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# Grandparent Involvement in Child Welfare Intervention With Grandchildren

*This article discusses the increasing role grandparents are playing in kinship care, or foster care of their grandchildren. It examines the support grandparents provide to grandchildren who are receiving services from child welfare agencies, the circumstances surrounding grandparents' involvement with these agencies, and the relationships between grandparents and social workers.*

**By James W. Gladstone and  
Ralph A. Brown**

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Studies show that kinship care or relative foster care has increased in the United States over the past 15 years, especially among African-American families.<sup>1</sup> Child welfare agencies place children with relatives for the same reasons that placements are made in other types of care arrangements, namely that parents are unable to care for their children because of substance abuse, poverty, and the incidence of HIV/AIDS.<sup>2</sup> While relatives are usually committed to long-term care,<sup>3</sup> they rarely want to pursue a permanency goal of adoption.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, although the financial burden of caring for a relative's child is often heavy, child welfare workers usually consider family caregivers to provide good care.<sup>5</sup>

While the literature on inclusive care and kinship care refers to family, there has been little direct mention of grandparents as a resource. The grandparent-caregiving literature, on the other hand, shows that grandparents may take active roles in raising their grandchildren when the grandchildren's parents are unable to do so. Pearson, Hunter, Cook, Ialongo, and Kellam,<sup>6</sup> for example, found that the degree of involvement that grandmothers had in raising their grandchildren was related to the absence of their children in their grandchildren's households. This, in turn, may come about because of a child's alcohol or drug abuse, teen pregnancy, incarceration of the child, and the AIDS epidemic.<sup>7</sup> Studies have also

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found that grandparents who become primary caregivers for their grandchildren are more likely to be single, African-American, and living in poverty.<sup>8</sup>

Grandparents who are primary caregivers often face a number of challenges. Studies have reported higher rates of depression, health problems, and fatigue among caregiving grandparents, as compared to others their age. Grandparents often have less time for themselves, their social contacts become limited, and economic pressures may increase if they are forced to quit their jobs, reduce their work hours, or stretch their financial resources.<sup>9</sup> Custodial grandparents may experience even more psychological distress when grandchildren exhibit emotional or behavioral problems.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, being a primary caregiver can also be rewarding. Grandparents have reported a sense of satisfaction that they can “be there” for their grandchildren and they gain a strong sense of purpose by being so actively involved in the lives of their grandchildren.<sup>11</sup>

This paper begins to look at the interaction that grandparents have with grandchildren who are involved with child welfare agencies, as well as the interaction that grandparents have with these agencies themselves. Learning more about the relationships that grandparents have with child welfare agencies will help identify ways that grandparents and child welfare professionals can work cooperatively, rather than at cross-purposes, for the benefit and “in the best interests” of the grandchild.

## Method

Qualitative data were collected from ten grandparents and ten social workers through personal, in-depth interviews. Each of the grandparents, nine grandmothers and one grandfather, had a grandchild receiving service from a child welfare agency in Ontario, Canada. The ten social workers who took part in the study also worked for this agency.

Interviews took approximately one hour to complete. Grandparent interviews took place in the grandparents' homes; interviews with social workers were conducted in the agency. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed. The analysis used a grounded theory approach. Themes and categories were coded by identifying key words, phrases, or similar ideas expressed by participants. Additional categories were then created through the comparison of themes presented in the data already analyzed with those revealed in new data.

Grandparents and social workers were asked about their involvement with one another and what they thought made their relationships positive or negative. Grandparents were also asked about the type of involvement that they had with their grandchildren.

