

Trends in Kinship Care

Grandparents raising grandchildren, from spoiling to toiling

By Kerry J. Bickford and Earl N. Stuck

We all know what grandparents do. They show up, spoil the grandkids, and go home before the hard work begins. They get to be the “good-guys”. It is for many grandparents, a very pleasant, well-earned relationship and in our dreams we all look forward to it.

But what if grandparenthood isn't always so simple? A recent (12/13/09) article from the New York Times asked this question. It was entitled “Grandpa Does More Than Baby-sit”. The story describes the long and frustrating road that one grandfather navigated as he sought to gain custody of his two grandchildren and preserve his family. His custody battle was successful, but the reality of parenting a new family presented and continues to provide more challenges than he could have ever anticipated. For many, this might sound like an interesting story, but not one that hits home to most families. However, for a large and increasing number of grandparents and other relative “kin” caregivers, the reality of raising children has become an unexpected, challenging experience. It can test the family's endurance and challenge family members' health, mental health, financial security, and family relationships.

Grandparents raising grandchildren is not a new phenomenon. Extended families have always pitched-in in times of need. For most of our history, there was no formal recognition of these relationships, and most families chose to keep “dirty linen” a private matter. Yet in recent years, the attention of professionals and advocates from two very different perspectives, child welfare, and elder affairs has converged on major changes in the lives of many grandparents when they become primary caregivers.

These are the facts:

- Nationally, according to census data, more than 6 million children – approximately 1 in 12, are living in households headed by grandparents (4.5 million children) or other relatives (1.5 million). (2007, AARP).
- In Massachusetts, there are a reported 67,651 children in grandparent headed households, plus another 19,721 living in homes headed by other older relatives. Of the children living in homes headed by grandparents or another relative in Massachusetts, 30,615 are living without either parent present and 16% live in poverty. (Grandfacts, Mass AARP 3/08).
- While these numbers are large, they tell only a small portion of the story. These figures do not include the many situations where children living in the home of a grandparent (or older relative) are unreported altogether, maintained by informal understandings and therefore unknown to the child welfare system. According to the US Population survey of 2002, nearly 80% of children in relative care are not placed there by the state and are not formally recognized.
- One grandparent's comment, “I feel like “who cares about my needs?” expresses the feelings of many. The needs of the children are well documented through the child welfare system, but the needs of the older caregiver have gone largely unnoticed. The added financial stresses to elder caregivers still in the workforce include the needs of the child and such things as day care. For those already on fixed incomes, the added

drain is often the difference between comfortable retirement and poverty. The impact on elder's health, mental health and social needs can be even greater.

In Massachusetts, state agencies such as the Department for Families and Children (DCF), the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, and service providers like Family Continuity that provide mental health counseling, wraparound, and family support services have seen this trend in the rapidly growing number of cases where birth parents are either out of the picture, or only involved sporadically, leaving relatives as the primary caregivers. Likewise, Elder Affairs reports the increased burdens that grandparents carry as a result of these added responsibilities at a time when income and health concerns can be challenges all by themselves. The challenges are undeniable and growing.

In 2009, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts created the “Commission on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren”. The Commission was “established to help grandparents with legal, education, health, economic and emotional issues. The Commission will serve as a resource for state agencies, legislators, the executive branch and private agencies in determining policy and practice.” Although the Commission does not have funding authority, its mission assures that the needs of grandparents and relative caregivers will not be lost as state human service priorities are determined. The Commission's final report and recommendations will be ready in 2011, but interim findings will be available soon.

During the fall of 2009 the Commission held a series of seven “Listening and Learning” sessions

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throughout the state with grandparents testifying about their experiences as the primary caregiver for a grandchild or young relative. The sessions were engaging, emotional, and focused on real-life examples of the powerful dedication, and equally daunting challenges that these families faced. Family Continuity, having seen the growth of need in its own caseloads decided to take an active part, and support the Commission's work wherever possible. Beginning with the development of its own “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren” survey and its dissemination within its own agency to clients (and a surprising number of grand-parenting staff), Family Continuity sponsored and attended other local listening sessions, gathering information that both confirmed and added to the Commission's work.

It is fair to say that the issues identified were as unique as the families and individuals who testified. But the themes in their stories clearly emerged. The grandparents and relative caregivers who testified were, without exception, deeply committed to the roles they'd assumed, and to providing the very best homes for the children in their care. Their words were passionate, honest, and pointed. The following summary combines the feedback gained from these listening sessions with the experience of Family Continuity and its staff throughout Massachusetts.



