

Reviews

Luci Bearon

Review of Video Tape: "Going to Grandma's House . . . to Live" Produced by the Parent Place, Springfield, IL

In recent weeks, the mass media have been running a number of stories about the important and varied roles grandparents play in the lives of children. One set of stories features a Supreme Court case in which grandparents are pursuing visitation rights (http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/scotus_grandparents990928.html). Another set reports on the frequency and quality of grandparent/grandchild interaction (<http://www.aarp.org>).

One issue also in the spotlight is the increasing prevalence of grandparents serving as surrogate parents in families where the parent is unable to provide adequate care due to substance abuse, illness, incarceration, or immaturity. Grandparents raising grandchildren face a variety of challenges, including legal issues in custody and adoption, added financial responsibilities, complicated family dynamics, parenting in a changing world, and coping with the stresses created by the situation.

Slowly, materials are being developed to meet the educational needs of this varied but primarily female and midlife clientele. There are now a few Extension or Extension-type curricula, a few popular guidebooks and many articles, pamphlets, resource directories addressed to state and local populations. There are, however, only a few videos that are useful for making this issue come alive. One such video is "Going to Grandma's House...to Live" produced in 1998 by Dina Coates-Koebler of the Parent Place in Springfield, Illinois, with the University of Illinois at Springfield Television Office. This 18-minute video weaves basic information on grandparents raising grandchildren with excerpts from interviews with three real-life custodial grandmothers and one custodial aunt all struggling with unplanned and stressful parenting situations.

In the first part of the video, Coates-Koebler provides a voice-over for a succession of still photos of children and grandparents. Her narrative profiles grandparents raising grandchildren and introduces some of the most common and challenging issues. Then the video introduces four women: Marge, who raised her grandchildren while their parents were in prison for armed

robbery; Peggy, who is raising a preschooler whose hyperactivity is a challenge for Peggy's deaf and anxious husband; Rosetta, who is raising her niece against the wishes of an irresponsible birth parent; and Pieretta who is parenting, and trying to adopt, a grandson while working and planning for retirement.

The interviews are provocative as the women have heart-rending realities. Marge, who lives on Social Security disability, was forced to take a second mortgage on a completely paid-up home. Now that the parents are out of prison, they refuse to allow her visitation on the grounds that she might interfere with their efforts to set up a viable family unit. Peggy's dilemmas are made real in a spontaneous scene in which her little grandson runs through the room, and knocks over the video production equipment. Rosetta shares her dismay over the fact that her niece's parents want custody solely for the Social Security check they would gain control over. Pieretta explains a number of frustrations she faced in accessing the legal system, handling the costs of parenting, adjusting her retirement plans, etc. Each woman gives several compelling examples about how the family problems impact negatively on the grandchildren themselves.

The video is an excellent trigger film for use in Extension programming. The content is informative, factual, and, importantly for this issue, touches emotions. The people in the still photos and the four women interviewed include whites and African-Americans, with a variety of family situations. The video flows smoothly, is entertaining, and brief enough to leave plenty of time for discussion. The only problem with the video is that the sound quality varies from segment to segment, forcing the audience to strain to hear a few spoken comments.

I have used this video with Extension professionals and with grandparents raising grandchildren to unanimous praise because the women interviewed are so engaging, and the situations graphic and real. Grandparents raising grandchildren identify with the women and find their challenges treated with a great deal of respect. Indeed, the narrator refers to the women as "heroes" because without them, the children would become the responsibility of society at large. In any event, no one who sees the video will easily forget these women. They are the faces of a group of people often invisible.

Contact Information:

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Cite this article:

"Reviews." *The Forum for Family and Consumer Issues* 5.1 (2000) 7 pars. 31 March 2000.