Forest Fire As a Shared Intergenerational Experience: Perceived Short-term Impacts on the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship

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Impacted by a forest fire that swept through an American university's mountain campus were 18 grandparents and 14 grandchildren participating in an intergenerational Elderhostel program. Six weeks after the fire, the grandparents were mailed a questionnaire that included questions about the fire's short-term impact(s) on their relationships with grandchildren. Almost all of the 13 grandparents who returned completed questionnaires reported that the shared experience of the fire increased the emotional bond with grandchildren. Many grandparents reported that the quality, intensity, and frequency of conversations with grandchildren had increased, especially during the period of time immediately following the fire. Findings from this exploratory study provide tentative support for the observation that grandparents can play critical roles in the lives of grandchildren during times of stress and crisis.

KEYWORDS intergenerational programs, grandparenting, grandchildren

INTRODUCTION

An early morning “dry-lightning” strike (i.e., lightning not accompanied by significant precipitation) in a rugged area of the United States ignited a forest
fire that eventually swept through a university-owned mountain campus. Being hosted on the campus at the time of the fire were 18 grandparents and 14 grandchildren participating in a week-long intergenerational program. In the morning on the day of the fire, the group had been divided roughly in half. Six grandparents and five grandchildren elected to participate in an all-day hike to a high mountain pass. The remaining grandparents and grandchildren opted to stay at the campus. As they ate lunch at the top of the pass, the hikers observed the gradual spread of the fire, which was located a considerable distance away. The fire posed no serious threat to life or property until later in the afternoon when the wind picked up and increased the rate and altered the direction of the fire’s spread. After descending below tree line on their return trek, the hikers could not accurately discern the direction or seriousness of the fire. Only the appearance and sound of spotter planes and slurry bombers signaled that the fire was out of control. Until they were intercepted by a program staff member, the hikers were unaware that the usual return route was in the path of the fire. This situation forced the hikers to take an alternate route in order to board evacuation vehicles. During the evacuation, husbands were separated from wives and grandchildren from grandparents. Figure 1 is a photo (taken by the author) of the returning hikers as they took an alternative route during the evacuation.

Although there was no serious injury or loss of life, the fire resulted in significant loss of personal and university property. As a stressful life event, the fire also set the stage for a drama that left an indelible impression on the grandparents and grandchildren who experienced it, as is illustrated by the following retrospective description written by an 11-year-old granddaughter.

**FIGURE 1** Evacuating intergenerational elderhostel participants view the advancing forest fire (Photo by the author).
On the second to the last day we had a choice to go on an all-day hike or stay back at the lodge. I decided not to go on the hike; so did half the group. My friends and I decided to go swimming in the river. The river was freezing cold. Most of us sat on the bridge to watch the other kids swim. We saw a little smoke in the mountains. We didn’t think much of it, and went on swimming. About twenty minutes later, the whole sky filled with smoke and went dark orange. Of course, my friends and I were scared. We decided to go back to our dormitory and find our grandparents. My grandma and I decided to start packing. About ten minutes later we were informed that we had to evacuate. We did not have a car, so we rode with some friends. We could now see bright orange flames rising over the mountains. When we got back down, television and newspaper reporters were waiting for us. I was interviewed by both. Many of the kids who were at the Elderhostel and were on the hike were crying because they lost things in the fire. I felt sorry for them.

This article reports the findings of a qualitative investigation of grandparents’ perceptions regarding the relationship impacts of having shared the experience of the fire with their grandchildren. Information was collected via questionnaires mailed to participating grandparents about a month and a half after the fire. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the extent to which grandparents perceived that the shared experience of the fire contributed to emotional bonding with grandchildren, at least in the short term. Prefacing the presentation of grandparents’ perceptions is background information on Elderhostel programs, a description of the content and focus of the intergenerational program impacted by the fire, and a brief summary of relevant findings from the literature on grandparent-grandchild relationships.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Intergenerational Elderhostel Programs

Elderhostel, also known as Road Scholar, was founded in 1975 for the purpose of providing older adults with low-cost educational and cultural programs. Elderhostel programs were first offered in the summer of 1975 at five colleges and universities in the United States, all in the state of New Hampshire. During the next 5 years, program participation grew exponentially, from 220 to more than 20,000, and Elderhostel programs proliferated across the United States and into Canadian provinces. In 1981, Elderhostel programs were launched in Mexico, Great Britain, and Scandinavia, with lectures, course-related field trips, cultural excursions, and extracurricular activities focusing on the cultures of the countries in which they were located (Mills, 1993). Elderhostel/Road Scholar programs now number more than 7,000 worldwide and are generally divided into several
nonexclusive categories: theme-based programs, intergenerational programs, outdoor adventures, service learning programs, adventures afloat, and independent city discoveries. The program category that is the focus of this study, intergenerational programs, has been part of Elderhostel since 1989.

