

UNIQUE COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES FROM FSU IN WHICH CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE RAISED BY GRANDPARENTS

ALEX ALTSHULER (MA)

During the past several years SELAH (Israel Crisis Management Center) – a volunteer organization assisting newcomers to Israel facing crisis situations – has developed a unique support program for families in which custodial grandparents raise grandchildren. These children are extremely vulnerable to psychological distress due to the compound stress of losing their parents on top of immigration process difficulties. Unfortunately, young immigrants can face a higher risk of mental ill-health (Oppedal, Roysamb & Heyerdahl, 2005); and grandparents with custodial responsibilities for grandchildren have an increased probability for emotional and physical distress (Goodman & Silverstein, 2006).

Objectives of the program included: building a support network among grandparents and grandchildren, increasing grandparents' understanding of their child's needs, empowerment of grandchildren and grandparents. Methods that were employed included: reaching out, identification of families' needs and designing personal advancement program for each child, supplying practical assistance to families, continuous tutoring by volunteers, emotional counseling, advocacy, support groups and seminars. Program results indicate meaningful reciprocal support among grandchildren and grandparents, enhancing of psychological well-being, increase in sense of competence and resourcefulness of grandparents as primary caregivers, improvement of children's learning achievements, self-confidence and self-esteem

In summary, the program's unique characteristics will be mentioned. They include: bridging the gaps between different professions through multidimensional approach to families' needs; implementation of multiple treatment modalities by an interdisciplinary team, including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and art therapists; cultural sensitivity; addressing common and separate needs of grandchildren and grandparents; clients' empowerment; program's long-term and continuous nature.

UNIQUE COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT PROGRAM FOR IMMIGRANT FAMILIES FROM FORMER SOVIET UNION COUNTRIES IN WHICH ORPHANED CHILDREN AND YOUTH ARE RAISED BY GRANDPARENTS



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1. OVERVIEW

- ◆ SELAH - The Israel Crisis Management Center - is a volunteer countrywide organization assisting newcomers to Israel from all over the world facing crisis situations.
- ◆ The specific program deals with immigrants from FSU to Israel and to date has included 117 families.
- ◆ Extreme vulnerability of both grandchildren and grandparents - combination of: immigration trauma and loss of parents / children.
- ◆ Main reasons for parents' death: illness, terror attacks, car accidents, work accidents and family violence.
- ◆ Increased need of the families for support and assistance immediately after the tragedy and during the coming years.
- ◆ Interdisciplinary perspective is realized through: addressing a broad spectrum of children and grandparents' needs, various intervention methods and diverse helpers teams.
- ◆ Long-term and ongoing nature of the program enables to provide families constant address and secure place for many years.

3. RESULTS

- ◆ Reduction of financial distress of the families.
- ◆ Meaningful reciprocal support between grandchildren and grandparents based on meeting with people in similar situations that understand their pain and the challenges they face.
- ◆ Enhancement of psychological well-being within both groups.
- ◆ Increase in sense of competence and resourcefulness of grandparents as primary caregivers.
- ◆ Development of open dialogue between grandparents and children about the common trauma and loss.
- ◆ Decrease in reciprocal judgmental attitudes and increase in understanding and tolerance between grandparents and children.
- ◆ Improvement of children's learning achievements.
- ◆ Reinforcement of children's self-confidence and self-esteem.

2. METHODS AND CHARACTERISTICS

- ◆ Reaching out to families after tragedy.
- ◆ Assessment of children's and grandparent's needs .
- ◆ Practical assistance: financial aid, advocacy for the families in their contacts with governmental agencies.
- ◆ Design of personal advancement program for each child.
- ◆ Option for emotional counseling and continuous tutoring.
- ◆ "Sweet Fund" - aimed at fulfilling children wishes and enabling them to develop their hobbies.
- ◆ Support groups for families which include combination of separate and joint tracks for grandchildren and grandparents.
- ◆ Healing retreats for families and hikes for youth and children.
- ◆ *All the methods are administered with a special emphasis on cultural sensitivity.*
- ◆ **Program team:** professionals and volunteers from different backgrounds- mainly psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, community workers and art therapists. Many team members are Russian speakers.

4. SUMMARY

- The program makes it possible to bridge the following gaps:
- ◆ Feeling of discontinuity caused by the loss among grandparents and children.
 - ◆ Extremely different conceptions of grandparents and children and communication difficulties.
 - ◆ A huge gap between the families' needs and their financial abilities.
 - ◆ Lack of social recognition of the special situation experienced by this group of children and their grandparents, that may cause isolation between them and the surrounding society.
 - ◆ Separate treatment modalities and perspectives.
 - ◆ Different tool boxes among professionals and volunteers.

"Whoever saves one life, saves the whole world"