

Grandparents acting as parents often do not seek social services support

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BLACKSBURG, Va., Aug. 9, 2010 – Nationally, approximately 2.4 million grandparents are raising 4.5 million children. Almost 60,000 grandparents in Virginia have stepped into the role of parents for their grandchildren, with approximately 6 percent of Virginia children being raised by a grandparent. For the most part, grandparents find joy and satisfaction in the experience, said [Megan Dolbin-MacNab](#)^[2], assistant professor of human development in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences at Virginia Tech. But the responsibility can also bring stress.

"Grandparents step in when there are problems with the grandchild's parents, such as drug use, incarceration, abuse, and neglect, among other problems," said Dolbin-MacNab, who is a faculty affiliate for the Center for Gerontology. "Some grandparents take on the role as parent informally, while others become a formal foster parent or legal guardian."

Dolbin-MacNab's most recent research focused on grandchild well-being and relationship dynamics within the grandparent-headed family. "Grandchildren are often very grateful for their grandparents' sacrifice and are aware of what life would have been like if their grandparents had not stepped in," she reports.

Still, as a licensed marriage and family therapist, Dolbin-MacNab says she sees the challenges. "Grandparents may have age-related health issues, and some may experience serious depression or psychological distress. Finances are often a significant source of stress because grandparents may not be employed or may be on fixed incomes. There may also be legal difficulties related to obtaining custody or guardianship," she said. "In addition, due to the circumstances that brought them into their grandparents' care, grandchildren can have serious physical and psychological problems that grandparents must address," Dolbin-MacNab added.

Despite these challenges, many grandparents are not seeking social support services. In particular, grandparents may not be accessing support services related to nutritional needs. Research suggests that some grandparent raising grandchildren may have difficulty affording nutritious foods, while others may be unaware of guidelines for healthy eating, especially for young children.

To address this need, Dolbin-MacNab and [Elena Serrano](#)^[3], associate professor of human nutrition, foods, and exercise in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, have begun a two-year project, supported by a \$253,984 grant from Virginia Department of Health's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Food Programs. The goal of the project is to discover ways that the Virginia Department

Health's Supplemental Nutrition Program for *Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)* and Community Nutrition Services can better reach and serve the needy, young children being raised by grandparents.

WIC approached *Karen Roberto, director of Virginia Tech's Institute for Society, Culture and Environment* about the project. *Roberto pulled in Dolbin-MacNab, whose research has focused on grandparent-headed families, and Serrano, who has studied community nutrition programs, food security, and WIC.*

Dolbin-MacNab and Serrano will use a variety of community participatory methods to talk to WIC staff, professionals from community and state agencies, grandparents who are already using WIC, and other grandparents raising grandchildren. "Through this project, we want to learn best practices for serving grandparent-headed families with nutritional needs and what the barriers are to grandparents and grandchildren using WIC," said Dolbin-MacNab.

Past research indicates that overcoming barriers to using support services is essential. "Barriers might be something obvious, like a lack of transportation or childcare. However, grandparents might be so worried that someone will judge their family situation or parenting skills that they won't seek assistance," said Dolbin-MacNab.

In the current project, Dolbin-MacNab and Serrano intend to help WIC identify common barriers experienced by grandparents raising grandchildren and develop strategies for overcoming such barriers.

Results from the project will provide insight into the nutritional status and needs of grandparent-headed families and assist WIC in delivering services and educating grandparents. The researchers will also produce educational and outreach materials for WIC as well as training materials for WIC staff on how to engage and serve grandparent-headed families.

Finding ways to better support grandparent-headed families is rewarding to Dolbin-MacNab. As someone whose grandmother helped raise her, she says she respects and likes the grandparents she meets through her research. "They want to tell their stories. You can't just collect your data and walk away. They want to know who you are and engage with you." She recalls how a research trip to Big Stone Gap, Va., once evolved into a friendly debate about the right and wrong way to make biscuits. "Despite all that teaching, my biscuits still don't turn out quite right. But, I'm working at it."

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Megan Dolbin-MacNab (left) and Elana Serrano

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