

GRANDPARENTS RAISING GRANDCHILDREN

Few people imagine when they give birth to a child that some day they may end up raising their child's children. Yet grandparents, regardless of income, background, or race, are becoming parents again. Other relatives (older siblings, aunts, uncles and great grandparents) are also raising children without a parent in the household.

For centuries grandparents have taken over as parents during a family crisis. What is new, however, are the escalating numbers of grandparents raising grandchildren.

How many children are living in grandparent-headed households?

The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) points out the following from the Census 2000:

- 6.3% (4.5 million) of children in the United States under age 18 are growing up in grandparent-headed households. Approximately one-third of these children have no parent present in the home.
- The numbers of children in grandparent-headed households have increased 30% since 1990, and 105% since 1970.
- The majority of grandparents raising grandchildren are between ages 55 and 64; approximately 20 to 25% are over 65.
- Ethnicity crosses all lines:

	Grandparents	Grandchildren
White	51%	44%
African American	38%	36%
Hispanic	13%	18%

- While grandparent-headed families cross all socio-economic levels, these grandparents are more likely to live in poverty than other grandparents.
- There are eight times more children in grandparent-headed homes than in the foster care system.

Why are grandchildren living with their grandparents?

Often the grandparents are responding to issues in the middle (parent) generation, such as death of a parent, illness, divorce, immaturity, incarceration of the parent, parental substance abuse, child abuse, or neglect. Drug and alcohol abuse accounts for 80% of grandparent families. Grandparents step in to fill a gap created by the problem as a result of the love they feel for their grandchildren.

Grandparent-headed families face some additional challenges. They need to resolve legal issues around custody, guardianship, or adoption; without legal status grandparents may not be able to enroll their grandchildren in school or make medical decisions for them. Financial decisions may involve a grandparent's employment or applying for benefits like Medical Assistance, Kinship Care, Foster Care or Social Security. Appropriate child care needs to be located, including day care, before and after-school programs, and respite care. Obtaining adequate medical care can be a challenge, including getting insurance coverage through private insurance or public programs. Education and emotional support for their grandchildren is important, along with finding support for themselves.

Grandparents raising grandchildren have some unique social and emotional needs tied to parenting the second time around. Lenora Poe, a licensed marriage, family and child therapist in California, and author of "*Black Grandparents As Parents*," shared basic physical, emotional and financial issues in the AARP Grandparent Information Center newsletter.

- Grandparents may feel deprived of a positive relationship with their own children (birth parents). Many of them grieve over the emotional death of their sons or daughters.
- Some grandparents may feel deprived of a normal relationship with their grandchildren. Grandparents also may feel robbed of being able to do the things that other adults their age are doing.
- Even though grandparents hope the arrangement of caring for their grandchildren will be temporary, many have found that it is permanent. Feelings of anger, embarrassment, guilt and frustration are frequent. They may wonder whether they are to blame for their children's behaviors and what they can improve this time around. They can feel ambivalence toward both their children and their grandchildren - whom they love on the one hand, and resent on the other.
- Unfortunately many grandparents suffer in silence because they feel judged, criticized, and abandoned by family, friends and society. They often put their physical and mental health on hold, and sometimes they are not sure whether they are just tired or really sick.
- When their adult children are in and out of their lives, this produces challenges in setting appropriate limits and boundaries, and having their authority undermined.
- Parenting grandchildren is totally different from parenting one's own children. Many grandchildren have special medical, psychological, and educational needs. Grandchildren can also be angry at their parents, often taking it out on their grandparents, and are confused by their parents absence and have divided loyalties.
- Since their grandchildren often are emotionally frail, grandparents may have mixed feelings about how to discipline them. When grandchildren are already feeling lonely and punished by their parents, it's easy for grandparents to become over protective. At the other extreme, some grandparents set overly rigid boundaries for the children. Both groups are terrified that the children will repeat the problem behaviors of their parents.

Where can grandparents find support in Racine County, WI?

- Information and Assistance - 638-6321 or 1-800-924-5137 - Previously Racine County Human Services Department provided this service, but now it is transferred to SAFE Haven staff who answer your call. Sometimes people just need someone who's non-judgmental who can listen and brainstorm some possible solutions. When I talked with a staff member, he assured me grandparents have been raising grandchildren for some time, and the information shared is confidential and available 24 hours a day.
- Parents Helpline - 637-9273 or 1-888-333-6061 - Another program of SAFE Haven focuses on parenting and grandparenting issues.
- Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support group - Held the third Tuesday of the month from 5:30 - 7:30 p.m. at Next Generation Now, 1220 Mound Avenue. Child care for children 6 and under is available. Call Diane Gautsch at 635-1920 for more information.
- CARE Center (Care Access for Racine County Elders) - A variety of services are accessible by calling 687-2371 or 687-2360, or stopping at the center located at St. Luke's Hospital, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Several other community resources are available to families. Try contacting your grandchild's school or child care provider, religious organizations, or community centers. The Quick List -

Resources for Families brochure lists numerous other resources in the areas of advocacy, child care, counseling, education, employment/training, financial, health, housing, legal, literacy, older adult services, parenting, transportation, veterans, etc. Call Racine County UW-Extension to obtain a copy at 886-8460 or 800-522-6240.

What Websites Have More Information?

- Grandparenting Today
URL: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent/index.html>
- GrandParents Raising Grandchildren - Partnership of Wisconsin
URL: <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grgp/index.html>
- AARP Grandparent Information Center (GIC)
URL: <http://www.aarp.org/grandparents>
- Generations United
URL: <http://www.gu.org/>
- GrandsPlace
URL: <http://www.grandsplace.com/>

Written by:

Beverlee Baker, Family Living Educator, Racine County University of Wisconsin – Extension
January 2002

References:

Poe, Lenora M., "The Changing Family: Social and Emotional Needs of Grandparents Parenting a Second Shift" (AARP - Grandparenting Website)

Facts About Grandparents Raising Grandchildren (AARP Website)