Grandparents Raising Grandchildren:  
*The Role of Grandparents in the Lives of Youth*

Rachel Dunifon and Kim Kopko  
*Cornell University*

Denyse Variano  
*Cornell Cooperative Extension, Orange County*

Jackie Davis-Manigaulte  
*Cornell University Cooperative Extension, New York City*
The Role of Grandparents in the Lives of Youth

• More than ever, grandparents may play key roles in the lives of their grandchildren
  – Increases in life expectancy, resources
  – Greater need
    • Single parenthood
    • Maternal employment
    • Recession
    • Custodial grandparents
Grandparents in the Lives of Youth

• This talk focuses on children being raised by their grandparents
  – 2% of all U.S. children (twice as likely among African-American children) (Pew Research Center, 2010)
What do we Know About Children Raised by Grandparents?

• Most are outside the reach of social service agencies

• Reasons for children coming to live with their grandparents include
  – Substance use
  – Abuse/neglect
  – Mental health
  – Incarceration
  – Death
  – Teen parenthood
What do we know?

• More disadvantaged than other family types
  – Higher poverty, lower education, health problems
• Children often have mental health concerns
• Less well-known
  – Sources of strength
  – Grandparents as parents
  – Relationship quality
  – Teenage years
A New Cornell Study

• Goals:
  – To better understand families in which grandparents are raising teenaged grandchildren
  – Ultimate goal—use research to inform policies and programs
Cornell Study

• In-person interviews with 59 grandparent/teen pairs from across New York state
  – February-August 2009
  – Youth aged 12-18

• Worked with community agencies to recruit families
  – Cornell Cooperative Extension and others
Three Components of Study

• Surveys of grandparent and youth
• Videotaped discussions
• Audio-taped interview of grandparents
  – How did youth come to live with you?
  – Contact with parents
  – How has parenting changed/stayed the same?
Relationship to Youth (percent)

- Maternal grandmother: 47%
- Paternal grandmother: 34%
- Maternal grandfather: 9%
- Paternal grandfather: 3%
- Great-grandmother: 7%
- Step-grandfather: 0%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>AVERAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent Age</td>
<td>63 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Age</td>
<td>15 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent African-American</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent Hispanic</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent White</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length Youth has lived with grandparent</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth sibling(s) outside of HH</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent married</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent years of education</td>
<td>12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent employed</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent has a disability</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth has a health condition</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons youth not living with mom</td>
<td>Percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntarily gave up child</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substance abuse problems</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom abused/neglected child</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom’s partner has issues</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom deceased</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom incarcerated</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom too young when child born</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom mental health problems</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom left child alone/abandoned</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“His birth mother really signed off on him when he was four... after she and my son divorced....He went with my son for eight years and that was just horrible. My son didn't take care of him... [he and his wife] had two more children.... And they were the precocious little girls....And Max just got shoved by the wayside...And then when he was 13, they just called us one Saturday night and said Max's not going to live here anymore, come and get him, he's out.”
Key Findings

• Parents are still active players in children’s lives
  – Many parents live nearby (63% saw mom in last year)
  – Some have regular, smooth contact with parents
  – Parents can undermine GP rules, try to lure children away
  – Other children or partners can complicate things
  – Move in and out of kids’ lives
Key Findings

• Youth feelings toward parents
  – Very complicated, often around siblings

• Oftentimes this hinders the grandparent-grandchild relationship
“I had books thrown at me, chairs...but through it all he always cried and said, Nana, I didn’t want to hurt you, I was so angry...I don’t think I’ll ever forgive mommy and daddy”
“So I can understand what she's going through. And all the children that's really raised by grandparents, I can understand what they going through. It's not that because they bad kids, it's just because they miss their parents and if their parents realized this now, if they know what these children were going through, really realizing stuff they would straighten up. They would really straighten up.”
Key Findings

• Youth relationship with parents falls into groups:
  – Parent is like friend or distant relative
  – Ongoing pain
  – Written parent off
Key Findings

- Youth who have written off their parent have a better relationship with grandparent
“My parents were horrible, so why do I care if they’re not here? You [Grandma] have your faults and everything, but at least you know what you are doing”
“I have a stronger bond with [Grandma] than with my mother...I don’t even call my mother mommy...[Grandma] is my mother because she’s been there for me my whole life. That’s why she’s my mother. You can’t call nobody mother who wasn’t there for you.”
Role of Parents

• Very complicated
• Grandparents oftentimes want to make connections
• A cynical view may be adaptive for some kids
Key Findings