The Intergenerational Program Impacted by the Fire

Although by no means unique among intergenerational programs, this particular program was structured primarily around experiential learning activities. Taking advantage of the mountain location of the campus, the program incorporated daily hikes to enhance classroom instruction on wildlife/stream ecology, geology, and natural history. As they hiked, grandparents and grandchildren were encouraged to observe and record wildlife and native flowers. On one afternoon during the weeklong program, grandparents and grandchildren were given the opportunity of jointly sketching pictures of the landscape, including a mountain meadow and an old evergreen tree, dubbed “the grandpa tree,” based on a cycle-of-life story read to the group prior to the nature sketching activity (see Donahue, 2000).

In addition, a high-adventure ropes course located a short distance from the main lodge was incorporated into the program as a vehicle for enhancing personal growth and self-confidence and for fostering team building and support. Participants were given the opportunity to step (literally) outside of their personal comfort zones by engaging in an activity with a high level of perceived risk. Grandchildren witnessed their grandparents walking across a narrow log spanning about 40 feet (12 meters) and elevated some 30 feet (9 meters) above the ground.

GRANDPARENT-GRANDCHILD RELATIONSHIPS

In reporting findings of their classic study of grandparenting, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) observed that grandparents have strong attachments to their grandchildren and that, in most cases, this bond assumes the form of a companionate relationship based on regular contact and an informal style of interaction. Moreover, Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) argued that grandparents take their relationships with their grandchildren quite seriously and generally describe feelings for their grandchildren with passion and conviction. Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) also provided evidence that grandparents respect a norm of noninterference and often assume a posture toward their grandchildren that emphasizes emotional gratification and companionship. Nevertheless, during times of family crisis (e.g., divorce), grandparents frequently step in to help.

More recently, in reviewing the literature on grandparent-grandchild relationships, Hayslip and Page (2012) reported findings similar to those
published by Cherlin and Furstenberg. But they also stated that grandparents may underestimate their contribution to the socialization and guidance of their grandchildren (see also Strom, Strom, & Collinsworth, 1991), particularly during times of stress. The quality of the relationships between grandchildren and their grandparents has been found to buffer the negative impacts of stressful events (e.g., parental divorce and death) on grandchildren (Henderson, Hayslip, Sanders, & Louden, 2009).

In spite of studies on the role of grandparents during periods of family turmoil, what appear to be missing from the literature are investigations focusing on the impact(s) that a shared, singular, stressful event might have on the grandparent-grandchild relationship. One clue regarding such impacts is found in Turner’s work on the nature of task bonding in interpersonal relations (Turner, 1970). According to Turner, an activity or event (which may or may not be stressful) that brings two people together for a period of sustained interaction supplies an occasion out of which other bonds may develop. Interaction in a shared activity or task can permit the discovery of additional bases for collaboration and interaction that would otherwise remain undiscovered. “The importance of collaboration of any kind is that it sets in motion an interaction sequence that often translates latent bonds into active ones” (Turner, 1970, p. 55).

In soliciting information from grandparents subsequent to the fire, it was hypothesized that this shared stressful experience would lay the foundation for greater emotional bonding between grandparents and their grandchildren. Although the exploratory nature of this investigation did not permit an empirical test of this hypothesis in the long term, an examination of grandparent perceptions a few weeks following the fire provides tentative evidence that this shared stressful experience did transform some latent emotional bonds into active ones.

METHODOLOGY

Characteristics of Intergenerational Program Participants

Participating in the intergenerational Elderhostel program at the time of the fire were 18 grandparents (11 grandmothers and 7 grandfathers) and 14 grandchildren (8 granddaughters and 6 grandsons). Twelve of the grandparents were married couples. The six single grandparents (five of whom were grandmothers) were each accompanied by one grandchild. Two of the six grandparent couples each brought two grandchildren (siblings). Grandparents ranged in age from 66 to 82. Because of publicized age restrictions, all of the grandchildren were between 11 and 12 years of age. Only four grandparents were residents of the state where the program was being hosted. Most grandparents and grandchildren were from other areas of the United States and had traveled a considerable distance to participate in the
program. There were no participants representing racial/ethnic minorities nor were there any international participants.

