

2017

Kinship Care and Communication Family Portraits Project “Helping Teens to Tell their Stories”

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Recommended Citation

DiSciullo, E. (2017). Kinship Care and Communication Family Portraits Project “Helping Teens to Tell their Stories”. *GrandFamilies: The Contemporary Journal of Research, Practice and Policy*, 4 (2).

Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/grandfamilies/vol4/iss2/7>

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*Practice Brief***Kinship Care and Communication:
Family Portraits Project - Helping Teens Tell their Stories¹¹**

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Abstract

This practice brief focuses on the importance of communication within the kinship family with particular emphasis on the challenging teen years. It highlights information on the changes impacting relationships within kinship families as children age. This brief includes details about the *Family Portraits Project*, a specific and easy to replicate intergenerational project designed to enhance communication in kinship families.

Keywords: kinship care, art therapy, intergenerational caregiving

The Relatives as Parents Program (RAPP), funded by the Brookdale Foundation, and which has operated through the Cornell Cooperative Extension in Orange County, NY since 1998, is designed to assist grandparents and other relatives who have taken on the parenting role. As a program with an intergenerational focus, the needs of the entire family are addressed. Through formal surveys and anecdotal feedback gleaned from adult and youth participants, we have learned the importance of providing an environment where family members can come together to build a sense of belonging and community, assist in the development of personal and social skills, and recognize the strengths of their new family. One essential element of the family environment is promoting enhanced

¹ An earlier version of this article's content can be found at:
<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download;jsessionid=D53D06301059C5C16267E7F4272C13D1?doi=10.1.1.400.5890&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

communication between kinship caregivers and the children in their care. This brief focuses on the importance of communication within the kinship family, with emphasis on the challenging teen years. It contains details about a specific intergenerational project designed to enhance family communication, entitled the *Family Portraits Project*. The program includes 119 kinship families residing in Orange County, NY. Most families participating in the program had been involved with RAPP for several years. While the program was well received by families with school age children, families with teens also found the *Family Portraits Project* to be an excellent tool for enhancing their interpersonal communication. Teens, working cooperatively with their peers and caregivers, used this tool to explore their families' histories and to confidently tell their own stories. The youth voices clearly suggest the positive impact of this project,

“This is the best thing I have ever done. It makes me think that my family is right in front of me. ...still in my life.”

—Timothy, RAPP youth

“It has helped me look at my family history. Now when I grow up I won't forget it, because it will be right there for me.”

— Adam, RAPP teen

Background

Communication, while important for families with children of all ages, is especially challenging with teenagers in the family. Grandparents report increased difficulties parenting their grandchildren as these children get older. Research from Moore, Hatcher, Vandivere, and Brown (1999) confirmed that the teenage years are particularly challenging with regards to communication involving discipline for families in which grandparents are raising grandchildren, especially in families with older grandparents who tire more easily or have potentially outdated views on parenting. Common communication issues raised by both grandparents and grandchildren are:

- Difficulties relating to each other due to a generation gap, in which grandparents are perceived to have unreasonable guidelines related to clothing, rules, and dating, as well as a perception that the grandparents are unduly strict.
- Grandparents often feel that children today are not as receptive to their rules as they were in the past and that society at large is more lenient than they are accustomed.

These communication differences create difficulties on the part of the grandparent to develop and enforce realistic discipline strategies, and to accept discipline from the grandparents. Support, education, and communication help bridge these gaps and potentially reduce risky behaviors among teens

Research also suggest, older teens require more monitoring, report lower relationship quality with their grandparent receive less positive parenting, and have fewer family routines than do younger teens (Dunifon & Kopko, 2012). These findings suggest that grandparents need support and strategies to help them to remain involved in their teen's lives in a developmentally appropriate way.

Teens being raised by their grandparents also develop an increased awareness of the complexities of their living situation. They may have questions about their parents' past behavior and current role in their lives. They may also compare themselves to friends who are not being raised by their grandparents. A stage of adolescent development is establishing identity and considering one's role in the context of the family and peer network. This is a tall order for all teens, but teens being raised by grandparents face special challenges. For such teens, the identity-formation process includes thinking through why and how they came to live with their grandparent, what role their parent may play in their lives, and how they tell that story to themselves and to others.

Many teens being raised by grandparents have ongoing relationships with their parents, but find these relationships to be challenging. Dolbin-MacNab and Keiley (2009) found that a substantial group of teens (20%) refused to talk about their parents in a study, because many found it to be too distressing. These findings are all indications of the complex feelings some teens raised by grandparents have about their parents. Research further shows that when teens have a difficult relationship with their parents, their relationship with the grandparent can suffer with relationships of poor quality, more feelings of anger, lower family attachment, and less effective communication and parenting strategies (Dunifon & Kopko, 2012). Despite these challenges, many teens raised by grandparents report strong emotional bonds and warm interactions with their grandparents, as well as feelings of respect and gratitude that increase as children enter adulthood. Furthermore, grandparents raising grandchildren demonstrate high levels of warmth as well as an increased maturity and perspective that accompanies raising children for a second time.

Family Portraits Project Overview

Given the unique situations of kinship families, the need for opportunities to "tell stories" is a useful communication strategy for both teens and their caregivers. Unfortunately, however, teens are not always enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts, feelings, and intentions with the adults in their lives, especially when these thoughts and feelings involve their birth parents and difficult past histories. Current research on grandparents raising their grandchildren, as well as guidelines for implementing a

successful *Family Portraits Project* series to support the development of positive communication and strengthened family dynamics in such families, help to frame the described practice approach.

