School-Age Children Raised by Their Grandparents: Problems and Solutions

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During the past decade, several studies have been published that investigated the social, emotional, and physical functioning of grandparents raising their grandchildren. Research suggests grandparents in these families experience high levels of stress and psychosocial difficulty. In addition, the available data suggest children raised by their grandparents often encounter behavioral, emotional, and academic problems at school. The problems they experience indicate these children require intervention assistance from psychologists, school counselors, and other school professionals. This paper provides a brief report of the phenomenon, particularly as it relates to the grandchildren’s school-related functioning. Practical and theory-based interventions are described to improve the educational and developmental outcomes of these grandchildren.

During the past decade, several studies have been published that investigated the social, emotional, and physical functioning of grandparents raising their grandchildren (cf. Cox, 2003; Emick & Hayslip, 1999; Hayslip et al., 1998; Kropf & Burnette, 2003). Not until recently have scholars addressed the behaviors and school-related functioning of grandchildren in these families (cf. Harrison, Richman, & Vittimberga, 2000; Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003).

Grandparents who raise their grandchildren can provide a loving, familial home environment that is more positive than a foster care or other such governmental arrangement. Nonetheless, raising children is difficult for grandparents during what should be their golden years. Most grandparents do not bargain on having children to raise when they should be enjoying a time of peace and quiet. It seems that no matter how the grandchildren behave, they impact the well-being of their grandparents, for better or worse, simple because of their presence (Harrison et al., 2000). Grandparents who raise their grandchildren also significantly affect the educational functioning, developmental outcomes, and well-being of their grandchildren (Edwards, 2003; Harrison et al.). Few publications offer practical and theory-based interventions to help these families. In this article we review much of the available data and add to the database relative to these new family relationships. We focus on the social, emotional, behavioral, and school functioning of children raised by their grandparents. Practical, theory-based interventions are described to assist these families and improve the children’s school-related functioning.

An Alternate Family Structure

The numbers of grandparents who become surrogate parents to their grandchildren are increasing substantially (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000). According to the United States Census Bureau (2001), approximately 5.6 million grandparents live in homes that include grandchildren younger than 18 years of age. Almost 6% of children in the United States live in households maintained by grandparents (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler). In many of these families, no biological parents are present. Nearly four million grandchildren have grandparents who serve as their primary caregivers. Almost one million of these grandparents have raised
their grandchildren for five years or more. Children raised by their grandparents can be found among all religions, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler). Nonetheless, some variation by ethnicity is evident with 13.5% of African American, 6.5% of Hispanic, and 4.1% of Caucasian American children living in such families (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler).

Grandparents who assume the surrogate parenting role often do so as a result of the death of their adult children, their children’s divorce, unemployment, and teenage premarital childbearing. Parental deaths as a result of violence and AIDS particularly contribute to the increase in these alternate families. Additionally, physical and emotional child abuse as well as drug use and incarceration among some parents resulted in social service agencies removing sizable numbers of children from the homes of these parents and placing them with a relative, frequently the children’s grandparents (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Harden, Clark, & Maguire, 1997). Their grandparents are often the only family members willing to assume care of these children (Edwards, 1998). Overall, variables such as poverty, being a woman, being African American, being younger, having more children living in your home, and the death of a child all increase the likelihood of grandparents assuming care of their grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler; Harden et al.).

An Indistinct Role

Grandparenthood is frequently viewed as a role without any definitive characteristics because there are no explicit or set expectations (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). Several grandparenting styles are evident and it is difficult to establish what is or what should be normal. Among grandparents, there may be minimal involvement to extensive involvement with their grandchildren. Grandparents may believe there is a lack of respect for the elderly and they may reduce the role they play in their grandchildren’s lives because they do not wish to be rejected by their children or grandchildren (Dolbin-MacNab & Targ, 2003). Nonetheless, there is some satisfaction noted with respect to the grandparenting role. This satisfaction is usually seen as a result of the value given to grandparents because of their financial, baby-sitting, safety valve, stabilizing functions, and biological relationship (Landry-Meyer & Newman).

Although the relationship of grandparent to grandchild involves a biological linkage that is second only to the parent-child dyad, grandparents tend to have disadvantages when placed in the role of surrogate parents (Edwards, 2001). These disadvantages may include illness, lack of desire for the parenting role, decreased energy level, and old age (Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 1997; Minkler, 1999). The noted characteristics may limit grandparents’ abilities to help their grandchildren succeed in school.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of raising one’s grandchildren, the experience can be beneficial. Grandparents who raise their grandchildren recognize they are needed (Strom, Heeder, & Strom, 2005) and raising their grandchildren may give grandparents a greater purpose for living (Dolbin-MacNab & Targ, 2003). Additional benefits of raising one’s grandchild include the opportunity to raise the child more effectively than the child’s parent, the possibility of establishing a closer relationship with the grandchild, and the ability to keep their biological descendants out of the foster care system (Dolbin-MacNab & Targ, 2003). Living with someone who loves and is willing to raise them and the opportunity to maintain the family connection and history are distinct advantages for children in these alternate families.

