



Jackson County Department of Public Health

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2020-28
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
September 28, 2020

THE REALITIES OF GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

When a parent has a substance use disorder (SUD), they may have difficulty caring for themselves and others. Children living with a parent who has a SUD are more likely to experience lower socioeconomic status, abuse, neglect, and child maltreatment, to have issues with academics, social settings, family functioning, and access to fewer household resources. However, it is important to note that not all children will experience negative outcomes if their parent has a SUD.

Based on a report by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), about 1 in 8 children (8.7 million) aged 17 or younger live in households with at least one parent who has had a past year SUD. With the current opioid epidemic, there has been a lot of concern for children whose parents cannot adequately care for them due to their substance use. In addition, parents may not be present due to incarceration, treatment programs, hospitalizations, or even death. Statistics show that of the children who entered the formal foster care system in 2016, 34% were removed from home due to parental substance use. Of those children, about 1/3 formally lived with relatives. Generations United estimates that there are actually 20 times more children living with relatives and grandparents outside of the formal foster care system.

Across the U.S., over 2.4 million grandparents are responsible for their grandchildren. In North Carolina, 170,000 children under age 18 (7%) live in households headed by a grandparent. Research shows that the number of grandparents raising grandchildren (and other relatives caring for children in their family) has increased. The term "Grandfamilies" refers to families where grandparent(s) are raising grandchildren. Data shows that grandfamilies have a wide span across all racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic spectrums.

Grandfamilies also face unique challenges. In 2018, over half of grandparents raising grandchildren were still part of the work force and 46% were over the age of 60 years. A quarter of them reported having a disability. Additionally, there can be legal, financial, housing, educational, physical and mental health challenges for grandfamilies.

Though it may be very difficult when a child cannot be with their parent, there is positive news. Decades of research confirms that children in grandfamilies thrive. They are more likely to have safe and stable childhoods than children raised by non-relatives. They also experience fewer changes with schools, and have better behavioral and mental health outcomes. Keeping connections to family, including brothers and sisters, their culture and community are extremely important and usually accomplished when children live in grandfamilies. Further, they also "report that they always felt loved" (grandfamilies.org). Grandfamilies also benefit the grandparents, as they report that they often experience an increase in a sense of purpose.



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If you or someone you know is part of a grandfamily, visit www.grandfamilies.org and www.gu.org for valuable resources. To learn more about the opioid epidemic and get involved, contact Janelle Messer at (828) 587-8238 or janellemesser@jacksonnc.org.

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