Approval and Restrictions

After securing approval from the university’s institutional review board (IRB) and approximately 6 weeks subsequent to the advent of the fire, consent forms and questionnaires were mailed to all 18 grandparents who participated in the program. In complying with IRB restrictions, no questionnaires were mailed to grandchildren or to their parents nor were any participants contacted via phone or in person. Basic demographic information regarding grandchildren was supplied by the responding grandparents. In a few instances, grandparents shared unsolicited narratives about the fire that had been written by their grandchildren, one of which appears in the introductory section of this article.

Respondent Characteristics

A total of nine grandmothers (five maternal grandmothers and four paternal grandmothers) returned questionnaires, as did four grandfathers (all maternal). Represented in the returned questionnaires were six grandmother-granddaughter dyads, three grandmother-grandson dyads, two grandfather-granddaughter dyads, and two grandfather-grandson dyads. The mean ages of the grandparents and grandchildren were 71 and 11, respectively. Table 1

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presents a summary profile of the characteristics of responding grandparents and their grandchildren.

Organization of the Mailed Questionnaire

Part 1 of the questionnaire solicited information on the demographic and relationship characteristics of the grandparent and grandchild. Grandparents were asked to specify genders and ages, both for themselves and for the grandchild(ren) who had participated with them in the intergenerational program. If more than one grandchild had participated in the program, the responding grandparent was asked to provide information on the oldest grandchild. Grandparents were also asked to indicate whether they were the grandchild's maternal or paternal grandparent.

Part 2 solicited information regarding the grandparent's perception of the seriousness of the fire before the actual announcement to evacuate. Grandparents who were on the hike when the campus was evacuated were asked the question, “At what point did you realize that the fire was serious, and that there was concern for safety?” For grandparents who remained on the campus and were among those first evacuated, the following questions were posed: “Describe where you were when you first received the evacuation notice?” “Did you think about leaving prior to the time you received the formal evacuation notice?”

Part 3 queried respondents about their feelings during the evacuation. Grandparents were asked, “During the evacuation, did you at any time feel concerned for your personal safety and/or for the personal safety of your grandchild(ren)?” They were also given a list of 10 adjective pairs, each set on a 5-point scale, and asked to circle the number that best described their feelings at the time of the evacuation. Examples: Fearful 5 4 3 2 1 Unafraid; Upset 5 4 3 2 1 Calm; Vulnerable 5 4 3 2 1 Safe. An evacuation stress score was derived by summing responses across the 10 items, with higher scores indicative of greater stress.

Part 4 of the questionnaire ascertained whether or not personal property and belongings were lost as the result of the fire and, if so, the monetary value of possessions lost. Grandparents were also asked the following question: “So-called dollar amounts of losses often do not reveal the sentimental value of things that perished in the fire. Please list and describe possessions lost in the fire that had significant meaning to you and/or your grandchild.”

Part 5 consisted of a single question: “At any time during the evacuation, were you separated from your grandchild(ren)?”

Part 6 of the questionnaire is the primary focus of this article and posed several questions designed to assess the perceived impact of the fire on grandparent-grandchild relationships. The lead question in this section asked grandparents to describe conversations that the grandparent had during and immediately after the evacuation. Grandparents were also asked to describe
conversations with children between the end of the evacuation and the time they had received the mailed questionnaire. Additional questions included the following:

- What effect(s) do you feel this shared experience will have on the two of you the next time you are together?
- Do you feel closer to your grandchild as a result of having shared the experience of the fire?
- How did the grandchild’s parents react to the news of the fire and subsequent evacuation?
- Have you and/or your grandchild experienced any problems sleeping since the fire, due to dreams about the fire/evacuation?

Part 7 assessed the extent to which grandparents felt the intergenerational program staff were helpful during the evacuation. Two questions were asked: (1) “In your opinion, how helpful were program staff during the evacuation?” (Extremely Helpful 1 2 3 4 5 Not Helpful) and (2) “What things did the program staff do that you found most helpful?”

Part 8 was the concluding section of the questionnaire and was designed to collect information on the comparative stress of the fire. This section began with a list of 15 potentially stressful life events but did not include the forest fire. Events listed included earthquake, death of a loved one, a serious personal health problem, and tornado/hurricane. For each event, grandparents were asked to indicate whether they had ever experienced it and, if yes, if they had experienced it within the past 12 months. Also included in Part 8 was a second list of stressful life events. This list was identical to the previous one but the fire was included as the last item. For each event listed and personally experienced by the grandparent, they were asked to circle a number on a 5-point scale indicating the amount of stress associated with the event.

