

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in Simcoe County

June 2003

- **Prepared for: The Barrie & District Association for
People with Special Needs**
- **Grands Parenting Again Support Group, Barrie, Ont.**

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1) Background:

The Barrie & District Association for People with Special Needs (BDAPSN) has actively supported a local group of grandparents known as Grands Parenting Again, since 2000. The latter group was developed as a result of grandparents in the Barrie area requesting that a playgroup be established specifically for those grands who had custody of their grandchildren or grandnephews/nieces.

Because BDAPSN has a long history of providing early childhood education and related services across Simcoe County, they were more than willing to work with this unique group of parents.

Grandparents as primary caregivers for grandchildren face special challenges and have a variety of needs that typical parents do not face. Over the past several years, the Barrie group has met regularly, shared individual experiences, organized workshops with the assistance of BDAPSN staff and traded information on a variety of community services. In 2003, the group in partnership with BDAPSN requested funding from the National Child Benefit Reinvestment Fund to undertake a broader view of the issue of grands raising their grandchildren.

The proposal identified a primary need to determine how many grandparents were the primary providers for their grandchildren across Simcoe County. The project also wanted to determine the key issues facing these grands and to discern how many grandparenting families were “at risk” and why. The project would also attempt to determine which local services were being used effectively and where obvious gaps in support existed.

In addition to these major outcomes, the proposal also suggested that a one-day Conference be held to bring grandparents together from across the County. The purpose of the day would be to provide an opportunity for grands to network, participate in educational seminars and identify additional needs collectively.

2) Methodology:

When funding was subsequently approved for the project, a consultant (Paul Muldoon) was hired to address the outcomes identified. This would include meeting directly with grandparents across the County and undertaking a literature and demographic review. The consultant was also asked to help organize and manage the Conference event and to prepare a subsequent Report on the overall project findings.

Focus group meetings were held in late May/early June in Orillia, Collingwood, Midland/Penetanguishene and Barrie. Attendance at the meetings ranged from

8-15 people depending on the location. The Ontario Early Years Centres across the County hosted the sessions and had local staff participate as well.

Individual interviews took place with grandparents in Alliston and Bradford/Innisfil in lieu of formal group sessions. Collateral meetings also occurred with the Simcoe CAS, a local Legal Aid representative and BDAPSN staff.

3) Broad Demographics:

The role of grandparents as primary providers for their grandchildren is a rapidly growing social phenomenon both in Canada and in the United States.

According to 2001 Census Canada data, there are 56,790 grands raising grandchildren across Canada with no biological parent present. 50% of these households are noted as single grandparent providers. In 1996, the census data had shown only 27,000 households in this overall category nationally. While this increase seems remarkable and may reflect differing methods of identification, it confirms nonetheless that this is a powerful and growing trend across the country.

Ontario accounted for 19,445 or 34% of the total number. In keeping with the national trend, fifty three percent (10,195) of the Ontario group are single grands.

In terms of children being supported, the 2001 data suggests that 37,680 Canadian kids aged 0-19 were living with grandparents as the primary provider. (25,245 were 0-15; 12,435 were 16-19). (Of note, a further 19,110 young adults between the ages of 20-35 were living with their grandparent(s) who were still acting as the primary provider.)

In Ontario, the data states that 11,685 children (0-19) were in the primary support and care of their grandparents in 2001. Of this total, 7670 were 0-15 and 4015 were 16-19.

According to the 2000 US Census, there are 2,350,477 grandparents in the USA that are responsible for raising 4.5 million of their grandchildren. Fully 10% of all American grandparents are raising one or more of their grandchildren.

4) Why is this Phenomenon Occurring?

A wide-ranging review of articles, interviews, research, etc. reveals that there are a series of factors at work contributing to the growth of grandparents raising their grandchildren in Ontario and elsewhere. Many of these elements were confirmed locally. They include:

- *Mental health issues of biological parents.*
- *Drug/alcohol abuse or addiction problems with the parents.*
- *Teen pregnancy. Inability to assume/ maintain parental role.*
- *Separation or divorce.*
- *Lifestyle issues, transience, etc.*
- *Poverty.*
- *Death or disability of a biological parent.*
- *Sole parenting responsibilities and inability to cope.*

5) Why Do Grandparents Do It?

