

# *Bull-Dozing the Family Tree: Children;* *Grandparents; and Alienation*

Carol A. Golly, LCSW, RPT-S  
Child and Adolescent Therapist  
Naples, FL



# Topics for Today's Presentation

- What is Alienation?
- What techniques and behaviors do alienators employ in their campaign?
- Significance of Grandparents
- Nature of disruptions in the grandparent-grandchild bond
- How can clinicians help alleviate suffering of grandparents?
- What are grandparent's rights?

# Alienation-Definition

- From the Latin “alienare”
- The attempt on the part of one parent to disrupt the relationship between the child and the other parent
- Can occur in intact families, but most prevalent in divorced families
- Parental Alienation Syndrome, or PAS, occurs in extreme cases of alienation, where the child becomes “complicit” with the alienation

# Alienated Grandparents

- Grandparents and extended family members can be alienated from grandchildren:
  - The strategies used by alienators are similar to PAS
  - The manifestations in the child of being alienated from grandparents are similar to PAS
  - Serious lack of research in alienated grandparents

- A subset of the ages old practice of vilification of one's enemies
- Observation/anecdotal reports as early as 1940
- The rise of psychology in family law – changes in family demographics, move from tender years presumption to best interests, decreased focus on the family and more on the individual
- Move toward diagnosis: Richard Gardner, M.D. (1992, 1998)
- Move toward description: Johnston and Kelly (2001)

# Gardner's Parental Alienation Syndrome

- A childhood disorder which typically arises during custody disputes
- An unjustified campaign of denigration of one parent by the other parent, where the goal is to influence the child
- Results from combination of alienating parent's behavior and the child's own contribution
- If true abuse or neglect is present there is no diagnosis

# Affinity, Alignment, Estrangement, Alienation

- **Affinity:** based on temperament, gender, age, interest, parenting styles; may shift with development stages
- **Alignment:** often results from intense marital/divorce conflict, need to take sides, common in older children with moral judgment; often temporary but can consolidate with protracted conflict.
- **Estrangement - Family estrangement** is the physical and or emotional distancing between at least two family members in an arrangement which is considered unsatisfactory by at least one involved party.

# Risk Factors - Child

- Temperament – anxious, depressed, socially avoidant, special needs
- Age – older than five
- Intelligence – higher intelligence equals higher risk?

# Risk Factors – Parents- Who Are Alienators?

- History of Domestic Violence
- Personality Disorders: Anti-Social; Borderline; Narcissist
  - i. Power and Control; Emotionally Reactive; Lack of Empathy or Conscience, Insecure, Early “Attachment” (bonding) Difficulties
- Financial stress
- Marital affairs

# Parental Alienation is Emotional Abuse of Children

- **Emotional abuse** is “a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incidents that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered or only of value in meeting another’s needs” (Federal Child Abuse and Treatment Act, PL 93-247)
- Actions that characterize emotional abuse (Hamarman and Bernet, 2000):
  - Rejecting, ignoring, isolating, corrupting/exploiting, terrorizing, verbally assaulting, and over pressuring

# PAS as Emotional Abuse: Core Components

- The child is **rejected** based around four themes (Rohner, 2004): coldness; hostility, indifference; and lack of love and care
- The child is: **isolated; ignored; terrorized; corrupted; verbally assaulted; and threatened with abandonment**
- The child is exposed to **domestic violence**, and parental **drug and/or alcohol** use
- **Personal details** are shared that exceed the child's cognitive and emotional abilities

Gardner (1998); Rand (1997)

# Bias

- Alienation denies that bias exists; no other perspective or point-of-view.
- Extreme case is a CULT
  - Differing viewpoints disallowed and punished.
  - No knowledge of healthy human relationships, appreciation and tolerance of differing perspectives.
  - Deficits in critical thinking and problem solving.
  - A child is “imperiled” for thinking for themselves.
  - Fear-based dynamic (Gardner)

