

Grandparent-Headed Families in the United States: Programming to Meet Unique Needs

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ABSTRACT. Grandparents are returning to the role of parents in ever-increasing numbers. Custodial grandparents often find themselves isolated from sources of support as they face unique emotional, physical, and financial challenges on a daily basis. Nearly half are grandparents without partners and the majority are caring for two or more young children. Children in the care of grandparents are more likely to experience cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges. Their early traumatic experiences may lead to difficulties in communication and forming attachments.

The *Parent Topics Questionnaire* is a standardized assessment measure designed to provide parent education group facilitators with specific information about needs, desires, and expectations of participants. Administration of this instrument to four parent groups revealed a high readiness for information among the custodial grandparent population. Based on information obtained from this measure, a holistic program was developed which simultaneously provided services to caregiving grandparents, their young grandchildren, and educational professionals.

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Grandparent and grandchildren's groups met weekly and emphasized topics and activities aimed at meeting common needs within these populations. Educational professionals participated in a series of inservice meetings aimed at increasing awareness of needs and strengths of grandparent-headed families, modifying curriculum to more effectively meet grandchildren's needs, and enhancing knowledge of existing resources. Pre- and post-test analysis demonstrate significant positive effects for all involved populations. Grandparents were found to increase in parenting knowledge, perceived levels of social support, willingness to utilize existing resources, and enjoyment of time with their grandchildren. Levels of isolation and perceived depression were decreased. Participating grandchildren demonstrated increased abilities to interact effectively with peers and adults and perceived their interactions with grandparents more positively. Educational professionals reported feeling more informed about custodial grandparent family issues, more confident about interacting with grandparents, and more knowledgeable about existing resources. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Grandparents are returning to the role of parents in ever-increasing numbers. Recent statistics indicate that nearly 4 million, or 5.5%, of American children live in grandparent-maintained households (Casper & Bryson, 1998). This represents an increase of 76% over a three decade period. Currently, 6.7% of families with children under 18 years of age are maintained by grandparents. During the 1990s, the most substantial increase occurred in numbers of children living with grandparents only (no parents present). More than half of the children residing in grandparent-headed homes are under six years of age (U.S. Census Bureau, 1996). Additionally, 75% of grandchildren begin living with their grandparents when they are less than five years of age (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler & Driver, 1997). Programming for this population has typically focused on service provision to custodial grandparents. Less attention has been given to meeting the unique needs of grandchildren. Additionally, professionals are typically provided with little in-

formation or strategies to effectively work with grandparent-headed family members. This article will examine the process utilized to design a holistic program for multi-generational families. Strengths and challenges associated with the custodial grandparent role, emotional themes common in grandparented children's lives, and development and implementation of a comprehensive program designed for custodial grandparents, grandchildren, and educational professionals are reviewed. Assessments related to program design and effectiveness are summarized.

INCREASING NUMBERS OF GRANDPARENT-HEADED FAMILIES

Custodial Grandparents

In many cultures, elder individuals have traditionally played an important part in family support roles. Recently, however, in the U.S., the large number of parents who are failing, for one reason or another, to effectively parent or to meet the developmental needs of their children has given rise to an increasing number of "skipped generation families." In these families, the biological parents are absent from the home over an extended period of time and grandparents have had to step in to serve as the sole or primary caregivers for their grandchildren (Jendrek, 1993; Strom & Strom, 1993). The high rate of teenage pregnancy, incarceration of individuals who are parents, parental alcohol or other substance abuse, the death of one or both parents, HIV/AIDS, an unprecedented rate of divorce among couples who have children, child abuse and neglect, and other economic and social conditions are contemporary problems contributing to the increase of the custodial grandparent family typology (Becklund, 1993; Barry, Frontier, Smith & Archibald, 1993; deToledo & Brown, 1995; Fuller-Thomson, Minkler & Driver, 1997; Jendrek, 1994; Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 1999; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998).

