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Book Review of "Resilient Grandparent Caregivers: A Strengths-Based Perspective"

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Book Review

Resilient Grandparent Caregivers: A Strengths-Based Perspective

Bert Hayslip, Jr. and Gregory C. Smith (eds), 2013.

Routledge (Taylor & Francis), New York, 268 pp. ISBN-10: 0415897556; ISBN-13: 978-0415897556 0

The title of this book, *Resilient Grandparent Caregivers: A Strengths-Based Perspective*, edited by Bert Hayslip, Jr. and Gregory Smith, provides an apt way of framing this diverse collection of articles about grandparent caregivers. The emphasis on “resilience” and individual and family “strengths” stands in contrast to much of the existing literature which emphasizes deficit and dysfunction in grandparent caregiver families.

The 16 chapters of this book, written by a distinguished group of researchers and practitioners, provide a balanced view of the grandparent caregiver experience. The authors do not shy away from the difficulties, deny the challenges, or ignore the physical, social, and emotional toll that raising children under difficult circumstances can have on grandparent caregivers’ lives. However, what seems most striking and, from my point of view, refreshing about this book is the robust rejection of the portrayal of grandparent caregivers as being passive victims of challenging circumstance. As Donna Butts, Generations United’s executive director, succinctly states in the forward, the research and programmatic examples presented in this book demonstrate “how grandfamilies use their resiliency and resources to overcome challenges” (xvi).

The key to understanding how the remarkable challenges that grandparent caregivers face can coexist with the perseverance and other assets they possess lies with the word “resilience.” The book lays out the contours of resilience in the lives of grandparent caregivers. The contributing authors note their impressive coping and other cognitive skills, resourcefulness, problem-solving capacities, and continuing abilities to adapt to change. Along these lines, the authors provide rich examples of how grandparent caregivers derive meaning, satisfaction, and even a sense of empowerment from their caregiving experiences.

Another theme highlighted in the book is the crucial role of social support—from other grandparent caregivers, from mentors, and from professional counselors—in helping grandparents transcend the caregiving challenges they encounter. The power of social support is conveyed in chapters with titles such as: “Formal Social Support: Promoting Resilience in Grandparents Parenting Grandchildren” (Dolbin-Macnab, Roberto, and Finney), “Skip Generations: A Strength-based Mentoring Program for Resilient Grandparent Caregivers” (James and Ferrante), “Promoting Resilience: Counseling Grandparents to Raise Effective Grandchildren” (Zuckerman and Maiden), and “Mutual Exchange within Skipped Generation Households: How Grandfamilies Support One Another” (Kolomer, Himmelheber, and Murray).

Some grandparent caregivers garner support and strength from their cultural heritage and values. This theme is articulated most convincingly in the two chapters of the book: “Raising Grandchildren as an Expression of Native Hawaiian Cultural Values” (Yancura and Greenwood) and “Promoting

Family Empowerment among African American Grandmothers Raising Grandchildren (Whitley, Kelley, and Campos).

The book is organized into three parts:

- (1) “Resilience and resourcefulness among grandparent caregivers.” Articles in this section emphasize the positive attributes and qualities of custodial grandparents.
- (2) “Interpersonal aspects of resilience and resourcefulness in grandparent caregivers.” These articles examine the significance of several forms of social support that grandparent caregivers receive and provide to others.
- (3) “Strength-based interventions with grandparent caregivers.” These articles explore ways in which programs and policies can be crafted to tap into, and further enhance, grandparent caregivers’ resiliencies.

The applied nature of this book and the emphasis on interventions is not restricted to the third section. In fact, each of the chapters is written or co-written by a practitioner, such as a geriatric social worker, counselor, psychologist, or geriatrician. The mixture of researcher and practitioner perspectives strengthens this book by highlighting pertinent grandparent caregiver-related research questions and theoretical frameworks. This insures that efforts to delineate the multidimensional construct of resilience are grounded in practice.

A particularly important message for practitioners is the need to think beyond the myriad of challenges faced by grandparent caregivers and the crafting of simple programmatic “fixes” for each challenge. In the middle of the equation is the individual who possesses a host of strengths and resiliencies, as well as capacities that have yet to be discovered. In this context, intervention becomes an exercise in tapping into relative caregivers’ adaptive abilities, readiness to learn, and motivation to succeed.

The goal of helping grandparent caregivers to become more knowledgeable, effective advocates on behalf of their families and the children for whom they care is quite different than setting out to “give to” or “do for” them. Smith, Dannison, and James, in their chapter (“Resiliency and Custodial Grandparents: Recognizing and Supporting Strengths”), frame this intervention goal, as well as the book’s explication of the construct of resilience, in empowerment terms: “Resiliency is enhanced when grandparents are assisted in recognizing that knowledge is power” (pg. 233).

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