

# Grandparents Raising Grandchildren

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that over three million children currently live with their grandparents, which represents a 40-50% increase in the past decade. It is estimated that 4% of all white children, 6% of all Hispanic children and 12% of all African-American children now live with their grandparents (Minkler & Roe, 1993).

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) reports a 17 percent jump in the number of children cared for in grandparent-only households in one year (1992 to 1993). This is contrasted with a gradual 6 percent rise over the prior 22 years. The Census Bureau figures that 3.4 million children are raised by grandparents or other relatives, and 44 percent of the nation's grandparents spend 100 or more hours a year taking care of grandkids.

Clearly, grandparents are very influential in their grandchildren's lives whether they provide occasional care, live close by or far away. But what happens when grandparents assume the role of parent for their grandchildren? Several factors come to the surface:

## **Attitude Adjustment**

Grandparents usually anticipate later life as a time to enjoy the privileges of grandchildren without the responsibilities. It may take some effort to adjust to the new role of caretaking, and it may mean many adjustments in life planning, from finances to career changes to location and lifestyle changes.

## **Stretched Resources**

Many grandparent caregivers find their personal resources stretched to the limit and

they lack the support of friends who can identify with the stressors they may be facing. Issues of health, financial stability, and parenting are important to these individuals. Financial resources planned for the retirement years may be quickly depleted as the children's needs are addressed. Grandparents often report additional obstacles, including difficulty obtaining insurance coverage for dependent grandchildren and enrolling their grandchildren in school when they do not have formal guardianship of the child.

## **Psychological challenges**

Grandparents who serve as surrogate parents for their grandchildren face a different set of psychological challenges than first-time parents and non-caregiving grandparents. Concerns include: loss of the expected and preferred grandparent role; uncertainty about the permanence of the childcare arrangements; and the relationship with the son or daughter who is unable to fulfill the parenting role. Other emotional difficulties may include feelings of disappointment, shame, anger, conflict with family members, self-doubt about the ability to parent effectively, loss of freedom, disruption of friendships with peers, loss of control over one's future, and worry about the stability of the child's future.

## **Sense of Purpose**

Grandparents involved in raising grandchildren often report a greater sense of purpose in their own lives. Margaret Jendrek from Miami University in Ohio interviewed 114 grandparents who were providing regular care. Most were caring for only one grandchild, but some had responsibility for as many as five. Nearly all respondents

were grandmothers. Jendrek identified three types of grandparents;

" Day care grandparents, who provide regular daily care for an extended period.

" "Living-with" grandparents, who reside with a grandchild but do not have legal custody (usually the grandchild lives in the grandparents' home.)

" Custodial grandparents, who have obtained legal responsibility for the grandchild.

Jendrek found that grandparents were more likely to be caring for a daughter's child than a son's, especially in the custodial situation. Day care grandparents usually cared for very young children, while other grandparents cared for children up to age 14. All three groups reported that rearing young children affected their lifestyles, friendships, family, and marriage. Nearly three-fourths of all the grandparents reported major adjustments in their routines and plans. As might be expected, custodial grandparents reported the most change. Still, more than half of all the grandparents (and nearly two thirds of the custodial ones) reported a greater sense of purpose in life because of their caretaking responsibility.

### **Reasons for Grandparent Care**

Grandparents are increasingly being called upon to provide support and assistance to families in need. Factors such as incapacitating illness, substance abuse, incarceration, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, and financial crisis affect parents' ability to care for their children. These influences give rise to an increasing number of "skipped-generation families," where the biological parent is absent from the home and grandparents serve as sole or primary caregivers for their grandchildren.

Grandparents rarely plan to raise a second generation of children.

Jendrek found that the reasons for caring for a grandchild varied widely, depending on the type of care. Most day care grandparents cited the mother's full-time work schedule, while custodial grandparents noted the mother's emotional problems. Financial help was the most common reason given by grandparents who lived with a grandchild.

Overall, about two-thirds of the grandparents had offered to provide care. "Living-with" grandparents, however, are apparently more often in a position where they simply begin to take over. In some cases, this assumption of care may develop because the child's mother had not yet left home herself. This circumstance, as well as the fact that these grandparents do not have legal authority over the grandchild, may help explain why "living-with" grandparents were found to experience more stress than the other two types of grandparents.

