

Ethnotheories of Rural and Urban Batswana Grandmothers

Regarding Children's Development

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Abstract

Childcare by grandmothers is a common feature in the African traditional milieu. In Botswana, grandmothers are perceived as custodians of culture and are implicitly expected to impart to their grandchildren traditional wisdom, values, and beliefs. Although these are widely known roles of grandmothers, studies of caregivers' developmental expectations ("developmental timetables") seldom include grandmothers. This study examined child development ethnotheories of 20 rural and urban Batswana grandmothers. The findings indicate that urban and rural grandmothers generally expect similar skills, but for some, at different ages. Rural grandmothers had early expectations for self-care skills and participation in household chores. Both groups of grandmothers used various cultural practices to help their grandchildren to attain the expected skills.

Introduction

The numbers of children living under grandmothers' care continue to grow due to a host of economic and social challenges that are facing modern families (Goodman 2012). In Botswana grandmothers support more children than before (Shaibu, 2013). Similarly, South African grandmothers in the Agincourt sub-district are caring for an average of 4 to 5 grandchildren (Schatz, 2007). Other than providing basic care for their grandchildren, these grandmothers also impart to their grandchildren traditional wisdom, values, and cultural beliefs. Although the roles played by grandmothers are widely known, very little attention has been given to examining the developmental skills that they expect from young children. Knowledge of grandmothers' developmental timetables is important for establishing whether there is congruence of expectations among people who participate in children's care, for developing culturally relevant caregiver support programs, and for designing appropriate agendas for children in any given context. To understand the expectations of Batswana grandmothers, this study examined the grandmothers' ideas of what young children should be able to do at the ages between 3 and 5 years, and the practices that these grandmothers use to promote children's desired skills.



Two grandmothers and their grandchildren in Kanye village

Methods and Materials

Procedures

- ❖ IRB exemption was obtained from UConn
- ❖ Research permit was acquired from Ministry of Local Government, Botswana.
- ❖ Grandmothers were recruited through a snowball process in the capital city of Gaborone and the village of Kanye.
- ❖ A total of 20 grandmothers (10 urban and 10 rural) participated in focus group discussions.

Sample Characteristics

- ❖ Grandmothers of preschool children ages 3 to 5 years.
- ❖ Urban grandmothers were generally younger and more educated than the rural mothers.

Results

Skills Grandmothers Expect from Children

1. Self-care: Feed self, potty-trained, start dressing self

An urban grandmother said, "They should be able to undress and go to the toilet at 3 years," but a rural grandmother had a different opinion: "Even at 2 years., he knows how to dress himself and doesn't wear clothes backwards."

"Even bathing themselves, they bathe themselves at 4 to 5 years, and your role is to help them with their back, but as for the face and legs, even to apply body lotion, they do it", a rural grandmother commented.

2. Communication: Verbally express wants, follow simple commands

An urban grandmother explained: "He can be sent around; in Setswana culture a child starts to be sent to do tasks at 3 years." A comment from a rural grandmother, "This one is 2 years, ... he is clever, and he is the one we send around., he already understands everything...."

3. Customs: Take with both hands, be polite

An urban grandmother said, "In Setswana culture we have different values that we want to start instilling in children when they are 3 years, like the culture of respect – in the form of ma'am, sir, and the like."

A rural grandmother remarked, "Yes, you tell them. When you give [something to] the child and they receive, "take with both hands, and say thank you mama." Another rural grandmother explained, "The first thing when they have become clever, you teach them that when visitors arrive at home, you get them a chair. Visitors should not come and stand like this,"

4. Begin household chores: Wash socks, do simple tasks

An urban grandmother said, "When washing clothes, you put their sock in the laundry, allow the child to wash the sock, while knowing that you will finish it off. But the child would know that they should wash their sock."

Another urban grandmother commented, "When a child is 5 years we expect them to be able to make their bed, able to fold their clothes and put them away nicely."

For a rural grandmother, "When they are 5, they know that when visitors come, they make tea, they prepare cups and bring tea." Another commented: "Yes, right now even soft porridge, they know how prepare it."

5. Environmental independence: Independently buys from nearby tuck-shop, play in street without adult supervision

A rural grandmother, "For me at 2 years the child goes to the tuck-shop, because they can talk, yes I send them, go and buy bread. Another, "When a child is 5, they can go and play with others outside the yard."



A grandchild washing socks



Grandchildren hanging laundry



Two grandchildren cooking



A grandchild serving tea

Discussion

Our findings showed that urban and rural grandparents' ethnotheories about young children's development served as a guide for structuring children's experiences, and also influenced the support that these grandmothers' gave their grandchildren. The results on the skills expected for self-care, communication, politeness, environmental independence, and participation in household chores are consistent with the findings of Zeitlin's (1996) study of mothers in Nigeria. In our study, urban and rural grandmothers' developmental timetables for children at 3 to 5 years encompassed similar kinds of skills. Overall, rural grandmothers had earlier expectations than urban grandmothers for self-care skills and participation in household chores, as well as for environmental independence. Further, rural grandmothers expected more skills and higher levels of competencies at 4 and 5 years compared to urban grandmothers. For skill-developing practices, both groups of grandmothers taught, guided, demonstrated, modelled and engaged children in household activities in efforts to facilitate development of valued skills among their grandchildren.

Conclusions

- Urban and rural grandmothers expect the same skills from their grandchildren but differ in the age at which they expect to see some of these skills.
- Both groups of grandmothers use similar cultural practices to help their grandchildren develop the expected skills.
- Grandmothers who participated in the study invested time and effort in training their grandchildren to develop the valued skills.
- Given the considerable differences in age and education of the urban and rural grandmothers, the general similarity of their developmental expectations is impressive, reflecting shared ethnotheories of child rearing and development.

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