

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 Podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal, and in this episode, we are going to discuss the trend of grandparents raising grandkids, the unique supports required to make it successful, and how educators can use family engagement strategies to meet these families' needs. Our guests are Dr. Barbara Boone, director of the Statewide Family Engagement Center at the Ohio State University. Welcome back, Barbara.

Barbara Boone:

Thank you. It's great to be here, Eric.

Eric Neal:

I'm excited to be doing this again with you. Also, Angela Provenzano. Angela is a doctoral student in the occupational therapy program at the Ohio State University. Angela also runs a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren. Welcome Angela, how are you?

Angela Provenzano:

I'm good. Thank you for having me here as well. I'm excited.

Eric Neal:

This is a really interesting topic that I think is very timely for things that are going on right now. I'm really excited to hear about the amazing work that you're doing, and your story about how you came to do that kind of work.

Eric Neal:

Barbara, can you tell us a little about how grandparents raising grandkids influences the work that is happening at the Statewide Family Engagement Center?

Barbara Boone:

Sure. Well, first I want to agree with you that our conversation is really timely today. Last year, in 2020, our governor recognized September as the Grandparent and Kinship Caregiver Month in Ohio. In his proclamation, he notes that 2.7 million grandparents in the United States are raising their grandchildren. In Ohio that translates to about over 227,000 children under the age of 18 living with their grandparents or another kinship caregiver, like an uncle or an aunt or an older sibling. About 9% of those kids we know are with their grandparents, and we know that it's higher in some regions of Ohio, so that could be a low estimate. We don't necessarily have everybody counted on that, but we know that at least half of those kids are being raised solely by their grandparents, and we know that grandparents, they're experienced at parenting, they're dedicated, they're really often like a super secure foundation for their families and multiple generations of their families. Most of them are employed and they're busy people, but most of them also step into this role as the caregiver for their grandkids because something stressful happened. Something even traumatic happened in their family and they can become caregivers for their grandkids overnight. It can really result on a real strain for kids. We can often see maybe decreases in their grades or their attendance or their motivation or other signs that kids need help.

Barbara Boone:

Well, when we heard about Angela's work at OSU with grandparents, at the Statewide Family Engagement Center, we knew this was a group of families that we wanted to help schools to be able to reach out to and work with them well for the sake of their kids. We reached out to Angela to learn from her and see what we could do together.

Eric Neal:

Angela, you have a really interesting story about how you came to be involved in this work. Can you share a little bit about that?

Angela Provenzano:

Sure, I'd love to share about this. I think all good things in passionate work starts with a story. My cousin was actually raised by my grandparents from the age of about five. His mother and father had drug abuse involved and also his father's in prison currently. What Barb was mentioning, just the brokenness of families, that arrangement started from there. My grandparents raised him until he was about 12 and he lived with them and I had an inside, outside view of it because although I wasn't raised by my grandparents, I was hearing about the challenges and also the positives and had a chance to reflect on what all of this meant. Also, a feeling of helplessness because when I was away at school, I just wanted to do more to be able to support my grandparents because it is a lot, especially at an older age, and especially after my grandmother got diagnosed with cancer, my cousin kept living with her until she passed away. It was really cool to see her commitment to my cousin through all of that. That was her main priority and really her main joy in life.

Angela Provenzano:

I really felt like this was something I wanted to do more with and to help more families because you don't really even think of it as a thing or something that could be challenging, I think, unless you've seen it firsthand because it's the assumption, oh, they're family, this is what they're supposed to do, so seeing that it was more than that. My cousin actually lives with my parents now so I've been able to see the aunt, uncle dynamic with kinship families, which just means any person within the family that's not the biological parent taking care of the child.

Angela Provenzano:

When I got to OSU, I applied for the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship and this allowed me to start the Ohio Kinship Caregiver Support Group. This started at the start of COVID, so it had to transition to online services. It actually ended up being a blessing in disguise in a lot of ways, because we were able to reach people all over the state and it took out some barriers of transportation and childcare and all of that.

Angela Provenzano:

The support group has been running since June of 2020, we're going into our second year of it. It's been really great and really cool to meet kinship caregivers, grandparents raising grandchildren from around the state and hear their stories and just for them to feel empowered to come together and know that they're not alone in what they're doing.

Angela Provenzano:

I'm also looking forward to working on my capstone project with the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center. I'll be going there and help designing trainings for professionals and educators around how they

could better support grand families in the school system, help meet their needs, and also developing some resources for grand families within the school system. I'm really excited about that because the school system is just a really special place to help these families, especially when they're involved in so many other systems as well.

