

# Grandparenting and Adolescents' Personality Development

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**Abstract.** The present research was designed to apprehend whether, as reported by western studies (e.g., Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007; Schwartz, et al, 2009) similar benefits of grand-parenting for adolescents' behavioral and emotional outcomes are observed in South-Asian region, generally perceived to contain people with collectivistic tendencies. Specifically, the study examined the contribution of grandparents' mere presence in the family structure to behavioral and emotional adjustments of adolescent grandchildren and the grandparents' involvement vs. grandparents' emotional closeness with their grandchildren in the personality development of adolescents. The interactive role of gender of grandchildren and grandparents' emotional closeness in predicting adolescents' adjustment was also explored. The sample comprising of 200 adolescents, 100 girls and 100 boys with their ages ranging from 16-19 completed Urdu-translated versions of the test battery. Non-significant *t*-values and hierarchical multiple regression analyses, respectively, implied that the mere presence of grandparents in the family structure and grandparents' involvement has no contribution in adolescents' personality development. However, grandparents' emotional closeness with their grandchildren was found to be significantly associated with adolescents' emotional ( $\beta = -.12$ ;  $p < .05$ ), conduct ( $\beta = -.21$ ;  $p < .01$ ), and peer ( $\beta = -.23$ ;  $p < .01$ ) problems. Moreover, it was also found that boys benefit more from moderate closeness to their grandparents as compared to girls. Though results of the present study clearly points towards the positive contribution of grandparents in the personality development of adolescents, in contrast to western findings, the findings of the present study indicate that grand parenting has complex parameters and which may have differential dynamics for different cultures.

**Keywords:** Grand-parenting, Adolescents, Personality, Family science.

## 1. Introduction

Grandparents often serve as a positive influence in the lives of their grandchildren by taking on various roles such as caregiver, playmate, adviser, and friend (Elder, & Conger, 2000). Recent studies have found significant association between greater grandparents' involvement and fewer emotional problems and more pro-social behaviour (Schwartz, Tan, Buchanan, Flouri, & Griggs, 2009) and reduced adjustment difficulties (Lussier, Deater-Deckard, Dunn, & Davies, 2002; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007) among adolescents. This link has been found especially strong for those adolescents living in single-parent or step-family households (Dunn, 2002; Lussier et al., 2002; Office for National Statistics, 2007; Ruiz & Silverstein, 2007; Schwartz et al, 2009). Research has also shown that adolescents who perceive their grandparents as influential in their lives tend to exhibit lesser negative risk-taking behaviors and more positive risk-taking behaviors; this effect being larger for girls than boys (Goodrich, 2009). Werner and Smith (1982) regard contact with grandparent (s) as one of the many protective factors for children at risk for maladjustment.

### 1.1. Why Grand-parenting Works for Adolescents?

Goodrich (2009) has suggested that grandparents exert a constructivist influence in the lives of their grandchildren because they represent a group of potential "mentors" who meet all of the criteria for being "naturally" apt and aligned on family, social class, and culture to make a significant long-term difference in the lives of their adolescent grandchildren. While, Roberts and Camasso (1990) believe that extended families are generally more successful as compared to nuclear families because they help ingrain the lesson that although people differ, they are fundamentally related and may still treat one another with respect, appreciation, and love based on their common bonds. It has also been proposed that grandparents provide support and guidance to the young and serve as a source of assistance, meaningful activity, and pride for the

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older people (Elder & Conger, 2000), all of which have been shown to be positive outcomes in effectively operating adolescent mentoring programs.

## **1.2. Grand-parenting and Related Factors**

Mueller, Wilhelm, and Elder (2003) have identified two types of most prevalent grand-parenting: instrumental and interpersonal. According to this typology, instrumental assistance involves providing financial support to grandchildren and possibly helping those grandchildren find meaningful employment (Mueller et al, 2003). Interpersonal assistance, or helping, includes the grandparent serving as a voice of experience or wisdom for the grandchild (Mueller et al., 2003). As a result, adult grandchildren appear to be increasingly turning toward their grandparents for advice and support (Elder & Conger, 2000) in a very “natural” context. Interestingly, the age of the grandchildren has been found to mediate the effects of grand-parenting on them. A longitudinal study examining the “grandparenthood” in different family structures found associations between closeness of child-grandparent relationship and children’s adjustment only at the first point of data collection when the mean age of the grandchildren was 14 (Dunn, 2002). Results of such studies have compelled several researchers to understand grandparenthood as protective elements in the lives of the adolescents (see, for example, Goodrich, 2009; Schwartz et al, 2009). On the other hand, research has revealed that usually grandchildren are significantly closer to the maternal than paternal grandparents, and between their maternal grandparents, they are significantly closer to their grandmother than grandfather (Wood & Liopsis, 2007).

