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Collaborative Education Through a Foster Grandparent Program: Enhancing Intergenerational Relations

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ABSTRACT. The collaborative efforts of one College of Nursing's successful interface with a local Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) is presented. The importance of academic affiliations to achievement of intergenerational program goals is addressed through a discussion of evaluation results that show positive effects on the well-being of FGP participants. Implications for continued development of intergenerational education and research programs that focus on foster grandparents and children and adolescents are explored. The value of involving older and younger generations in nursing education and nursing practice is highlighted through a discussion of Healthy People 2000 objectives.

The intergenerational movement as a social imperative has been emphasized in literature focusing on activities and programs that bring old and young together (Newman & Brummel, 1989; Travis, Stremmel, & Duprey, 1992). Evaluation of age-integrated programs

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which link older adults, and young children and adolescents has shown that fears and misconceptions about aging are reduced for younger persons and that the shared interactions of young and old are mutually beneficial (Aday, Sims, & Evans, 1991). Programs such as Foster Grandparents and the Retired Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) have been instrumental in successfully bringing young and old together; Foster Grandparents for over 25 years and RSVP since 1971.

These programs which employ older persons to assist families and children through crisis are becoming increasingly important to a segment of the younger generation. Many children and adolescents with serious problems that result from parental neglect, abandonment, and physical and psychological abuse are frequently being raised by grandparents (Kelly, 1993). In fact, more than 3 million children live with grandparents or relatives other than parents (Popiel, 1993). These trends suggest that older adults who become responsible for care of children and adolescents through blood and affectional ties or through volunteer programs need considerable support to deal with the complex problems faced by the younger generation. That this is even feasible is implied by the literature on grandparenting among African-American communities. Harrison (1993) reported that grandparents' affection and nurturance enhances the development of grandchildren by engendering positive self-regard and increasing social competence. Strom and Strom (1993) noted that elderly persons can become effective participants in communication with the younger generation through appropriate training programs that support and develop skills specific to current needs of children and adolescents.

Study of intergenerational linkages which are formed in programs such as Foster Grandparents may reveal information leading to a better understanding of factors important in promoting contact between younger and older persons. This knowledge can be especially useful to developing nursing practice that focuses on collaboration across specializations and disciplines. Facilitating cooperative efforts among nurses who focus on care of either the young generation or the old generation can promote awareness of the interdependence between generations and can dispel stereotypes of intergenerational conflict and competition. Examined in this paper

are intergenerational aspects of a Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) which has had a unique affiliation with a College of Nursing practice center. Findings from an evaluation of the program are analyzed for their application to educational strategies which can facilitate clinical experiences beneficial to nurses and to recipients of their care.

COLLEGE OF NURSING AND FOSTER GRANDPARENT AFFILIATION

A Nursing Practice Center affiliated with a College of Nursing in a large urban university began working with a local FGP in 1984 by providing annual physical assessments which are required for all program participants. An advanced practice family nurse is employed in the Center and is responsible for conducting comprehensive health assessments that include both a physical examination and a psychosocial assessment. Additionally, undergraduate and graduate students who are assigned to the Center for clinical experiences take part in the assessments. College of Nursing faculty may participate to fulfill faculty practice and community service obligations.

The health care of the foster grandparents includes several dimensions: health promotion, health maintenance, and health education using an anticipatory guidance model. Referrals to other health care professionals and social service agencies are an important component of this process. Nutrition assessments and guidance, and classes in normal aging have been offered to the elders who serve as foster grandparents. The intergenerational focus is supported through counseling and classes for foster grandparents on child growth and development, and communication with children, including ways to handle discipline and behavior problems.

The partnership between the College of Nursing and the FGP has developed and been enriched over time. Recently, members of the university community were invited to serve on a special evaluation study committee of the FGP. The committee was delegated the task of evaluating the program and making recommendations. This undertaking prompted further exploration of the program's potential for expansion of educational opportunities for students in the

clinical specializations of gerontological and child and adolescent health nursing.

The unique service mission of the Foster Grandparent Program, which employs older adults to serve children in the local community, provided an exemplary model for shared nursing practice. FGP currently receives federal and state government funding for placement of 51 volunteers. The majority of the foster grandparents are African-Americans. They give individual attention to children with special needs in a variety of health, education, and welfare agencies; they volunteer 20 hours each week, for which they receive a nontaxable hourly stipend, and benefits such as travel reimbursement, health examinations, and daily meals.

The philosophy underlying the FGP is that older persons are a powerful human resource who have unique strengths which can be used in the care of special and exceptional children. Young children in institutions were the primary focus of the FGP when it began nationwide in 1965. Today, foster grandparents give their knowledge, love, kindness, hope, and talents to children and adolescents in schools, hospitals, day care, detention centers, homeless shelters, and other places where they are most needed.