## Findings

### ***Type of Support Provided to Grandchildren By Grandparents***

Grandparents provided various types of support to their grandchildren. These included instrumental and emotional support. Grandparents, for example, prepared meals, bathed their grandchildren, and took them to the doctor and dentist. They also represented a sense of stability and consistency to their grandchildren by maintaining routines, calming their grandchildren's fears, and acting as confidantes. One grandmother, for example, referring to her granddaughter who had been sexually abused, stated:

She loves me, I love her. During the day she laughs, but it's the bedtime. At one point, she wouldn't sleep in her room. She would want to sleep on the floor in my room or in bed beside me. She'd say “Nanna, I don't want to sleep in there” because she had a fear of someone coming in and taking her. I'll sit and read her four or five stories. In fact, I've sat there while she's sleeping and kept right on reading just to make sure that she is sleeping. That's how I do it.

Grandparents spent time with their grandchildren, for example, taking them to the park, on outings, to McDonalds, and talking, singing, and reading to them. Grandparents also provided guidance. They taught their grandchildren life skills, helped them with their homework, and offered help with anger management.

Several factors were perceived by grandparents to mediate the amount and type of support that they provided to their grandchildren. Not surprisingly, geography was a major factor, particularly in terms of whether grandparents and grandchildren lived in the same household. Grandparents who lived in different places of residence, especially if they were in different cities, did not have the same opportunities to engage in helping activities on a daily basis.

The actions of young-adult and adult children were a second factor influencing the support provided by grandparents to grandchildren. In some

cases children facilitated contact and support by what they did. One grandmother, for example, explained that in the past the social worker would not give her information about her grandchild without getting prior permission from her child, the grandchild's mother. The grandmother telephoned her daughter and told her:

You have to call the woman at child welfare and you have to tell her that they can tell me what I need to know. My daughter said, "Okay." She phoned child welfare and said, "I'm telling you that you can tell my mother anything she needs to know about my children" and slammed the phone down on her ear. But it worked. At least they deal with me now.

Developing more open communication with the child welfare agency allowed this grandmother to have more contact and provide more support to her grandchild.

In other cases, children influenced the amount of support provided by grandparents to their grandchildren by what they didn't do. One grandmother, for example, was seeking custody of her grandchild because she felt that her daughter was too "irresponsible." The daughter would leave the grandchild with her and "disappear for a few days." The daughter's absence was the catalyst that led to this grandmother's increasing the support she provided to her grandchild. She provided more support because her daughter was unable to do so.

A third factor that was perceived to influence contact between grandparents and grandchildren was the child welfare system. One grandmother, for example, lived in a different city from her grandson, who had been placed in a foster home. When the grandmother wanted to visit her grandson she had to make arrangements with the foster mother whom she said "dislikes me and has been fighting me every step of the way." The social worker and foster mother, as representatives of the child welfare system, were perceived by this grandmother to be gatekeepers who controlled the amount of contact that she could have with her grandchild.

### ***Circumstances Associated with Grandparents' Becoming Involved with the Child Welfare System***

Some grandparents had been providing long-standing support to their grandchildren. Other

grandparents became more supportive after coming into contact with the child welfare system. The next question we addressed was, "Why did this come about?" There appeared to be four circumstances bringing grandparents and child welfare agencies together:

1. **The Child Welfare System Was Perceived to Be a Resource to the Grandchild.** In some cases, grandparents initiated contact with the child welfare agency because they were concerned about their grandchildren and their children's inability to parent the grandchildren. These grandparents did not necessarily have poor relationships with their children; however, they were concerned, about the well-being of their grandchildren.

One grandmother said that her daughter "had a job on the streets." The daughter would leave the grandchild with her and "come and go when she felt like it." This grandmother eventually contacted the child welfare agency, looking for some guidance.

2. **The Grandparent Was Perceived to Be a Resource to the Grandchild.** In some cases, social workers with child welfare agencies approached grandparents, asking them whether they would care for their grandchildren because their children (the grandchildren's parents) were abusive, neglectful, incarcerated, or wanted to place the grandchildren for adoption. The grandparents may have become known to the social worker through conversations with the grandchildren's parents or because the grandparents contacted the agencies out of concern for their grandchildren.

