A Web-Based Fact Sheet Series for Grandparents Raising Grandchildren and the Professionals Who Serve Them

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Purpose: To develop and evaluate a series of web-based fact sheets for grandparents raising grandchildren. The fact sheets focus on child development issues that grandparents may face when raising their grandchildren. Design and Methods: The fact sheets were developed using research on attachment theory, child development, and the needs of grandparents raising grandchildren. The fact sheets can be viewed online or downloaded for free. Evaluation data for the fact sheets were gathered using an online survey. Results: Results of the survey revealed that the fact sheets are used by grandparents and professionals. Respondents reported sharing the fact sheets with others and using them for personal use, in support groups, and as a general agency resource. Implications: The fact sheet series is a useful way to reach both grandparents and professionals working with this audience in a variety of settings. Modifications to the fact sheet series are suggested to address additional needs of grandparents raising grandchildren.

Key Words: Web-based education, Custodial grandparents, Grandchildren, Grandparents raising grandchildren

Grandparents raising grandchildren are becoming an increasingly prevalent family structure in the United States. According to data from the U.S. 2000 Census, 2.4 million grandparents were responsible for raising their grandchildren—many in households without the parents present. More than half of affected grandchildren are younger than 6 years (Bryson & Casper, 1999). Many grandparents are raising their grandchildren because of problems experienced by their own children—the middle generation—due to economic difficulties, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and incarceration (Hayeslip & Kaminski, 2005). Another reason is the child welfare system’s growing reliance on kinship care (Nisivocia, 1996; Rosenfeld et al., 1997). Because custodial grandparents often experience parenting stress, depression, health problems, and economic hardship (Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 2000; Ross & Aday, 2006), there is a need for innovative interventions. This article describes one approach to reaching custodial grandparents and the professionals working with them: Web-based fact sheets.
Background

Many grandparent caregivers lack support in their roles as nontraditional grandparents, including access to information about child development. In one study of grandparents raising grandchildren, only 3% of respondents indicated that they received consistent support (Burton, 1992). In addition, many children in custodial grandparent homes exhibit behavior problems, which are often associated with disrupted family relationships (Poehlmann et al. 2008). Because of the limited information and support available, custodial grandparents are often unsure about how to cope with their grandchildren's behaviors, relationship and communication issues, and contact with their parents, especially when grandchildren are young (Poehlmann, 2003, 2005). Recognizing and understanding these issues are important for custodial grandparents and those who work with them (Emick & Hayslip, 1999; Sands & Goldberg-Glen, 2000; Hayslip, Shore, Henderson, & Lambert, 1998).

Providing custodial grandparents with information about relevant child development topics may better prepare them for coping with the challenges of raising their grandchildren. However, previous parenting and grandparenting resources have rarely targeted the unique challenges faced by custodial grandparents and the children in their care. Although resources designed for grandparents raising grandchildren are becoming more prevalent, they often do not focus on child development or the importance of family relationships, especially for young children. Many resources currently offered focus on assisting grandparents with legal issues, school systems, health care, and economic issues (Patrick & Hayslip, 2003) rather than focusing on children's development or relationships. Patrick and Hayslip call for researchers to expand their focus beyond the grandparent to include grandchildren's needs. In addition, they suggest that researchers should "give away their knowledge" by communicating theory and findings to grandparents and the professionals who support them so that custodial grandparents, their communities, and policies can be transformed to further benefit grandparent-headed families. To help address these issues, faculty and staff from the University of Wisconsin–Extension and the University of Wisconsin–Madison developed a Web-based fact sheet series to increase the knowledge of custodial grandparents and the professionals who serve them regarding child development issues. The information covers attachment relationships, communication, and children's emotional reactions and behavioral adjustment. Because past evaluations support the effectiveness of parenting newsletters (Garth et al., 2003; Riley, 1997; Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, & Winnett, 1991; Walker & Riley, 2001), we modeled the fact sheets after such resources.

Through the Eyes of a Child: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Fact Sheet Series

The fact sheet series entitled "Through the Eyes of a Child: Grandparents Raising Grandchildren" is available on the Web. It is estimated that the United States has more than 200 million Internet users (Wright, 1999). More than 70% of the individuals between 50 and 64 years and 35% of those older than 65 years report using the Internet (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2008). Recent trends also point to an increase in the use of the Internet among ethnic minority groups, although disparities among groups based on ethnicity and education exist. Educated seniors are more likely to use the Internet, as are Latino/Hispanic and Caucasian seniors (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004). It should be noted, however, that many grandparents raising grandchildren are not seniors. For example, in a recent study of custodial grandparents raising young grandchildren, grandparents ranged in age from 36 to 80 years, with a mean of 52–53 years (Poehlmann et al., 2008).

