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It takes a village to raise a grandchild: Developing communities of support for grand-families on PEI, Canada

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Cover Page Footnote

We wish to acknowledge all participants who engaged in our collaborative community workshops and particularly the grandparents who shared their experiences leading grand-families.

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Abstract

In this practice brief, we outline our research focused on grandparents raising grandchildren in Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. Specifically, we highlight a series of collaborative community workshops implemented as part of our research project. Using a participatory action research approach, we worked with grandparents raising grandchildren to codesign and implement the workshops, which we titled *It Takes a Village to Raise a Grandchild*. These two workshops brought together grandparents raising grandchildren and key community members, including clergy, educators, health-care providers, politicians, social services, child services, and researchers, with a total of 113 people engaged. The goal of these workshops was to build awareness and increase understanding of the issues facing grandfamilies and to increase cross-collaboration between sectors to optimize grandfamily wellbeing.

Overarching themes that arose as the priority issues affecting grandfamilies included: health, education, legal, social services, financial, and support/help. Central to the workshops was an opportunity to highlight the lived experience of being a grandparent raising grandchildren with a particular focus on resilience needed to lead a grandfamily. These workshops provided a catalyst for

interdisciplinary sharing and spurred the development of new partnerships and the creation of supportive networks.

It Takes a Village to Raise a Grandchild: Developing Communities of Support for Grandfamilies on PEI, Canada

Grandfamilies are created when grandparents step up and step in to be the primary caregivers for their grandchildren. Research has shown that families adapt and transition to become a grandfamily for diverse reasons, including parent illness, injury, or disability; parent addictions or substance use disorders; the absence, incarceration, or death of a parent; or parent immaturity such as adolescent pregnancy (Avery & Novoa, 2022; Chan et al., 2019; Choi et al., 2016; Hadfield, 2014; LeFebvre & Rasner, 2017; Martin et al., 2021; McLaughlin et al., 2017; Murray et al., 2022b). Grand-families are universal, crossing all cultures and societies (Chan et al., 2019). Despite this global reach, systematic reviews and meta-analyses show that a majority of research on this subject is generated in the United States and reflects the experiences of grandfamilies living in urban settings (Chan et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

In Canada, over half a million (553,855) children were living with at least one of their grandparents in 2021; of these families, 36,860 children were living with their grandparents as primary care providers (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Prior to 2001, grandfamilies were not counted in Canada until the concept of "census family" was broadened to include "skip-generation families," meaning

grandparents and grandchildren living in the same household without the middle-generation parent (Statistics Canada, 2022b). The grandparent was thus recognized as the child's “parent” within the census family. Census 2021 data compared to 2017 shows that the number of children living in a skip-generation family (not living with their parents) is on the rise, with an increase of 13.4% over that time period (Statistics Canada, 2017, 2022a).

Intentional Terminology

The term grandfamily is intentional and is most representative of the families we worked with in our project. We chose this term as opposed to other terms used—such as kinship care (Dolbin-MacNab & O'Connell, 2021), skipgeneration family (Statistics Canada, 2022), and custodial grandparents (Fruhauf et al., 2022)—because grandparents in our research did not feel these terms accurately represented the unique family that forms when grandparents raise grandchildren. They believed it is important to delineate the particular title when they create a family that is, indeed, “grand.” We agree with this position and view the term “grand” as grounded in the strength of the family unit and the grandparent that steps up and into raising grandchildren. This strengths-based approach was integral to the codesign of our research and informed the intentionality of the language we used, language that reflects dignity, honor, and respect for grandparents raising grandchildren.

While many grandparents take on their new parenting role without hesitation, they have unique experiences, face several challenges, and live with certain realities that warrant focused attention. Many grandparents in these families are second-, or even third-time caregivers. Stepping up to lead a grandfamily typically involves a significant shift in a grandparent's aspirations and expectations of life and/or retirement (Murray et al., 2022a). Leading a grandfamily can negatively impact the grandparent's well-being later in life, and grandparents in these families have reported feeling excluded, misunderstood, judged, and disregarded, resulting in a lack of community and financial support and services (Murray et al., 2022a).

