

Understanding and Managing Relationships in Grandfamilies

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Families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren have many strengths, but they might also face some challenges. One particular challenge may be learning how to manage the role of the biological parent, as sometimes the parent is still in contact with their child and other times the parent is no longer involved in their child's life. One research study surveyed and interviewed 44 grandparent-grandchild pairs and found several themes to describe families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren. Using these themes as a guide, the following recommendations were developed to assist you if you find that a particular theme describes your family situation.

Parent is Like a Friend

A number of families in the study talked about how the parent was more like a friend than a parent. Youth who had a parent in this role had some confusion about family roles and what to expect. Here are a couple of recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Set clear boundaries for the parent if the parent is still in contact with your grandchild. Make it clear to your grandchild who will be making the decisions about different areas of their life. For example, maybe you make decisions about curfew and choosing who the teen will spend time with while other areas can be decided with input from the parent.
- Communicate often with the parent (if this makes sense for your situation) to make sure that you are in agreement about rules, discipline, and your grandchild's choice of friends and activities. Keeping the parent involved may avoid issues where the parent does not know what the expectations or rules are.

Parent is Unreliable or Destructive

One of the most common themes in the study was that the parent is unreliable or even destructive. In these situations, the parent did not maintain contact with their child or, if they did, the parent was hurtful to the child. Here are a couple of recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Try to limit the amount of time that your grandchild spends with their parent or try to be present during the time your grandchild is with their parent. Every situation is unique and you will want to determine what is most appropriate for

your family. If it is harmful for your grandchild to continue a relationship with their parent, be sure to clearly communicate to your grandchild that it is not their fault.

- Suggest less intense ways for the parent to maintain contact with your grandchild (if appropriate). Some ideas are writing letters, sending emails or text messages, or periodic phone calls. If the parent seems to be aggressive or hurtful in person, keeping interactions to remote forms may be best.

Youth Longs for Parent/Grandparent Encourages Parent-Child Relationships

Families in the study talked about how the youth longed for a better relationship with their parent. Many youth felt that their parent could never be replaced and wished that they could spend more time with their parent. In some families the grandparent helped to facilitate the grandchild contacting or seeing their parent. Here are a couple recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Find ways to include the child's parent in conversations and daily life. For example, display a picture of the parent in your home, tell positive stories about the parent, or ask your grandchild how their parent is doing. For some families, however, bringing up the parent may cause distress for the grandchild. In these situations, you may find it better not bring up the parent and instead acknowledge the youth's feelings, saying something like, "I know that you would really like to have your parent here, but I am so glad that I get to experience how you are growing up to be such a wonderful person."
- Consider encouraging or setting-up ways for your grandchild to connect with their parent (if a healthy relationship exists with their parent). Some examples are phone calls, emails, and texts. Invite the parent over for dinner, or assist your grandchild and their parent in getting together for a certain activity on their own. Ask the parent to attend your grandchild's school events (sporting event, musical performance, etc.) so that your grandchild feels that the parent is a part of their life.

Grandparent Points Out Parent's Faults

Families talked about how the grandparent focused on the parents' negative attitudes and faults. Grandparents in these situations felt like the youth did not value what they did and had an unrealistic view of their parent, placing them on a pedestal. Grandparents in this situation often pointed out the failings of the parent so that their grandchild would have a more realistic view of their parent. Here are a couple recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Remember that continually pointing out the parent's faults to your grandchild may make your grandchild feel caught between you and their parent which may cause stress for your grandchild. This does not mean that you need to be dishonest or withhold information about something that the child's parent has done, but ask yourself if your grandchild needs to know certain information before sharing any negative information about their parent.
- Communicate news with the least amount of negativity and in a way that does not convey a sense of you vs. their parent. If you do need to communicate a fault of the parent to your grandchild (such as a parent forgetting to call when they said that they would) you could say, "I'm really sorry that your parent didn't call today, I know you were looking forward to that. Do you want to see if we can reschedule?"

Youth Feels Anger Toward Parent

A number of the families in the study mentioned how the youth had strong feelings of anger toward their parent. Although the anger was focused on the parent, sometimes this frustration spilled over to the grandparent. Here are a few recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Talk to your grandchild about how it is completely normal to feel angry about their situation. Discuss healthy ways to deal with their anger, such as exercising, talking about their feelings, or taking some time to cool down. Also, talk with your grandchild about unhealthy ways to deal with their anger, such as aggression, self-injury, substance abuse, violence, and other risky behaviors.
- Help your grandchild identify what may be triggering their anger. For example, if they seem to repeatedly get angry when their parent fails to arrive for a scheduled visit you might be better prepared to deal with how to manage their anger in the future.
- Try not to take it personally. If you find that your teen's anger is spilling over to you try to calmly express how that makes you feel and see if you can come up with a solution to avoid a repeat in the future.

Youth Feels Ambivalent Toward Parent

Families also talked about ambivalent feelings the youth had toward their parent. This happened when a youth said that they would like to see their parent but became uninterested or unengaged when they were with their parent. Here are a couple recommendations if you find this describes your family situation:

- Talk with your grandchild about their parent. Ask if they feel nervous about seeing their parent, or if there is a particular reason why they do not seem to be talking to their parent very much. You might be able to identify why your grandchild is feeling excited to see their parent and then uninterested when their parent is actually present.
- Try not to make assumptions. Perhaps your grandchild feels like the parent doesn't care about them, they are unsure if the parent will actually show up, or they are simply anxious. Discussing the reasons with your grandchild may help to clarify why your he/she feels worried or confused.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide several themes that describe families in which grandparents are raising their grandchildren. The recommendations based on the study themes may provide guidance to grandparents who are not only raising their grandchildren but are often also trying to manage a complex relationship with their grandchild's parent. It is important to keep in mind that every family is unique, and families where a grandparent is caring for a grandchild are no different!

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