



Custodial Grandparents and Schools: Building Successful Partnerships



Key Words

grandparents raising grandchildren,
custodial grandparents (& school)

American families are more diverse than at any other point in history. Today professionals recognize strengths and challenges that impact step, blended, single parent, teen, dual career, grandparent-headed, single gender, new immigrant, multi-cultural, and two parent families.

Schools are challenged to meet educational and socio-emotional needs of children and to work effectively with all families. It takes sensitivity and careful preparation to insure that today's school environments are welcoming and provide opportunities for family members' involvement. *Assisting families in providing homes that fully support learning and growth is an important task for family life educators.*

Custodial grandparents may face unique challenges when interacting within the school environment. Today's educational system is very different from the past generation. Grandparents, suddenly immersed in the school culture, may feel overwhelmed and uncertain of what questions to ask or where to go to get answers. They may have previous negative experiences with schools and educational personnel which further complicate interactions with school systems.

- Children in grandparent-headed homes may be challenged in their physical, cognitive or emotional development. They are more likely to have been prenatally exposed to drugs and/or alcohol, have experienced abuse and/or neglect and have difficulties forming attachments. (Minkler & Roe, 1993, Smith & Dannison, 1998, Smith & Dannison, in press)

- Children in the care of grandparents experience higher levels of behavioral and emotional problems than do children living with biological parents. Studies have found significantly higher numbers of children from grandparent-headed homes with learning disabilities and/or mental impairment, with increased numbers repeating at least one grade in school when compared to the general population. (Sawyer & Dubowitz, 1994; Dubowitz, Feibleman, Starr & Sawyer, 1994)

The home-school connection is critical for every young child but it is especially crucial in grandparent-headed homes. School personnel need information about specific realities associated with custodial grandparent families and must understand how family circumstances interact with children's educational needs. Grandparents need specific information related to navigating the school system, communicating with school personnel and structuring home environments to maximize children's learning. Custodial grandparents can benefit from involvement in support groups that provide opportunities for education, respite and networking. The curriculum for support groups should include issues relating to navigating the school system.



Creating a Positive Home-School Environment

Manage School Enrollment

Initially, grandparents may be faced with decisions regarding the most optimal school placement. Previously, most children went to neighborhood schools or the school most closely located near their home. Today's choices may include public, private, charter, magnet or religiously affiliated institutions. Grandparents may benefit from networking with parents of similarly aged children and asking questions of school personnel. Grandparents should be encouraged to discuss what documentation, including birth certificate or guardianship, health records and transfer school records, will be necessary for school enrollment. Additionally, they may request a copy of the school handbook or other written information about school calendar and policies. It may be necessary to obtain additional immunizations and medical and/or dental care prior to beginning school.

Meet and Greet School Staff

Grandparents can view the beginning of school as an opportunity to "set the stage" for their grandchildren within the school environment. Meeting teachers, administrators, school counselors, para-pros and bus drivers and sharing as much information as appropriate about the grandchild's history can be a large step toward initiating a home-school partnership. An early face-to-face meeting can also make future written or telephone communications more effective.

Plan the Details

Transportation can be a major challenge for custodial grandparents. They will need to become familiar with the best route for walking or driving to school or learn about their grandchild's bus route. Grandparents in urban areas may need to set up transportation which includes utilizing public bus systems, trains or subways. Grandparents should be encouraged to write down bus numbers, important telephone contacts and phone numbers and to be familiar with transportation schedules. They should develop a plan for transportation on days when there are weather-related obstacles or school delays.

Grandparents may need assistance in planning nutritious school lunches and snacks and in obtaining free or reduced lunch/breakfast if appropriate. Dialoguing with other parents and observing same-aged children will assist grandparents in making decisions about school supplies and clothing. While grandparents' financial concerns may limit their abilities to provide everything their grandchild needs and wants, it is important to insure that grandchildren's clothing and school articles don't immediately label them as "different." Assist grandparents in prioritizing which articles are most important to purchase and provide them with information about sources for obtaining inexpensive and/or second-hand clothing.

Establish Routines

Grandparents, unaccustomed to getting one or more children out of the house in an efficient manner, may be amazed at the time it takes to organize their mornings. Grandchildren will

benefit from a morning routine which includes time for breakfast, necessary hygiene, and opportunities to gather together necessary articles. Help grandparents establish a consistent positive pattern for separating and reuniting. Developing a schedule and then practicing a "dry run" prior to beginning school may also be helpful.



Issues to consider when establishing after-school routines could include locating child care (if necessary), determining a time and place for doing homework, providing nutritious snacks, involving children in some extra-curricular activities and limiting television viewing. Establishing expectations for completing household chores and prioritizing time for family-centered activities is also important.

► Building Appropriate Expectations

A large component of insuring children's success in school is capitalizing on resources within the home environment. Grandparents need information about what is expected of their grandchild at each grade level and will benefit from strategies which enable them to assist with learning and homework at home. Encourage them to take advantage of frequent communication with their grandchild's teacher, available homework hot lines or websites, and to regularly check their grandchild's backpack for notes and other school communications.

Keeping important notices in one spot within the home and creating a "master calendar" located in a central spot will enable grandparents to keep track of school-related activities and assignments. Increased awareness of community resources (i.e., libraries, "homework houses", free tutoring programs, etc.) can also enable grandparents to better assist their grandchildren.

► Meeting Grandchildren's Special Needs

Many children in the care of grandparents will benefit from specialized services to support their physical, cognitive or emotional needs. Grandparents need to become aware of available support programs and serve as advocates to insure grandchildren receive necessary intervention. Assisting grandparents in learning about disabilities, including ADHD and fetal alcohol syndrome is an important first step. Grandparents need to become familiar with school policies and terminology relating to special needs learners. Interacting with parents whose children are receiving similar services is another means of providing education to grandparents.

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Dr. Linda Dannison is Professor and Chairperson, Family & Consumer Sciences, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI and Dr. Andrea Smith is an Associate Professor in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Leadership at WMU, Grand Rapids, MI. They collaborate and consult on program and curriculum development for grandparents raising grandchildren.