

# *Grand Voices for America's Children*

*New Perspectives on Grandparents and  
Other Relatives Raising Children*



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### **About GU**

Generations United (GU) is a national membership organization focused solely on improving the lives of children, youth, and older people through intergenerational strategies, programs, and public policies. GU represents more than 100 national, state, and local organizations and individuals working on behalf of

more than 70 million Americans. Since 1986, GU has served as a resource for educating policymakers and the public about the economic, social, and personal imperatives of intergenerational cooperation. GU acts as a catalyst for stimulating collaboration between aging, children, and youth organizations, providing a forum to explore areas of common ground while celebrating the richness of each generation.

Since 1997, one of GU's main initiatives has been its work to support relative caregivers and the children they raise. GU's National Center on Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children seeks to improve the quality of life of these caregivers and the children they are raising by addressing the unique needs of each generation. It provides a wide variety of resources, technical assistance, and training to service providers and professionals across the country, and educates policymakers on the importance of adopting intergenerational public policies and programs.

### **About the Project**

In December 2004, The Pew Charitable Trusts (the Trusts) awarded GU a generous grant as part of its national foster care policy initiative to help move children in foster care more quickly and appropriately to safe, permanent families and to prevent the unnecessary placement of children in foster care. In May 2004, the Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care recommended changes to address the reasons why children languish in foster care: (1) federal financing incentives favor foster care over other services and options, and (2) state and local courts frequently lack the tools and information needed to oversee foster care

cases. As part of the initiative's third phase, multifunded advocacy, the Trusts is collaborating with GU and other organizations to raise awareness of the commission's recommendations and to encourage support for them. The Trusts is supporting GU to raise awareness about the need for federal guardianship assistance to support older Americans raising children in foster care and for improved court oversight of foster care.

The Pew Charitable Trusts serves the public interest by providing information, policy solutions, and support for civic life. Based in Philadelphia with an office in Washington, D.C., the Trusts will invest \$177 million in fiscal year 2005 to provide organizations and citizens with fact-based research and practical solutions for challenging issues.

More information about The Pew Charitable Trusts is available at [www.pewtrusts.org](http://www.pewtrusts.org).

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts or the Brookdale Foundation Group.



*by Harriet Rosenberg*





## *Introduction*

*“We might be hungry but we still have the family together – and family is everything”*

Relative Caregiver Focus  
Group Member

**A**cross the country, there are more than six million children living in households headed by grandparents and other non-parent relatives. Both inside and outside of the child welfare system, these relative caregivers provide a vital safety net – preventing children from going into foster care, caring for abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes, and stepping forward as legal guardians to children who would otherwise remain in foster care. Despite their commitment to the children they are raising, however, relative caregivers often struggle to access even the most basic family supports — from enrolling children in school to authorizing medical care.

To improve the lives of these families, we must begin to explore new strategies to bring to life the impact of their experiences on the general public. In short, we must find more compelling ways to encourage

grandparents and other relative caregivers to tell their stories. Focusing public attention on potential solutions as well as existing problems is a tall order, however, especially in the face of the inconsistent and sometimes contradictory media accounts of these families. From heroic images of relative caregivers as “silent saviors,” the glue that keeps families together, to corrosive stereotypes of intergenerational dysfunction, media messages play a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of and support for these families.

In the real world, of course, no single image — no matter how compelling — tells the whole story. The needs and circumstances of these families are as complicated and diverse as the families themselves. At the same time, however, sharpening our collective ability to shape a consistent national message that

elicits positive media coverage and builds widespread support for these families is the cornerstone of any successful advocacy effort. And in a saturated media market that already asks the public to care about dozens of different social issues in the course of a single day, speaking on behalf of grandparents and other relative caregivers raising children with a strong and unified voice has never been more important.



