

COPMI

Keeping families in mind

GEMS

Edition 9 - April 2010

Gateway to Evidence that Matters

Grandparents parenting grandchildren when parents have a mental illness

Quick Facts

- Grandparents contribute significantly to the community as primary carers for their grandchildren.
- An unquantified number of grandparents are 'hidden' due to the stigma of mental illness, and cultural and family values.
- Some grandparents caring for grandchildren rate their health and wellbeing as poor.
- The effect on children of parents with mental illness of grandparent care is not at present known.
- Family counselling can enhance resilience, through shared understanding of the changes for the family, including experiences of loss and grief.

Grandparents provide primary care in 22,500 Australian families, for 31,100 children aged between 0 – 17 years¹; in 2008, 5.7 million US children lived with a grandparent². An unquantified number of grandparent carers are 'hidden', and do not access financial and other supports. The reasons may relate to stigma (parental mental illness or substance abuse acting as a barrier), or cultural tradition³.

Research to date relating to grandparents as primary carers has not specifically referred to grandparents caring for children of parents with mental illness, consequently this GEMS draws on material concerning grandparents as primary carers more generally, including those caring for grandchildren because of parental drug and alcohol misuse⁴.

An issue closely associated with grandparents becoming primary carers for their grandchildren is the intergenerational transmission of mental illness. Identifying this transmission is an opportunity to identify risk and protective factors that sustain or disrupt patterns of mental illness⁵. Two publications have studied the intergenerational transmission of depression, including the role of grandparents in moderating the effect of parental psychiatric illness on children⁶, and the possible impact on the parenting of grandchildren by grandparents^{5,6}.

In the general grandparenting literature, the well being of a child depends on the grandparent's physical and mental health, as well as on the circumstances that lead to surrogate parenting by grandparents.

Grandmothers raising grandchildren report increased stress and depressive symptoms relative to age peers, but less so if the surrogate parenting

role is a cultural norm⁷ or freely chosen⁸. Several reports suggest negative effects of child-rearing on the health and finances of grandparents⁹, which depend largely on pre-existing grandparental characteristics¹⁰. Other studies found that grandparents experienced benefits such as knowing their grandchildren had stability, and enjoying their achievements^{7,11}.

Practice implications

Grandparents parenting their grandchildren face a lack of information about programs available for them, general insensitivity to their situation, stereotyping, and a lack of advocacy on their behalf¹², but practitioners may assist in several ways:

- Counsel grandparents to support them in the transition from the role of grandparent to their parenting role, including managing anxiety about their new responsibilities, and feelings of resentment and guilt they may have about the parent (their own daughter or son) being unable to care for their children^{4,13}
- Provide information about child development, particularly children's emotional needs at different ages, acknowledging also that the child is adjusting to separation from his/her parent¹²
- Provide psycho-education about mental illness symptoms and treatment and how they may affect the child's parent, and assist grandparents to understand how the child's parent is experiencing the loss of their parental role
- Facilitate family counseling to enhance resilience through shared understanding of the changes for the family, including experiences of loss and grief.

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http://cra.curtin.edu.au/publicationsInformation/printDocs/FinalGCHN_Report_OCT2004.pdf

Online information: www.grandparentsasparents.com.au/

Mental illness fact sheets: http://www.sane.org/information/factsheets/treatments_for_mental_illness.html

Hayslip, B. & Kaminski, P. (Eds.). *Parenting the custodial grandchild: Implications for clinical practice*. New York: Springer Publishing Company; 2009. This book has three sections which address: intergenerational relationships, parenting grandchildren, and interventions.

For practitioners: Keeping Families and Children in Mind: COPMI Mental Health Worker Education Resource for those working with families and parents with mental illness. Free online professional education. Module 5 concerns Carers, and includes a section about grandparents caring for their grandchildren: www.copmi.net.au

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- Link grandparents to social support groups for psychological and moral support, information about legal rights, and processes for negotiating with government departments.
- Link to available neighbourhood groups and online groups¹⁴.
Implement a multimodal intervention program which decreases stress, and improves health, and social support¹⁵.
- Reduce the invisibility of grandparents' experience by educating service providers such as health and welfare practitioners, professionals, teachers, and government officers, about the role of grandparents as primary carers, and the entitlements of grandparents as carers¹¹.
- The efficacy of interventions such as psycho-education for grandparents
- Understanding differences in experiences for grandparents caring for children of parents with mental illness compared with other grandparents
- Outcomes for children of parents with mental illness when cared for by grandparents, including children's experiences of grandparent care¹⁷
- Relationships between grandparents and parents and children when parents have a mental illness
- Differences in the acceptability of grandparent care across cultural groups, particularly in relation to parental mental illness.

Limitations

Limitations identified¹⁶ could be addressed through the following research opportunities:

- The influence of stigma of mental illness on identifying as a carer and accessing services

