Grandfamilies: New study uncovers common themes and challenges in kinship care
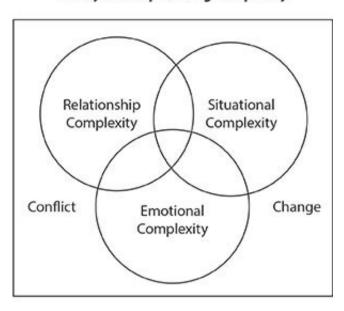
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The Theory of Compounding Complexity explains that grandfamilies face a combination of three types of complexity: relationship complexity, situational complexity, and emotional complexity, which all exist amidst conflict and change. Credit: George Mason University

Today, more than 2.5 million U.S. grandparents are raising their grandchildren due to the opioid crisis and other social issues. These grandfamilies—where grandparents are raising grandchildren in the absence of the biological parents—are becoming increasingly common. While kinship care is often considered a better alternative to children

being placed in non-relative foster care, grandfamilies often experience unique challenges with significant economic and social impacts.

More recently, with the COVID-19 pandemic, media outlets have written about the high risk these grandparents are at for COVID-19, and their dilemmas between staying healthy and caring for their grandchildren, worrying about what may happen to them should they fall sick. Some resources are available for grandfamilies, but the exact impacts of the CARES Act on grandfamilies are still being clarified.

Dr. Catherine Tompkins at George Mason University's College of Health and Human Services is an expert in gerontology and grandparent kinship care. She led a recent study on the challenges grandfamilies face, interviewing 15 low-income grandfamilies and developing the Theory of Compounding Complexity. The study was published online in *The Gerontologist* in February.

"In Fairfax County alone, there are more than 5,000 grandfamilies, and we are just beginning to understand some of their complexities and challenges. Compounding Complexity explains what these families experience and can assist social workers and other practitioners in working with them," explains Tompkins.

The Theory of Compounding Complexity explains that grandfamilies face a combination of three types of complexity: relationship complexity, situational complexity, and emotional complexity. An example of relationship complexity is the change from a past family relationship to the current one, where a grandparent is now making day-to-day parenting decisions. An example of situational complexity includes raising children at a time grandparents expected to be retired, sometimes being forced to return to the workforce. Examples of emotional complexity are grandparents preparing their grandchildren for a visit with a biological parent and the parent not showing up or the

grandparent being forced to choose between their existing relationship and their grandchildren:

"I was engaged to someone for eight years. My two grandsons are difficult and have special needs. My fiancé made me choose between him and my grandsons, so I chose my grandsons. He left and my heart was broken."

These three categories of complexity all occur amidst conflict and change. Conflict often arises from power dynamics between custodial grandparents and biological parents. Change also has a significant impact on these families and contributes to the complexity of their experiences.

In their interviews, Tompkins and colleagues uncovered complex challenges in these families. One case demonstrates all aspects of the Theory of Compounding Complexity:

"A grandfather, caring for his grandson, was holding onto emotions of guilt, regret and remorse for not being able to prevent the illegal behavior of his daughter and feelings of resentment and disapproval toward his daughter for making bad choices and not putting her child first. The daughter expected her father to lessen the complexity of the situation by taking care of her child but still allowing her to parent from jail and pick up where she left off when she returned from prison (conflict). The grandson was fearful of living within the neighborhood that his mother lived in once she got out of prison (change). Thus, each family member had emotional responses to the situation and to the relationships involved which compounded the complexity of the situation."

"Compounding Complexity offers a new lens that service providers can use when they interact with grandfamilies," explains Tompkins. "While this is most informative about our specific group of participants, it lays

the groundwork for additional study on grandfamilies."

This study was funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation and supported by Fairfax County Department of Family Services.

Tompkins is currently working with the Fairfax County Kinship Family Institute to run an online support group for local kinship families in the Fairfax, Virginia area during the COVID-19 pandemic. She suggests taking into account the unique needs of grandfamilies when we consider ways to help our community members and make additional resources available during the pandemic.

For future research, Tompkins and colleagues recommend studies that include the perspectives of the biological parents and externally validated studies using the framework of Compounding Complexity to inform best practices for working with these families.

More information: Catherine J Tompkins et al, Compounding Complexity: Examining Multiple Factors Leading to Challenges Within Grandfamilies, *The Gerontologist* (2019). DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnz189

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