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Grandparent/Grandchild Relationship: Linking Grandparent Involvement to Adolescent Pro-social Behaviors

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Introduction:
Due to the changing dynamics of family life, there is a current need to understand the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Grandparents today are more involved in the lives of their grandchildren because of increased life expectancy, divorce rates, and dual working homes (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, & Buchanan, 2009). We examined how grandparents’ financial involvement with the family and their emotional closeness to the adolescent (Kemp, 2005) impacts behavioral outcomes. One study shows that a negative grandparent-parent relationship will negatively affect the grandparent-grandchild relationship (Attar-Schwartz, S., Tan, J., & Buchanan, A, 2009).

We hypothesize that the financial support of grandparents, grandparent emotional closeness with their grandchildren, and the strength of the grandparent-parent relationship all lead to pro-social outcomes. We define prosocial behavior as positive interactions with strangers.

Methods:
Participants for this study were taken from the Flourishing Families Project, which is a longitudinal study of inner family life involving 500 families with a child between the ages of 10 and 14 at Time 1 (collected in 2007; M age of child = 11.29, SD = 1.01, 49% female). The majority of participant families for the study were randomly selected from targeted census tracts in a large northwestern city using a national telephone database. A limited number of families were also recruited through other means (e.g., referrals, flyers; n = 77, 15%). The overall response rate of eligible families at Time 1 was 61%. Families were interviewed in their homes, with each interview consisting of a one-hour video (not reported here) and a one-and-one half hour self-administered questionnaire completed by the child, mother, and father.

For the current analysis, data were taken from responses to Time 2 (collected in 2008) and Time 3 (collected in 2009) surveys from the Flourishing Families Project. Ninety six percent of participants responded at Time 2 (N = 478), and ninety six percent of participants responded at Time 3 (N = 480).

Results:
The correlation between grandparent closeness and the grandparent/parent relationship with the maternal grandmother was weak (r = .14), negative when adolescents reported on maternal grandfathers (r = -.28), paternal grandmothers (r = -.16), and not significant with the paternal grandfathers (ns), suggesting that emotional closeness to a grandparent is sometimes opposite or unrelated to the grandparent/parent relationship.

Parental involvement was also correlated with grandparent emotional closeness when adolescents reported on maternal grandfathers (r = .14), maternal grandfathers (r = .32), paternal grandmothers (r = .36), and paternal grandfathers (r = .20), indicating that the increase in the involvement of parents with their children was associated with increases in emotional closeness to a grandparent.

Adolescents’ pro-social behavior with strangers is positively correlated with grandparent closeness when adolescents reported on the maternal grandfather (r = .27), and the paternal grandmother (r = .29). These findings suggest that adolescents may display more prosocial behaviors when they also report closeness to a grandparent [see tables 1 & 2].

Discussion:
Using data from the Flourishing Families Project we expected that the financial support of grandparents, grandparent emotional closeness with their grandchildren, and the strength of the grandparent/parent relationship would all lead to pro-social adolescent outcomes. Our results partially support our hypothesis in that grandparent emotional closeness leads to adolescent prosocial behavior. However, grandparent financial involvement does not. The grandparent parent relationship does not significantly influence financial and emotional involvement in predicting pro-social behavior.

Developing a relationship with a grandparent gives the adolescent valuable experience in building relationships with others outside the home, which is why those that felt close to grandparents also exhibited more prosocial behaviors. The findings on financial involvement were inconclusive because of other variables that were not taken into account such as single versus two parent families and socioeconomic status. The grandparent/parent relationship does not necessarily reflect the strength of the grandparent/adolescent relationship, however, there needs to be further research because of this unexpected finding.

References:

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Closeness to Grandparents Relates to Pro-social Behaviors