Recent efforts to increase the dissemination of child development research cite the importance of using the Web (Martland & Rothbaum, 2002; Sherrod, 1999) as its use allows researchers to reach a larger and broader audience, including parents, practitioners, and policymakers (Martland & Rothbaum). Our fact sheet series followed recommendations for the successful dissemination of academic research to a general Web audience. In particular, the series is easy to read and use, academically rigorous, aesthetically appealing, and useful (Martland & Rothbaum), and its distribution cost is low. The fact sheets can be downloaded free of charge, printed in color or black and white, and reproduced "in house" for a minimal cost.

Theoretical and Conceptual Basis

A team of child and family researchers, Extension specialists, and a clinical psychologist developed the
fact sheets. Early in the project, the team decided that attachment theory and research (Bowlby, 1982) would provide the theoretical and conceptual basis for the information. An attachment perspective is uniquely suited to helping families with grandparents raising grandchildren for several reasons. This perspective emphasizes the importance of early relationship experiences and also acknowledges that children’s and adults’ opportunities for forming attachment relationships exist throughout life. In addition, attachment theory addresses interactions among behavioral, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and social-contextual dynamics in relationships rather than focusing on any one of these domains. Attachment theory is particularly relevant for grandparents raising grandchildren because the effects of parental deprivation, separation, and loss on development are of central importance. Moreover, attachment theory seeks to understand processes associated with adaptive and maladaptive relationship patterns, and it has successfully guided intervention with high-risk populations, such as children experiencing domestic violence, maltreatment, and parental depression, and grandparents raising grandchildren (Berlin, Zeanaah, & Lieberman, 2008). Finally, attachment theory emphasizes the importance of sensitive and responsive caregiving as the foundation of secure attachment relationships, which is relevant for interventions designed to improve children’s relationships with custodial grandparents.

**Development and Essential Features of the Fact Sheet Series**

The first step of developing the fact sheets involved gathering information and research focusing on the needs of custodial grandparent families. Fact sheets were drafted and organized by child development and family relationship topics. To ensure that they were relevant and useful to the target audience, the second step involved sharing early drafts of the fact sheets with three ethnically, geographically, and economically diverse custodial grandparent focus groups. These groups provided input that shaped the method of delivery and content of the series. Changes made based on focus group input included a focus on younger children, increased sensitivity to race and culture, issues related to contact with parents, and the importance of grandparents taking the child’s perspective. The third step involved having six external reviewers with expertise in child development, gerontology, child welfare, and adult education read and recommend revisions to the fact sheets. Their recommendations included use of simpler wording, numbering the series, and inclusion of references to other information sources. Finally, an external editor reduced the reading level of the fact sheets to grades 6–9, and University of Wisconsin–Extension provided design and dissemination expertise. Young children provided the artwork for the series. The resulting fact sheets are available on the University of Wisconsin–Extension Web site (http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent/relationships/) along with marketing materials and a brief online survey. Table 1 presents a description of each fact sheet.

**Evaluation of the Fact Sheet Series**

Evaluation of the fact sheet series was conducted using a three-question survey designed to measure the initial impact. The first question asked users to identify themselves as one of the following: grandparent or relative raising grandchildren, professional (aging agency, youth agency, family nonprofit organization, higher education institution, and other professional organizations), both professional and grandparent or relative raising grandchildren, or other. The second question asked respondents to indicate how they planned to use the fact sheets: for personal use within family, to share with a grandparent or relative caregiver, as an agency resource, in a counseling setting or support group, as an educational resource, in media campaigns, or other. Question 3 was an open-ended question: “What do you see as the value of the fact sheet series?” Because the survey was brief and anonymous, no additional information was solicited.