*by Beverly Persell*

With the generous support of The Pew Charitable Trusts and the cooperation of other partners involved in national and local efforts to support

grandparents and other relatives raising children in foster care, Generations United (GU) has enlisted Strategic Insight, a team of creative talent and qualitative research experts, to help develop an effective message that will build public support for grandparents and other relatives raising children. This guide summarizes the preliminary results of this groundbreaking research. As such, the recommendations offered are neither intended to dictate all public discourse around this issue nor to preclude more nuanced messages for more specific audiences, such as policy makers or agency administrators. Instead, the research findings are designed to provide a dynamic first step in discussing, developing, and implementing a comprehensive national communications strategy on behalf of grandparents and other relatives raising children with a special emphasis on children in foster care.



*by Hazel Soloman*



## *Research Process*

*How did GU begin putting together an effective message strategy for grandparents and other relatives raising children?*

GU began the research process by working with Strategic Insight, a communications consulting firm, to conduct in-depth discussions with more than a dozen experts on policies and programs that address the needs of grandparents and other relatives raising children. These experts included representatives from the Children's Defense Fund, AARP, CWLA, Casey Family Programs, Urban Institute, The Brookdale Foundation Group, and a variety of other national organizations. Following these initial brainstorming sessions, professionals from Strategic Insight developed an appropriate messaging framework. Using 360 Probes<sup>®</sup>, a proprietary research procedure, the messaging professionals from Strategic Insight created and tested different kinds of language and labels – sometimes referred to as “probes” — to describe grandparents and other relatives raising children and to present alternative rationales for public support of these families. These probes were then tested with several focus groups — guided interviews with groups of individuals specially selected to share their opinions on these and related issues.

### *How were the focus group participants chosen?*

Strategic Insight conducted a total of five focus groups – two in New Orleans and three in New York City. The locations for the focus groups were chosen in states that are already engaged in ongoing coalition-building efforts on behalf of grandparents and other relatives raising children led by GU through its grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. In New Orleans, one focus group consisted only of relatives raising children. The other group was made up of female members of the general public over age 50 — the population most likely to vote and therefore influence policy makers. In New York City, three groups were conducted: one among relatives raising children; one among female members of the general public over age 50; and one among male members of the general public over age 50.

### *How were the focus groups conducted?*

The focus group leader began by asking the participants in the general public focus groups to discuss the main issues on their minds without specifically bringing up the subject of grandparents and other relatives raising children. The participants in the relative caregiver focus groups were asked about their own experiences in raising the children under their care. Both types of focus groups were then asked to write down privately their reactions to the following “basic premise:” *an increasing number of grandparents and other relatives are raising children because their parents are unable or unwilling to do so for one reason or another.* Their written reactions were followed by a group discussion of the basic premise. Next, the participants were asked to respond to a

*“I could really care less how much money we save. It’s the welfare of the child that matters.”*

General Public  
Focus Group  
Member

series of “motivational probes” – themes or statements designed to elicit the strongest responses for and against these families. These probes were designed to explore participants’ different perceptions of this issue, such as the relative caregiver’s role in keeping the family together or the larger impact of relative caregiving on society. Participants were then asked to react to a range of different labels for caregivers and their families and for “subsidized guardianship,” an ongoing financial subsidy some states provide to children who exit the child welfare system into the care of permanent guardians, usually relatives. After testing the group’s response to these potential labels, participants were asked – first as individuals and then as a group – to respond to common counter-arguments against grandparent and other relative-headed families .



*by Rowena Scott-Johnson*



## *Summary of Research Findings*

*Was the issue of grandparents and other relatives raising children a primary concern for participants in the general public focus groups?*

No. Although most participants in the general public focus groups were aware of and concerned about a range of serious issues (e.g., disintegrating culture, the economy, health care, Social Security, and taxes), no one in these focus groups brought up the specific issue of children being raised by grandparents and other relatives until prompted. Many participants worried about the "future of children today," but did not consider relative-headed families a "top-of-the-mind" issue.

*How did focus group participants from the general public react to the following basic premise?*

An increasing number of grandparents and other relatives are raising children because their parents are unable or unwilling to do so for one reason or another.

