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## **Grandmothers becoming grandmothers again**

Bonnie Rentz Weathersby

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GRANDMOTHERS BECOMING GRANDMOTHERS AGAIN

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Bonnie Rentz Weathersby

September 1998

GRANDMOTHERS BECOMING GRANDMOTHERS AGAIN


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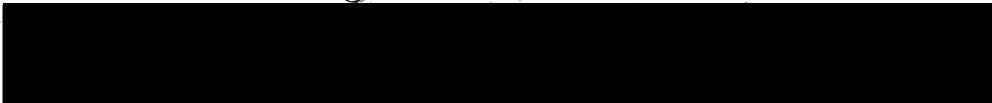
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by  
Bonnie Rentz Weathersby  
September 1998

Approved by:

  
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6/4/98  
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to examine positive and negative emotional, psychological, physiological and physical effects on grandmothers who have been at least partially responsible for a grandchild or grandchildren living in their homes and then experiencing being separated from that child. This study used an open-ended interview question inviting grandmothers to share their positive and negative reactions to the separation. This study discovered that grandmothers experience strong emotional affects and depression upon separation. Findings suggest further research is warranted to help social workers better understand the experiences grandparents face when separated from grandchildren who have lived with them.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all the dedicated grandparents who have put their lives on hold to take a grandchild into their homes and their hearts.

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Studies have been conducted to look at the stress and problems grandparents have while living with and/or caretaking their grandchildren and at grandparents losing grandchildren to death, but little is said about the grandparent who is left in a precarious situation when the grandchild leaves the home to live elsewhere. Smith (1988) points out that the time when mature adults no longer have dependent children in the home focuses on an important turning point. This is the time in life when adults expect a substantial reduction of responsibilities for dependents and is the most expected transition an adult faces. This transaction is generally valued and looked at as a time of increased freedom (Smith, 1988). Women often return or enter the work force and the couple faces less financial obligation. However, when a grandchild moves into the home, even in cases when one or both parents of the child move in with them, the financial obligation increases. The grandmother usually is unable to return to work or may need to quit a career she has had for sometime. This can cause the grandparents to miss the enjoyment of financial freedom they may have looked forward to and dip into their retirement funds.

This is also the developmental period in which people can look forward to being free to discover and participate

in activities and events that they enjoy. They build a social network of friends with whom they can participate and with whom they can share this part of their lives. People look forward to the time in their lives when they are free to come and go without the worry of dependents. However, when grandchildren live in the home, people experience the stage differently than expected. Then, when the grandchildren move out of the home, the grandparents are left to recover what's left of their lives. This study was designed to discover how the grandparents are affected by the separation when the grandchild leaves the home to live elsewhere.

The literature offers very little about this particular aspect of the grandparent/grandchild relationship. This study was designed to discover the reactions, symptoms, and emotions that grandparents experience without presenting specific ideas to the participants in the form of a questionnaire or an interview with directive questions. Rather, the study was designed to allow the participants the opportunity to express in their own words what they have experienced and their reactions to the experiences.

In studies involving the actual loss of a grandchild through death, the grandparents often grieve for the parent of the grandchild, also. But when the grandchild is



removed from the home by the parent, this is not the case. Some of the grieving symptoms the author expected to be replicated in this study were physical symptoms such as insomnia or other sleep disturbances; seeing and/or hearing the grandchild in dreams or in the home when the child is not actually there; lack of interest in social activities and outside involvement; intense feelings of separation and loss; and intense longing for the grandchild as discussed by Ponzetti & Johnson (1991) and Ponzetti (1992).

This study was not being compared to any other study. It was exploratory and the purpose was to determine whether or not further research or intervention was warranted.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1986, seventy-eight percent of adults aged 55 and older were grandparents (Purnell & Bagby, 1993). According to the 1990 Census Bureau, almost 1 million grandparents are raising grandchildren by themselves and another 1.5 million have a son or daughter with the child's children living in the home. This represents approximately 5 percent of American families (Yorkey, 1994). National data indicate that from 1990 to 1995, there was a 56 percent increase in the number of children who were living in the home of a grandparent with no parent present (Heath, 1997).

