

BIG MAMA

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

A *Big Mama* Discussion Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Tracy Sereteau's documentary about 89-year-old Viola's fight to retain custody of her grandson illustrates many of the difficulties facing an increasing number of grandparents raising their grandchildren in the USA today.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide can be used to facilitate discussion among different groups of viewers. Possible applications include Professional Training including Social workers, Medical staff. Also University faculty/school and child care center staff University Programs including Sociology, Psychology, Gerontology, Urban studies, Anthropology, Cross-culture and other grandparent support groups

For social workers and other professional staff:

- Facilitate staff in beginning discussions about their own prejudices and assumptions.
- Encourage professionals to develop appropriate and sensitive interventions and programs to assist grandparents acting as surrogate parents.
- Stimulate discussion on issues of cultural sensitivity.

For University Programs:

- Increase awareness of the contributions that aging persons make to their families and society.
- Encourage analysis of the wider issues of foster care and child welfare reform.
- Examine the role of the state and the role of the family and society.
- For grandparent support groups:
 - Help grandparents articulate their fears and anxieties.
 - Encourage caregivers to develop survival strategies through open and honest communication about the issues they face.
- Stimulate discussion about resources available.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

More than one in 10 grandparents will parent a grandchild for at least six months, often much longer, as the number of children going to live with grandma and/or grandpa continues to rise dramatically and become increasingly a focus of the public eye. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1997 almost four million children were living in homes maintained by their grandparents, up 76 percent from 2.2 million in 1970. In a majority of the cases, grandparents were the primary caregivers. The U.S. 2000 Census Supplementary Survey found 5.6 million grandparents with grandchildren under 18 living with them. Almost half of these had responsibility for their grandchildren, including 840,000 who had been caring for the children for five or more years. While this alternative family group is present across all socioeconomic and ethnic groups and geographic areas, these families are more likely to be poor and located in or near cities. According to 1995 Census data, 13.5 percent of African-American children lived with their grandparents, as did 6.5 percent of Hispanics and 4.1 percent of whites. The most common reasons why children end up living with their grandparents are parent drug or alcohol abuse, neglect or abandonment of children; incarceration, physical or mental illness, death of one or both parents; teenage pregnancy; divorce or parental joblessness. In the last decade, grandparent and kin caregivers have become more visible and proactive - organizing support groups and joining with children's advocates, service providers, and concerned public officials to publicize the issues and begin developing a support system for relatives raising children. Grandparent advocates hope the numbers will help them push for laws to make it easier to gain custody of a neglected or abused grandchild. Without custody, it is difficult to deal with schools or doctors, and often impossible to obtain subsidized health insurance or day care if needed.

VIDEO SYNOPSIS

Big Mama follows 18 months in the life of Viola Dees (89 years old) as she tries to persuade Los Angeles authorities that she can care for her grandson, 9-year-old Walter. Born to a drug addicted mother, Walter was in foster care until Dees managed to get him released into her care at the age of four. He was a very disturbed child, traumatized by the death of his father and the disappearance of his mother, while still appearing bright and sweetly loving to his grandmother. The film focuses on the continuous battle against age discrimination faced by Dees and many like her. While contending with her own declining health, and a bureaucratic and legal system that continually threatens to force them apart, Dees fights the misconception that age supersedes one's ability to love and care for a child. "When, exactly, are you too old to love your own grandchild?" she asks. Big Mama candidly chronicles the family when life deals them several blows. Dees suffers a heart attack, provoking hostile and disturbed behavior from Walter who burns their house down when he sets a magazine ablaze in his room. When Walter is admitted to a psychiatric hospital, the doctors determine that Dees is no longer able to handle her grandson, and will not release him to her until she agrees to place him in long-term residential care. After a challenging search, Walter is accepted at an appropriate facility and thrives during his year there. However, when treatment is completed, social workers determine that Dees is too frail to care for him, and Walter is placed in a foster home. Walter's aunts and uncles are unable to take him in, possibly because they feel unqualified to deal with his often threatening and troubled behavior. Sadly, Viola Dees died at age 91. Weeks later, the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services sought an eleventh-hour block of the film's release, citing issues of Walter's privacy. The case was ultimately dismissed and the documentary went on to win an Academy Award in the Short Documentary section. None of the film is staged or reenacted.