The attention of the participants in all of the focus groups was drawn, first and foremost, to the plight of the child. Many participants in the focus groups

***“I have empathy. It’s so important to give a child a foundation to grow on and a stable environment.”***

**General Public  
Focus Group  
Member**

readily acknowledged the problems facing grandparents and other relatives raising children and were aware that, in most situations, relative caregivers are rescuing children from unfortunate circumstances. Interestingly, individual reactions to the basic premise, while mixed, were not grounded in the belief that the “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” In fact, grandparents and other relative caregivers were largely exempt from any criticism from the groups.

Where there was resistance to the basic premise, it was primarily based on negative assumptions about the children’s parents rather than on the notion of a multi-generational cycle of failure. In particular, many participants reacted negatively to the idea that parents are “unwilling” to care for the children — blaming “selfish” or “money-obsessed” parents for the fact that relatives have to step forward. A few participants in the general public group also expressed doubt that the number of grandparents and other relatives raising children was really on the rise. “I don’t feel like there’s more now than there was before,” commented one participant, “but I do feel like grandparents are playing a big role in children’s lives.”

In the final analysis, participants were most influenced by the innocence of the children and the moral strength and sacrifice of their caregivers.

***What did the focus groups composed of grandparents and other relative caregivers think about the challenges facing their families?***

For the most part, the grandparents, aunts, and uncles participating in the two relative caregiver focus groups emphasized their strong sense of duty, family

responsibility, and the need to step forward to care for a child when other family members are not available. Although most participants in these groups admitted to facing a range of challenges in their caregiving roles, they also stressed that, in the end, their efforts were worth it to keep their families together and the children out of the foster care system. Many participants also expressed an interest in joining a support group in their local communities that would give them the opportunity to talk through shared issues with other relative caregivers in similar situations.

*What was the most compelling theme or “probe” tested among the five focus groups?*

Again, the participants in all the groups focused chiefly on the needs and circumstances of the children. In particular, there was a collective belief that no matter why parents can no longer take care of their children - death, divorce, neglect, abuse or poverty - it is never, ever the "fault" of the child. Noted one participant: “often the things of the parents are thrown up in the kids’ faces – it’s not their fault.” Said another: “A child’s life is at stake.”

*Were there other themes or “probes” that tested positively among the focus groups?*

Most participants came together around the importance of keeping the family together for the sake of the child. Those who supported the relative caregivers, for example, were most focused on financial support as it related to the child’s needs. Some themes resonated more strongly than others based on the individual composition of the focus groups:

*“It was easier for them to adjust with me because I’m their grandmother.”*

Relative

Caregiver

Focus Group

Member

**“The child didn’t ask to be brought into this world.”**

**General Public  
Focus Group  
Member**

- ◆ General public focus groups: *Keeping siblings and families together when something happens to the parents should be a major priority.*
- ◆ Relative caregiver focus groups: *It’s usually less traumatic for a child who has lost his or her parents to be raised by responsible relatives than to be thrown into the foster care system.*
- ◆ All focus groups: *Foster care should be a last resort. All attempts should first be made to place children in homes of caring relatives.*

**What themes or “probes” did not test well among the focus groups?**

- ◆ *A relative who steps in to raise a child is giving that child a second chance.* Many participants found this statement too sweeping. Said one, “not all relatives are necessarily giving the child a second chance; they can be abusive.”
- ◆ *The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.* This probe was generally perceived as too cold and unemotional for many participants.
- ◆ *There is truth in the statement “blood is thicker than water.”* This theme was rejected by some focus group participants. Although it did resonate with some relatives raising children, this statement was offensive to the adoptive and foster parents who participated in the general public focus groups.
- ◆ *It not only may be better for children to be raised in relative-headed homes, it also saves taxpayer dollars.* Generally, language that centered around the financial impact of relative caregiving did not

resonate emotionally with the focus groups and prompted many in the general public focus groups to bring the argument back to the support of the child. For example, one participant noted "these children need stability and that to me is a compelling reason."