In most cases, grandparents genuinely recognize that they are the blood relatives of their grandchildren regardless of circumstances. They are often drawn to and bond strongly with their grandchildren who may be at risk. Some have been involved with these children since birth or within several days or months of the child's birth if issues were apparent.

There is also no doubt that grandchildren also bond strongly with their grandparents when the latter take on this role at an early stage in the child's life. This occurs in spite of the confusion and stress of the relationships with biological parents as well as grands.

Some grandparents have applied to the Family Court for custody against the biological mother and/or father independently of any CAS involvement. Others have applied after their grandchildren have been put in the care of the CAS following an apprehension. The legal test for custody in all cases is whether the best interests of the child are served by placing him/her with the grandparent the biological parent or some other alternative provider.

Grands typically feel very strongly about keeping their grandchildren connected to their own families and out of the formal foster care system if possible. They also feel the need to instill a sense of security for their grandchild including the knowledge that their families did not abandon them. Thus, in spite of the significant stressors that accompany the role, grandparents are stepping up to the plate in greater numbers than ever.

Parenting has changed over the years and many grands feel uncertain in this context, particularly given the nature of the undertaking and the passage of time since their own parenting experience. Most however are willing to relearn these skills and to apply them in a different time and context.

Most will also gladly make the financial and social sacrifices necessary to take on the role. Typically, they feel a great deal of gratification and sense of purpose from the role as well as the stress and hard work.

6) Social Cost/Savings:

The data suggests that grandparents are providing a very valuable service on behalf of the Province of Ontario and Canada as a whole. For instance, if all 11,685 Ontario children being raised by grands were in the care of local CAS's and placed in foster care homes, the cost to support them would exceed \$10.6 Million per year. (based on an average \$25.00 per diem foster care rate).

If only the 0-15 age category were considered, the cost for their foster care maintenance would still approximate \$7.0 M per year.

7) Overreaching Issues:

a) Financial Impact:

Grandparents in this role regardless of community share a common experience of feeling the burden of increased financial costs in taking on the primary parental role for their grandchildren.

Most common for older grands is the impact related to the costs of raising children in a world of fixed retirement incomes. For younger grands, there is the strain of having to provide additional monies while still working for the same pay cheque. Irrespective of income, these grands are raising children at a time where costs are more than double what they may have faced as parents themselves.

One common example relates to the cost of securing custody for their grandchild in the Court system. Due to assets accumulated over a lifetime (retirement savings, home, car, etc.) many are ineligible for Legal Aid and have been forced to use their retirement savings to pay for legal costs. Some have spent in excess of \$10,000 locally in this regard.

Other areas where grands face financial impact are:

- Cost of drugs/dental assistance for those without insurance or social assistance benefits.*
- Expenses related to community involvement and special events for kids. (sports, summer camps, etc.)*
- Child care for working grands with pre-school grandchildren.*
- Legal costs related to custody reviews.*
- Ongoing basic care on a month-to-month basis. (food, clothing, shelter)*

Many view current policy, which refuses to financially support grands as legitimate alternative foster care providers frustrating and unfair. The only option in Ontario has been for individuals to apply for Temporary Care Assistance, a foster allowance program administered by municipal governments through the Ontario Works Act. This provides for a maximum monthly entitlement of \$214.00 per month for the first child and \$174.00 for any additional children.

This entitlement is available as long as deemed necessary and is based on the child's as opposed to the grands income. Drug and limited dental coverage are usually part of the allowance and special activities (soccer, baseball, swimming lessons, etc.) may be approved at the discretion of the local jurisdiction.

