



RAISING Grandchildren

BY BOB SKIPPER

IN KENTUCKY, AN ESTIMATED 70,000 GRANDCHILDREN ARE BEING RAISED BY THEIR GRANDPARENTS AND OTHER FAMILY CAREGIVERS WHO ARE NOT THEIR PARENTS. WHAT EFFECT DOES THAT RELATIONSHIP HAVE ON THE GRANDPARENTS? THE GRANDCHILDREN? WHAT SUPPORT IS THERE FOR THESE NONTRADITIONAL FAMILIES?

Those are some of the issues that Melissa Hakman, an assistant professor of psychology at Western Kentucky University, is trying to address with her research. A clinical psychologist by training, Dr. Hakman is taking research which started with “traditional families” and combining it with research she began at the University of Richmond in order to work with the Barren River Area

Development District (BRADD) to help caregiving grandparents.

Dr. Hakman said her interest in parent-child interactions extended to custodial grandparents because there was little information available. “Most



Dr. Melissa Hakman

of the literature which is available has documented effects on the custodial grandparents, including increased stress, lack of resources, financial strain, decreased marital satisfaction, decreased parenting satisfaction, and difficulty managing the grandchildren’s behavior. Research has also examined the reasons why grandchildren are placed in grandparent care. Some of

those reasons include parental drug abuse, child maltreatment, and child neglect,” she explained.

When she came to Western in 2003, Dr. Hakman began working with Kim Halter, coordinator of the Barren River Family Caregiver Support Program at BRADD, by conducting a psychoeducational group treatment program for grandparents and another program for the grandchildren. The programs were conducted using two treatment manuals which Dr. Hakman created with student assistance based on her findings from a previous study of needs identified by the grandparents.

“Dr. Hakman, through her research, has identified that not only are grandparents in need of support groups and educational training, but that



the grandchildren also need support groups and educational trainings," Halter said.

"The grandparent group involved an educational component focusing on 'normal' child development. The group also covered parenting issues, coping with the new parenting role, managing stress, and building a positive relationship with the grandchild," Dr. Hakman said.

The children's group targeted children aged four to twelve who were raised by their grandparents. "One of the first goals of the grandchildren's group is to help grandchildren cope with feelings associated with their placement and normalize some of the feelings they have about being different," she said. "Letting them know 'hey there are other kids like me living with their grandparents,' helps them understand that they are not alone. The group also helps the children cope with some of the feelings of rejection because they often don't know why they have been placed with their grandparents."

Other areas addressed were increasing feeling identification, increasing coping skills, building the relationship with the grandparent, and taking responsibility for their behavior. The group also helps children deal with issues which sometimes arise when parents reenter the picture. Grandchild ask, "Who am I supposed to obey and how am I supposed to deal with that?" Hackman added.



At the end of the program, Dr. Hakman said the grandparents verbally reported improved behavior by the grandchildren and that they

were feeling less stressed. "But I don't have the empirical research data to support that," she added. "I hope to do that within the next couple of years."

Halter concurred with Dr. Hakman's report, stating the grandparents she worked with reported they benefited greatly from the training, and that children showed a decrease in behavior problems at school as well as an increased willingness to work harder at school. "They also reported that they felt like barriers between their grandchildren and themselves had been lifted," she said.

Halter and Dr. Hakman are hoping to expand the program to the other counties in the BRADD, and one of Dr. Hakman's graduate students just finished her master's thesis which examined custodial grandparents' level of reported stress and role satisfaction.

"Dr. Hakman has also conducted many one day workshops with grandparents raising grandchildren throughout the ten-county BRADD, and we receive very positive feedback from the grandparents regarding her presentations on issues with which they are struggling while raising their grandchildren," Halter said.

In another study, funded by a junior faculty research grant titled *A comparison of parent-child interactions between traditional caregivers and nontraditional caregiving grandparents to their children's behavior*, Dr. Hakman is conducting a naturalistic observation examining parent-child interactions in traditional families and in nontraditional, caregiving grandparent families. "Some of the research documents the high levels of stress in these nontraditional families, and we do not know if the stress experienced by these caregivers is any greater than stress experienced by traditional caregivers," she said. "Even though grandparents will say that some of the stress is caused by

child behavioral management issues, we do not know if this is actually the case. We need research that investigates how grandparents and grandchildren interact and how that influences what parenting strategies they use. In addition, we need information about how these interactions influence the grandchild's behavior, especially in the long term."

Although her primary focus is on parent-child interactions in "traditional" families, Hakman said she expanded her research to custodial grandparents because she found herself treating more and more of these nontraditional families clinically. "I hope to examine grandparent-grandchild interactions in order to devise interventions to help this population in need — both the grandparents and the grandchildren. "Some grandparents report to me that the grandchildren are different than what their children were, and often face difficulty dealing with issues facing today's children."

Dr. Hakman's interest in parent-child interaction began when she was an undergraduate student at Oklahoma State University. "My early studies were laboratory manipulations focused on "normal kiddos" (those without significant psychological problems) and their mothers where I assessed the efficacy of various parenting strategies, particularly verbosity and nurturance in a variety of tasks."

Hakman expanded her research to examine parenting issues in parent-child interactions in clinical populations. She obtained a research grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families which funded a project examining an empirically validated treatment used with children to try to correct behavioral problems (Parent Child Interaction Therapy, or PCIT) with physically abusive parents. "So the work that I



Jennifer Hutcherson, an undergraduate research assistant, codes a videotaped parent-child interactions in 10-second increments using a behavioral code.

did was with children who had been physically abused by a caregiver who was referred for treatment," she said. "We provided PCIT to see what changes occurred as a function of treatment and where the majority of change occurs within the program."

Whether Dr. Hakman is doing research with nontraditional or traditional families, she engages both graduate and undergraduate students in her projects. "I think it's a unique opportunity for them, especially since my area is clinical psychology. You don't necessarily see a whole lot of clinical psychologists using observational research methodology due to its tedious nature," Dr. Hakman said. "I always tell students that even if they aren't going on into clinical psychology, the research experiences in my research lab give them a good foundation of research methodology, and they get to experience the nuts and bolts of doing research with children and families."

One of the unique opportunities for students is exposure to behavioral

coding. Many of her undergraduate students begin as she did, coding the recorded interactions between parents and children in experimentally manipulated lab studies. This involves dividing each taped observation into ten-second increments and coding discrete and continuous behaviors as well as coding for content and duration. "There are a lot of different behaviors that are coded in the various studies for both children and the parent," she said. Students typically train from six to fifteen hours a week and have to attain a ninety percent reliability with a master code before they can actually code the interactions independently. As part of observational research, students also are exposed to issues related to interrater reliability, the difficulties operationally defining behaviors, and the importance of accuracy.

"It is a very tedious research process," Dr. Hakman said. "It is time intensive but very rewarding. It is also a research method that lends itself very well to student engagement."