Many custodial grandparents do not fit the stereotypical notion of senior citizens actively enjoying retirement era pursuits. The mean age of these grandparents is generally in the middle 50s (Minkler & Roe, 1993; Smith & Dannison, 2000), over half are grandparents without partners (Creighton, 1991) and the majority are caring for two or more young children. The parental responsibilities they perform often are accompanied by the need to provide support and/or physical care to their own ag-

ing parents. The constant challenges associated with this bi-directional nurturance leaves many grandparents emotionally, physically, and financially drained.

Custodial grandparents often find themselves isolated from sources of support. Their involvement in "off-timed parenting" leaves them socially isolated and lonely. Many also experience deep feelings of failure, guilt, and embarrassment over their own child's inability to effectively assume the role of parent (Dannison & Smith, in press; Smith & Dannison, 2002). These emotions, coupled with the fact that they are assuming care for children who are often physically and emotionally needy, add to the challenges of the custodial grandparents' role.

Children in the Care of Grandparents

Children living in grandparent-maintained homes differ from those living in parent-maintained homes. A study of American grandparent-headed families showed that children are more likely to be younger, to have a household head who is older, have heads of households who are not employed, to live in the South or central cities, and to be poor (Casper & Bryson, 1998). Children in the care of grandparents are also more likely to live with a caregiver who has not graduated from high school. Over 30% of children living with their grandparents are in households where no grandparent has a high school diploma. Only 12% of children living in parent-maintained homes have parents who have not graduated from high school (Casper & Bryson, 1998).

Children of grandparent-headed homes 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. They may have experienced abuse and neglect and they often have difficulties forming attachments (Minkler & Roe, 1993; Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998). While many act out inappropriately, others may cope by becoming either withdrawn, non-verbal or "too good to be true." Grandparented children often deal with many troubling and confusing emotions. Feelings common to grandparented children include grief and loss, fear, guilt, embarrassment, and anger (Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1998). It may be difficult for children living with grandparents to communicate about the traumatic experiences that have changed their lives. They may also be challenged in terms of physical, cognitive, or emotional deficits which impede development. Children in the care of grandparents experience higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems than do children living with biological parents.

Over 26% of children in grandparent-maintained households had clinically significant levels of emotional and behavioral problems, compared to 10% of children in the general population (Dubowitz, Feibleman, Starr & Sawyer, 1994). Additionally, 30% of grandparented children exhibit learning disabilities and/or mental impairment, and over 60% repeat at least one grade in school (Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994). Clearly, grandparent-headed family members have unique and ongoing needs for both educational and supportive services.

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

An assessment instrument was developed to determine grandparents' prioritization of potential parent education content. The *Parent Topics Questionnaire* was administered to various parent groups, including custodial grandparents. Grandparents' responses indicated a high readiness to learn and provided information about topic areas of greatest interest to them. Curriculum was designed to meet informational needs determined by the questionnaire and also focused on providing emotional support, respite and enhanced accessibility to available resources. Awareness of high levels of emotional needs, developmental delays and poor social skills in grandparented children led to the development of a curriculum used in programming for grandchildren. Professional inservice presentations for educators were also developed, implemented and evaluated.

The Parent Topics Questionnaire

The *Parent Topics Questionnaire* is a standardized instrument designed to elicit participant interest in particular topics commonly available in parent education programs. This easily administered assessment allows parent education group facilitators to quickly and efficiently assess the needs, desires, and expectations of their group members before or during the first class session. Internal consistency within the instrument's eleven topic areas, determined after pilot testing, ranged from Alpha = .8099 to .9567 (Gerard, Smith & Dannison, 1999).