- Health problems are prevalent
  - 34% of grandparents disabled
  - 50% of youth have a health condition

“I guess one of the hardest things is when...I’m hurting and I still have to cook. I still have to make sure you have clean clothes, a clean bed. That you bathe. When I’m not feeling well, it’s an extra effort for me”
Key Findings

• Families have many strengths
  – Wisdom, experience
  – Religion
• Warmth very high
• Due to unique role, many grandparents appreciate the “second chance” they have been given
  – Youth show appreciation
“I’m not busy chasing my own tail, finding out who I am...I know a little bit more about what’s important, what matters...”
“The years are different, but the parenting, the nurturing of the children is still the same...It doesn't change; that's the same. It's just that you've been over it and hopefully this time, you know, you have more insight of what should or should not be done, you know.”
Implications for Practice

• Many strengths to build on
• Highlights need to take a holistic approach and consider the entire family
  – Parents play a key role
  – Siblings outside of the household
Implications for Practice

• The role of parents is painful and complicated
  – For some children, writing their parents off is necessary
  – Grandparents and children will differ in their relationship with the parent
  – This relationship will evolve over time
Resources for you

http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/index.cfm

http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/research/briefs.cfm

http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/research/parentpages.cfm
Adolescent Development and Teens Being Raised by Grandparents
Adolescence

- Adolescence is a time of significant developmental change
- Changes occur on a number of levels and in a variety of contexts: individual, with peers, and in families
- Even as researchers try to understand these multiple aspects of change during adolescence, the context within which adolescents develop also continues to change, further complicating the picture
Adolescence

• Increasingly, one of the ways in which the context of adolescent development is changing is that more teens are being raised by grandparents

• The largest percentage (41.3%) of children being raised by grandparents are adolescents (12 to 17 years) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)
Adolescence

- Two significant changes that take place during adolescence are autonomy development and identity formation.
- Desire for autonomy grows from early adolescence to late adolescence.
- The development of a coherent self-concept, or identity is likewise an important task of adolescence.
Autonomy

- Developing autonomy, or becoming a self-governing person, is one of the fundamental tasks of adolescence.
- Autonomy is often confused with being rebellious, and becoming an independent person is often associated with breaking away from the family.
- However, the development of autonomy during adolescence is viewed by researchers as gradual, progressive, and normative.
Autonomy

- Autonomy development emerges during early adolescence and may contribute to parent-child conflicts, particularly during the ages of 11 to 14 years.

- Navigating autonomy with a grandparent (whom youth may not view as a parent) can be a complicated task for youth.

- If a teen has regular contact with their biological parent, they may also need to learn to navigate autonomy with multiple parental figure.
Identity

A second important developmental task during adolescence is developing a coherent self-concept, or sense of identity.

Identity formation is more pronounced during late adolescence as cognitive abilities mature.

The adolescent selects and chooses from among the many elements that could conceivably become a part of his or her adult identity.
Identity

- Other people with whom the young person interacts serve as a mirror that reflects back to the adolescent information about who he or she is and who he or she ought to be
- The responses of these important others shape and influence the adolescent’s developing sense of identity
Potential Implications

• The ways in which grandchildren navigate their relationships with their grandparents could potentially impact identity formation

• Depending on level of parental contact and involvement, teens may or may not be able to develop a coherent identity
Potential Implications

• An inappropriate sense of obligation to grandparent caregivers could compromise teens’ autonomy and well-being

• Although some teens may not have difficulty forming a coherent identity, others may struggle in terms of developing a personal narrative that describes their unique family arrangement
Narratives and Identity

• Work by Fivush and colleagues (2010) describe narratives as both the *process* by which identity is created and a *reflection* of that identity.

• The ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences, as expressed in their personal narratives, provide the foundation for understanding of self, and this emerging understanding of self is expressed through personal narratives.
Narratives in Adolescence

- Recent research has begun to examine the emergence of life narrative in adolescence

- During adolescence, youth begin constructing the story of a life that defines who they are and who they want to be (Habermas & Bluck, 2000)
Our Study

• Qualitative Data

  – Videotaped discussions of “what it is like for families like ours”
Method

- We coded the videotaped discussions of youth talking about what it is like being raised by their grandparent and looked at excerpts with teens talking to their grandparents about their family circumstances
Personal Narrative