## SUPPORT FOR SUBSIDIZED GUARDIANSHIP

**T**hirty five states and the District of Columbia now have subsidized guardianship programs, an increasingly popular permanency option that provides an ongoing financial subsidy to eligible children who exit the child welfare system into the permanent care of a legal guardian, often a relative. In its national report on child welfare reform, *Fostering the Future: Safety, Permanence and Well-Being for Children in Foster Care*, The Pew Commission on Children in Foster Care, a nationally renowned panel of child welfare experts, recommended that federal guardianship assistance should be available to eligible children who leave foster care to live with a safe, legal guardian when



*by Animesh Hardia*

adoption or reunification is not a viable permanency option.

As part of its research, GU explored the reactions to the concept of subsidized guardianship. As a general principle, focus group participants were open to the idea of a federal fund for caregivers, although more research is needed to determine the extent of such support in the face of other national funding priorities. The focus groups composed of members of the general public did not generally oppose taxes going towards such a fund. In fact, there was unanimous support for the fund going to those who "needed" the

help. Commented one participant: “there should be more support within the community in taking on this responsibility.” Participants in the relative caregiver focus groups also supported the idea of the fund, but were especially focused on supporting those in need. “How can you do it without the money?” pointed out one caregiver. Interestingly, even caregivers who would not necessarily qualify for the assistance themselves were supportive of the fund.

GU’s team of messaging professionals also tested the general reaction to the term “subsidized guardianship.” Focus group participants favored labels that emphasized keeping the family together and that clearly communicated whom the fund will support. Labels such as Subsidized Guardianship, Keeping the Family Together Fund, Family Guardian Assistance, and Family Preservation Support were the most popular. Participants in the general public focus groups also favored the term “fund” over “assistance” or “subsidy” because it was more dignified and less value-laden.



*by Billie Wright*



## *Preliminary Conclusions*

### **It's about the Child.**

- ◆ The advocacy community needs to raise awareness about the issue of grandparents and other relatives and the children they raise before someone else does. In framing an effective message, we must first do no harm. More specifically, we should avoid all references to:
  - Parents as “unwilling” to raise their children because it only generates blame for the parents.
  - Relative care as a “growing” problem because it invites a counter-argument that distracts the public from the central emotion of the issue.
  - Relative care as “a problem” because it invites a counter-argument that distracts from the central emotion that the families generate.

**No matter why parents can no longer take care of their children – death, divorce, neglect, abuse or poverty – it never, ever is the ‘fault’ of the child.**

- ◆ In framing an effective message, the mantra that should be used in describing the issue of relative care to the public should be: *“It’s about the child.”* All messaging should focus on needs and plight of the children and their potential to overcome their fate with proper and loving care from relatives. Put differently, the family should be kept together for the children’s sake.
- ◆ Remember that a child-focused message is especially powerful because it evokes the archetype of the innocent – a universal, symbolic model that speaks directly to the public’s most deeply-held values and experiences. People readily acknowledge that a child is blameless, and the innocence of the child grabs them emotionally. Grandparents and other relatives act as stewards of this fundamental value by preserving and protecting this innocence.
- ◆ The advocacy community, where appropriate, should consistently use language that evokes the values and strength of grandparents and other relative caregivers who are willing to step up to the plate on behalf of children.
- ◆ In discussing these issues with the general public, there does not seem to be as much leverage in less emotion-laden language such as lauding the benefits of “tax savings” and “raising productive citizens.” Keep in mind, however, that such language may still be appropriate for certain targeted audiences, such as policy makers.

- ◆ In discussing these issues with the general public, be sure to emphasize the most compelling theme: No matter why parents can no longer take care of their children – death, divorce, neglect, abuse or poverty – it never, ever is the ‘fault’ of the child.