This article is limited to responses that pertain to the relationship impacts of the fire as perceived by the grandparents. The primary question addressed was, “To what extent did the shared experience of the fire impact the grandparent-grandchild relationship?”

RESULTS

Presented in this section are grandparents’ perceptions regarding the impact of the fire in terms of emotional closeness, followed by an exploration of grandparents’ comments regarding the content and focus of conversations with grandchildren after the fire. The section concludes with a few observations regarding the stress experienced during the evacuation from the fire.
Increase in Emotional Closeness

Eleven of the 13 grandparents gave an affirmative answer to the question “Do you feel closer to your grandchild(ren) as a result of having shared the experience of the fire?” Grandparents who gave affirmative responses were asked to provide reasons for increased closeness. Typical of grandparents’ responses was the following insightful observation from one grandmother: “An experience with some threat to physical well-being makes you feel closer because you shared it. It still doesn’t replace the parental relationship. But it does provide a basis for feeling closer to your grandchild.” The most salient theme among grandparents’ reasons for increased closeness was that the grandparent had an opportunity to observe the grandchild in a novel situation: one where the child “let down her guard” (to use the words from one grandmother) and openly shared feelings with the grandparent.

Speaking from a temporal distance of 6 to 10 weeks after the fire, many grandparents also reported that the shared experience of the fire had since served as the basis for increased conversation with grandchildren. This finding seemed to be especially true of grandsons attending the Elderhostel with their grandmothers. From the perspectives of these grandmothers, their grandsons had been fairly uncommunicative during much of the week until the experience of the fire. The fire subsequently served as a catalyst that unleashed a volume of conversation between grandchild and grandparent and enhanced the bond from the perspective of the grandparent. Of her grandson, one grandmother reported, “He wasn’t very talkative when we first arrived, but the fire changed all that. He really wanted to talk about it with me.”

Other grandparents commented on the fact that they felt closer to their grandchildren because they had “survived together” (using the words of one grandparent) a potentially life-threatening experience, an experience that provided a common bond not directly shared by the parents. One grandmother shared the following:

We were together a couple of hours at the airport, waiting for her flight. We bought two copies of every newspaper we could find so that we’d know more about the fire. Mary was looking forward to telling her family all about it. She was sorry her interview with the television was not included on the ten o’clock news. Later in the summer, we were together at our family reunion and I brought her an album of photos I had taken, and the newspaper clippings. She was most pleased with the album! We will always be able to renew our relationship with a “Remember when . . .” story about the fire experience.

Focus and Content of Intergenerational Conversations

All grandparent respondents reported having had what they deemed to be significant conversations with their grandchildren, either during or
immediately after the evacuation. In many of these instances, the grandparent acknowledged the seriousness of the threat of the fire but tried to reassure the grandchild that things "would turn out all right." One grandmother wrote the following:

We voiced some apprehension as to whether we'd get a ride out during the evacuation, but basically expected that we would. The staff was doing a great job. There was some uncertainty about whether we could get our things out, though. I think we both were confident that we'd get out ourselves. We were both excited and fearful by the sight of the flames as they neared the dorms and the lodge. We were aware that this was a most unusual occurrence. The forestry students who were being evacuated with us told us that "we were due for a burn" and explained the benefits of a fire like this.

For those who lost property, grandparents' conversations with grandchildren were aimed at helping grandchildren to reframe the situation in a positive way. For example, one grandfather who had lost his car and all of the belongings in their dormitory room reported the following conversation with his grandson:

We discussed the loss of our car and all of our personal items except for what was on our backs, but most important of all acknowledged the fact that we were both alive and uninjured. . . . Since we live some miles away from each other, we don't get together very often. We have only seen each other twice since the fire. But we have talked on the phone and discussed our losses and the fact we got out safely. We did go back [to the location of the fire] one time together and saw what was left. I was able to salvage some things from the ashes of the dorm where we stayed, and also from my burned-out car. And we again discussed what we went through together . . . our ordeal.

Other grandparents reported that normally quiet grandchildren actively sought audience with their grandparents to air feelings and concerns. Typical of these conversations is the following observation by a grandmother concerning her granddaughter:

Anna could talk very little until her nosebleed, which lasted for one and a half hours, stopped. She is not an excitable type and not always very talkative, but this time she needed to. Driving back to my home . . . she talked about the smoke and fire as we held the ice and wet cloths to her nose. At home the bleeding soon stopped and we continued talking about it all while I fixed some supper. When we first met back at the main campus (we were separated during the hike) we just held on to each other and cried. Before our supper she wanted to talk to her mom
and dad. I phoned them, briefly explained that we were okay, [and] then she talked at least forty-five minutes with them.

