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Navigating the Coronavirus Pandemic: Advice *for* Grandparents From Grandparents

Abstract

In a qualitative study, I explored the experiences of grandparents during the coronavirus pandemic in the spring and summer of 2020 in the United States. Grandparents affected by the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent restrictions shared their experiences in audio/video recorded interviews. Responses to one interview question asking about advice they would give to other grandparents were analyzed. Four themes were identified from the data analysis. Advice given was motivated by a desire to help other grandparents and their families. Implications for Extension professionals are discussed.

Keywords: [grandparent](#), [grandparenting](#), [coronavirus pandemic](#), [COVID-19](#)

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Introduction

There are an estimated 64 million grandparents living in the United States (Survey of Income and Program Participation, 2008). Those who have strong ties to their children and grandchildren enjoy a place of esteem and respect—so much so that many grandparents are involved in the day-to-day care of grandchildren and support the needs of their families in normal times. The specific support provided by grandparents is based on the needs of families and the abilities of grandparents to purvey it but typically includes emotional, financial, caregiving, and instrumental support (Bates et al., 2018).

During this time of global concern over the coronavirus pandemic and the accompanying county, state, and nationally imposed restrictions (stay-at-home orders, self-isolation mandates, physical/social distancing, etc.), family members are having to adjust the type and frequency of contact they have with one another. The adaptations families are making to stay in contact coupled with the general concern over the health and wellness of loved ones has implications for the relational, physical, emotional, and economic well-being of grandparents and the grandchildren and children they support (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020; Cudjoe & Kotwal, 2020). This circumstance presents a unique opportunity for Extension researchers to explore the experiences of families during an event that has affected practically all Americans. This article details a recent empirical

research study on the experiences of grandparents during the coronavirus pandemic. Study results provide Extension professionals an opportunity to share recent and relevant applied scientific findings about the coronavirus pandemic with grandparents and their families.

Method

I initiated a qualitative research study in May 2020, approximately 2 months after the first stay-at-home orders came into effect in the state of Ohio. My purpose was to learn about the wide range of experiences of grandparents during the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, I asked research participants open-ended questions with the goal of eliciting descriptions of their personal experiences related to the question topics.

Participants and Recruitment

Recruitment occurred through word of mouth and with the assistance of Ohio State University Extension professionals who shared the recruitment letter and materials with their local constituents. Twenty-one grandparents were recruited. The participants ranged in age from 58 to 77; three were grandfathers. They were interviewed over the Zoom videoconferencing platform (phone and/or video enabled), with one interview occurring via email. Interviews, which lasted between 35 and 98 min, were audio/video recorded, automatically transcribed by Zoom, and cleaned manually.

Most of the grandparents interviewed had been a kinship caregiver at some point in their lives, and about half were providing full-time care of their grandchildren at the time of data collection. All had a close relationship with at least one of their grandchildren. Caregiving status was not a required criterion for inclusion in the study and therefore was not addressed via a formal interview question.

Interview Question

In this article, responses to only one interview question are reported. Near the end of each interview, grandparents were asked the following question: "Do you have any advice for other grandparents who are currently dealing with the coronavirus pandemic?" Some grandparents gave extensive and detailed advice; others did not.

Analytic Strategy

I conducted a modified grounded theory analysis—modified in that I was not seeking to develop hypothesized causal associations (refer to Glaser & Holton, 2007; see also Goodsell et al., 2011). To analyze interview narratives, I explored the context in which the advice was given and the purpose behind the advice. In the first reading of the narratives, I noted the number of different or unrelated pieces or categories of advice given by grandparents (open coding). After reading through several interviews, it became apparent that the advice purpose varied; some advice was directed at helping grandchildren, some at helping grandparents, and some at helping families or society generally. Next, I identified common purposes of the advice and classified those as themes (focused coding). Four themes emerged after the initial reading. In subsequent readings, I created a subcategory list for the advice and listed individual pieces of advice, some of which were duplicates, into these subcategories. The findings are trustworthy due to my training in and work on previous empirical qualitative research, experience conducting interviews, and expertise in the area of grandparent studies.

Interview questions were shared with a colleague with similar methodological and content training.

Results: The Advice

Advice that centered on the pandemic context was motivated by a desire to help other grandparents and their families and was categorized into four main purposes: (a) to help grandparents relate to and connect with their grandchildren, (b) to help grandparents get through the stresses of the pandemic, (c) to help grandchildren be successful during the pandemic, and (d) to help grandchildren and grandparents be prepared for the future.

Help Grandparents Relate to and Connect With Their Grandchildren

To help grandparents relate to and connect with grandchildren during the pandemic and the associated lockdown restrictions of physical/social distancing and self-isolation, many grandparents in the study suggested ways of "being present" in grandchildren's lives. One way identified was keeping in touch through low-tech methods of communication such as sending letters or cards, sending small gifts, talking on the telephone, and making an effort to use technology such as video chat. No doubt grandparents already have been using these methods to connect with grandchildren, but some grandparents emphasized the importance of allowing grandchildren to talk, not interrupting them, and really listening. Through such open communication, grandchildren will share their concerns about the pandemic and feel reassured of their grandparents' love and support.

Grandparents also gave advice about not getting upset over the physical/social distancing restrictions that do not allow grandparents to hug, kiss, and touch their grandchildren. Telling grandchildren that they are truly loved is one way to compensate for the limited affection. Finally, grandparents emphasized that it is the little things—the little gifts, the little remembrances, the little activities—that make a difference and that relationships matter most.