Dual goals of the FGP focus on the value of intergenerational relationships. First, by enabling low-income persons 60 years of age and over to participate in community service to children, it is the expectation that foster grandparents will develop greater feelings of self worth and an increased sense of physical and mental well-being. Second, the attention that foster grandparents give to children and adolescents with exceptional or special needs will lead to improved physical and psychosocial well-being of the children. These goals reflect the belief that positive outcomes are produced by intergenerational associations. Indeed, as the anecdotal evidence from annual evaluations suggests, the FGP program has had positive benefits for both the older adults and the children they served.

THE FOSTER GRANDPARENT DATA

The primary purpose of the evaluative data was to provide a description of the program's successful aspects and to examine ways in which the program could be strengthened. Secondly, the

data offered insights into the intergenerational experiences between the older adults and children. The latter evaluation broadened the experiences in nursing education to include child and adolescent health nursing, and reinforced community and university affiliations.

Results from a 14-item evaluation questionnaire conducted with 39 foster grandparents, of whom only two were male, were reviewed. Focus was given to specific questions assessing participants' general perceptions about their reasons for becoming a foster grandparent, motivation for continuing in the program, perceived benefits from being a foster grandparent, and changes noticed in the children. In addition, participants' descriptions of the talents and activities they shared with the children were examined. The foster grandparents were assigned to children with special needs who were enrolled in a number of places such as Headstart, day care, and hospitals.

FINDINGS OF THE EVALUATION DATA

In describing why they became a foster grandparent and what motivated them to continue, participants' responses distinguished between love for children and personal enjoyment in the experience. Another dimension of motivation and interest in foster grandparenting was concern for, and interest in, guiding children, and for being useful and helpful. Erikson's (1963) description of generativity which includes productivity, creativity, and the capacity to provide for succeeding generations best represents this dimension (Weiland, 1993).

The theme of motivation and interest in foster grandparenting was depicted by statements of "I love children" or "I enjoy it." Frequently, this intense affection of love and fondness of children was combined with phrases suggestive of the pleasure and delight the experience gave to participants. Love and enjoyment were also expressed in statements that communicated feelings of generativity: "I love children and like to keep busy" and "I enjoy being with the children, it's rewarding giving love to those who really need it." The desire for companionship fused with the fond associations

foster grandparents felt for both staff and children, leading one participant to comment "I have met some good friends."

Providing needed help to others that in turn made participants feel useful, and "good when I go . . . and they are waiting for me" were frequently expressed. Enhanced personal well-being was also identified as a reward, most often expressed as I "feel better and younger" and "have more to look forward to" and "I'm more patient, more alert."

Descriptions of the talents they shared and the activities they engaged in with the children indicated a distinction between concrete and intangible responsibilities. Touching children's lives through love, affection, wisdom, and understanding were frequently mentioned as talents that foster grandparents shared. "The art of loving and treating each other kindly," "understanding, listening and caring," and "I'm there to share, listen, and love them" were common responses. In contrast, concrete activities conducted with the children were usually depicted as participation in tasks important in children's development: playing games, singing, counting, reading, dressing, feeding, and toileting.

Foster grandparents perceived that what they were doing has a positive influence on the children; only four participants noted little or no change in the children. Achievement of better social skills was a recurring theme among the responses. They "understand better," "listen, care for each other," "play well together," "obey," are "more friendly, trusting, loving," and "attentive, less rebellious."

DISCUSSION

This review of the evaluation data depicts the meaning the experience held for the 39 participants and illustrates the benefits derived from intergenerational interactions. Foster grandparents' statements about their motivation and interest for what they were doing demonstrated that they were energized by love for children and that the dimension of generativity was of substantial importance. The examples participants gave of activities they conducted suggested that simple tasks were of significance to the children for whom they cared. They, likewise, were convinced that their talents of friendship, caring, and understanding were valuable to the chil-

dren. Findings from a longitudinal study of a FGP corroborate the present findings of the positive effects experienced by participants (Saltz, 1989).

Bowlby's (1979) concept of attachment as a life-long developmental process is also applicable to the current findings. He postulates that shared and trusting relationships in early life lead to successful social and intimate relationships which provide confident sharing, trust, and security for the persons involved. Through consistent caring and nurturing, the foster grandparents were providing a safe environment for the children to develop trust and test social relationships.

