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## Grandmothers' Developmental Expectations for Early Childhood in Botswana

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### Abstract

*Urban and rural grandmothers (n = 20) in Botswana participated in focus groups to learn their expectations for the acquisition of skills by preschool children. Their expectations for self-care, traditional politeness, and participation in household chores were dramatically earlier than developmental timetables reported for Western middle-class populations. There are some differences, however, in the urban and rural grandmothers' expectations. Rural grandmothers had earlier expectations for self-care skills and participation in household chores, and they had more specific expectations for mastering Setswana cultural customs. In addition, some urban grandmothers, who were generally more educated, described using more reciprocal communication, and they believed in playing with their grandchildren, whereas the rural grandmothers' communication was more instructional, and they insisted that children should play away from adults. Strikingly, there was no mention of school readiness goals or activities by either group, suggesting a "cultural mismatch" between the standard early childhood curriculum, largely imported from the United States and other Western countries, and the cultural backgrounds of Botswana families. To create a more workable partnership between preschool teachers and grandparents—*

Childcare by grandmothers is a common feature in the traditional African milieu. In Botswana, grandmothers are perceived as custodians of culture and are implicitly expected to impart to their children and future generations traditional wisdom, values, and beliefs. Childcare by grandparents, particularly grandmothers, is widely practiced in Botswana, and in fact has historically been a core cultural practice. As Izzard (1985) explains, migration of women has been part of Botswana culture dating back to the pre-independence era, when women were heavily involved in farming and made seasonal moves between their villages and

children, and the level of proficiency they want children to achieve. Edwards, Gandini, and Giovaninni (1996) explain that developmental timetables are crucial for children's development because they lead to early proficiency in culturally valued capabilities. Thus, awareness of skills expected from children across early childhood stages is important for developing supportive programs for caregivers, and for designing appropriate agendas for children in any given context.

A great deal of research on developmental timetables has used the Developmental Expectations Questionnaire (DEQ), created by a team of U.S. and Japanese researchers (Hess et al., 1980). The DEQ was developed to measure adults' expectations of child behavior in seven domains: Emotional maturity, Compliance, Politeness, Independence, School-related skills, Social skills, and Verbal assertiveness. The items, to be rated in relation to "children in general," are to be assigned to one of three age groups (younger than 4 years, 4–6 years, and 6 years or older), thus capturing the transition from early to middle childhood. Hess et al. (1980) used the DEQ to examine maternal expectations of developmental tasks in Japan and the United States. They found that Japanese and U.S. mothers held divergent views: the mothers in Japan had earlier expectations for mastery of skills that showed self-control, compliance with adult authority, and social courtesy in interaction with adults; in contrast, U.S. mothers emphasized early acquisition of skills related to individual action, standing up for rights, and other forms of verbal assertion. Using a slightly adapted version of the DEQ, Goodnow et al. (1984) compared the developmental timetables of Lebanese-born mothers residing in Australia with Anglo-Australian mothers, and they also reanalyzed



Serpell & Jere-Folotiya, 2008; Zeitlin, 1996), was generally perceived in Kokwet as a sign not only of maturity, but also a good indicator of the child's personality. Mothers of children aged three to 10 years old were asked whether each of their children in that age range was old enough to be entrusted with a local errand and also whether the child was old enough for the mother to know "what kind of child" he or she was. For the Kokwet mothers, judgments of whether the child was old enough to go to a local shop to make a small purchase (a walk of 5–20 minutes from home) and whether the child was old enough for the mother to know its personality, increased in parallel from age 3–9 years, with about two-thirds of the mothers of 6-year-olds expressing positive judgments of both. In contrast, 70% of the New England mothers thought they could judge their child's personality at age three, and this proportion rose to 100% for the 6-year-olds. The New England age trend in mothers' judgments of whether the child was old enough to make a small purchase independently in one store at a local shopping mall while the mother was at a different store (an adaptation of the Kokwet measure), however, generally paralleled the Kokwet age trend but never reached 100%, even for children aged nine. Evidently, the Kokwet and Duxbury mothers were using different kinds of criteria for judging their child's personality. For the Kokwet mothers, a child's personality could not really be judged until the child was old enough to carry out errands responsibly: at that point, some children distinguished themselves by carrying out the errand as instructed, without getting distracted along

