



GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

"I never thought I would be raising kids at my age. All of that was supposed to be behind me."

— Martha, 61-year-old grandmother raising her daughter's children

Today, more than ever before, grandparents are assuming the role of parents to their children's children. You are not alone if you are a grandparent who recently took on this responsibility, or if you are just now considering raising a grandchild(ren). When unforeseen circumstances prevent parents from carrying out their parental duties, grandparents often take on the task of raising their grandchildren. Most grandparents assume the responsibility of parenting their grandchildren at a period in their life typically reserved for retirement, leaving behind dreams of leisurely playing and visiting with grandchildren. These grandparents need support and access to community resources to help them cope with parenting issues arising from their unique situation and, also, need to maintain their own health and well-being to meet the challenges and demands of parenting.

Who Are Grandparents Raising Grandchildren?

There is not just one face of grandparents raising grandchildren today. You may be someone who is retired or working. You could be male or female, divorced, married, or widowed. You could be struggling financially or have a large nest egg with more than enough money for monthly expenses and entertainment. You may have never finished high school or have a college degree and beyond. In fact, a "grandparent" does not have to be a biological relative. You could be an older person who is a close family friend, or an older relative, like an aunt or uncle, to a child who needs parental care.

Grandparents may or may not have legal guardianship, custody, or have adopted their grandchildren. For those grandparents without legal authority, parenting tasks such as providing the child with health insurance, consenting to medical treatment, or enrolling the child in school may be difficult.

What Motivates Grandparents to Raise Their Grandchildren?

Typically, grandparents raise their grandchildren because the grandchild's parent or parents have died or have a problem that prevents them from providing good, consistent, loving care for their children. Thus, if you are an older adult taking care of your grandchild(ren), you are almost certainly motivated to do so because you care deeply for your grandchildren and want to do all that is necessary to give them a nurturing and safe home environment.

Examples of the kinds of problems that a parent whose child is being raised by an older relative may have include: mental health difficulties, physical disability, drug and alcohol abuse, and/or incarceration. Some grandparents raise a grandchild(ren) due to the death of the child's parent from an accident, suicide, or terminal illness. Or, the reason may be because the child's mother got pregnant at an early age and lacks the responsibility or financial stability needed to provide care for her child. At other times, the reason children are not being raised by their own parents is because the parents have abandoned, abused, or neglected their children, and the courts have ordered them removed from the parents' care. It could even be because the parent is single or divorced and needs help because of school or work demands.

Sometimes, the situation is temporary, as in the case of a specific financial or medical crisis, child neglect, or abuse; or permanent, as in the case of death. In temporary situations when either part or full-time assistance is provided, grandparents typically hope that the child's parent will get through their crisis and will eventually resume their rightful role as a primary caregiver. Some situations initially believed to be temporary become permanent.

Grandparents usually step into the role of caregiver out of love for their grandchildren and their family. Caring for the child may also be a necessity—there may be no one else except strangers to take on the parental role, a situation that is often considered an unacceptable option to a grandparent choosing to raise a grandchild. In these situations, a grandparent's feelings of unconditional love are combined with a deep-rooted sense of family responsibility and commitment.

What are Some Benefits to Raising Grandchildren?

There are many benefits—to both the children and the grandparents—when grandparents become surrogate parents. Grandparents can provide stability, predictability, and a healthy role model for their grandchildren. Grandparents bring the benefit of experience and perspective to the parenting process.

Providing care to grandchildren helps some older caregivers feel young and active, giving them a greater purpose for living. Grandparents may thrive on receiving love and companionship from their grandchild. Some grandparents see parenting a grandchild as a chance to raise a child differently a second time around. It is clear that many grandparents have a strong familial bond and, despite the challenges, derive satisfaction from acting as parents to their grandchildren.

What Parenting Challenges Might Grandparents Encounter?

Becoming a parent to a generation once removed has an endless number of challenges. You may find it difficult to say “no” or set limits if you feel sorry for your grandchildren because of the circumstances that led them into your care. Or, conversely, you may be concerned that without a strict upbringing, your grandchildren may not respect your authority. Children of parents who are unable to care for them are more likely to have behavioral and emotional problems such as rebellious and limit-testing behaviors. The children may experience intense emotions such as worrying about their parents, guilt over the family’s break-up, or concern about their welfare should something happen to their grandparent. You may need to help your grandchildren cope with these issues.