Help Grandparents Get Through the Stresses of the Pandemic

Grandparents experienced a number of challenges and stresses because of the pandemic and the associated restrictions. Although these stresses were detailed in other parts of the interviews, their solutions came in the form of advice to others who might encounter similar challenges. Most of the advice focused on mindfulness methods of reducing stress and on ensuring that one stays healthy.

Grandparents shared messages of hope and encouragement, making statements such as "things will get better" and "this will end." These hopeful morsels struck a positive and courageous tone: stay strong, be grateful you are still here and healthy, keep your faith and be prayerful, take it day by day, and be grateful for your family.

Other pieces of advice focused on taking care of oneself by wearing the appropriate protective gear, washing one's hands, following guidelines disseminated by civic leaders, and practicing physical/social distancing. Grandparents advised caring for oneself psychologically, such as by not worrying, not complaining, not being afraid, and not thinking negatively.

Finally, grandparents did not want other grandparents to turn inward and feel sorry for themselves. It was in

this vein that they recommended reaching out to others, sharing ideas with other grandparents who are providing full-time care for their grandchildren and need assistance with educational resources, and focusing on family members and their needs. Encouragement to stay active was followed by caveats regarding being cautious and mindful about what is going on around us in order to healthy and safe.

Help Grandchildren Be Successful During the Pandemic

Although no grandparents reported any positive cases of coronavirus among their immediate or local family members, they all felt it was important to follow the stay-at-home orders and physical/social distancing guidelines. It was apparent from the interviews that nearly all grandparents followed these guidelines not only to be good examples to their children and grandchildren but also to avoid the possibility of becoming infected. As a result, grandchildren were indirectly affected by the pandemic and the guidelines.

Grandparents who did not live with their grandchildren missed them and were in turn missed by grandchildren who may have experienced feelings of loss and grief. For grandchildren who live with their grandparents during this time, grandparents were reflective and empathetic about the impact the restrictions were having on their grandchildren. They could see that grandchildren were eating more, were not focused on their schoolwork, were missing their friends, and over time had become annoyed with being homebound. One thoughtful grandmother reflected on what she had learned:

When things are going a little crazy and I want to yell, I want to discipline, I have to just step back and say, "Okay, what's really going on?" It really doesn't bother me to stay in the house, but when you get kids that go to school every day, have friends that they laugh and talk with, and then all of a sudden you're stuck in the house with these old people, with these little crying babies, it eventually gets to them. I try to recognize what is going on with them and be able to help them out instead of me getting upset all the time.

To help grandchildren be successful during this challenging time, grandparents advised being an example of strength, resiliency, and hope in front of one's grandchildren—taking care of oneself so that grandchildren will want to take care of their own health. Grandparents recommended caring for grandchildren by talking to them, keeping them fed with healthful foods, helping them with their schoolwork and staying in touch with their teachers, finding a routine and sticking to it, and encouraging them to be active and busy instead of allowing them to play video/computer games all day.

Help Grandchildren and Grandparents Be Prepared for the Future

The final purpose of the advice given was to help grandchildren and other grandparents be prepared for the future. Most of the grandparents ardently acknowledged that life after this pandemic would not be the same as it was before. In fact, one grandmother warned that sometime in the future there will be another pandemic and that people must prepare for it. Others suggested that it is important to teach grandchildren life skills, including coping with frustrations, loss, and life challenges. Helping grandchildren acknowledge that there will be drama, tragedy, and accidents in life will go a long way in helping them prepare emotionally and psychologically for when adversity arises. This type of fortitude, also referred to as grit, is an important aspect of resilience. Strong and supportive relationships with loving family members such as grandparents are essential in helping children get through the challenges of life.

Implications for Extension Professionals

Extension professionals can use the implications of these findings in three specific ways to strengthen grandparents and their families during the pandemic and the associated restrictions.

- Grandparents are resilient to the crucibles of life and model for their children and grandchildren how to adapt to very difficult situations. Modeling resiliency is likely the most stabilizing influence a grandparent can demonstrate for their family. It communicates confidence, self-determination, fortitude, and hope. These lessons are key to helping others navigate life's challenges. Extension professionals who work with adults they know to be grandparents can encourage them through formal or informal instruction to be active participants in their grandchildren's lives.
- Extension professionals working with parents can encourage them to accept help offered by grandparents. Grandparents may be able to assist with their grandchildren's extracurricular activities, online school activities and homework, and other commitments while parents are working from home or fulfilling other employment obligations. Grandparents do not need to be physically present to carry out their assistance with some of these activities.
- Grandparents who have adopted new technologies to communicate with family members during the pandemic restrictions may be more confident and capable of using those same technologies to receive Extension outreach and contact. Extension professionals can capitalize on this circumstance, particularly during the pandemic, to reach older adults in new ways.

Conclusion

The study reported here underscores the fact that grandparents are important members of the nuclear and extended family. When the family is in crisis, grandparents often step in to support and stabilize. They are a type of safety valve that can be tapped when life heats up and is seemingly boiling out of control (Hagestad, 1985). They are advisors, teachers, role models, mentors, and a source of unconditional love and care (Bates & Taylor, 2016). Their assistance is one tool for addressing mental health stresses experienced by children and adults. The findings of the study can be a source of guidance and comfort to other grandparents who have found themselves directly and indirectly affected by the 2020 coronavirus pandemic.

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