In one situation, the grandparent's daughter gave birth to the grandchild just as she was entering the correctional system. The social worker, who knew about the grandparent because she was already caring for her daughter's other child, contacted the grandmother and asked her if she would care for her infant grandchild as well.

3. **The Grandparent Was Perceived to Be a Resource to the Child.** Social workers may have retained primary contact with the grandchildren's parents (that is, the grandparents' children), but may have involved the grandparents in meetings because they were

perceived to be a resource to their children and the helping process.

For example, one social worker reported that whenever she visited the grandparent's child to discuss parenting issues, the grandmother would also be present. She would take notes, relay information to her daughter, and try to keep her daughter "calm."

4. **The Grandparent Was Perceived as Detrimental to the Grandchild.** Grandparents may not have been viewed as a resource, but as detrimental to the well-being of their grandchildren. This situation occurred when grandparents had custody of grandchildren and demonstrated limited parenting capabilities, resulting in grandchildren having to be removed from the grandparents' homes. It was noted, however, that grandparents may not have been anxious to parent their grandchildren initially and may have been realistic about their parenting skills. Grandparents may have assumed the role of surrogate parent because their children were unable to parent on their own and the grandparents did not want the grandchildren to enter foster care. Once the grandparents took on this role, however, they may have found that they could not manage parenting effectively.

One social worker, for example, spoke about a grandmother who took care of her grandchild after her daughter died following a drug overdose. The grandmother was able to "more or less provide a roof over their heads" and "the basic necessities," but she "wasn't able to provide them with what they needed emotionally." While this social worker eventually removed the grandchildren from this grandmother's home, she recognized that:

I don't know if anybody could have given more to the kids because of where they were at the time. I had compassion for her. I think she wanted to try her best. She could have said (at the beginning when approached), "No." She could have said, "I'm not doing this, it doesn't matter" and we couldn't have forced her. But she wanted to try and she wanted to see.

### **How Grandparents and Social Workers Evaluate Their Relationships with One Another**

We were interested in what grandparents and social workers valued in their relationships with one another. Grandparents evaluated social workers along several dimensions:

1. **Friendliness.** Grandparents valued social workers who were "friendly," "easy-going," and "easy to talk to." These characteristics seemed to set a tone for the grandparents, who found it easier to engage with the social workers, rather than withdraw or lash out. As one grandmother remarked about her social worker: "She's been friendly. I've got no problems with her. Like I've never gotten angry."
2. **Information.** Grandparents appreciated social workers who gave them information and responded to their questions. Grandparents were especially interested in receiving feedback when a home visit had been conducted because the grandparent was applying for custody of the grandchild. As one grandmother stated: "I mean not everybody can have an answer, but at least they can find out the information."
3. **Emotional Support.** Grandparents felt more positively toward social workers who were "empathic" and "understanding." Referring to her social worker, one grandmother stated: "She talks to me a lot and she keeps me going. Some days it's very difficult."
4. **Material Support.** The material support provided by some social workers was very helpful to the grandparents. Social workers offered food vouchers, recreation passes, and Christmas gifts for the grandchildren. These resources were especially important to grandparents who had limited finances or whose caregiving responsibilities allowed them little respite away from their grandchildren.
5. **Advice and Services.** Some grandparents welcomed the advice that social workers gave to them around child-management issues, counseling that social workers provided to their grandchildren, or referrals to other agencies that could supply these services.