OPTIONAL PRE-SCREENING ACTIVITY

Ask the audience questions to introduce the theme: Is anyone here a grandparent? Was anyone in the audience raised by a grandparent? Is anyone in the audience raising grandchildren?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A. GENERAL

Could you identify with any of the people in the film? How do you feel about the family in the film? Do you think this kind of situation occurs often?

B. FAMILY AND STATE RESPONSIBILITY

For the first time, the U.S. Census Bureau counted how many grandparents are raising their children in the 2000 Census. That question was mandated in the 1996 welfare reform law, as lawmakers and welfare officials warned of the number of parents unable to care for their children because they were addicted to drugs, in prison or dead. What kind of social or state interventions might halt the upward trend of children sent to live with grandparents?

Walter's aunts and uncles were unable or unwilling to take over responsibility of their brother's child when authorities deemed Viola too frail to take Walter back in, or when Viola died. What is the responsibility of the family versus the responsibility of the state in this situation? Is family responsibility just a myth? Should the emphasis be on keeping a child with his or her extended family? What kind of supports or programs might have encouraged Walter's extended family to seek custody?

C. FINANCE

Grandparents face a number of difficulties, including financial when they take over the role of surrogate parent. Many elderly people are already living on a low income and taking on the care of a grandchild may put their economic future in jeopardy. Meal programs usually cease, subsidized housing may be jeopardized, or eviction from senior housing may occur when a child enters the household. Many grandparents are denied benefits provided to foster parents based on their blood relation to the child, even though they may be in just as much need. Such inadequate assistance only adds to grandparents' economic difficulties, and in a sense penalizes them for their willingness to care for their grandchildren. What type of government support should be available to grandparent caregivers?

The TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) program, a result of welfare reform in 1996, offers financial help to families with a low income. The money comes from the federal government, but the states run the program. Adults can not receive TANF benefits for more than five years (a lifetime limit) and must get a job when the state says you are ready. The rules affecting grandparents and their grandchildren vary from state to state. In most states a child-only grant is available which exempts the grandparent from the work requirement. Is it the state's responsibility to pay provide financial assistance in these cases? Should it be easier to access aid?

D. FOSTER CARE

As of September 1999, 568,000 children lived in out-of-home care (family foster care, kinship care or residential care). Of the children in foster care, 42% were black non-Hispanic, 36% were white non-Hispanic, and 15% were Hispanic, according to the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) National Fact Sheet 2000. Children in the child welfare system are more likely than other children to be living in poverty and be in poor health. Adolescents in foster care are among those most at risk to abuse alcohol or drugs, contract and transmit HIV infection, or become a teen parent, the CWLA states. Dees adamantly did not want Walter to be part of the foster care system. Is the U.S. foster care system so bad that grandparent's feel compelled to step in? What steps could be taken to change this?

E. LEGAL ISSUES

Grandparents who want to legalize the relationship with the grandchildren they are raising have the option of adoption, guardianship, certification as a foster parent, or powers of attorney. Unless the parent is deceased, adoption is difficult because it entails terminating all rights and obligations of the child's parents, and requires that the grandparent must admit their child is an unfit parent. Guardianship may be either permanent or temporary. Certification as a foster parent qualifies the caregiver for financial benefits on a par with other foster parents. Powers of attorney allow grandparents only to make decisions regarding the grandchildren. They do not transfer legal custody. Grandparents without legal rights or duties, who just assume daily responsibilities, can face difficulties. They are ineligible for state benefits and must abide by decisions of the child's parent. The courts are supposed to base their decision of the "best interests of the child" rather than the interests of the grandparent. However, the rights of the grandparents often come after the rights of the natural parent. What rights should grandparent caregivers have? How easy should it be to overrule parental rights? Who should decide what is best for the child?