and Oodi hills, on the west of Notwane River, about 15 kilometers from the South African border (Mosha, 1996; Sebege & Gwebu, 2013). On the periphery of the city are eight villages that serve as residential suburbs for a significant proportion of people who work in Gaborone (Sebege & Gwebu, 2013). From an administrative center with a few landmarks including a small railway station in 1962, Gaborone has become one of the fastest growing capitals in Africa. Mosha (1996) attributes the city's growth and sustained development to its careful planning and management. Gaborone has modern civic and commercial centers, infrastructure such as water, electricity, roads, and sewage system (Mosha, 1996), as well as clinics, hospitals, and schools. In addition to having several public and private universities, numerous public and private high schools, and a multitude of elementary schools, Gaborone has about 107 licensed preschools.

Along with administrative and infrastructure developments, Gaborone has experienced an upsurge in population since independence, from 3,855 in 1964 (Sebege & Gwebu, 2013) to 23,192 in 2011 (Government of Botswana, 2015). According to the 2011 census, Gaborone has about 120 neighborhoods, arranged following the Botswana Social Integration Policy, which aims to plan localities in a systematic manner that is free from



grandmothers, including their age, occupational status, educational background, and the age of their preschool-attending grandchild.

**Procedures.** The first author collected data for this study between July and August 2018, after obtaining approvals from the University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board and from the Ministry of Local Government in Botswana. A focus group discussion for Gaborone grandmothers was conducted at a seminar room located within the University of Botswana. For Kanye grandmothers, the focus group discussion was held at a rented hall located in Kanye village. Each of the participating grandmothers completed the consent form and then the demographic questionnaire in the presence of the researcher. Grandmothers had a choice of completing the original, English questionnaire or one translated into Setswana, the local language. The translated Setswana focus group guide and demographic questionnaire were used for participants who could not read and/or write English language, and for all participants who preferred to use a translated instrument. The researchers and research assistants helped participants who could not read and/or write to complete the consent form, and then the questionnaire, by reading aloud each item to the participants, waiting for their response, and checking the item verbally selected by the participant. The Kanye focus group discussion was conducted in Setswana, while both Setswana and English were used during the Gaborone focus group discussion. Each focus group discussion lasted for 45–60 minutes. Discussions were audio recorded with participants' permission. Participants were served with refreshments, and each participating grandmother was given a \$5 equivalent amount as compensation for their transport cost.

**Data Analysis.** Focus group data were analyzed inductively following the steps proposed by Cresswell (2014), which include organizing, preparing, and transcribing the data verbatim; reading through the selected scripts of data to get a general sense of the information; and reflecting on its meaning. Coding of data followed thematic analysis (McClelland, 1975) and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each transcription was independently analyzed and checked for accuracy by the primary investigator. A three-step approach to thematic analysis was used which involved: (a) Reading the entire text to make sense of the data, (b) looking for statements or phrases to sort the data into segments, and (c) line-by-line reading and assigning codes to segments of text. The coding process included extracting and assigning codes to themes and sub-themes. Overlapping themes were combined and checked for accuracy by the research team. For quality and validity, the author discussed the coding process with the main supervisor. The first and second authors then reviewed each code and theme to reach a consensus, and finally, verified that themes were supported by codes and quotations. The coding process was done on the focus group transcripts in their original language version. The extracted quotations were then translated to English language for reporting purposes. The demographic



questionnaire responses were summarized in terms of means and range of response for each item, separately for the urban and rural groups.

## **Results**

The grandmothers described an assortment of skills that they expected their grandchildren to demonstrate at the ages from 3 to 5 years. Grandmothers in both groups explained that while they have general expectations for children at different ages, they were also mindful TJ /GS4e.7(ha9(atpac)19.7(e)-212.57(es

and (b) to grant the new mother and their infant time to bond (Geiger & Alans, 2005). The rural grandmothers thus expected their grandchildren to be off the diapers from as early as 1.5 months.

*Communication Skills.* Both rural and urban grandmothers explained that they expected their 3-year-old grandchildren to be able to talk and to follow simple commands. One rural grandmother said, “They should be able to talk and take porridge and eat.” An urban grandmother explained, “He can be sent around; in Setswana culture a child starts to be sent to do tasks at three years. We send them around: ‘Go and get me that thing, bring me that thing.’” A similar comment was made by a rural grandmother, “He is going on three, but he is clever. This friend of mine, you see him, I send him to the house, ‘Go and get me something from the house.’” A rural grandmother described even earlier competence in communication: “This one is two years, ...he is clever, and he is the one we send around because there are no other people. Yes, he already understands everything....”