The above cited researches have profound implications for Asian societies, especially South-Asian, where the social network system is as yet not strong enough to substitute the so-called extended family coordination. On the other hand, the conclusions drawn by western researchers clearly point towards the benefits of joint family systems, predominantly the empirically demonstrated influence of “grandparents.” However, prior to 1970s not much work has been undertaken to understand the dynamics of grandparenthood (Goodrich, 2009). The present research was designed to answer following questions: (1) How do adolescents’ behaviour problems compare across family structures with and without grandparents? (2) Does grandparents’ involvement impact their grandchildren’s personality? (3) Does grandparents’ closeness with their grandchildren impact adolescents’ personality? (4) Does grandparents’ closeness have better personality outcomes for boys as compared to girls?

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Participants**

The sample comprised of 200 adolescents, 100 girls and 100 boys with their ages ranging from 16-19. Of the total participants, 50% came from family structures including grandparents and 50% from family structures without grandparent (s). Gender was equally divided for both categories. Among the former group, almost 83% adolescents came from families with whom paternal grandparents were living, while 17% reported that their joint family structure included maternal grandparents.

### **2.2. Test Battery**

#### **2.2.1. Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 1997)**

SDQ is a 25-item, 3-point Likert-type scale. An Urdu-translated version of the scale provided by the original author (Goodman, 1997) was used to measure four difficulties, namely hyperactivity ( $\alpha=.55$ ), emotional symptoms ( $\alpha=.65$ ), conduct ( $\alpha=.73$ ) and peer problems ( $\alpha=.72$ ) and a strength, namely pro-social behaviour ( $\alpha=.52$ ) among adolescents. A total difficulties score is calculated by summing the scores for all dimensions except pro-social behaviour.

#### **2.2.2. Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship Scale (Elder & Conger, 2000)**

This scale measures two aspects of grandparenthood: grandparent involvement and grandparents’ emotional closeness with adolescents. As recommended by Elder and Conger (2000), the quality of

grandparents' emotional closeness with adolescents was evaluated by using a 4-item, 4-point Likert type rating scale ( $\alpha=0.71$ ). In order to assess grandparent involvement, 6-item scale, with 4-point Likert type rating scale was used (Elder & Conger, 2000) ( $\alpha=0.72$ ). The scales were translated into Urdu language using back-translation procedure.

### **2.2.3. Demographic Profile Sheet**

Demographic Profile Sheet enquired following from the adolescents: their age, gender, education level, grandparents (maternal as well as paternal) living with them or not.

## **2.3. Procedure**

The participants for the present study were taken from various evening academy schools by using convenient sampling procedure. The participants were approached individually, and after assuring confidentiality and taking their consent, the battery of scales with precise instructions was applied.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Adolescents' Behavioral and Emotional Adjustment in Different Family Structures**

In order to determine adolescents' behavioral and emotional adjustments in family structures with and without grandparents, *t*-values were computed for all the dimensions. None of the values were found significant.

### **3.2. Grandparents' Involvement and Grandparents' Closeness and Adolescents' Personality**

Hierarchical Regression Analyses were conducted to predict adolescents' behavioral strengths and difficulties from grandparents' involvement and closeness with grandchildren. In the first step, demographic variables such as age, gender, and qualification were entered, followed by grandparents' involvement in the second step and grandparents' closeness in the third step (see Table 1). Results showed that emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems, and total difficulties increase with age, while hyperactivity decreases with age. Pro-social behaviour is not affected by age. As expected, emotional symptoms and peer problems were found more in girls than boys. However, girls also reported more conduct problems and total difficulties and less pro-social behaviour than boys. Hyperactivity was observed more in boys than girls but did not attain statistical significance. In addition, level education was found to be negatively associated with emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems, and total difficulties in contrast to hyperactivity, referring to the fact that with education adolescents reduces former behavioral problems but is positively tied with later problem. After controlling for these factors, non-significant contribution was found between grandparents' involvement and adolescents' personality development. Inclusion of grandparents' closeness in the third step indicated significant contributions in adolescents' behavioral and emotional outcomes. Adolescents who were close to their grandparents showed less emotional, conduct and peer problems than adolescents who were not close to their grandparents. Hyperactivity and pro-social behaviour were not found to be related with grandparents' closeness.

### **3.3. Grandparents' Closeness, Adolescents' Behavioral and Emotional Adjustment and Gender Differences**

Two Multivariate Analyses were carried out to investigate interaction of grandparents' closeness and gender to predict total difficulties and pro-social behaviour among adolescents (see Table 1). Non-significant results were obtained for pro-social behaviour. However, significant results were obtained for total difficulties ( $F(2, 97) = 15.24, p < .000$ ). As anticipated, girls with less closeness with their grandparents reported more total difficulties than girls with more closeness with their grandparents. Least problems were observed among girls with moderate closeness with grandparents. This pattern was observed to be repeated for boys. Figure 1 also shows that boys benefit more from grandparents' closeness than girls.

