents and the children in their care. Teachers must ensure that children being raised by grandparents have consistent access to nurturing adults in their home and school environments. Providing predictability and consistency within the school environment will increase children's feelings of security and personal competence. Young children from grandparent-headed homes often urgently seek acceptance from the significant adults in their lives. Teachers can greatly enhance children's feelings of self-worth by conveying their caring and confidence in the child's abilities, and by providing them with opportunities to act out their conflicting emotions in appropriate ways. It is particularly important for teachers to advocate for children who do not seem to be coping well with their new home environment, particularly when inappropriate behaviors go beyond what can be tolerated. Teachers often must initiate steps to ensure that grandparented children take advantage of professional help. Consistent communication between the grandparent and the educator is imperative.

Providing opportunities for grandparent involvement in the school environment will benefit both grandparent and grandchild. Teachers need to let grandparents know that their efforts are noticed and appreciated. The lives of several million American children are tightly interwoven with those of their grandparents. Supporting custodial grandparents and grandchildren is an integral part of optimizing children's development, and influencing their chances for success.

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