Additionally, you may not feel up-to-date on the latest kid fads, TV shows, movies, Internet and music. Similarly, you may not feel knowledgeable about some of the subjects being taught in school or the new methods used to teach them. This may make it difficult for you to communicate with your grandchildren, share day-to-day experiences, or understand their behavior.

Sometimes, a teenage grandchild may abuse a grandparent financially, physically, or sexually. The grandparent may be embarrassed or feel afraid to discuss the situation. Professionals like pediatricians or child welfare workers are often unaware that elder abuse may be occurring in a home

where grandparents are raising children. Therefore, these professionals often do not look for warning signs or symptoms of elder abuse, or bring the subject up in conversation. The only way for the abuse to stop is to tell someone and get help.

Professionals are available in most communities to help you with most parenting issues and challenges. Mental health professionals, including child and adolescent psychiatrists, community mental health and child welfare agencies, and parent-teacher associations, can be important resources.

How Do Grandparents Cope with their New Life Situation?

Caring for grandchildren can be one of the most challenging as well as one of the most rewarding events in your life, requiring you to make some changes to the way you live your daily life. Some areas of your life you may need to adjust include:

- **Financial.** The costs of raising a child(ren) is likely to impact your budget or retirement fund. It may affect plans you have made for yourself such as vacations, home repair, or an investment.

Suggestion: Depending on your financial situation you may need to determine if governmental assistance benefits are available to help cover the costs of childcare. Such benefits may cover food, housing expenses, clothing, as well as physical and mental health care or income/child tax credit. For example, if your grandchild has a disability or parent has died he or she may be eligible to receive a Social Security check each month. Or your grandchild may qualify for your state's Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Also, governmental financial assistance may be available, especially if the child was abandoned, neglected, or abused.

- **Social.** You may become isolated from your own age group, many or all of whom are having a more traditional grandparenting experience. "Parenting" may have become all that you do. This isolation can lead to unhappiness and frustration.

Suggestion: You, as a caregiver, also need time to concentrate on yourself. This is perfectly acceptable and not at all selfish. It is important for you to stay connected with your peers and continue activities you enjoy. Take a break from your grandchildren to run errands, spend time alone or with your spouse or a friend, or even to take a class. This time

away from child rearing is essential to helping you become a more relaxed person and a better grandparent to your grandchildren. It is healthy to cultivate interests outside your family responsibilities to keep you feeling emotionally balanced. Seek out people in your family, circle of friends, or community who are understanding and compassionate to your situation. Such individuals will likely form a support network for you to turn to when problems arise.

- **Physical.** Your body may not be ready to handle middle of the night feedings and the constant lifting and bending you may be doing while chasing after toddlers. You may also find it difficult to keep up with the pace of high school age children, to find the energy to help middle school children with their school work, or to attend school activities and conferences.

Suggestion: Parenting as an older adult will put new demands on your time, energy, and family resources. Regular exercise can relieve physical and mental stress. As an older adult you may face common illnesses and conditions related to aging. The added pressures of parenting can exacerbate any preexisting conditions. It is important that you safeguard your health and quickly address any health concerns you may have in order to be optimally prepared for the challenges of parenting. Your health care provider should know your special circumstances and be available and responsive to your physical needs. Thus, it is important to find a primary care physician you are comfortable talking with about your family situation and its potential effects on your health. Caring for yourself by seeing your doctor regularly is vitally important when children are dependent on you for their well-being.

- **Emotional.** The transition from being an older adult without dependents to raising grandchildren can be very stressful. Giving up your time, energy, and money to take over the responsibilities of being a primary parent again can stir up feelings such as grief, anger, loss, resentment, and possibly guilt, leading to depression or anxiety. The stress of parenting may escalate when other demands for your attention occur simultaneously. These may include caring for your own elderly parent, sibling, or spouse. Some grandparents may feel guilty or embarrassed that their own children are not capable of being dependable parents. Others may feel guilty and heart broken if they are not able to raise all of the grandchildren needing care.

