

## *Aging Families— Series Bulletin #2 The Sandwich Generation*

This bulletin is the second in a series of bulletins that will provide information on the unique characteristics of later life family relationships. The focus of this particular publication is the generation of family members providing care to both their aging parents and their young or young-adult children; a generation frequently referred to as the “Sandwich Generation.”

*Nancy is 47 years old and the mother of three children. Her first child, Abby, is from her first marriage and is currently a freshman in college and living out of state.*

*Nancy also has a daughter, Rachel, who is 11, and a son, Matthew, who just turned 8 from her current marriage. Nancy is a schoolteacher and her husband, David, sells surgical equipment to health care providers around the country. David’s job can be very stressful and requires a significant amount of travel. This frequently leaves Nancy to manage both the childcare duties as well as the household tasks such as laundry, cooking, and paying the bills. Last year, Nancy’s father was diagnosed with congestive heart failure.*

*Nancy’s mother, who has severe arthritis, is unable to provide all of the care her ailing husband requires so she is becoming increasingly dependent on Nancy for assistance. Although Nancy loves her family and her parents very much, she has been feeling overwhelmed with the increasing demands in her life. She is a mother, a wife, a daughter, a teacher, and sometimes wonders which part of her is not claimed by*



*someone else. Her days begin at 4:30 in the morning and end at 10:30 at night with one last call to her mother to see if Dad has settled down for the night. Despite her husband David’s loving support, Nancy still feels the majority of burden is placed on her shoulders. More recently she has begun to worry about her own health as well as her emotional stability. She is just not sure how long she can keep up this pace.*

### *The Sandwich Generation*

In the United States, from 1900 to the year 2000, life expectancy increased from 47 to 76 years. In other developed countries, such as Japan and Sweden, similar improvements in the human life span occurred. One consequence of this extended longevity is the gradual expansion in the population of older adults. This remarkable growth in the aging population results in concern about the availability of family caregivers to informally assist with the inevitable limita-

tions associated with aging. Researchers consistently report that family members, especially female family members, provide the majority of instrumental and expressive care to their aging loved ones. Due to the social patterns of delayed parenting and increased female labor-force participation, a generation of middle-aged adults is becoming increasingly caught between the demands of child rearing and providing care to their aging parents. This trend, identified as the sandwich generation phenomenon, has become a topic of considerable research interest.

### *Defining the Sandwich Generation*

In 1981, Dorothy Miller coined the term *sandwich generation* to refer to an inequality in the exchange of resources and support between generations (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1994). Specifically, Miller was referring to a segment of the middle-aged generation who provides support to both younger and older family members yet does not receive reciprocal support in exchange. Miller emphasized the unique stressors of multigenerational caregiving and the lack of community resources available to assist the middle generation. Because multigenerational caregivers are most often women dealing with complex role configurations of wife, mother, daughter, caregiver, and employee, some researchers use the phrase *women in the middle* interchangeably with the *sandwich generation* or *sandwiched generation* (Dautzenberg, Diederiks, Philipsen, & Stevens, 1998).

Despite clear emphasis on the experiences of middle-aged adults and their caregiving responsibilities, some variation in the conceptualization and definition of sandwich generation families exist. Conceptually, some researchers emphasize the demographic implications of this family type, whereas, others point

to the consequences of this family arrangement on individual well-being and family functioning (Dautzenberg et al., 1998). A number of researchers define this population as middle-aged adults caring for young children (< 18) and aging parents simultaneously. Other researchers, however, insist this population consists of middle-aged parents caring for aging parents as well as young adult children (> 18). Finally, in addition to disagreement over the age of the child (ren), variation exists as to whether the youngest generation must be living in the home or whether providing financial support to children is sufficient for middle-aged adults to be sandwich generation members.

### *Prevalence*

Most likely as a result of a definitional inconsistency, some controversy exists over the prevalence of a middle generation sandwiched between younger and older family members. Elaine Brody (1990) suggests that due to increased life expectancy and the need to provide care to aging parents, many middle-aged women will inevitably spend time as *women in the middle*. Brenda Spillman and Liliana Pezzin (2000) reviewed the 1994 National Long Term Care Survey and found approximately 3.5 million individuals, primarily women, were dually responsible for an aging parent and a dependent child. In contrast, other researchers (Himes, 1994; Spitze & Logan, 1990; Ward & Spitze, 1998) consider the sandwich generation phenomenon to be a gerontological myth. Due to the roles of childcare and elder care disproportionately occurring sequentially rather than simultaneously, some researchers view this family form as the exception rather than the norm (Loomis & Booth, 1995). A majority of empirical studies examining multigenerational caregiving have been conducted, however, samples are often small and non-

representative. As a result, more nationally representative studies, both in the United States and in other developed countries, are needed to assess the likelihood of families experiencing multigenerational caregiving tasks and the impact these responsibilities may have on family relationships and family functioning.

### *International Comparisons*

The sandwich generation is not a phenomenon unique to the United States; in fact, the same demographic changes taking place in the United States are also taking place in other developed countries. Despite demographic similarities, very few international studies have been conducted to provide information about multigenerational caregiving from a global perspective. One study conducted by Dautzenberg and colleagues (1998) examined the prevalence of women in the middle in the Netherlands. Limiting their population-based sample to women aged 40 to 54, the authors found 29% of respondents cared for children in the home as well as parents or parents-in-law. Further, these mothers provided care to adult children living outside of the home and to grandchildren. If a broader definition of care were utilized, 34% of their study sample would have met the criteria of multigenerational caregiving. Two other studies involving small non-representative samples of women from Canada (Raphael & Schlesinger, 1994) and Israel (Remennick, 1999) also provide documentation of women caring for both aging parents and children of varying ages.

### *Impact on the Family*

Research investigating the effect of multigenerational caregiving on family relationships and family functioning is limited. Loomis and Booth (1995) looked at a national sample of middle-aged married persons to document the effect

of multiple caregiving responsibilities on individual caregivers. The authors found multigenerational caregiving had little to no effect on the dependent variables of psychological well-being, satisfaction with leisure time, financial resources, or marital quality. Ward and Spitze (1998) investigated the frequency of multigenerational caregiving and the impact of these responsibilities on perceived marital quality. Despite women providing more assistance to children and parents as compared to men, marital happiness was shown to increase with age.

A small number of researchers have examined the effect of multigenerational caregiving on the well-being of the youngest generation, consisting of children and adolescents. Tebes and Irish (2000) evaluated the impact of support interventions for multigenerational caregiving mothers on the behavior of their children. These authors found that children of intervention participants displayed reduced depression and increased social competence. Hamill (1994) evaluated parent-adolescent communication among middle generation caregivers and found that strain between caregiving mothers and aging parents was associated with poor communication with adolescent children.

### *Conclusion*

Although researchers disagree about the prevalence of the sandwich generation phenomenon, the demographic trends of delayed parenting and increased life expectancy are irrefutable. In order to accurately estimate the frequency of multigenerational caregiving and analyze the impact of this caregiving arrangement on the family system, however, a universal definition of what constitutes the "sandwich generation" is needed. Additionally, more representative sample studies are needed.

## *Suggested Reading*

AARP (2001). *In the middle: A report on multicultural boomers coping with family and aging issues.*

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