Schools and health centers do not always recognize grandparents as primary caregivers, so that even routine actions such as enrolling the children in public school or getting them vaccinated can become a huge task. Accessing health insurance can also be a difficult process. Should these processes be changed to recognize other types of family units? How could this be done?

States are adopting varied strategies to address the needs of grandparent caregivers, according to the AARP. Some have passed kinship care legislation, which enables grandparents raising grandchildren to receive the same legal rights and benefits as foster parents. In a few states grandparent caregivers' legal rights have been improved. Formal

temporary custody, which gives legal authority for a child to the grandparent, without the need to prove that a parent is unfit, goes a long way toward easing what is at best a painfully difficult experience for all family members. In other states, the social service system has moved away from a single-minded emphasis on family reunification toward policies that consider the best interest of the children. Existing supportive programs - Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income, Head Start, and Food Stamps - have been made more "grandparent-friendly." Should this be the decision of the individual states or should such decisions and policies be made at federal level?

F. CHILDREN

Children who were prenatally exposed to drugs, such as Walter, or who have suffered from abuse or neglect may suffer from physical and/or emotional problems that may make it difficult to provide care for them. Despite the problems, Dees hoped that her time with Walter made a difference: "I hope deep in my heart that Walter remembers some of the good things that I've taught him and he'll be able to fall back on them and recognize them." Is there a temptation for professionals to give up too fast on these children or to underestimate the power of love? Can love alone make a difference? At what stage is it "too late" for these children? 2. Walter experienced a series of profound losses in the early years of his life with the disappearance of his mother and the death of his father. After Dees' heart attack he became deeply disturbed, hostile and difficult to manage. "He's afraid he's losing someone again," was his aunt's explanation. Would it have been better for Walter not to become so close to his grandmother?

CONCLUSION

This issue is gaining widespread attention as the number of grandparents raising their grandchildren increases, and as grandparents become more vocal. There are many resources available to researchers, professional and grandparents. The following websites and books will provide a start point for those wishing to learn more about this complex social issue.

REFERENCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

WEBSITES

AARP's Grandparent Information Center has fact sheets, information on local support groups, and a newsletter for grandparent caregivers. www.aarp.org/grandparents

The Brookdale Foundation Group provides research support and money for programs that serve grandparent caregivers. www.brookdalefoundation.org/

The Association for Gerontology in Higher Education (AGHE) provides support for gerontology research, instructional, and service programs in universities and other institutions of higher learning. www.aghe.org

Generations United is a national organization that provides information and resources to grandparents and service programs. www.gu.org

National Alliance for Caregiving connects families with information on caregiver resources and local services. www.caregiving.org

Child Welfare League of America. In addition to their other services, CWLA offers an annual national conference that focuses exclusively on kinship care programs and issues. www.cwla.org

Children's Defense Fund provides a strong, effective voice for all the children of America who cannot vote, lobby, or speak for themselves. www.childrensdefense.org

Information on welfare reform provided by the Administration for Children and Families. www.acf.dhhs.gov/news/welfare/

BOOKS

Black Grandparents as Parents. Lenore Madison Poe, Ph.D., ISBN: 0-9633992-0-9

Empowering Grandparents Raising Grandchildren. Carole B. Cox, ISBN: 0-8261-1316-8.

Raising Our Children's Children. Deborah Doucette-Dudman (with Jeffrey R. LaCure), ISBN: 0-925190-91-8.

Relatives Raising Children. Marianne Takas, The Brookdale Foundation Group, 126 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022

Relatives Raising Children: An Overview of Kinship Care. Joseph Crumbley (Editor), Robert L. Little (Editor), ISBN: 0-878686-84-3.

Second Time Around. Joan Callandar, ISBN: 1-58151-021-7.

To Grandmother's House We Go and Stay: Perspectives on Custodial Grandparents. Editor: Carole B. Cox, ISBN: 0-8261-1286-2.

CONTRIBUTORS

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