Eric Neal:

Barbara, I can I imagine it's exciting. A lot of times we get our best practices and our evidence-based practices and things like that from research, but for you to be able to connect to someone who's actually working with families right at this moment. It's got to be really exciting and engaging for you at the Statewide Family Engagement Center to be connected in that way.

Barbara Boone:

It really is. Being at Ohio state, we're a research institution and we're committed to this idea of supporting research. Then also we call it translating research, taking what we learn from research and then how do we get that to our kitchen table? How do we get that into classrooms? How do we learn from that and improve the lives of Ohioans? We love that. We also love and value just as much as that scientific research, are those personal stories of families. We have talked to lots of grandparents and other kinship caregivers. We have videos of them telling their story. We have written their stories down because we feel like that can also be just as compelling as the data, the numbers and the studies. I think we need all of it together. I think Angela brings all of that together in her work as well.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. Angela, have you found that the grandparents finding out about your story, has it really helped them to open up and build these trusting relationships? In a network like this, one of the most challenging aspects can be getting people to be vulnerable and share. Has it helped the fact that they know that you have firsthand experience with their situation?

Angela Provenzano:

I think it definitely helps. It was intimidating for me coming into this world because I'm a young college student, I've never cared for a kid in my life. How am I going to foster an environment where they feel comfortable and safe and feel like they can relate to me? I think the biggest thing working with caregivers or anyone in this situation is just authenticity. I always say, I can't ever know what you're going through, this is why I need you here to share and support with one another, because I can never say, oh, I understand that or know what that's like, because I've seen it, but I have never experienced it. Really, I just create a space where everyone can be authentic and bring their story to the table. I find that it's grand family supporting each other in their experiences more than me doing that. I'm just there to create the space. It's been really cool to step back at support group meetings, sometimes not even have to say anything because the caregivers are the ones with the experiences, sharing with one another.

Eric Neal:

Oh, definitely. Angela, grandparents as caregivers fall under the umbrella of kinship care, which you said it's a blanket term for family members supporting their relatives. It sounds like an ideal solution, but legally can be challenging. Can you talk about formal versus informal caregivers and what that means in relation to the child welfare system?

Angela Provenzano:

Sure. Well, from my personal experience, my parents and my grandparents just took in my cousin without any legal custody or anything like that. No papers, his mom still signs forms and everything like that. I didn't realize all the technicalities that go into the legal system and kinship caregivers. I mean, it's a whole different world. It's very difficult.

Angela Provenzano:

Formal caregivers are actually caregivers who come into caring for a child through the child welfare system. Someone will make a call and say, this is an unsafe situation with a child living with their current parents. Then a kinship caregiver will be asked if they can take the child in.

Angela Provenzano:

Normally, formal caregivers are licensed through the foster system. They actually have a foster license and they will receive a lot of benefits from the system since it's through the child welfare system. Knowing that, about probably less than 10% of caregivers in Ohio are formal licensed kinship caregivers. This is a big barrier. It differs a lot state to state, but Ohio, we do not have a lot of formal caregivers. Where informal caregivers either get private custody, so they go through their own attorney to get custody of the child, or sometimes there's no legal documents with that child.

Angela Provenzano:

In Ohio, we do have the Grandparent Power of Attorney, which is for grandparents only. That means a grandparent has the rights to enroll a child in school and get the medical care, but they still have no legal custody of that child.

Angela Provenzano:

It differs a lot family to family. It's a really complicated process, and the child welfare system is its own whole system to go through, which can be also a challenge for caregivers.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. Barbara, I find it interesting that we really push the family engagement aspect in education. We know that the more engaged families are the better outcomes that we have for students, the happier people are with their experience, but then it's almost like you're engaging them to come in. They may or may not even have decision-making power in some of these things. I could see that being a real challenge for schools where you're trying to get that engagement and then what do you do with it once it happens? You almost have to look case by case.

Barbara Boone:

Yeah, you absolutely do. I think that for schools, being aware of who is parenting a child in any current day and situation, I think it's so important to know so that teachers, school counselors, school social workers can have that on their radar. Just, how is this kiddo doing? How are they navigating this really big change in their life? Also just being aware, knowing I can talk to this person, I can be supportive of this person. We're not going to maybe be making these more legal decisions together, but I can still interact with this person as someone who is caring for this child, and be supportive of them. I think the more that... I would love to see grandparents who are raising their school-aged kids, think of schools as

this wonderful group of people who support them. It's not another stress in their already stressful time in life, but that there are people they can look to.