The adolescent development process, combined with teens increasing awareness about their unique living situation, highlight the need for efforts such as the *Family Portraits Project*, a creative family project that naturally opens the channels of communication. The program is a six to ten session series using art, writing, photography, and computer technology to develop a personal family book. The aim is to provide youth in kinship care with a safe, fun, and educational way to explore their family dynamics and history, while improving communication with their caregivers. It focuses on the creative process of storytelling as a vehicle for self-expression. Group discussions during each session provide opportunities for connecting with peers while take-home prompts allow for storytelling and intentional information-gathering at home. Through this process, each participant creates an individual book to take home and share with their family and friends.

Family Portraits Project Goals

The goals of the *Family Portraits Project* encompass emotional, academic, and social outcomes. Creating a family portrait allows participants to:

- Develop creative strategies for dealing with emotions and expand abilities to communicate emotions
- Hear and witness peer and adult support systems
- Develop peer relationships and interpersonal skills
- Improve family attachment and communication
- Achieve insight and personal/ family growth
- Work collaboratively during group discussions and develop feelings of camaraderie. Improve self-esteem and discover talents
- Improve perseverance through long-term commitment to their project
- Develop problem-solving and organizational skills, including ability to differentiate when to ask for support and when to work independently
- Improve 21st century technology skills through use of digital photography and various computer programs

Family Portrait Action Steps

The main action steps for implementing a *Family Portrait Project* are described below. The noted steps are flexible and may be adapted to best meet the needs of family members. .

- *Introduction* - Initially families are introduced to the project and informed that they will be asked to make a commitment to participate regularly. Consistent attendance throughout this project enhances group cohesion and promotes successful completion. Ideally groups should be limited to 10 families with each

session allowing for one hour of artmaking and additional time for clean-up, snack, and discussion. Anecdotal evidence suggests that youth ages 7 and up have been most successful in this model. It was found that younger children did not have the cognitive ability for long-term planning, computer skills needed, or understanding of some prompts.

- *Story Reading* - Next, a book about unique family structures is read to and discussed with the group to help open communication, break down barriers, and build community. *Love is a Family* by Roma Downey is one example of an effective story used in this context.
- *Former Stories* - Families are shown books that previous *Family Portraits Project* participants have created (or examples created by the staff) and are afforded opportunities to ask questions, express concerns, and discuss their willingness to fully participate. Providers are encouraged to create a personal book prior to starting this project to familiarize themselves with the process.
- *Selecting Book Topics* - During the first session, families are asked to review the list of possible book pages together and spend time as a family talking and taking notes about the topics. Some of the page prompts include: *The day I was born*, *Something you should know about me*, *The family member I am most like is,,,* (See Appendix for a comprehensive listing of topic prompts). Participants are encouraged to have fun discussing family memories, history, and legacy and to consider using different prompts to fuel dinnertime conversations or in place of TV time.
- *Family Memories* - Families are also encouraged to begin taking photos, as well as collecting family photos and other documentation, to help guide the process and encourage communication and creativity. Families who do not have access to a camera at home are provided with a disposable camera to use for taking new photographs.
- *Teen Groups* - Each session, the teens meet as a group for a discussion about the "topic of the week" which relates to one of the page prompts. For example, the group members might share "what I learned about my family," "what my family looks like," "what I really love about my family," or "my family's biggest challenge." They then will complete one page of their book using various art materials, writing, and/or photos to illustrate their reactions and expression about the topic or prompt.

- *Listen and Share* - Through this group process, participants utilize opportunities to listen to others who are like them and share thoughts and feelings about their family that they may not feel comfortable doing elsewhere. Beginning with their peers, the act of being heard and witnessed can be enough to open the door for continued communication outside of the group. Further, the multimodal opportunities for self-expression (through photos, art, books, and discussion) enable even the most nonverbal teens to explore and share their emotions.
- *Caregiver Groups* - While the teens are meeting, caregivers converse during support group about similar topics and their success or challenge in communicating with their teens. After these separate meetings, caregivers and teens join to work collaboratively on book pages or themes to include in the final book.
- *Book Compilation* - Once participants have created their book pages, they begin to compile their books using digital images of their artwork and computer technology to produce a bound book composed of their artwork, photos, and writing about their creative expressions.
- *Book Gallery* - The project then culminates with a "gallery of books" where participants are presented with their books and encouraged to share them with one another. Families are able to take these books home to keep and reflect on throughout the years as their "family portrait" changes.

Conclusion

While relationships between teens and caregivers can be complicated, most grandparent caregivers have an exceptional gift in being able to share their family history and build a lasting legacy. The benefits of this exploration reach not only teens and caregivers, but also family members near and far working to bridge the gaps that exist in these complex family portraits. The *Family Portraits Project* gives families permission to embrace their differences while developing the positive communication skills so critical in the risky teen years.

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Appendix

Family Portraits Project: Sample Page Prompts

Below is a listing of sample prompts that may be used by family members to assist in creating their family portraits. Page prompts may be adapted to meet family needs.

The day I was born...

Something you should know about me...

The family member I am most like is...

What makes me unique in my family...

How I see myself vs. How my family sees me..

Family shield...

Our family tree...

Visual timeline of our family...

My invention to make my world a better place...

What HOME feels like to me..

The best thing about ... (family member name)...

Me at age ____ (caregiver at same age as child)...

The best & worst thing about being ____ years old..

Self Portrait Page

Our favorite family activity

Favorite family recipe