Families are Important
Families are not cast in molds. Families can be single parents raising children, gay or lesbian partners, a grandmother raising a grandchild, or a group of friends living together. By choice or by chance, families are the bonds we all form. Simple categories cannot house complex networks of relationships. Families have many variables. Using research literature, FamilyTrends describes different family forms and identifies characteristics common to certain family types. Because to really understand the needs of families—to shape policy and inform practice—we must begin by understanding families themselves.

Defined
Children under the age of eighteen who are living with their grandparents are on the rise. Traditionally, grandparents have offered daycare services for their children who work outside of the home. It is becoming more common for grandchildren to be raised by their grandparents. The children’s parents, or the middle generation, may or may not be present in the household. With the absence of the middle generation, the grandparents may or may not have legal custody over their grandchildren (Bryson & Casper, 1999).

Custodial grandparents often assume custody due to the child’s parents’ use of drugs, emotional or mental problems, physical illness such as AIDS, or neglect or abuse of the child (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Jendrek, 1994; Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). Reducing the possibility of the child being placed in foster care is another reason grandparents may care for their grandchildren. Custodial grandparents often assume custody due to the child’s parents’ use of drugs, emotional or mental problems, physical illness such as AIDS, or neglect or abuse of the child (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Jendrek, 1994; Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997).

North Carolina
In North Carolina, 174,000 grandparents were living in households with grandchildren under the age of 18 (Children’s Defense Fund et al., 2002). That is 1 child out of 11 live with their grandparents in North Carolina (Casey Family Programs, 2002). Charlotte has the highest incident with 10,747 grandparents living with grandchildren, followed by Greensboro with 3,811 grandparents (Children’s Defense Fund et al., 2002).

Strengths and Challenges
Grandparents
Raising grandchildren is considered an “off-time” role. Most grandparents have raised their children and are preparing for the role as a grandparent, not a parent (Jendrek, 1993). Due to the unexpected nature of this role, grandparents

References
react differently raising their grandchildren. The amount of time the grandchild is expected to stay with the grandparent can create additional role strain. Often times this situation begins as a temporary situation but frequently turns into a permanent one (Pruchno, 1999).

Grandparents who are raising grandchildren tend to be more highly educated (at least a high school education), younger, and employed as compared to other persons their age (Bryson & Capser, 1999). The low-end of the age range for these grandparents is forty (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996). The ethnicity of the family can play a part in how grandparents will react to this new role. The Black community has a long history of caring for family members, which allows for greater acceptance of the surrogate parent role. Latino families also have strong family traditions of caring for family members, but often times this caregiving is for older parents, not grandchildren. Parents are expected to be able to fulfill their parental role (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002).

Grandparents feel good knowing that they have stepped in to assist a family member and will be able to provide a caring home for their grandchildren (Burton, 1992). Raising grandchildren can give grandparents a sense of purpose and an opportunity to provide a safe, stable environment for their grandchildren. Grandparents report that raising their grandchildren helps to keep them feeling young and in shape (Jendrek, 1993). The responsibility of caring for their grandchildren boosts self-esteem (Pruchno, 1999) and gives them an increased purpose for living (Jendrek, 1993). Overall, they report feeling satisfied with their role as caregiver to their grandchild (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002).

According to a report by the Census Bureau in 2000 roughly 2.4 million grandparents had sole responsibility for raising their grandchildren.

Compared to non-caregivers of a similar age, grandparent caregivers had higher rates of depression, health problems and limitations in activities and lower rates of happiness (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002). Additionally, grandparents raising grandchildren report feeling more physically tired, having less privacy, and having less time with friends, family and spouses. Changes to their regular routines and plans occurred so as to care for their grandchildren (Jendrek, 1993). Grandparents’ work schedules were disrupted with either a reduction of work hours or a need to quit work altogether due to the presence of grandchildren (Pruchno, 1999). These grandparents report feeling out of phase with their friends who are not faced with the same responsibility (Jendrek, 1993).