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Grandparents are struggling, expressing great confusion and frustration regarding the “system”. Grandparents and other kin caregivers feel that their needs are often not recognized by any system. They perceive the child welfare system as rightfully caring for the children, but not the caregivers, unless they are the birth or adoptive parent. Likewise, they feel that the system supports for elder Americans do not address their roles as caregivers. As one grandparent asked, “How many people are they going to refer me to before I find someone who can help me?” Caring for children two generations removed from their own childhoods, places them in contact with systems such as special education that did not even exist when they were in school. Grandchildren with special needs: hearing loss, ADHD, learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral needs, with IEP's all require confident, knowledgeable advocates.

Beyond confusion and frustration, several specific areas of needed support emerged.

Grandparents expressed lots of financial questions, mostly related to how to navigate the systems within which they find themselves. How and where do you apply for transitional assistance, food stamps, summer camps, day care, health insurance and educational assistance? Likewise, health insurance is extremely important to grandparents. The health care system and managing both their own and their grandchildren's needs, creates further hurdles. While insurance for grandparents is tied to either their own employment or to Medicare, MassHealth (the state's Medicaid program) is considered the gold standard for providing coverage for these children. If a grandparent adopts, they are forced to go under their own insurance and lose out on the child's benefits through Mass Health.

Another issue that received much attention was child care. This service is essential if parenting and the additional financial need forces retired grandparents back to work. Child care costs are high, and many grandparents don't receive any assistance with this. Even if they qualify for the subsidy, current budget restrictions have placed a freeze on child care vouchers. To further amplify the frustration, most services cease or are greatly reduced once grandparents adopt or become guardians. Housing issues are also a concern. Several grandparents reported being on the verge of losing their homes because they didn't receive any financial assistance for raising their grandchildren. Others, in senior housing have had to move due to having a grandchild living with them.

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The “system” concerns lead to a multitude of legal questions like, “What are my rights vis a vis those of the birth parents or of the child welfare system?” They report needing a point of reference and clear information about their legal rights and obligations. Grandparents feel they receive conflicting information legally, medically and financially. While they are committed to caring for their grandchildren, they often feel pressured to adopt, only to find that doing so jeopardizes the support they need in order to care for the children. With many legal questions, they are concerned about their own liability for their children and grandchildren, especially when their situation is informal and unrecognized.

They worry about the futures of their families. Many grandparents are dealing with difficult sons and daughters who have mental illness, addictions or are incarcerated. To them, it is an added stress to think that the rights of absentee parents come before the rights of grandparents who are providing a stable home for their grandchildren. This is exacerbated by the guilt and shame when some feel they failed as parents to their own children. As one said, “It’s far too painful. There is joy, energy and hope with my granddaughter but with my daughter there is still a lot of pain.” Grandparents are also faced with a double generation-gap. Some grandparents struggle to bond with children who are 35 to 60 years younger, to participate as caregivers in the lives of young people whose experiences and values differ greatly from their own.

Equally important to mention is that grandparents are concerned about themselves.

They report social and recreational isolation, and not enough support, mentoring or information in general. They have a 24-7 commitment with almost no respite from family or friends, resulting in a “perpetual state of exhaustion. Commenting on this one grandmother said what many feel. “Some days I think that exhaustion is the only thing that is consistent about me...my granddaughter’s godfather recently broke his wrist and can’t assist me the way he normally does driving her to soccer, homework, etc.. It’s only been three weeks but I want to scream doing it totally on my own”.

Grandparents are additionally burdened by

financial constraints that have forced them into using money that was “supposed to be for retirement” and recreation. Their dreams of R&R are swept aside as they care for their grandchildren. Finally, Grandparents physical and mental health needs are often unmet, as they struggle to address the needs of their grandchildren first.

These concerns have been gathered from grandparents and relative caregivers with a wide variety of backgrounds, experiences and resources from which to draw. This feedback is not, nor can it ever be conclusive. While many report confusion and abandonment by the “system”, others feel that they’ve been well served, especially when a worker has taken the time to listen to them, and see the situation from their viewpoint. Although general-

ly critical of the system, most also feel that the system is capable of helping, once it understands the multitude of dilemmas they face.

Where do we go from

here?

While the Commission will require time to form its final recommendations, and to garner support for the resources to support these families, several needs are already apparent.

First, grandparents need clear and understandable advice and counsel related to their roles, and the children’s needs. They need direction, unbiased information as well as guides and mentors to help them navigate a system that can be intimidating.

