Support Group Goal

Grandparents and other adults raising kin will have an opportunity to share their concerns and learn positive ways to care for their families as well as themselves.

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- discuss the reasons for the escalating numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren.
- share the joys of grandparent caregiving.
- identify some of the adjustments or issues affecting their roles as grandparent caregivers.
- identify local community resources

Materials Needed

- Paper, pencils, flipchart paper and markers
- Participant's handout: *Adjusting to Your Role*
Background Information for Facilitator

Grandparents play a variety of roles in the lives of their grandchildren including babysitter, playmate, storyteller, friend, and sometimes even financial provider. But today, more than ever before, grandparents are assuming the role of parents to their grandchildren.

Currently over six percent of children in the United States live in a grandparent-headed household. This accounts for more than 4.5 million children under the age of 18. There are another 1.5 million children in the U.S. living in households headed by other relatives, and 2.5 million children live in relative-headed homes without a parent present.

Sometimes grandparents gradually assume caregiving responsibilities when parents cannot fulfill their roles. Or it may happen instantly because of parental death or abandonment. Substance abuse is the most commonly reported reason. Others include divorce, incarceration, illness, abuse, neglect, and abandonment. Often it’s a combination of reasons. Regardless of the cause, major changes and adjustments will take place for the grandparents as well as the grandchildren.

In the midst of providing care, grandparents often feel anger, sadness, and guilt. Many are afraid for their grandchildren and worry about their ability to cope with their losses. Other grandparents wonder if their adult child’s problems are the result of something they did or didn’t do. It is common for caregivers to feel alone and isolated. However, grandparents who have survived emotional pain like this say that as difficult as it was, those feelings did not break them. They learned to be patient with themselves and to take one step at a time until it was possible to do more. Grandchildren also need time and support as they adjust to their situations.

It is helpful for grandparents to understand that this caregiving issue knows no racial, ethnic, cultural, or economic boundaries. It is a national problem that can potentially impact us no matter where we live. It is equally important for caregivers to know where to go for help. There are many community, state, and national resources that can benefit them and their grandchildren. A resource table should be assembled for each session. Grandparents should also be encouraged to share information about resources that have benefited them too.

Bibliography


Discussion Guide

Introductions

- Welcome the group and introduce yourself.
- Share the goal of the support group and the importance of confidentiality.
- Have participants introduce themselves and offer them the opportunity to share about their situations.
- Introduce today’s topic and objectives.

Start the session by reading these scenarios:

**Eileen’s Story**

It had been 30 years since Eileen had a baby living in her house, but at the age of 75, she found herself providing full-time care for her infant great grandson, Dustin. Dustin’s mother had lost custody of him and her two other children because of neglect and abuse. Eileen and her husband were awarded joint custody of Dustin with his father, who is Eileen’s grandson.

Raising a great-grandchild has meant many lifestyle changes for Eileen. Instead of her regular routine of shopping and lunch with her friends, she finds herself changing diapers, buying formula, and pushing a stroller. “There are some mornings when I feel so tired that I wish I could stay in bed,” Eileen admits, “but when I hear MaMa coming from the other room I forget about being tired.”

**Bernice’s Story**

Bernice had made it – she was finally ready to retire. She had worked for 32 years as a secretary and accumulated an impressive savings account and benefits. Because Bernice had been widowed for 15 years, she wanted to make sure she was financially secure before retiring. Her four children were grown now and married with their own children. Just when life seemed settled and secure for her, the unthinkable happened. One evening Bernice opened her door to find a police officer standing there. The officer told her that her son and daughter-in-law had been killed in a head on collision. In the blink of an eye, Bernice’s life had changed forever. Her plans for a retirement filled with travel and leisure were gone. She now had her two granddaughters to raise.

The next year was the hardest Bernice ever remembered. She worked through the grief of losing her son and his wife, moved in with her grandchildren, sold her own home, and struggled daily to gear her life in a new direction as a second-time parent. When asked about her role as parent to her grandchildren, Bernice said, “I love to be with them every day and watch them grow. I’m just so thankful I’m able to be here for them.”

There are many reasons why grandparents and other relatives are called upon to care for children.

**Discussion Question**

Divide participants into small groups for discussion. Ask each group to select a recorder who will write down responses from their group. Distribute pencils and paper to the recorders. Have each group discuss the following question:

**What are some of the reasons for the increasing numbers of grandparent caregivers?**

Ask each recorder to share the group’s responses. Record their responses on flipchart paper.
Feedback

Possible responses may include the following:

- Drugs/alcohol
- Pregnancy
- Single parenthood
- Parental immaturity
- Illness
- Death
- Divorce
- Incarceration
- HIV/AIDS

Other factors include domestic violence, child abuse, neglect and abandonment, and unemployment.

Share that substance abuse is the most common reason for grandparents raising their grandchildren. Often it is a combination of factors. Regardless of the cause, grandparents and grandchildren may face many challenges as they adjust to their new living situations.

Discussion Question

In their small discussion groups, ask each recorder to record responses to the following question:

In what ways has your life changed now that you are providing full-time care to your grandchild(ren)?

Feedback

Possible responses may include:

- Retirement plans—Retirement plans may be put on hold indefinitely, or grandparents may be forced to retire to pursue their caregiving roles.
- Friendships and social life—Grandparent caregivers often experience a decline in their friendships and social activities. There is less time to develop social relationships or keep in touch with current friends.
- Family support—Grandparents raising grandchildren may not have the emotional and physical support they need from other family members. The lack of financial, housing, health, and respite care resources may cause added frustration.
- Emotions—Feelings of grief, anger, and fear are common emotions experienced by both the grandparents and their grandchildren. Grandparents and grandchildren may be grieving the loss or failure of the parent(s). Additionally, grandchildren may experience behavioral problems as a result.

Other adjustments include: financial concerns, medical care issues, legal issues, education challenges, changes in parenting practices, and loss of the grandparent role.

Share that even though these challenges may seem insurmountable, it is sometimes a comfort to know that along with the burdens, there are joys and opportunities for growth and sharing that come with spending one-on-one time with their grandchildren.

Discussion Question

Ask the group the following question:

We’ve talked about the struggles of adjusting to the grandparent caregiver role. Now let’s talk about the joys. What are the rewards or satisfactions of your caregiving role?

Ask for a few participants to share their thoughts.
Feedback

Emphasize that grandparents are typically quick to report how much joy their grandchildren bring to their lives. Grandparents who spend full time with their grandchildren have an opportunity to make a positive difference in their lives. Many say that love is the greatest reward they receive for raising their grandchildren.

Activity

Have each grandparent identify something they just love about their grandchild or grandchildren. Give everyone at least two chances to respond and ask that no one repeat any responses.

Discussion Question

Grandparents need resources to help them care for their kin. Community resources may be beneficial. Sometimes the participants are also aware of other resources.

Ask the participants the following question:

> Have you come across any resources that have helped you and may be beneficial for other grandparents?

Record resource suggestions.

Feedback

Direct participants to the resource table to pick up materials that may benefit them.

Personal Plan

Have participants think of one thing they can do to help themselves as grandparent caregivers. Distribute the participant handout and ask them to complete the Personal Plan.

Ask if anyone would be willing to share his/her plan. Encourage participants to work on their plans and share their progress at the next meeting.

Reflective Summary

There are no easy answers or quick fixes for the complexities grandparents face as they adjust to their roles as second time parents to their grandchildren. However, many grandparents find comfort in the support they receive from other grandparents who are facing the same challenges. Support groups may provide a safe harbor for grandparents who want to share and learn from one another and to know they are not alone.

Conclude by saying that you hope to see them at the next meeting.