

ENHANCING THE GRANDPARENT EXPERIENCE

Parent Effectiveness Training for Grandparents



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Background

Grandparents caring for, or parenting, their grandchildren, are increasingly contacting ParentLine ACT regarding parenting issues. Telephone counsellors report a desire by some grandparents to renew and revise their parenting skills, and to meet other grandparents for social support, and to reduce isolation.

Grandparents today are expected to take a more active role in their grandchildren's lives than in past decades - through increased active involvement such as childcare or parenting (Canberra Mothercraft Society, 2006). Sands and Goldberg-Sands (2000) suggest that preventive services such as Parent Effectiveness Training (P.E.T.) could be useful to reduce the stress felt by grandparents, as they meet this increased responsibility. They also identified a possible whole of family benefit if family relationships could be improved.

Parentline ACT was granted funding by the ACT government (Healthpact) to run a P.E.T. course for grandparents. P.E.T. teaches communication skills based on Gordon's (1970) Theory of Healthy Relationships (Wood and Davidson, 2005). It emphasises mutual respect as well as avoidance of the negative effects of relying on parental power (rewards and punishment) to manipulate child behaviour. This is an approach which may be particularly challenging to grandparent participants who have already raised a family.

The aim of running an inaugural P.E.T. course for grandparents was:

- to enhance parenting, grandparenting and relationship skills;
- to reduce stress and isolation;
- to examine whether such a course was beneficial to grandparents, and whether the participants felt it should be offered to others grandparents.

Method

Grandparents attended an eight week P.E.T. course weekly for three hours (10 am to 1 pm). Stress levels relating to particular child behaviours were self-assessed at the beginning and end of the course. Participants completed a qualitative questionnaire at the completion of the course, as well as giving verbal feedback.

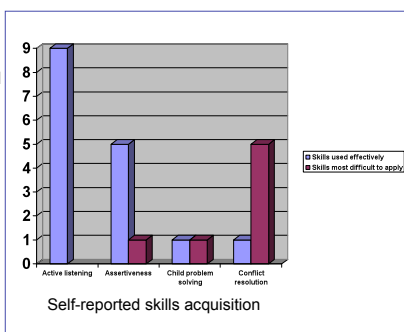


"My grandchild is laughing again, after six months of not laughing. Maybe we won't have to go to the psychologist now."

"My son and I are more respectful of each other, and my grandsons are picking up on this."



"I feel so much more confident in caring for my grandchild, and feel that I'll make less mistakes this time because of my P.E.T. skills"



Results

Eleven of twelve initial participants completed the course. Nine participants completed evaluations. Seven of the nine said they felt "very glad" they had taken the course, with the remaining two saying they felt "glad". Two of the participants were grandfathers.

Grandparents reported feeling less stressed at the end of the course, with self-assessed reductions in stress ranging from 5% to 50%.

All participants found the skill they used most effectively was active listening. The skill that most participants found difficult to apply was conflict resolution.

All grandparent participants said it would be useful to offer this course to other grandparents.

Participants expanded their social environment, meeting other grandparents with similar concerns, with the group planning to meet after completion of the course.

Self-reported Effects on the Family

An improvement in the relationship between adult children and the participants, where they are more respectful of each other, and this being modelled to the grandchildren.

Adult children being influenced by the changes in their parents, and so beginning to treat their children (the grandchildren) with more respect, and less physical discipline.

Feeling closer to their grandchildren.

More peace and harmony in the family.

Grandparents feeling more tolerant, and the family being surprised by the changes in the grandparent.

The relationship between some participants and their spouses improving.

Reflections and Conclusion

At times, a few of the participants found some of the course content very confronting, almost "demoralising". They reported feeling guilt about the way they had raised their adult children, particularly if the adult children had then had difficulties in their lives. They wondered if they may have prevented problems in their adult children had they acquired the skills from this course decades ago. However, they persevered to complete the course, because of the benefits they felt they had gained.

Grandparents became empowered and confident, as they gained new insights and skills in communicating with their grandchildren. They felt less stressed, more peaceful, and they saw improvements in their family's well-being. The change in family relationships may help reduce the psychosocial and behavioural risk factors for their grandchildren. The benefits of the course did not remain with just the participants, but had a ripple effect, influencing their adult children and their family, as well as friends.

References

- Canberra Mothercraft Society (2006) Grandparents Parenting Grandchildren because of alcohol and other drugs. Canberra Mothercraft Society
- Sands, R.G. and Goldberg-Glen, R.S. (2000) Factors Associated with Stress Among Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren Family Relations 49,1.
- Wood, C.D. and Davidson, J.A. (2005). Minding our language: Parent Effectiveness (PET) Training Australian style. In T.Bowles (Ed.) Proceedings of IV Australasian Psychology of Relationships Conference: The good, the bad and the ugly in personal, national and international relationships (pp149-153). Melbourne:APS