Support Group Goal

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

Session Objectives

Participants will:

• have the opportunity to express their concerns and challenges regarding family relationships.
• learn how to improve strained relationships when grandchildren become part of the household.
• activate a personal plan for developing desirable relationships with their younger children/grandchildren.

Materials Needed

• Flipchart paper and markers
• Participant’s handout: Family Relationships
Background Information for Facilitator

Everyone has relationships—some are good, some are okay, and some need improvement. Having a satisfactory relationship with younger children and grandchildren can be challenging. Many of us have never been taught how to make relationships more positive. If anything, we are often told that good relationships come naturally. In reality, they require a lot of attention and commitment.

Certain characteristics and family situations can influence how a young child responds to stress and how easily he or she is able to rebound. Children who are easy-going, are able to talk about the situation, and have good problem-solving skills are better able to overcome difficult times in their lives. It’s also been found that children who have a close relationship with someone important to them, like a grandparent, are often more resilient.

Major changes in a young child’s life can affect his/her behavior. Disruptions such as a separation from parents may influence children’s ability to relate to others, sleeping and eating habits, performance in school, and the way they view life. Therefore, it is especially important for grandparents to assume the role of nurturer when grandchildren or other kin are going through a crisis and need help coping with the situation.

Grandparents sometimes find that their grandchildren suffer occasional setbacks in how well they are coping with a crisis. Hearing others talk about their parents or families, dealing with the death of a person or pet, moving, going to a new school, or observing a holiday or other celebration can trigger problem behavior. During these times, grandchildren need extra understanding, love, and support.

Positive relationships are an important part of every child’s development. Attachments are relationships that children form with the people they trust the most. In addition to having their basic needs met, children look for comfort, love, safety, and protection through their attachment relationships. If there is no adult on whom the child can depend, he or she may grow up not trusting others. This will negatively affect his or her ability to form good relationships. Grandchildren who are unable to form any previous attachments may have a difficult time developing positive relationships with grandparents and other family members after they arrive. This can be compounded if the grandchild also experienced a terrible disruption.

Today’s session will generate discussion about the ways children and grandchildren reacted when they became part of the household, roadblocks to developing a positive relationship with the grandchildren, and methods for forming closer attachments.

If the challenge of maintaining the grandparent identity while acting in a parent role comes up in the discussion, you can read more about it in the article, I Just Want To Be A Grandma. It can be found at www.urbanext.uiuc.edu in Issue 2.

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 the opportunity to share their situations.
- Ask participants to report on their personal plans.
- Introduce today’s topic and objectives.

Discussion Question

Ask participants the following question related to how their children felt when a grandchild moved in:

Everyone has to make adjustments when grandchildren become part of your household. How did your children react or behave when another child arrived?

Record their responses on flipchart paper.

Feedback

Mention that many lives are touched when a grandchild moves in and relationships are disrupted. Therefore, it is important to try to understand how your children might feel, however illogical their reactions might seem.

Share the possible reactions and reinforce those mentioned by participants.

They:

- Are upset because the grandchildren are taking your time, attention, and possibly finances.
- Don’t like having to share their room, toys, etc.
- Feel like the new child just “took over.”
- Are upset that the regular routine has changed.
- Are angry that the grandchild’s parents won’t/can’t take care of their own child(ren).
- Are upset because they had no choice in the matter.
- Feel lost with all of the changes.
- Aren’t able to describe why they feel the way they do.

Mention how children choose to handle their feelings will depend on their ages, the circumstances, and their prior relationships with you. Some may try to punish you or ignore the whole situation by keeping a polite distance, while others may cooperate as best they can.

Moments of competition and resentment may be more sporadic once everyone settles into a new routine, but not always.

Discussion Question

Pass out paper and pencils. Ask the participants to answer the following questions:

Many problems or roadblocks seem to get in the way of developing trusting and loving relationships with grandchildren. What kinds of relationships do you wish to have with the grandchildren living with you and with those not living with you? Are they the same or different? What kinds of relationships do you have now?

Ask participants to share their responses.
Feedback

Have the participants think about the differences between the descriptions. Mention that now we’re going to explore some methods they can try to help bring the current relationships closer to the types of relationships they would like to have.

Discussion Question

Have a flipchart and marker available to record the answers to the following questions:

What is your biggest roadblock to having a positive relationship with your grandchildren? What techniques have you found useful in improving your relationships?

Ask volunteers to share their responses while you record them on flipchart paper.

Feedback

Share the following tips and reinforce the techniques they gave to improve relationships with their children and grandchildren:

- Communicate effectively by speaking clearly and listening for understanding. Children deserve to be heard. Their concerns are valid even if you can’t do much about them.
- Validate their feelings. It doesn’t matter what their feelings are, they are entitled to them. Try to understand these feelings and not take them too personally.
- After listening to their feelings, express your point of view.
- Institute family meetings to enhance communication. This will help family members feel connected as parts of the group, and it will reduce family stress.
- Don’t forget your other grandchildren. It doesn’t take a lot of time or money to make children feel remembered. Even a postcard says that you are thinking of them.

Consider the roadblocks listed on the flipchart. Ask the group members if they have additional ideas for removing their roadblocks. If not, continue the discussion and ask for more specific ideas later.

Personal Plan

Have participants think of one thing they can do this week to make the relationships they have with younger children and grandchildren more positive. Distribute the participant handout and ask them to complete the Personal Plan.

After a few minutes, 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 session.

Reflective Summary

Mention that the group has just shared challenges and concerns that cause strain in their relationships with younger children and grandchildren. They also discussed the kinds of relationships they want and some suggestions for making it happen.

Conclude by reminding them that there are no perfect families, only people who are striving.