Grandfamilies in Canada

In Canada, the presence of grandfamilies goes largely unnoticed. Grandfamilies report feeling invisible in their communities (Murray et al., 2022a). They say that service providers, public officials, educators, and health-care providers repeatedly fail to recognize or attend to the emotional, physical, and financial strains being placed on them as individuals (Murray et al., 2022a). While many grandparents are at retirement age, are on limited and fixed incomes, and may require assistance themselves due to advanced age and chronic illness, some grandfamilies are led by grandparents in their 40s or 50s who have now stepped into the role of "second-time parent" to their grandchildren (Murray et al., 2022a).

Our research on grandfamilies focuses on the experiences and stories of grandparents raising grandchildren in the small and mostly rural province of Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada. PEI is unique because it is geographically small (5,620 km²) and has a relatively low population compared to the other provinces in Canada. The population count is 167,680, and 21% of the population is over the age of 65 (Statistics Canada, 2022c). The whole island could be considered “rural” as the capital city of the province has a mere 38,000 residents (Statistics Canada, 2022c). Known for its tourism, farming, and fisheries, PEI is built on the strength of family, community, and connections. People are often engaged in their communities, with neighbors knowing each other and caring for one another.

The History of Grandfamilies on PEI

PEI is rapidly becoming a Canadian leader in grandfamily knowledge generation, knowledge mobilization, and legislative transformation addressing these families' issues. Much of this work has been done at a grassroots level, in direct response to a gap in services and supports specific to grandfamilies. One outcome of this grassroots work was the formation of a community-based nonprofit organization, Building GRAND-Families Inc.

Building GRAND-Families Inc. was founded *by* grandparents raising grandchildren *for* grandparents raising grandchildren. It was established as a not-for-profit organization to study, serve, and support families in PEI being led by a

grandparent(s) or great-grandparent(s) with or without parental involvement.

Building GRAND-Families Inc. offers grandparents a place to find information, support, direction, socialization, a nonjudgmental listening ear, and peer support. The organization's website provides stories of grandparents in similar situations to create a community-of-support, cultivate a sense of belonging and inclusion, and relieve some of the feelings of social isolation.

Thanks to Building GRAND-Families Inc., grandparents raising grandchildren and academic researchers have come together to work in partnership, codesigning research studies that advance knowledge specific to the experiences of Canadian grandparents raising grandchildren. The study described in this paper is one example of such research. It involved two distinct qualitative research methods: 1) collaborative community workshops and 2) conversational semi-structured interviews with grandparents raising grandchildren. This paper focuses on the design, implementation, and findings of the collaborative community workshops.

With an aim to promote and strengthen community action, we worked in partnership with grandparents raising grandchildren to develop the workshops. Workshop delegates included grandparents raising grandchildren, as well as representatives from community organizations that serve and support grandfamilies including (but not limited to): educators, health-care providers, policymakers, social services workers, child services representatives, and

researchers. The workshops aimed to build awareness and increase understanding regarding issues facing grandfamilies and to increase cross-collaboration between sectors to optimize grandfamily well-being on PEI. Central to the workshops was an opportunity to highlight the lived experience of being a grandparent raising grandchildren with a particular focus on resilience needed to lead a grandfamily. Framing the community workshops through the lens of *It Takes a Village to Raise a Grandchild*, our workshops provided a catalyst for interdisciplinary sharing and spurred the development of new partnerships and supportive networks responsive to grandfamilies' needs.

Partnering to Strengthen Action

Participatory action research was the overarching design used to guide the planning and implementation of the collaborative community workshops. Participatory action research engages people other than formally-trained researchers to offer ideas about the research question, the study design, how to interpret the findings, and how the findings can and should be used (Lawson et al., 2015). Fundamental to the conceptualization of this study was the intentional development of partnerships between and among academic and nonacademic members of the research team. In developing the project team for this participatory action research, we were mindful of recommendations made by Cargo and Mercer (2008) in that academic and nonacademic partners should strive for equal participation so that a balance can exist between scientific expertise and

excellence and the lived experience expertise offered by research partners.

Through a balanced co-sharing approach new opportunities to develop capacity and invite ownership of projects exist.

The Process: Developing and Delivering the Collaborative Community

Workshops

The *It Takes a Village to Raise a Grandchild* collaborative community workshops brought together grandparents with those in the community who study, serve, or support families. The research team worked collaboratively to brainstorm different sectors that grandfamilies intersect and interweave with on a regular basis. In determining this list of potential delegates, we asked the grandfamilies, "who is in regular contact with your lives, and who do you wish knew more about what it is like to be a grandfamily?" From the answers to this question, a diverse list of sectors were identified, including (but not limited to) educators, health care professionals, social workers, and government officials representing diverse perspectives and geographical locations. Personalized letters were then sent inviting these people to our workshops. These letters were followed up with a phone call.

