Golden Opportunities

Wraparound services can help children whose primary caregivers are grandparents

By Amy Mason

Most grandparents look forward to their golden years—that stage of life when they can have fun with their grandchildren and give them back to their parents when they’re ready for a break. But many of today’s grandparents have had to take on a different role, stepping up to take the lead on raising grandchildren.

At Madison County Elementary School in Gurley, Alabama, more than 6 percent of students are being raised solely by a grandparent as a result of untimely deaths, incarceration, or drug addiction. These circumstances create challenges with resources, medical needs, confidentiality, and the cycle of poverty that affects student performance in school.

Grandparents can be overwhelmed by the children under their care or requiring their supervision, and they often
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lack access to the resources required to raise them. At Madison County Elementary School, we have a number of supports that help older adults manage their responsibility to raise a child.

**Food and Financial Supports**

To start, we have established community partnerships with Graces of Gurley and the Care Center, two local nonprofit organizations, to provide monthly food boxes, Christmas gifts, and weekly “Bag of Blessing” food distributions for families in need. Since 2016, the Care Center has also facilitated a 21st Century Learning Center afterschool and summer program at the school.

These programs alleviate some of the financial burden for families and provide students with additional time at the school so they can take advantage of high-quality academic and enrichment programming, as well as receive snacks and meals.

Our school is fortunate to have two grant-funded, full-day pre-K classes through the Alabama Office of School Readiness. At age 4, students are able to attend school with their older siblings.

Families can also sign up for the Dollywood Imagination Library, a foundation started by country music star Dolly Parton, to expand reading at home. Children from birth to age 5 within the school community get a free book every month by mail. The monthly selections are full of quality children’s literature.

**Facilitating Health Care**

Sometimes, grandparents do not have the right to make medical decisions, so they are not able to help children attend doctor’s
appointments or get prescriptions filled. Madison County Elementary offers a Health Establishments at Local Schools (HEALS) clinic on campus that helps students apply for coverage as uninsured patients.

Students can then attend appointments while at school, so the grandparent doesn’t have to spend as much time taking them to appointments. Our school system’s social worker also supports families by transporting them to medical appointments that might be difficult to keep due to a lack of reliable transportation.

If the parents are still living, they often want to maintain parental rights. Confidentiality creates a challenge for schools; we can’t always have an open dialogue with grandparent caretakers regarding the student’s educational performance or academic and behavioral concerns.

Our teachers found some success with encouraging the grandparent to have the custodial parent attend these conferences with them so that critical information can be shared about the child’s academic needs.

**Family Education**

Grandparents are not digital “natives,” so they are often unaware of the risks associated with students using technology and social media in the home without adult supervision. As a Title I school, Madison County Elementary has provided programming beyond the school day to educate families about specific apps and websites that might be of concern.

Children who are raised by grandparents often struggle with generational poverty, and patterns of household dysfunction are hard to break. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have a tremendous impact on the potential for future violence and victimization, the CDC says, as well as lifelong health and opportunity.

Some students have multiple ACEs including the loss of a parent prior to the age of 18. Madison County Elementary uses Conscious Discipline, a social-emotional approach developed by Becky Bailey, and other social emotional learning tools to help students connect with a caring adult at school. Daily “restorative circles” provide opportunities for students to talk about their feelings while in a calm state, and the approach can transfer to handling conflicts with others.

The collaborative approach helps students feel connected at school. It is also our goal to help connect grandparents performing a second round of parenting with resources and supportive community agencies. As the old saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child—and that couldn’t be truer for our most vulnerable students.

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