Grandparents can feel as if they are in a double bind: they are concerned about what they did wrong with their children that prevents them from caring for their own children, and they worry about how they will care for their grandchildren (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996). Some grandparents want the role of grandparent, not parent, but fear the return of the parent due to their inability to parent (Jendrek, 1994). Other family members may not be supportive of their decision to care for their grandchildren, which can add additional stress (Jendrek, 1993). Other family members who need care may also be in the household, adding additional stress (Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). These feelings and conflicts are less for parents who are providing daycare for their grandchildren (Jendrek, 1994).

Grandchildren

Grandchildren who are raised by their grandparents are as healthy as, perform at the same academic level or above, and have fewer behavioral problems than those children who are raised in other nontraditional family types (Solomon & Marx, 1995). Grandparents often provide their grandchildren with more support and care than their own parent could provide for them (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996). Grandchildren benefit from having both their grandmother and grandfather in the home (Solomon & Marx, 1995). Depending on the nature of their parents’ leaving, these children experience grief over their parents’ absence (Goodman & Silverstein, 2001). They may have residual problems such as learning disabilities, a physical addiction to a drug, or emotional or psychiatric disorders from the drug or alcohol abuse of their parents. Physical abuse by their parents or the incarceration of their parents are situations that can cause additional problems for the child (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996). Some grandmothers report that the grandchildren living with them have mood swings, were argumentative and impul-
Implications for Policy and Practice

Policy

Grandparents raising grandchildren are more likely to live in poverty (Bryson & Casper, 1999), which can create barriers to accessing needed health and social services (Burton, 1992). Economic assistance for this population would allow the grandparent to provide better care for their grandchild. The children are more likely to be uninsured than other children (Bryson & Casper, 1999). Legal custody of the children can open doors for additional health and social services. Legal problems, such as locating health care for the child without parental or legal guardian consent, are an issue for grandparents (Solomon & Marx, 1995). Legal counseling can help address these problems.

Practise

Grandparents’ stress levels rise when they lack the support they need to effectively care for their grandchildren (Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000). Support groups for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren allow for mutual support, parenting education, and respite care (Pinson-Millburn, Fabian, Schlossberg, & Pyle, 1996). Family therapy has also been shown to be effective in helping grandparents come to terms with the loss of the middle generation (Goodman & Silverstein, 2001). Grief over and disappointment with the parent need to be addressed in order to save the relationship with the parent (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002)

Grandparents can have limited access to professional services due to income, time, or transportation. Linking grandparents into a “natural helping network” can be successful if appropriate helpers are identified and a relationship is established (Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1993). Legal counseling for the grandparents could provide greater knowledge about foster parenting and their rights as grandparents (Burton, 1992).

Conclusion

How grandparents are involved in their grandchildren’s lives is changing. It is becoming more commonplace for grandparents to be solely responsible for raising their grandchildren. According to research, both grandparents and grandchildren benefit from being part of this family form. Raising grandchildren can give grandparents a sense of purpose, and grandchildren benefit from having a secure, safe-and familiar-home. Both grandparents and grandchildren, however, are subject to vulnerabilities. Linkages to natural helping networks and professional services can offer support to assist in the success of this type of family.

References


(Cont’d on back page)

Annotated Bibliography

For more information on these and other references on this topic, please visit the Annotated Bibliography section of the FamilyTrends website (www.familytrends.org). This section summarizes the research literature and other helpful sources for a particular FamilyTrends Brief. Journals for Social Work, Psychology, Marriage and Family, Public Policy and other similar disciplines are referenced. This list will be updated periodically in order to capture the most recent literature.


About the Jordan Institute

Created in 1996, the Jordan Institute for Families is the research, training, and technical assistance arm of the School of Social Work at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The Jordan Institute is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that develops knowledge and promotes practices and policies that build supportive families and stable communities.

Cutting across traditional disciplinary lines, the Jordan Institute is a conduit partnering scholars and researchers from complementary fields. This interdisciplinary approach leads to rich and relevant research and training and ensures that the Jordan Institute makes substantive and systemic contributions to policy and practice.

The Jordan Institute addresses family issues across the lifespan that threaten to undermine some families—such as poverty, abuse, mental illness, school failure, and substance abuse—as well as challenges that confront most families—such as providing for aging family members and caring for young children.

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