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randparents Raising Grandchildren

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Who are the grandparents raising their children's children?

The Grandparent Information Center, hosted by the American Association of Retired Persons, has collected many statistics indicating there is not a "typical" grandparent who is raising a grandchild. About two-thirds of the grandparents who have been in touch with the Grandparent Information Center are married and average 55 years of age. About equal numbers are working (42 percent) and living on a fixed income (46 percent). Seven of 10 grandparents in contact with the GIC have reported they are raising their grandchildren without benefit of legal custody (1).

Many grandparents encounter difficult social or health problems with their grandchildren. Solutions or remedies to these problems may be hard to find. Many of the children experience emotional, social, educational, and behavioral difficulties, and it is not easy for the grandparents to provide them with needed services. Research conducted in 1997 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggests the average income for grandparent-headed households with children is under \$20,000 (2).

What is the status of the grandchildren being raised by grandparents?

More than 30 percent of grandchildren being raised by grandparents are 4 years old or younger. With the increases in the number of babies affected by substance abuse, parents incarcerated or incapacitated by diseases such as AIDS, abandoned newborns, and teenage pregnancies, this number will grow (3).

Although state funds to provide financial and support services for grandparent caregivers are limited, many states are beginning to develop creative financial options to respond to these needs. These include subsidized guardianship, adoption assistance, and/or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). West Virginia does not have subsidized guardianship, but some states do offer it. The payments are either less than or equal to the state foster care payment (4).

1. Ask CEOS members if they know any grandparents raising their grandchildren.
2. Are club members aware of support services available for grandparents in their community?

Behaviors of grandchildren being raised by grandparents

Grandparents can do a lot to reassure their grandchildren that their mixed feelings about what is going on are normal. Talking with children about their fears, hurts, and anger helps to keep these feelings from turning into negative behavior. Grandchildren who are too young to talk about their feelings or who simply can't verbalize what is going on in their heads usually act out these feelings in some way. Clinging, babylike behavior, "testing" and "manipulating" behavior, eating and sleeping disorders, and other symptoms may suggest extra reassurance is needed. Having routines helps. Calmness and consistency in eating, sleeping, and family activity patterns help to normalize the living situation for all involved. Counseling can be helpful to families in processing trauma and loss they have experienced.

Parenting has changed dramatically since most grandparents raised their own children. Good principles in parenting today include:

- Avoiding physical punishment. Grandparents who model respect for others can expect the same for the children over time. Hitting a child teaches that anger and aggression are acceptable ways to solve problems.
- *Reinforcing good behavior* by creating good behavior and paying attention to it. Being specific in praise and letting grandchildren see their efforts are appreciated when chores are completed build more of the same behavior as well as good will.

- *Using “Peacetimes.”* When behavior is out of bounds, a situation can be calmed if the adult calls a halt to what is going on and calls for peacetime. Peacetime involves joining together and asking first for quiet time and then for shared observation and discussion about the situation. It is important that the child know what behavior was unacceptable.
- *Make discipline an opportunity for the child to increase self-responsibility.* Discipline can be more effective over time if it is logical, related to the issue at hand, and positive. The goal is for children to learn to regulate their own behavior and to be responsible for their actions. If a bicycle is left in the driveway where it can be hit, several choices of discipline may be made available to the child. For example, the choice of keeping the bicycle out of the driveway or facing a time restriction on riding the bicycle gives the child a choice that deals with the issue and involves the child in an acceptable solution.
- *Teach responsibility by providing choice to the child.* For example, the first time a child throws food at the wall you’ll probably want to let the child know this isn’t acceptable behavior. At the same time, you may want to let him know that if this happens again, he won’t be able to finish dinner. In addition, you may want to suggest he’ll have to clean up the mess. If it happens again, the child has made a choice.
- *Pick your battles.* Not every misdeed needs to be confronted. Many behaviors can be chalked up to “trying on new behavior.” They can be diverted if they are ignored and/or not accepted. Everyone is entitled to feel unhappy and resentful sometimes.

1. Parenting and grandparenting education and newsletters help grandparents learn about parenting today. What classes or supports are available? How can CEOS help get the word to parents and grandparents about available supports?
2. CEOS may know grandparents they can individually support with respite care if the children are young.
3. Help the parenting grandparent to benefit from establishing and following up with goals that support their own well-being as well as that of the children (5). These might include:
 - Being optimistic,
 - Adjusting to their new role,
 - Learning contemporary views about children and adolescents,
 - Cooperating with the parent who shares responsibility for care,
 - Monitoring children’s social and academic development, and
 - Arranging periodic relief from daily responsibilities.

Schools can help

Schools can help grandparents cope with the stresses of parenting a second time around. School personnel may need to learn to recognize and accept strong feelings experienced by the grandparent, parent, and child involved in this situation. Grandparents sometimes feel disappointment mixed with anger, blame, guilt, and concern about finances. Parents usually have ambivalent feelings of gratitude and resentment as they grieve the loss of their child, even if it is in the child’s best interest. The children may feel abandoned even if they are grateful to the grandparents (6).

1. Call the local school principal or superintendent. Does he or she know of services in the public school to support grandparents raising grandchildren or grandchildren living with their grandparents? KidSource Online (www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content2/grandparents.3.html) provides a primer for schools supporting grandparents as parents. The primer provides information for school personnel regarding some of the issues of grandparenting families. Strategies and policies that can help grandparents and grandchildren are suggested in the primer. Bring copies of the strategies and discuss how they might be used.
2. Minigrants are available to community collaborators to start support groups. A grant fund you may want to explore for your own community is a KinNET support group for relatives caring for kin in foster care. These groups are forming across the country and are supported by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services through Generations\United and the Brookdale Foundation Group. See the Web site (www.gu.org/projg&osupport.htm).
3. Invite a social worker or a school counselor to report on services available to grandparents and/or grandchildren in the community and/or school.

