Families in which grandparents or other relatives are raising children (often called kin care families) can be very complex. One issue is the role of the parents in such families.

Although not living in the household, parents can affect all members of kin care families. For relative caregivers and children alike, the triangular dynamic in which the caregivers, biological parents and children are undeniably connected can be a source of stress and anxiety. Grandparent caregivers, particularly, often feel conflicted between their feelings, allegiances and difficulties with their own children and meeting the needs and dreams of the grandchildren they are raising. Furthermore, as children being raised by relatives get older, they become increasingly aware of, and develop questions about, the role of their parents in their lives, in the past, the present and into the future. This brief presents recent research on the role of parents in the lives of children in kin care families, and provides suggestions for practitioners based on this research.

While there are a number of reasons parents are not caring for child(ren) being raised by relatives, research shows that they often are still involved in children’s lives. In a study of 59 New York families in which grandparents were raising their grandchildren, 63% of the children interviewed saw their mother in past year while 35% saw their father (Dunifon and Kopko, 2011). Further, in a study of 41 teenaged grandchildren being raised by their grandparents, Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley (2009) found that 88% of the teens had some contact with at least one of their parents. However, the quality of that contact varied widely.

It has been found that why and how children ended up in kinship care is a strong predictor of relationship quality within families. For teens specifically, there is a tendency to have a harder time bonding with their grandparent when they feel conflicted about their parents and the situation that led them to live with their grandparent. Situations that seem to cause particular issues for children are those in which parents voluntarily gave up their child in order to live with a romantic partner, those in which the parent is raising other children, and those in which substance abuse or other issues caused the parent to leave the child’s life and to have an erratic ongoing relationship with the child (Dunifon and Kopko, 2011).

Almost half of the teens interviewed by Dolbin-McNabb and Keiley (2009) reported feeling caught in the middle between their parents and their grandparents; as though they had to choose between the two. This can put children and teens in a very difficult place emotionally and negatively impact family bonding. Further, a full 20%
of youth in that study refused to speak about their parents because it was too distressing, while a quarter of the youth reported having a relationship with their parents characterized by distrust, anger, and loss and spoke of their parents’ unreliability, lack of attention, and inability to keep them safe. Finally, a third of the teens reported a relationship with their parents that was based on companionship and fun, rather than discipline or authority; these teens spent time in enjoyable activities with their parents, but did not necessarily see them in a parental role. Similarly, Dunifon and Kopko (2011) found that about a quarter of the teens in their study had a bad relationship with their mother (regular contact, but poor interactions), and about a third had a bad relationship with their father.

The ambivalent feelings that youth in kinship families have toward their parents can play out in complex ways. Youth who report having a poor relationship with their mother are observed to have greater anger, lower relationship quality with their grandparent, and receive less effective parenting from the grandparent compared to those who have a good relationship with their mother, or even those who do not have any contact with their mother (Dunifon and Kopko, 2011).

This research provides insight into the dynamics of kinship families and their complicated parental relationships. What is clear is that parents play key roles in the lives of children being raised by relatives. What is needed are ways to help caregivers and children think realistically about the role parents play in their lives, and to support them as they navigate this difficult dynamic.

Based on this research, here are some tips to support your work with these families:

- While many caregivers feel that any relationship with a parent is better than no relationship at all, poor parental relationships may negatively impact the entire family. Thus, practitioners should be aware of the fact, and reinforce with caregivers, that parental interactions should not always be encouraged and that work may need to be done in order to set the stage for successful interactions. In particular, practitioners should think carefully before inviting parents to kincare events or including them in activities. Depending on the situation, parental involvement may not be beneficial until more work is done with all members of the family.

- Educational programs that coach and support biological parents for re-entry into a child’s life may benefit the family as a whole and encourage building smooth family relationships. Programs that recognize and address this need may include support groups, parent education or therapeutic play sessions for parents seeking to re-integrate into their children’s lives.

- Confidential counseling for children and teens is also critical. Children in kinship families may not always feel comfortable sharing conflicted feelings about their parents with their caregivers. Providing opportunities for children to confidentially express and further understand their desire to be reunited with their parents, while at the same time realistically addressing their parents’ shortcomings, can help. As stated by one New York teen, “The hardest is, like, really thinking about
why your parents couldn’t be there. And, like, dealing with all that. And it’s, like, a lot of stress once you really think about it.”

- Being sensitive to children’s developmental needs is important. Young children experience the loss of their parental relationships in very different ways than do teens. Caregivers will need to revisit what they tell the children in their care as children age. What is acceptable and appropriate to tell a younger child regarding why they are not living with their parents may not satisfy a teen, and caregivers should know that these complex conversations will need to be revisited. Providing caregivers with guidance as to what information about the parents to share, and how, depending on the situation and the age of the child, can be useful. It has been found that developmentally appropriate honesty is most beneficial. “Practice conversations” with caregivers may be a beneficial exercise to engage in and can give caregivers opportunities to rehearse tactful, honest answers to questions that will likely arise.

- When working with children being raised by relatives, it is important to allow for groups that encourage communication amongst similar-aged children and be sure that group facilitators are familiar with typical developmental reactions. Program providers should use informal methods to open doors for communication and encourage conversations amongst teens. Knowing that others share similar experiences has multiple benefits including acceptance.

- Reassure families that feelings of grief, relief, pain, loss and anger are normal in any combination. Often the emotions of children and caregivers in kinship care situations mirror the stages of grief and loss, denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Additionally, families may not move through these feelings in a linear way, but may cycle through them repeatedly, depending on how the interactions with the parents are going at any point in time and how children’s understanding of and questions about the issues evolve over time.

- Children should be reassured that the reasons that they are not living with their parents are NOT their fault, that they are loved by their family and that it is OK to miss their parents. It is important to allow children to speak positively about their parents even if caregivers are angry, disappointed and conflicted about them. It is also OK for children to have a realistic view of their parents’ shortcomings. However, care needs to be taken to approach this in a developmentally-appropriate way and for caregivers not to impose their own feelings toward the parent on how the child may be feeling. Counseling and support groups to help caregivers express and understand their difficult, multiple roles may also help them navigate their delicate family dynamics.

- Whenever possible, caregivers should avoid burdening children with the legal and logistical details of their custody arrangement. The details can be unnecessarily hurtful and confusing to children. Grandparents could utilize friends, family and support groups to vent feelings and sort out answers to complicated custody situations or legal issues.

- Remind caregivers that they can control their own behavior and actions, but not that of the children’s parents. Focus on what they can do to make the world a
better place for the children in their care. As stated by one youth, “The best thing, like I said before, is just knowing that there’s at least somebody there.” While all children and teens may not express this enough, we can applaud caregivers for the important, difficult job they do every day! This positive reinforcement goes a long way.

- Letter writing can help children express and understand their feelings in a safe and confidential manner. Children can choose to send their letters to their parents, siblings, or caregivers or keep them as a diary of their evolving feelings.

- Know when to refer families for more help. Some signs to look for are persistent negative changes, either behaviorally, socially or emotionally; school difficulties and/or sudden drop in grades; and talks or attempts to hurt themselves. Overall, helping children, teens and caregivers to recognize that they are not alone in their complicated family experience is a critical piece in supporting the parent-caregiver-child triangle for optimal relationships.
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