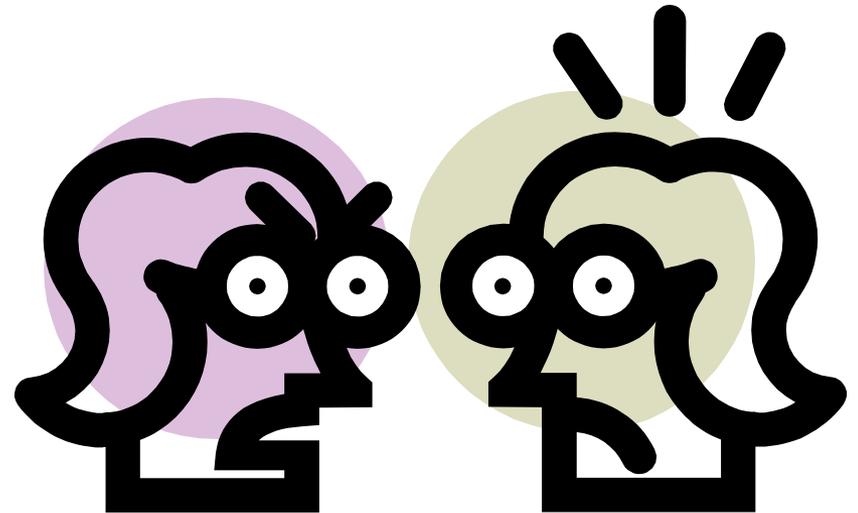
# Alienating Behaviors by Parents “Techniques”



- Negative verbal
- Negative non-verbal
- Specific accusations of abuse or neglect regarding the targeted parents
- Exposing the child to too much information related to adult issues (marital conflict, DV, court proceedings, etc.)
- Extending negative campaign outside the family
- Asking the child to report, spy

# Alienating Behaviors by Parents

- Failure to facilitate parent time
- Intrusion into parent time (calls, texts, drop-bys, contact at school)
- Emotional dependence on the child
- Throwing Out Gifts from Parent
- Interrogating Child After Visit with Parent
- Monitoring Phone Contact or Letters
- Exclusion of the targeted parents from school functions and other activities



# Alienating Behaviors by Parents

- Having Child Refer to Someone Else as “Parent”
- Interfering with Communication
- Removing Pictures of Parent from Child’s Home
- Loyalty Bind and Withdrawal of Love- Child’s Positive Feelings for Targeted Parent Met with Emotional Distance and Punishment
- Telling Child Parent Does Not Love Child, or Want to See Him or Her.
- Creating the Impression that Parent is Dangerous or “Bad”
- Asking Child to Keep Secrets From Targeted Parent

## Behaviors of Alienated Child

1. Campaign of denigration
2. Weak, frivolous, and absurd reasons for the denigration
3. Lack of ambivalence toward both parents
4. The “independent thinker” phenomenon
5. Lack of guilt regarding poor treatment of the rejected parent
6. Reflexive support for favored parent
7. Use of “borrowed scenarios”
8. Animosity toward the rejected parent’s friends and family

## **Possible Long-Term Impact of PAS on the Child**

**Amy J. Baker, PhD (2007) self-selected case studies  
of severely alienated children interviewed as  
adults**

- Low self esteem, reported by 65% of participants
- Depression, 70%
- Drug and alcohol abuse, 35%
- Lack of trust, 40%
- Alienation from their own children, 50%
- Divorce, 57%

