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An increasing number of American grandparents are finding their later years different

from what they expected. Instead of a quiet retirement, sweetened by delights of occasional visits with grandchildren, many grandparents have taken on the role of surrogate parents to their grandchildren. Reasons behind this trend involve a variety of family circumstances, including the death of one or both parents, parental abandonment, the high incidence of divorce, an increase in the number of never-married mothers (especially teen mothers), parental imprisonment, drug addiction, or mental illness. The AIDS epidemic also plays a role in this increasing shift of responsibility for child rearing. The Orphan Project of New York City (1995) estimates that 75,000 to 125,000 children will be orphaned by the year 2000 because their mothers have died of HIV/AIDS.

Recent legislative activity is also likely to contribute to an increase in the number of grandparent-grandchild families in the future. The amended September 1995 Social Security Act requires states to specify adult relatives as the first foster care option; the Kinship Care Act of 1996 (introduced by Senator Wyden of Oregon and recently referred to the Senate Committee on Finance) puts grandparents first in line as potential foster care parents and adoptive parents for grandchildren who, for safety reasons, have been removed from their parents' home.

In short, while grandparents have often raised their grandchildren in times of family crisis, the proportion of families in crisis situations is growing. A 40 percent increase in grandchildren living in their grandparents' homes, many without their parents, was reported between 1980 and 1990 (de Toledo & Brown, 1995). Families made up of grandparents and their grandchildren are just one of the diverse family structures with which schools are learning to work.

THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF GRANDPARENTS AS PARENTS

The National Center for Health Statistics (Saluter, 1996) reported that 3.735 million children under the age of 18 (5.4 percent) live in the home of their grandparent or grandparents, and that black children are more likely (13 percent) to live with a grandparent than white children (3.9 percent) or Hispanic children (5.7 percent). While nearly half the grandparent households with a grandchild include the child's mother, about a million families in the United States are made up of grandparents raising their grandchildren without one of the children's parents (Takas, 1995). Thus, about 1 in 20 children under 18 lives in a home headed by a grandparent without parents present. Grandparents serving as surrogate parents represent all socioeconomic and ethnic groups. Most families headed by grandparents live in an urban setting and have less than a high school education, and more such families live in the south (57 percent) than in all other areas of the United States combined (Turner, 1995).

HOW SCHOOLS CAN HELP

Schools can contribute significantly to helping grandparents cope with the stresses of parenting a second time around. As a basis for understanding and helping, school personnel may need to learn to recognize and accept strong feelings experienced by each member of the grandparent-parent-child triad. Grandparents (even those who find great satisfaction in raising their grandchildren) often feel disappointment mixed with anger, blame, guilt, and serious concern about family finances. Parents usually have ambivalent feelings of gratitude and resentment, as they grieve the loss of their child even if they recognize that the decision to remove the child from their care is in the child's best interest. Often, resentment deepens as estrangement widens. Children raised by grandparents may express feelings of abandonment, even though they are grateful to their grandparents for taking care of them (Saltzman & Pakan, 1996). Grandparent and grandchild interactions with noncustodial parents can be supportive or damaging to all the parties involved.

SCHOOL STRATEGIES INTENDED TO HELP GRANDPARENTS

Schools can use many strategies to support grandparents who are working to raise and educate their grandchildren. Many schools may find the following list of suggestions useful.

Examine school policies on enrollment. Existing policies may need revision to accommodate the realities of children living with their grandparents. For example, in some districts, once the grandparent has informal authority from the parent or legal authority, he or she is able to enroll the child in school, review the child's records, and make any requests or decisions about the child's education (American Association of Retired Persons [AARP], 1993). In other districts, formal guardianship is required for anyone other than a parent to make school decisions on behalf of the child.

Have helpful information on hand for grandparents acting as parents. School counselors may want to write to the organizations in the Resource List accompanying this digest for more information on parenting the second time around, and they may want to share it with teachers and grandparents acting as parents. They may want to check with local social service agencies to find out about support groups and "reparenting" or "grandparenting" classes for grandparents raising a second family. Such services may help reduce the isolation that is commonly cited as a major problem for grandparents raising their grandchildren (de Toledo & Brown, 1995).

Keep in mind that short-term "respite care" for young and school-age children often tops

the "wish list" of grandparent caregivers (Turner, 1995). If they do not already routinely do so, schools can prepare information in advance on before- and after-school programs, on lunch and breakfast programs, and on Head Start or other preschool programs for "all" families.

Be sure that school policy supports appropriate referrals for educational, health, and social services, as needed. Grandparents may not be aware of services available to help their grandchild academically or to help the child deal with emotional and psychological problems. Eligibility for such services may be in question in some situations, yet many grandparent-grandchild families are particularly in need of this kind of assistance (AARP, 1993).

Keep in mind that school may be a much different place from the schools that grandparents remember. Schools might consider scheduling extra time for grandparent teacher conferences, letting grandparents know how to reach the teacher not only when there is a problem but at any time, and encouraging grandparents to volunteer at school to gain a sense of current school practices.

Use "family-friendly" strategies to encourage surrogate parents to take an active role in their children's education. These strategies include using inclusive language on home-school communications. Schools might want to stress to teachers the importance of understanding how the child views his or her primary caregiver. When the teacher is sending home important notices, the teacher needs to know whether it is "Grandmommy" or "Poppa" who will need to read, sign, and return the forms. The child and his or her classmates need to hear the teacher's accurate acknowledgment of this important relationship.

SCHOOL STRATEGIES INTENDED TO HELP GRANDCHILDREN

Schools can also help children cope with the stresses of adjusting to their living arrangements. The strategies listed here particularly affect the children.

Anticipate transitional or adjustment difficulties and act to minimize them. If a grandchild has only recently come into the grandparents' home, he or she may need time to adjust to a new routine, including expectations that he or she will attend school regularly and

complete schoolwork.

Look for children's strengths and build on them. As many as two-thirds of children who have grown up in difficult circumstances have within them the resilience to grow up to lead healthy, productive lives (Benard, 1991). With support and sensitivity, these children can often meet teachers' expectations.

Place children living with grandparents with the most stable and experienced teachers. Whether because of long-term family instability or recent sudden trauma, children living with their grandparents may not only need extra attention during the school year but also the classroom stability that an experienced teacher can provide.

Try not to single out children because of their family status in front of peers or other teachers. Shame and the feeling of being different from their peers, however unjustified, can contribute to a difficult school adjustment for these children.

CONCLUSION

Children from families headed by grandparents constitute a growing proportion of students in schools, and their numbers can be expected to continue to increase. Schools that recognize and support these nontraditional families will be able to provide better service to their communities.

See the Grandparents as Parents Resource List of related publications and organizations.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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