



When Grandparents are the Only Parents Lesson Plan

Introduction

More grandparents are taking care of their grandchildren. The 1990 United States Census reported that 3 million children (5 percent) have grandparents as their primary caregivers. It is believed that the percentage is actually higher than would be revealed through self-reporting census data. This trend is across racial and socioeconomic groups and has enormous social and legal ramifications. Pupil personnel specialists may use this activity as a classroom exercise for students, in-service material for co-workers, an after-school student group discussion, or for a grandparent support group led by school or community counselors.

Objectives

Students will: know that a growing number of grandparents are the primary "parents" to young children; understand some of the mixed feelings family members have; and express personal viewpoints.

Materials

Handout: "When Grandparents are the Only Parents: Different Perspectives"

Procedures

1. Introduce the handout by presenting information in the introduction. Talk about the word "perspective." Illustrate by explaining how artists use different perspectives in their paintings to convey messages or themes. Then use examples of perspectives in real-life situations, explaining how persons experience events from different points of view.
2. Read the handout, which gives three different perspectives on family arrangements where the grandparent becomes the parent. Invite initial reactions to the case studies.
3. Discuss the case studies by using the following leading questions: (a) What feelings did both the grandmother and grandchild express? (b) What were their concerns and worries? (c) What kinds of help and support do the grandmother and grandson need?
4. Encourage students to be aware of and sensitive to different family situations. Growing up is not easy. Nor is being a parent. For some families, grandparents are the best "parents."

Extension Activities

- Arrange a special open house for grandparents. Inform them about the school and allow opportunities for them to meet other grandparents.

- Initiate a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren.

When Grandparents are the Only Parents: Different Perspectives

From a grandmother's perspective

My husband and I became foster parents to our grandson Joey when he was 4 years old. Our daughter, Joey's mother, was incapable of taking care of her son. She had no steady employment and was arrested for drug use. She was not emotionally capable of handling a small boy. We were concerned that she was physically abusive. Her boyfriend showed no interest in being a responsible father.

We may not have been the best parents in the world, but we did the best we could. Once kids reach a certain age, you can't make them act responsibly. We could let our daughter suffer the consequences of her behavior. After all, it is her life. But why should our grandson suffer? Although our daughter objected, we had to take control for Joey's sake.

It hasn't been easy. First we had to work with the Department of Social Services and the judicial system. People interrogated us as if we were the bad guys. The prejudices we felt from social workers, lawyers, judges, therapists and teachers were painful. We are working now on the legal papers to be Joey's adoptive parents.

Our life became a repeat performance of when our children were younger - P.T.A., the zoo, babysitters, extra laundry, bedtime stories, buying sneakers, "brush your teeth" and "pick up your toys." But we love Joey and wouldn't have it any other way.

We worry about Joey constantly. What do we tell him about his mother and father? How much does he need to know? Will we be healthy enough to keep up with him as he gets older? If we failed our daughter, what makes us think we can do any better with our grandson? Is Joey embarrassed by us when his friends come over? What will it be like when he is older? Will we still be around?

From a young mother's perspective

I love Joey very much. I want what is best for him. I wish I could have given him a normal home but I didn't.

I look at other kids and their parents and think about what I could have had. I miss not being able to do things with my son, like taking him roller skating or to the movies. I hear other parents complain about their kids.

I can't complain.

My parents won't have anything to do with me. It is as if I never existed. I can't even see my own son. They treat me like a criminal. I hate what happened but, at the same time, I know that they are doing what they think is best.

I never intended it to turn out like this. If I had it to do all over again, I would change my life. I'd kick my drug habit and get my life together. I wouldn't have been fooled by my boyfriend, thinking he would always be here. I would have kept Joey - raised him myself. Somehow, maybe we could have managed. But then I guess it is better for him the way it is.

I wonder what Joey thinks of me? What do my parents tell him? What does he tell his friends? Can I ever make it up to him? Will he ever forgive me?

From a young child's perspective

I moved in with my grandparents when I was 4 years old. I am 13 now, so that means I have lived with my grandparents for almost 10 years.

It's OK, I guess. My mom and dad had some disagreements and they couldn't really take care of me. They loved me, but it was tough for them to get jobs, I think. I'm not sure exactly how it all happened. Once I remember a judge asking me about how my mom treated me. She used to beat me, but then I probably deserved it. Maybe if I had just kept quiet, things would be different now.

My grandparents are really old - about 55 I think. All of their friends are old, too. None of their friends have children my age. It is so embarrassing when they go to school and my friends ask me if they are my parents.

My grandparents won't let me do anything. They are so old-fashioned. They tell me they don't want me to end up like my mom. I have to go to church all the time. None of the other kids' parents make them go to church. They always ask me dumb questions. I guess they're just trying to be friendly.

Do I like anything about living with my grandparents? Sure, I guess. My grandmother makes great chocolate chip cookies which she puts in my school lunch bag. The other kids try to take them from me or trade for one of their cookies. I just say, "No way!" My granddad takes me fishing. None of the other boys get to do that. It's great. Actually, my grandparents do a lot for me.

It's probably better for me to stay with my grandparents. I wouldn't want to live in a foster home or have someone else as parents. Sometimes grandparents are the best parents.