



Parenting for grandparents and other relative carers

YOU'RE NOT ALONE: The Challenges of Parenting for Grandparents and other relative carers'

Presentation to

KINSHIP CARE FORUM
Making a Difference

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Clocktower Centre, Moonee Ponds

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Introduction

*"Grandparents bringing up grandchildren live with many unresolved issues and usually ongoing worries, not only about the grandchildren, but also about their own children. They also have to deal with their own ambivalent feelings about the situation, ...little government financial support, ...difficult to find. They cannot enjoy indulging their grandchildren, and they cannot simply hand them back to their parents when they have had enough. These grandparents are in many ways **unsung heroes** who receive little public recognition for their role and contribution to the wider community in addition to their own family".*

(Ochiltree, G, 2006, Grandparents, grandchildren and the generation in between, p87, ACER Press, Camberwell, Victoria).

I wanted to begin with this quote from Gay Ochiltree's above-mentioned book because I think it illustrates the ground swell of thinking in relation to kinship or relative care, and the rationale behind the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner's (OCSC) development of a suite of resources with the aim of supporting family members who provide kinship care.

While the quote speaks of grandparents it is vital that we acknowledge that while most kinship carers are grandparents, many are in fact aunts, uncles, brother and sisters, step relatives and family friends.

The resource, *Parenting for grandparents and other relative carers*, produced by the OCSC, and launched this morning, was developed with the following considerations in mind:

- Relative care, also referred to as kinship care is the fastest growing type of care in Australia and overseas.
- In 2007, almost 2000 children in Victoria were in statutory care with relative carers, and there are probably as least as many or more children living in private arrangements with relative carers.
- The role provided by relative carers is absolutely vital, in that they provide the love, security and stability that all children so desperately need.
- Relative or kinship care has many benefits in that children are still with their family, rather than 'in care', there is a sense of the family being kept together, and contact with family members is facilitated.
- Research has also shown that most children and adolescents like living with their grandparents (research only involved grandparents, not other

relative carers), often more so than living with their parents. The research, undertaken by Curtin University, showed that children liked the feelings of love, trust, security and safety in contrast to their former often traumatic lives.

Objectives of the Resource

- To acknowledge and support the role provided by kinship and relative carers to both the children in their care and the broader community.
- To validate and legitimise the often mixed emotions of kinship and relative carers as they endeavour to meet the many needs of the children in their care.
- To encourage relative carers to seek assistance from government agencies and from community organisations when they have specific concerns about a child or children, in order to provide them with the particular support they require.
- To provide information and strategies in relation to some of the issues commonly experienced by relative carers in raising a family member's child or children.

Limitations/Special Considerations

1) First, in producing this resource, the OCSC, was motivated by a desire not to patronise or stereotype kinship or relative carers, their families, circumstances, or parenting capacities. The need for kinship care crosses all class, social and cultural boundaries. The reasons why it is needed are complex and diverse, and families providing kinship care are as diverse and unique as any others.

2) Secondly, as the author of the resource, I was, and am, very keen to make clear that this is not intended to be a manual, or all-encompassing guide to parenting. Rather, it is intended to be an aid and support to relative carers revisiting the parenting role possibly after a number of years, to family members who may already have their own children, and also to relatives who may never have parented before.

3) The resource is not focused upon parenting skills or capacity so much as some of the issues commonly exhibited or experienced by children whose parents are unable to raise them, for whatever reason. It is important to acknowledge that parenting children who have been separated from their parents sometimes involves special and quite complex challenges, above and beyond the typical challenges of parenting. Eg. The experience of trauma.

4) As all children and all families are unique, it is not possible to provide a prescribed formula as a course of action or strategy for support in every situation. The possible mechanisms for support will also vary depending on the resources and dynamics of particular communities. What the resource does do is to recommend community organisations and service providers which relative carers could approach for support and/or appropriate referral.

Mixed Emotions: An unplanned responsibility

As Gay Ochiltree's quote highlighted, it is fairly typical for kinship carers to feel some ambivalence about their situation. Whilst they love the children in their care and are committed to providing the best possible care for them, it is understandable and quite natural that they may feel some disappointment or even resentment at plans for the future which have been put on hold, of reduced finances, social opportunities, scope for hobbies and relaxation.

Or their life circumstances may be quite different, in that if employed, work may have had to be put on hold. Many of the major milestones and events in life are times and stages we plan for, but in reality taking on the challenge of kinship care is an **unplanned responsibility**. It is a responsibility that often arrives very suddenly, sometimes without any warning, and yet involves a total life adjustment 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Anxieties about health, finances, legal issues and the future are commonplace. In addition many carers are coping with their own confusion, grief or anger in relation to the inability of the parents to care for the children.

If you are not already aware, there are 2 additional resources: ***Financial support for grandparents and other relative carers***, and ***Legal Issues for relatives as carers***, which were published by the OCSC. ***Financial support....*** is in your conference pack and additional copies can be obtained by ordering online through our website, or by phoning the office. The ***Legal issues...*** publication will be launched and available in July.