The word “clever” used by these grandmothers (*bothale*) is closely linked with social competence reflecting the child’s ability to perform

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through neighborhoods. In expressing her difference of opinion about this

Further, the rural grandmothers expected higher levels of competencies in household chores for their grandchildren at the ages of 4 and 5 years than the urban grandmothers.

**Grandmothers' Views on the Importance of the Expected Skills.**

Regarding why they deemed the expected skills important, grandmothers from urban and rural locations had some similar but also some different views. The main themes that came out of the focus group discussions were independence, good behavior, and knowledge of who they are.

*Independence.* Both groups of grandmothers felt that the skills they expect from their grandchildren are crucial for the development of children's independence. An urban grandmother explained: "In Setswana culture, independence is a very important skill, what we really want..., what we teach them. ... by involving them to do the things by themselves so that they are not dependent on you all the time: 'Come and dress me, come and do this.'" Relatedly, a rural grandmother had this to say: "Yes, we encourage these skills so that the children can use them later in life as they grow, knowing that when they are given food they should first wash their hands, then receive food using both hands, eat, and wash hands, then drink water, so that they don't stay hungry or thirsty when I am not there." Another rural grandmother added, "The children should be able to talk for themselves..., when they are left with other people." From these grandmothers' point of view, the expected skills provide their grandchildren with the tools essential for survival and for becoming self-reliant as adults. Indeed, the theme of independence was a crosscutting topic during the urban and rural grandmothers' focus group discussions. The discussions of the expectations

“A child this size [showing size with a hand], when you ask them, ‘Who are your parents?’ They should not say, ‘Mama, Papa’ that is not good! You should teach the child that they are a child of *Dineo*-your real name, not ‘Mama, Papa.’ When I ask, ‘Whose child are you?’ you should be able to say, ‘I am the child of *Tiso* from such and such a place.”

**Grandmothers’ Practices to Promote Acquisition of Children’s Skills.** The grandmothers described a host of practices that they used to promote the skills they expected from their grandchildren. In addition, both urban and rural grandmothers mentioned love, affection, patience, persistence, presence, and attention as some of the characteristics that draw children closer to their grandmothers. As one urban grandmother commented, “The patience, the affection, boundless love attracts children to grandmothers because the mothers are too busy. Even when the mother arrives home from work, it’s ‘Hi,’ then she goes to the bedroom and at times she would stay in the bedroom without giving the child attention... and grandmother would sit and play with the child.” A rural grandmother echoed a similar sentiment: “To raise a child requires someone who is patient, and who has lots of love for the child, you will see the child growing well and also loving you.”

Both urban and rural grandmothers supported the development of desired skills among their grandchildren by teaching or training, guiding, demonstrating, modeling, and participating. A rural grandmother stated, “When a child starts learning how to talk, we begin teaching them many things, like, ‘Ma’am,’ ‘Sir,’ ‘Come here, go there.’” Another rural grandmother added: “Every time after the child bathes, you show them, how to put on a t-shirt, panty, trouser, shoes, they get used to it. Even shoes, you guide them how to put on shoes properly, when they mix them, you tell them ‘Hold the shoes this way and put this one this side.’” In explaining a similar approach, an urban grandmother stated, “When we talk to children, we show them that this goes this way, this that way, the head goes here, the arm goes here, so that they can know what to do the next time they are on their own.”

Another skill-developing practice used by the grandmothers was detailed by an urban grandmother: “I believe there should be a child’s role model in the home, one who can model the behaviors that the child would believe in. And it is very important that we model the behavior and also be a positive role model.” Similarly, a rural grandmother commented, “Yes, appropriate role model because if you insult, saying ‘You such and such,’ even the child will say it thinking that is the language.”

The grandmothers in both urban and rural settings were in agreement that teaching the children expected skills can be achieved by involving and allowing the children to engage and learn through participating. Nonetheless, the two groups of grandmothers differed on when to start training their grandchildren. Urban grandmothers’ timing for verbal

communication and interaction with their grandchildren was earlier than that of rural grandmothers. In contrast, rural grandmothers had earlier expectations for self-help skills like potty-training, dressing self, cooking, and running errands. While urban grandmothers explained their expected age for dressing self as "They dress themselves at three years," a rural grandmother made it clear that: "Even at two years..., he knows how to dress himself and doesn't wear clothes backwards." This variation in timing of expected skills in unced grandmothers' ideas about when they should start helping the children to attain such skills.