However, it is not known whether the positive outcomes can be expected in other intergenerational relationships. The recipients of foster grandparent care in this study were primarily young children. In our society today, many children and adolescents experience a wide range of disruptive life events such as change in home residence, change in school, parental separation, divorce, parental illness or addiction, and unexpected pregnancy during the adolescent years. Increasingly, children and adolescents are experiencing conflict that leads to violent acts and often the death of peers and adults in their communities and schools. Many of these children may not be directly involved in the conflict, but are unwilling observers to violent acts in their homes, schools, and communities. The cumulative effects of these experiences and their associated losses have been identified with negative life outcomes (Boyce & Jemerin, 1990). Consequently, it is imperative that alternative ways to support and guide these children be explored.

Programs that extend foster grandparenting to involvement with children and adolescents with difficult problems or at risk for adverse outcomes need to be developed. Foster grandparent involvement in the schools could be helpful to children's acquisition of basic skills and subsequent application to life activities outside of school. Foster grandparents could, for example, be instrumental in the development and maintenance of conflict resolution and mediation programs in the schools and in the community. Their knowledge of parenting and children would be invaluable in guiding expectant teen mothers and teen parents through the difficulties of parenting an infant and bringing up children at a very young age.

This latter area is a difficult and potentially conflict ridden one for the biological grandparents of adolescents. With appropriate education and guidance, foster grandparents could be a valuable resource to fellow grandparents through modeling of positive behaviors in child care activities.

Priority must be given to active recruitment of male foster grandparents for the positive role modeling that only they can provide. The expertise of elders, both female and male, as teachers and coaches of important life skills could be fostered in diverse settings. It is also critical that evaluation of the effects of the program on the recipients, the children themselves, be conducted.

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS

Educational implications for health professionals can be placed in the context of *Healthy People 2000* objectives (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990) which are directed toward vulnerable populations. The challenge of *Healthy People* is: "... to use the combined strength of scientific knowledge, professional skill, individual commitment, community support, and political will to enable people to achieve their potential to live full, active lives" (p. 6). Clearly, ample opportunities exist to further this goal through continued collaboration between academic practice centers and community-based intergenerational programs as described in this paper. Moreover, the linkage of two different specialties in nursing that cross generations, gerontological nursing and child and adolescent health nursing, is one way that comprehensive health education for prevention and health promotion can be used to achieve *Healthy People 2000* objectives. Student learning experiences that focus on unique aspects of intergenerational relationships between older adults, and children and adolescents could be the emphasis of these intradisciplinary efforts.

The expansion of existing training programs for foster grandparents is requisite for them to successfully develop skills to work with children and adolescents who have special needs. Academic or community nursing centers with collaborative ties to communities and school systems are in an exceptional position to identify children and adolescents at risk and to develop training programs for

foster grandparents. A dual approach to foster grandparent education and training, using both child and adolescent and gerontological nursing theory and practice knowledge, would strengthen current approaches that employ only one nursing specialty. Experience in our Nursing Practice Center with the Foster Grandparent Program suggests that such a design would provide a stable environment for more comprehensive assistance to the foster grandparents and permit expanded programming to children and adolescents.

Development of programs that include undergraduate and graduate student internships with foster grandparents and children and adolescents through university and community partnerships would enable better monitoring of the health status of both foster grandparents and children. Health risk reduction factors as advocated in *Healthy People 2000* could also be monitored and evaluated longitudinally for both groups. Foster grandparents themselves could be taught how to prepare other foster grandparents with requisite skills. Expansion of foster grandparent programs with carefully designed implementation and evaluation criteria would provide useful data for justification of these programs. Research and evaluation findings could be used as opportunities to increase funding and effect public policy initiatives at the local and national levels. Ultimately, creative programs could facilitate mutual understanding between generations and promote strategies to effect positive health outcomes for all generations.

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Conference for Senior Citizens to Promote Self-Care Strategies

Emma S. Crook, MSN

ABSTRACT. The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (1990) stated in its publication *Healthy People 2000: Full Report* that preventable risk factors can be reduced by changes in health related behaviors, and these behaviors can be influenced by early health care intervention. "Senior Conference—Target Health '93" offered a specific program for African-American Senior Citizens to promote independent living and self-care strategies while fostering participation in the management of their own health. One hundred thirty seven African-American seniors attended this conference. The topics presented included self-care for chronic diseases, health promotion activities, and availability of community resources. The conference approach used adult learning principles and brought health professionals, health services, and community leaders to the seniors for improving their health related knowledge and communication skills.

In East St. Louis, Illinois, nearly two-thirds of the senior citizens, predominately African-American, live below the poverty level (Bureau of the Census, 1990). In addition to a lack of sufficient monetary funds, many of these seniors experience a high incidence of chronic disease, accidents, and obesity. Those seniors with health problems frequently find themselves ill-prepared to make major

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