“And then when you’re raised by a grandparent, you’re thinking, “This isn’t my mom. I ain’t got no dad.” Everything is so off from that original state . . . deep inside . . . it’s always going to be inside of me. You know I thank God for you guys [grandmother] trying to help us . . . you know, making us comfortable, but our state of mind is still going to be always “This isn’t my mom.” Reality. Face it. This isn’t my mom. And that’s the point. Like, it’s like, nobody can really take the place, so . . . that’s just . . . always going to be there. I mean, the good times, you know . . . you’re raising me or whatever, I’m happy for that. But then it’s like back to reality, to me. For us.”
“I hate being away from home. I want to go back home one day”

“When I was little I always used to say, Why can’t I have a normal life like all my friends do?”
Personal Narrative

• “You don’t have your parent . . . you don’t have your mother or father with you, and so kids at school don’t really understand as much. They kind of see it differently, until you get to, like, the end of high school. And then it’s not as much of a big deal, because it’s pretty common now. But, it’s still different.”
“And . . . you always relate me to . . . my mom, or my dad, and I’m not . . . like them. . . . I don’t like when people say I look like my mom or . . . I don’t like when they say I act like her.”
Challenges to Adolescent Development

• As the personal narratives demonstrate, youth being raised by grandparents not only face the important developmental tasks of becoming autonomous and forming an identity, but their circumstances may make these developmental tasks more challenging.

• In addition to navigating the normative developmental tasks, research demonstrates that children raised by grandparents are at increased risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Smith & Palmieri, 2007) and compromised emotional well-being in adulthood (Carpenter & Clyman, 2004) given the traumatic events many have been through.
Challenges to Adolescent Development

• Adolescence is also a time of increased risk-taking behaviors

• With greater freedom and independence, youth face new choices involving drinking, addictive substances, and sexuality—frequently in combination

• Poor choices about these risks can have terrible consequences for individuals, families, and society as a whole
Risk-Taking Behaviors

• Again, in our interviews, youth talked about the vulnerabilities they face as they make important decisions regarding risky behaviors (alcohol, drugs, sexual activity), school, and friends, and as they struggle with their feelings about their biological parents.

• These outcomes, coupled with evidence that adolescents comprise a demographic that is particularly vulnerable to risky decision-making behaviors (Reyna & Farley, 2006), underscores the important and potentially influential role that grandparents play in lives of their grandchildren.
Challenges to Adolescent Development

• Indeed, the grandparents we interviewed point to challenges in raising their teenage grandchildren. They express concern over issues such as discipline and monitoring and are in need of resources to aid them in navigating the developmental period of adolescence.

• However, these challenges may also present opportunities for grandparents to play a particularly beneficial role in the lives of children in the teenage years.
Summary

- All teens face normative, developmental tasks during adolescence
- Autonomy development and identity formation are just two of these tasks
- Teens also engage in higher rates of risk-taking behaviors
- As a result of these developmental tasks and challenging behaviors, parenting during the teenage years requires adjustments as teens become more autonomous and independent
Summary

• For teens being raised by grandparents, the normative developmental tasks of adolescence are accomplished in a different family arrangement.

• How this arrangement is viewed by the adolescent may impact the personal narrative they construct about their lives.

• Grandparents raising teens often find themselves navigating not only the normative developmental tasks of adolescence (autonomy development and identity formation), but also raising teens who may engage in risk-taking behaviors and who may struggle with being raised in a grandparent caregiver arrangement.
Summary

• Despite these potential challenges, grandparents can be a stable, supportive and nurturing influence on the teens that they are raising.

• One goal of our continued work is to respond to the needs of grandparent caregivers and provide resources and curricula for grandparents raising teenage grandchildren.

• Take away message: **Support from grandparents can be vital during adolescence!**
The Relatives as Parents Program in Orange County (NY)

A part of the Family and Consumer Sciences program in CCE-Orange County since 1997

Our audience includes:

- All relative caregivers (grandparents, other adult relatives and fictive kin) who have taken on the role of primary caregiver for a related child AND
- Children aged birth through 21 years living in kinship families
I childproofed the house, but they keep getting back in!
Kinship Caregivers: Our “unsung heroes”

• Adults had not planned to care for related children, many of whom are traumatized, have chronic health, mental health or learning disability.
• Caregivers themselves are experiencing the more difficult aspects of growing older.
• Plans for their retirement years are replaced with play dates and PTA meetings.
• As children age, communicating about critical issues like internet safety and talking with teens about drugs & alcohol may be especially hard.
RAPP Services and Supports

- Regardless of a caregiver’s age, race/ethnicity, gender, living situation and SES, all relative caregivers have the common need for camaraderie, education and support.
- Mutual support groups provide a safe place for caregivers to share problems, needs & solutions while building new friendships.
- Parenting, nutrition and financial management education help provide knowledge and skills to assist the changing family. Resources including legal, mental health and educational advocacy are available through contracted services and strong community collaborations.
RAPP Youth Development

• RAPP youth also have the need for **friendship, support and education**.