Social workers also evaluated grandparents along several, albeit different, dimensions:

1. **Caring Attitude.** Social workers looked at grandparents more positively when they felt that grandparents genuinely cared about their grandchildren. As one social worker stated, “When you sense that she is feeling care and love for her grandchildren, it’s easier for you to connect with her.”
2. **Effectiveness.** Social workers placed value on grandparents who were perceived to care for their grandchildren effectively. This value was not related as much to the caring attitude that grandparents had toward their grandchildren; rather, it referred to the actual assistance that grandparents provided to their grandchildren. Social workers, moreover, were not insensitive to the difficulties that grandparents faced in caring for their grandchildren. As one social worker said about a grandmother with whom she worked: “She’s financially strained...her grandchildren all have some disability like ADHD...and she’s a single grandmom.” The “bottom line,” however, was that her grandchildren “have everything that they need.”
3. **Information.** Social workers valued grandparents who provided them with information and who were “honest and up front about what’s going on in her home.” Referring to one grandmother with whom she worked, a social worker remarked: “She’s very honest with me. She’s very forthcoming with things. Like, if something happened that she knows that I should know about, then she will call and inform me and keep me updated on what’s going on.”

This provision of information about grandchildren was especially helpful to social workers because it helped them meet their mandate, which focused on the protection of the children. One social worker went even further, explaining that she needed to be informed and to document whatever happened to the grandchild “in case we have to go to court and our notes are subpoenaed—just for my sake to say that I’ve covered myself.”

4. **Respect.** Social workers felt more positively toward grandparents who recognize the social worker’s expertise and authority, who ask for the social worker’s help when they were perceived to need it, and who “respect

what (the child welfare system) is trying to do.” One social worker, for example, had a compatible relationship with a grandparent because “she seemed to understand the social worker’s role and didn’t challenge it.”

Social workers often felt more positively toward grandparents whom they felt shared their same goals—namely, the protection of grandchildren who were at risk. As one social worker stated: “She is cooperative. She sees the need to protect the children. Her concerns, I guess, are the same concerns that the Society (child welfare) has. So, it becomes more easier (sic) to deal with grandma.”

One important aspect of this cooperation was for grandparents not to form a coalition with their children whose parenting abilities may be called into question. One social worker described this process:

Automatically, the defenses are up. Grandma may be aligning herself with mom until she finds out the reason for my visit. And then, she will not necessarily align herself but support the Society’s (child welfare) need to investigate or to complete an assessment of the family’s situation at that time.

5. **Compliance.** Grandparents who were perceived to comply with what they were asked to do were viewed more positively by the social workers. This included grandparents who “followed up” and listened to what the social worker said. One social worker offered an example:

I say, “You know, the room is messy and there’s a lot of safety hazards here. I think it would be more safe if you made it child-proof, clean up the place a bit.” And then I would come back a week later and it still isn’t done. And now I’d have to get a bit more forceful. I’d have to say, “Listen, you have to do this, or...”

## Discussion

Our findings have led us to two main conclusions. First, the majority of grandparents and social workers at child welfare agencies have a common interest in the well-being of the grandchildren. Grandparents are supportive in instrumental and emotional ways, a finding well documented in the

grandparenting and grandparent-caregiver literature.<sup>12</sup> Social workers also try to protect grandchildren who are at risk. They feel entrusted by the state to ensure the safety and well-being of vulnerable children who may not be receiving the care that they need from their families.

Our second conclusion is that grandparents and social workers may share common goals, but the extent to which they work together in pursuit of these goals is influenced by the use of power in their relationships. It appears clear that social workers have more power than grandparents. Grandparents, however, are not necessarily powerless. The more meaningful question is whether they experience a sense of power in their relationships with social workers.

Power is defined in terms of resources. As Hasenfeld<sup>13</sup> states, "The amount of power that A has over B is a direct function of the resources A controls and B needs and an inverse function of the ability of B to obtain these resources elsewhere." Social workers hold several resources that may be valuable to grandparents and that they may have difficulty obtaining elsewhere. As our findings show, social workers have the expertise to provide advice and guidance, as well as the legal mandate to intervene in situations in which grandchildren are at risk in their parental homes. Grandparents who recognize this will access child welfare agencies when they have concerns about the well-being of their grandchildren. When grandchildren are at such risk that they are removed from their parental homes, then child welfare agencies become the gatekeepers who control the opportunities that grandparents have to be with their grandchildren—by placing grandchildren in the grandparents' homes, or by facilitating visits with grandchildren who are in foster homes or care facilities. Social workers in child welfare agencies also provide various types of material and emotional support to grandparents, especially when they are raising their grandchildren.