Common objections from grands to this system are the limited allowance itself, (maximum of \$7.00 per day), the expectation/requirement to pursue support from either biological parent on an ongoing basis, having the program administered through the Ontario Works system and the requirement that the monthly allowance be reduced based on any other entitlement from programs such as the National Child Benefit.

b) Emotional/Physical Stress:

Various studies in both the U.S. and Canada have confirmed that parenting grandchildren negatively impacts grandparent health in many cases, either physically, emotionally or both. In one American study, 25% of grandparents interviewed reported clinical levels of depression as compared to 14% for those not in the role.

Some of the factors that contribute to the high stress factors are:

- *Conflict, disappointment and uncertain involvement with biological parents.*
- *Stressful visit with biological parents.*
- *Physical demands of parenting young or teenaged children on middle aged or elderly grandparents.*
- *Anger and confusion of grandchildren regarding relationships with their biological parents and/or grandparents. “Are you Mom”?*
- *Uncertainty of how to discipline children who already may be emotionally fragile or have other special needs related to their formative years or experiences.*
- *Workload related to supporting grandchildren in addition to other family obligations, jobs in some cases, other important spousal or parental relationships, etc.*
- *Loss of freedom, isolation in the role, loss of former social networks, lack of a readily available support system for many grands.*
- *For some younger grandparents, the stress related to supporting their own aging parents as well as assuming responsibility for their grandchild or grandchildren. This is the ultimate “sandwiched” experience.*
- *Lack of available or affordable respite or relief from the role.*
- *Aging and physical fatigue. Feeling overwhelmed and drained.*
- *Mixed social support from the community which ranges from “Are you Crazy?” to “You’re a Saint”.*
- *Frustration with the court system and nagging fear of future custody reviews and possible reversals of the custody disposition.*

- *Lack of public awareness of the issues or recognition of the valued role that grands are playing in this regard.*

8) Local Demographic Data:

Simcoe County is a rapidly growing area of Southern Ontario. According to County of Simcoe data, its current population is 377,000, up from 325,000 in 1996. This represents a 14.3% growth rate over this period.

In terms of grandparents raising grandchildren, extrapolation from Census Canada data regarding some of the County's major urban areas (Barrie, Orillia, Collingwood, Midland) revealed that in these communities alone, 300 grandparents are raising 160 of their grandchildren. However, these numbers only address 46% of the County's total population.

By using the same ratio and applying the data to the remaining 54% of the County population, it is estimated that there are approximately 650 grandparents in the County who are the primary caregiver for some 350 children.

Another way of estimating the total local number is to compare the ratio of grandparents locally to provincial demographic data. In this context, from a 2001 Ontario population of 11,410,000, Census Canada indicates that there are 19,445 grands and 11,685 children within this category.

Applying this ratio to the municipal population of 377,050 results in an estimated number of 641 grandparents raising grandchildren in Simcoe County. This confirms the accuracy of the projection at approximately 650 grands from two separate sources. (federal and municipal).

Based on the 160 children extrapolated for the local urban centres (46% sample), we can posture that this figure would reach 350 children when applied on a Countywide basis.

9) Results from Local Focus Groups

Local Focus group meetings were held in Barrie, Orillia, Collingwood and Midland/Penetanguishene. Unfortunately, there were limited registrations in Alliston and Bradford, which resulted in individual interviews being conducted as an alternative in these locations.

For many participants outside the Grands Parenting Again group based in Barrie, this marked the first time that they had been involved in any discussions with other grandparents who were also raising their grandchildren.

In addition to initial networking and information sharing, the meetings also resulted in the articulation of some common themes regarding the issues/needs facing local grands. They were as follows:

- ***The Value of Support Groups:*** *There was a significant commitment noted for the development of additional groups in each of the major communities across the County. These self-help models are viewed as crucial vehicles for peer support and education. Budding groups are already meeting in Midland and Orillia as a result of the focus group activity.*
- ***Financial Strain:*** *Financial issues were raised at **all** sessions. Comments echoed findings already noted in the areas of loss of retirement savings, displeasure with the limits of the Temporary Care Allowance provisions, cost for extra needs, high cost of drugs, dental & eyeglasses for those who did not qualify for the OW program, need for both grands to work in some cases to make ends meet, the limits of sole support or fixed incomes in other cases, expensive child care for those still working with pre-school grandchildren, etc.*
- ***Legal Issues:*** *included lengthy custody processes in many cases, the tenuous basis of the agreements in some instances (subject to ongoing review by application), the high cost of legal representation, a lack of local lawyers practicing Family law, lack of accurate and affordable legal advice, etc.*
- ***Emotional Stresses:*** *included ongoing conflict with biological parents, impact of the role on spousal and other family relationships, the confusion and mixed feelings of grandchildren as they bond with grands while seeing biological parents sporadically or not at all in some cases, the loss of personal freedom of grands, the loss of social networks, feelings of isolation, impact at work, etc.*
- ***Lack of Public Awareness or Acceptance:*** *including lack of government recognition for the role that grands are playing, low level of public awareness of the issue, mixed response to the undertaking from the community, etc.*
- ***Age and Physical Health:*** *physical stress as well as mental impact; children take a physical toil that is harder at this stage of life, lack of respite options or the money to purchase relief support from the role.*

- **Lack of Readily Available Counselling Services for Grands as well as Grandchildren:**, some grandchildren have special physical or emotional issues related to their earlier care in abusive environments, grands have feelings of being overwhelmed at times, the impact on other family members is significant, grandchildren fear the death or possible abandonment of their grandparents, etc.
- **Mixed Perceptions of CAS Involvement:** There was mixed experience noted by participants in terms of their involvement with the Simcoe CAS. Many saw the Society as having been supportive, a partner and ally who operated in the best interests of their grandchild. Others however were mistrustful and feared further CAS involvement.

10) Results of the June 21st 2003 Conference Day:

The Countywide Conference drew over 50 grandparents on a summer Saturday in June including 9-10 grandfathers. The following presentations were included in the daylong session:

Paul Muldoon, Research Consultant to the Project: (Review of initial Findings)

Alex Von Bredow, Supervisor, Family Duty Counsel, Legal Aid of Ontario: (discussion of Court related processes; Q&A)

Sue Carmichael, Director of Services, Simcoe CAS, Donna MacDougall, Manager of Foster Care Services, Simcoe CAS: (Role of CAS, Kinship Care discussion; Q&A)

Krista Euler, Caseworker, Ontario Works, County of Simcoe; (Review of Temporary Care Allowance provisions, Ontario Works; Q&A)

Karen MacKay/Young, Early Literacy/Nutritional Specialist, Ontario Early Years Challenge Fund; (Hands on workshop regarding literacy and early reading;)

In addition, Betty Cornelius, a grandparent from the Haliburton area who has organized a summer camp program for grands and grandchildren spoke briefly to the group. Details of the presentations and discussions are included as an Appendix to this Report.

Feedback from the participants was very positive. Each attendee completed a written evaluation. Comments ranged from viewing the sessions as very informative to excellent with strong educational value, etc.

One concern related to the need for more time for grands to network, ask more questions etc. In this regard, a suggestion was offered that a weekend long conference is considered in the future as opposed to a one-day format. The vast majority of participants expressed the need to continue to network with other grands in the future.

Major results/outcomes from the day were:

- *Education for many grands into the broader issues affecting them in this role. This was particularly relevant for those attending a group meeting for the first time. Major topic areas addressed included demographic trends, legal, child welfare, financial and policy aspects of the role.*
- *A commitment to extend the grandparent support network across the County with active groups ready to commence in Orillia, Midland and Collingwood at this time.*
- *A set of recommendations for change in a number of areas to go forward as part of the Summary Report on the project. (See following Section)*
- *A strong sense of common purpose and resolve to improve the environment for grandparents locally.*
- *A new sense of mutual respect and support for local professionals in the Legal, Ontario Works and Child Welfare communities.*
- *The opportunity to meet and network with many other grandparents and to share individual experiences, advice, support and encouragement.*
- *Sharing of a variety of written materials on the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren as well as helpful materials regarding parenting skills, literacy, nutrition, legal advice, summer camp programs, etc.*

11) Kinship Care:

Kinship care agreements, which recognize grandparents as a legitimate alternative to foster care providers, are not yet recognized in law in Ontario. However, they are common in some provinces and in the United States and are being considered by Ontario at this time.