Barbara Boone:

So many of our schools have school social workers, like I said, and counselors who know about resources and can help grand families get connected with resources that they may not even be aware of or ever thought that they would tap. I think oftentimes they tend to be people who are going to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and get it done. Knowing that there are resources that they can access and having someone to just be a listening ear, being someone who can point them in the right direction, could be such a great help. I think our schools are so well positioned to do that because of how close we are to families.

Eric Neal:

Definitely. Angela, your support group has really taken off and been a huge help to people. Can you talk a little bit about some of the challenges, layers that the grandparents face when they do step up as caregivers?

Angela Provenzano:

Yeah. This is something I can talk about all day, so I'll try to limit it. It's just the idea that we don't think beyond the grandparents caring for their child. What does that mean? There's so many layers that go along with this. The important thing to know is these are all going on at the same time, so nothing in isolation, which makes it even more challenging.

Angela Provenzano:

Barb mentioned this earlier, but I think just realizing that kinship families often come from a place of brokenness and trauma is the most important place to start. This isn't a situation that happened because everything went right and just being sensitive towards that and implementing principles of trauma informed care. A lot of times it's drug abuse or mental health issues of the birth parent. These are lifelong conditions, unfortunately, and sometimes birth parents can come back and be in the child's life, but oftentimes grandparents raising grandchildren are the ones doing it for the child's entire life, so being sensitive towards that.

Angela Provenzano:

Also, a challenge coming from an occupational therapy perspective is these grandparents' lives change overnight. A lot of them are working, a lot have a peer group that they're with that they might have a routine with, a lot of them are looking for retirement or are retired. When this child comes into their life, the whole way they spend their time in a day has to change because they might have to be home to care for a child, they might have to pay for childcare, but we all know that's expensive, and they have to keep track of practices. They have to keep track of the child's friends and play dates and all of that. There's just so much that comes to caring for a child. When you're pregnant or expecting a child, you have nine months to prepare for that. A lot of times these transitions can literally happen in a week and there's no preparation. That's definitely a challenge and something to be sensitive to.

Angela Provenzano:

Also, a lot of these grandparents feel isolated from their peers because they probably don't know anyone their age still raising a child, so there's a lot of social isolation that comes with this and they might not be able to relate to the other classmates' parents and all of that who might be in a different stage of life. That's why the support group is so great. Just knowing that they're not in this alone, and their situation might be a little different, but at the end of the day, they're all just trying to do what's best for the child.

Angela Provenzano:

Then other layers, we talked about the whole legal custody battle, or just navigating the legal systems is definitely a challenge. One of the most important things that comes up when working with grand families is just realizing there's a disparity and a lack in resources, especially financial resources. This is often very common and a lot higher proportion of grand families live below the poverty line and lack meeting their basic needs. Like I said, a lot of this comes with those informal caregivers who aren't receiving help from the state, who aren't receiving help from the child welfare system, which is most of the caregivers in this case. They also didn't financially prepare to have a child come live with them. We all know children can be expensive. Definitely the financial need is a huge cause of stress for kinship families.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. Barbara, talking about resources, how does the Statewide Family Engagement Center support kinship care families in general, and grandparents in particular?

Barbara Boone:

Eric, we've done a few things and we look forward to more, but here's how we got started. We started by studying research about what's been done across the country with grandparents raising their grandchildren, different programs and practices of schools that were really benefiting these families. Then we took them and we summarized all the best practices in a short, readable resource written for school principals or school social workers, or district leaders, even community leaders who want to understand grand families and how their schools can improve how they support them.

Barbara Boone:

It's really a very quick summary, but really then we summarized it in nine types of things you can do. That might include things like making sure grandparents feel welcome and set at ease in a building. Angela was bringing up that this is not necessarily their peer group and how different it might feel as a grandparent walking the halls of kindergarten registration with much different and younger families all around you. People aren't looking at you necessarily and thinking, there's my peer, and so I think that just knowing that they are a group of folks who could use that extra welcome and support. Reaching out, I think, to grandparents and checking with them, seeing if they have questions or concerns, letting them know the school's ready or willing to help them. I think that can be especially helpful for a grandparent who is suddenly responsible for a child, and perhaps even receiving special education services. Just, how do I navigate that as a grandparent, I think.

Barbara Boone:

If we can just... sometimes that positive call, that positive touch can be such a wonderful thing and not to wait for problems to happen, but to reach and give this person a relationship where they can develop some trust in the school.