Another grandmother shared the following:

We talked all about her experience and mine . . . she read every article about the fire in the local newspaper. I got my film developed and printed the enclosed pictures . . . they were the focus of some of our talk. Then when her family arrived, almost all the first day was just Lilly telling her experience to her family.

Almost all grandparents reported that conversations with grandchildren included an attempt to calm the grandchild, to contact the child’s parents as soon as possible, and to allay their (the parents’) fears stemming from reports in the news media. Typical is the following statement by one grandmother:

My goal was to allay any fears Patti might have. In the car we talked about possible causes of the fire, how it spreads, etc. We recalled the beautiful area around the “grandfather tree” [one of the program’s activities earlier in the week] and hoped it would be spared. We stopped on a hill and looked back at the huge fire and tall smoke and were awed at its might. We talked about calling her parents so they wouldn’t worry in case they heard about it on radio or TV and agreed to keep it short, stressing that all was well—and leaving the details to tell when she returns home.

Evacuation Stress

As mentioned previously, on the morning of the fire, intergenerational participants had voluntarily been divided roughly in half. Parsing the group into those who went on the hike and those who remained behind meant that—at the time the fire threatened the campus—some grandparents were separated from their grandchildren and some grandparent couples were separated from each other.

From comments overheard by program staff during the evacuation, it was hypothesized that grandparents who had been separated from grandchildren and/or from spouses would report greater evacuation stress than those who had not been separated. According to information gleaned from returned questionnaires, however, such was not the case. There were no significant differences in mean evacuation stress scores for those who experienced a separation from grandchildren and/or a spouse during the evacuation versus those who were not separated (\(M = 1.93\) versus \(1.81\) respectively). Program staff also discerned that grandmothers voiced more concern than did grandfathers during the evacuation but there was no empirical support for this.
However, one grandmother who was not separated from her granddaughter during the fire reported the following:

During the drive back down to town, we talked as we saw the smoke spreading. Sixteen miles on the curving, gravel road gave us an opportunity to talk. We left about an hour before the dorm burned. Since Brianna had originally signed up for the hike (but slept in), we talked about how fortunate it was that we weren't separated. But we were worried about the safety of the hikers. We saw the firefighters rushing up the road and knew it was serious. The next day we read the newspaper article and saw the front page picture of the hikers. When I thought that my granddaughter could have been on the hike, I got tearful for a moment. She later told her mother she wished she had been on the hike in order to experience the rescue!

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although it was not explicitly conveyed in promotional information, one of the objectives of the intergenerational program in which the participants were engaged at the time of the fire was to enhance the emotional bonding between grandparents and grandchildren. In fact, the majority of the week's activities prior to the fire had centered on accomplishing this objective. Hence, it is difficult to know the extent to which the shared experience of the fire and evacuation *per se* contributed to the closeness reported by the grandparents or merely served as an opportunity for the results of the program's objectives to be played out in dramatic fashion. In addition, because participation in intergenerational programs such as the one reported in this study is voluntary, many grandparents and grandchildren who register for these programs are likely to already enjoy some level of rapport, mutual respect, and emotional closeness.

That the information presented in this article was the product of a data collection effort initiated only after the advent of the fire means that it should be viewed as exploratory. To test the hypothesis that a shared stressful event produces increased emotional bondedness will require a study wherein baseline measures of relationship quality are available and where data are collected from both grandparents and grandchildren.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

Reported in this article were the findings of an exploratory study of the effects of a forest fire as a shared experience between grandparents and grandchildren. To be sure, there are too many confounding variables to claim that the shared experience itself strengthened the grandparent-grandchild
bond. However, enough anecdotal evidence exists in observations rendered by grandparents to indicate that such a shared experience contributed, at least in the short term, to an increased sense of emotional closeness.

This study also provides additional support for the claim by Cherlin and Furstenberg (1986) that grandparenthood is not a meaningless, unimportant role. Instead, grandparents often play a critical role in times of crisis. Troll (1983) once referred to grandparents as “the family watchdogs” who are in the background during tranquil times but are ready to step up when an emergency arises, which certainly was the case with the grandparents who participated in this study.

NOTE

1. Throughout this paper, grandchildren’s names are pseudonyms.

REFERENCES