For example, in Illinois and Wisconsin, kinship care programs are significant aspects of the child welfare approach in the context of family preservation. Fully 38% of all children in care in Illinois are in kinship care arrangements, which are approved, funded and monitored by the local child welfare authorities.

With the growing trend of grandparents raising grandchildren has come an increased interest by child welfare authorities and government in exploring ways to more fully support this version of care.

By definition, kinship care is the full time care and nurturing of children by relatives or others who have a legitimate kinship bond. Advocates view kinship care as a method of keeping children permanently connected to both their extended families and indirectly to their own parents as well.

Critics point out however that it has not increased adoption levels nor has it always resulted in permanency for the grandchildren. Some would also suggest that if there are problems with the biological parents, one is likely to find the same or similar issues with the grandparents. This is the logic of “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”.

While this latter assertion may be true in some cases, this project came into contact with many grandparents who clearly did not apparently share the problems of the biological parents. This generalization is in many cases appears to be quite inappropriate.

To this point, concepts being considered in Ontario suggest that legal custody of affected grandchildren would likely remain in the hands of government or its designated agent in any kinship care plan. This is practice in some jurisdictions including Alberta.

However, this requirement would be difficult for some local grands to accept. While most are willing to have some ongoing involvement of government in exchange for financial assistance, many would not be comfortable with any requirement that would have them relinquish custody of their grandchild.

Determining how accountability for their actions as substitute parents would be measured is a related issue that will also have to be resolved in any future kinship care arrangement. If grandparents are to receive financial, training and other supports accorded to foster parents, it is likely that some criteria for service expectations/requirements would apply as well.

A special category of alternative care, which recognizes and values grandparents as a preferred option to foster care may have to be considered. However, unlike traditional foster parenting, accountability (training, licensing, supervision, etc.) arrangements would be determined and applied in a unique context, as would financial consideration.

Simcoe CAS has recognized the value of grandparent and other family-based care. The agency now has 23 children in some form of kinship care support at this time. Only 3 of the 23 are “in care” cases.

Nine of the 23 cases involve support orders with the kids being temporarily in the care of grandparents while the biological parents attempt to sort out their issues and parental responsibilities. For those children living with grands, support has been primarily provided by assisting with the cost of special events, transportation, medical expenses where necessary, etc.

A province wide study of kinship care arrangements is now underway by the Ministry of Community, Family & Children's Services. This project is being led by Niagara Family & Children's Services. Other Societies such as Metro CAS are also heavily involved in developing further application of the kinship care concept at this time.

12) Summary of Local Needs Expressed:

- 1. Increased financial support from government for grandparents in the areas of legal costs related to determining custody of their grandchildren.*
- 2. Increased financial support from government for grandparents in the areas of monthly support entitlements. There is a strong preference for kinship care consideration in this regard, which would be preferably administered by the child welfare community. This is seen as generally preferable by grands as opposed to having support administered by the Ontario Works system.*
- 3. Increased access to local counselling services for both grandparents under stress and grandchildren who must cope with the confusion and complex issues of substitute care and relationships with biological parents/grandparents.*
- 4. Increased public awareness and recognition of the growing reality of many more grandparents raising grandchildren. Increased public support for this form of care.*
- 5. Access to reasonably priced legal assistance for grandparents as they encounter custody applications and review processes.*
- 6. Access to respite care (financial assistance via the foster allowance) to provide grandparents with occasional relief and opportunities to address other neglected aspects of their lives.*
- 7. More localized access to support groups across Simcoe County as opposed to only the one group located in Barrie.*

8. *More parenting resources and parenting tips for grands are needed. This is intended to respond to changes in parenting approaches and to the uniqueness of the grandparent parental role. Discipline, managing visits with biological parents, names to use, behaviour management, literacy support, grandparent fatigue, etc. are but a few examples of the issues only grands face. The OEYC's would be a preferred source for specialized resources in this regard.*