Nevertheless, "living-with" grandparents preferred their informal arrangement. Obtaining legal custody would involve declaring their own child an unfit parent, which takes an emotional as well as financial toll. Jendrek noted that grandparents in all three categories are committed to providing a stable family environment. They also display an ability to improvise in the face of unusual and sometimes difficult situations.

### **Need for Support**

Of these three types of grandparents, those providing day care seem to function most

like our society's common definition of grandparents. But in all three arrangements, grandparents are likely to need extra support and encouragement from other family members. They may benefit as well from connecting to available social agencies and organizations in the area.

There are a variety of options available for support. Some hospitals and educational programs offer grandparenting classes to address the changing roles of grandparents. Other options might include support groups and American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) resources. Call around in your community to see what is available.

Support groups for grandparents raising children are springing up around the country. To learn how to join or start a group in your area contact:

Grandparents Reaching Out  
141 Glensummer Road  
Holbrook, NY 11741

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren  
PO Box 104  
Colleyville, TX 76034

Grandparents Rights Organization  
555 S. Woodward Ave., Suite 600  
Birmingham, MI 48009  
(810) 646-7191

AARP Resources  
Grandparent Information Center  
PCDD/Programs  
601 "E" Street NW, Room B5-436  
Washington, D.C.  
(202) 434-2288

Sources:  
Deb Gebeke, Family Science Specialist, North  
Dakota State University Extension Service, 1996.

*Grandparents Raising Grandchildren*,  
Family Information Services, January 1997.

Minkler, M. & Roe, K. (1993)  
*Grandmothers as Caregivers; Raising  
children of the crack cocaine epidemic*.  
Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

## The Gift of Grandparenting

The grandparent-grandchild bond is second in importance only to the bond between parent and child. However, this relationship is often overlooked as other family relationships receive more time and attention. As families are bombarded with social and economic pressures, a source of family strength can be the love between grandchild and grandparent.

Having the energy and time to be an effective, loving grandparent can sometimes be a challenge. Focusing on the positive influences grandparents have may help us to better realize the importance of grandparenting. **Lessons from grandparent to grandchild includes:**

**Love and Acceptance.** It means a lot to know that whether you fail a test, break a glass, or lose a ball game, grandparents still love and accept you. The gift of "I love you, no matter what," whether spoken aloud, written in a letter, or shown by deeds will always be one of the most treasured and remembered gifts of all.

**Self-Confidence.** Children feel special and worthwhile when their grandparents listen to them and give praise for a job well done.

**Good Example.** Young people tend to

admire their grandparents and, therefore, can be strongly influenced by them. If youngsters have pleasant experiences with elders who approach life with excitement and good humor, they will have a more positive view of life and of growing older themselves.

**Experience and Wisdom.** Because of experiences, grandparents can be excellent teachers in such areas as business management, mathematics, art, or storytelling. Additionally, many older people have grown rich with a special wisdom and understanding. By sharing their past experiences, elders model for children ways to deal with fears and resolve life's big and little difficulties.

**Understanding of Change.** Grandparents are experts in change. They have seen the first televisions, the first computers, and the first space flights. By sharing their memories of these experiences, elders can help children understand that change is part of life, that there are cycles of plenty and scarcity, and that time can often heal. Grandparents can also do much to give children a feeling of family as they share stories about the day when their children were young.

**Happy Memories.** Warm moments with grandparents can become special memories, experiences that provide strength during difficult times. Some children will remember the twinkle in Grandma's eyes as they played games together, or how wonderful it felt to be sung to or how prickly Grandpa's beard felt. Kind words, loving gestures and special times will be fond memories that last a lifetime.

**Calmness and Peace.** Because of years of maturing experiences, grandparents often grow increasingly relaxed, calm and

confident. They may become less ruffled by the inevitable ups and downs of daily living. When a grandparent is able to share calmness and peace with a youngster, it is a most healing and enriching experience.

If you are a grandparent, find ways to strengthen and nourish the bond you have with each grandchild. If you are a parent, find a way to encourage that special relationship between your children and your parents.

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