To mitigate barriers to participation—i.e., transportation, personal schedules of grandfamilies and other participants—we hosted workshops in two distinct geographical regions of PEI, Western Region and Charlottetown. By offering these collaborative community workshops in two locations, we hoped to

promote diversity in community representation by those who study, serve, and support grandfamilies, as well as uncover additional factors specific to regional community contexts that should be considered.

Each four-hour workshop was scheduled from 10:00 a.m.–14:00 p.m. to support maximum participation from grandparents with school-aged grandchildren. The first workshop occurred in the Western Region of PEI and included 43 delegates. At the second, in our provincial capital city, over 70 delegates attended. (Over 90% of the delegates invited participated in a workshop or sent a designated representative.)

Representatives expressed their keen interest in participating in the workshop and learning more about the experiences of grandfamilies and how they can better serve or support them. Many community participants expressed that they appreciated the opportunity and were happy to participate, and conveyed that this workshop would be their first professional development experience focused on this unique family type.

Both workshops were designed to be highly participatory and organized similarly to ensure consistency. We intentionally chose round tables for all delegates to flatten hierarchies and allow respectful listening to grandfamilies' stories. We did not want the perception of a particular delegate sitting at the “head” of a rectangular table and leading a discussion, but rather we wished to promote the active and equal engagement of all delegates, with each person

bringing their experiences and insights into the discussions. Our goal in using a codesign participatory approach to knowledge sharing was for all delegates to leave our workshops with increased awareness, understanding, and ultimately new ideas for action that could be implemented into their respective fields.

Each circular table included six to eight delegates. All tables had at least one grandparent or great-grandparent raising their grandchildren as well as a combination of people representing policymakers, researchers, and professionals who frequently interact with grandfamilies. Our seating plan was strategically designed to promote the development of new relationships among delegates, i.e., requests from delegates to sit with friends or colleagues were denied.

Each workshop included the following components (with a facilitator guiding the day and directing the delegates on their activities):

- An Elder and Knowledge Keeper from the Mi'kmaq First Nation opened and closed each workshop to reflect our values and honour the Indigenous Peoples on whose land we gathered.
- Government representatives from the Ministry of Health and Wellness and the appointed Child and Youth Advocate spoke.
- Two grandparents shared their stories of becoming a grandfamily to the whole group, then the representative grandparent at each table shared stories of their lived experiences of leading a grandfamily with the delegates at their table. (It is these stories that opened hearts and minds.)

- Following introductions at each table group, the delegates engaged in an experiential learning activity where they worked together to identify critical issues impacting grandfamilies on PEI. Each issue was written down on a sticky note and placed on a *Challenge Wall*. Once all issues had been identified, participants worked together to categorize the issues into common themes.
- Groups then selected one theme, or key issue, to work on and developed an *Opportunities Map*, where participants discussed opportunities to address their chosen issue through changes in policies and practices. During these deeper discussions about each theme, additional issues were identified and subthemes emerged.
- Then, delegates brainstormed tangible *actions*, i.e., strategies and solutions for addressing their chosen issue. These recommended actions focused specifically on supports, funding, resources, and service provision.
- Each workshop concluded with a series of engaging debriefing activities where the recommended actions were shared with the larger group, and broader reflections on key insights gained through the workshop were discussed, using reflective questions such as “*Wouldn't it be great if grandparents raising their grandchildren on PEI. . .*”

Delegates acknowledged that addressing all the issues identified will be a monumental task and not something that can be solved by the government alone.

It really will *Take a Village*, including government, grandparents, practitioners, and researchers working together to implement sustained actions that improve the lives of grandfamilies across PEI.

Findings

After each workshop, the research team collected and reviewed all the sticky notes and poster papers written by delegates. Upon initial review, 507 issues facing grandfamilies on PEI were identified from the recorded individual sticky notes, transcribed verbatim onto an Excel spreadsheet, and categorized into the themes per the delegate's design. Some issues belonged to more than one theme and thus were represented in each applicable category or theme. Many issues were identified multiple times. For example, the word “support” appeared in 80 of the identified issues often associated with “lack of support.”

The following six overarching themes for priority issues were identified by the delegates: (1) health, (2) education, (3) legal, (4) social services, (5) financial, and (6) support/help. These overarching themes as well as subthemes identified by the delegates are offered in *Table 1: Priority Issues Affecting Grandfamilies*.

