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# randparents Raising Grandchildren

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“Where there is room in the heart, there is always room on the hearth.” Elisabeth Marbury,  
*My Crystal Ball*

## Introduction

More than 3.9 million grandparents are raising their grandchildren in their homes. Overall, about 5.4 million children nationwide live with their grandparents. In fact, one in 10 grandparents has been the primary support of a grandchild at some time in their lives. While this is not a new phenomenon in this country, the rate of grandparents raising their grandchildren is increasing, and there is every reason to believe the numbers will continue to grow. In fact, the most recent count of grandchildren being raised by their grandparents indicates these numbers increased nearly 36 percent in one year over the previous year (U.S. Census, 1994). A Census Public Information report (CBOO-FF) dated September 2000 noted that the number of children residing in homes maintained by grandparents represents an increase of 641,000 since 1992. The increasing incidence of parental substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, parental AIDS, incarceration, divorce, and desertion has resulted in higher rates of children being raised by grandparents.

This lesson will explore some of the joys and challenges in raising a second generation. Further information and support services that may be of assistance to the grandparents and their families will be suggested.

## Raising a second generation has many joys and satisfactions

Providing grandchildren with a sense of security by helping them to grow in their self-confidence, self-identity, self-respect, and self-esteem brings joys as well as challenges in parenting. Grandparents often experience a self-renewal through their grandchildren. In the best of circumstances, the

renewal can be both biological and emotional, adding new social networks and experiencing emotional self-fulfillment in being able to support the positive development of a generation that carries a family forward.

Being there for the children is of profound importance, especially for children who have resided in troubled situations. Grandparents can serve as attachment figures and provide a positive identity and family continuity. Providing an unquestionable calming influence, dependability, and communicating unconditional love provides a much-needed stability for the growth and development of the children (1).

## Raising a second generation has many challenges

Many grandparents raising grandchildren face ongoing issues around the basic physical, emotional, and financial adjustments they must make. Many grandparents who are parenting their grandchildren are deprived of a positive relationship with their own child. In fact, many start their role grieving an actual or emotional death of their child. “That’s not my daughter,” one woman said. “Drugs have taken over. That’s not the girl I raised, loved, and nurtured.” Thus, grandparents are often dealing with feelings of failure, guilt, and embarrassment.

Many of the children being raised by grandparents have psychological and/or physical problems related to their earlier experiences. They may have experienced home conditions that affected growth physically, emotionally, and/or socially. At best, many are grieving some loss of their own parents.

## Building on family strengths

As grandparents take on an expanded grandparenting role, coming to some agreement on what these roles will be with any other adults involved in the caregiving will make a big difference to the children. If philosophies, values, and ways of working with each other and with the children are consistent among the persons providing some level of parenting, there is a much greater chance

for success with the children. Maintaining strong communication ties across caregivers and dealing with issues that arise as a family provide children with capable and positive role models to support their growth now and in the future. Research informs us of the importance of talking through how caregivers will meet the kids' needs and how each involved will help to provide the children with the following:

- *understanding* that takes into consideration how the children view, influence, and respond to the world around them;
- *guidance* modeled by the caregivers' behaviors; establishing and maintaining reasonable limits, direction, and activities to meet their needs;
- *nurturing* with kindness and attentive listening to feeling and ideas;
- *affection and compassion* freely given;
- *motivation* that models and stimulates curiosity and imagination in learning about the world; and
- *advocacy* that builds a support system around the children in their family, neighborhood, and community.

In the best of circumstances, children who are being raised by their grandparents are going to experience loss and abandonment as well as other issues relating to their place in the family. This is not what they expected out of life either, even if they were babies when this change in parenting took place (2). Keeping a journal and the baby stories, a family tree, and a record of large and small events and milestones and showing them frequently to the child are ways to share how important they are to you and how glad you are to be with them (3).

### **Schools can help grandparents**

Schools can use many strategies to support grandparents who are working to raise and educate their grandchildren. Grandparents need information about the children they are raising and general information on child development and parenting. Existing policies may need to be revised to accommodate the grandparent's informal authority or legal authority so the child can be enrolled in school, records can be reviewed, and requests or decisions can be handled legitimately. In collaboration with community groups and human service agencies, schools can support short-term respite services, counseling services, and other social, legal, and/or policy services.

### **Care for the grandparent**

Care for the grandparent is as essential as care for the children. A grandparent's lifestyle is changed and challenged in many ways when raising a second generation. Boundless energy may no longer be there. Many grandparents have health issues of their own. As one grandparent said, "It is not the American dream to raise a second family" (4). For many grandparents, dreams disappear with this life change, social life declines, and the new role often comes with an emotional roller coaster attached. While there may be much joy in having more time with one's grandchildren, isolation may be one of the challenges as one gives up his or her current lifestyle and takes on a whole new level of problems difficult to resolve.

When grandparents take on parenting roles, that very special relationship with the grandchild that was so wonderful with short visits changes. Being prepared and able to deal with this loss and any other grief that may have created this new life situation can be a big challenge that one needs support for when taking on these new roles.

### **Footnotes**

- (1) Weissbourd, Bernice. "Parent Informaion: There Will Always Be Lullabies." *Enduring Connections Between Granparents and Young Children*. Zero to Three. Org. August, 2000.
- (2) Doucette-Dudman, Deborah with Jeffrey R, LaCure. *Raising Our Children's Children*. Minneapolis. Fairview Press. 1996. P. 115.
- (3) National Extension Parenting Model.
- (4) DeToledo, Sylvie and Deborah E. Brown. *Grandparent as Parents: A Survival Guide for Raising a Second Family*. New York. The Guilford Press. 1995. P. 22.

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