

Article 23

Grandparents as Parents: A Growing Phenomenon

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Grandparents often play pivotal roles in the lives of grandchildren, but their roles change drastically when they become the primary caregivers for their grandchildren (Reynolds, Wright, & Beale, 2003). The proliferation of nontraditional family structures indicates a shift in development of the conventional family unit that historically consisted of a father, mother, and their children. Over the last several decades there has been a significant increase in what is known as the custodial grandparent phenomenon (Rodriguez-Srednicki, 2002). Some 3.7 million grandparents are currently helping to raise 3.9 million children in the United States. Between 1990 and 1998, the number of these families increased by 53%; over 1.3 million children are now being raised solely by their grandparents (Casper & Bryson, 1998). Because parental engagement is a significant factor in a child's success at school (e.g., Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004), how might school counselors facilitate grandparents' involvement?

Grandparents who are voluntary caretakers assume the role of parent for a variety of reasons for example, death of either or both parents, parental divorce, parental employment on evening shifts or multiple jobs, parental child abuse or substance abuse, or parental incarceration (Giarrusso & Silverstein, 1996). Although they love their grandchildren, assuming the role of primary caregiver was not a planned experience—in many cases a sudden expedient custodianship was in the best interest of the children. Circumstances such as incompetent parents or unconcerned parents also influence the decision to assume the parenting role by grandparents (Landry, 1999).

When grandparents assume parental roles in the lives of their school-age grandchildren, they are permitted certain rights within the school setting; however, many caregiving grandparents have not legally assumed custody, causing problems for both grandparents and schools. Grandparents who do not have legal custody or guardianship often have problems that result from the unexpected timing of the parenting role. For instance, when a child is enrolled in school, certain documents must be presented or the child will

not be permitted to register. These include the Social Security card, immunization record, proof of residency, birth certificate, records from previous schools, and any special services they may have been receiving. If any of the names on these papers fail to match, the child cannot be enrolled unless a notarized statement of guardianship, a court document signed by a judge, or adoption papers are presented at the time of enrollment.

Most states have laws that identify specific parental rights and responsibilities in schools. These could apply to custodial parents, foster parents, surrogate parents, legal guardians, or custodial grandparents. For example, Chapter 26, section 26.004 of the Texas Education Code states that the just mentioned persons have the right to have access to their child's: counseling records, psychological records, teacher and counselor evaluations, attendance records, test scores, grade records, disciplinary records, applications for admission, health and immunization information, and reports on behavioral records. The American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (1995) further supports this position, stating that when counseling clients who are minors, or any individual unable to give voluntary informed consent, parents or guardians may be included in the counseling process as appropriate. "Counselors act in the best interest of clients and take measures to safeguard confidentiality" (B.3).

The role of grandparents or other custodial caretakers can be classified in four separate categories. They include limited caretaking, participatory caretaking, involuntary caretaking, and voluntary caretaking. Each of these is based on the amount of grandparent/grandchild involvement. The first category includes grandparents who have limited contact with grandchildren. Whether grandparents are or are not highly involved in their grandchildren's education, when primary caretakers are custodial parents, grandparents do not have access to confidential school records. When conflicts in families cause separation from a close grandparent/grandchild relationship, emotional bonds can be significantly traumatized and children may exhibit behavior problems, poor academic performance, stress, and sometimes grief issues at

school. In these situations, referrals to the school counselor may be made (Reynolds et al., 2003).

Voluntary care providers assume the parental role and responsibilities of raising their grandchildren either the majority of time or all of the time. Their reasons for assuming this enormous responsibility are situational, but typically voluntary care providers accept custody in order to insure their grandchildren are in a safe and stable home in the absence of their parents. This sometimes occurs when parents merely prefer certain school districts for superior academic or athletic programs (Landry, 1999).

Involuntary caretaking grandparents have become full-time custodians with little or no forewarning and not by personal preference (Roe & Minkler, 1998-1999). The biological parents may or may not be living in the home. If the grandparents have not received legal custody, it is likely they will have problems associated with the unanticipated situation. These include providing documentation in order to register students in a public school and many times being able to get proper medical care in the event of an illness or accident. Children may exhibit behavioral problems, adjustment problems, and resistance to changes in school; and many other problems are likely because of the unexpected shift of the parental responsibilities coupled with the children's lack of understanding (Roe & Minkler, 1998-1999).

