Parents and Grandparents View the Autistic

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Mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers of 19 autistic children completed a questionnaire describing their view of the handicapped child, the impact of the child on the parent, and the relationship between the parents and grandparents. Paired t tests revealed that whenever there was a significant difference between the generations, grandparents took a more positive view. For example, maternal grandmothers had a more positive view of the child than did their daughters, and paternal grandmothers had a more positive view of their relationship with their son than did the son. Grandmothers demonstrated an empathic understanding of their daughter's experiences. There was a significant Pearson product-moment correlation between grandmothers and grandfathers in overall scores, their view of the child, and how they viewed their son's or daughter's experiences as the parent of a handicapped child. Maternal grandparents visited the family significantly more often than paternal grandparents. The study offers us a first empirical look at grandparents and their autistic grandchild.

There exists a modest but growing literature examining the impact of the developmentally disabled child upon family members, including mothers (Cummings, Bayley, & Rie, 1966; DeMyer, 1979), fathers (Cummings, 1976; DeMyer, 1979), and siblings (Cleveland & Miller, 1977; Gath, 1973, 1974; Lobato, 1983), as well as upon the marital relationship (e.g., DeMyer, 1979; Gath, 1978; Koegel, Schreibman, O'Neill, & Burke, 1983) and the functioning of the family as a unit (Koegel et al., 1983). In spite of these diverse studies of various groupings in the family system, little formal atten-
tion has been paid to another significant component of the extended family: grandparents.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by this lack of interest in the experiences of grandparents. There is relatively little research on grandparents of normal children, much less the grandparent of the handicapped child. Thus, a recent book by Kivnick (1982) is one of only a few empirical attempts in psychology to study grandparenting. Other psychological, anthropological, and sociological efforts to understand the role of grandparents have included work by Albrecht (1954), Apple (1956), Neugarten and Weinstein (1964), and Wood and Robertson (1976). They offer a slim data base for our systematic understanding of the impact of grandchildren and grandparents upon one another or the role of parents as intermediaries between these two generations.

What little we as scientists know about grandparents suggests that their roles and perceptions are potentially valuable to our understanding of the family of the handicapped child. Berns (1980) in a nonempirical discussion points to the importance of our sensitivity to the disappointment of expectations felt by the grandparents of a handicapped child as well as the potentially useful role these elder family members can fill in supporting the parents and giving the handicapped child a sense of value. Rhoades (1975) described a workshop for grandparents as a vehicle to enable them to understand better the grandchild's handicap and the constructive role they might play for the child. In her examination of the impact of the Down's syndrome baby upon the family, Gath (1978) pointed toward the maternal grandmother as an important source of support.

In light of these suggestions that grandparents may play a valuable role in the family of the developmentally disabled child, we decided to explore in a systematic fashion how mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers described their autistic (grand) child, the experiences of the parents of the child as seen by the parents themselves, the grandparents' perceptions of their adult child's life, and the relationship between the two adult generations as viewed by each side.

**METHOD**

**Subjects**

Subjects for the present study were 19 mothers, and their own 15 mothers and 11 fathers; 14 fathers, and their own 10 mothers and 7 fathers. Thirty mothers and fathers of autistic children enrolled at the Douglass Developmental Disabilities Center, a university-based day school for