Kelley (1993) found that 56 percent of the

grandparents in her study on grandparents raising grandchildren cited the primary life stressor encountered to be financial difficulties related to raising their grandchildren. One grandmother stated, "I gave up a job making \$30,000 a year and am now receiving AFDC. I receive no support from either parent. My daughter drained me emotionally and financially because of her drug habit. I've used all my savings" (Kelley, 1993). Often times, the grandparents receive no outside financial help and are unable to claim the grandchildren on their taxes because the parent still claims the children. Many grandparents have no legal rights because they are not the custodial care giver. When the grandchild leaves the home, the grandparents are often left in financial distress with no where to turn for help. They have often depleted their retirement funds, have given up a career, and/or possibly used all their savings and other resources. Jennifer Heath (1997) quotes Muriel Banquet, coordinator of a support program for grandparents in Connecticut, "It's in the cities and it's in the suburbs. It's everywhere. They're dipping into their retirement. They're doing without. And there's no respite care...They're very brave. Many of them are doing this against great odds."

When the grandchild moves in, the freedom the grandparents may have had is no longer available. They are

unable to pick up and go whenever they want because now they must think of the child. This lack of freedom also affects the grandparents' friendship network. Grandparents begin to lose contact with friends (Jendrek, 1993). In Jendrek's 1993 study, one grandmother said, "...We can't have them [friends] over for dinner by ourselves; there's always the children here..." Jendrek also found that "child free" friends may not wish to spend time with a family that has children and many of the invitations the grandparents receive are for "no children" activities. A grandmother in Kelley's 1993 study states, "I am too old for the young mothers and the people I grew old with do not have grandchildren with them all of the time. We have nothing in common anymore. This situation makes me feel like a misfit...." She should be going to senior citizen activities, but instead, is going to parent-teacher meetings.

These individuals are not only "off-time," but also feel the disjuncture between the anticipated grandparent role and the caretaking grandparent role (Jendrick, 1993). Many subjects in Kelly's (1993) study reflected a sense of loss related to their inability to function as a "traditional" grandparent. In many instances, the biological parent enjoys the traditional grandparent role in that they visit on special occasions and they have few

of the caretaking, financial or disciplinary responsibilities. When the grandchild leaves the home, the grandparents are left without the network of friends that is the first line of defense for most people in times of stress (Jendrick, 1993). They no longer have anything in common with the parents of the grandchild's friends, yet they have lost contact and/or commonality with most of their cohorts.

Grandparents do report that they are concerned about the grandchildren going back to live with the parents (Kelley, 1993; Jendrik, 1993; Jendrik & Johnson, 1993). In the study by Kelly, 17.5% reported concern that the grandchild might go back to an unfit parent. Jendrek reports that many of the grandparents faced the concern that they never know when the grandchild's parents would take the grandchild back or move away and the concern that this was an unstable condition for the child. However, these concerns have not been answered or explored with research.

Research has determined that grandparents who have a grandchild in the home do suffer from higher levels of psychological distress, loneliness, stress, and financial difficulties. Harel's (1988) study, reports that high levels of stress can cause a wide range of physiological disorders, diseases, mental disorders, deviant behavior,

ans social pathology. Harel quotes other studies that indicate that extreme stress can cause symptoms such as depression, startle responses, anxiety, hyper-arousability, intrusive imagery and sleep disturbances for decades after the stressful experience. He further states that clients under these conditions are particularly vulnerable to loss and separation.

Emik and Hayslip (1996) state that the research suggests that the demands of custodial grandparenting may be harmful to the grandparents' psychological adjustment, especially if they are caring for problem grandchildren and that these persons may be particularly in need of mental health services. These grandparents are under stress due to the situation which placed the grandchild in the home. The parent of the grandchild usually had problems which led to the child moving in with the grandparent. Yorkey (1994) defines the four most common reasons for a grandchild to move in with the grandparents as the four D's: drugs, divorce, desertion and death.

#### METHOD

This study used data collected from participants from the general population, using the snowball sampling approach. The author made inquiries of people she knew in the community who had experiences having a grandchild move out of the home and found grandmothers who were interested

in taking part in the present study. The author got further referrals from those who participated and from some who did not participate.

The participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent before the interview (Appendix A). They were asked one open-ended, exploratory type of interview question: How were you affected when your grandchild moved out of your home? This was the only direct preconstructed question used in the interview. The participants were encouraged to express freely how they felt, reacted and responded. In case the participant couldn't think of something to get started, the author used the following questions to probe for more information: Were you socially affected? Physically? Financially? Were your family relationships affected? Most of the grandmothers spoke freely and did not need to be probed for information.

