



## **Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Partnership of Wisconsin**

### **Historical Perspective Sheds Light on Grandparent's Changing Role**

Grandparents play a wide variety of roles these days, as caregivers, friends, heads of the family, nurturers, and many others. So, it's interesting to look at how the role of grandparents has evolved throughout the history of this country, according to Mary Brintnall-Peterson, a University of Wisconsin-Extension specialist on aging.

In a 1996 edition of the journal, "Generations," Gratton and Haber outline the three phases in the history of American grandparents, beginning back in Colonial times.

From this period until the beginning of the Civil War, grandfathers were patriarchs, since they usually maintained control of all the family's economic assets until they died. Entire generations of families were dependent on grandfathers. About 87 percent of all grandparents bequeathed property to families upon their deaths.

In contrast, grandmothers often had to live with their children if they were ill or unable to care for themselves, becoming dependent on the oldest male in the family. Men transferred land and assets to their sons, not their wives or daughters.

Because children were so dependent on their fathers for assets, there were many multi-generational households in which several families lived on the same piece of land. Family tension often arose from this situation.

Between the mid-19th century through the early 20th century, medical experts began to view aging as a disease, and older adults were seen increasingly as incapable of caring for themselves.

As the nation became more industrialized and less agricultural, fewer men maintained control of the family through property ownership. By 1890, only one-third of families bequeathed property to family members.

People began to sell property to use in their own retirement, rather than willing it to another generation. Political debates began on the proper place of older adults within the family structure. Some family experts even suggested that different generations should live separately to avoid tension.

Then during the Depression and establishment of Social Security and other social programs, American experts stopped seeing older adults as a burden.

The generations were no longer economically dependent on each other, so they could strive for relationships that revolved around love and caring, rather than financial security.

Women began to have more economic security and independence, and could engage in relationships that were more equal. Companionship was seen as the major relationship between grandparents and the rest of the family.

Today, many families are linked more by relationships than by economics. Families may vacation together, get together to celebrate important family events and holidays, or see each other every day. Grandparents may take on the roles of child caregiver, confidante, playmate and friend.

Provided by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, Ph.D., Program Specialist in Aging at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. For more information or questions contact Mary by phone (608) 262-8083 or by email at [mary.brintnall-peterson@ces.uwex.edu](mailto:mary.brintnall-peterson@ces.uwex.edu) . This publication is distributed through the Grandparenting web site found at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/grandparent/index.html>