• Monthly youth groups and special events provide children and teens with **a safe place to meet and have fun** with others who are “just like me”.

• Carefully constructed **social supports and leadership activities** help youth gain confidence in themselves, their peers and other caring adults.
“We’ve been thinking a lot about what we want to do with your life.”
Teen Leadership Institute

• Older youth explore basic independent life skills through a series of hands-on activities, including cooking, financial management, problem solving, internet safety and goal setting.

• Prepare to assume leadership roles with younger RAPP youth, including program and event planning, youth mentoring and development of second Institute.
There’s a 300 pound insect right behind you.

Your newspaper is on fire.

Hmmm.

Hmmm.
Family Portraits Project

• Encourages RAPP pre-teens and teens to tell “their family story” through a variety of expressive medium including art, writing, photography and computer technology.

• A safe way to explore family and improve communication among the generations using the creative process of storytelling and interviews to enhance self-expression.
WHAT'S WITH MICHAEL THESE DAYS, JOHN?
HE'S CHANGED!

HE'S RUDE, HE'S SULLEN, ASK HIM TO DO SOMETHING AND HE MAKES SOME SMART- ALEC REMARK!

I THINK IT'S HAPPENING EL, I THINK HE'S BECOMING ONE OF THEM.

(GASP!) YOU MEAN YOU MEAN - A TEENAGER?!
Grandparents and Teens

- More than 200 caregivers and educators completed a survey consisting of 25 relevant topics related to raising teens.
- The issues most cited involved the challenges of communicating with teens, keeping teens free from alcohol and drugs, computer technology and safety, setting and enforcing realistic limits and understanding teen development.
The national award-winning Cornell Cooperative Extension workshop manual for those who work with grandparents and relatives who are parenting again!
PASTA

• PASTA was designed specifically to meet the needs of grandparents, relatives and other non-parental caregivers who are parenting related (and non-related) children. Third revision, 2009.
• The 16-hour curriculum is designed to be presented as an 8 session workshop series, each planned for a 2-hour block of time. It is also effective delivered as single topics in a support group or conference setting.
• Includes pre and post survey and demographic data collection to help evaluate impact.
Revised Third Edition including:

Legal Concerns of Relatives
Raising Children
Grandparents and Teens
Living Together

Living with Teens Can Be Challenging
Table of Contents

• Workshop 1 - It Wasn't Supposed to Be Like This
• Workshop 2 - Getting to Know You
• Workshop 3 - Rebuilding a Family
• Workshop 4 - Discipline is Not a Dirty Word, But It May Look Different Today
• Workshop 5 - Legal Concerns of Relatives Raising Children
• Workshop 6 - Standing up for Grandparents and Grandchildren’s Rights
• Workshop 7 – Grandparents and Teens Living Together
• Workshop 8 – Living With Teens Can Be Challenging
PASTA Participants Say:

“I liked the give and take of information; I felt I wasn't the only one who is going through tough problems.”

“Some of my ideas on discipline were refreshed: I am now going to use different tactics - not spanking or slapping hands.”

“I am becoming a better advocate for my grandchild; in regards to the laws, I understand the system more.”

“At last there is practical information to help me raise my teen grandchildren!”
PASTA Group Leaders Say:

“Relative caregivers have so many needs; this resource does a wonderful job of choosing the most important to highlight.”

“This is an excellent program and can be easily used to train those who work with kinship care families across the nation.”

“After the local program, two grandparent caregivers emerged as leaders to initiate an ongoing support group that will meet monthly.”

“We are so pleased that there are new workshops on raising teens. This is a growing issue for our families.”
Finding Help...

- AARP Grandparents Info Center
  http://www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/gic
- The Brookdale Foundation Relatives as Parents Program
  www.brookdalefoundation.org
- Parenting in Context:
  http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/index.cfm
- CYFERnet Parent/Family (June Mead, Editor jm62@cornell.edu)
- Generations United gu@gu.org
- National Committee for Grandparents for Children’s Rights
  www.grandparents for children.org
- New York State Kinship Navigator www.nysnavigator.org