The eleven topics evaluated by the questionnaire are: *Pregnancy and Childbirth, Infancy, Early Childhood, Middle Childhood, Adolescence, Health and Safety, Social Issues Related to Parenting, Family Relations and Communications, Guiding the Behavior of Children, Parenting Patterns, and Parenting and Working*. This sixty-three-item question-

naire takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. Respondents complete an importance scale where #1 equals "trivial; should not be included" and ranges to #5, "crucial; must be covered as a unique concept." Each topic area requires a number of responses related to varying subjects within each content area. Resulting scores by responses within a topic can easily be ordered for program planning and prioritization.

The *Parent Topics Questionnaire* was administered to participants in four parent education programs: (1) participants in a parent education enrichment class, (2) a program for single mothers, (3) a program for custodial grandparents, and (4) a program for teenage parents. Cell sizes for each group ranged from 21 to 65 persons; $N = 138$. Significant differences ($p < .05$) were found between the groups in eight of the eleven scaled scores by topic area and the differences followed a consistent pattern. Custodial grandparents and teen parents felt most in need of specific information and assistance in particular topic areas. Participants in these groups indicated consistently that topics in eight of the eleven areas, *Pregnancy and Childbirth, Infancy, Early Childhood, Adolescence, Health and Safety, Social Issues Related to Parenting, Parenting Patterns, and Parenting and Working*, were of importance to them.

Data from this study indicate that parents go through periods in which their readiness or willingness to learn about their parental role is exceptionally high. Such "teachable moments" represent teaching as well as learning opportunities. Teenage parents and custodial grandparents represent populations with high "readiness to learn" who may benefit greatly from supportive and educational services (Gerard, Smith & Dannison, 1999).

SERVICES TO CUSTODIAL GRANDPARENT FAMILY MEMBERS

In 1999, based on the results of the *Parent Topics Questionnaire Study*, a pilot project was implemented to deliver services to caregiving grandparents ($n = 29$ year 1 & 15 year 2), grandchildren ($n = 33$ year 1 & 16 year 2), and educational professionals (teachers, teacher aides, school social workers, administrators; $n = 88$ year 1 & $n = 47$ year 2) in a large county in the American midwest. Programs supporting diverse families are enhanced by adopting a multi-faceted, holistic approach (Anderson & Smith, 1999; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Smith and Dannison, 2002), necessitating the development of programmatic services which

moved beyond meeting exclusively with grandparents. Groups for grandparents and grandchildren, in both rural and urban locations, met weekly for 8 weeks during year one of the project and for 14 weeks during year two of this program. School personnel participated in a series of inservice meetings comprising 8-10 hours of professional training. Pre- and post-test data reveal significant, positive gains for both grandparents and grandchildren, increased knowledge and willingness to implement change for professionals, and emphasized the need for comprehensive services over an extended period of time (Smith & Dannison, 2002).

Support Group Services for Grandparents

Urban and rural grandparents with grandchildren attending Head Start, preschool or early elementary school were recruited for program participation with the assistance of classroom teachers and school staff. They were randomly assigned to treatment and control groups. Control group participants received identical programmatic services at the conclusion of the treatment group phase. Before the actual start of each group, two to three "open house" meetings were held. Highly promoted by classroom teachers, these "Open Houses" were an important first step in helping grandparents to learn more about the program, to meet group facilitators and ask questions, and to complete pretest assessments in a nonthreatening environment.

Grandparent groups met weekly. Session topics included *Understanding Your "Not-So-New Role," Promoting Personal Well-Being, Refining Parenting Skills, Building Relationships, Working with School and Community, Managing Finances, Exploring Legal Issues, and Looking to the Future*. Session materials were presented in a variety of ways, including the use of case studies, problem solving, brainstorming, role playing, large and small group discussions and demonstrations. Time during each session was devoted to grandparents' sharing personal experiences, exchanging information and answering questions. Grandparents who participated in the sessions were informed that this was a pilot program and that a key expectation was their provision of critical, weekly feedback about session content and materials.