Grandparents, in turn, represent important resources to child welfare agencies. They offer a home for their grandchildren, which can be especially important if foster homes are in short supply. Moreover, placing grandchildren in grandparents' homes is consistent with agency philosophy (and the personal philosophy of the social workers we interviewed) to promote a sense of family continuity for grandchildren. One social worker suggested that placing grandchildren with grandparents is even more successful than placing them with aunts and uncles.

According to this social worker, the grandchildren's parents already see the grandparents in the role of parents, whereas they view their siblings more as a "peer," which could increase the possibility of competition and feelings of rivalry within the middle generation.

Grandparents can be resources in other ways as well. Social workers rely on grandparents for information, particularly regarding their children's ability to parent the grandchildren. Social workers may also depend on grandparents to supervise visits between their children and grandchildren when noncustodial children have access to the grandchildren but only in a protective environment.

Grandparents may not be powerless in their relationships with child welfare agencies due to the resources they represent to these agencies. Findings suggest, however, that grandparents do not perceive themselves as having much power in these relationships. Most grandparents viewed the child welfare agency as "a threat," they felt that they were "in a precarious position," and that social workers in the agency "call the shots." The central complaint that most grandparents had was that social workers had unreasonable expectations, especially with regard to how they cared for their grandchildren. As one grandmother stated, "I don't mind being involved, but they come across as if I don't know how to raise my grandchildren... Don't come in and order me around. I've brought up kids." The "threat" that was perceived to accompany this message was that failure to comply would result in the grandmother's losing custody, losing access to her grandchild, or not gaining custody, if this is what the grandmother was seeking.

It was noted, moreover, that the same grandparents who worried about their status in the agencies may have reported that they had friendly and easy-going relationships with their social workers. This suggests that some grandparents may interpret power differently, depending on whether the focal point is the agency or an individual child welfare worker.

### **Implications for Practice and Policy**

As our findings suggest, grandparents may be an underused resource for the child welfare or child protection system. Clearly, power and the use of authority are historical issues that social work practitioners have addressed and continue to address. Power particularly is central in child protection agencies, given their legal mandate and accountability to society and the courts. However, the extent to which

social workers in child protection access and acknowledge grandparents' strengths in caring for their grandchildren has the potential to develop further partnerships among grandparents, grandchildren, parents, and child protection agencies.

If grandparents perceive agencies only as confrontational in exerting power over them and their grandchildren, they may be less likely to contact these agencies at early stages of potential abuse or neglect. The degree to which child protection workers develop and maintain open communication and respect for grandparents' source of knowledge and information about their grandchildren potentially can decrease the level of risk and the need to intervene earlier to prevent harm to grandchildren. Similarly, if social workers assess grandparents' strengths merely on the basis of compliance with workers' directions, agencies may be eliminating the energy and knowledge that grandparents may proactively bring to the situation. Grandparents, as our findings indicate, may be reluctant to communicate important risk indicators to social workers.

We recognize that some grandparents have limitations and may not be the best or most appropriate source of support for their grandchildren. However, in other situations, social workers may wish to assess the extent to which they have identified grandparents' strengths and the possible resource the grandparents could be to their grandchildren. This situation is particularly relevant and timely given the lack of, or decreasing availability of, community resources for children and families in many communities, especially for temporary or longer-term resources for out-of-home placements for children. Grandparents may provide an additional option for financially challenged child protection agencies in developing and expanding out-of-home placement resources.

Last, the principles of least intrusiveness and best interests have the potential to be recognized and supported by examining the extent to which grandparents may be a resource for their grandchildren rather than more expensive out-of-home care facilities, e.g. foster or group home placements.

## Endnotes

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