Each grandmother was also asked some demographic questions: Age of grandmother, age of grandchild, how long the grandchild was in the home, whether the parents were in the home also and whether or not the grandparent had full, partial or legal custody.

Each participant was given a Debriefing Statement (Appendix B) specifying resources for support or in the event that the participant should be caused any stress or psychological discomfort due to the interview. Each

participant was also given a list of local resources related to grandparenting (Appendix C).

## RESULTS

Twelve grandmothers who had at least one grandchild living in her home and then move out were interviewed regarding the effects on her when the grandchild moved out of the home. The length of time that the grandchild lived in the home ranged from 3 months to 10 years. Three of the grandmothers had full custody of the grandchild with neither parent of the child living in the home. Six of the mothers lived with the child in the grandmother's home and in three of the cases, both parents lived in the home. The grandchildren ranged from infants to teenagers. The ages of the grandmothers ranged from 43 years old to 63 years old. The grandmothers were from the local community at large.

Out of the 12 grandmothers that were interviewed, eight used strong words such as devastated, traumatic, "felt like death" and horrible to describe their feelings after their grandchild/grandchildren left their home. One grandmother stated, "They become your own and then they are pulled away." "The loneliness, I'd go to tuck him in at night and remember he wasn't there. It was bad. I'd been his mother for 5 years. It was like giving up my own child." One grandmother described it as being equal to losing the child to death only there is no end; the pain

continues. Another stated, "I thought I would die!" These grandmothers had become attached/bonded to the children and the loss caused them to experience grief issues. The five who did not use these strong words to describe their emotions had their grandchildren close by and were able to maintain a close relationship with them.

Seven grandmothers experienced depression to some degree. "I went into a depression. Didn't want to eat or go to church; cried all the time." Another stated, "I was very emotional and sad." "Lots of crying, couldn't eat or sleep. Couldn't do anything." Only 2 of the grandmother stated they experienced any physical affects: stomach problems and headaches. Five of the twelve expressed that they spent a lot of time crying and shed many tears. Most of these women were not expecting to become depressed when the grandchildren moved out. Most of them stated that they didn't know there were other women who felt the same way they did. They thought that they were experiencing something others had not experienced.

Seven of the women stated that they experienced a great deal of loneliness when the children moved out. "Our schedule evolved around them." "Something is missing." There is an "emptiness." These women felt "a loss" when their grandchildren moved out. They found it "hard to get used to" the grandchild being gone; "hard to get used to



living without her." One woman stated, "I almost became a shop-aholic. I didn't want to go home. I felt empty." The loneliness at home was too much for her to endure, so she avoided going home. "I was very, very lonely. I lost my companion. It helped to talk to other people." Another woman also stated that she lost her companion.

Part of the loneliness was due to the loss of social contacts with the grandparents' peers. Six commented on the fact that they had lost social contacts throughout the time their grandchildren were in the home and now had no contact with peers and also did not have the grandchildren to spend time with. "I was left with few social contacts." "When he started living with us, I gave up school. I lost touch with my friends because I didn't have them to do the things we had done, I'm just now getting back to that again." "I had to quit my job when they moved in. I lost touch with my friends. Now I feel isolated." "I have had to rebuild friendships and social contacts." One grandmother expressed loss of contact with grandchild's school and school involvement.

They were/are worried. "Worrying about his well-being," was the statement made by two of the grandmothers. Another was concerned about the mother keeping the granddaughter in school. Five grandmothers mentioned being worried, and one stated she was "obsessed with thoughts

and worries about her grandchildren."

Eight grandmothers stated that they were better off financially when the grandchild moved out. They had been supporting them while they were living with them so they now "have more money" and "less expenses." One grandmother stated that she and her husband were left in the hole financially. Two are still spending the same amount of money supporting the grandchild so there is no difference in their financial situation. Only one grandparent stated that they lost money when the grandchildren moved out and that was because the parents had been contributing to the rent.