Second, grandparents raising their children’s children need clarity regarding their legal status, and recognition that their voluntary commitment, born out of love does not alter the hard and pragmatic facts of raising someone else’s children. Adoption, while a noble ideal may not be a viable solution to every case, especially where it results in financial hardship and further alienation from ones own child.

Third, grandparents need access to mental health, health care and other services for themselves, to address isolation, and many other needs placed on the back burner when caring for your children’s children.

Fourth, they need places to go for personal support and peer support especially from others who are living with the same challenges and fears.

Finally, based on the comments of many, they need the various systems with which they interact, to interact with each other and help problem-solve real issues for both the children and the caregiver.

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rent child rearing issues. Sue was also busy with soccer, Brownies/Girl Scouts and play dates. During this time, we tried unification twice but both times it was unsuccessful. It was difficult seeing my daughter angry and in a lot of turmoil and emotional pain. I felt bad for her but I also knew that she made numerous bad choices and that her right-frontal lobe injury prevented her from being the person she wanted to be. I didn’t like having to “police” her. The visits worked best if she just went into Sue’s room and they watched a movie or played a game. As a rule, she called her daily and therefore was up on what was going on in her little girl’s life.

The next phase was probably my most challenging. I was nearing retirement age, feeling pretty worn out and Sue was about to enter Middle School. The upcoming teens years really frightened me. I think I may have had a mild breakdown when she entered 6th grade. I remembered my daughter turning from angel to devil overnight when she became a teenager. I constantly needed to remind myself that they were two different girls and it was a different period of time. My own mother had died from alcoholism when she was only 49 years old. At that time I knew nothing

about the disease of alcoholism (only that I hated it) but by the time my granddaughter was born, I knew plenty! After my daughter’s car accident in 1987, I became a faithful member of Al Anon. I learned about the three Cs: “I didn’t cause it, I can’t cure it and I can’t control it.” It’s an insidious disease. I have learned to have compassion for the alcoholic but I have also learned when I need to “detach with love”.

Sue is now getting ready to enter High School. She is a good student, a good athlete and a good person. A therapist once said to me “Those are the cards she was dealt; she needs to play them”. I’ve tried to guide her, educate her and love her to the best of my ability. She has been a beacon of joy in my life. Last night I laughed so hard with her, I felt like I would bust. She told me she loves to make me laugh and I believe her. I trust her with all my heart and she does the same with me. Even during the dark times we try to maintain respect for each other. We pray together, sing together, laugh together and watch out for each other. I would say this is a good reason to “Celebrate being a grandparent raising a grandchild”!

Cate D. serves as a Commissioner on the Status of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Massachusetts.

Too often the experience is perceived as no system being willing, as one grandparent said, “to hold on to the hot potato”.

Grandparents and older kin caregivers represent a growing resource for children in need of loving, stable homes. They represent a resource upon which the child welfare system is increasingly reliant. According to the Urban Institute, “while child welfare agencies traditionally work with foster parents having no relation to the children in their care, over the past 15 years agencies have increasingly relied on relatives. Today, both by mandate and best practice trends, almost all child welfare organizations consider kin to be the first placement choice.” (R. Green, “Foster Children Placed With Relatives Often receive Less Government Help,” 2003)

Our conclusion is that like so many other “real world” problems, issues facing grandparents and other older kin caring for children do not fit neatly into one department or jurisdiction. The issues are not simply child welfare issues any more than they are elder services issues. The needs of older kin are every bit as real as those of children, and the creation of a safe and stable home requires that the needs of both be addressed. The solutions are not to be found in the creation of new departments, but rather collaborations between the various public sector agencies like DCF and Elder Affairs, and community based service providers like Family Continuity, where resources can be directed toward the whole family.

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Resources

Department of Elder Affairs: www.mass.gov/elders, see “Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Resource Guide” or call 1-617-727-7750
Department of Children and Families: www.mass.gov/dcf or 1-617-748-2000
Family Continuity: www.familycontinuity.org or Information line at 1-866-219-3320

It is with great sorrow that we announce the death of Brenda Davies, the Senior Leader for the Malden, MA BSC Team. Brenda died on Thursday, January 14 after a short illness. The following is taken from her obituary:

Brenda had a Masters degree from Simmons University, was a superb shot with a pistol and a brilliant pianist; she held a private pilot’s license and had oodles of fun and enjoyment with her horse Penny and her two beloved cats, Bella and Sam. She will be greatly missed by her family and many, many friends.

As you can see, Brenda lived life to the fullest. She was passionate about many things including the work that she and her dedicated team, the Malden Risktakers, are doing in the BSC. Her passing leaves a gap that will be very difficult to fill. Our deepest sympathy goes out to all who knew her.