Table 1: Summary of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Adolescents' Personality from Background Variables, Grandparent Involvement, and Grandparent Closeness (Standardized Beta Coefficients) (N= 100)

	Emotional Symptoms	Hyperactivity	Conduct Problems	Peer Problems	Pro-social Behavior	Total Difficulties
Step 1						
Age	.54***	-.35	.18	.75**	.19	.53**
Gender (girls)	.70***	-.04	.27**	.31**	-.35***	.62***
Qualification	-.63***	.51	-.21	-.46**	-.19	-.40**
R <sup>2</sup>	.47***	.05	.07**	.17***	.14***	.36***
Step 2						
Grandparent Involvement	.07	.14	-.03	-.07	-.11	.07
R <sup>2</sup>	.47***	.07	.10**	.31***	.16**	.35***
Step 3						
Grandparent Closeness	-.12*	.05	-.21**	-.23**	-.10	.09
R <sup>2</sup>	.48***	.08	.14***	.35***	.17**	.36***

Note: Emotional Symptoms:  $F(6, 93) = 14.53, p < .000$ ; Hyperactivity:  $F(6, 93) = 1.29, p < .27$ ; Conduct Symptoms:  $F(6, 93) = 2.44, p < .000$ ; Peer Symptoms:  $F(6, 93) = 8.33, p < .000$ ; Pro-social Behavior:  $F(6, 93) = 3.18, p < .01$ ; Total difficulties:  $F(6, 93) = 8.65, p < .000$ . \*\*\* $p < .000$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

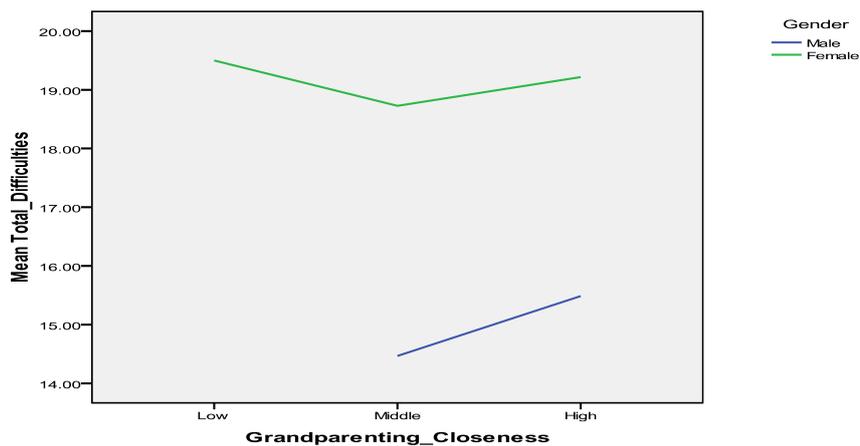


Figure 1: Interaction between grandparents' closeness and gender in predicting total difficulties.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

Generally, the results of the present study led to the conclusion that grand-parenting tend to inhibit behavioral problems among adolescents. In contradiction to previous findings, which have established substantial contribution of closest grandparents' involvement in less emotional problems and more pro-social behaviours (e.g., Schwartz et al, 2009), results of the present study showed that grandparents' emotional closeness significantly impacts emotional, conduct, and peer problems of adolescents. Precisely, it may also be taken to mean that grandparents' involvement and closeness are two distinct dimensions with varied cultural influences for adolescents. In addition, grandparents' emotional closeness appeared to protect boys more compared to girls in various behavioral problems (Figure 1). Both, girls and boys with high and low closeness with their grandparents appeared to benefit less as compared to girls and boys with moderate closeness with grandparents. This finding also depicts the intricate role of grandparenthood.

One of the primary functions of the family is to raise young persons in as healthy a manner as possible (see, for example, Bornstein, 1995). Numerous positive outcomes for adolescents have been linked with family structure and dynamics, including emotional awareness and non-delinquent behaviors (e.g., Minhas &

Khalid, 2009). Many of the research on identification of protective factors for adolescents against behavioral problems point towards the added benefits of joint family system in contrast to nuclear family system (e.g., Minhas & Khalid, 2009). Following the lead of Western cultures, the family structure in Asia and especially South-Asia has been steadily changing. Traditionally, “South-Asian family” comprised of three generations living together in a same house: grandparents, parents, and children, with the key function being to raise the young person in as healthy a manner as possible (e.g., Bornstein, 1995). However, urbanization and the desire to role model western patterns of family dynamics have brought significant changes in the family structure in Asian societies. While, the results of the present and previous studies have established that adolescents are definite beneficiaries of their grandparent (s) contact and that this contact is an important protective resource in their lives. It is, therefore, proposed that grandparents may serve as functional substitutes in lessening adolescents ‘personal and social problems. In conclusion, it is also suggested that grand-parenting is a vast subject area with far-reaching implications for families and societies. Future researches may cover gender of grandparent(s), grand-parents financial dependence, grandparents’ physical health and other family structures.

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