Barbara Boone:

I think it also looks like schools using inclusive language. We have family teacher conferences as opposed to parent teacher conferences. We have so many families, we honor them all when we can just use that broad term.

Eric Neal:

I know what you mean. My wife was talking about her school, the trend, the shift in language from Donuts With Dad to Donuts With Dudes or something like that, something more inclusive where anybody who's a male figure in that life could come. Maybe it is just something with families so that it opens it up to all or however, but just be thinking in that way about how you're signaling to the kids that their situation is not a problem, it's just maybe not the same as everyone else's, and signaling to those people that they're welcome to come in and participate.

Barbara Boone:

Yeah. That is a great point. I think it's really such an easy lift too, that not all of these things are expensive programs, or we need to hire new personnel in order to change something as easy as that. I think also thinking about our school forms and things, that is there a place where I can write my name? Anyone can write their names, see themselves in that form even?

Barbara Boone:

Angela's support group that she has, I've gotten to participate a few times and it's truly an amazing group of, I call them heroes all the time. I think schools also have a chance to create times where they know of kinship caregivers, like grandparents who are raising kids, to be able to have coffee with them. Have support times for them, helping them connect and get to know one another. Sometimes those social networks we have are really a source of strength for us, that it's so nice when you see other people can really relate to what you're going through and maybe have been there ahead of you and can give you some hindsight. I think that those are really helpful.

Barbara Boone:

Just to get back to what we're doing at the Statewide Family Engagement Center, so on our website, we have trainings that we have posted there. We have the brief, we have tools for families, and that's all... We call it all, Grand Understandings is the label we give to all of this work that we do. We created a short one pager as well for grandparents that gives them some tips. We try to keep it short, one page you could put on the refrigerator, and we also had it translated into six languages. Hopefully most schools in Ohio will find something there that they are able to use with families that they are working with.

Barbara Boone:

Like I said before, we lead a lot of trainings. We have talked to the families, some families in meetings, but we've also have been doing trainings with schools, talking about these different approaches that they can take, shared those interviews and video and print that we have with grandparents that are accessible, that anybody can take and use. It would be a great thing to play in a staff meeting, take 15 minutes, listen to it, and then discuss, what do we do? Who do we know that's a grandparent or another kinship caregiver in our school? How are we doing in partnering with them?

Barbara Boone:

We also just... we have a state advisory council that guides our work at our center, and we've recruited, intentionally, grandparents who are raising school aged kids to be on our council so that their voice is part of all the voices of the families that we work with.

Barbara Boone:

Then we've also connected with some really amazing resources and individuals like Angela, who we share their resources. We continue to think about what else can we do to bring tools to help people be aware, but then also particularly in the education system, how we can reach out to these families. We know that family engagement isn't one size fits all. This is such a great example of how we really need to tailor what we do sometimes to really connect with and support the families that we're working with.

Barbara Boone:

Of course, we always promote everything on social media. We do that as well.

Eric Neal:

That is the way to reach out. Now, Angela, the educational environment can be particularly challenging for grandparents. What are some of the challenges that they face in schools and what are some of the strategies or supports that they can use to navigate that?

Angela Provenzano:

Sure. I actually did pose this question to my support group a couple of months ago, so I have some insight from caregivers. One thing they said that was difficult was just the feeling of shame that comes along with being a grandparent caregiver. It's an unspoken feeling of shame, I would say. Having to tell the child in your care, having to tell their story, having to say what had happened to them before coming into their care, there's a lot of shame that comes along with that. Often, the birth parent is the child of the grandparent caregiver so that brings in a whole other dynamic, that it is difficult to speak about these things. The most important thing, just when you're first meeting grandparent caregivers, allowing them to feel comfortable and also to share things on their own time and not forcing anything, because it is reliving a traumatic event when thinking about the circumstances coming into this. Just being super sensitive towards that.

Angela Provenzano:

Another challenge some grandparents expressed was not feeling they were treated as an equal to other parents, and teachers would see them as a grandparent and not a parent. Whether the child calls them mom and dad, or grandma and grandpa, they're still the parent and the one making decisions and the primary caregiver, so assessing our own biases of, what do I think of when I think of grandparent? Because a lot of times we think of a few old people who spoil their grandkids, but that's not always the case, so just being able to take your bias out of what the term grandparent brings about and realizing that in some cases, a grandparent is equal to the parent. Inviting them to be part of the PTA, inviting them to come in and including them in the classroom, whenever possible, how Barb was saying, just so they can feel like they're just another parent in the classroom.