A number of observations became readily apparent. Groups of 8-10 participants appeared to be an optimal size. While it was important to have enough participants to provide a "critical mass," larger sizes did not provide grandparents with sufficient opportunities for participation. Grandparent group attendance was consistent and all were active partic-

ipants. Group members became increasingly supportive of one another over time and openly shared information and insights with one another. Comments about the group were overwhelmingly positive and typical statements included, "The people in this group have become my new friends" and "I thought I was the only one raising grandchildren." Participants expressed strong desires to continue meeting after the duration of the formal weekly sessions and the majority elected to participate in regularly meeting contact groups (Dannison & Smith, in press).

Group Services for Grandchildren

Grandchildren's play groups met concurrently with grandparents' groups and piloted specially designed activities and interventions for young children (ages 3-6 years). Group sizes and adult/child ratios were kept small and consistency was emphasized. Children were provided with opportunities to participate in a variety of interactions aimed at enhancing self-esteem, improving social skills, and celebrating family diversity. Emotions commonly experienced by grandparented children—grief and loss, guilt, fear, embarrassment and anger (Smith, Dannison & Vacha-Haase, 1999)—were introduced, with emphasis on assisting children to recognize and express these feelings appropriately. Routines were established during the first session and were carefully maintained in future meetings. Sessions were active and fun, providing children with interactions and activities in the areas of literature, drama, music, physical movement, and art. Extensive opportunities for guided interactions and socialization with peers and adults was an integral component of each group session.

Participating grandchildren's social skills and self-confidence appeared markedly improved over the duration of their group involvement. The grandchildren viewed their group as an important component of their lives. They developed friendships, displayed increasingly appropriate social behaviors during activities, established relationships with adult facilitators, and became supportive of one another.

Integration of grandparent and grandchildren's groups was accomplished by closely and sensitively involving the grandchildren's group teacher (an early childhood specialist) at the end of each grandparent session. During each session, the same teacher summarized content and reviewed interactions with the grandparents. Anxious about their grandchildren's abilities and behaviors, grandparents were able to receive immediate feedback about children's actions and activities. They came to view this teacher as a professional they could trust and fre-

quently asked questions or voiced concerns about child development issues or parenting practices. Grandparents were also provided with age appropriate activities for use with grandchildren at home and they received additional information about parenting issues and resources.

Educational Opportunities for Professionals

School personnel participated in a series of half-day educational inservice meetings focused on providing information about custodial grandparent families, recognizing common strengths and challenges, and enhancing communication. Information was presented using large group presentations, small group activities, panel discussions, case study analysis, guest speakers and other interactional strategies. Opportunities for modifying curriculum and school settings to more effectively meet the needs of grandparent-headed family members were identified and educators were provided with information about legal issues and existing community resources.

THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Pre- and post-test assessments were conducted on participating grandparents, grandchildren and educational professionals. Grandparents completed the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Grandparent Survey*, a 66-item assessment designed specifically for this study which focuses on the areas of parenting knowledge, perceived social support, depression and self-esteem. Grandparents also completed weekly evaluation forms which allowed them to rate and give specific feedback on each group session. Grandchildren were assessed using a modification of Harter and Pike's *Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and Acceptance for Young Children*. This 33-item assessment was adapted to use specifically with grandchildren being raised by their grandparents. School professionals completed three assessment measures. The *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Teacher Survey* focuses on determining teachers' knowledge of unique challenges and strengths associated with grandparent-headed families, and their willingness and abilities to effectively modify curriculum and school settings. The *Teacher Report of Child Behavior* (Shaefer & Edgerton, 1979) and *The Teacher Report of (Grand)Parent Involvement-Short Form* are pre-post-test measures which allow teachers to assess chil-

dren's social behaviors and grandparents' involvement and communication with the educational system.