Table 1

Priority Issues Affecting Grandfamilies

Health	Education	Legal	Social Services	Financial	Support/ Help
Mental illness & mental health	Technology	General “legal”	Isolation	Child care	Respite
Substance use disorder	Educational supports	Policy	Time	Medical	Time
Aging	General “education”	Guardianship	Parenting relationship	Legal	Guidance & mentorship
Financial		Lawyer access	Child protection services	Housing	General “support” & “help”
		Stability & security	Sports & activities	General “financial”	
		Child protection services	Navigation of supports	Stress	
			Housing	Services/ aide	
			General other	Transportation	

While **health** was identified as one of the six overarching priority issues, it permeated all of the themes. Specifically, the conversations were dominated by mental illness and addictions, stressors related to the grandparent's physical and cognitive deterioration **possibly** due to aging, the inevitability of death, and worry about who would care for their grandchildren when they die.

Delegates noted that grandfamilies experience additional **financial** stress from accessing mental health services since private insurance plans rarely cover personal and family counseling, and if they do, grandchildren are not recognized as eligible dependents. Counseling is often foregone due to extensive wait times in the publicly-funded provincial health system and the high cost of private mental health therapy. Predominant areas related to mental health that were discussed include grandfamily burnout, compassion fatigue, stress, trauma, grief, and loss.

Delegates identified the need for more professional development in **education** so that early childhood and elementary school educators can learn about grandfamilies and the unique experiences of children living in grandfamilies. In particular, it would be beneficial for educators to learn about when and how to advocate for, and to assist with accessing, learning assessments and supports for grandfamily children (who may have underlying learning challenges and possible undiagnosed learning disabilities related to in-utero parental use of alcohol and drugs).

A lack of policy and legal rights for grandparents raising their grandchildren was a priority issue discussed in the **legal** theme. Delegates felt there were gaps in legislation, policies, and practices to support grandfamilies. These gaps negatively impact the stability and security of the grandfamily, contributing to “not feeling permanent as a family” due to systemic challenges related to custody and guardianship agreements. Also identified were challenges grandfamilies face as they navigate complex legal systems and experience additional financial stress due to the high cost legal services.

In discussions related to **social services**, delegates repeatedly expressed concerns that existing government services and supports are developed in “silos.” There is a need for policies, practices, services, and supports to be created that are child- and grandfamily-centred, where the best interest of the child and family as a whole are the central focus of all decisions made. Concern was raised regarding the relationships between grandparents and Child Protective Services (CPS), with grandparents reporting that their experiences had been characterized by “constant stress and trauma of CPS visits.” Housing was also identified under the social services theme, particularly, discussions on how challenging it can be to access affordable housing due to current low vacancy rates and government housing policies that do not recognize grandfamilies.

The **financial** theme included discussions about stress arising from additional and unexpected financial costs related to child care, legal,

transportation, housing, and medical expenses (e.g., therapy, dental, and off-island medical trips). Delegates identified how a lack of understanding and awareness about grandfamilies resulted in policies that were not responsive to the unique needs of their families and contributed to additional financial stress.

The final theme identified was broad and reflected a need for general **support/help**, i.e., the need for additional formal and informal support for grandfamilies. Examples included the need for respite care similar to what is provided to foster families and access to support groups such as those that exist within Building GRAND-Families Inc., which provide opportunities for grandparents across PEI to come together regularly for sharing, community building and socialization.

In the final exercise of the workshop, delegates worked together to identify tangible actions they felt could directly impact their assigned priority issues. The recommended actions included:

- **more financial support** to be on par with foster family compensation;
- **a grandfamily navigator** who could serve as an advocate for grandfamilies and help them access services and supports, and be the primary point of contact for both grandparents and those who work to serve and support grandparents raising grandchildren;

- a **less siloed approach in developing governmental policies** that directly impact grandfamilies and service providers, leading to the development of a one-stop shop for grandfamilies;
- **legal support** for custody and guardianship matters, specifically, providing access to affordable (or free) lawyers in a timely manner;
- **revisions to child and family legislation** to acknowledge the rights of grandfamilies;
- access to **respite care**; and
- additional intergenerational mental health services for grandfamilies as a whole (grandchildren, parents, and grandparents).

