Multigenerational Relationships in Grandfamilies
By Rachel Dunifon, Kimberly Kopko, & Eliza Lathrop Cook

Families are dynamic, complex, and diverse. One particularly complex family type is grandfamilies—where a grandparent is raising the grandchild(ren) with no parent present in the household. Currently 1.6 million or 2% of U.S. children currently live in grandfamilies (American Community Survey, 2014). Although this family type possesses a variety of potential strengths, such as having an experienced caregiver be an integral part of the child’s life, researchers have also found that grandfamilies experience challenges. Specifically, researchers have identified several reasons that may have necessitated a grandparent becoming the primary caregiver for their grandchildren, including substance use, abuse and neglect, incarceration, mental health issues, young birth-parent age, and death (Gleeson et al. 2009; McKlindon et al. 2007). While biological parents are no longer living in grandfamily households, researchers have found that approximately two-thirds of children raised by grandparents still maintain regular, ongoing contact with their mothers and roughly 40% of children maintain regular contact with their fathers (Dunifon, Ziol-Guest, & Kopko, 2014).

This Research Brief highlights research from Rachel Dunifon, Kimberly Kopko, P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Lauren Wakschlag (2016) featured in the edited book: *Multigenerational Relationships in Families with Custodial Grandparents* in which the authors collected data from 44 grandparents and their teenaged grandchildren across New York State. Analysis of the data identified seven main themes that demonstrate the continued involvement of the biological parent in the lives of teens being raised by grandparents and the ways in which this involvement differs based on the following seven profiles.

**Parent is Like a Friend**
Eleven percent of families discussed that the parent behaved more like a friend than a parent. Families in this situation experienced several positive outcomes for the grandchild because the parent-child relationship was frequently described as warm or friendly. However, this often became an issue, particularly if the parent encouraged certain behaviors that contradicted rules and expectations of the grandparent. Overall, the ambiguous nature of this relationship was not ideal for grandchildren as youth were often unclear about family roles and what to expect. The following quotes illustrate this particular theme:
“He [dad] interacts with them and he’s pretty good. I would say his behavior is more like a favorite uncle than a dad...kind of a warm relationship, but it’s not real close.”

“It’s a very good relationship for my grandchild [with the mom] ...It’s a very difficult relationship for us...because there’s been times when her mother has given her poor advice...I mean my grandchild’s very immature and so is her mother, so I think that on a level of, mature level they’re about at the same level.”

Parent is Unreliable or Destructive
One of the most common themes that emerged in 32 percent of families was the parent being labelled as unreliable or destructive. Youth in this group had a depressing, although more realistic, view of their parent. In some ways, their realistic view was helpful in facilitating their ability to move on. Teens in this group reported an overall higher quality grandparent-grandchild relationship and lower levels of anger compared to the larger group and also expressed gratitude for their grandparent. The following quotes illustrate this particular theme:

“I have a stronger bond with [grandmother] than my own mother. I don’t even call my mother “mommy.” She’s [grandma] my mother, because she’s been there for me my whole life...I can’t call nobody “mommy” that wasn’t there my whole life...everything’s good. It’s the best thing. Better than I would if I lived with my mother.”

“My parents were horrible, so why care if they’re not here?...That’s the only difference between you [grandma] and them. You have your faults and all your problems and everything, but at least you know what you’re doing. For the most part.”

Longing for Parent
Fourteen percent of the families stated that the youth longed for a better relationship with their parent than their current relationship. Many grandchildren in this group discussed that their grandparent was not their real parent and that their real parent could never be replaced. Overall, youth in this group reported lower levels of anger and higher grandparent-grandchild relationship quality; however, they also reported high levels of behavioral issues. The following quotes illustrate this particular theme:

“What’s the hardest thing? Just being without my mom. I love my mom. I miss my mom. Just thinking about her makes me want to cry!”
“The hardest thing is knowing that you’re not with your real parents. That hurts sometimes to think that I have to count on you for everything instead of my mom and my dad. It’s hard.”

