

Polk/Burnett Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Newsletter



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Understanding Emotional Issues in Your Grandchildren's Lives

Inside this issue:

*Strategies for
Helping Children
Deal With:*

- *Grief and Loss*
- *Guilt*
- *Fear*
- *Embarrassment*
- *Anger*

Special points of interest:

Verbally
acknowledge a
child's loss.

Provide
consistency in
environment.

Model appropriate
expressions of
anger.

Websites:

[www.fcs.uga.edu/
extension/cyf_public.php](http://www.fcs.uga.edu/extension/cyf_public.php)

[www.uwex.edu/ce
s/flp/grandparent](http://www.uwex.edu/centers/flp/grandparent)

[www.uwex.edu/ce
s/flp/grandparent/
view.html](http://www.uwex.edu/centers/flp/grandparent/view.html)

Children in the care of grandparents may come to their current living situations from diverse circumstances, but most share a lack of consistency in their early lives. Discipline may have been inconsistent and inappropriate, meals may often have been sporadic, and daily schedules left to chance. The following five factors may contribute to the confusing emotions experienced by many grandparented children.

1. Grief and Loss:

Children in the care of grandparents have not only lost a parent but have also lost a "traditional" grandparent. Grandchildren may find it difficult to give up their special relationships with "grandma" or "grandpa" as he or she becomes the primary caregiver.

Common Strategies for Grandparents:

- Verbally acknowledge child's losses. Discuss changes in child's life and what they've had to "leave behind."
- Take photos of child in his/her new environment. Display on a bulletin board or collage.

2. Guilt:

Custodial grandchildren may feel high levels of guilt. They may view their parents' absence as proof that they "didn't measure up" or had misbehaved in some way. Children may verbalize that they

wish they were smarter, prettier, or hadn't hit their brother so that their mom or dad would still be living with them. Children from poor early home environments may feel additional guilt as they realize they really like their new living situation.

Strategies:

- Provide many opportunities each day to enhance child's self-esteem. Allow them to "help" as frequently as possible and reinforce their efforts.
- Praise child consistently for even small, positive gains. Keep feedback genuine but look for opportunities to "catch" child in desired behaviors.
- Discuss that everyone makes mistakes. Brainstorm ways to apologize/make things right again when mistakes occur.

3. Fear:

The many inconsistencies in early interactions, combined with a change in living situations, contribute to feelings of fear in many grandparented children. They may have never developed a relationship with a consistent adult caregiver. Some children are unable to form relationships and cannot maintain interactions. Others become inappropriately attached to the grandparent or older sibling. They may have extreme difficulties separating from their trusted caregiver and are fearful about reaching out to others.

Source:
Dannison, L. for Family Information Services, Minneapolis, MN © 2004. Reprinted with permission.

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Strategies:

- Many children are frightened of being alone in the dark. Allow child to decorate a small flashlight and keep it next to (or in!) his/her bed each night.
- Reinforce “brave behaviors.” Start a sticker chart and provide stickers for each brave behavior displayed. Remember, for a fearful child, a “brave” behavior may be something as simple as smiling at a friend or not crying when separating from grandma.

4. Embarrassment:

Children in grandparent-headed homes may feel sensitive about their family’s situation. Comments and questions from other children may be difficult for them to manage. Grandparents will look different than other kids’ parents, or clothing or social schedules won’t match with their friends and can further intensify children’s feelings of embarrassment and not belonging.

Strategies:

- Assist the grandchild in developing answers to questions that other children or adults may ask about their home life.
- Be aware of ways you can assist your grandchild in “fitting in.” Search out what after school options (i.e. sport teams, scouts, 4-H, etc.) are available and popular with children.
- Talk to other caregivers about clothing and activities.
- Share a humorous and embarrassing moment or two from your own life. Focus on how you were able to laugh about this situation at a later time.

5. Anger:

Children living with grandparents have often experienced major changes in their lives and usually have had little control over contributing circumstances. This

feeling of a lack of control over their lives often intensifies their feelings of anger. Episodes of angry behavior may take many forms including threats, destructive behaviors and violence toward self or others.

Strategies:

- Look for opportunities to model appropriate expressions of anger. Identify the feeling and show how it can be managed correctly. For example, “*I’m really angry that I broke this bowl. I’m going to go away by myself for a few minutes until I calm down. Then I’ll come back and pick up the broken pieces.*”
- Provide a variety of outlets for expressing anger. Options include pounding clay or pillows, finger painting to wild music, running in place, taking ten deep breaths, or listening to quiet music.

Summary

Custodial grandparents need to maintain a consistent and nurturing environment for the children in their care by:

- Providing predictability to help increase children’s feelings of security and personal worth.
- Enhancing children’s feelings of self-worth by communicating their caring and confidence in the child’s abilities to act out their emotions in appropriate ways.
- Reassuring grandchildren that everyone feels sad, guilty, or angry at times and that these are acceptable emotions that need appropriate outlets.
- Grandparents need to be alert to frequent and/or extreme emotional outburst and be ready to seek professional help from a teacher, school counselor, or mental health worker.