



Grandparents Raising Grandchildren: Parenting the Next Generation

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This publication looks at the background of grandparent-headed families, its challenges and benefits, and discusses resources and support to help make this family form successful in all aspects.

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NOT ALL PARENTS EXPERIENCE THEIR “GOLDEN years” in the same way. For many families, plans for an empty nest and retirement are not a reality. It is growing more common for parents to go through the transition from caring for their children to caring for their children's children. The following examples illustrate the increasing number of grandparents being called upon to parent their grandchildren.

Clara rises every morning at 6:00 am so that she can drive across town in time to be at her daughter's house by 7:30 am. Clara cares for her two grandsons while her adult daughter attends college.

Ralph and Sara have been parenting their granddaughter, Vanessa, age 8, for three years. Vanessa's parents were killed in a car accident, and Ralph and Sara were given custody of Vanessa. Ralph and Sara were retired, but recently returned to work because they were unable to afford the cost of raising a child on their fixed income.

Loretta picks up after her two grandsons in their tiny two-bedroom house. Her son and daughter-in-law are in prison for the manufacture and sale of methamphetamine. Loretta is parenting her teenage grandsons and holds down a full-time job to make ends meet. She hopes her family will someday be reunited so that she can return to the traditional role of grandparent.

Increasing numbers of grandparents as caregivers

In Montana, and other areas around the country, the population of grandparents who provide the primary care for their grandchildren is growing. Primary caregiver is defined as someone who is responsible for meeting a child's basic needs -- such as housing, food, clothing, medical care, education, discipline, socialization and emotional nurturing.

According to AARP, Montana ranks ninth in the nation for the increase in grandparents raising grandchildren between the years of 1990-2000. During this period, the number of Montana grandparents who are responsible for caring for their grandchildren has increased by 53%. In Montana, 6,053 grandparents hold the primary responsibility for meeting the basic needs of their grandchildren, while 11,098 grandparents live in households with one or more grandchild who is under the age of 18 (U.S. Census 2000).

Although the practice of grandparents raising grandchildren is not new, their role as primary caregivers is a growing trend throughout the nation. Close to six million children live in households with their grandparents, according to 2000 Census data. One of the concerns surrounding this trend is that many grandparents don't consider themselves to be the primary caregiver even though they work and pay the price for raising the grandchildren in both figurative and literal senses.

Reasons grandparents are raising grandchildren

Grandparents are faced with the responsibility of caring for their grandchildren for a variety of reasons which may include: death of the parent, involvement of social services due to child abuse or neglect, abandonment, teen pregnancy, parental immaturity, issues arising from divorce of the parents, parental issues with alcohol or drugs, military deployment, financial difficulties of the parent, or illness which hinders the parent's ability to provide for their child. A common factor among most grandparents is that they are parenting their grandchildren due to an unhappy event or a crisis within the family.

Challenges for grandparents raising grandchildren

Often, grandparents are willing to assist in the care giving role, but do not have the resources they need. Many grandparents are on a fixed income and may not be able to afford additional costs associated with raising a child such as child-care, insurance, health care and providing for the basic needs of the child. Even things like enrolling the child in school can be a challenge, as many states require proof of guardianship or custody. Becoming a parent again can become overwhelming as grandparents delve into child care, after school programs, sporting events, enrichment activities, medical insurance, health care, school enrollment, custody and legal issues and investigate the assistance options available.

Grandparents may not feel as though they can keep up with the child, due to health concerns or simply because children are so active. They may feel out of touch with what is happening in today's educational system and with child care methods that have changed since they first were parents.

Becoming a grandparent again can be very trying, but there are options available in many communities as this issue becomes more prevalent.

Positive aspects of grandparents raising grandchildren

As primary caregivers for their grandchildren, grandparents are able to have a closer relationship than they might have if the children lived with their parents. Today, many families are distant from one another because their jobs, preferences, or desires for independence take them to different areas of the country. Grandparents in general may not have as many opportunities to spend time with grandchildren as they have had in years past.

By living in the same household, grandparents have the opportunity to pass on their wisdom, stories, memories, traditions and family history directly to the grandchild. This can help grandchildren feel more connected to their family and its history, have more of a sense of where their family came from, and hear stories about their parents when they were young. Grandparents have a wonderful opportunity to teach their grandchildren and a chance to learn new and exciting things from them.