Grandparents’ Functioning

The series of circumstances associated with the increase in the numbers of children raised by their grandparents presents a daunting challenging. To illustrate, when the
nuclear family breaks down children may experience social-emotional and school-related problems as a result. Subsequently, they are sent to live with their grandparents. Generally, grandparents are more often physically fragile, sicker, and older than the typical parent. Research indicates that when these grandparents take on a surrogate parenting role they tend to experience stress that results in increased illness, depression, and anxiety (Emick, & Hayslip, 1999; Poehlmann, 2003). These grandparents may encounter problems providing appropriate care to children who manifest difficult adjustment. Furthermore, raising children who evidence serious behavioral problems may exacerbate grandparents' emotional and physical difficulty. Children raised by caregivers who experience emotional and physical distress may concomitantly demonstrate inappropriate or delinquent behavior and problems in school (Rogers & Henkin, 2000). Their grandparents may have less energy to assist with the children's school work and social-emotional development. Some grandparents may be unable to help with homework because of limited expertise with current school subjects. They may lack time and patience to help their grandchildren succeed academically (Rogers & Henkin, 2000). Some custodial grandparents may feel ambivalence or even anger regarding their reentry into a parenting role (Hayslip et al., 1998). In addition, impoverished, physically fragile, sicker, or older grandparents may have a difficulty transporting themselves to the school, preventing them from meeting with teachers and school counselors and actively involving themselves in the child's education (Edwards, 1998). All of these issues can foster a difficult school and educational experience for children raised by their grandparents, particularly when the children must also cope with the loss of their parents and perhaps other siblings. Given the context of their stressful development and living environments (Minkler, 1999), it is not unexpected that children raised by their grandparents will experience school-related problems.

Grandchildren's Functioning

Few studies investigated the functioning of children raised exclusively by their grandparents. The majority of these studies focused on children raised by any number of relatives, not exclusively grandparents. Children raised by relatives experienced various health disturbances including anemia, asthma, and dental problems (Dubowitz, Feigleman, & Zuravis, 1993). A study utilizing a large sample of low-income families found children raised by relatives displayed lower academic scores when compared to matched peers (Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994). They exhibited more grade failures, learning disabilities, and incidents of mental retardation, presumably because of pathogenic care, poverty, and trauma. Children who were neglected or abandoned by their parents experienced feelings of loss, rejection, and attachment disorder (Dubowitz & Sawyer, 1994).

The two empirical studies available in the literature that exclusively investigate children raised by their grandparents suggest these children function similar to children raised in other alternate family structures (Harrison et al., 2000; Solomon & Marx, 1995). In the earliest study, the grandchildren evidenced better physical health and fewer behavioral problems than children living with only one biological parent. The relationships between students and teachers were similar for both groups. However, boys raised by grandparents demonstrated more behavioral problems than girls. They evidenced behavioral disorders and conflicts at home and at school. Children raised by older grandmothers functioned better academically than children raised by younger grandmothers. The authors suggested younger grandmothers may have resented early entrance into the grandparenting role and spent less time providing educational support to their grandchildren (Solomon & Marx, 1995). According to this study, the
most significant school-related problem for children raised by their grandparents was that they experienced academic problems.

The second empirical study involved children who were referred to an outpatient child and family therapy clinic. The findings of this study revealed children raised by their grandparents demonstrated elevated levels of emotional and behavioral problems, but not more than the other children referred to the clinic because of an apparent need for counseling. Nonetheless, the grandchildren’s emotional and behavioral problems were substantially elevated when compared to a non-referred population of children living in one and two-parent-headed homes (Harrison et al., 2000).

Despite the critical concerns children raised by their grandparents encounter, traditional and nontraditional interventions are available to help these grandchildren and grandparents reduce the heightened amount of stress they encounter and improve their well-being. We will describe next several community-based interventions and then present practical interventions that can be implemented in the context of school.

**Intervention Approaches**

A number of interventions helpful in assisting at-risk children may also improve the school functioning of children raised by their grandparents. The emergence of children raised by their grandparents leads to a dissolution of grandchildren’s social support networks (Emick & Hayslip, 1999; Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000). Social support has been shown to serve as a buffer to stress and stress symptomatology (Poehlmann, 2003). Thus, social support theory offers a useful framework to provide intervention services to these families. If these families are provided emotional and instrumental support, it should ease the transition from a traditional to alternate caregiver arrangement and limit subsequent social-emotional and school-related distress. Grandchildren and their grandparents should be encouraged to develop support networks in their communities, schools, and faith-based organizations as a proactive method of attenuating stress.

Effective emotional support provided by a family or community support network could include building an affiliative bond, providing advice and positive feedback, and other expressions of appreciation for grandparents who fill the surrogate parent role. Instrumental support may consist of financial support, respite care, assistance with transportation, assistance with discipline, and helping with homework (Edwards, 2001). When grandparents who raise their children receive instrumental and emotional support from significant others, this will likely enhance their emotional and physical well-being as well as improve the grandchildren’s school-related functioning (Gibson, 2005).