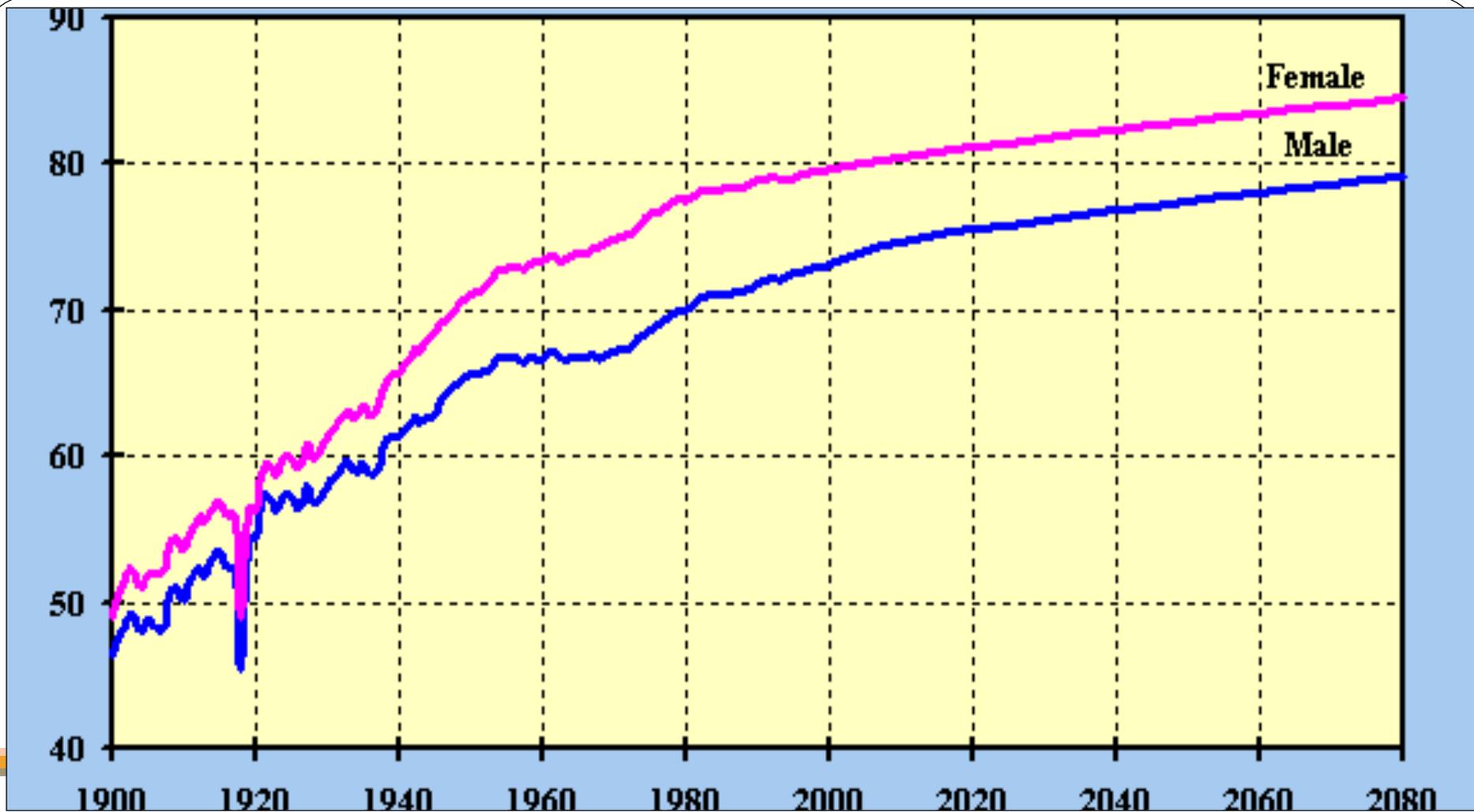


# Grandparents-Why They Matter

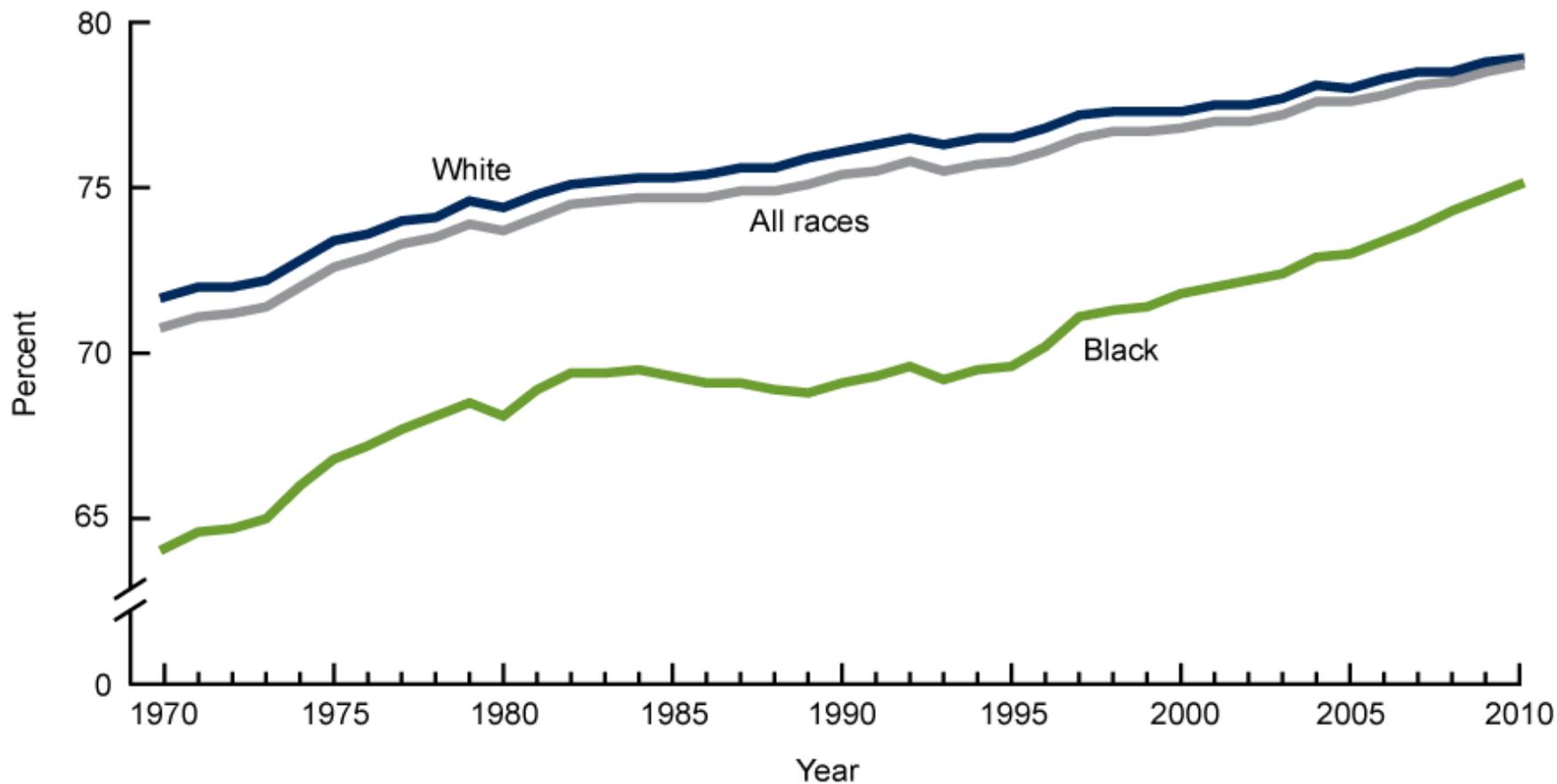


# Grandparent Demographics

- 70 million in US
- 1/3 of US population
- 1.7 million Americans become GPs every year
- Increased longevity resulted in more children having GPs
- In 1900 fewer than 50% of adolescents in US had two or more living GPs; by 1980 this number grew to 90%
- 72% say being a grandparent is the single most important relationship of their lives ([www.Grandparents.com](http://www.Grandparents.com))