13) Recommendations/Ideas for Change to Improve the Quality of Life for Grands:

Local:

1. *Support groups are crucial to the emotional health, education and peer support of grands. Budding groups forming in Orillia, Midland & Collingwood must be encouraged to develop and will need support.*
2. *The Ontario Early Years Centres across Simcoe County are a logical focal point for meeting, providing educational resources and limited staff support to grandparent groups. The Centres in Simcoe North and Simcoe Grey are encouraged to become involved with local groups as has been the case in Barrie.*
3. *Occasional Countywide meetings of local grands are recommended regarding ongoing public education, workshops, sharing local group dynamics, lobbying for change, etc.*
4. *In order to ensure the participation of as many grands as possible, funding assistance to support those grands with financial need is recommended. (child care, transportation) This could be accomplished with the possible assistance of the Ontario Early Year Challenge Fund or through the support of local OEYC's.*
5. *Given the high levels of stress being encountered by grands and grandchildren, priority for counselling is necessary for both groups. Local child & family service agencies are accordingly requested and urged to priorize referrals for counselling from grands and from the grandchildren involved.*
6. *Peer support opportunities need to be developed for grandchildren being raised by their grandparents, particularly as they approach their teen years. The issues of identity, relationships and self-esteem will take on increased significance at this time.*

7. *Increase access to informal respite services for grands across the County. Financial support would best be provided as part of a monthly foster allotment either in conjunction with OW or any kinship care arrangement. Grands should be free to then make their own respite arrangements.*
8. *The Catholic Family Life Centre in Barrie is urged to again run its series of sessions specifically designed for grandparents raising grandchildren. The funding source for this service (NCB) should be reminded of the high praise for the course from past participants and the need for others to have the same opportunity. If funding permits or can be accessed, this service should be expanded across Simcoe County.*
9. *The project clearly demonstrated the value of agency collaboration and the overlap of issues across jurisdictions. Hence, agencies such as BDAPSN, Simcoe County CAS, County of Simcoe, etc. are urged to seek a common table where the issue of grandparents raising grandchildren can be discussed.*
10. *BDAPSN is encouraged to share the report with the Simcoe County Family Child and Youth Coalition, Family Table.*

Policy related recommendations include:

11. *The need for Ontario to consider funded kinship care as a legitimate and desirable form of substitute care for children in need of protection. This policy would require changes to the Child & Family Services Act as well as additional resources being made available to local Children's Aid Societies. Funding and accountability mechanisms need to be developed in the context of kinship care as opposed to traditional foster care.*
12. *The need to provide an 800 service offering basic legal information for grandparents facing custody issues involving their grandchildren. This service should also include a referral mechanism to local professional legal firms, where qualified lawyers can offer support for grandparents that is reasonably affordable.*
13. *The need to amend the Temporary Care Allowance provisions of the Ontario Works Act to remove the requirement to pursue revenue from biological parents who are not family members.*
14. *The need to consider a change to provincial policy which would exempt the National Child Benefit Supplement from being treated as child income for families in receipt of the Ontario Works Temporary Care Agreement.*

Appendix - Helpful Local Services:

Services viewed by grandparents as being consistently the most helpful to them in their role of raising their grandchildren were the following:

- *Grands Parenting Again Support Group, Barrie (OEYC supported)*
- *Ontario Early Years Centres and related services across the County*
- *New Path & Kinark Children's Agencies*
- *Catholic Family Life Centre (Barrie)*
- *Big Brothers/ Big Sisters*
- *Simcoe CAS*
- *BDAPSN*
- *Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto*
- *County of Simcoe (child care and Temporary Care Allowance programs)*
- *Early Intervention Programs across the County (speech/language, resource teacher, early literacy, etc.)*
- *YMCA programs & services*
- *Local 12 Step programs (Alateen, Alanon, etc.)*
- *Legal Services (expensive but necessary in some cases)*
- *Grandparent websites such as www.cangrands.com,*
- *Local Member of Parliament's Office (mixed experiences)*

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