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ABSTRACT

Numerous challenges face the growing number of grandparent-headed households, including isolation from friends and social supports, and difficulties in caring for grandchildren exhibiting multiple needs. This paper describes a pilot program in which a university and a large county-wide Head Start program formed a partnership to focus on serving the needs of custodial grandparents, their preschool-aged grandchildren, and Head Start personnel. Grandparents from rural and urban sites were randomly placed in treatment and control groups. The treatment was comprised of three components: (1) an 8-week program of educational and support services for grandparents, including weekly 2-hour meetings on personal well-being, parenting skills, legal issues, financial concerns, and working with school and community; (2) 8 educational interactions for grandchildren held at the same time as--and integrated with--the grandparent groups, with session topics focusing on self esteem, diverse family types, and emotional themes common in grandparented children's lives; and (3) education of Head Start personnel on strategies for enhancing communication, educating grandparents about child development, and adapting curriculum to meet the children's needs. Pre- and posttest assessment showed positive changes for all three populations. Grandparents increased their knowledge of child development and parenting skills, self-esteem, and knowledge of available resources and decreased their feelings of isolation and depression. Grandchildren showed increases in self-esteem and social competence. Staff reported increased knowledge about the unique challenges and strengths of grandparent-headed families. Modifications were made for Year 2 of the project. (Contains 10 references.) (Author/KB)

Grandparent Headed Families and Head Start: Developing Effective Services

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Abstract

Grandparent-headed households have increased over 60% since the beginning of this decade (Children's Defense Fund, 1997), and predictions suggest this family type will continue to increase dramatically. Substance abuse, incarceration, mental and physical illness, teenage pregnancy and welfare reform have significantly impacted the numbers of grandparents who find themselves in the role of parent once again. This paper describes a pilot program partnering a university with a large county-wide Head Start program focused on serving cusodial grandparents, their preschool-aged grandchildren and Head Start personnel.

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Grandparent Headed Families and Head Start: Developing Effective Services

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Grandparents are being recycled as parents in increasing numbers.

Recent statistics indicate that over 3 million children currently live with their grandparents in a home where no biological parent is present (Children's Defense fund, 1997), representing an increase of 53% since 1990 (Casper and Bryson, 1998). High rates of teenage pregnancy, parental alcohol and other substance abuse, incarceration, the death of one of both parents, divorce, child abuse and neglect, HIV/AIDS, unemployment and other social conditions continue to contribute to this escalating family typology (deToledo and Brown, 1995; Smith, Dannison and Vacha-Hasse, 1998). Proportionally 4.1% white, 6.5% Hispanic, and 14.5% of African American children were living with their grandparents (Minkler and Fuller-Thomson, 1999). In 1996, over half the children living with grandparents were under 6 years of age (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996). Additionally, 75% of grandchildren began living with their grandparents when they were less than 5 years old. These statistics vividly illustrate the magnitude of this issue in the lives of many preschool children.

Many grandparent caregivers find their personal resources stretched to

the limit. They face multiple challenges on a daily basis as they struggle to redefine every aspect of their lives, including work, home, friendships, and personal pursuits. Isolation from friends and other sources of social support is common and issues related to health, finances and parenting are prominent (Dannison and Smith, 1998; Minkler and Roe, 1993). Grandchildren in the care of grandparents often exhibit multiple needs. Many have been prenatally exposed to drugs and/or alcohol and have experienced sustained abuse or neglect as a result of living with a drug involved parent. (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1990). All have experienced inconsistencies and instabilities in their earliest environments. Many grandparented children act out inappropriately, while others cope by becoming withdrawn, non-verbal or "too good to be true". Emotional themes common in the lives of grandparented children include grief and loss, guilt, fear, embarrassment, and anger (Smith, Dannison, and Vacha-Hasse, 1998).

A pilot program partnering a university with a large county-wide Head Start program was initiated in 1999. Funded by two private foundations and under the guidance of a 20 member Advisory board, this pilot project focused on serving custodial grandparents, their preschool-aged grandchildren, and Head Start personnel. All three populations participated in a series of pre- and post-test assessments to determine the effectiveness of the services provided.

Grandparents from both rural and urban sites were randomly placed in treatment and control groups and were invited to participate in an 8 week

program focused on educational and support service provision (N = 19). Topics covered in the weekly, two hour sessions included personal well-being, parenting skills, legal issues, financial concerns, and working with school and community. Facilitators utilized the resource *Second Time Around - Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: A curriculum for Grandparent Support Groups* for instructional materials (Dannison & Nieuwenhuis, 1996).

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 participants. 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).

A second programmatic component provided services to Head Start children being raised by grandparents (N = 18). Grandchildren participated in a series of eight educational interactions, held at the same time as the grandparent groups. Session topics focused on enhancing self esteem, appreciating diverse family types, and on the five emotional themes common in

grandparented children's lives. Grandparents were kept informed on topics covered during each week of the children's sessions and were provided with follow-up literature and activities to use at home.

Group sizes and adult/child ratios were kept small and consistency was emphasized. 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 play group as an important component of their lives. They developed friendships, displayed increasingly appropriate social behaviors during activities, established relationships with adult facilitators, and become 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 frequently 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.

The program's third component focused on educating Head Start personnel (N=31) about the unique strengths and challenges associated with grandparent-headed families. Strategies for enhancing communication, educating grandparents about child development, and adapting curriculum to more effectively meet the needs of grandparented children were presented in a series of half-day inservice meetings.

Pre- and post-test assessments were conducted on participating grandparents, grandchildren and Head Start personnel. Grandparents completed the *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Grandparent Survey*, a 66 item assessment instrument designed specifically for this study focusing on 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*. The 33 item assessment was adapted to use specifically with grandchildren being raised by their grandparents. Head Start personnel 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* and *The Teacher Report of (Grand)Parent Involvement-Short form* are pre-post test measures which allow teachers to assess children's social behaviors and grandparents' involvement and communication with the educational system.

Data analysis showed significant positive changes for all three populations. Grandparents increased in knowledge of child development and parenting skills, self esteem, and knowledge of available resources. Significant decreases were seen in feelings of isolation and depression. Grandparents responded that they could take more time to relax and care for themselves (17% pre-test/67% post-test), were able to locate assistance when they needed help parenting their grandchild (54% pre-test/73% post test), indicated that they were interested in knowing how their grandchild was doing in school (53% pre-test/79% post test), felt they had appropriate information to be a good parent to their grandchild (66% pre-test/87% post test) and almost always or always enjoyed the time they spent with their grandchild(80% pre-test/100% post test).

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% pre-test/88% post-test), took them more places (53% pre-test/87% post-test), smiled at them more frequently (47% pre-test/75% post-test) and prepared more food that they liked (33% pre-test/87% post-test).

Head Start personnel commented favorably about changed behavior 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 with in 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 make effective changes.

During year two, this project was adapted from 8 to 14 weekly sessions for both grandparents and grandchildren. Ongoing, bi-monthly meeting contact groups allow involved grandparents and grandchildren to continue meeting after conclusion of their weekly sessions. Additional resources have been developed to support groups who continue to meet.

Programs serving multi-generational families have tended to focus solely on providing information and/or support to the caregiving grandparents themselves. Holistically-based programs need to be provided to better meet the needs of custodial grandparents, their young grandchildren and the professionals that work with them each day. The strengths inherent in multigenerational families need to be supported and celebrated as the numbers of children living with grandparents continues to escalate. The time is right for strong, carefully planned and sensitively administrated programs that support grandparents' efforts to help children to develop and thrive in their family, social and school environments.

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