Grandparents' rights

There are four types of court-recognized rights related to grandparenting: visitation, guardianship, custody, and adoption. West Virginia is one of 18 states with a standby guardianship law, which allows a parent to designate an adult to care for a child (7). Outside of adoption, guardianship is the safest, most stable arrangement for a grandparent raising a grandchild. It is a type of custody that is both physical and legal. It transfers custody to someone other than a parent when one or both parents are dead, missing, or unfit. Guardianship does not terminate parental rights, but it does suspend them.

The advantage of guardianship is control. The grandparent decides where the grandchild lives (within the state) and has legal authority to enroll the child in school, give consent to medical treatment, and make many of the decisions a parent

can make in terms of education, sports, health care, employment, and legal actions. The grandparent also has control over when and how a grandchild sees the parent(s) unless there is a court-ordered visitation schedule (8).

Other types of custody involve judicial determinations that may entail drastic changes in the child's legal relationship with his or her own parents (9). Deciding on legal intervention is often undesirable. With a courthouse tug and pull, parents often become distanced from their children, with unplanned hostile and alienating energy becoming the norm in a family. Legal arrangements are not easily undone. Assuming custody of a grandchild involves making a big commitment, especially if the children's parents fight the attempt to obtain custody. In any event, one would want to review the situation very carefully before filing.

Connect-and-share activities

1. The American Association of Retired Persons' Grandparent Information Center is a clearinghouse for local and national resources addressing the legal, social, health, and financial issues that grandparents face. For more information, write: AARP/GIC, Dept. P, 601 E. St. NW Washington, DC 20049; send e-mail <gic@aarp.org>; or visit the Web site (www.aarp.org/confacts/programs/gic.html).
2. Examine policies of organizations in the community, such as schools and human service agencies, to determine if they have services available for helping grandparents in their roles as caregivers and get the word out to grandparents.
3. Consider a community support group for grandparents who are raising grandchildren. Sharing common issues and offering respite care, child care, and parenting education can enrich the lives for each. Grandfathers should be encouraged to be a part of the planning and participation. The Brookdale Foundation (www.ewol.com/Brookdale) supports this work. Its phone number is 212-308-7355.
4. Generations United is a national coalition dedicated to intergenerational policy, programs, and issues. They provide a forum for those working with children, youths, and older adults (www.gu.org).

5. Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Implications for Professionals and Agencies was a national videoconference presented by the University of Wisconsin in 1999. On Feb. 27, 2001, a second national videoconference Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Legal and Policy Issues provided additional information regarding the range of difficulties faced by grandparents. Information regarding the purchase of the videotapes from these programs and suggestions for resources and related Web-based information is available (www.uwex.edu/grg).
6. G.A.P. (Grandparents As Parents) provides phone support network for sharing of experiences and feelings between grandparents who are raising their grandchildren for various reasons. C/O Sylvie de Toledo, P.O. Box 964, Lakewood, CA 90714. Telephone: 562-924-3996; Fax: 714-828-1375.
7. Young Grandparents Club promotes educating of grandparents to develop close relations between generations; provides referrals; advocates on grandparents' rights; and offers workshops, classes, seminars, conferences, bimonthly newsletter, and networking. It assists with starting informal neighborhood groups. Charges dues. 5217 Somerset Dr., Prairie Village, KS 66207. Telephone: 913-642-8296.
8. Grandparents Rights Organization (GRO) advocates and educates on behalf of grandparent-grandchild relationships, primarily with respect to grandparent visits. GRO assists in the formation of local support groups dealing with the denial of grandparent visitation by custodial parent or guardian; provides newsletter, information, and referrals; and holds conferences. Charges dues. 100 West Long Lake Road, Suite 250, Bloomfield Hills, MI 48304. Telephone: 248-646-7191 (day).
9. Grandparents for Grandparents Inc. offers support and education to grandparents being denied access to their grandchildren; works to obtain uniform nationwide laws, provides newsletter, phone support, information and referrals; offers some legal advice through an attorney for members and assistance in starting new groups. P.O. Box 42, Whitehouse Station, NJ 08889. Telephone: 908-534-4961 (eve.)
Celine DeRosa.

Footnotes

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- (2) Satterfield, Mattie. *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: What Are the Financial Options?* Kinship Care Services, Child Welfare League of America. AARP GIC Newsletter. November 1, 2000. P. 1.
- (3) AARP Grandparent Information Center. Washington, DC 20049. Tel. (202 434-2296). August, 2000.
- (4) Satterfield, Mattie. *Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: What Are the Financial Options?* Kinship Care Services, Child Welfare League of America. AARP GIC Newsletter. November 1, 2000. P. 2.
- (5) Nelson, Dr. Patricia Tanner. Extension Family and Child Development Specialist. Newark, DE. Peer Review Publication Memo. University of Delaware, November 29, 2000.
- (6) Saltzman, Glenn and Patricia Pagan. New York. Feelings in the Grandparent Raising Grandchildren Triad. *Parenting Grandchildren: A Voice for Grandparents*. 2 (1, Winter). P. 4-6.
- (7) Generations United. *Standby Custody Bills*. Minnesota. <Gu@gu.org>. Summer, 2000. P. 9.
- (8) DeToledo, Sylvie and Deborah E. Brown. *Grandparent as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family*. New York. The Guilford Press. 1995. P. 149.
- (9) Karp, Naomi. "Legal Problems of Grandparents and Other Kinship Caregivers." *Generations*. EBSCO. ISSN: 0738-7806. Spring. Vol. 20, Issue 1, p. 57.

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