

The Protective Role of Grandparents: A Valuable Intergenerational Resource

Submitted by: Kate Fogarty, Ph.D., Youth Development, FYCS

Introduction

The role grandparents play in children's development is an increasingly recognized phenomenon in the U.S., as well as other developed nations. For example, nearly 6% of children reside in homes where grandparents are the head of household (U.S. Census, 2001) and there has been a recent, steep increase in grandparents serving as surrogate parents to their grandchildren (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000). The increase is attributed to a number of dire conditions affecting parents/children of grandparents such as: (1) death, divorce, child abuse, drug use and incarceration (Edwards & Daire, 2006); and (2) grandparents are the most willing of any family member to take grandchildren into their home (Edwards, 1998).

Beyond the influence, grandparents have on their grandchildren while they raise them – such as academic success and psychological well-being (Edwards, 2003) – grandparents also affect grandchildren *even when they do not live under the same roof*. When children face high risk situations such as poverty and parental mental illness, grandparents can make a difference by positively affecting a child's development. Notably, recent findings support how grandparents buffer the negative effects of high risk on children. High risk settings that include: poverty, parental mental illness, and stressful family events are found to be correlates and causes of maternal depression (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006). Maternal depression has notable negative effects on parenting and children's functioning, effects which have been found to be lessened by grandchildren's sense of emotional closeness to their grandparents.

Maternal Depression and Family Relationships

Maternal depression affects children through family relationships by how parents and children interact with one another (Davies & Windle, 1997; Nelson, Hammen, Brennan, & Ullman, 2003). Compared to nondepressed mothers, depressed mothers are found to respond:

- minimally or inconsistently with their children;
- express more negative emotions with their children; and
- are less engaged when interacting with their children (Petterson & Albers, 2001).

Like poverty, maternal depression:

- inhibits children's cognitive development (Petterson & Albers, 2001);
- worsens their behavior problems (Elgar, Curtis, McGrath, Waschbusch, & Stewart, 2003; Zuckerman & Beardslee, 1987);
- influences teens' acting out behaviors and impairs their functioning in social and academic roles (Nelson, et al., 2003).

Depressive symptoms reported by mothers are associated with adolescent daughters' (but not sons') experiences with depression, behavioral problems, and academic difficulties (Davies & Windle, 1997). Mothers' reports of depression when children are school-aged and adolescents had negative effects on psychological functioning and educational attainment for adult sons and daughters (Ensminger, Hanson, Riley, & Juon, 2003). Moreover, mother's depression when children were school-aged to young adult was significantly related to children's reports of depression in young adulthood (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006). Similar to the timing effects found with poverty, the longer a period of time a child experiences maternal depression, the more negative developmental effects result (Petterson & Albers, 2001).

Maternal depression has clearly been established as a risk factor for poor child, adolescent, and young adult (e.g., developmental) outcomes. For example, a national, representative longitudinal study has found that being (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006):

- female;
- unmarried vs. married and cohabiting;
- cohabiting vs. married;
- depressed in childhood; and
- having a depressed mother as a child,

each increased the likelihood that children would be depressed as young adults.

Grandparent(s) as Protective Factor

However, this same study shows that a child's relationship with his or her grandparent(s) is a source of protection or a protective factor. For example, a grandchild's:

- sense of emotional closeness to their grandparent(s);
- frequency of contact with grandparent(s); and
- view of their grandparent(s) as a source of social support, together buffer the

“intergenerational effect” of maternal depression on children (Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006).

In other words, for children with depressed mothers, the higher a child's sense of “social cohesion” with their grandparent(s), measured by the above three factors, the less likely he or she is to experience depression in adulthood. Or, among all children, the link between depressive symptoms of mothers and children was found to be weakened by the presence of strong grandparent-grandchild relationships.

Notable protective factors pinpointed in resilience research include: availability of community support networks, the presence of caring adults, possession of high intelligence, and having high self-esteem; these protective factors have caught the attention of youth interventionists and prevention researchers. Decreasing the influence of risk factors and increasing or providing the presence of protection in the lives of at-risk youth is a main goal of intervention. There is logic in targeting those protective factors found in youth development research as part of treatment and prevention for youth at risk (Wolkow & Ferguson, 2001); however, setbacks occur due to limited knowledge of how to influence underlying processes that buffer risk and stress in the lives of youth (Rutter, 1993).

Implications for Extension

In light of the recent findings of the protective function of grandparents on youth outcomes, Extension educators can (adapted from Silverstein & Ruiz, 2006):

- Consider ways to mobilize family resources toward the extended, and beyond the nuclear, family;
- Emphasize the importance of intergenerational relationships in families;
- Incorporate ways for intergenerational family participation in programs;
- Encourage the volunteerism of older adults in the community (e.g., as “surrogate” grandparents to individual youth or youth programs); and
- Make use of multigenerational resources in their programs.

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