A Growing Awareness

Fortunately, I think we are experiencing a groundswell of awareness in relation to the extent and importance of kinship care. During the past 12 months there seems to have been a steady stream of newspaper articles and television segments highlighting the challenges faced by relative carers and grandparents in particular. We hope that this parenting resource, not only provides carers with some useful information, but also has the effect of further enhancing community knowledge and understanding of the incidence of kinship care and the challenges it often entails.

The Child's Experience

The experience of every child moving into a kinship care situation will be different- unique. Some children will have experienced some degree of trauma due to being separated from their parents, and possibly because of neglect and/or abuse. Trauma affects children differently, depending on their temperament and how resilient they are. It is common for children to experience a set of intense overlapping feelings which may include: grief and abandonment, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, insecurity, embarrassment, hope and fantasy.

It is important to recognise and acknowledge the range of feelings the child may be experiencing and to understand how these may be influencing the way in which they are behaving. Every child separated from their parents will experience some sense of loss, and therefore grief. This grief may manifest itself as anger, sadness, depression, confusion, nightmares or forgetfulness, and also by wanting to block things out and play with friends and socialise.

Children often have mixed emotions about Mum and Dad. Whilst they often understand that Mum and Dad can't care for them, they often long for time when they can. They may repeatedly ask if their parents are coming back, or have swings in mood about them.

Behavioural responses to experience

Without wanting to deny the complexity of challenges often faced by relative carers, it is helpful to consider the behaviour of children in terms of the experiences they have had and the range of feelings they may be having. The parenting resource deals briefly with some of the behavioural manifestations of

trauma, separation, stress and anxiety, such as: sleeping difficulties, bedwetting, eating issues, manipulative behaviour, clinging and immature behaviour. As policy makers, educators and community service providers, we need to promote sensitivity and understanding of the intensity and complexity of emotional and behavioural issues that may be experienced by kinship carers and the children in their care.

Children with special needs

The challenges of parenting a child new to the family are intensified when the child has special developmental needs. Many kinship carers find themselves in the situation of caring for a child, who in addition to the stress and anxiety that usually accompanies separation from parents, brings with them one or more additional special needs. These may include: a learning disorder, autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, severe emotional and psychological problems, or have been born drug or alcohol affected.

If children have special needs, the challenges of raising them are much greater. It is quite normal to at times feel frustrated, lonely and unsupported. These feelings are often experienced by a child with special needs' natural parents, and so may be compounded when a relative carer takes on full time care of the child..

Negotiating the typical challenges of parenting

In addition to a range of considerations about the child's emotional and behavioural adjustment to their new situation, and possibly in relation to special developmental needs, relative carers will also need to negotiate the ordinary or typical range of issues that parenting involves. These include things such as: immunisation, home safety, early childhood, schooling, hobbies and interests, adolescence, etc, etc.

It becomes clear that relative or kinship carers are indeed **unsung heroes**. Not only are they parenting a child (or children) that is not their own, but in addition to the typical challenges of parenting they must often confront a whole range of special issues, needs and considerations, that the child brings with them.

It's OK to ask for support

In facing these challenges it is easy for relative carers to feel that they are on their own. It is important to remember that there are others facing very similar challenges to you and you may benefit from visiting or joining a Grandparent or Relative Carer support group. Sharing your concerns with other relative carers can provide you with new friends, resources, ideas, strategies and avenues for support.

Just as parents should feel comfortable seeking support within the community when they need it, relative carers taking on the parenting role of a family member's child or children, need to feel able to ask for advice, support and guidance. It may be necessary to approach more than one organisation or individual, but if you approach community organisations with a focus on children and families they should be able to put you in touch with, or refer you, to the assistance you require. You could approach your GP, Maternal and Child Health Centre, kindergarten, child care centre, school, Community Health Centre, a counsellor.

At the back of the booklet, ***Parenting for grandparents and other relative carers***, there is a list of useful contacts and support services, including Child

FIRST contact details for Child and Family Information, Referral and Support Teams. There is also a list of Grandparent and relative support groups. Telephone support services are also listed.

Whilst grandparent and relative carers are often ***unsung heroes*** we don't want them to suffer in silence. Asking someone for assistance or advice can be the first step in bringing about an increased awareness and understanding of what you are experiencing.

Conclusion

Grandparent and relative carers face many challenges, and whilst every situation is different, there are certainly many common elements of experience. It is important to legitimise the sometimes mixed and ambivalent feelings of relative carers, who so desperately want to optimise the lives of the children in their care, but at the same time sometimes yearn for opportunities lost, dreams denied and lives unencumbered by the responsibilities of child rearing. The challenge for all of us is to do whatever we can to attempt to lighten the load for relative carers, to increase awareness of the vital role they perform, and to make organisations and services as responsive as possible to their needs.

Copies of the resource 'Parenting for Grandparents and Other Relative Carers' can be ordered on our website www.ocsc.vic.gov.au or by calling the Office of the Child Safety Commissioner on (03) 8601 5884.