The majority of grandparents desire a happy, relaxed, voluntary relationship with their grandchild that is void of parental accountability (Shore & Hayslip, 1994). For many grandparents, a significant amount of social and emotional intrusions prohibit the lives they anticipated and affect them profoundly financially, socially, and emotionally. The independence they had anticipated is nonexistent, and personal development options are limited as well (Glass & Hunnecutt, 2002). They are no longer able to see their futures as they had once pictured them. There is a wide gamut of emotions resulting from the turmoil of dealing with the role of a second parenthood, and these difficulties can surface as anger and resentment.

One source of annoyance for grandparents is a school's policy permitting students to be picked up, checked out of school early, or even to have conversations with grandparents while in school. This is a typical occurrence in many schools when grandparents have assumed more parental responsibilities and are accustomed to attending to doctor appointments, dental appointments, and other such errands. State law clearly specifies how such situations may be handled. In Texas, for example, the law states that neither biological nor adoptive grandparents may request possession of or access to a

grandchild if (1) the grandparent is a parent of a person whose parental rights have been terminated by court order or death; (2) the grandparent is a parent of a person who has relinquished parental rights and custody was awarded to an authorized adoption agency or individual conservator; or (3) the grandparent is a parent of a person who relinquished or had parental rights terminated when the other biological parent died and the child was adopted by persons other than the child's stepparent.

There are also numerous legal issues that must be addressed in order for grandparent caregivers to meet eligibility criteria for a child's school enrollment, educational rights, financial assistance, insurance coverage, social services, and housing assistance. Eligibility is based on the legal relationship between the grandparent caregiver and the grandchild. Regulations for kinship care vary from state to state, and as families relocate, new state laws and regulations must be followed. These laws are sometimes in flux due to advocacy groups seeking reforms.

Kinship care falls into two categories. One is private kinship that places children with a family member. In most cases, these caretakers do not receive child-care expenses, but may be eligible for some types of assistance such as free or reduced school lunches. Private kinship care arrangements fall into three categories: (1) the grandparent is caretaker, but the parent retains legal custody and can make any decisions regarding the kids; (2) the grandparent has temporary legal custody, which public housing and some school districts require of caregivers grandparents may thus make decisions concerning daily care of the child, but parents are still involved in major decisions; or (3) the grandparent adopts the child, and rights of the birth parents are terminated. Few grandparents choose this option because it can end a relationship with one's own child.

The second type of custody is foster kinship care. This allows relatives to assume the role of caregiver through a foster care relationship. This is sometimes the preferred option, because relatives are not required to have background checks or home inspections. This program allows caretakers to receive compensation for their responsibilities (Gebeke, 1996).

Some public school systems offer parenting classes that offer support, open the communication between grandparents and school officials, and provide helpful information that make this life transition a little less difficult. School counselors are typically the facilitators of such groups. Grandparents may also have access to similar resources in churches, civic groups, county extension agencies, colleges, or local and regional education agencies (Glass &

Hunneycutt, 2002).

Parenting classes for caregiving grandparents have been successfully implemented by public school systems in some states. Low performing schools in the state of Texas are required to provide parenting education; many other states also have similar programs. Each school district in Texas has a parent involvement coordinator who is mandated to meet the needs assessed locally. Such programs are typically funded through state-provided at-risk funding, private donations, or grants. Community agencies have also offered parenting classes for “grandfamilies,” including support groups such as Grandparents As Parents (GAP) (De Toledo & Brown, 1995).

Grandparents raising their grandchildren is a growing trend. It is imperative that grandparents know their rights and for schools to systematically address the emotional, academic, and social needs of these students as they enroll in public schools. In addition to the altruistic desire to address children’s needs, schools have an interest in kinship care because they are evaluated for their effectiveness. To the extent a custodian’s involvement affects a child’s achievement, this issue will have an impact on the entire school’s evaluation. School counselors will need to develop additional support group strategies and interventions to serve this growing population. School personnel should be educated about the legal rights of custodial caregivers and adhere to these laws. The laws in place are continually changing, so staying abreast of these changes is also necessary.

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