
African American Grandfamilies' Attitudes and Feelings About Sexual Communication: Focus Group Results

Judith B. Cornelius, PhD, RN

Sara LeGrand, MS

Loretta Sweet Jemmott, PhD, RN, FAAN

Little attention has been given to the responsibilities that African American grandparent caregivers face when they assume the role of raising their grandchildren. One particularly challenging task of grandparent caregivers is communicating with their grandchildren about sexuality issues. This study therefore examined the sexual communications and attitudes and feelings toward these communications between African American grandparent caregivers and their adolescent grandchildren (11-13 years of age). Focus group methodology was used to generate data about the grandparent/grandchild sexuality communication process and attitudes and feelings toward that process. The sample included 40 dyads of African American grandparents/grandchildren, for a total of 80 participants. Grandparents as well as their adolescent grandchildren desired open communication about sexuality issues, said that societal pressure makes sexual encounters hard to resist, and felt that they needed assistance with the sexuality communication process. Nurses can build upon the study's results to assist African American grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren with sexual communication.

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Increasing numbers of children are now living in grandparent-headed households (U.S. Census Data, 2003), and this growing social phenomenon is referred to by the term *grandfamily* (Racicot, 2003). Among those of color, HIV is contributing to the growing number of grandparent-headed households (Weber & Waldrop, 2000). Adolescent grandchildren raised by grandmothers are more likely than children raised by their parents to live in poverty, to be exposed to illegal alcohol and drug use, and to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005).

African American children are more likely to live with grandparents than children from other ethnic groups (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005), and when they become adolescents, these grandchildren are at risk for adopting risky sexual behaviors (Gillespie, Kadiyala, & Greener, 2007). Although the overall incidence of AIDS is declining, there has not been a comparable decline in the incidence of new HIV cases among young people, especially African American young people. Today, African Americans from 13 to 24 years of age represent 61% of the estimated

Judith B. Cornelius, PhD, RN, is assistant professor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Sara LeGrand, MS, is a University of North Carolina at Charlotte Doctoral Student. Loretta Sweet Jemmott, PhD, RN, FAAN, is van Ameringen professor and director of the Center for Health Disparities Research, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

number of HIV infections (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2007; Durant et al., 2007). Because the average time period from HIV infection to the development of AIDS is 10 years, most adults with AIDS were likely infected as adolescents or young adults. In 2006, African Americans 25 to 29 and 40 to 44 years of age represented 13% to 16% of HIV-infected individuals in the United States (CDC, 2008).

Historically, African American grandparents have had a profound effect on the health beliefs of the family (Watson & Koblinsky, 2000; Watson, Randolph, & Lyons, 2005). Yet as a result of strained family relations and issues with parenting, many custodial grandparents experience psychological distress in their new role (Goodman & Silverstein, 2002; Kaminski & Hayslip, 2004; Minkler, Fuller-Thomson, Miller, & Driver, 2000) and are ill-prepared for sexual communications (Cornelius, LeGrand, & Jemmott, 2008).

Research on the grandparent-grandchild sexual communication process is limited. One study by Brown et al. (2000) indicated that African American grandparents were unprepared to talk with their grandchildren about topics such as sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Gibson (2002) reported that African American grandparent caregivers typically had low educational achievement, limited income, and no preparation for their new caregiver role other than their previous parenting experiences. Silverthorn and Durant (2000) reported that many custodial grandparents lacked knowledge about STDs, drug use, and the effects that peers have on their grandchildren. Robbins, Briones, Schwartz, Dillon, and Mitrani (2006) reported that drug-using adolescents from grandparent-headed households had a greater prevalence of marijuana abuse (a major risk factor for unprotected sexual behaviors) and received less supervision than drug-using adolescents from parent-headed households. In a study of 40 African American grandparent-grandchildren dyads, Cornelius et al. (2008) reported that African American grandparents needed assistance with the sexual communication process with their grandchildren and were willing to use the church as a venue for HIV prevention education. Kelley and Whitley (2003) reported that close to 30% of their sample of

102 African American grandmothers and great-grandmothers scored high on psychological distress associated with their new parenting role—distress serious enough to warrant intervention—and that grandmothers and great grandmothers needed parent education classes on topics such as sexuality issues.

Although numerous sexual communication studies have targeted parents and their adolescent children, few have targeted African American grandparents and their adolescent grandchildren. Although African American grandparents are vital to the survival of the African American family (Watson et al., 2005), comprehensive sexuality education programs for grandfamilies are basically nonexistent. As a first step toward developing interventions to strengthen grandparents' communication skills and improve their attitudes and feelings about discussing sexuality issues, the study reported here examined grandparent/grandchild sexual communication processes.

Method

Design

The study was part of a larger qualitative and quantitative research project that examined African American grandparents and their middle-school and early adolescent grandchildren's concerns about HIV and issues and barriers to prevention (Cornelius et al., 2008). Surveys and focus groups were used to explore the grandparent-grandchild process of sexual communication and grandparents' and grandchildren's attitudes and feelings toward these communications. The qualitative results from the focus groups are reported here.

Setting and Sample

African American Protestant churches were the setting for the study because they were a convenient meeting place for participants. Grandchildren were eligible if they self-identified as African American, were 11 to 13 years of age, spoke and understood English, and were living with a grandparent. This age range was selected for study because it is the time when children are approaching or beginning adolescence, with all its challenges. Grandparents

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