**Social Security Administration Data**  
Life Expectancy in the United States 1900 with Projection to 2080



Life Expectancy 1970 to 2010 by Race

# Significance of Grandparents

- Consensus of studies on GPs and grandchildren show they
  - Interact with each other often
  - Enjoy mutually satisfying relationships
  - Are emotionally close (Smith & Drew, 2002)
- GPs serve as valuable sources of social support for children during times of family stress (Lussier et. al., 2002)
- Schutter (1997) found that children in divorce connected family emotional bonding with GPs' listening, keeping them safe, and gift giving
- Barnet (2010) found that high levels of grandmother involvement may mediate the effect of economic, parenting, and child temperamental risk on grandchildren's social adjustment

# Grandparents Affect Development of Grandchildren: **DIRECTLY:**

- Care giver, playmate, story-teller and friend
- Role as Family Historian
- Transmission of Family Values, Ethnic Heritage, and Family Traditions
- Mentoring
- Buffer between Parent and Child- This role may take on added significance when parents divorce

# Direct Influence

- Children Exposed to More Diverse Social Relationships and Family Systems
- Infant Development is Positively Related to Grandparent Behavior –Involved and stimulating grandparent interaction with infants is correlated with higher scores on measures of infant intelligence.

# Grandparents Affect Development of Grandchildren: **INDIRECTLY:**

- Support for their Adult Children, the Child's Parents; Emotional and/or Financial Support
- Counsel during Emotional Crisis
- Model Child-Rearing Skills, Advice, and Provide Information



# Disruption of the Grandchild-Grandchild Bond

- Little information or study of the phenomenon
- Access to grandchild is controlled through voluntary consent of both parents
- Transitions in the middle generation (death, divorce, illness, relocation, etc.) can compromise the ability of GPs to engage with grandchildren (Drew & Smith, 1999)

# Three Life Events Affecting Bond

- **Parental Separation or Divorce**
  - Maternal GPs fare better (Drew & Smith, 1999)
- **Death or Relocation of Adult Child**
- **Family Feuding**
  - Grandchildren may be used as pawns to “punish” GPs for perceived wrongs
  - Dysfunctional aspects of grandparenting relates to the quality of GP-grandchild relationships
  - Likely intergenerational nature to feuding (Caspi & Elder, 1988) and child abuse (Oliver, 1993)
  - Kornhaber (1996) described clinical grandparenting difficulties that can be related to insecure attachment transmitted from parent to child

# Effects of Contact Loss on GPs

- **Prolonged Grief Response-** consistent with bereavement theory
  - **INTENSE CHRONIC GRIEF**
  - **SYMPTOMS OF PTSD**
  - **COGNITIVE INTRUSION**
  - **MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**
  - **NUMBNESS AND SHOCK**
  - **SHAME, REJECTION, AND BETRAYAL**
  - **DEPRESSION**
  - **PHYSICAL HEALTH PROBLEMS**
  - **ANXIETY-** Fear of not seeing grandchild again; worry about well-being and safety of grandchild

# Ambiguous Loss

- The grandchild is not physically present but is present in the heart and mind of the grandparent
- Continued hope for reunification
- Sense of powerlessness
- Role confusion (Am I still a grandparent?)
- Social support in ambiguous loss tends to disappear over time

**Longitudinal Study- Drew & Silverstein (2007):**  
*Grandparents' Psychological Well-Being After Loss of Contact with Their Grandchildren*

- 343 California grandparents from the *Longitudinal Study of Generations*
- Surveys completed by grandparents, their spouses, adult children, and adolescent grandchildren
- Depression scales completed by the GPs
- Results:
  - 38% experienced contact loss due to divorce
  - 23% experienced contact loss due to family conflict and feuding
  - Remainder experienced contact loss due to death or illness of the adult child; geographical separation; and crises faced by the grandchild

