Grandparents Raising Grandchildren  
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NMAIMH competencies addressed:

Theoretical Foundations
  • family relationships and dynamics

Direct Service Skills
  • Observation & listening

Systems Expertise
  • community resources

Working with Others
  • Building & maintaining relationships

Reflection
  • Contemplation

There is no such thing as a baby….A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship. D.W. Winnicott (1964, p. 88)

New Mexico has a long history of grandparents (and other family members) raising grandchildren. Extended families are an important part of New Mexico’s cultures and traditions, and often represent a significant asset to families and communities. What is new is that grandparents have become a broader “safety net.” Grandparents are more frequently assuming the primary care of their grandchildren, as these children’s parents are absent or minimally present due to substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, employment difficulties, poverty, military deployment, teen pregnancy or other challenges (Egan and Egan, 2017).

This trend of grandparents raising grandchildren has been increasing over the past thirty years in our state and across the country. The percentage of grandparent-headed households increased from 3% in 1970 to 8% in 2015 in the U.S. compared to 6.3% and 10.9% in NM for the same time period. In addition, New Mexico has seen a significant rise in these numbers just over the last decade – from 47,382 grandchildren in 2005 being raised by NM’s grandparents to 55,259 in 2015. The grandfamilies at greatest risk are those with minimal to no parental involvement. In addition, many grandfamilies have significant levels of unmet need, challenges, with limited resources and benefits available (Egan and Egan, 2017).

Throughout NM, home visiting program staff are acknowledging and discussing the increasingly high number of families enrolled in home visiting, with grandparents raising grandchildren. They recognize that when grandparents assume responsibility for their grandchildren, these families are more likely to need an extensive level of support and
resources. Additionally, most grandparents raising grandchildren can be identified as attachment figures other than the child’s parents, because they provide physical and emotional care for the child and are consistent figures in the child’s life, in addition to having an emotional investment in the child (Howes, 1999). Grandparents are also serving as a “secure base” for their grandchildren. From an Infant Mental Health and attachment perspective, it is important to acknowledge the complexity of the intergenerational relationships in these families and its impact on the well-being of the infants and young children, in relationship with their grandparents.

Infant Mental Health promotes the social and emotional well-being of infants, young children, and families, within the context of secure and nurturing relationships. As grandparents assume responsibility for their grandchildren, these may occur: 1) disruptions in attachment, especially in relationships involving the parent when parental problems exist such as maltreatment, incarceration, substance abuse, illness, etc.; 2) attachment relationships between the grandchild and the grandparent develop or become revised; and 3) family members’ internal working models of attachment and caregiving are challenged and shaped (Poehlmann, 2003).

In summarizing several studies examining attachment relationships between children with prior difficult life experiences and their non-parental caregivers, Howes (1999) concludes that “in order to construct a secure attachment relationship with such a child, an adult may need to be much more sensitive than is the case in typical child–adult attachment” (p. 680). This conclusion is important because it highlights the need for caregivers to read children’s signals accurately and provide a high level of support for grandchildren with disrupted early attachment experiences. In addition, studies focusing on the development of grandparent – grandchild attachment relationships and how these relationships may function as protective or risk factors for children are important for understanding the development and family life experiences of children raised by their grandparents. When examining disruptions in attachment relationships, that occur when children are separated from their parents, the child’s age, cognitive and emotional expectations about caregivers, as well as the balance of risks and resources in the family, are always important variables to consider (Poehlmann, 2003).

Additionally, how grandparents portray the circumstances and facilitate parent–child contact during the separation partially depend upon their relationships with the child’s parents and their appraisal of the situation, or the meaning they attribute to their role (Hayslip et al., 1998). Whereas some grandparents focus on stressors and challenges inherent in raising their grandchildren (Emick & Hayslip, 1996), others emphasize the potential emotional rewards of parenting again (Burton & DeVries, 1992). When grandparents begin raising their very young grandchildren, the well-being of family members depends on a complex set of circumstances, including reasons for the child’s placement, the child’s age, the history of relationships and quality of current relationships in the family, patterns of communication, the balance of risks and resources, and supports available in the social context (Poehlmann, 2003).
NM Home Visiting staff have consistently identified the strengths and successes of the grandparents raising their grandchildren, as well as the challenges, including fulltime caregiving responsibilities, feeling overwhelmed, financial insecurity, and experiencing guilt and grief as they may have lost or now interact with their “children”, the parents of their grandchildren. Grandparents may or may not have a partner and may have their own economic, physical, social-emotional, and legal challenges and need for support. Supporting the grandparents through reflective dialogue to identify and build on their strengths and resiliency is an essential process for home visitors. From this vantage point, home visitors in partnership with the grandparent, will build on what is working well for the grandfamily and support the grandparent(s) in identifying areas of growth from which Family Goals will be developed, to include Infant Mental Health goals supporting a secure, nurturing and attuned grandparent-grandchild relationship.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- What reflective question might you ask the grandparent to understand their perspective on raising their grandchild?
- What reflective question might you ask the grandparent to help them identify and support their understanding of the attachment impact on their infant and young grandchild now in their care?
- As a reflective supervisor, what additional support may your home visitor need as they support the grandparent-grandchild relationship?
- As a reflective supervisor, what reflective questions might you ask your home visitor to explore their successes and challenges in supporting grandparents raising grandchildren?
- As a home visiting program, what community resources and partners might best support the grandparents raising grandchildren families? Also, what additional supports might you create within your own agency?

References/Additional Resources