Grandparent Group Results

Analysis of pre- and post-test assessments showed significant increases in grandparents' parenting knowledge, perceived levels of social support, willingness to utilize existing resources, and enjoyment of time together with their grandchildren. Levels of isolation and perceived depression were significantly decreased. Grandparents reported feeling freer to take time for themselves each day (47% pretest/67% post-test), eating dinner with their grandchildren each evening (66% pretest/80% post-test) and were more inclined to communicate with their grandchild's teacher (53% pretest/89% post-test). Grandparents were better able to locate and access community resources (40% pretest/73% post-test) and spent increased time with friends who were also raising grandchildren (0% pretest/40% post-test). In addition, grandparents reported that their grandchildren enjoyed time spent together (80% pretest/100% post-test) and felt more hopeful about their grandchild's future (47% pretest/67% post-test).

Grandchildren's Group Results

Results from participating grandchildren indicated increases in their abilities to interact with peers and their levels of self-esteem. Significant increases were also found in grandchildren's perceptions of their relationships with grandparents. Four of five assessment items specifically related to the grandparent/grandchild relationship were higher at post-test. Grandchildren reported that grandparents talked to them more frequently (47% pretest/88% post-test), took them more places (53% pretest/87% post-test), smiled at them more frequently (47% pretest/75% post-test) and prepared more food that they liked (33% pretest/87% post-test). During year one of this project, grandchildren did not perceive that grandparents read to them more frequently at post-test. During the second year of the program, grandparents were provided with books to determine if easy access to appropriate reading materials would increase reading interactions between grandparents and grandchildren. At pretest, 60% of the grandchildren ($n = 16$) responded that grandparents read to them "pretty much" or "a whole lot," 33% responded that grandparents read to them "sometimes," and 7% reported that grandparents "never" read to them. After the conclusion of the 14-week group, during which time appropriate literature was provided

for use at home and effective ways of either reading or storytelling (for grandparents challenged with reading) were modeled, grandchildren's responses changed significantly. None (0%) responded that grandparents "never" read to them, 13% reported that grandparents read "sometimes" and 87% reported that grandparents read to them "pretty much" or "a whole lot." This example further illustrates that grandparents, while being firmly committed to providing a consistent and nurturing environment for their grandchildren, they are often too overwhelmed to deal effectively with the numerous systems that they are confronted with on a daily basis. Suggesting that grandparents obtain books for their grandchildren at the store or at the public library was more than most could handle. Providing books to them for use at home with their grandchildren removed one obstacle and significantly increased the reading behaviors which occurred during the second year of this project.

Results from Educators

Classroom teachers commented favorably about changed behaviors they observed among children participating in the grandchildren's groups. Comments from educators indicated that although nearly all (86%) were interacting with children from grandparent-headed families, most (96%) had little formal knowledge about this family typology. They were unsure how to enhance children's learning and to serve as an ongoing resource for grandparents. Participant assessments rated these inservice sessions very highly, with comments indicating that most (94%) were better informed about unique challenges and strengths associated with grandparent-headed families, more confident about interacting with grandparents and more willing to implement changes and modifications within both individual classrooms and school environments. Educators' feedback indicated that they welcomed opportunities to interact around the issues unique to grandparent-headed families. Increased awareness of the circumstances and challenges facing grandparent-headed family members and knowledge that their support and expertise could make a positive impact was a strong motivator for school personnel to move toward making effective changes.

CONCLUSIONS

Programs serving multi-generational families have tended to focus solely on providing information and/or support to the caregiving grandparents themselves. Holistically based programs better meet the unique

needs of custodial grandparents, their young grandchildren and the professionals who work with them each day. Utilizing information gained from the *Parent Topics Questionnaire* about custodial grandparents' readiness to learn and topic areas most of interest to them contributed greatly to this particular program's effectiveness. Combining this knowledge with an ecological focus that emphasized the recognition and response to needs of all grandparent-headed family members and involved professionals greatly increased its success. The strengths inherent in multi-generational families need to be supported and celebrated as numbers of children living with grandparents continues to escalate. The time is right for carefully planned and sensitively administered programs that support the custodial grandparent family.

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