Suggestion: Whether it be a friend, family member, or mental health counselor, it is important for you to have someone to talk with whom you trust and who is compassionate and understanding enough to guide you to an appropriate professional for help if needed. Attending support groups can enable you to meet other grandparents who are parenting again. The group setting provides an opportunity to share experiences and learn from each other.

- **Legal.** Without legal authority, many caregivers have difficulty providing consent to medical, dental, and psychological services their grandchildren need. Because state laws vary, they may not be able to receive public benefits like Medicaid. Alternatively, the legal process may be lengthy and expensive and may damage an already fragile relationship with the biological parent. You may also be worried about what would happen to your grandchild if something happens to you.

Suggestion: You may want to consider weighing the pros and cons of obtaining legal guardianship, custody, or adoption. You also may consider changing legal documents that were in place before assuming care of a grandchild. For example, you may want to update your will to include a grandchild as beneficiary of your estate, or you may want to identify another primary caregiver as guardian in the event that something happens to you.

- **Housing.** Where to live can be a significant obstacle when deciding to raise a grandchild. You may not have an extra room for the child to live or live in a residence that does not allow children.

Suggestion: When deciding to raise a grandchild, you may need to consider relocating if you do not have enough space or if the residence where you live does not allow children. If the child is able to move into your home, adjustments may need to be made, e.g., perhaps a common living area is transformed into a sleeping area, a bathroom is shared, or valuable possessions taking up space need to be put away or protected.

Where to Get Help

National Resources

AARP's Grandparent Information Center (GIC). This Center offers information and resources on all issues facing grandparents raising grandchildren via articles, a free newsletter, message boards and more. It also provides a search to locate a support group.

Phone: 1-888-687-2277

Web site: www.aarp.org/families/grandparents/gic/

American Bar Association. This association can refer you to an attorney who specializes in guardianship, adoption, and custody issues.

Phone number: 1-800-285-2221. Web site: www.abanet.org/home.html

Generations United (GU) National Center on Grandparents and Other Relatives Raising Children. This organization seeks to improve the quality of life of relative caregivers and the children they are raising. Provides useful information on current issues faced by grandparents including legal options, public benefits, federal and state legislation, support group and other resources. Phone: 1-202-289-3979.

Web site: ipath.gu.org/Kinsh6261201.asp

GrandsPlace. This on-line site for grandparents and others raising children offers support for one another through message boards, chatrooms, and offering resource information.

Web site: www.grandsplace.com

National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse. A comprehensive Web site for information about elder abuse, including how to report abuse, what services are available to stop abuse, and how to find those services in your community. Phone: 1-202-682-4140.

Web site: www.preventelderabuse.org

New York City Resources

CornellCARES. This Web site developed and maintained by Weill Medical College of Cornell University's Division of Geriatrics and Gerontology, provides an easily accessible Web-based directory of NYC Medicare mental health providers. Some specialize in treating issues faced by grandparents raising grandchildren. Go to *CornellCARES.com* and click on *Provider Directory* to begin the provider search.

Grandparent Family Apartments. A 51-unit apartment building in the South Bronx, the first public development in the United States designed and built exclusively for grandparents raising grandchildren. The grandparents must have legal custody of their grandchildren to be eligible for an apartment. Phone: 1-212-721-6032 ext. 248.

Grandparent Resource Center. This Center is part of the New York City Department for the Aging and offers a wide variety of services and help to parenting grandparents, including referrals, respite care, support groups, financial and health benefits resources, information on adoption, kinship foster care, and child custody options.

Phone: 1-212-442-1094.

Web site: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/grc.html>

The Family Center. The Family Center offers a wide variety of services to grandparents, including respite care, legal advice, and family mediation.

Phone: 1-212-766-4522 or 1-800-219-4522.

Web site: www.thefamilycenter.org/programs

Lincoln Square Neighborhood Center. This council offers services such as child and youth activities, legal advice and advocacy, and aid in obtaining financial assistance for the care of a grandchild.

Phone: 1-212-874-0860.

Web site: www.unhny.org/member/agency_detail.cfm?ID=5039

This resource provides brief, general information about this health care topic. It does not take the place of specific instructions you receive from your health care providers. For answers to other questions, consult your physician or other health care provider.

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