Support groups

Grandparents may feel a desire to talk with people who are in a similar situation and to have a support network to rely upon as questions and concerns arise. Through cooperation from the Brookdale Foundation, AARP, several other state agencies, and community interest across the state of Montana, MSU Extension is working to bring Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support groups to Montana communities.

Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support groups are designed to meet the needs of the grandparents who have been asked to help raise their grandchildren. Through support groups, grandparents can find information to help them get financial and legal assistance. They also gain a group of peers that can address their concerns and share their successes when it comes to being a parent again.

For more information on Grandparents Raising Grandchildren support groups contact your local County or Reservation Extension Agent, or the Montana State University Extension Family and Human Development Office at (406) 994-6745.

Conclusion

Becoming a parent again can be an overwhelming and challenging task for grandparents. It can also be a rewarding and memorable time if resources and support are available. Support networks are being created to help families in this increasingly common family form be healthy and successful in all aspects.

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Tips to help grandparents cope

There are some important tips to keep in mind to be a healthy caregiver to grandchildren.

Take care of yourself.

It is difficult to care for your grandchildren if you are not in the best health. Be sure you are going in for regular check-ups and taking any medications you may have been prescribed. Maintaining a healthy diet and regular exercise will also help you to feel more energized and balanced.

Take a break.

If you are feeling ill or just feel like you could use some time alone, call on a friend, relative, or an agency in the community that provides respite care. Being a parent again takes a lot of energy, and there will be times when you need some time for yourself. Try to have some time for yourself even if it means getting up earlier than the grandchildren to have some quiet time, or spending time during the day when they may be away at school doing something YOU enjoy.

Seek help when you need it.

Help can come in many forms such as financial assistance, child-care assistance, spiritual advice, support from neighbors and friends or even assistance from people who are going through the same thing as you. Other grandparents may be willing to trade child-care so that everyone gets a break now and again to relax.

Set limits.

Set limits for yourself and for your grandchildren. Be firm but fair with your grandchildren, and remember that structure and rules help children to know what is expected of them.

Speak with an attorney.

Consult an attorney for advice on legal issues and financial planning for your grandchild. Some attorneys work on a sliding fee scale and may be able to provide low cost legal advice. Montana Legal Services is another resource for information regarding legal matters.

Seek out sources of assistance.

If you are on a fixed income, it may be helpful to contact your local Office of Public Assistance. You may qualify for Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) grants, Food Stamps, or welfare benefits.

Focus on the positives.

You have a wonderful opportunity to be an influential and important part of your grandchild's life. While this opportunity comes with many challenges, it can be a very special experience for you as well as for your grandchild. The happy, fun and silly moments can be what help you through the difficult times in your role as caregiver.

Additional support for Montana grandparents raising grandchildren

For grandparents or for friends, teachers, and social service staff who know of grandparents raising grandchildren, the following information and resources may be of assistance.

Internet Resources

Grandparents can access a variety of information via the Internet and through state agencies such as Montana Aging Services, Department of Health and Human Services, and the Montana AARP office. Some helpful sites are listed below. For phone numbers of local agencies, look in the government section of the phone book.

MSU Extension & Family Human Development

<http://www.montana.edu/wwwhd/> - Provides helpful information and links for grandparents who are raising their grandchildren.

<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt200706HR.pdf>

This guide answers many of the common questions grandparents and other relative caregivers have when they are faced with parenting a second time around.

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

www.aarp.org - Provides information on financial assistance for grandparents, becoming the best grandparent, support groups in local communities, and other resources.

Grandparents United

www.gu.org - "Represents more than 100 national, state and local organizations representing more than 70 million Americans and is the only national organization advocating for the mutual well-being of children, youth, and older adults."

Children's Defense Fund

www.childrensdefense.org - CDF educates the nation about the needs of children and encourages preventive investment before they get sick or into trouble, drop out of school, or suffer family breakdown.

CYFERnet

<http://www.cyfernet.org/> - CYFERnet is designed to be used by anyone who needs comprehensive children, youth, or family information including: educators, researchers, parents, youth agency staff, community members, human services and health care providers, students, policy makers, youth, or media.

Other Web Sites

Several states have web sites that may be helpful for grandparents raising grandchildren. A great deal of information is available by searching for "grandparents raising grandchildren" with an Internet browser or search engine.

Publications

Several books and journal articles are also available on the topic of grandparents raising grandchildren. Many can be accessed through libraries or bookstores.



<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt200401HR.pdf>

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