Grandparent Encouraging Parent-Child Relationships
For 30 percent of the families the grandparent was central to facilitating a positive parent-child relationship. For some grandparents, filling this role was easy and they were able to naturally encourage a relationship between their grandchild and their parent. However, other grandparents communicated a great deal of frustration and effort in trying to bond the parent and child. Many grandparents in this group put aside their issues and anger with the parent to encourage a positive relationship between the parent and grandchild. The following quotes illustrate this particular theme:

- “I can't make her...call him...She says I'm tired of being a bigger person. He's the adult, he should call me, and she’s right, she's right”.
- “I tell [the grandkids] that the mother loves them but she doesn't know how to be a mom. I don’t know whether she knows how to be a mother or if she doesn’t know how to be a mother”.

Pointing Out Parent’s Faults
Only five percent of families fell into this particular group where the grandparent focused on the parents’ negative attitudes and pointed them out to the youth. Youth in this group were living with their grandparent for a shorter amount of time compared to the group as a whole and the parents in these cases were encouraging the youth to leave the grandparent’s home, raising the possibility of the grandparents feeling threatened by the parent. Similar to the literature on divorced parents, youth in this situation appeared caught between two caregivers (the grandparent and the parent) which may have contributed to an increase in behavioral issues. The following quote illustrates this particular theme:

- “I told her...go live with your father then. You know, call him up and see. He's always telling you how he's always there and all this good stuff. He was telling her on the phone and yet he would never come to see her and wouldn’t call her; she was always calling him. I feel that, you know, he should answer for himself. Otherwise, she’s just going to keep going on thinking he’s Mr. Wonderful.”

Anger Toward Parent
Eighteen percent of the families discussed strong feelings of youth anger toward the parent, although sometimes this frustration spilled over to the grandparent and
took the form of physical violence. Youth in this group were much more likely to have been given up voluntarily by their mother (63% compared to the 40% of the whole sample) and this knowledge may have contributed to their increased anger. Interestingly, youth in this group did not report higher rates of anger towards their grandparent. The following quotes illustrate this particular theme:

- “But as he got older and became a teenager, you know, the hormones are flying anyway and then he starts thinking about, gee, these two are really lousy. So when he got to be a teenager, you know, then it started to get bad with him. He was just so angry at both of them, and I said it would be better if you get out.”
- “I had books thrown at me, chairs. I broke the blood vessels in my arms, but through it all, he always cried and said, ‘Nana, I didn’t want to hurt you, I was so angry, I was so angry, I’ve been so hurt. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive mommy and daddy.’”

Ambivalence Toward Parent

Nine percent of families described ambivalent feelings of the youth toward their parent. This occurred when grandchildren expressed an interest in seeing their parent but then appeared uninterested or unengaged when their parent was present. Youth in this group had higher levels of anger and depression as well as lower-quality grandparent-grandchild relationships. Unclear family boundaries may have played a role in youth feeling ambivalent about family roles and expectations. The following quote illustrates this particular theme:

- “She wants to be with her mother, but when her mother’s there she doesn’t interact with her...She interacts with me more than she does with her mother, and yet she wants to be with her mother.”

Conclusion

Research findings from this study demonstrate the complex relationships in grandfamilies where the biological parent is still involved in the life of the teen. The above profiles highlight the need for parenting skill education for the nonresident parent, which could encourage biological parents to maintain healthy contact with their child. However, in some circumstances it may be in the best interest of the youth to disengage from the parent. In these particular situations, further support and resources may best be directed toward the youth and grandparent. Overall, further research and programs are needed to assist families in grandfamilies to better navigate these complex relationships.
References


Visit the Parenting In Context project at:
http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/

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Rachel Dunifon is a Professor in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management and Associate Dean for Research and Outreach in the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University.

Kimberly Kopko is a Senior Extension Associate and Director of Parenting In Context in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University.

Eliza Lathrop Cook is the Associate Director of Parenting In Context in the Department of Policy Analysis and Management at Cornell University.

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