

Impact of Education on Grandparents' Actions in Raising Grandchildren

Abstract

Grandparents raising grandchildren represent a population of adults who confront complex interpersonal and environmental challenges. The intent of this case study was to gather and interpret evaluative data to better understand the impact of a 1-day community education program for grandparents who raise their grandchildren. Extension's philosophy of systematic program evaluation to improve supports for families and communities furnished the framework for the project. Elements felt to be essential for a well-designed, 1-day grandparent education program have been extracted from past evaluation cycles and offered here as recommendations.

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American family life is reconfiguring in ways more dependent on extended family support. Specifically, grandparents are increasingly serving as a safety net for younger generations who need a stable environment (Goyer, 2010; Livingston & Parker, 2010).

The combination of a changing family dynamic and deep state-level budget cuts to kinship care has significant implication for Extension initiatives to support grandparents raising grandchildren. Grassroots' assessment of need among the 63,000 Kentucky kin caregivers is an essential step in Extension's strategic plan to help Kentucky individuals, families, and communities create more abundant lives and healthier environments.

Reported here are the results of a comprehensive evaluation of an annual, 1-day education program for grandparents sponsored by the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. Grandparent education models are typically described as a series of classes spread over weeks (Cox, 2002; Ganthavorn & Hughes, 2007; Kicklighter et al., 2007), so this intensive 1-day event may serve as a useful model for organizations that serve a largely rural population of grandparents. The purpose of this article is to report what we do, what we learned, and the impact of education on

grandfamily health.

Description of Education Program

Family and Consumer Sciences Extension focuses on individual and family development by promoting effective communication, understanding developmental ages and stages, appreciating individual and cultural differences, developing a strong value system, making wise decisions, and encouraging a supportive environment. An output of the Grandparents and Relatives as Parents (GAP) program is building community capacity to nurture families through appropriate collaborations and programs that exist locally and statewide. Program development was based on the Nurturing Families initiative that was identified as a statewide high priority need in the University of Kentucky's Family and Consumer Sciences Extension's Strategic Plan. (Family and Consumer Sciences Extension Strategic Plan, UK Cooperative Extension, 2011).

Over a decade ago, a representative from city government attended a grandparent support group at a local elementary school. At that time community efforts to support grandparents raising grandchildren were sparse and decentralized. Those grandparents shared their desire for education with the city's Coordinator for Aging Services, and the idea for a grandparent conference-style education program was born. Under Extension guidance, concerned service providers and volunteers took the idea to scale by planning a citywide grandparent education program. What began as a small group meeting in the Fayette County Cooperative Extension Office has since grown into a multi-county, regional event with over 385 people from 55 counties participating in the most recent program. While the program has expanded and adapted to changing needs, the primary goal to educate and support kinship families in taking action to improve their lives has remained consistent.

What We Do

Each year GAP organizers conduct a system of conference and post-conference evaluations including face-to-face interviews with a subset of grandparents to discern program effectiveness. Although the transition is not yet complete, the GAP evaluation team is replacing traditional pen and paper methods with a Qualtrics® online survey platform to streamline data collection and analysis. West (2007) endorses use of an Internet survey to simplify program evaluation and underscores the need for Extension professionals to also apply the results in a meaningful way. The GAP Board has representation from a diverse group of people with backgrounds in education, financial, legal, health, and social service venues, so program evaluation results are interpreted from multiple perspectives. Formal and often extensive discussion of assessed need leads to an informed plan of action to revise next year's offering.

What We Learned

Partnering agencies require impact data, so evaluation procedures were developed to discover whether conference attendance actually influences grandparents' ability to raise grandchildren. What actions do grandparents take on behalf of their grandchildren? Analysis of grandparent interviews in a recent evaluation cycle revealed a complex set of environmental and social stressors that undermine action toward more positive parenting. Strained and distrustful relationships with the

children's biological parents and health concerns of both generations were noteworthy and greatly influenced household routines for many families. Legal issues were clearly a concern, including cost and lack of access. Alternately, post-conference survey showed grandparents do take action to improve family well-being as a result of conference attendance (Table 1). Given the social and environmental barriers experienced by this population, the positive changes in attendees' lives are particularly noteworthy and demonstrate the positive impact of a 1-day educational event on grandparent actions.

Table 1.
Percent of Grandparents Taking Action as a Result of Conference Attendance

Action	Percent
Plan for grandchild's future	63%
Use new strategies to reduce stress	51%
Change methods to discipline grandchild	46%
Advocate for family	46%
Change response to family member who abuse drugs	37%
Advocate for others	23%

What the Audience Values

By analyzing program evaluation data over time, GAP organizers distilled the ingredients essential for conference success.

1. Offer workshops targeting legal issues, substance abuse, financial resources, grief and loss, parenting skills, nutrition, and stress relief.
2. Provide one-on-one legal consultations. Currently 15 local attorneys volunteer their time at the conference, and each agrees to work pro bono with one grandparent during the year.
3. Include the larger environment that influences the family, including information on child support benefits.
4. Remove barriers to participation, including conference location, day and time, accessibility of the facility, parking, and cost.
5. Recruit a powerful keynote speaker who has a personal connection to grandparenting to set the tone for the day.
6. Furnish a cutting-edge education session for professionals that will focus their ability to assist grandparents.

7. Develop a video of each session, and make them available post conference via the GAP website.
8. Orchestrate a region-wide media campaign leading up to the event to draw new grandparents.
9. Create a celebratory atmosphere, including warm welcome, festive table decorations, boxed lunch, door prizes, and opportunity for grandparents to relax and connect.

Conclusion

This article describes one community's effort to sharpen its response to family hardship through systematic program evaluation. The case presented here can inform others who share a similar interest in providing a well-designed, 1-day education program relevant for a diverse group of kin caregivers. One grandmother's written assessment typifies the general mood of participants: "I came to the GAP conference to meet others who are experiencing the same life and hurdles that I am. I am not alone."

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