**Who Is Using the Fact Sheet Series?**

Between 2003 and 2008, 404 users completed anonymous online surveys regarding their use of the fact sheet series. Of those, 37% (n=150) were grandparents or relatives raising grandchildren, 48% (n=195) were professionals, and 9% (n=38) were both professionals and grandparents raising grandchildren. About 5% (n=21) fell into the “other” category. Of the 195 professionals who completed surveys, 28% (n=55) were family nonprofit professionals, 25% (n=49) aging agency professionals, 13% (n=25) youth agency professionals,
Table 1. “Through the Eyes of a Child” Fact Sheet Titles and Descriptions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding children’s development</td>
<td>Individual differences&lt;br&gt;Areas of child development&lt;br&gt;Concerns about children’s development&lt;br&gt;Special issues for children in kinship care&lt;br&gt;What is attachment?&lt;br&gt;Types of attachment relationships&lt;br&gt;Developing attachment relationships&lt;br&gt;Healthy attachment relationships&lt;br&gt;Culture and attachment&lt;br&gt;What does your grandchild expect?&lt;br&gt;Implications for future relationships&lt;br&gt;Resilience: From heartbreak to hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of close relationships</td>
<td>Disruption&lt;br&gt;Stages of coping&lt;br&gt;How a child handles stress during a disruption&lt;br&gt;Resilience: What helps?&lt;br&gt;Where to go for help&lt;br&gt;Helping your grandchild communicate&lt;br&gt;Problems in communication&lt;br&gt;How much should you tell young children?&lt;br&gt;Helping grandchildren and their parents stay in touch&lt;br&gt;Common behavior problems&lt;br&gt;Warning signs of serious behavior problems&lt;br&gt;Where to go for help&lt;br&gt;Culture and parenting strategies&lt;br&gt;Each situation is unique&lt;br&gt;Alternatives to visits&lt;br&gt;Helping children make positive transitions&lt;br&gt;Good practices for parent-child contact&lt;br&gt;Patterns across generations&lt;br&gt;Breaking negative family cycles&lt;br&gt;The relationship between you and your grandchild&lt;br&gt;Other family relationships&lt;br&gt;Where to go for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship expectations: Now and in the future</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Disruptions in close relationships: How they affect a child’s behavior, thoughts, and feelings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding children’s behaviors</td>
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<td>Children’s contact with their parents</td>
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<td>The cycle of family patterns</td>
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11% \((n=21)\) higher education professionals, and 23% \((n=45)\) “other” professionals.

How Are the Fact Sheets Being Used?

When asked how they planned to use the fact sheets, 47% \((n=189)\) of the respondents said that they planned to share the fact sheets with a grandparent or relative caregiver. An additional 46% indicated that they planned to use them for personal use within a family, and 37% \((n=151)\) said that they planned to use them in support groups. A substantial number of respondents indicated that they would use the fact sheets as a specific type of resource: 37% planned to use the fact sheets as a training resource, 36% \((n=144)\) as an agency resource, and 22% \((n=88)\) as a counseling tool with individuals and families.

Sharing fact sheets with grandparent caregivers was the most common use of the fact sheet series for agency-based professionals. For higher education professionals, however, the most common use was as an educational resource in training.

What Is the Value of the Fact Sheet Series?

Of the 404 individuals who completed surveys, 95% \((n=385)\) chose to share their perspective on the value of the fact sheet series. Of those, 167 were professionals, 115 were grandparents, 38 were grandparents and professionals, and 12 indicated “other.” Responses to this question were analyzed using a qualitative approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two individuals reviewed the comments using an open-coding method and independently generated initial conceptual labels from the words used by respondents. Using this list of initial labels, written comments were reviewed and categorized. Coders reviewed each other’s decisions to
ensure consistency of categories as they had been defined. Finally, responses that appeared closely linked were examined for connections and grouped into more abstract categories. Following this process, four overarching categories emerged to describe the value of the fact sheets for custodial grandparents and professionals. We labeled these “knowledge,” “support,” “adaptability,” and “better life.”

**Knowledge.**—Our analysis of Question 3 showed that 52% (n=199) of the 385 individuals gave responses that we categorized as knowledge. This category comprised responses that used words such as “understanding,” “insight,” “information,” “learning,” “resource,” or “tips.” For example, one grandparent wrote, “Good information for things I had long ago forgotten about or never had to deal with.” A professional working with an aging agency wrote, “Succinct information and valuable resources about critical issues to grandparents and relatives raising children related in an easy to read and use format.”

**Support.**—The overarching category of support emerged from the initial labels of “general support,” “not alone,” and “needs support.” Approximately 9% (n=33/385) of respondents cited support as the key value of the fact sheets. Grandparents said that the fact sheet series showed them that they were not alone. One wrote, “It is great to know that others have similar situations. My husband and I are not alone.” Others noted the value of a Web-based resource that can be shared easily with support groups, clients, friends, and family, leading to an increase in communication with others who can offer assistance. “Information to share with others,” wrote one grandparent, “so we know we are not alone in our community.”

