This brief aims to describe a unique study that was developed to better understand families in which grandparents are raising teenaged grandchildren. Families were recruited from multiple community agencies working directly with local grandparent caregivers across New York State, such as Cornell Cooperative Extension and other agencies. In-person interviews with 59 grandparent/teen pairs were conducted from February-August 2009. The awareness that the teen years are particularly difficult for kinship families paired with the lack of research about relationship quality and parenting in such families, especially during the teenage years emphasized the need for this study. Additionally, to better understand the relationship quality among grandparents and teens in such families, as well as the parenting behaviors of grandparents raising teens, the study focused on bringing multiple methods together to better understand these aspects of grandparent-caregiver families.

The Process
The unique study utilized an innovative method of data collection that consisted of three components--a survey, videotaped discussions, and audio-taped interviews of grandparents. The survey was conducted via computer for the teens and face-to-face for the grandparents. This element consisted of questions aimed at gathering household information, such as others living in the household, how long the teen had been living with the grandparent, health status of the grandparent and grandchild, and the marital status and employment of the grandparents. The survey also included questions about grandparents’ parenting behaviors, teen behaviors, and the quality of the relationship between the grandparent and the teen.

This study also represents the first time videotaped observational data was collected on a sample of grandparents raising grandchildren. Families were asked to first discuss “What is it like for families like ours,” each sharing their perspectives. Next, both the teen and the grandparent were asked to choose a topic on which they disagree and to discuss that topic. These videotapes were then carefully coded by the research team, and each family member was scored in terms of factors such as anger, listening, relationship quality, and warmth. Grandparents were scored for aspects such as their parenting behaviors, including monitoring and authority, and teens were scored for factors such as maturity and defiance.

Finally grandparents were asked a series of open-ended questions, covering topics such as how the youth came to live with them, how their parenting has changed or stayed the same since they raised their own children, and what type of contact they have with the grandchild’s parents.

After the data from these three key components were coded, the research team developed measures of relationship quality, parenting behaviors (such monitoring); parenting styles (authoritative, permissive, authoritarian, and uninvolved); youth anger,
attachment and trust; family routines; and parenting stress, challenges and satisfaction. Then, factors such as socio-economic status, age, race, employment and marital status, length of time youth lived with grandparent, religiosity of grandparent and role of parents were examined to see if they were linked to the measures of parenting and youth well-being. Finally, a careful examination of this data has informed the development of a number of fact sheets that provide research based, practical tips to support work with kinship families. Not only has this study provided insight into the dynamics in these families, but also the strengths, challenges and the idiosyncrasies of this unique group of families.

The Families
The analysis of the family demographics within this study, provide a more intimate picture of the sample.

- The average annual household income of neighborhoods in which these families live was $34,801.17.
- The average grandparent age was 63 years old and the average youth age was 15 years.
- 47% of the grandparents were married.
- The average grandparent had completed, but not gone beyond, high school.
- Few grandparents were working. Only 24% were employed and 34% possessed a disability that prohibited them from work.
- Almost half of the teens reported a health condition that limited their ability to take part in everyday activities or that required regular use of medicine.
- 80% of the youth reported having a sibling(s) outside of household while 35% had a sibling(s) in household.

This map depicts the geographic location of the families that participated in this study.

The racial profile of participants is reflected in the below chart.

A key area of the study examined reasons youth were not living with their parents. It is important to note that participants could choose more than one category as they applied to their particular situation. As noted below, the most common reason given by the grandparents for why the child was not living with the mother or father was that the parent “voluntarily gave the child to the grandparent.” This represents situations in which the parent chose not to have the child in his or her life, rather than having the child taken away by a social service agency. Examples of this type of
situation include the parent moving in with a partner who did not want the child living with them, or the parent moving out of state and not taking the child. These situations are also often combined with the parent having substance abuse problems, or the parent having mental health issues.

**Reasons for not living with mom:**
- Voluntarily gave child to grandparent 40%
- Mom had substance abuse problems 26%
- Mom abused/neglected child 26%
- Mom’s partner has issues 16%
- Mom deceased 10%
- Mom incarcerated 10%
- Mom too young when child born 10%
- Mom left child alone/abandoned 7%
- Mom mental health problems 7%

**Reasons for not living with dad:**
- Voluntarily gave child to grandparent 34%
- Incarcerated 21%
- Deceased 12%
- Substance use problems 12%
- Abused/neglected child 10%
- In gang/violent 3%
- Dad’s partner has issues 3%

As reflected above, most youth in this study have resided with the grandparents for at least 5 years.

**The Findings**
The combined look at demographics, relationship quality and parenting styles has provided significant implications for working with kinship families. Amongst the findings is evidence to support the increasing difficulties for families with older caregivers as well as older teens; the differences between less educated grandparents and working grandparents in regards to communication and trust; the positive influence of religiosity on family outcomes; and the impact of why parents are not in custody of their children on family relationships. Our series of fact sheets explore these finding in greater detail and provide support for program providers to effectively work with this population.
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