# Drew & Silverstein (2007)

- GPs had increased depressive symptoms compared to a non-contact loss group
- Mental health progressively worsened for these GPs as they grew older
- Sudden contact loss resulted in depressive spike, which returned to previous levels after 3 years
  - Authors suggested that GPs may develop innate resiliency resources and coping skills over time, and may be assisted through grief therapy
- Other studies show a similar correlation between contact loss and increase in physical health problems

# Developmental Theory- Erik Erikson

- German-born American developmental psychologist (1902-1994)
- 8 universal life stages in personality development
- A crisis is negotiated in each stage, which can be resolved in either an adaptive, or a maladaptive manner



# Developmental Theory- Erik Erikson

**Middle Adulthood (40-65 years), “Generativity vs. Stagnation”** – a period involving nurturing, teaching, leading, or in some way promoting the next generation. Successful negotiation of stage leads to feelings of accomplishment, while failure results in superficial involvement in the world and self- focus.

**Maturity (65- on) “Integrity vs. Despair”** – occurs as older adults review their lives, and evaluate it for meaningfulness and satisfaction. The alternative is despair or evaluating one’s life as unsatisfying, having great regrets, and feeling there is no time to change anything.

# Attachment Theory

- Babies form multiple attachment relationships, arranged hierarchically
- As the baby grows, he or she will develop multiple attachment bonds with others whom the child can turn to for support and comfort over the lifespan (Ainsworth, 1989)
- Believing that one is unloved by a caregiver becomes a belief that one is unlovable
- In Parental Alienation syndrome, children are told they are unloved by the other parent, and that parent's extended family
- As alienated children suffer the loss of primary attachment figures such as GPs, they may also lose the feeling of being worthy of love

# Life Lessons that Devalue Family

- Grandchildren who witness their grandparents treated with contempt by their parents may be learning life lessons about a *family culture that devalues salient extended family relationships*
- In his classic text on personality development “The Person”, Theodore Lidz warns “*How the old people are treated by their children commonly furnishes an illustration to grandchildren of how persons treat parents.*”

# Interventions for Alienated GPs

- Reunification- Immediate resolution of contact loss and much of grief. However, trust issues remain
- Support groups- Peer lead and mutual aid vs. therapist lead
- Legislation for Grandparent Rights
- Court Interventions

# Grandparent's Rights

Historically,  
grandparents (GPs)  
had no common-law  
rights to visitation  
with their  
grandchildren



# Move Toward Grandparent Rights

- 1970s and 1980s- Divorce rates increased, along with the number of children born to single mothers
- GPs became more politically active as they played an increasingly active role in the lives of their grandchildren

# Move Toward Grandparent Rights

- 1980s- A nationwide move to enact legislation giving GPs the right to petition the courts for visitation with their grandkids
- In time, all fifty states had some kind of law addressing GP rights

# Troxel v. Granville

- Washington state case
- Brad Troxel had two young daughters with mother Tommie Granville. They were unmarried.
- Brad committed suicide in 1993
- Brad's parents given some visitation but wanted more



# Troxel v. Granville

- 1997- A Washington trial judge ruled in the Troxel's (GPs) behalf.
- 1998- WA state court disagrees
- 2000- The US Supreme ruled in a 6-3 decision that the WA court went too far in ordering GPs have visitation, and reversed the decision.

# Troxel v. Granville

- “Matrimonial law experts believe the ramifications of the Troxel ruling are huge as they endow natural and adoptive parents with the power of being primary decision makers when it comes to child visitation while severely limiting the ability of any and all third party petitioners to intervene”

Richard Kent, Esq.

*Solomon's Choice, A Guide to custody for Ex-Husbands,  
Spurned Partners, and Forgotten Grandparents*

# Improving the System

- Many people in the legal community believe that if a person can demonstrate a substantial relationship with a child in question, then they should automatically be granted standing by the court to petition for visitation rights if they are denied by the parent(s)
- State of Connecticut- looking to repeal statute regarding third-party visitation.



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