

# Skipped Generation Grandfamilies, A note about grandparents raising grandchildren

By Janice Black, CFI, Parent Educator, Supervised Visitation

From time to time, grandparents ask for parenting time and decision making responsibilities. In the not too distant past, as a Family Advocate for CPCD(Community Partnership for Child Development)/Head Start, I noticed that about 20% of children on my caseload lived in households headed by their grandparents, and many of these grandparents assumed the responsibilities, with no legal standing, of parents. This percentage is different from the general population, which is closer to 8% or 10% according to various data compiled in the last decade. It is believed that this proportion is rising and that the age of the grandparent who is stepping into this role is younger than it was a generation ago. The families I was serving were likely to live at poverty or low income levels by virtue of being in Head Start, a free early child development program which has income eligibility criteria. To differentiate between families that are actually headed by grandparents and multigenerational families (those in which grandparents and parents are both present), the term “Skipped Generation Grandfamilies” is used to refer to the former. Some characteristics of Skipped Generation Grandfamilies differ from those of parent-child families, according to the 2000 U.S. Census and the American Community Survey which was conducted from 2005-2007.

1. Age: In parent-child families, the ages of the children are almost evenly distributed across three ranges: 12-17 years, 5-11 years, and less than 6 years of age. In Skipped Generation Grandfamilies, a disproportionate number of the children are 12-17 years old, 42%.
2. Disability: More than twice as many children in Skipped Generation Grandfamilies as in parent-child families have an identified disability – mental and/or physical (1/7 versus 1/16 respectively).
3. Poverty: Twice as many children in Skipped Generation Grandfamilies live below the poverty level, (1/3 versus 1/6).
4. Education: 1/3 of head-of-households in Skipped Generation Grandfamilies do not have a high school diploma, compared to 1/8 of those in parent-child households.

Statistics have their place. But, on the ground, what are these real families with flesh and blood people like? The people who head Skipped Generation Grandfamilies today are different in some ways from those of a generation ago, and don't fit stereotypes (if they ever did)!

1. They tend to be younger and at different stages in their lives.
2. They are more likely to be healthy and physically fit (and thus more able to run after toddlers and teenagers).

(I cannot resist inserting a reference to a description here from the Grandparent Information Center published by the AARP Foundation.) It refers to “Teengirl” who bursts into tears one minute over a boy or because her shoes are all wrong, (“I hate them!” she yells) and then, spotting a friend, runs, “shrieking at the intensity of a glass-shattering scream as though she has recognized a long-lost sister.” In consideration of the higher proportion of Skipped Generation Grandfamilies who have teenagers than do parent-child households, this bears mentioning. (People deserve credit for taking on this commitment a second time. Many report that it is easier the second time around. One might think one's energy level would be less than it was, but maturity, skills and experience, and the benefit of perspective seem to even things out.)

3. People heading Skipped Generation Grandfamilies are more likely to still be in the workforce. Many of them do quit their jobs to stay home to take care of the children. Others have to work more to manage the added expenses (food, housing, clothing, and etc.).
4. They are more likely to have some assets, such as home equity.

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In my naiveté (while still at CPCD/Head Start), I expected to encounter motivations such as need for power and control, codependency and possible financial gain. (What? Financial gain from TANF - Temporary Aid for Needy Families - benefits?) However, without exception, the primary motivation of the heads-of-household of Skipped Generation Grandfamilies whom I have met professionally and personally, is to provide a stable home for the grandchildren. A great many of them do have a significant increase in needs. Many ask for help in specific areas:

1. Information on health insurance;
2. Social networks/support groups (especially because so often, the role is the result of the death, incarceration, military deployment, substance abuse and mental health issues, or domestic violence in the life of the child's parent);
3. Help with childcare or respite care. Typically their peers do not have children at home, so grandparents have fewer informal resources for babysitting, play dates, and etc. although this is by no means always the case;
4. Assistance with the added financial burden; and
5. Special considerations regarding military benefits (when the absent parent has been deployed or is killed in combat).

Although (predictably) many of the grandparents have to put former expectations on hold (such as for retirement, travel, free time, financial ease), not a one has ever complained to me about these losses or disappointments. Rather, I come across terms regarding this unexpected lot in life such as "a blessing", and "light in our lives". Also, more than one adult who was raised by a grandparent has confided fond memories of those years with feelings of security and playfulness (with, truthfully, some bittersweet elements), and of a particularly good adult relationship with the parenting grandparent. Often it seems that the grandparent is able to keep the traditionally indulgent grandparent role, while also assuming the responsibilities of a parent.



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