#### DISCUSSION

In this exploratory study, data were assessed regarding the affects grandmothers experienced when their grandchildren moved out of the home after a bond was formed. Social workers should be interested in grandparents who are suffering from the loss of a grandchild because this loss can disrupt family and social functioning and can lead to depression. This population needs support to help them deal with the "grief" they must deal with, but instead, they get little understanding from society. Their grief is not seen by those who have not experienced the situation. Those who view the situation see the

grandparents as having been cut loose from the responsibility that was not theirs in the first place. The grandparents are perceived as being "set free" from a burden. They are now free to live their life as grandparents. They are not seen as a population who has to deal with feelings that do not "fit" the normal development of life. They are not seen as people who have formed a special bond with their grandchild; after all, they are just the grandparents, not the parents. This population is not seen by society as a population who needs support and education to learn how to live without the grandchild, how to live without guilt and grief, to rebuild a social network, or even to determine what their lives mean to themselves. This group of people have to re-discover how to live with the new empty nest.

The grandparents who didn't experience such a desperate loss are the ones whose grandchildren are still seen regularly and are still in the local area. Some of the grandmothers had maintained their social contacts while the grandchild was in the home. Though this didn't prevent the emotional trauma, it gave them some social support that those who gave up their friends did not have.

Findings from this study indicate that grandparents will be better able to deal with the separation if they maintain personal activities and a social network of

friends while the grandchild is in the home and if they are able to maintain a close relationship with the child when the child moves out. Social workers will be effective if they can reach the grandparents while the grandchild is still in the home and begin to work with them before the separation occurs. A separation will most likely occur at some point in time and the grandparent can benefit from social work intervention to be prepared when it does occur.

These grandparents are not getting the supportive service they need. They are not reached by service providers in the same places that other older adults are reached. They will not be found at senior centers, but may be reached at preschools, PTA meetings, parks, and churches. Social workers are more likely to reach these grandparents by contacting agencies where children are served. Social workers working with pediatricians, teachers and ministers will have a better chance of reaching this population.

Some kind of financial allowance or tax break should be implemented for this population. None of the current tax laws pertains to this situation. These grandparents are saving government monies by their emotional and financial support to these children, but most of them are left with financial difficulties and are unable to recover any of the financial burden.

Research is still needed in the areas of grandparents and their new roles. Specific issues needing further study include family dynamics for grandparents raising and losing grandchildren, developmental issues for the grandparents' age group, grieving issues, separation issues and the repeating of the empty nest syndrome. This study indicates that this population needs attention, services and further research to explore types of services social workers can provide for them.

Appendix A: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**INFORMED CONSENT**

The study in which you are about to participate is designed to explore how grandparents who have been caretakers or partial caretakers of grandchildren living in the grandparents' home feel when the grandchildren are removed from the home for any reason. The purpose of the study is to discover positive and negative reactions, experiences and feelings grandparents face when they are separated from their grandchild, after having developed a close bond with the child.

This study is being conducted by Bonnie Weathersby from approximately August 1997 through May 1998 under the supervision of the Social Work Department, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the University's Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

Please be assured that any information you provide will be held in strict confidence by the researcher. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. All data will be reported in group form only. At the conclusion of this study, you may get the results or if you have any questions contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin at CSUSB at (909)880-5507.

I acknowledge that I have been informed of and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I acknowledge that I am over 18 years of age. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason if I so desire.

---

Participant's signature

Date

## Appendix B: DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

### DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for participating in the study examining the effects on grandparents who have been separated from their grandchild after having been caretakers or partial caretakers for a period of at least six months.

Previous research has focused on the relationship while the grandchild is still in the home; this research is exploring the grandparents' lives after the grandchild are removed from the home.

If your participation in this research raised any issues you would like to discuss further, there are resources available for you to talk to someone. A list of resources has been attached.

If you would like more information or the results of the study, please contact Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Department of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino at 909-880-5507.

Appendix C: LIST OF RESOURCES

**Bilingual Family Counseling Services**

313 West F St.  
Ontario, CA 91762  
(909) 986-7111

**CSUSB Community Counseling Center**

5500 University Parkway  
San Bernardino, CA 92407  
(909) 880-5569

**Grandparents As Parents (GAP)**

Sylvie deToledo  
1150 E.4th St.  
Long Beach, CA 90802  
(310) 983-6555

**Grandparents Offering Love and Direction (GOLD)**

700 N. Johnson Suite O  
El Cajon, CA 92020  
(619) 447-7349

**Grandparents Support Group of Los Angeles**

Tiney Harris  
1887 Cordova #4  
Los Angeles, CA 90007  
(213) 733-9312

**West End Family Counseling Service**

855 N. Euclid  
Ontario, CA 91764  
(909) 983-2020  
or 10630 Town Center Dr.  
Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730



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Focus on the Family.