## WHAT’S IN A NAME? USING THE TERM “KINSHIP CARE”?

**T**he language we use to describe a person or an issue plays an important role in how the public reacts to them. Although “kinship care” has become popular shorthand for the more cumbersome phrase “grandparents and other relatives raising children,” preliminary research suggests that it does not resonate with the public and, in some cases, with relative caregivers. In fact, focus group participants in this study generally shied away from any language using “kin” or “kinship.” One participant said that kinship care “sounds like a social service term.” One of the New York City support group participants said, “It’s a redneck term.” What’s the bottom line? Try not to use the term “kinship care” when talking to members of the public or reporters who know little about the issue. It elicits a neutral reaction at best and does not win any friends to the cause. So what terms work? Generally speaking, focus group participants were drawn to more value-laden terminology – language that seems to embody and embrace the positive, emotional role that grandparents and other relative caregivers play in the lives of children. These terms included Families Raising Families, Grandfamilies, and Stay Together Families.



## *Getting the Message Out: Next Steps*

**T**he messaging research summarized in this guide is an important first step in developing a common vocabulary to speak with the public and the media about the needs of grandparents and other relatives raising children. Grounded in a shared understanding of why some language and issues resonate with the public more than others, GU and its national, state, and local partners look forward to using this knowledge to support their ongoing advocacy efforts with a clear and consistent statement of both challenges and solutions. We intend to use the information in new publications, presentations, and work with media. We encourage you to do the same and look forward to hearing about your efforts.

As you are considering the new research contained in this guide, keep in mind one of the fundamental principles of messaging work. It is impossible to find an effective message that pleases everyone. In fact,

communications professionals maintain that the messages that satisfy virtually everyone are often the ones that are least effective in building public support for an issue. Why? Because in the process of building consensus among a number of diverse and equally important constituencies, messages can become easily watered down, appealing to a common denominator of experts and advocates, but failing to excite or engage the public at large. In addition, agreeing on an effective, new message can be particularly difficult because our natural instinct is to embrace the familiar, even when change is needed to move an issue to the next level.

Given these inherent challenges, this research represents the initial stage of a more comprehensive effort to develop a common understanding around the language we use, still taking into careful consideration the opinions of the families we serve and the advocacy community. Over the next several months, GU and its partners will be building on the research conducted in these first focus groups by sharing informally its results with relative caregivers and service providers across the country. Once you have a chance to consider the information contained in this guide, we encourage you to share it with the families and communities you serve and get back to us with any questions or comments you may have by e-mailing [gu@gu.org](mailto:gu@gu.org).

## OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES ON EFFECTIVE MESSAGING AND COMMUNICATIONS:

**D**o you want to learn more about how to build public support for grandparents and other relatives raising children? You can find out additional information about how to communicate more effectively through the following resources:

*Generations United's Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children: The Second Intergenerational Action Agenda* includes a historical perspective on how the media has covered the issues of grandparents and other relatives raising grandchildren over the past two decades, including the results of a review of more than 500 relevant articles. 202-289-3979 or [www.gu.org](http://www.gu.org).

*Frameworks Institute* advances the nonprofit sector's communications capacity by identifying, translating, and developing research for framing the public discourse on social problems. Especially helpful are *FrameWorks E-Zines*, on-line newsletters that analyze new and effective messaging strategies. 202-833-1600 or [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

*The Communications Consortium Media Center* is a public interest organization dedicated to helping nonprofit organizations use new media and telecommunications technologies for public education and policy change. 202-326-8700 or [www.ccmc.org](http://www.ccmc.org).

*agoodman* is a communications consulting firm that helps public interest groups, foundations, and progressive businesses reach more people more effectively with helpful publications. 213-386-9501 or [www.agoodmanonline.com](http://www.agoodmanonline.com).

*Cause Communications* is a nonprofit communications firm that advances the work of foundations and nonprofits through communications that reach, inspire, and motivate. A free copy of their *Communications Toolkit: A Guide to Navigating Communications for the Nonprofit World* can be ordered from their website. 310-458-2823 or [www.causecommunications.org](http://www.causecommunications.org).





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