As the factors which hinder the families and particularly the children’s functioning are ascertained, interventions can be implemented to treat the underlying causes of either family or individual dysfunction. In addition to social support theory, social role theory provides a framework to help psychologists design and implement systematic intervention strategies, particularly with grandparents (Landry-Meyer & Newman, 2004). For example, due to the indistinct grandparent caregiving role, support groups for grandparents could address role timing (caregiving role was unexpected), role ambiguity (parent role, sometimes with no legal custody), and role conflict (traditional and expected role as grandparent vs. surrogate parent role). The following are helpful approaches psychologists can apply when working with grandparents who are raising their grandchildren:

- Assess grandparents’ appraisals of the situation, such as whether they focus on the stressors, challenges, or potential emotional rewards of caregiving.
- Assist them in finding meaning in parenting again.
• Identify risks for intergenerational patterns of relationship dysfunction and foster experiences leading to alteration of maladaptive cycles.
• Foster grandparents’ knowledge of strategies for responding therapeutically to grandchildren with disrupted attachments (Poehlmann, 2003, p. 154).

Intergenerational counseling and intervention approaches that address interactions, affect, communication, and emotional support favorably impact many grandparents’ emotional and physical well-being (Poehlmann, 2003). The aforementioned processes can improve grandparents’ functioning and their ability to support their grandchildren’s interpersonal, emotional, and academic development (Gibson, 2005; Kropf & Burnette, 2003).

**School-based Interventions**

Schools are excellent resources to help manage the needs of children raised by their grandparents. Schools are located centrally and are integral components of most communities. They are also comprised of professionals who possess the requisite knowledge and skills to develop and implement interventions for children raised by their grandparents. Since many hours of a child’s day are spent in school, interventions developed for children raised by grandparents should include a substantial school-based component.

Psychologists, school counselors, and other school professionals can develop support groups for these family members. Meetings can be convened at the school separately for grandchildren and grandparents, and they can occasionally meet together. Support groups could focus on building on existing strengths of grandchildren and grandparents. In light of the factors that led to their placement with their grandparents, children may need assistance coping with the loss of their parents, the associated early childhood trauma, and difficulty establishing social networks (Edwards, 2001). Additionally, children may need assistance understanding the new relationship with their grandparents and the revised roles their grandparents must play in their lives (Hayslip et al., 1998; Gibson, 2005).

Children raised by their grandparents may need substantial stability in their schooling and counselors should work to place these grandchildren with the same teachers and classmates in consecutive years. Grandchildren may benefit from social skills training and learning skills to establish and maintain friendships. Given their reported academic problems and many grandparents’ inability to provide academic and homework assistance (Rogers, & Henkin, 2000), grandchildren with academic concerns should be provided tutoring. They should also be offered the assistance of a peer, adult mentor, or school professional that could provide help with homework completion.

Social workers can also help grandparents by connecting them with community agencies and resources that provide therapeutic, financial, and social service assistance. Grandparents may need information regarding referral sources for after-school care, medical and dental treatment, community-based counseling, and legal services to determine whether they can receive financial assistance for assuming the care of their grandchildren (Reynolds et al., 2003). Further, they may need assistance locating appropriate community activities such as sports and music programs as well as summer camps for their grandchildren. These extra-curricular activities are prosocial in nature and can enhance the grandchildren’s socialization outcomes (Gibson, 2005).

In addition to offering information on needed resources and providing or coordinating services for these families, psychologists, school counselors, and other school professionals can benefit from increasing their knowledge regarding how to work more effectively with these grandchildren and
grandparents (Gibson, 2005; Kropf & Bur- nette, 2003). School professionals need to be aware of the potential financial and emotional stress associated with the caregiving grandparent role (Reynolds et al., 2003). School professionals must consider and be sensitive to differences in grandparents' understanding of the current educational system (Strom et al., 2005). We cannot overstate the importance of a strength-based approach when working with grandparents. School professionals must be empathetic, avoid blaming, and guard against being perceived as judgmental when communicating with grandparents (Gibson, 2005). They should ensure grandparents' support and consent before implementing interventions. School professionals should use language that builds on strengths (e.g., "You might already know this..." and "I'm impressed you are so committed to helping your grandchild succeed," etc.) in order to better connect with grandparents. As a result of these approaches, grandparents may take a supportive and strong role in nurturing their grandchildren's educational functioning and social-emotional development.

**Conclusion**

Many grandparents who raise their grandchildren endure social-emotional and physical distress. Grandchildren in these families also experience academic, behavioral, and other school-related problems. Members of these families need systematic and theory-based interventions from school personnel to attenuate the difficulties they encounter and improve their educational outcomes.

Despite the problems experienced by grandchildren and grandparents when grandparents assume fulltime caregiving responsibility for their grandchildren, these alternate family structures may be the best setting to raise the children when there is a breakdown in the nuclear family. Grandchildren and their grandparents enjoy a rather close biological linkage. Grandparents can be allies with school professionals in ensuring their charges' appropriate social-emotional development and school-related functioning. We believe they will more effectively link with teachers as sources of support, school involvement, and assistance (Gibson, 2005) when psychologists, school counselors, and otherschool professionals implement some of the practical and theory-based interventions offered in this paper.

**References**