Angela Provenzano:

Other struggles, especially with COVID, was online learning. That was a huge barrier and a huge learning curve, especially for grand [inaudible 00:25:13] with technology, but also those who have been away from school for a very long time. Any way to bring in additional support with that change and realizing that maybe there might not be as much homework help at home as the child advances in subjects.

Angela Provenzano:

I think everything else that Barb mentioned for supports were really great suggestions. The main thing is just having that one person to be a safe space for the grandparent caregiver, because oftentimes there's no one and they're trying to navigate all these systems and they say all the time, I'm calling all these phone lines and no one's answering, and they feel like they have no one to go to. If a teacher or an educator or whoever can just create a safe space and tell them, I'm here for you, you can talk whenever you're ready, I know this might be difficult to talk about.

Angela Provenzano:

When I was in the schools, I saw that they had a trauma checklist that they sent home for a grandparent caregiver to fill out, but that might be something difficult for a caregiver to do and maybe they're not ready for, so just meeting them where they are and having in-person interaction can really help when it's feasible, and forming that relationship of a safe space, because I think that can feel difficult for grandparent caregivers at times.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. It sounds like if you're thinking about ways that you can foster and maintain these positive relationships, that it really just starts with letting them know that you know they exist and that they're welcome and that you want to be there for them.

Angela Provenzano:

Yeah. Something that I've heard just recently, which I really liked is, allowing people to own their own stories, whether that's a child or a caregiver or whoever. Never forcing someone to tell their story, but also creating a space where they can share their story. I just think that speaks a lot to the importance of even with the grandchild that might be in your classroom. If they're older, not having to have them explain what happens, but maybe they have a peer group they're comfortable sharing with, or they'll get to that space at one point. We should all be empowered by our stories and not feel ashamed of them or like we have to share them.

Eric Neal:

That's definitely a good tip. Angela, if people would like to find out more about your support group or find resources to support grandparents, where should they go?

Angela Provenzano:

My support group is [Kinshipcaregiversconnect.com](https://www.kinshipcaregiversconnect.com), so you can find it there. I'm working on getting on social media, but not quite there yet. There is also other great statewide resources. There is OGKC, Ohio Grandparent Kinship Coalition, and they have resources on their website.

Angela Provenzano:

Also OhioKAN, K-A-N, is a new program rolled out statewide to help kinship caregivers navigate all the different systems.

Angela Provenzano:

On my website, we also have video resources about different topics related to things I mentioned, like education, legal system, the mental health of children, mental health of caregivers, all of that. You can feel free to check that out.

Angela Provenzano:

Also the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center, as stated before, has tons of great resources on this topic as well.

Eric Neal:

That's great. Barbara, if people would like to know more about the Statewide Family Engagement Center, where should they go?

Barbara Boone:

People can find all of the resources I mentioned and many more on lots of topics, always focused on family engagement and education at Ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu, all one word, Ohiofamiliesengage.osu.edu. There's also, we have recordings of lots of trainings on lots of topics, as well as all of our Grand Understandings work.

Barbara Boone:

Eric, we also host an annual family engagement leadership summit in September of every year. Listeners can register for the summit on our website, which is free, like all of our resources. That's just a day of learning about family engagement on a variety of topics, including grand families. In fact, this year, Angela is leading one of our sessions. Then if listeners can't make it to the summit, all of the sessions are recorded and then we have them available on the website so that folks can share them and watch them and rewatch them, so they're all available later as well.

Barbara Boone:

Remember, Grand Understandings is the title that we give to all the resources we have. It also is the hashtag we use on Twitter, if listeners want to follow along with us there.

Eric Neal:

That's great. Well, Angela, I really appreciate you coming on today and sharing your story and the wonderful work you're doing. Thank you very much.

Angela Provenzano:

Thank you for having me. It was such an honor.

Eric Neal:

Dr. Boone, we appreciate you as always. Hope to see you again in the future. We really value our partnership with the Statewide Family Engagement Center. Thanks again for coming.

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Barbara Boone:

Thank you. I look forward to this, and thanks for giving us space and time to talk about this really important topic.

Eric Neal:

Always.

Eric Neal:

Well, that wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 Podcast. If you'd like to know more about who we are and the work that we do, check out our website at SST11.org, contact us by phone at (614) 445-3750, or follow us on Twitter [@SSTregion11](https://twitter.com/SSTregion11).

Eric Neal:

Until next time, I'm Eric Neal. Thanks for listening.