Discussion: Impact

Throughout this process, new understandings, and insights about grandfamilies living in Canada emerged. The primary aim was for immediate impact on the service and support providers, politicians, and other non-grandparent delegates to gain a greater understanding and awareness of the issues facing grandfamilies and discover how they could work more effectively with grandparents raising grandchildren to address the issues identified. Secondly, we hoped to illuminate to the larger research community about the lived experience of grandfamilies and offer a way to engage with this population that is meaningful, inclusive, and collaborative. In doing so, we attended to gaps in knowledge about the Canadian grandfamily experience and offered a more rural

perspective from lens of our small island (Chan et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2017).

These workshops made it clear that progressive solutions to issues impacting grandfamilies can be found through increased awareness, knowledge-sharing, and collaboration and that, when such solutions are adopted, it can lead to strengthened grandfamily well-being and resilience.

Through this participatory approach to knowledge-sharing in our collaborative community workshops, we aimed to increase knowledge about the unique needs and challenges experienced by grandfamilies, become a catalyst for interdisciplinary sharing, and spur the development of new partnerships and supportive networks that are responsive to the needs of grandfamilies on PEI. Fruhauf et al. (2022) identified the strength in using community-based participatory research with grandfamilies to help bridge science into practice and the importance of the role of university–community partnerships.

Following the workshops, the research team shared our findings with multiple government departments and policymakers which led to several important conversations and consultations. Some of the known impacts to date:

- We were invited to participate in meetings to review the PEI Child Protection Act, where we spoke specifically about issues facing grandfamilies.

- The Department of Social Development and Housing implemented a tailored mental health support program for grandparents raising grandchildren on PEI after our workshops.
- The findings of our workshops provided evidence to help refine and enhance a program for grandparents raising grandchildren and alternate caregivers. This program, now known as the *Grandparents and Alternate Caregivers Program*, provides monthly financial assistance, medical, dental, and optometry benefits, and child-care support for grandparents who are raising grandchildren and others who are stepping in and stepping up to care for children when their parents are unable to do so.
- New relationships were established between educators, health-care providers, and others, leading to new opportunities to work together to enhance understanding of the unique experiences and issues facing grandfamilies on PEI. For example, we worked with educators to develop a booklet focused on what teachers should know about working with grandfamilies. This booklet is being rolled out to all schools across PEI.
- We are working on a new project to promote grandfamily mental well-being and resilience, partnering with one of the workshop delegates to create an equine-assisted learning program focused on the unique needs of grandfamilies. This program provides 10 sessions with exercises all aimed at strengthening resilience and enhancing social support.

- We are also working with a private therapist (registered social worker), who has designed a series of small group workshops addressing topics raised by workshop delegates.

Conclusion

Through our collaborative community workshops, we discovered that raising a grandchild indeed takes a village. Central to the workshops was highlighting the lived experience of being a grandparent raising grandchildren on PEI. Through active engagement of delegates in roundtable discussions, we collectively learned about the priority issues impacting grandfamilies which are consistent with reports from other grandfamilies (Fox et al., 2022).

Delegates then collaborated to develop recommended targeted actions on the identified priority issues, including access to information, system navigation, and financial, legal, social, and emotional support.

Workshops began with people from diverse backgrounds sitting at tables with a keen desire to learn more about the experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren on PEI. By the end of the workshops, these people had established new relationships and shared a collective vision for how these issues could be addressed through practical and realistic solutions.

We believe that working collaboratively through partnership engagement is key to success. Our workshops presented an opportunity to bring people together in a spirit of collaboration and partnership. Prior to these workshops, many

delegates did not know one another nor understand the experiences of grandparents raising grandchildren. While they may have been working regularly with these families, they did not know how they, through their respective roles, could work with others to support grandfamilies.

In this practice brief, we have described an example of participatory action research and showcased how academic researchers can partner with knowledge users to cocreate studies. Working with grandparents raising their grandchildren in the planning and implementing the collaborative community workshops, we made great strides in advancing issues facing grandfamilies. Through active engagement and knowledge mobilization, this project has helped to build capacity, awareness, and new relationships between grandparents and community partners.

The opportunity to bring together grandparents raising grandchildren with practitioners and policymakers was pivotal in building community and fostering new collaborations. Following our workshops, our research team prepared presentations and reports for practitioners and policymakers, providing evidence and a road map for strengths-based and family-centred actions. Findings from this project have been used to revise and refine policies and programs and have helped to raise awareness and increase understanding about issues that affect grandfamilies.

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