2011

Perceptions of Family Empowerment in African American Custodial Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren: Thoughts for Research and Practice

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Perceptions of Family Empowerment in African American Custodial Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren: Thoughts for Research and Practice

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Empowerment practice is an approach to help marginalized families reduce their sense of powerlessness. The present study explores empowerment practice with a sample of low-income African American custodial grandmothers. It specifically describes how the effects of a strengths-based community service program influenced caregivers' sense of empowerment. Using the Family Empowerment Scale, the results suggest that the service intervention supports the empowerment dimensions and three subscales (knowledge, advocacy, and self-efficacy); the results did not support the competency subscale. Although all age groups experienced an increase in empowerment, older grandmothers had significant differences in perceptions regarding social systems, as well as a sense of competency as compared with younger grandmothers. Implications for service delivery and future research are presented.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Practitioners working with custodial grandmothers should consider incorporating combined home-based and group services to affect participants' sense of empowerment.

- When designing service programs for custodial grandmothers, variations in service delivery methods may be necessary to accommodate the specific service needs of older vs. younger custodial grandmothers.

Grandparents raising grandchildren is a prevailing family arrangement in U.S. society. Managing the care of children who experienced serious traumas requires constant attention and extensive resources. As hard as they may try, many grandparents experience frustration and anxiety, believing they lack the means to control their family circumstances, and the larger community has little regard for them. Feeling overwhelmed, without support, and in need of resources, custodial grandparents are at risk for having a reduced sense of empowerment. The focus of this study is to address the sense of powerlessness felt by many custodial grandparents, specifically African American grandmothers raising grandchildren. The study explores the effects of a strengths-based support program on perceptions of empowerment among grandparent caregivers.

There are 2.4 million grandparents in the United States serving as primary caregivers for their grandchildren, and 34% are in parent-absent households (Simmons & Dye, 2003). Parental substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, incarceration, homicide, HIV/AIDS, and, more recently, military deployment are the predominate reasons grandparents are raising their grandchildren (Bunch, 2007; Dowdell, 1995; Kelley, Whitley, & Sipe, 2007; Poindexter & Linsk, 1999; Vega et al., 1993). Some of these issues overlap, suggesting that families are trying to manage serious and difficult social problems while raising children. Despite such burdens, most custodial grandparents have shown their commitment to serving as surrogate parents. They consider their parental roles as satisfying and rewarding; few would prefer any alternatives. However, many grandparents worry about being full-time custodians. Previous studies suggest financial hardship, housing limitations, lack of transportation and day care, and inadequate material resources are reasons grandparents experience high levels of anxiety, frustration, and fear (Landry-Meyer, Gerard, & Guzell, 2005; Waldrop & Weber, 2001). Further, as grandparents experience the effects of aging, they become anxious about parenting grandchildren as their health fails and functioning declines (Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2000; Whitley, Kelley, & Sipe, 2001).

Grandparents also have concerns about meeting their grandchildren's special needs. Prenatal exposure to illicit substances and alcohol, coupled with poor parental functioning following birth, increase grandchildren's risks for emotional, physical, and developmental problems (Scarcella, Macomber, & Geen, 2003; Whitley & Kelley, 2008). Accessing public welfare services and benefits is often necessary to address their grandchildren's needs. However, many grandparents are unfamiliar with public welfare systems or harbor frustrations from previous experiences with them; other grandparents simply think they are not eligible to receive public benefits and do not begin the process to obtain them (Macomber & Geen, 2002; McCallion, Janicki, Grant-Griffin, & Kolomer, 2000).

Few studies have considered the influence of social stigma on family functioning in grandparent-headed households. Nearly 45% of all custodial grandparents are persons of color; African American grandparents represent the largest proportion by race (Okazawa-Rey, 1998; Simmons & Dye, 2003). Caregivers of color are more likely to have experienced poverty, worked in low-paying jobs, received public assistance, and care for several grandchildren for extended periods with inadequate resources to meet all their needs, as compared to their White counterparts (Poindexter & Linsk, 1999; Simpson & Lawrence-Webb, 2009). Empowerment practice is a method to help marginalized families gain a sense of control over their life circumstances. It helps reduce the feeling of powerlessness that inhibits one from taking appropriate action to resolve problems. Exploring the concept of empowerment with African American custodial grandparents is important because occurrences with social discrimination and oppression intensify their vulnerabilities, adding another layer of complexity to their caregiving behaviors. As a response, the present study explores empowerment practice with a sample of low-income African American custodial grandmothers. It specifically describes the effects of a strengths-based community service program on caregivers' perceptions of empowerment.

Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services | www.FamiliesinSociety.org
DOI: 10.1606/1044-3894.4148 | ©2011 Alliance for Children and Families

Volume 92, Issue 4
Pages: 383–389
URL: http://www.familiesinsociety.org/Show.asp?override=true&docid=4148

383

rent knowledge. Issues of oppression and discrimination add complexity to caregiving behaviors and should continue to receive explicit attention in relation to grandparent caregivers of color. Additional studies may also inquire how various demographics affect perceptions of empowerment and service delivery options, including issues of gender. Studies exploring empowerment perceptions among grandfathers of color raising grandchildren is another phase of inquiry that requires attention.

Conclusion

Custodial grandparents encounter numerous challenges when raising grandchildren. The challenges are especially difficult for grandparents of color, who encounter various forms of social stigma and discrimination. Empowerment practice is a potentially effective approach to help them gain a sense of control over their lives. It also helps grandparents to recognize personal strengths and collective efficacy for positive social change.

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