



Tips for Success: Building Support Groups for Custodial Grandparent Families



Key Words

grandparents raising grandchildren,
group leadership

Grandparents raising grandchildren is not a new phenomenon. Elders have traditionally played important roles in family support and childrearing. The major differences are in the numbers — an over 60% increase during the 1990s — and in the social conditions causing the escalation of this family typology. Nearly 5.5 million, or 7.7% of all American children, are currently being parented by their grandparents (*U.S. Census Bureau, 1999*). Custodial grandparent families represent an ever increasing population in our culture, necessitating that family life educators and other professionals become more aware of the special needs of both caregiving grandparents and the grandchildren who are growing up in these nontraditional homes.

Group-based services provide an important means of education, support and respite for adults (*de Toledo & Brown, 1995; Smith & Dannison, 1999*). Effectiveness can be enhanced by utilizing a holistic, multifaceted approach (*Anderson & Smith, 1999; Heywood, 1999*). The Second Time Around: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren initiative, established in 1996, has served as a model for providing simultaneous services to custodial grandparents, their young grandchildren, and involved professionals. The unique strengths and challenges associated with grandparent-headed families necessitate careful planning, implementation and evaluation of programming. Successful programming recognizes the daily realities faced by these individuals and their extended families.

Tips for Successful Programming

1. Utilize a Holistic Approach

Program success will be enhanced by adopting a holistic approach which involves grandparents, grandchildren, other extended family members and involved professionals. Consider providing education, support, enrichment and respite to all involved populations. For example, including grandchildren in play group interactions while grandparents attend educational group sessions increases consistency of participation. Additionally, there are other opportunities to involve professionals, such as teachers, counselors and supportive staff workers, in specific interactions which will expand their understanding of the challenges facing custodial grandparent family members and provide them with specific skills and strategies.

2. Establish Effective Recruitment Practices

Getting grandparents to attend their first group session is often the largest hurdle to overcome. Locating custodial grandparents can be difficult due to the informal nature of their care arrangements. Invitations and encouragement to attend group meetings are most effective when they come from a trusted professional or a friend. Consider utilizing preschool and elementary school teachers, public health workers, churches, and recreational programs for recruitment. Notices in local newspapers, radio announcements and flyers on bulletin boards in stores and offices may also be effective. Use successful program graduates as recruiters.

3. Plan “Open House” Meetings

Providing grandparents with an opportunity to meet group facilitators, learn more about the program, ask questions and complete any programming questionnaires in a comfortable environment is a helpful first encounter.

“Open House” meetings can provide potential members with a chance to meet and greet facilitators and other grandparents on an informal basis. Grandchildren find it easier to attend ritual play group meetings if they have an opportunity to meet and begin establishing a relationship with their teacher. Planning for both group sessions is more effective if facilitators have a good sense and understanding of the specific needs of the group.

4. Maintain Small Group Size

Support groups of 8-10 participants in both the grandparent and grandchildren’s group are an ideal size. Larger sized groups prohibit effective interaction between participants, while smaller sizes lack a necessary “critical mass” for group cohesiveness.

5. Select Co-Facilitators

Using co-facilitators enhances relationship between group members and facilitators as well as between group members. Grandparents benefit from having opportunities to receive personalized attention from another trusted adult. Consider the age and ethnicity of the grandparent group and try to select at least one facilitator who is similar. Facilitators need to be willing to share practical examples from their own lives when appropriate. Maintaining a small adult child ratio is also beneficial for grandchildren’s groups. Many grandchildren have experienced cognitive, physical and/or social delays and respond positively to personalized relationships with caring teachers. Additionally, communication between facilitators of all groups is extremely important. Scheduling regular times for sharing information and planning future group sessions is important.

6. Attend to the Group Environment

Attention to the small details often secure the success of both grandparent and grandchild groups. Insure that group members are comfortable in the physical setting, that the chairs are comfortable, and that there is adequate space and opportunity for face-to-face interaction. Group members respond positively to small touches like homemade cookies or other carefully prepared snacks. Food is equally important in the

grandchildren groups. Children may arrive at morning groups without having breakfast or they may attend late-afternoon groups needing a snack. Providing other services such as transportation (i.e., taxi vouchers, bus fare, and carpooling) and childcare for older and younger children is also essential. Grandparents and grandchildren respond positively to a consistent general routine and familiar facilitators. They will anticipate week-to-week consistency.

7. Provide Positive Feedback

Feedback is often very important to group members. Recognizing their challenges and accomplishments and providing personalized messages which underline the importance of the role they are fulfilling are powerful reinforcers for custodial grandparents. Many grandchildren also respond favorably to positive messages. They seek out opportunities to “do well” at a task and look to facilitators for recognition and approval. Grandchildren may also seek opportunities for physical contact and attention.

8. Integrate Grandparent and Grandchildren’s Groups

Interaction between the grandparent group members and a consistent grandchildren’s group facilitator holds strong potential for sharing information and providing parenting skills. Grandparents need opportunities to learn about the focus of grandchildren’s group sessions, to receive feedback on their grandchild’s interactions and behavior, and to go home with specific ideas and resources for activities. The grandchildren group facilitator may become a trusted professional that grandparents feel comfortable approaching with questions, needs and concerns.

9. Create a Fun Environment

Custodial grandparents, often isolated from interaction with peers, look forward to group meetings as social time out with other grandparents. Grandparents quickly begin to form supportive relationships, sharing resources and ideas. Creating an environment that provides grandparents with a bit of fun can greatly contribute to a group’s success. Provide time for grandparents to interact with each other and look for instances when humor can be introduced. Incentives may be

an effective strategy initially in promoting attendance at group meetings. One suggestion is to pass around a “grab bag” filled with inexpensive, fun items (i.e., make-up, nylons, home gadgets, chocolate, etc.) during each session. Grandparents really anticipate the fun of selecting a small personal item each week, and also benefit from the unspoken message that they are being recognized for their role as a custodial grandparent.

10. Include Opportunities for Feedback

Group success is enhanced when grandparents sense they have “ownership” in the group and a say in what is being planned for group sessions. Provide regular (i.e., weekly) opportunities for grandparents to complete a short survey which asks for their feedback on each particular session. Grandparents who are nonreaders can complete the questions verbally with one of the facilitators. Encourage leadership from within the group itself. Provide opportunities for group members to assume responsibility for group tasks (i.e., making coffee, sending reminder postcards, calling members who are sick or facing difficulties, etc.). Anticipate that grandparent and grandchildren group members may desire to continue meeting after the “official” time for weekly group sessions is complete. Assisting them in organizing ongoing contact group sessions is an important role in maintaining sustained benefits for group participants. Follow-up groups are a source of evaluation, suggestions, and future participants.

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