Potty-training was another area where there were clear differences of timetable between the two groups of grandmothers. Descriptions given by rural grandmothers included "When we take them out of con nement, they leave diapers altogether," and "For me, all my grandchildren, when they are still in con nement, the moment the umbilical cord detaches, I train them to squat. I don't have a child... altogether, I don't have a child who defecates on clothes. I start training them from a month." The remarks made by these rural grandmothers illustrate the earliness of their potty-training, which contrasts with potty-training timing by the urban grandmothers, who expected their grandchildren to "be able to undress and go to the toilet" at 3 years. Another difference in expectations between the two groups of grandmothers regards participation of children in cooking. Rural grandmothers expected their grandchild to be able to make tea and soft porridge at the age of 5 years—quite an advanced skill—whereas urban grandmothers expected the child to be able to at least peel vegetables for adults who were cooking. Running errands was expected as early as 2 years by rural grandmothers: "For me at two years the child goes to the tuck-shop, because they can talk, yes I send them, go and buy bread." In contrast, urban grandmothers started a bit later: "A child starts to be sent to do tasks at three years."

There were some differences between the two groups of grandmothers in how they communicated with their grandchildren. An urban grandmother said, "The grandmother would rather say, 'My boy, wait, let's sit down and talk,' .... You see, sometimes children want you to reason with them." Another urban grandmother suggested offering praise: "After the child has been able to put on a garment well, 'Wow my beautiful smart girl!' You see, motivating her." This grandmother further elaborated, "When I come from work, I have time for them, I sit down with them and we play..., and do this and that. Another said, "You put things aside, take the child and put her on your lap and talk to her." These descriptions of verbal communication given by urban grandmothers represent reciprocity in communication, warmth and exibility, negotiation and bargaining, as well as emotional closeness. For rural grandmothers, communication appeared more instructional, often in the form of commands: "You tell them, 'Take with both hands, and say thank you.'" Another rural grandmother elaborated: "At one year, you give them toys to play there..., you watch them

from a distance.” The same sentiment was emphasized by another rural grandmother, “You have to teach them that when we are here, they play there!” As described in these grandmothers’ expressions, their way of communication required compliance and very little verbal response from their grandchildren. The rural grandmothers’ insistence on children playing away from adults contrasts with the urban grandmothers’ ideas of playing with grandchildren, a form of proximal interaction.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Both urban and rural grandmothers in the present study described an assortment of expected skills for children at the ages of 3–5 years, with interesting differences in their apparent expectations. From a cross-cultural perspective that the Batswana grandmothers’ expectations for the acquisition of skills



With regard to expected skills at 3 years, the grandmothers studied here, from urban and rural locations, generally expected the same skills. The rural grandmothers, however, appeared to have earlier expectations for self-care skills and participation in household chores, and they elaborated extensively in describing their expectations for mastering Setswana cultural customs. Notably, grandmothers in both settings explained that the main purpose of assigning household chores to such young children was for training purposes rather than for actual help: if the child did not properly rinse her panties after washing them, or failed to wash her plate completely, the grandmother would quietly take care of it for her.

For interacting with their grandchildren, some urban grandmothers described using more reciprocal communication, and they believed in playing with their grandchildren, whereas the rural grandmothers thought of their communication with their grandchildren as more instructional, and they insisted that children should play away from adults. The urban grandmothers who talked about playing with their grandchildren were more educated. A striking absence in both the rural and urban grandmothers' focus group discussions was any mention of school readiness goals or activities, such as book reading with their grandchild. In contrast to the current preoccupation with getting children ready for school as young as 2 years of age in the United States, school readiness was apparently not on the developmental agenda of these grandmothers, even though they all had grandchildren attending preschool.

even for those who are already enrolled in preschool. From comments made by the grandmothers in the focus groups, it appears that preschool teachers were at best keeping them informed about their grandchild's progress, but they apparently did not offer advice on how the children could also learn school-related skills at home. Parents and grandparents in Botswana may feel that sending their young child to preschool entails making a painful choice between inculcating behavioral norms and skills

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