**Adaptability.**—Many professionals found the fact sheets to be a useful addition to their repertoire because they are easily adaptable for specific purposes or specific audiences. Among professionals who answered Question 3, 41% (n=69/167) adapted the fact sheet series for their own purposes, with 16% adapting the series for support groups, 13% for specific clients, and 3% for training purposes.

**Better life.**—The better life category was unique to grandparent respondents. This category described grandparent responses indicating that the fact sheets helped them give their grandchildren a “better life” or that they “helped us help the child.” Some grandparents shared personal stories, whereas others made general comments about how the fact sheets helped them reflect on improvements that had been made or could be made in their grandchildren’s quality of life. Some grandparents referred to attachment concepts in their comments, suggesting that the fact sheets may have facilitated reflection on the meaning of security, communication, and sensitive responsiveness to children in their care. For example, one grandparent wrote the following:

[The fact sheet series] allows you the ability to change the way you raise your grandchildren as you understand the way the child actually sees the world around them, and so gives you the tools to help them become stable, secure, loved, nurtured and feeling safe as well as feeling like they belong.

**Discussion and Implications**

Although most users valued the fact sheets, some wanted additional information, such as legal and financial advice. Respondents also said that they wanted to know how to gain custody of a grandchild, to obtain information focusing on older children, and how to start a support group. Some users requested the series be translated into Spanish. Current trends suggest that the number of Latino/Hispanic children being raised by grandparents will continue to increase in the future (e.g., Fuller-Thomson & Minkler, 2007), and therefore, there may be a need for translation. However, because we did not request any demographic information, we do not know how many of the professionals or grandparents surveyed were Spanish speaking.
and children, and helped custodial grandparents feel like they were not alone. In addition, professionals found the fact sheets easy to adapt for unique audiences and specific purposes such as training, and some grandparents felt that the information affirmed their efforts to create a better life for and more loving relationships with grandchildren.

In addition to confirming the usefulness of this intervention, our survey results also provided our research team with information that can help improve online educational tools for custodial grandparents, such as a need for Spanish-language materials and information focusing on older children. We also learned that it would be beneficial to gather information about the demographic characteristics of users (e.g., language used, ethnicity, age of grandparents and children), so that we could address needs of specific groups, such as older grandparents or grandparents with older children. The addition of a Web site mechanism to allow users to request additional information would provide an opportunity to learn more about the needs and concerns of our audience.

A better understanding of how professionals are using the fact sheets could allow for additional resources to be developed to enhance learning and training, such as support group guides, discussion questions for use in small groups or dyadic sessions, and visual aids for presentations. Furthermore, the issue of “who” is accessing the Internet is a challenge that should be continually addressed by professionals working with this population. Professionals should be alert to potential disparities in accessing the fact sheets and provide access in ways that are user friendly. Because the fact sheets are available for download free of charge, costs of printing and distributing should not be prohibitive to professionals working with this audience.

Grandparent responses to the fact sheets could also be used to expand and refine our application of attachment theory to this population (Poehlmann, 2003). Although several grandparents referred to attachment concepts in their responses, we were not able to observe how they applied these concepts in their interactions with grandchildren. Increasing our knowledge about grandparents’ attachment history, reflective capacities, openness to new information and suggestions, and willingness to make use of resources such as printed information, support groups, and interventions may help us gain a new understanding of relationship processes that occur in custodial grandparent families.

Moreover, this information could be used to develop additional innovative interventions. Future surveys could tap into these processes, especially if a Web-based survey asked respondents to complete a measure of self-reported attachment style and answer questions assessing whether their level of responsiveness to grandchildren increased following use of the fact sheets.

Limitations

Although the online survey elicited a large number of responses, we do not know how many users viewed the fact sheets but did not complete the survey. Lack of information regarding participant demographics also limits our understanding of the value of the fact sheets for particular ethnic and racial groups. Because the fact sheets are available only in English, the series may have limited utility for non–English-speaking families and professionals. Further, because the fact sheets focus primarily on issues related to younger children, they may be less relevant to grandparents raising older children, although attachment issues and behavior problems may be key concerns in these families as well. Despite these limitations, our results indicate that the fact sheet series is an innovative and valuable resource for grandparents raising grandchildren, as well as for the professionals who serve them.

References


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